

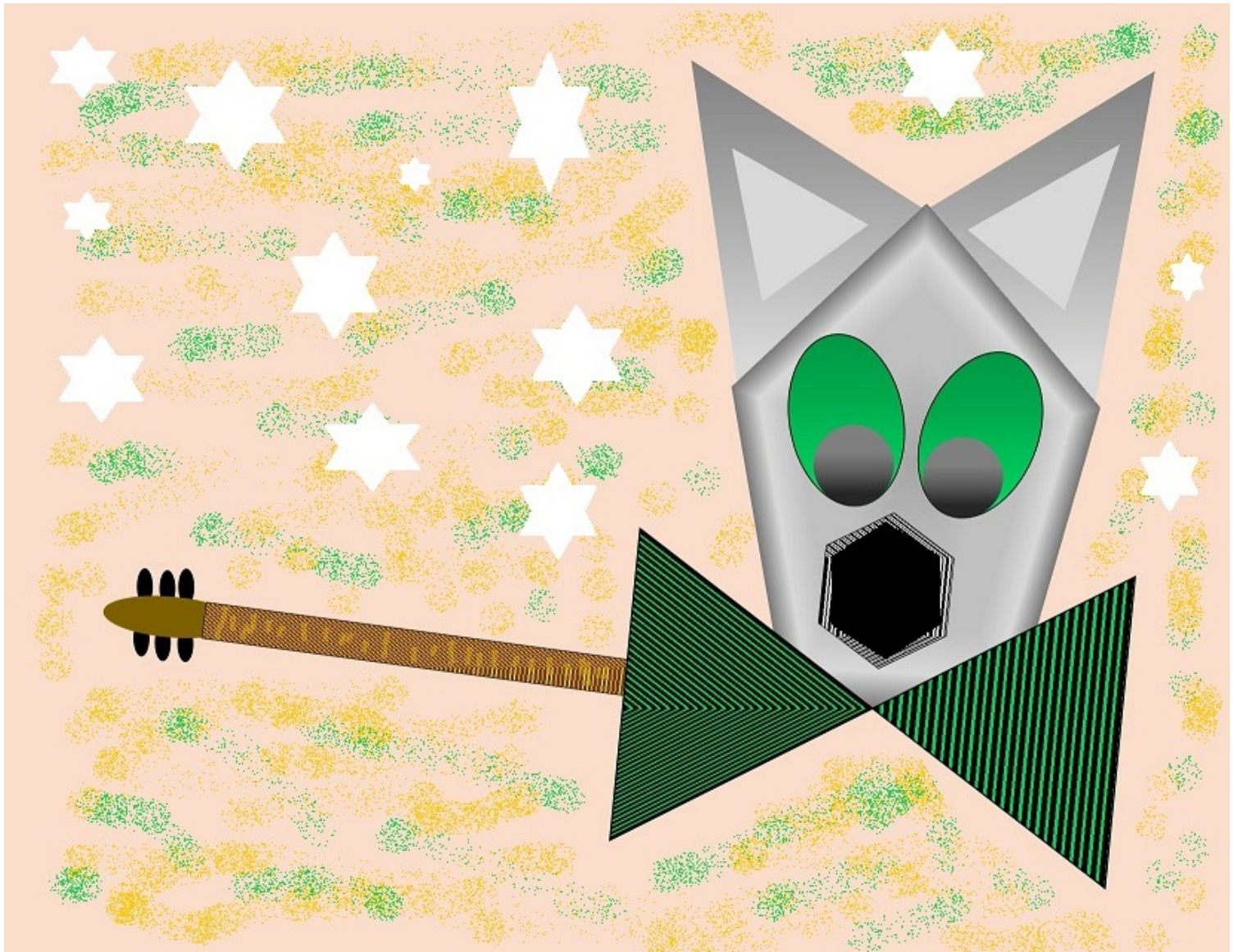
玉兔 蚀

Yutu Shi

(Jade Rabbit Eclipse)

by



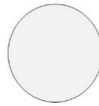


This work is for those who wish
to reach the moon
and play for the stars
in all they do.

~ tommywart

Phases

月



Arising



Cooperation



Opposition



Overshadowing



Obscurity – Part 1

官



Obscurity – Part 2



Reformulation



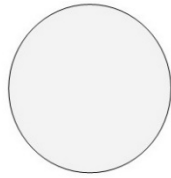
Comprehension



Realignment



New Clarity



Arising

Married to an immortal favored by the Emperor for his special set of skills, Chan'ge led a life of leisure as part of her status as a member of the royal court. But when her husband, Huan'g, used those skills to solve a problem the Emperor himself had created, the Emperor was so displeased with the result that he banished both Huan'g and Chan'ge from the heavenly kingdom, forcing them to live on earth as common farmers.

Over time, given the ravages of changing weather patterns, with floods and fires and droughts, the farm slowly succumbed, and barely produced enough to sustain the couple. Chan'ge grew careworn and bent with the struggle to maintain even the most meager of households, and Huan'g became desperate to find a way to better their situation.

In the market one afternoon, Huan'g encountered an ancient hag hawking what she claimed were restoration beans. Ingesting even half of one of these beans would restore an individual to whatever previous status he or she once had and now sought to regain. The old could be restored to youth; the newly poor could revive previous riches; the lame returned to health. With a tug on his sleeve, the hag warned Huan'g that ingesting the entire bean could result in overcompensation: too much of anything would not be a good thing.

With a burst of inspiration, Huan'g realized a single bean might restore both he and Chan'ge to their former comfortable position as companions to the Emperor. Pulling all his money from his trouser pocket, he bought one bean. The hag wrapped the bean in a piece of embroidered cloth and thrust it on Huan'g.

On returning home, Huan'g put the bean, swaddled in its cloth, on the bedroom dresser, then left on another errand. Curious about what her husband had been up to, Chan'ge opened the cloth and discovered the bean. While she wondered what it was for, she heard Huan'g returning; in her desire not to be caught snooping, hungry, and without thinking, Chang'e quickly ingested the entire bean.

As she realized her transgression – as she once again began to turn immortal – and as the effects of this were lifting her off her earthly plane of existence, Chan'ge realized she would now be tasked with providing sustenance for her husband and all her terrestrial family. Becoming more light-headed, she gazed at the embroidery on the cloth that had coddled the bean. Instantly she recognized that it named and measured all the ingredients necessary to formulate the spice of Life, a mixture that would sustain any creature that ingested it.

Quickly Chan'ge resolved on a course of action. Gathering from her pantry all the ingredients needed, she threw them in her rucksack. Now she must seek out the assistance of Jade Rabbit, a young apothecary she had often encountered in the marketplace. With his own special set of skills, he was uniquely qualified to formulate the spice of Life. Knowing of his musical talent, she had the creation in mind – it was no problem; she was becoming a goddess! – that would appeal to the young Jade, and perhaps sway him to accept her offer.

She rose to embrace the occasion.





Cooperation

Jade, a rabbit of fine sensibilities, was the only son of Harrood, the local apothecary who worked out of a small shop in the village, concocting both healthy herbal medications and flavorful food supplements. Like any dutiful son, Jade helped his father at the shop. It wasn't all just sweeping floors and cleaning jars; Jade learned how the combinations of chemistries inherent in all herbs and spices could achieve many different effects, both on the dispositions of other creatures and on food itself.

One of Jade's finer sensibilities also drew him to creating music, and his chosen instrument for his expressions was the guitar. But the guitar was only the beginning; living in the age we do, Jade discovered that the various devices available which affect the parameters of a sound's pure signal could be used, in still more various combinations, to (in effect) do for his compositions what the herbs and spices that his father used did for his own creations.

And so Jade grew, refining his sensibilities for both his inherited profession as an apothecary and his inherent talent for musical composition. His growing skills came to the attention of Chan'ge, a woman of uncertain means married to an area landowner. Over time, Chan'ge learned to trust Jade's touch when it came to getting just the right blend of herbs and spices for her various needs.

When, through her own transgression, Chan'ge greatly affected the course of her family circumstances, she realized that Jade Rabbit could play an integral role in helping her make the best of them. By agreeing to grind for her the spice of life, a unique formulation she acquired as a byproduct of her transgression, Jade Rabbit could salve the consequences of her altered situation.

To attract him to accept her offer, Chan'ge created an exquisite mortar and pestle combination that could be transformed into a nuanced instrument of musical composition she christened the PulsarGuitar. Powered by the universe Chan'ge was becoming part of, the PulsarGuitar was capable of producing any effect that might affect the flavor of a sound's pure wave.

"Gifted Jade, I am leaving this place and rising to fulfill a destiny I have chosen for myself. I will voyage to the face of the moon, from there to provide for my kindred here below. I value your skills, and so I beseech you to accompany me." She handed Jade her gift. "May this become the tool of your trades."

Jade Rabbit admired the heft of the pestle and the solid base of the mortar. Once Chan'ge showed him how to transform them into the PulsarGuitar, he marveled at its lightness, its sleek contours, and its balance on his hands. It moved, without effort, as he did. As he began to play, he found it said what he thought, with all the nuance he could muster.

"Dear lady, this gift and the arrangement you propose will greatly further my own aspirations as both an apothecary and a composer, and I most readily and gratefully accept your offer."

And so together they began.





Opposition

Blood Wolf, so named because he had been born on a night when the moon hung closest to his native land, sat at the edge of a clearing near the river, an obscure tributary that fed into the MissiLethe, and watched the full moon hover like a wafer just over the horizon. He reflected that it was now still as it always was.

Ages ago, when wolves first became entangled with humans, it never went well for the wolves. First the humans shunned them, then came the persecutions, and then the outright violence, leading to the wholesale slaughters, all so the humans could claim the right to protect a land that was never theirs in the first place.

Wolves by necessity thus became wary, living on the fringes of the encroaching chaos the humans called civilization. Once the local population of edible mice, rabbits, and such was exhausted, we grew gaunt with hunger, especially in the deep winters. At the beginning of every year, when the moon once again hung closest to the face of our land, we would gather to howl our protest.

We both resented and became used to the fact that, time after time, we were ignored.

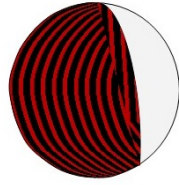
But now word reached Blood Wolf that a human and a rabbit had migrated to the face of the moon and were in collusion, making some enchanting concoction that was called the spice of Life, capable of sustaining any who ingested it.

From long experience with humans, Blood Wolf knew that this one, a woman who had somehow snagged a perch on the face of the moon, would never be willing to share the spice with his kind; humans never shared with wolves. But in a few days the moon would be nearest us once again, and the skies told him that this time his land would rise to achieve a complete Overshadowing of it, a total eclipse.

Under a cover of darkness, Blood Wolf would step out onto the face of the moon, and would sniff out the spice and the implements for making it. He would overpower the human and take it all from her, thus assuring the continued existence of he and his kind.

As for that rabbit who ground the spice? Blood Wolf was sure that he would serve up as a tasty meal. His lips moistened at the prospect.





Overshadowing

Wraiths of uncertainty plagued the solar winds, and Chan'ge, now adjusting to being the goddess of the moon, felt them prick the fine hairs at the base of her skull. She summoned her dependable familiar, Jade Rabbit.

"My dear companion, I sense a hungry and desperate force running amok within the cosmos. I fear you may soon come under attack during this imminent Overshadowing, as this force craves the spice of Life you so faithfully grind for me. Take all the ingredients of the spice along with your mortar-and-pestle magic in this rover I am providing for you and journey to the far side of the moon, secure everything there in your workshop, and wait for me there until this darkness has passed. I must send to my terrestrial family our latest rendering of the spice of Life, then I will be observing everything from a safe location on the southern boundary of the lunar rim."

Ever obedient to the desires of his mistress, Jade Rabbit stashed the remaining ingredients and the tools of his trades in the rover and scurried around the curve of the moon to his workshop in the shadows of a crater abandoned by an ancient sea. There he stored everything in a cavern he had discovered within the crater, and then he settled in for the coming storm. During the fleeting peace of the moment, he sensed an astral realignment, the sun slipping behind the relative mass offered by the obscurity of the earth.

Imperceptibly at first, and then with greater urgency, the pale face of the full moon, leaning so close toward the earth, became cloudy, as the encroaching eclipse blemished its comeliness. During this disturbance, there appeared the snarling visage of Blood Wolf.

Harbinger of an alien culture, Blood Wolf was gaunt and famished with months of cosmic winter. During the Overshadowing of the eclipse, he prowled the darkened face of the moon, jaws agape, teeth dripping, searching for the spice of Life his native intelligence told him was nearby. Without it, he knew his era would soon be a thing of the past. Sniffing about, he followed the lunar equator to the edge of the curve to the dark side.

Jade Rabbit, ever ready to defend the moon, transformed the mortar and pestle with which he ground the spice of Life into the PulsarGuitar. A gleaming instrument powered by the black-hole singularity of the expanding universe, the PulsarGuitar in turn transmogrified Jade Rabbit

into a voice for his convictions. When he played, all who heard him understood intuitively the clarity of his intentions.

Rooting himself firmly within the concavity of the sheltering crater, Jade Rabbit began to play. Dynamic undulations of quivering rhythmic figures built toward tensions released in serpentine melodic phrases. Subtly manipulating the aural effects of delay, distortion, and sustain, Jade Rabbit channeled the commanding tones of the PulsarGuitar through the dark turbulence of Blood Wolf's keen of desperation and toward the golden warmth provided by interstellar translucence.

Try as he might, Blood Wolf could not pinpoint the source of the emanations confounding him. With increasing despair, the creature howled with frustration. Then, thwarted by the crescendoing complexity of Jade Rabbit's artfulness, he whimpered in defeat, slinking away to a rocky outpost at the northern pole of the lunar rim.

Sensing the ebbing of danger, Jade Rabbit resolved the strands emanating from the PulsarGuitar, and the universe once again returned to sonic harmony. As he transformed his instrument back into the commonplace tools for grinding the spice of Life, he became aware of the reemerging presence of Chan'ge, appearing in the form of a holographic projection.

"Faithful friend, once again, in your own sweet way, you have provided the cosmos with the seeds of stability necessary to the survival of that which is best in us. While it appears that the wrath of that wolf may have abated, thanks to your exquisite compositional talents, be watchful, as this Overshadowing is not yet spent."

"I am about to launch our latest shipment of the spice of Life to my people on earth. Then I will wait here in safety through this disturbance. All indications are that it may be a forceful one, perhaps somehow altering our cosmic alignment."

"When I return, we shall proceed to build on this enlightenment you have so clearly established."





Obscurity – Part One

Blood Wolf lay on a rock outcropping over the desolate northern lunar pole, watching the fully encroaching gloom of the Overshadowing, and brooded over his failure to secure the spice of Life for himself and his kind. It became clear to him that he might be unable to overcome the emanations that Jade Rabbit creates with that infernal instrument he wields. Well, he thought, if he could not obtain the spice of Life, maybe he could find a way to contaminate it so that it would be useless to all. Perhaps I can find a way to poison the ingredients that vile rabbit keeps on hand for grinding it.

News reached Blood Wolf that his eastern brethren on earth were subverting a mission to the moon, and the cargo would include a variety of WaterBears, extremely tiny biotronic creatures immune to the vacuum of space, and capable of withstanding great extremes of heat, cold, and pressure. Indestructible, they could even survive extinction events. Moreover, they could be impregnated with any organic substance.

Sensing his opportunity, Blood Wolf directs his team on earth to provide these brethren with a contaminant for the spice of Life. This AntiSpice can be used to inseminate these WaterBears, which can then be unleashed to poison the spice of Life ingredients. Because his eastern brethren hacked into the missile's guidance system, the rocket crashes on the moon, releasing the poisoned WaterBears, programmed to seek out the whereabouts of the spice of Life. Immediately they head for the dark side of the moon.

Meanwhile, since finding the storage cavern within the crater on the dark side of the moon, Jade Rabbit has established his workshop within the crater, and he has been busy sorting and inventorying the ingredients for the spice of Life. As he does so, he realizes that many of the ingredients, first brought by Chan'ge from earth in her initial arising, are now in short supply. He must consult with her about this when she returns from her safe location at the southern lunar pole, where she is launching the latest shipment of the spice of Life, sending it to the family she supports on earth, and observing the ravages of Blood Wolf during this Overshadowing, now almost complete.

Prior to this Overshadowing, on one of his earlier forays to the moon's bright face, Jade Rabbit had discovered some ancient WaterBears, ingrained in the footprint of one small step left by a man who visited long ago. Knowing they were impervious to all the extremes they had been subject to all these years, Jade Rabbit thought they could still be useful, so he had brought

them back to his workshop, where they rested comfortably and were well fed from his stock of ingredients. In time, they prospered and so became allegiant to Jade Rabbit as repayment for his good treatment of them. But in turn, they added to the depletion of his stock, and this was now becoming an acute dilemma.

And now, some newly arrived and ravenous WaterBears, laced with Blood Wolf's AntiSpice, home in on Jade Rabbit's workshop, intent on breaking into the storage cavern to corrupt the ingredients the young apothecary has in stock. Sensing their arrival (his ears are finely tuned, after all) and realizing their intentions, Jade Rabbit transforms the mortar and pestle, the tool of his trades, into the PulsarGuitar, and, using unusual frequencies that employ altered minor harmonic scales augmented by mysterious melodic modes, he directs his own cadre of older WaterBears to build of themselves a wall blocking any entrance into the cavern where the ingredients of the spice of Life are stored.

Once he has secured his storage facility from these poisoned WaterBears, which hover about awaiting the slightest chance to compete their mission, Jade Rabbit returns to his workbench, where he breaks down the PulsarGuitar into his mortar and pestle and sets upon blending the spice of Life for the most recent pending order Chan'ge has given him. This particular variation calls for an ingredient she rarely uses, and Jade realizes the amount he has on hand in a jar on his workbench will not be enough to complete the batch she has called for. He rises from his workbench to fetch more from the storage cavern.

It is only then that Jade Rabbit realizes his dilemma. Now that his own WaterBears have walled in his storage cavern to protect the ingredients from the new poisoned WaterBears carrying the AntiSpice, even he cannot procure more of *any* of his ingredients without first opening his wall, thus extending entrance to – actually inviting in – these creatures which will doom his and Chan'ge's livelihood.

Nor can he run the risk of directing his own WaterBears to completely reverse themselves into walling in the new WaterBears carrying the AntiSpice, for fear of some sort of containment failure. If these poisoned creatures were to escape, anything might be possible.

Jade Rabbit realizes that, since all these creatures are virtually indestructible, this siege could go on for literally forever. But Chan'ge and all those who depend on her (including himself) cannot. Without the spice of Life, we all will fade into oblivion. Jade Rabbit pondered. I must resolve this quandary. But how?

As he ponders, the Overshadowing reaches its full maturity. Hidden on the dark side of the moon, Jade Rabbit cannot be seen. From earth, any who might be watching the event see only a pulsating ring of cosmic fire around what appears to be the charcoal orb of the moon. If they can observe closely, they might glimpse the wavering shapes of two beings, one each at the northern and southern lunar poles, fading in and out with the flickering glow.



Obscurity – Part Two

As the moon turned into a charcoal orb of blackface, and as a ring of celestial fire haloed its rim, both Blood Wolf and Chan'ge looked to the mirror image of the dark side, their visions drawn to Jade Rabbit in his workshop at the bottom of the crater, and both headed in his direction, Chan'ge to rejoin her companion, and Blood Wolf to destroy them both.

Knowing the way, Chan'ge reached the workshop first. There she beheld Jade Rabbit, sitting at his workbench, a look of vagueness and frustration on his face.

"Jade, my friend, why do you look so perplexed?"

With irritation and a hefty thump, Jade repeatedly bounced the pestle in its mortar. "Ah, my lady, in my unthinking stupidity, I have instructed my WaterBears to wall off our storage cavern against these new, possibly infected WaterBears. I suspect they have come at the command of that wolf that was prowling the surface earlier."

"Well, while that's not good news, it sees you have protected our stock."

"But now not even I can get into the cavern for more of the ingredients to the spice of Life, and I need to do so for your next request."

"Ah, I see." Chan'ge withdrew a small object from the folds of her kimono. To Jade's eyes, it looked much like a double-barreled electronics remote atop a finger-molded joystick. The grips of the handle were perfectly slotted to Chan'ge's slim fingers. "Well, I can clear up this problem

for you." She aimed the instrument toward the gnat-fly swarm of WaterBears hovering near the cavern entrance.

At that moment, Blood Wolf reached the top of the crater housing the workshop. He saw the woman and the rabbit below, and, pricking his ears, he hunkered down on the crater rim to assess the situation.

Jade took in the thing in Chan'ge's hand and his eyes opened wide. "My lady, what is that you hold?"

Chan'ge lowered the object slightly and let a faint smile cross her face. "Oh, it's just something I've created, much as I did the PulsarGuitar for you. I call it the DeTerminator. Its beam can illuminate a space, like what people used to call a flashlight, as well as determine the organic and biotronic composition of any item it is focused on. It can then internally formulate a bullet that, when fired, can alter its target at my discretion, or terminate it."

Jade lowered his eyes. "My lady, as always, I am impressed with your inventiveness."

Chan'ge's eyes twinkled with a slight amusement. "Well, I am finding this business of being a goddess has its appeal."

"But perhaps we ought not to terminate these WaterBears just yet; examining them might be more fruitful, don't you think? Can you contain them for now?"

"Of course." She again aimed the DeTerminator at the cloud of WaterBears.

Once Blood Wolf witnessed what was transpiring, he gave a savage snarl and bounded to the crater floor, skidding to a stop just feet in front of Chan'ge. Looming over her, his tongue drooled as he sneered.

"You'd best hold what you might be doing, bitch, or it will be the last thing you ever do."

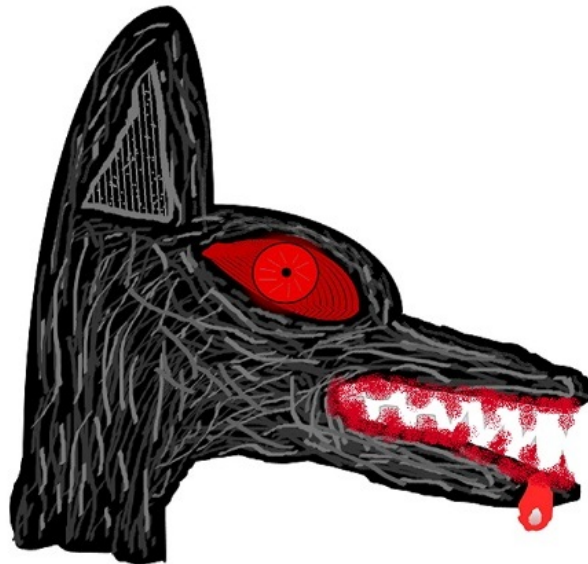
Chan'ge turned to face the beast. As she did so, a tricolored green, yellow, and red laserlight beamed from the DeTerminator and bloomed on Blood Wolf's chest. "Don't call me 'bitch'", she said. "Take one more step, you mangy creature, and I will drop you in your moon-dusty tracks."

The two stood facing each other down as Jade Rabbit sat at his workbench, fingering the mortar and pestle. He slowly arose from his stool. "Well, this appears to be what in Mexico I once heard described as a stand-off. Perhaps we should all take a deep breath and see what's what, okay?" He left his workbench and began to move to his kitchenette. "I'll tell you what, I'll make some tea."

Blood Wolf, still with a laser flower blooming on his chest, bit the edge of his formidable lip. Knowing he might be outmaneuvered at the moment, he decided it could be best for now to

get a further grip on what was happening. After all, he reasoned, he could make mincemeat of them both once he sensed the appropriate moment of weakness. "Well, perhaps a tad..."

Chan'ge lowered the DeTerminator slightly. "All right then. As I was journeying here, I received word about some developments that might affect all of us. I think you both will find it enlightening to hear what I have to say."





Reformulation

Blood Wolf scowled. "Yo, lady, just chill for a moment... If you don't want me to call you 'bitch' then you best introduce yourself." His snout pointed toward Jade Rabbit, edging toward his kitchenette. "I gather that pipsqueak heading for his stove is Jade Rabbit. So, who're you?"

Chan'ge lowered the DeTerminator a bit further and bowed slightly to the beast. "I am Chan'ge, newly risen goddess of the moon." She then raised her weapon to allow its flower of light to bloom once more on the wolf's chest. "And who might you be?"

With a roll of his massive shoulders, he said "I am Blood, a wolf of earth come to this place during the Overshadowing we are now experiencing."

"And what do you seek of us, then?"

Blood Wolf snorted. "What do you think? I seek the spice of Life you two make. I come to take it all for my own kind. Barring that, I am here to destroy it all so you can't avail only your human self of it. Too long have you people done so to my kind."

Chan'ge reflected, stroking her chin. "And thus your WaterBears, invading our domain."

"Yes. They are infected with my synthesis of the AntiSpice, which will render infertile all the ingredients you use for making your concoction." Blood Wolf continued. "I overheard you while I was above on the crater rim. You say that DeTerminator of yours can alter or extinguish these little pets of mine." He scraped the sharp end of a foreclaw through the fly swarm of his WaterBears; snagging one, he held it up briefly for inspection and then deposited it on the floor of the crater at the feet of Chan'ge. "Show me."

Jade Rabbit set a kettle to boil and paused at his stove, his senses pricked with interest. Out of habit, he was on his guard to assist Chan'ge, should she need it, but this interaction was bound to give him more data with which to assess the two involved. Until the Overshadowing, Jade had known nothing of this wolf, and all he knew now of him he had learned in the short interval of the eclipse. Of Chan'ge, he was more familiar, having encountered her countless times previously in the marketplace of their village on earth, and on a deeper level in this arising to the moon. Now was his opportunity to increase his understanding of both the players and their dispositions.

Chan'ge hesitated. She looked closely at the small creature on the floor in front of her. "Very well," she said. "I will analyze and then neutralize it." She trained the DeTerminator on the

WaterBear. The tri-colored beam covered it; then Change fired, there was a purring, and the WaterBear, a pale violet with the AntiSpice, turned an opaque pearlescent.

Blood Wolf scraped the WaterBear off the cavern floor. Reaching into the matted hair of his chest, he withdrew a wooden jeweler's loupe and fitted it to one of his bloodshot eyes. After studying the WaterBear closely for a few moments, he returned it to the floor. "I see, woman, that at least part of your claim is true. Now, finish it."

Chan'ge's face flushed with astonishment, and she shifted the DeTerminator to once again plant a flowerbeam on Blood Wolf's chest. "What? You want me to terminate this now innocent creature simply to prove myself? You must be mad."

Jade spoke softly to Chan'ge. "My lady, a word, if you will." When Chan'ge shifted to be nearer him, still keeping the DeTerminator trained on Blood Wolf's chest, Jade continued in his most inside voice. "My lady, this is a test of your resolve. This wolf may not be as monstrous as he appears to be, but one false move by us and we could make him so. You must now demonstrate your resolve, if only to avoid our own execution by him."

With her free hand, Chan'ge pulled at her lip as she pouted. "Humph! Perhaps I should just alter or terminate that mangy beast instead, simply for demanding such outrageous conduct of me."

Jade smiled faintly. "Well, that would certainly show your resolve, my lady. But if you only alter him, hateful as he can be, he will simply find another way he can get at us. No, you will have to terminate him, and if you fail somehow to do so, he will most certainly destroy us, for I feel he is bent to follow that way."

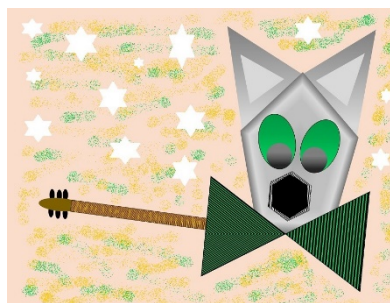
Pacing with impatience, Blood Wolf stopped and howled. "ENOUGH! Let's get on with it here! SHOW ME!!"

Jade urged Chan'ge quietly. "Go ahead. You can do this."

Chan'ge turned to face Blood Wolf and the neutralized WaterBear on the floor. She set her lips and aimed the DeTerminator at the motionless creature. When she fired, all that could be seen afterward was a tiny wisp of yellow-gray smoke. There was no more creature.

At that moment, the kettle on the stove began to whistle its readiness.

Chan'ge looked Blood Wolf in his eyes. "There. Now can we all just sit down to tea so that I can tell you my news?"





Comprehension

Jade Rabbit placed a cup of tea and a plate of biscuits with jam in front of Chan'ge, seated at the head of the kitchenette table, then returned to lean against the counter by the stove, next to his own mug.

Blood Wolf sat at the table on his haunches on the crater floor; he was big enough that he still towered a head above Chan'ge while she was seated. All he had before him was a shallow pan of tea; Jade had nothing that appealed to him to nibble on, other than his own puny frame.

Blood Wolf dipped his tongue into the tea (it was hot, but too fruity-sweet for his taste) and then spoke first. "So, Chan'ge, what's this news you have for us?"

Chan'ge gently picked up her teacup with the fingertips of both hands. She blew across the tea, her breath a soft ripple on its surface. After taking a long swallow, she exhaled slowly, then lowered the teacup to its saucer. Raising her eyes slowly to the others, she said, "There's a source for the spice of Life right here on the moon."

Both Jade Rabbit and Blood Wolf stared at her, their mouths agape.

Chan'ge continued. "When it became apparent that I was arising to become goddess of the moon, and that I would need to provide for my people on earth below, I only managed to take what little I could with which to do so. And now that remaining store is low," here she glared at Blood Wolf, "and currently quarantined against your infected WaterBears."

Blood Wolf gazed at her with coolness. "I only act as I do because for ages you humans have persecuted my kind, and I vow that will happen no longer."

"Meanwhile," Chan'ge went on, "because they knew I would need more ingredients if I were to continue serving them, my people created a genetically modified organism, called Audrey 3.0, that can produce all of the various components used in the spice of Life. They even found ways to draw both water and oxygen from the dust mantle here on the moon. And now it's all here, here on the dark side, in a silo lander just north of this location."

Blood Wolf sneered. "Ah, so that's what that wreck is. I saw it on my way here, but I reasoned I had no need to waste time inspecting it on my journey, especially since it looked to be only a tin can of space junk tipped on its side as it fell out of orbit."

Chan'ge's face turned to one of alarm. "What! I was not told that. We must go to assess and repair any damage and right things immediately!"

Blood Wolf raised a giant paw and thumped it on the table next to his pan of tea, which thrashed crazily at the impact. "Just a minute, both of you! Nobody's going anywhere. Why should we? I'm sure you have intended to keep this AudTrio for yourself – "

"It's Audrey 3.0," said Chan'ge mildly.

"What?" Blood Wolf howled.

"The plant. Her name is Audrey 3.0."

"Whatever," Blood Wolf slobbered. "That's too much of a moniker for a plant, even if it is the progenitor of the spice of Life, so AudTrio it is."

Chan'ge and Jade Rabbit glanced at one another, then said together, "Whatever."

Returning to face Blood Wolf, Chan'ge said, "From what my people on earth say, if ... AudTrio arrived in good shape, she has the potential to feed us all."

"Including my kind?"

"Including all kinds."

Jade Rabbit moved to clear the kitchenette table. "Well, if that's the case, perhaps we all ought to go ascertain that AudTrio is in fact in good shape." He looked steadily at both Chan'ge and Blood Wolf. "Still, I'm not comfortable leaving those infected WaterBears here alone with the small remainder of our stock."

Blood Wolf tilted his head in thought. "I suppose I can help you with this expedition, but only if I have your assurances that my kind will share in whatever largesse we might find. If you want my help and you can offer me this assurance, I will allow you to neutralize my WaterBears, but I insist on taking them with us, just in case. If all this doesn't meet with your approval, then my WaterBears and I will just wait for you here, and you can take your chances about what you find – or don't find – when you get back."

Knowing they really had no choice, for without Blood Wolf's brute strength they might never set the silo lander aright, Chan'ge and Jade Rabbit reluctantly assented to the creature's demands. Chan'ge drew her DeTerminator and took a bead on the swarm of infected WaterBears, turning them opaque with sterile innocence. Blood Wolf swept them into a small cloth sack and stored them within the matting of the fur on his chest.

Jade Rabbit then handed a packet of foodstuff to Chan'ge, who stowed it in her rucksack, while he donned a small backpack containing his mortar and pestle. "We should be going, then."

And the three set off, climbing out of the crater and heading north.



Realignment

They began the journey by all piling onto the rover Chan'ge had first provided to Jade Rabbit. Jade was driving, Chan'ge sat primly beside him, and Blood Wolf hunkered on his haunches on the small cargo platform in the rear. Just as they neared the spot of the silo crash, the rover sighed to a stop, its solar battery depleted after its long duration spent on the dark side of the moon. As they exited the useless vehicle, Jade reflected that mankind's penchant to neglect infrastructure maintenance on earth was quickly becoming the norm here as well.

In silence, they walked the rest of the distance to the silo site.

The silo, a small cylindrical rocket lander, had indeed fallen on its side with the initial impact of its landing. Peering through an observation port, the threesome spotted a plexiglass object that appeared to have last seen service as a document carrier in a drive-up bank teller's pneumatic tube system.

Within the carrier, the trio beheld the desiccated form of a strange plant, withered and enfolded in shriveled leaves.

Blood Wolf looked dubious. "Is that it? AudTrio?"

Chan'ge let out her breath in relief. "Yes, and she appears to be alive, but she's fading in the cold of the lunar night. We must revive her if she is ever to be of any further use to us, and we may have to move her to the face of the moon. I fear the cold here might prove to be too much for her."

Jade Rabbit began to loosen the bolts on the silo hatch. "Then help me get her out of here while we plan the next step."

Once inside the silo, Jade loosened the plexiglass carrier containing AudTrio from its protective harness. On closer inspection, the threesome ascertained the plant's condition.

AudTrio was indeed a strange creation. Rising from a stalk resembling that of a sunflower, she had a head full of seeds surrounded by a protective screen of leaves, all of which were now harshly withered. The genetically modified fascination of AudTrio's head was that each seed contained the foundation for a different ingredient within the spice of Life, the rough and the smooth and the sodden and the dry. She had it all.

Chan'ge stood erect from her inspection and faced the other two. "She appears to be healthy, but she won't survive if we don't move her to the bright side of the moon."

Blood Wolf loomed into her face. "Just a minute there, missy. Unless I'm mistaken, you need me to help you with that. Goddess or not, I doubt that you and that puny companion of yours have the strength for the job."

Jade and Chan'ge exchanged glances. Chan'ge then spoke softly. "That's probably true."

"So," Blood Wolf followed, "if you want my help, you need to once again promise me that we're really those three Mouseketeers."

Jade Rabbit looked incredulous. "What? Mouseketeers? That old TV show for kids?"

Blood Wolf drooled in frustration. "No, not them. I mean those all for one, one for all guys."

Chan'ge suppressed a smile. "You mean the Three Musketeers. But I see your point. And so we promise you that, with the proper checks and balances, such will always be the case."

"Checks and balances?" Blood Wolf looked skeptical.

Chan'ge gazed at the creature steadily. "Look. We know that you don't trust us, and we're unsure we can trust you. That's okay; trust is only earned through mutually assuring experience. So, with your help now, we will grant you access to AudTrio, and even a portion of control when it comes to caring for her. But, for now and in the near future, since AudTrio is after all our creation, we will be watchful, and we will be responsible for the overall security of her new facility."

Jade Rabbit chimed in. "And I shall remain in charge of grinding the spice of Life, not only for Chan'ge and her kind, but also for you and yours as well."

"If all goes well," Chan'ge remarked, "we can discuss this again."

Blood Wolf considered these developments carefully. This pair was offering him not only access to, but also a modicum of control over, the key to an abundant supply of the spice of Life. Without his assent to their terms, AudTrio could die on the vine right here on the dark side, and all would be lost, lost for them all. Blood Wolf knew it would be fruitless to try to defeat them here directly; he'd tried that, and Jade Rabbit had tied him into an ineffectual pretzel with the PulsarGuitar. But if he cooperated for now, they might still save the plant, and tomorrow would be another day to plot further, if need be.

Blood Wolf rumbled as he spoke. "All right, I will trust you for now. But I too will be watchful."

"Great," said Jade Rabbit. "Now we need to get AudTrio out of here, or all of this trust will be for nothing."

"But how?" asked Chan'ge. "Our rover is incapacitated."

After a brief search of the silo, the threesome turned up what looked like an ancient dogcart, a square wooden box on an axle with two creaky spoked wheels. The cannister containing AudTrio fit snugly within the box. And Blood Wolf fit into the harness on the cart.

"So, what now?" Blood Wolf twitched his shoulders to ease the fit of the harness. "Is this new facility on the face of the moon, the one you spoke of earlier, ready now for occupancy?"

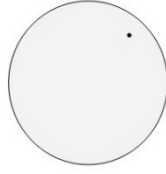
Chan'ge smiled faintly. "It is. Although as a goddess, in reality I may not be able to carry much weight, I have only to imagine a possibility and it becomes so."

Blood Wolf started forward. "Well, let's get to it, then."

As the Overshadowing began to clear, the threesome trudged abreast toward the brightening horizon, Blood Wolf pulling the cart in the center, Chan'ge to his left flank, her finger on the DeTerminator within the folds of her kimono, and Jade Rabbit on the creature's right flank. Jade took his mortar and pestle from his backpack, quickly converted it to the PulsarGuitar, and began to play an intricate and sinuous progression.

As they approached the moon's horizon, AudTrio's great head rose to the top of its cannister encased in the dogcart. She began to pulse, faintly at first, then with a stronger beat, and to glow from within.





New Clarity

As the obscurity of the Overshadowing caused by the eclipse faded into the cosmic night, the clearing full moon became apparent again to those on earth. When they looked up, many simply saw an old familiar face framed within its circumference.

They didn't really see any difference in that face; to the naked eye, its features looked the same. It was only with powerful telescopes that anything different could be seen at all. And then it appeared merely as a benign mole high on one temple. A beautymark.

It was, in Chan'ge's imagined fact, AudTrio's new facility.

The silo had been reimagined as an atrium built upon a nuclear fusion electrolysis generator capable of providing air and water to the structure. The atrium was easily four stories tall. Interlocking catwalks along the inner wall linked every level. The dome at the top, a giant loupe similar to the one Blood Wolf carried, was in this case jeweled like an insect's eye, and each facet was focused on a different seed on AudTrio's head, and each seed in its turn bred a different ingredient within the spice of Life.

One of Blood Wolf's cleansed WaterBears was attached to the control panel of each facet of the loupe. By regulating the angle and tint of the facet, each WaterBear controlled the climate for its seed. Thus Blood Wolf had a direct hand, with a surprisingly green thumb, in cultivating what he had so desired for his kind.

To insure that all within the facility would remain stable, Jade Rabbit's WaterBears, recalled from the cavern on the dark side, had been weaponized by Chan'ge's DeTerminator with their own special sets of skills, and were stationed at strategic points throughout the atrium to assess and enforce any security needs, if need be. And Chan'ge always carried the DeTerminator within the folds of her kimono.

With Jade Rabbit playing the PulsarGuitar for the entire journey from the dark side, AudTrio had thrived, and by the time they arrived at the atrium, she had grown large enough to fit its center court with ease. And now she swayed gently on her stalk, the rim of her leaves parted around her face, and every seed glittered with its own radiance.

From the floor of the atrium along the inner wall, a fluted column arose, widening as it did so, to cap on a broad plateau level with the center of AudTrio's face. On the plateau, in a triangle facing the plant, sat Blood Wolf, Chan'ge, and, at the apex of the triangle, Jade Rabbit.

Befitting this occasion of inauguration, Chan'ge is seated on an ornate throne of lunar rock, and she wears a shimmering kimono, a rainbow of color, ever shifting as she does. Blood Wolf languishes on a contoured rock ledge, and wears a long cape fashioned of gray silk and finely linked chain mail.

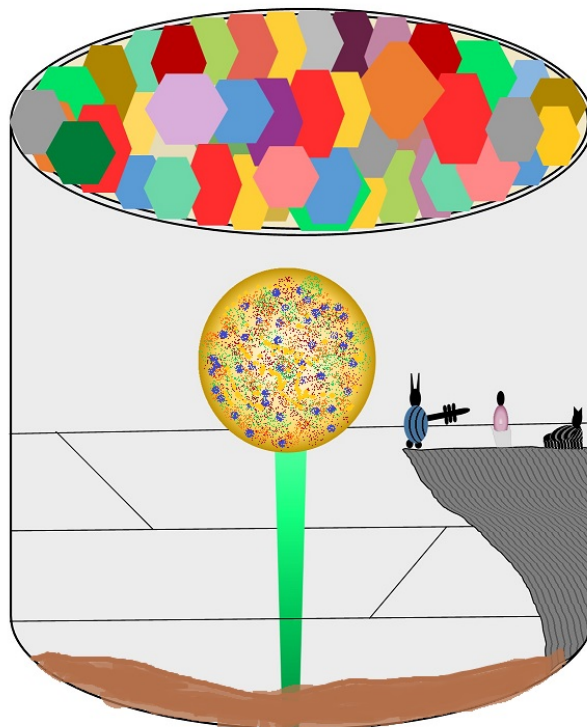
And Jade Rabbit, sporting a coat of deepening blues, sits on a simple wooden stool, similar to the one in his workshop, facing AudTrio, and fingers the PulsarGuitar.

As he begins to play, the music first spreads out, like the waves of the oceans on earth, flowing over and through one another, changing in tempo, swelling, ebbing, creeping up on calm beaches and crashing into jagged cliffs. Then it surges, and is shot through with streams of complexity, strands of intricacy, and, when it bursts into its fullness, it is flavored with hints of the cosmos of which we are all a part.

The compositions Jade Rabbit draws from the PulsarGuitar keep AudTrio entranced, Blood Wolf at bay, and Chan'ge at rest.

All around, under, over and through, from nearby stars and galaxies light years away, the universe blinks with approval.

25 Nov 19



How This Got Here

My friend Jeff Mac, aka Jade Rabbit, and I sit around the shanty and toss ideas about like they're pinballs skidding over our own imaginary landscape.

In this past few months, the pinballs we've levered into action involved how the (mostly) Chinese got busy on the dark side of the moon, just about the same time as what was called the Blood Wolf Supermoon eclipse happened. That's the one that had everybody, including my brother, chilling in the autumn air for the rare photo-op. (None of his shots are here; I decided to draw my own phases as chapter headings. Sorry, bro.)

This was all happening against a world events backdrop that consisted (and still does) of what should be (but these days isn't) scandalous nationalism, raging separatism, isolationism, back-stabbing of sundry varieties, denial, delusion, and the downright desperation of disavowal.

We each then go off and contemplate this cosmic stew. The stew consists of what I write mixed with what Jade composes. I send him stuff I've done, and then he sends me his first take, and I listen to that as I write my next stuff, and we rinse and repeat. It's safe to say that this story wouldn't exist without him.

But yeah, I suppose the story itself is mine, so I'll take the credit for that. And I'll also take the blame for the weird pictures you find strewn about like so much space garbage. I've already mentioned how I can't draw, but that doesn't seem to stop me from trying. Jade and I have talked about the story's overall vibe as being both spacey and folksy, so that's what my childish attempts try to amount to. Besides, to make this booklet, I needed the visual filler to accompany the verbiage.

Jade and I have already agreed that, when it comes to putting this out as a collaboration – and it is a collaboration – I'm in charge of the verbiage, and he's in charge of the music, and we'll find someone who knows what's what to be in charge of the visuals. They might be paintings, or photos, or collages, but whatever they are, they'll be done by a real visual artist. So, yeah, you'll only get my primitive attempts as part of this booklet. Treasure it, for once we're famous it'll be sort of an early out-take.

At any rate I hope you enjoy the verbiage – and are mildly amused at the visuals.

I hope, too, we soon realize that things might be better off, as Rodney King put it, if we could all just get along. There's so much at stake, both here on earth and out there in space, and we can't afford to lose it.

~ tommywart

