

The Prophet Is In

"What are you looking at, gagbiscuit?"

Soft lotiony ladylike words wouldn't be coming out of a mouth like that. The thing that just sprouted was missing the horns, spaded tail and pitchfork, so it looked like your run-of-the-mill 1st-grade girl. Daffy knew better. Harmless 1st graders didn't say things like, "Because I know what I'm looking at. Something that'll get swallowed up in that tussle down there if it doesn't beat it back to its home planet," and then jab their fingers down towards the ground like they were aiming for a nuke button that just wouldn't let her rip.

With a menace like that on the loose, surely Samara would whoop out her moral integrity and keep the big bad blackmail off the streets. But no, she didn't even know it was talking to Daffy. She looked around for something that both had a home planet and could be part of a "tussle's" regular diet. Seeing nothing, she asked, "Is that a prophecy?"

The girl noticed the individual she hadn't threatened. She squinted, likely wondering just how harshly she should judge her. "What's it to you?"

"It is, after all, a very cryptic forecast, all that about home planets and tussles swallowing things up. I see that you didn't even need to meditate to see it. If such obscure futures lie in your view, then perhaps you could see nearer happenings?"

"Sure, I can see these nearer happenings of yours. You see this rock? I predict your lip will bust open if I throw it at you."

In no person would you find more morbid curiosity than the girl who did not hop out of the way. It split her lower lip into two unequal parts, then landed at a mortified Daffodil's feet. Samara touched her lip, observed the blood, then leapt into the air.

"It's a dream! You can indeed see the future. O jubilation, you must come to my bedroom, solve for me the fog of my celestial visions. You who foretell the acts yet to come of a mere rock, you can certainly lead me where the priests at school cannot."

"What??" Daffy had been inspecting all the blood on the rock, but the idea that this heathen might snatch a spot in Samara's favor made her drop it and tug at Samara's skirt. She whispered, "You can't let that thing into your house. Don't you see how cruel it is?"

"It? That thing? Daffodil, you astonish me. Femininity inhabits yon vessel. That much is clear to me."

"Cat! What did she call you, Deaffodil? Do you want to be meal-snack-dinner-food? Get going."

"Going we shall get," promised Samara, "to 265 Cheapskate Alley, where you shall unscramble the scrambled eggs of my spirit, and I shall formally christen you... uh..." She looked up to see if any letters

showed up in the cloud shapes or rock formations, then came up with "Mayoki Culbara, after the patron saint of circus tent arsonists."

A new name didn't lighten the... urgh... "young lady's" countenance so much as a centimeter. "You sound like an idiot. Why should I go anywhere with you?"

"Maybe you shouldn't," blurted Daffodil.

It made Samara all astonished again, and this time she was the one to ask for a private meeting. "Why do you protest on so? Were you not yourself a wandering refugee your first day upon this planet?"

"Well, yes, but I didn't threaten anyone."

Memories of her days on Slum Street, the days when she wandered around looking for food, interfere with this answer. Days before the big German shepherd protected her, before she knew what coughing up a hairball into the toilet would lead to. It must have made her look like she was lying.

"You needed protection," said Samara. "Our new arrival has none. Please, let me add her to our population, and watch as your worries, her forthrightness, drift away into the atmosphere."

"Hey, pukewad!"

Right. "Forthrightness." Drifting away. Right.

"How many times do I have to tell you? A trillion? Get on the stupid rocket and go. Or do I have to pick you up and throw you in that direction myself?"

That called for a retreat. Daffy threw herself into the purse and buried herself beneath the junk, trinkets, and... sniff sniff... corpses that she'd collected - or was that the grease she hadn't washed off yet? - while Samara told off Mayoki.

"Now, now, nobody is exiling anyone. Perhaps she isn't meant to board a rocket. Perhaps she has some destiny to fulfill regarding that other thing you said would happen." That blasted frosty Antarctic shivers all up and down Daffy's spine until her tail fur was ready for lift-off.

Beyond the arguing, some trumpet blared off in the distance. It sounded like someone trying to play several songs at once as fast and loud as they could. The closer they got, the more apparent it was that there were several trumpet players, all trying to outblow one another.

"Samara, the trumpets, do you hear that? Samara!" She had to shout over their arguing to get her attention. "It's a Code AL."

"What? Ooh, Alonzo must have called in an Alien Alert."

"What did I tell you?" Mayoki stomped her foot. "This never would have happened if you'd just get out of here like I said."

"And that we shall, to my house on Cheapskate Alley, lest they excavate our purses and pockets and confiscate the goods therein."

"I'd like to see just what goods you got. But I want to see the cat go to outer space anymore. Will she do that? I'd better follow you and make sure."

And so, that was the only reason Mayoki joined the party. They didn't go to any rocket, though, they went to the Tamsen house. Whether hidden beneath the mattress, under the floorboards, or even inside the light bulbs, Samara had been careful to place the carrion in unsuspected places. Even if her parents could smell it, they'd have a spell of a time locating the carrion and evicting it. She set out a bucket of hot water for Daffy to clean herself and three plastic cups of iced tea. She sat on the bed and awaited her fellow oracle's input. She could barely wait, and thought bouncing would make the answers come faster.

"Do you see anything?"

Mayoki picked up a mushed dry frog. "Do you see anything?" asked Samara.

"I see a dead animal that wouldn't be so dead if he didn't drink water from the turd dungeons." She flung it into the tea pitcher, where it failed to reinflate. "Should've just gone to space. Like a smarty-poo."

Daffy left her bath to take a look. "Oh, him? He wasn't near the ugwan when I found him. He got run over by a car."

Mayoki's whole upper forehead tightened like a ripe red fist. "Who's the one who can read the future here? Get back in the water." She picked up a chipmunk. "See this doofus? He got chopped by a vault in the sewer. Look at this snake. He tried to go for a swim in the ugwater, and then he stank to death. And this itsy bitsy spider got washed down guess-where-the-ugwan-how'd-you-know."

Daffy, all toweled up, scooted next to Samara on the bed as close as she could. "Misses, I fetched all those animals myself, and I have never been near the ugwan."

"Perhaps the censor clouds blur your vision, too?" suggested Samara. There was, after all, a transgression or two on Mayoki's record, right there for all to see. At this slumber party, Samara was the host, Daffy was the stowaway, the carrion were the guests, and Mayoki was the crasher. The biggest threat would be the poopers. The moment they uncovered this assembly, they'd definitely party poop on it. Getting answers was urgent.

Mayoki hurled a wad of dead critters onto the table and knocked two teacups over. "I wish I only had blurred vision. Heck, I wish I was only seeing the cat over there because I need glasses or something, but I can hear her talk, so yeah, I guess she really is there instead of going back to Jillingulon."

Samara started feeling a bit of uncozy warmth under her skin, the kind you feel when you go to a lot of trouble and get a stick of used chewing gum as a reward. "She has a name, you know; it's Daffodil Boghart. I picked it myself, after the patron saint of refurbished hairbrushes."

She hopped off the bed. "Why are you so dead set on exiling her anyway?"

"Dead set on exiling who anyway?"

Here came the party poop in the form of Ferdinand and Fiona Tamsen's personal inquiries. The girls' only defense was a frenzied cleaning riot, as Samara and Daffy crammed the corpses into whatever

crack in the wall or floorboard they could find while Mayoki finished off the tea set, then they all took turns spraying the most expensive perfumes on the dresser. There were too many conflicting smells, like jellybeans, pumpkins, horn-of-plenty and handyman. None of them gave you the feeling there was nothing dead in the house.

"Whatever that is, we can smell it through the closed wood," said Mr. Tamsen. He wasn't in for much more surprise when Samara opened the door and unleashed the perfume clouds. Mayoki took away the impact that might have had. The relatively less astonished Mrs. Tamsen wedged herself into the room.

"If you intend to stay the night, you'll have to pick a room with less..." she sniffed a cloud trickling her way, "*Eau du Roadkill*."

"Very well, Mama." They all filed out of the room, secret stowaway excepted. "Mayoki's parents are out of town so they sent her over here."

"We'll still need their number, for emergencies and all."

"You want me to call Mama, huh?" Mayoki turned back to the bedroom. "Here kitty kitty kitty kitty..."

She stopped to deliver Samara a "get the picture?" glare. Samara had thought that so much time in the spiritual realm would have taught her to believe just about anything, Yet here she was, forced to add a sellout from a fellow psychic to her absurd-but-believable-thing list.

"Very funny," said Papa. "There are no animals in this district. At least," he added with a bare-nostriled glance back at his daughter's room, "there aren't supposed to be. Come on, what's your number?"

"It's one-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-ten," blurted Samara right before seizing Mayoki's shoulders and steering her towards the door. "But we have crucial matters to discuss, so happy calling."

While Mayoki protested and Papa pulled out a cell phone, a rather sharp "*psst*" came from the bedroom. "Wait here while I fetch my purse." She went back to her bedroom and locked the door.

"I didn't think I could get you to see how dangerous she is after she threw that rock," warned Daffy, "but you have to notice how ready she'll tattle."

"She certainly has loose lips, but perhaps I can imbue her heart with the virtues of trust and honor."

Daffy's whiskers drooped. "What if she 'imbues' you instead?"

"I'll be sure she doesn't." Samara picked up a lumpy cloth bag with a pull string. She sat her purse on the bed and dug around in her dresser for anything else she might need. "I will bring the magic gravel. No subtle poisons shall soil my will to protect..."

But Daffy was gone when she turned around, and the window was open. All she could hear was hasty pat-tering away.

So soon? Well, she'd be back, perhaps with a little more trust to spare. It wasn't like she'd just flung open the window to create the illusion of leaving. It wasn't like she hadn't hopped aboard the Big German Shepherd after signalling for him to open the window for her. It wasn't like she was now tucked away in the purse to eavesdrop on the supposed dirt Mayoki would dish out at The Narcissist Coffee House and Gossip Center. No. It wasn't like that at all.

* * *

"Really rich of you," grumbled Mayoki, "taking me to a place I can't even read."

"I'll have read it for you. It said, 'Skinflint Furball Dispensation Launch and Lunch.' So convincing, you see, did you pitch your prophecy that Daffodil scampered off ahead of us to buy her own ticket." Samara leaned in on her elbows towards the girl she couldn't see. "Now, why don't we talk about my celestial censors?"

"Because I get the feeling you just gave me a huge stinky pile of bull hooey."

No hooey, honey. For real, the coffin-dim establishment surrounding them was the Narcissist Coffee House and Gossip Center. Samara had passed off the non-existent lighting as some kind of space parallel. Actually, the management liked to hand night vision goggles to the servers and create the impression that everything rolled around in the dark. This was its own brand of hooey. When they weren't colliding with or tripping one another with support canes, everyone there skulked around to eavesdrop on other tables. You never knew when a tasty rumor might pop up so you could slobber all over it with your ears, then spit it out into some other fangorious ear.

Samara and Mayoki now sat at a booth. They had to bang their knees and stub their toes to get there, but now the real deal could begin.

"How's about I scoop you up your own heap of hooey?"

"Oh, yes! I couldn't think of one more person, ahem, 'whooley' would have more to share about their time in the celestial realm."

Some nearby mashers heard the phrase "celestial realm" and thought, "boy, what I wouldn't give to spend seven minutes in that place," and then thought they could do it vicariously. Soon enough, under-the-table and beside-the-booths got crowded with the whooley just wa'n't get'n'y.

"Okay, you asked for it. I am going to sit here and tell you all about the place dead people hang around, and I won't just get up and ditch you here so I can make sure that fleabag didn't just pick some random rocket to, I don't know, the Chilihead nebula."

"I'm glad you are, will, won't, don't, can't, and didn't." Samara's ears ate up the sound effects Mayoki started making. It followed a pattern: a grunt, a crunchy solid smack, then a groan from someone nearby. Was it a spiritual language that Samara hadn't learned? The only English that came

out of it was, "Move, creep!" Eventually it was over, and all that was left was sobbing and fleeting footsteps.

"That's quite a marvelous language, I'm just not sure how to picture it. May you elaborate in English?" She didn't. Samara couldn't tell if she was speaking at all. Maybe she was speaking in brail this time, so she reached over to examine Mayoki's face flap with her fingers. Her aim in the dark was lousy, though, so instead she boinked an eyeball.

"Ow! Geez, lady... I take it this seat is taken?"

"You're not Mayoki," she noticed, "you're one of the conversation crashers from under the table, just now crawling up. Mayoki, where do you hide?"

The only hint she got when she waved her fingers around were these soft furry whisps. It struck her like a cheat sheet on a civic's test that all that hair must be fur from a dog - the fabled parental imprint.

"No, sir. You may take it." She took her purse and stepped over what she could of the wounded eavesdroppers and inhaled pooch hair until it ended next to another booth.

"All right, flake, where are we for real?"

Yup, there she was. Samara slid into the booth and wondered whether Mayoki got this rebellious streak from Mama Dookey or Papa Dookey. Then again, maybe she didn't share because she hadn't learned anything interesting yet. Maybe Samara had to pay an indulgence fee. Now, what was the wackiest thing she had learned about the big land upstairs?

"You know what," said Mayoki. "Don't answer that. Because I already know wherever we and these dingalings under the table are, it isn't anywhere near a launch pad."

"Yes, there is quite a number of dingalings under the table. Next to it, too." This was true. "Do you know what else there are?"

The "fun" fact she shared (something about some guy named "Halo Louis YEAH!") was so boring that everyone else collapsed into a coma upon hearing it. It could cure everyone's insomnia at a sleep clinic.

"Wasn't that remarkable? Mayoki?" She reached over and waved around her fingers again. There wasn't anyone creeping up from under the table this time; They were all unconscious. "Did you get up and walk away again? This royally frowns me."

Not only was all this fur making her coughy, but her purse was unusually heavy for some reason. When Benedict Hall opened back up, she might be able to sell this whole ordeal as some kind of preemptive penance for hanging around in a gossip joint.

At any rate, she met the trail's end at another booth. She could see Mayoki, of course, but she could smell her sulky, belligerent vibrations. She took a seat. With everything her guilt-tripping class taught her in mind, Samara took a deep cleansing breath and began.

"You know, the Great Cosmic Wonder loses Their smile when their chosen vessels do not meet in spirit."

"Ohmmmm."

"In fact, a frown takes up residence upon Their face."

"Uh, *Ohmmmmmm?*"

"And affordable housing upon the Wonder's face isn't cheap. That should tell you something about the affluence that particular frown-"

"HELLO?? *OHHHMMM??*" Mayoki banged on the table and startled the teaware. "Can't you see I'm meditating here? I want to see you-know-who go you-know-where before you-know-what happens you-know- when because you-know-why through you-know-how."

That was some outburst. People nearby murmured about "those argumentative whippersnappers."

"Child," said Samara, "I can see nothing more than you can. I can hear, feel, and smell, but most of all taste the shepherd fur."

Mouths shut. Rumors halted. Fine fragile ceramics fell to the ground and shattered. Talk of fur, or anything else that came off animals, had that power here. They were waiting for something to start the deliciousest of drama over.

Samara had to correct this before Mayoki caught on. "I mean, ruf drehpehs eht etsat lla fo tsom-"

"Don't rewind what you just said. You know you can't do it without starting with 'ruff' anyway." Step by step, inch by inch, the nosiest ears in the building tiptoed closer. "Besides, oh yes I can see in here. I can see the people, I can see the place, and most of all, ohmmmmmm, I can see our own putty tat isn't getting on a rocket."

Tense oveny pressure tightened all around them. Any minute, a tidbit would slip out so they could post it on tattlegram or snitch chat. "What do you mean, you can see in here?"

"What, you can't see all these losers with no lives pulling out their phart smones and butroids? What do you mean about shepherd fur?"

Ghostly faces lit up by the light of their phone screens. This was where people came to Hear and sheer. Or Share and hair. All those phones reminded Samara of some crucial oversight regarding her cover

"You know, I thought I gave Papa a jumble of numbers, but do your father and mother have a legitimate phone? If Papa really dials that number, will he really acquaint himself with the shepherd hiney fruit from whom you were born?"

At first, Mayoki had trouble figuring out what hiney fruit was. But then, she realized she needed to teach Samara a lesson. The lesson was this: when you suggest Mayoki is the offspring of butt chocolate, she grabs your purse and empties it all over the table until everyone hears that feline yowl they'd been waiting for.

They'd already had their hands on the camera button, so all the flashes canceled one another out. The people behind them, trying to shove their way to the front, disrupted their focus anyway.

Meanwhile, the staff fumbled through the crowd to pull the fur alarm. Searing red lights fried everyone's eye sockets, and a waitress cried out, "Animalert! Animalert! This is not a drill!"

Even through all the screaming elephants that they chose for the alarm's sound effect, Samara could still recognize the tone deaf arrhythmic blast of Code AL trumpets marching ever near. She couldn't dash out the window; metal security shutters slammed shut. Her vision returned enough to see the paws crossed out in red paint. Daffy, there on the table, scampered back into the purse. Mayoki was nowhere in sight, but good riddance anyway. Samara blind-girl's-bluffed to the front door, only to find another metal security shutter blocked the way. It was gone when a pawtrol car crashed through it, but she still couldn't leave because a large wide cop stood in the way.

"Not so fast, missy. Something's rotten in skinflint, and I have a fishy feeling it's crawling around in there."

Blam that Duncan for not having any classes on weaseling your way past police officers. But from the purse, Daffy cleared her throat. Samara caught on and moved her lips in ventriloquist sync.

"But officer, what if it gives us the preggies?"

He clamped his hands over his mouth. He backed up such a tsunamic hurl that every meat slab under his skin looked like it was getting the preggies, and he staggered backwards in search for a makeshift moat. With him out of the way, the rest of the Narcissist shot out of the building and into the street. They were afraid they'd get preggies, too. Samara rode the stampede wee wee wee wee all the way home, wiping chicken feathers out of her eyes so she didn't miss the sign for Cheapskate Alley.

She hopped off in front of her house. She was dizzy and nauseous, but at least she had enough sense not to waltz right in and face an interrogation, especially this late past her curfew. Papa was sure to notice the number she gave him led nowhere, and she hadn't yet cooked up any reasonable excuses. The big German shepherd crouched in the bushes, grunting his beckonings. She checked her window. No use getting in that way; Mama was in there waving the vacuum cleaner hose around in the air.

A tear trickled down her cheek. "If only a Sir Suck-a-Lot awaited me in the celestial realm."

"Is it safe to come out?" Daffy squirmed around in the purse. "I don't hear any trampling or clucking."

Samara plopped behind the bushes and yanked the purse zipper open. Unless they had night vision goggles, the neighbors weren't likely to spot either animal behind the shrubbery.

"I suppose it's safe. The foliage will most likely cancel any neighborly espionage." She crossed her arms and stared at her feet. "It'll do almost as good a job as a censor mist, to which I have no resolution because I couldn't complete my rendezvous with a certain soothsayer."

Daffy crept out of the purse. "It didn't sound like she'd soothsay anything when you were at the... what did you call it, a rum day view? I don't think she'll ever help you. I think she wants it all to herself."

"Possibly not, but must you scheme and skulk into my belongings like so? I would have permitted your company, even unbeknownst to her." She wiped her nose. "But I'm no further to spiritual clarity now than I was yesterday evening. I have no more than a befogged mind and an unqualified clergy."

"Don't forget a swollen lip. You know, she's making it so that I'll have no choice but to leave Earth. That scene she made at the café, I can't help but think she's got something even worse planned."

Samara turned and scowled. "Skinflinters made up the greater ruckus. Mayoki didn't inject them with their unfavorable attitudes towards neogs. All the statues, paintings, and propaganda long predated her arrival."

"I know, but look at how fast she not only noticed it, but used it."

Now there was something so obvious that there was no building a denial brick wall against it. Samara's mind was in and on space most of the time, so little Earth facts like Mayoki's heathenous side were things she'd like to leave for other Earthling to clean up. But did prophets really act like that? She'd never met any before. If there were any celestial factoids to extract, she might have to take on a sneakier way of snatching them.

She felt a paw at her elbow and turned. Daffy stared up at her. "Aren't you even just a little scared of her?"

"Not while I have the magic gravel." She dug around in her purse, only to find that, lo and behold, it was gone. So that's why everything tumbled down in the dumps. She reached through the bush and pulled up a fistful of the lawn. "Make that the magic crabgrass."

Optimistic glints did not in Daffy's eyes twinkle. She was too busy coughing up a hairball, and the shepherd, who'd been biting leaves off the bushes, took that as his cue to escort her well away. He picked her up by her neck fur. He let Samara have an apologetic furrow-brow, then took off.

Everything around her felt a lot different by herself; darker, doomier, more vulnerable to unhappy circumstances. She felt it lurking near her pores, like they were whispering to her, "Perceive you that? Fear, lurking willy-nilly about the the hours." Yes, it was a long-time-no-feel encounter with fear; not fear of any four-foot stingy prophet fink, but of the decision Daffy might come to without her watching.

She stood up. Even in the dark, she could see the shepherd's retreating figure, and everything else seemed to fade like sinking objects into a lake.

"You won't board a rocket, will you?"

Coughs and hacks were the only replies she got.

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Samara started doubting both the crabgrass and its magical properties throughout the night. Already, her dad accused her of harboring some kind of international fugitive in Mayoki; no telling just

what kind of outcastery she'd face when she got to Duncan. Everybody was sure to know about her alien collusion based on the coffee house incident and Alonzo's report.

She couldn't show her face up there, so she put on a trenchcoat, fedora, and sunglasses. All the contents of her purse would have to fit in a briefcase - not the crabgrass, though. She threw that out the window. For good measure, she unwrapped a white crayon and stuck it in her mouth. When she passed the mirror, she thought for a moment a mysterious masher had broken in, and only remembered the disguise after she got real sweaty running outside to escape. "Oh, I deceived myself. I passed the test."

Just to be sure, she went in front of the neighbor's house and boarded the bus there. Good thing, too. A lot of the kids on the bus had rocks in their hands, ready to throw them at the girl from 265. "Huh, guess Tamsen knows what's good for her and she's not coming out. I wonder who this stranger from 263 is, though. He looks like a criminal. I can't tell if we should stone him or the bus driver for letting him on in the first place."

It was just as she suspected. The Duncan school bus kids held a meeting there and then as to who deserved the stoning. Throughout it, twenty-six complaints were raised about Skinflint integrity being compromised by the resident space case, and how inhumane the new security tests were. Samara had to chant, "It's just on Earth. It's just on Earth. The ordeal shall not follow me into the celestial realm," to stop herself from jumping out the back window and hiding in somebody's mailbox.

They never decided who to stone by the time the bus pulled into the parking lot. It couldn't park, though; way too many students were lined up in the way. Mr. Klambadni rolled down the window and ordered them to get out of the road. They yelled back they'd been waiting in line too long to sacrifice their places. And what were they in line for? The passengers hopped out the windows and followed the line up to Duncan's front door, and saw through the windows the brand spanking new security measures.

The attaboys were in charge. You could tell by their trademark emblem, that banana thingy peeled at both ends. With each kid in line, they waved a stick in his or her face, then flung it across the hallway. You weren't off the hook even if you didn't chase it, because then they'd drop a bowl of dead fish and canaries at your feet, some goon in the ceiling would dangle a worm on a hook as you walked by, and then strap a saddle on you and wack you on the butt with a rolled up newspaper. If you showed enough humanity throughout all that, then you'd face Mr. Yagerbasket. He was all mummified and stuck in the wheelchair, but he had a gut-stained flyswatter. They had to stand still and let him whap their heads to prove they weren't insects. Anyone who dodged it was clearly an insect in disguise. Passing the screening or dragged off by the pawlice, every kid at the end murmured, "blam you, Tamsen."

They didn't stop at the kids. The infamous "applauding classroom" incident yesterday taught them that subterfuge could find its way the doors, walls, and furniture. In these instances, they pushed an X-ray screen around looking for signs of intelligence. One of these X-rays rolled by Samara, and the guy

pushing it halted. The realization struck her stiff: she was caught, the X-ray let him see her through the trenchcoat. He unlatched the window and opened it.

"You, in the stranger danger get-up. Principal Dr. Saturn wants you in her office. Shake a leg, or I'll out you."

Samara took her big sweaty trenchcoat and lunged through the window. She couldn't worry about the kids behind her having their fingers slammed as they tried to join her, she had a whole batch of excuses to think up. She was in for an interrogation; how would she get through it without compromising herself or Daffy?

Through the office door window, she didn't see Saturn the way you'd usually see her, roleplaying as a firing squad and shooting animal action figures with a Durf™ gun. She had to take off her sunglasses for a better look, but this time, she and her colossal seat sitters were folded into the *obmmm* position surrounded by candles and statues of people nobody recognized. Her eyes were closed and she was out of breath. Samara thought for a few minutes of calling an ambulance until she saw the four-foot abomination seated across.

Mayoki had her eyes closed too. Her mouth, though, was open. Samara couldn't hear her through the door, and she couldn't read lips either. She tried the door handle, but it was locked. The rattling alerted one of Mayoki's eyes, and her sluggy wet tongue stuck out. Samara gave her the koochie lip, and then Saturn woke up and saw her.

Mayoki unlocked the door. "I got another prediction. joint's about to teach a whole new set of lessons."

"You are surely a weasel," hissed Samara. "To deliberately influence an outcome is no prediction whatever."

"You got one thing right. *Whatever.*"

Samara went in, discarded the trenchcoat and fedora, and took a seat across from Saturn. She could see all those excitement waves rippling up and down her monumental tush cushions; that meant good tidings of great joy were not about to torpedo her way.

"Sacred tidings of tremendous jubilee!" began Saturn. "I saw it in a vision, as described in vivid detail by Ms. Culbara. I saw the sovereign ascension of natural Earthmankind." Her face just got rosier and rosier. "I saw the eternal dadgumnation of filthy space foreigners, once and for all."

"But surely, Dr. Principal, it couldn't be that eternal. After all, the séance came to an end. The dadgumnation does not still dance before your eyes."

All that rosiness wilted. She swapped it with indignance. "It was far from my last séance with Ms. Culbara. I shall check in regularly to see if they are just as dadgummed in the future. At any rate, you are a part of the Great Cosmic plan, Ms. Tamsen. I can feel it in my womb."

Samara had to get that lady's doom womb out of her mind as fast as possible. "Dr. Principal, in all my ventures into the post-mortal realms, whether infernal or celestial, whether skin, scale, fur, or feather, I have never seen anything of an ascension or mass dadgum-"

"You haven't selected the proper parts." Saturn hurled a briefcase onto the table. It opened on impact, showing a collection of saws, knives, hooks, needles, scissors, and jars. "Now, it shan't ask of you too much scheming. The law regarding the alien right not to be skewered and disassembled over there does not exist. Exploit that to the fullest extent. If the need arises, lure them into an operating room wearing veterinary scrubs."

Samara gasped. "I couldn't take on such false colors. The very honorific 'doctor' is affixed before your name, not mine."

Saturn's cheek fat lost some of its rosiness. She closed the briefcase and leaned in. "Ms. Tamsen. We have reputable reports that you have been fraternizing with an alien feline, and that you brought said feline into an eating establishment. I am certain you are familiar enough with Skinflint decrees to know that such associations come with severe penalties. It is a mercy for you that Ms. Culbara has introduced me to an afterlife that brightens my mood." She wasn't kidding. A thin golden halo began glowing close behind her. "What I here offer you is a chance at redemption. Your treason need not stain your own spiritual lenins, if you shall only accept and extract the designated organs."

Equally unfloral was Samara's face. "What, then, is the penalty that comes from my refusal?"

"There will be no refusal on your part. Decades long since have I awaited this salvation." Not only did she glow, but she also began to float and speak with about six different voices. "And now at last it comes. You shall capture the innards freely! In the place of alien intrusion you will set up a forcefield, and it shall not be permissive, but sturdy and deflective as the right cheek and the left! Unfair as the participation trophy and the loafer with the lofty inheritance! Dreadful as the Central Park Lucy statue in '09! Stronger than old cheese, stronger than dirt! All space cretins shall hate it and despair!"

All that glowing threw her hair out of wack and blew some of her paperwork off into the floor. Samara still had doubts about Mayoki's prophetic accuracy, but in all her time in front of the principal, she'd never seen her pull off a glowing float and gloat. Maybe that's what she really got from Mayoki. All she could do was muster up a complacent but weak grin and take the dissection kit out. Maybe she'd cram some supermarket liver into the jars. Who'd know the difference?

Some gritty object flew over her shoulder. The next thing she knew was her exposed identity; she'd left the coat and junk lying around in Saturn's office. "What are you guys waiting for? Stone her!" The exclamation came from some upstart in a line. A few other kids were about to reenact the lottery themselves until a shiney black bullwhip slashed their grips wide open. In possession of that whip was Alonzo Dubois.

"Now, now, don't let's regress to biblical penal systems. Look on the bright side; were it not for Tamsen's treason, I wouldn't have delighted in screening you lot."

A girl not part of the "Attas" blew her lip up. "Yeah, you delighted. You weren't the ones being pushed on the lawn and forced to see if you laid an egg."

Genevieve whirled around, and some other kids got a face full of hair. "At least we get to play with a ouija board."

The kids without whip scars on their fingers went through with their stonings. They all missed, though. Samara didn't occupy that part of the hall another half-second, she was so scandalized. What other cheap novelty occultism was Mayoki peddling? There'd sure be a lot of stray rocks on the ground and dents in the wall to toothpaste-calk by the end of the day. It looked to a lot of them like she wanted to cut in.

Sure enough, at the end of the line sat Mayoki, scooting a planchett around a ouija board for a few seconds before she slapped the guy's hand. "Stop moving it, blockhead." She had a big bulbous plum turban with stars on it, and held together with costume jewelry. It seemed to be made out of the same fabric as the tent behind her. Zodiac symbols dangled from the booth's overarching board, which itself had "The Prophet is: IN 5 cents" written across it in bright yellow letters, only the word "IN" hung as its own sign by a wire from a nail.

"What is the meaning of this?" Samara pointed to the sign. "I thought you couldn't spell."

"She can't." Some guy strutted out of the tent. "I wrote it for her."

"Yes. You were a very helpful stooge, Kevin." Mayoki grabbed some discarded cookie fortunes off the floor and threw them at his face. "Now get lost, I got a business to run." Kevin shambled off down the hall, his face all scrunched up like he was inches away from crying.

Samara turned to the next in line. "This is she on whose future forecasts you rest your fate?"

The kid was so aghast he didn't have an answer. Mayoki did, though. "Don't be so wishy-washy." She also had a weapon. The planchet soared over Samara's shoulder and knocked the next kid out cold. "Look what you're doing to my customers. Beat it, flake!"

Samara didn't linger. By now, everyone was too busy to chuck rocks at her. They were either checking on the unconscious kid or, for some reason that would have slowed her down, getting eeny-meeny-miny-moed by Mayoki. No, she slipped out of sight and made it behind the tent so she could get a better look at the hoo-hah Mayoki wanted to pass off as legitimate supernatural tools.

The interior was lit up by a few scented candles, Sassafras and essence of nursing home, by the smell of it. On a large round table sat layer after layer of bad faith prophecy apparatus: Fortune cookies, divining rods, tarot cards, drunk-up teacups. Samara had half a mind to sweep it all off the table. The other half noticed the wishbone and the rabbit's foot. Jackpot! Just the fake evidence she needed to show a-dissecting she had gone. She popped open the briefcase and jarred them. Now, if only she had a disguise to get out of here with, just in case they still wanted to stone her. She snipped one of the tent walls free and tried to cut eyeholes, but she had a little trouble with the scissors and the sheet she wanted to wear wound up all Swiss.

"What do you think you're doing? I told you to get out of here."

Samara whirled around to see Mayoki, having just come in to pick the clover (which by the way didn't even have four leaves), and now indignant that Samara should come in and deface her business.

"I want to verify your wares here for their celestial authenticity."

Mayoki whirled around. "Do any of you losers have a brick I can sling?"

"I got a rock," offered the kid in front.

Samara did not back down. She tapped Mayoki's shoulder. "What troubles you? Do you fear I shall find your instruments to be plain dull objects with no divine function? I think you are, because you're a big chicken." She bent over and started doing the bee's knees. "Ackity-ackity-ackity *-yow!* Ackity-ackity *-yow!*"

Nobody wanted to stone her after that. They wanted to hide from her. Everyone except Mayoki. All that celestial verification needed showed up when she demoted the junk on the table to ammunition. She'd need to take up sports, or at least a heretic stoning class, if she wanted to land a hit. "Get out of here, carrot head!" Even with her lucky hits, Samara seized the suitcase and used it as a shield.

Among the more out-of-place projectiles was a blu-ray disc labeled, "Kookamunga." If anything permitted a glimpse into the afterlife beyond Samara's capabilities with animal corpses, that would be it. She took it and sauntered out of Mayoki's throwing range, and stole into the supply closet where they kept the TV with the built-in blu-ray player.

"THIS BLU-RAY INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK." That was the lone caption in the upper-left corner of an otherwise completely blue death screen. Samara did her best to picture the kind of person who'd have to spend an eternity in a world like that. The result was underwhelming, but before she ejected the thing, the picture scrambled and then rearranged itself into something more comprehensible.

She could tell what it was, but she kind of wished she couldn't. William Allen White's head, in all its two-dimensional cardboard cut out glory, hovered above a newsdesk with several dozen televisions playing newsfeeds behind him. It wasn't just his head, though. It was his head strapped onto a body way too small with a microphone in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. "Hello?" he said, and the voice almost made Samara back away right out of the closet, it was so relatively girlish and unsuitable for a seventy-year-old man from the 1940s. "Is this Clarkabeth Duncan Educationary? I see you aren't a neo... I mean, a talking space animal. If you were it definitely wouldn't be Duncan."

The lower jaw was cut out in the shape of a ventriloquist dummy's. That was the worst part.

"Don't... don't... don't let's start..." started Samara.

"Start what?"

"I don't know. Dating, I suppose."

"I'm not here looking for a date." He waved the papers he held. "I'm after signatures. You see, it's in Damselwood's best interest, and I mean all of Damselwood, Skinflint included, not to declare war on the ugwanvaders. I know, they've already done that, but I've started a petition that we propose a treaty between our own law enforcement and the new arrivals. I'm sure you've seen on the news that they put neo- excuse me, alien convicts on the front line. Well... I have an update. They've run out of convicts, and now the native Earthmen are taking the bullets."

"Serves those Earthmen right, if you ask me." Samara folded her arms and turned her nose up. "If my own people can't acquaint themselves with the mortal threshold, perhaps it will take an intergalactic outsider," she spread her hands towards the heavens, "dispatched by the Great Cosmic Wonder Themselves."

Speaking of which, there weren't any censor mists around to conceal the old newspaper editor's zombified expression. Had she been absolved? Or did the view depict some place in the natural realm? Samara had spent so little time there she couldn't nail just what environment it was. She could definitely see it, though, plane as the searing white sun through your eyeballs when you stared at it too long. She could hear the words, "Look, is this Duncan or not? I have a lot of signatures to collect and lives are on the line." She tested her other senses, rubbing her hands all over the screen, sniffing it, raking her tongue across it.

Off came William's face, and underneath it was a neog bear girl. "Did I get through to the nut house? I'm not a lollipop."

Samara pulled back. "So I taste... but neither are you the revived incarnation of a 20th century newsman, so why present yourself as such?"

The bear girl blushed. "Crap. Okay, you caught me... but you look like you're willing to listen. I am serious about the petition, and I know that most Duncaners won't listen to anyone like me. Any chance you could go around getting the school to sign it?"

Not with Mrs. Ludflax the custodian looking over her shoulder. She'd been eavesdropping in on Samara's dissection assignment, and knew she was too much of a freakin' ally to pull off a simple thing like that. Ludflax herself, though, could be in for an astronomical raise if she bagged a space varment herself. In her daze, she mistook the TV for a kind of cage, so she brushed past Samara and gave it the ax. Its screen exploded and blasted the woman through about six different walls before the momentum ended.

Samara noticed the blu-ray disc fly out after her. She wasn't done with it; there had to be some secrets she had missed. She hopped through the wall holes and shell shocked students and faculty to collect it. On her way past the hall, she noticed Mayoki dump a box of Tato-riffic crackers on the floor and hopscotch across them. Kevin peered out from around the corner. Before he got another faceful of stale junk food, he noticed, "You know, that looks remarkably like an old single woman in a cottage having conversations with inanimate objects."

* * *

She didn't sneak off to the Wizenid Widow's just yet. Before going on an undercover mission, Samara wanted to make sure her meditative powers were still scrambled by censor mists. She fished a roach out of the toilet, and sure enough, the afterlife was as cloudy as ever. It was a shame, too. He was such a gentleman with many flattering things to say about his new eternal motel.

She had no luck with the blu-ray, either. No matter how far into it she fast-forwarded, she never got to the part where the bear girl showed up. All it had was that "intentionally left blank" taunt. So she sat on her bed, turning it over. "What secrets do you hold that choose not to share?" She examined it from every angle she could think of, even though where were the fourth, fifth, and rest of the dimensions when you needed them? But then didn't need them after all to see tiny little fur fibers streaked in all along the shiny side.

"How simple can I be? And I not dispatching my ears, nose, tongue, and fingers to land this discovery."

What a tasty look at the afterlife that would be. How do you like that, Mayoki? On the other hand, that fur no doubt came from the shepherd's pelt. It wasn't the shepherd prime ribs and buttock bouquet afterlife she wanted a sneaky peak at, it was Mayoki's herself's.

A knock at the window interrupted her disappointment. It was Daffy and the shepherd, exactly the pair she needed to bake herself an alibi. She opened the window. "You didn't leave Earth after all. Now that you're here, you may cover for me. Come in, you too, sir."

While Daffy and shepherd hopped through the window, Samara wrote on a memo pad. Daffy lay the hedgehog she'd found next to the blu-ray and hopped onto the desk. "Nobody may see the oracle," wrote Samara. "Not nobody, not nohow." After checking the hallway, she taped it to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Daffodil. "You haven't even looked her. Or him, I didn't check."

"He'll have to wait. I seek a celestial sector of graver significance." She dug around in her closet and came out with a french fur coat and a straw hat. "And now," she said to the shepherd, "to get you in some fashionable clothing."

All Daffy could do was give her the hypnotic stare of skepticism as she tossed the coat around the unwilling shepherd. Right away he tried to defur it. "No sir, don't savage it; mother might force an entrance, and I want to maintain the illusion that I'm still here."

Daffy raised her paw. "Could we both just hide under the covers like Little Red Riding Hood?"

"Well... so long as you don't need to leave for a restroom break. Otherwise, a disguise is a definite prerequisite. At any rate, if either mother or papa comes along, just tell either that you are engaged in a 12-hour prayerathon. Speak through the muffler so she won't tell the vocal difference. Now, let me think... is there any matter I haven't covered?"

Based on the fearsome way Daffy's stomach snarled, it tasted like she needed to leave snacks around, even though it smelt like anything they tried to eat in this place would blast right back out their yakkers. "If you go hungry, just be sure not to leave the room without sufficient clothing." Samara didn't have time to perfect her cover; one second later was another tidbit lost; she slid out the window and snapped off a Y-shaped branch off the bush.

"At least tell me where you're going," said Daffy.

"The Wizenid Widow's." Samara shut the window and sauntered off up Widow's Peak.

There was enough sun left to keep the riff-raff and hooligans under all those rocks, behind those trees, and down those holes. Not critters, but looters. Still, she never knew what renegade hand might creepy-crawl up on her and smuggle the magic crab grass out of her purse. She made sure to tiptoe as she turkey-lurked to the top, swinging that Y-wood around for extra luck for Daffodil. She sure hoped her performance would trick the Tamsen parents.

Through the widow's window, she saw her whapping fragile objects off the top shelf and onto the floor. So much for the antique clock. So much for the hourglass. Good thing the widow had shoes on. Anyway, there in the corner facing the wall sat Mayoki. "So featherweight a sentence for one so abominable." But she wasn't in time out; she was doing the *ohmmm*, the perfect position for a supernatural eavesdrop.

The door was locked (this had to be Mayoki's doing), so Samara had to go down the chimney, little to the widow's ability to notice anything. When she got closer to Mayoki, she noticed the two hair wisps she pinched: dog fur. "Sakes alive on the other side! She is sojourning to the celestial waiting room. I shall steal in and witness her origins."

She crept a soft, dainty, lady-like hand out and touched one of Mayoki's braids. Then it was like a wrecking ball meteorizing the floor as she blasted downwards, surrounded by wood chips, dirt, and widowly antiques. "Oh my, I hope she doesn't notice."

She was too busy falling to get a good look at her surroundings, but when she was all done, she plunked onto a soft tissuey pad with urped up apple juice through tiny little pores. It burnt, kind of. There were those stubborn mists, all right. What she could see of her surroundings were things she had to get past the smell and heat first. It was like honey-I'm-a-titan-and-I-cut-one-in-the-spa around there. Beyond that, she saw curved jagged gravy-green spires. Acid motes surrounded turkey-colored mounds, throughout which webular trenches branched and a moist furry lawn.

The ground was made of these slippery tiles shaped like shark fins. They stretched and relaxed in waves. A bass drum roll echoed off the rolls, just about the only soothing thing in this place. There were tunnels, and orangey peanut butter gook surged up through them. The place even had a roof. It had the same fin-like tiles. Sharp knifey chandeliers hung down like cranes and reached down to chomp up fish scales and hamboogerlets squart down by a big puckering p'tooy hole.

"This must be the real Kookamunga. It stinks the eyes and other senses in such a way that it *all* earns censorship."

Whoops. The last thing she needed was more secrecy clouds ruining her espionage. She clapped her hands over her mouth so no more complaints would tip off the deities. While she wasn't talking, she heard someone talking.

"So *Dalhickohobbin* is not on a *rockofetch* to *Jimhogganyhoo*?"

"Last I saw, she was in a *plurf*."

That was Mayoki for sure, but plurf? Rockofetch? Dalhickohobbin? Blam these mists and their censorious interference. Though she couldn't yet pinpoint the direction, Samara wandered forward. She wanted the best earview she could get.

"How then, pray," said the other person, "might parent and child unite unless she gets there? Perhaps I should select another *sumfiardi* to do my bidding."

Mayoki screamed out a fake laugh. "Fat luck there. All these puke-clowns just want the *febrosi* to be their *meeyamoo*. Hire one of them and they'll just wind up in diapers and a bottle, if they can even get near her in the first place."

Hard as it was to find her way around the place, Samara did spot some hideous growth fiend as she rounded one of the turkey mounds. She slipped out of sight, then peeked back at some formless... thingy lumbering around, scabrous and suppurating.

"Astounding," said whoever Mayoki was talking to. "You truly think you are one-of-a-kind."

"More so than you, you holy fart-wisp of a *grindarindarozabo*, who can't even climb your way out of," Mayoki sniffed around, "A flennaticano's *stoggowidz*. And more so than the other herblumbs."

The pus-cloud creature wasn't the only one of its kind. At least it had no eyes to spot the intruder, nor a mouth that could rat her out, so she went on following their voices. She had to enter a censor mist, though, so she slowed her steps to make sure she didn't bump into any of these pimple phantoms.

"*You're* the herblumb, and the ultimate one, according to you, the ultimate *herblumb*, no less, you insolent whoopin-worthy leach."

"Yeah, well," scoffed Mayoki, "Guess what, parasite? I'm still ultimate. I can leave on my own. We have to slice a *kibobilty gumpst* open before you go anywhere. Question is, fyewt-fyewt, what are you gonna pay me?"

This was about to get real juicy. Samara sped up her approach, then tripped over a rib and stumbled into their line of vision. Mayoki turned. Her confederate was shrouded in a greasy black smog, a lot like car toot. The only thing Samara could see of them was the big chair they sat on, made of bones.

"That does it," snapped Mayoki. She stood on her toes and wacked her heels together. "There's no state like 'zone." With that, she sunk through the tiles and left behind her own fur cloud. The toot cloud got frantic, and a pair of rusty claws escaped their cover so that Samara could see them. She

couldn't appreciate the view for very long because an Earthquake happened. Even beyond the censor mists, Samara could see the chandelier claws shooting towards her and hairy gook boulders rolling her way. She clacked her own heels and echoed Mayoki's "no state" spell. The tiles gulped her.

Back at Widow's cottage, she found herself sitting on the floor and holding a fistful of Mayoki's hair. The girl it used to be attached to stood over her as red hot vapor sizzled off her forehead.

Samara sniffed. "Rather stingy of you, not introducing me to your friend up there."

Mayoki snatched her hairs back. "I'll introduce you to the rest of your life with a cracked apart skull. Get out of my life forever, or..." With some muscle pretty freakish for a first-grader, Mayoki grabbed an antique hourglass and wadded it up, metal, glass, and all (there wasn't any sand left over with all that pressure), and launched it at Samara's face. Good thing for Samara; it left a hole in the wall where it landed. "Out, schmuck, out!"

Before we all forget about the wizened widow, she was still knocking junk off her shelves when the war started. She swivelled around, not because of what Mayoki screamed, but she heard the crippling wails of her possessions as they blasted through her walls; not just the hourglass but her jam jars, her tea set, her dish towels and even a still lit candelabra. She was off to collect them and bandaid them, but no matter how many bandaids and "ouchie glop" she wasted, they'd still end up through the wall all crumpled up in a ball.

She finally came to her senses and saw the person responsible for all her sorrow: The yoga girl (which from our angle meant Samara). There could only be one explanation: she took her powers too far and telekinetically began lifting and deforming various items to test out how mighty her mind finally was.

And that's why she ushered Samara out of the cottage. Once she was gone, there was no need for Mayoki (who was somehow invisible to the old dame) to keep throwing all that junk.

"There was no concentrating in there anyway," resigned Samara. "I'll just have to do the dog fur."

* * *

She disappointed the prowlers and riff raff on her way back down the peak. All they could mug out of her was that crabgrass. Taking it wasn't even a challenge. "Its magical properties seem to have dried," explained Samara, and left them all to wallow. She couldn't waste her time feeling sorry for them. Mayoki was definitely a rival now. She knew sectors of the afterlife that she wouldn't teach to anyone else. All that stuff she told Saturn about mankind's intergalactic subjugation was a bucket of hog puddle. The stars were out, and they spelt as much in ancient Mesopotamian alphabets.

But she didn't fall for that hooley. Looking up at all those truths, written so by the Great Cosmic Wonder Themselves, she couldn't help but smile. Where'd she be without outer space? What religion would plunk her from yakketing stooge to yakketing stooge, each one pitching his own monopoly on the realms beyond? She had confidence in moonlight. She had confidence in wit. She would grit her teeth the grittiest of grit, and show everyone Mayoki Culbara was full of-

"Quit!" She was at the window when she saw the thing that could have wiped away her access to Mayoki's world for good. "Stop that, what are you doing?"

Daffy wasn't in the dress anymore, and neither was the big German shepherd. Instead, she took the sleeve and wiped the fur off the blu-ray. Incorrectly, no less. You're supposed to do it dry, but Daffy spat on it.

"That is crucial spiritual evidence you are cleansing," cried Samara. "It isn't dust, you are contributing to Mayoki's miserly aspirations!"

What's wrong with someone who doesn't even bang on the stupid window? It was the pits enough to make a nearby lizard scoff, "Lady, you do realize the furball can't hear you with the thing closed, right? You totally kind of don't, but still. Sill. Got it?"

She got the window open just in time for mom or dad to knock at the bedroom door. The window startled Daffy while the door took the dog by surprise, and they both scampered under the bed. Or tried to. The shepherd couldn't get his whole booty under there, so Samara climbed in and took over.

"I am engaged in an all-night prayer," she called without opening the door. "The wonder and I are fountain deep and wide in discussion."

"I believe it." It was her dad. "You two... excuse me, four are so deep in discussion that the animal musk doesn't interfere. What do you have in there this time? A coyote?"

He stuck his nose beneath the door. If it really were that strong, she wondered, how come he had to put his nose under the door to smell it? But there was no dissuading it with words. It didn't belong there. Samara took the pepper she'd brought in for an emergency dinner and dashed it onto the intruder. That did the trick. Now all he could say was "AAAckumFRRTTTsheeyuu!" and sneeze himself off the premises.

"His guesses warmthen," observed Samara. "Might hers? I suppose I shall have to establish a covert headquarters elsewhere." She looked at the blu-ray, then used her eyes to frown at Daffy. "As well as a keepsafe for importal artifacts."

Daffy knew that tone was directed at her, but she didn't understand the source of it until she crept into the open and saw Samara examining the blu-ray.

"I... listen, I have a reason I needed to dust it. You see... there's been some embarrassing things that he's been through."

"Embarrassed? Our hounding brethren?" Samara almost broke her neck laughing at the idea that dogs could ever be embarrassed, but then she remembered the coyote soul she once met, sentenced to

an eternity in a parlor chair having kissy blonde brutes poodilize him. She stopped laughing, and felt ashamed.

"I shall subject myself to a stern penance later on," she promised. "But first..." She scribbled up a form asking permission to poke around his inner supernatural premises. Then she dumped the tea on the floor so the dog could step in it and pawprint his signature.

Meanwhile, Daffy cleaned up all the fur. It was all off the blu-ray, but it stuck all over the dress sleeve like the world's tackiest front lawn. Before she could smuggle it out of sight, Samara folded it into a Bible-shaped stack and placed her left hand over it. Her right hand got confused as to whether it ought to be over her heart or up in the air doing the three-finger scout sign. Her mouth, though, was completely on track.

"I solemnly swear not to elicit laughter or any semblance of ridicule at the prospect I soon shall see."

Daffy tried to dig out the sleeve, but the fur was already all over the dress by now. There was no dusting it in time to stop Samara's meditation.

"Please," she objected. "I might not know as much about the spiritual world as you, but I know that this will only lead to trouble." Although he'd already printed the permission form, the shepherd got whiney. "At least let me come with you. I might have to scope out ahead."

"But what shall we do for a lookout? I do not know how much pepper Papa has left to expel before either he recovers or mother gives up so one of them may force entry and administer a sentence."

The big German shepherd already had the answer. With a big humiliated sigh, he staggered out of the closet in another one of Samara's evening gowns. He had all the accessories he needed to hide the fact that he was really a dog - turtleneck, sun hat, gloves, and a big long stocking shunked all down his tail. Samara was not sold *all* the way on it, but, like she said, "The spiritual realm may wait forever, but we mustn't."

They closed themselves in the closet and sat the dress between them. They tucked their legs in a "heap big sitting" knot and each took a hold of the sleeve. Daffy took a breath; "Here we go again," and the whole wardrobe and carpet flew up in soft cottony tatters as they plummeted through mystical belly farts and giblet constellations into an environment that looked a lot different from the one she followed Mayoki into.

This place looked a lot less fleshy. That wasn't exactly a good thing; the dry desert ground might not be squirting up acid at them, but they were surrounded by rusty junk hills with lots of nice sharp points. Although Samara didn't get the whole picture thanks to the censor clouds, she could see busted bicycles, pick up trucks, chain link fences, tanks, kennels, furniture, and pieces of incomplete architecture. Some of it even seemed to be dripping with butter. Wait, were those bones poking out between the spaces?

A gruff, eager bark from who knows where made it all the way to their ears. It was full of spit and hunger; you could even hear the drool splashes hitting the ground. Daffy seized Samara's arm. "Dogs! Dogs are here, and not nice ones either."

"You're clawing me," complained Samara. Daffy loosened her grip, but her fraidiness stuck around. "From which of your heart chambers comes this fear? You keep a dog alongside you three heaping quarters of the day."

"But that one is already on my side. It's different and dangerous when it barks before it sees you. The one here has the bark that tells me it wants to hurt someone. Badly. And that someone could be us."

More barking rolled their way. Samara, in her zeal to explore the place, couldn't deny all the aggression packed into it. These were dogs that hadn't eaten anything in a while, and any organic matter would no doubt to them look like prancing pork chops. In fact, a thick porridgey saliva puddle crept towards their feet. Starvation was this here hood's livni'est occupant, fo sheezy.

"We have to move." Daffy scuttled up one of the junk heaps. In spite of all the danger, Samara's lousier beef with the place was that it wasn't Mayoki's secret lair. She so desperately wanted a word or two, however censored, with that exhaust faced entity about whatever bargain went on between her and Mayoki.

She woke from her trance when she noticed, from between a safe deposit box and a refrigerator, a long bony hand shoot out from the junkpile and take a swipe at Daffy, just as she scampered over it. Daffy snatched her tail in alarm. "Hurry! Let's see what you need to see so we can get out of here."

Maybe she could interview somebody after all. Samara climbed her way up to the peep cavern. It was too dark in there to see the whole thing, but she did see a beady bloodshot yellow eye glaring back at her.

"May you tell me how you find this hungry place?" She asked. All she got in reply was a hiss of bad breath, and then a censor cloud moved in front of it. Samara sighed and shook her head. "Miser."

If nothing else, she might get a better view of the land at the top of the junk hill. Daffy's scurry got faster every time a new arm (most of these seemed to be missing their thumbs) bolted out and tried to grab her. She secured her personal space by seating herself in a refrigerator. Samara sought these swipecy dump bums for any word on the setting, even if it were so little as "this joint stinks." No, every bodiless eyeball was just as cagey as the first verbal cheapskate she met, all the way to the top of the pile, where Daffy sat in her fridge, gaping.

Samara could have brushed this off as run-of-the-mill childhood amazement. What she couldn't do was see the juicy chocolate goodness that lay at the center of this scene. "Blam that infernal censor cloud."

Daffy jaw went back where it belonged. "You can't see it?" She sounded relieved but cautious. This got Samara kind of suspicious.

Here's what she could see: on the other side of this junk heap spread a clearing, around which other junk heaps piled up. Dogs faced away from them. Even though they were a good half-mile away, their bones were obvious, like some vampire stuck a straw in them and sucked until their skin saran wrapped around their skeletons. Maybe it was all that drooling. Drool rivers trickled down each of their tongues, so much of it you could probably find extinct sea life if you dove deep enough. If only she could see just what looked so tasty.

"All I can see are the hunger hounds in all their hung-"

But the censor cloud was changing color; Samara noticed different hues streaking across it, and leaving a little transparency. She could now preview portions of what looked like a metal slab, parts of which stuck out a little more than others. Pores bloomed, then vanished. and conceal that part of the... carbonite block? It was the right shine and color for it, from what she could see.

"Wait, I'm getting a visual."

Daffy shot her gaze from the slab back to Samara several times. "We need to leave. Now."

"What? Not before I view this wonder."

"Samara, this is bad. We have to go immediately."

"The shepherd's salvation just might hinge on this prospect."

Daffy grabbed her arm, claws drawn. "*Samara!*"

The dogs stopped drooling and turned. Meat. Meat at last. They stopped drooling over whatever was behind that mist and heaved themselves up the dump, kicking junk and debris into the faces of their packmates. Those bony arms from inside joined the rumble and shoved the refrigerator, but they struck from too many angles to capsize it. For the moment, Samara forgot about the carbonite. She'd been braving afterlives for years, but she'd never felt so much scary craziness.

She grabbed Daffy back and cracked her ankles together. "There's no state like zona, zona, zona!"

Rather than take them both straight home, the mantra appeared to fast-forward the incoming disaster; the junk heap collapsed in on itself with the girls at the center, and brought the dogs and their wide-open maws with them. The whole scene went through a kind of "unrain" wherein filthy mailboxes, gears, tires, linoleum and things flew up into the sky. Shortly after, though, the carpet came back, and so did Samara's wardrobe, and there was no trace of the dogs or that miserable landscape they lived in.

The sleeve was all gone, too. Daffy shredded it and ate it.

It was too late for Samara to make her stop. How was she supposed to undo this mutiny? Daffy coughed up hairballs on a regular basis. There was no reason to think she could keep all that cloth down her throat forever, but there was no reason to believe she'd up and hack it out right in front of her, if she was that desperate to block her from going back.

"How could you?"

"*Ifts for our owm goob.*"

Samara felt like she needed an anvil to keep in the temper she never knew she had. "Daffodil, that looked like a crucial element of the afterlife. I might not see it anywhere else."

Daffy swallowed hard. "Good." Somehow, she didn't choke on it, but if she did, she wouldn't be getting any tea to wash it down with, either. It was going right back on the floor where it belonged.

"I mean... sort of... please try to understand, you wouldn't want to see what was in that metal block. It would have ruined your afterlife plans."

Was Daffy suggesting that Samara's psychic skills weren't up to standard? "My plans are impec... wait, can you see what's behind the censor mists?" She held Daffy by the shoulders. "I have to know, what was in that carbonite? What made those dogs so hungry?"

Daffodil didn't answer her. She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her teeth like the memory itself was a walnut, and her face a pair of crackers.

"Wondadgummit." That was all Samara had to say after all the penances the local priest declared, the worst of which included sensurround sound censor clouds until she memorized "Mayoki's creed" and recited all ten pages word perfect in front of the whole school, twelve paragraphs of which was in *shinto* tongues. She reiterated this to Daffodil the following morning when she dropped by to leave a vial of shepherd fur.

"Big hairy lump of good that will do me." Samara then slammed the window shut and yanked the curtains closed. If that was what it took to get rid of the anger, well, it got rid of a lot more than that. The next time she looked out the window, Daffy wasn't there. She lost more than the shepherd and her celestial visitations that day. She realized, far too late, she lost the last thing that gave her any happiness.