

# AMOS THE AMAZING



JORAH KAI



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# AMOS

THE AMAZING

The world's spiciest ice cream, a trip to Chongqing's rural countryside, and a strange collection of curious belongings begin this unforgettable tale that mixes Solarpunk science fiction and high fantasy for a thrilling modern fairytale.

Amos, a puckish 12-year-old boy who hides his insecurities behind a mask of mischief, dons strange artifacts he uncovers from his father's childhood bedroom. A peculiar power pulses through his body as he slips into a world of magic and monsters, where the dangerous-amber-eyed huli jing—a nine-tailed fox-spirit—draws him out, steals his soul, and poisons his grandpa.

Against all odds, Amos chases the fox into the Dreamland, where he meets friends and foes along the way on a perilous and fantastic journey to recover his soul before all is lost. A spine-tingling adventure full of imaginative characters and dazzling creatures, Amos the Amazing will delight adults, teens, and anyone who dares peer beyond the shadows.





MAP OF CHONGQING





# MAP OF AN'YATRA





CHAPTER 1  
THE BOOKSTORE



Alice slipped inside the bookstore and tiptoed down the cubist staircase. She sighed, agog at the panoramic view of thousands of beloved books. Walls of tomes lined several floors above and below her, and staircases cut every which way; a surrealist Salvadore Dali painting redefining her sense of gravity. All divisions were crystal-clear glass to give the impression of being at the center of a shifting Rubik's Cube of books. Photos on the internet of Zhong Shuge, Solarpunk Chongqing's newest architectural darling amongst hipsters and the literati, had impressed her, but being here was breathtaking. She'd only been back in China a few weeks and could hardly remember what her years of study in the Sprawl had been like.

She took a moment, in a reverie, to snap a few photos. Turning the camera to herself, she struggled to capture the immensity of the bookstore from an arms-length selfie. *I should have brought my droid.* Never one to give up without a fight, she set her timer to three seconds, and she snapped a handful of promising shots. Suddenly feeling the weird sensation of being watched, she spun around. No, there was no one there, it seemed, it was all her imagination. Alice examined the photos; her hair, a bright red bob cut popular among her friends in

cosplay culture, contrasted well with her blue nautical costume, and her cherry red lips accentuated her lily-white skin. *Perfect. Who needs droids? Not I!* Alice posted the picture to her socials, tagging the bookstore with the caption, “#Zhong-Shuge is amazing!! Better than I'd imagined! #booklife” The W4-hashtags infused the post with her excitement and the positive attitude that in 2038, made her posts a viral sensation, and she was already anticipating the sweet dopamine hit that accompanied the stream of rabid excitement when her social algorithms went platinum. It wouldn't take long.

She skipped down the stairs to look for her favorite sections, quickly locating science fiction and fantasy. Soon enough, she was entranced by the spines of famous and fantastical titles. A front-facing hardcover with a lovely frame jumped out, and she picked up a copy to examine: Guy Gavriel Kay, *The Fionavar Tapestry*. A sticker proclaimed it a special 50th-anniversary edition in gold leaf hardcover.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her stomach fluttered as she held this gorgeous tome. Leather-bound hardcover books held a special place in her heart. The cover illustration was a classic twist on off-Camelot fiction, based on the stories of King Arthur. It was a thick, hefty book. Thumbing through the beautiful gold-leaf pages, she paused to enjoy the occasional chapter illustrations. Reaching the back cover, she winced at the obnoxious sticker price. She couldn't afford it today.

“Ah,” sang a man behind her. He leaned against the K section sign on the wooden shelf. “You have good taste.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled, not looking in his direction. A little sorrowful, she put *The Fionavar Tapestry* back.

“Books are like an addiction,” he continued with a musical lilt. “You always want more. Those who don't read live only one life, and those who devour the pages of fantasy books are blessed with thousands...”

Alice glanced at him. A foreigner, yet vaguely familiar, was standing next to a glass display of new releases. He wore a wool cap, round glasses, and a scarf tied over a grey and

brown cardigan—hardly the clothes for a sweltering Chongqing day. But something was familiar about him. *Was he on TV? She'd seen him somewhere.* “Mhm, yeah,” she said a little more enthusiastically. “Hey, are you that guy from TV? Wood straws?” Alice asked with a chuckle.

“Bamboo,” the man said. “You know those old plastic ones were no good for anyone.”

“That’s cool,” she said. “You must have made a fortune off that.”

“Gave it all away,” the man said with a shrug. “To the fishes.”

Alice smirked. This guy was too much.

“If you like Kay, you might enjoy this story...” he paused, scanning the shelf. His fingers danced across the books.

“Hmm,” he mumbled. “Odd. They don't seem to have it yet.” He shrugged and looked at his watch. “A shame.”

“What story?” Alice asked but didn't wait for an answer. She moved on to the *L* section. Adventure called her name.

“It's the story of a boy ... about your age, well, when you were younger. Odd boy. Book lover,” said the man.

“Never heard of it,” she said. She was fishing again, her fine fingers running down the lovely spines of big, beautiful books. *Ursula K Le Guin, Kathryn Le Veque, and David Leadbeater* caught her eye. *Was that a new one?*

“Amos.”

She froze, and her breath caught in her chest. *Amos?* “What?” Alice gasped.

“His name is Amos. You seem curious...let me tell you about it,” he said. “I had the book launch here, actually. It’s a lovely place.”

*Book launch? He's a writer?* She continued on down through *M*. Alice didn't have particular plans this Saturday afternoon and intended to keep it that way. This was her *day off*. *But a writer, sharing a story,* she thought. That was something special. She could blog about that. “Um, sure, go ahead,” she said.

“To the café, Miss...”

“Alice,” Alice said.

The Storyteller, not seeming the least bit surprised, gave her a perfunctory smile. A little wide, and Alice thought of the Cheshire Cat from her favorite childhood story.

“Alice,” he repeated, and marched off.

She glanced at her mobile and smiled at the stream of new likes. *I could walk away*, she thought, but instead, she plodded after him to the bookstore café. *It could be any Amos, right? But she had a friend once... long ago, and his name was Amos.*

The man sat down near a window, away from a group of friends talking loudly and Alice joined him at a small table. Outside was an overcast, rainy day, but at least it was fresh. Yesterday had been blisteringly hot until the rain came. Soon, a robot waiter scooted over, a glowing set of cute anime eyes winked garishly as it bubbled a kawaii greeting. The robot raised the tray, and they took their drinks. It sang in appreciation to be of service, spun around, and rolled away.

The Storyteller continued, “I guess it begins years ago with a young married couple on their second anniversary...let’s see, *Once Upon a Time...*”

Alice smiled nonchalantly, but suddenly this random event seemed anything but. She started to ask him what this was about, but her words caught in her throat, so she simply swallowed the lump and listened as the day slipped away. The Storyteller painted a fantastic tale with a lyrical flourish. Soon she was lost, floating, somewhere between *magick* and memories, traveling dreamily through time and space.



## **Gift Basket**





*Once upon a time*, two young lovers crossed under the arched stone gate of the new Anju Ancient Town on a warm, sunny summer afternoon.

Today was their second anniversary and the grand reopening of the newly renovated 1,000-year-old pedestrian village. Red lanterns festooned the trees around the scenic gate and hung from the beautiful, carved arched roofs. The vivid Sichuan opera characters, garbed in red and yellow silk, guarded the opening, each with one hand holding a closed fan, the other a colorful sack.

Tian, a handsome, broad-shouldered company man, walked with his pretty young wife, the schoolteacher Mei, who was flabbergasted by the sights and smells. Their hands intermingled, despite the sweaty weather. Tourists from around the country flocked to experience the local culture. City workers had promised new attractions, cultural performances, and an endless sea of delicious, spicy snacks.

“What a beautiful day,” said Mei, inhaling the gorgeous aroma of fragrant orange flowers. A smile creased her serene, doll-like face. Tian nodded, smiling because she was smiling. As tourists buzzed around the sea of vendors, he pointed in the direction of her favorite snack. Tian had always had an excellent sense of smell and an almost supernatural sense of direction.

“Let’s try some,” he said.

“Oh, so stinky,” she said.

Tian pulled a single yuan from his pocket and handed it to the aproned chef. “Stinky tofu,” he said with a laugh.

They waited in the shade of a tree while a paper bowl was filled, and then they blew it cool before tasting the freshly fried treat.

“It smells like baby poo,” Tian said, laughing with his mouth full.

“But it's sweet and crunchy,” Mei said. “A delicacy!”

Walking and laughing, they reminisced about their last time here, pointing out new shops and cosmetic changes until they came upon the courtyard. A large crowd was hushed as they arrived, and a Sichuan Opera performance had just begun. The two settled under a shady tree with a good view of the stage.

Musicians in colorful, silk costumes banged drums with gusto. Sweat poured and sprayed from the stage as the music built and a pair of dancers weaved to and fro. Mei gasped as the actors strutted and teased the crowd until they unexpectedly changed faces, a movement so quick that when Mei blinked, she missed it. She laughed and punched Tian on the shoulder. The drums beat, and their faces transformed again. A red and white mask switched to blue and yellow. Mei clapped and cheered. To her, it was *magick*.

The music's tension rose and built, and the dancers circled, fans waving. The audience cheered and then hushed, anticipating a change would come soon, but the actors teased them, prolonging the anticipation, until in a flash, one transformed to a black and yellow mask, the other to a gold and red mask, and everyone applauded. The performers turned, and the masks repeatedly swapped in a crescendo, four times to coincide with the frenetic drumbeats. The audience was ecstatic, and the actors bowed their heads. When they rose, they revealed their true faces to the crowd.

“Oh, how do they do it?” Mei asked. Tian shrugged helplessly, a warm smile adorning his sun-kissed cheeks. Later, Tian and Mei walked down a narrow cobblestone road. The couple sampled local spicy noodles, savoring the delightful mix of hot peppers and vinegar. Tian got another bowl of stinky

but delicious black tofu. Before they'd finished, he bought a bag of fresh sesame crackers, and they came upon a Dragon dance already underway. Tongliang people were no strangers to Dragons, and for thousands of years, Dragon culture has shaped them, far beyond mere dance and lanterns. Historians say the Dragon spirit is deeply rooted in the land and its people.

"You know we're going to Beijing this year?" Tian said, whispering into Mei's ear.

"That's unbelievable," Mei said in mock surprise. She'd heard this story a dozen times before.

"It's an international Dragon dance competition. Countries from all over the world will be there, but I think Tongliang will win." He grinned, and she plucked a sesame seed from between his teeth and kissed him so he would be quiet and enjoy the show.

The fluffy, gold-adorned red-and-yellow-dragon bobbed and weaved, hiding a dozen young acrobats that controlled it with sticks. The line between Dragon and men blurred to become one spirit entity. It danced for minutes as the young performers spun and sweated, and when it was over, they cheered and moved on.

Tian and Mei had been hoping for a baby these two years but had not yet been blessed, and the pressure from family elders was heating up. They walked along the boulevard to a bench in front of a large iron door, and Tian squeezed her hand. "Let's stop here," he said. "It's where..."

"I remember, Tian," she said and smiled, looking around.

"It was two years ago, today..." Tian said.

Mei nodded, smiling. "I know, husband, where I said 'yes.'"

"So, in honor of those two wonderful years, you know, I wanted to--"

The banging procession of a dramatic parade reenactment became louder. First came a line of men in gold and red silks, crashing on their gong, and then followed stewards in

blue and black, carrying the standards of an ancient lord, followed by flag bearers in burgundy and gold, carrying the flags of ancient dragons.

The loud gonging drowned out his following words, so he stopped and watched as the county chief, a round-bellied man in red with a long black beard, walked by with another in blue and grey. Both wore traditional black Ming dynasty hats. The procession passed them by, and the palanquin came along, a litter carried by six servants in red, bobbing up and down.

The windows were covered with green silk, but for a moment, Mei froze, eyes locked with a face inside the cart. Mei caught a glimpse of the shape. First, for a moment, it manifested as a beautiful woman with sharp angular features, but then the curtain shifted, and Mei saw a wild, ear-to-ear grin of something wild, and not quite human. A cat? Or ... something *supernatural*. Her heart skipped a beat.

“My imagination,” she mumbled. *No one ever rode in these reenactment carriages, much less a Cheshire cat. But how wonderful this new Anju was, and how unique and magical their anniversary was shaping up to be.*

When the procession had disappeared down the road, Tian opened his mouth to speak again, but he stared, stunned at the ground. His jaw hung open. Mei raised her eyebrows and followed his gaze down to the cobblestone steps. Her heart jumped again. Anju Ancient Town was full of surprises.

A basket had appeared at her feet, and inside was a baby boy swathed in a red fabric blanket. Mei picked up the boy, gazing into his curious eyes. He did not cry, and when she touched him, he grabbed hold of her extended fingers with his tiny hands. He wore a silver necklace doubled over his tiny neck, and on it was a silver ring with the insignia of a triple spiral that looked like three trees, weaved together. There was no name or number inside the basket, only a tiny piece of paper with a script the pair had never seen before. Mei held the boy, entranced.

“A treasure,” she mouthed but was too stunned to say any more. And so, he was named.

Eventually, the moment passed, and Tian stood up, arms crossed across his chest. “We must contact the police. Someone has lost their child.”

Mei was stunned. *How could he?* “Tian.... no. We will listen for anyone who is looking for a child. We'll wait right here.”

Tian shook his head. “We can't--”

“We will wait all day,” Mei insisted. “And we will come back tomorrow and the day after and wait with him all day for someone to claim him.”

Tian put up a finger and opened his mouth to interject, but Mei beat him to it. “If no one does, by the end of the third day...” Mei said, trailing off.

“It's not how things are supposed to-,” Tian said, but watching her hold the blanketed boy, a tear came to his eye, and he wiped it away. “Okay, okay, Mei. I'll run and get some milk.”

Tian went out to find a pharmacy and returned, his bald head sweaty and looking a little euphoric to be Cosplay Dad, waving a milk bottle. Mei was still waiting in the shade in front of the iron door. She rocked the babe, who was now sleeping. She offered him the nipple of the bottle, and he woke and began to drink. He did not cry or whine in the sticky heat or the bustling commotion.

In the shade of green trees, they sat almost statuesque on the stone bench for three days and nights.

Much to their surprise, there was no talk of missing boys or distraught parents. They took him back home at the end of the third night and decided to discuss it no further. He was their little miracle, their Treasure. Tian had locked up the mysterious jewelry and bundle of robes in case the family came looking for him one day. But days turned to months, and months to years.

Sometimes Mei dreamt of that face, the endless grin, behind the silken curtain of the litter, but she never told a soul.

Tian continued his job on the road, returning from business as often as possible, and Mei kept teaching her beloved students and raising their beautiful baby boy. A year later, they got their second miracle. The following spring, Mei gave birth to a daughter, and they called her Grace. She had the most remarkable eyes, one brown and one green, but the doctors said she was perfectly healthy, if prone to frequent and sudden cat naps. They were a perfect, totally normal family, with only a couple of very minor exceptions, and for many years lived mostly quiet, happy, everyday lives. Until one day, they didn't.



“So, it’s a story... about a young couple in old China?” Alice asked, yawning. She tilted her head blankly and gave a dramatic sigh.

“No, no, no, definitely not,” The Storyteller said and smiled. “It’s about Amos, and the fate of the world, and you’re about to meet him.”

CHAPTER 2  
THE DEATH WAIVER



Powered by imagination and sugar, a 12-year-old boy in a cherry-red bathrobe wound through a crowded pedestrian street of the floating Hong Ya Dong shopping plaza on the back of a magickal feathered river serpent. Bringer of knowledge, inventor of books, and protector of Chongqing, the river spirit bearing Amos sprinkled through tiny pores in the tightly packed crowd, marinating in the pungent spicy haze of a myriad of remarkable delicacies.

Amos glanced back to see Alice and Ruby Red scowling at him as he jostled by grannies and their service droids, stacked-high with bags and parcels. He crept like a spider monkey through webs of playing children. The pair of girls followed out of curiosity, or perhaps accountability to their parents, for Amos was always getting into some kind of trouble and the hot wind of their disapproval blew his invisible sails to full mast, pushing him forward until his target was in sight. As he scampered past stilted, Bayu-style antique buildings, the mid-morning sun shone an eerie hue from the mysteriously crimson sky onto deep brown arched rooftops. The somewhere-post-apocalyptic Solarpunk glow illuminated traditional wood-paneled buildings carved with stories of heroes, myths,

and monsters. Amos was not a hero, but today he would become a legend.

He patted the folded *death waiver* in his housecoat pocket and smiled. He could see Mrs. Pi's Beijing-style Ice Cream ahead. "Respiro Del Diavolo," he whispered, "Devil's Breath: today you will be mine!"

Above their heads shone blinding, radiant megacity skyscrapers that reflected the red sky in the morning, *shepherd's warning*. Up there was a pulsing chrome futuristic super city. But here on the cliff, life was timeless. Amos outstretched his arms like wings as he whirled by flying red lanterns and glowing fluorescent signs depicting noodles, dumplings, and snacks of every variety.

In surprise, children and grandparents pointed to the sky at the butterfly effect that began with a peculiar sandstorm from the endless red tundra of the Mongolian desert to cover the capital and push far west. It gave him the slightest edge, and Amos pushed on.

With each step of his white bunny slippers, he silenced his classmates who had laughed at him. Each step brought him closer to sweet vindication—*liar, weirdo, bookworm*. The bullies' voices rattled around his head rent-free, like broken brackets, but would soon be silenced. They had called his plan *impossible*, but today, *Amos would do impossible things*.

The Hong Ya Dong tourist shopping plaza was a recent facelift to the ancient State of Ba fortress that once stood upon this cliff for millennia. Today the floating plaza, modeled after Miyazaki's iconic bathhouse from Amos' favorite movie, the classic anime *Spirited Away* (and inspired by a real place, *Dogo Onsen*), was universally popular for its unrivaled view of the two rivers and its unique selection of sweets.

"Hurry up!" Alice shouted to Ruby as they scampered through the crowd after Amos.

Amos pushed on, determined to collect the largest bag of sweet treats that any boy had ever seen before he conquered la crème de la crème of spicy ice cream in a viral video, no less.



As he ran, a stick full of rainbow cotton candy sprang askew. His other hand clinched a bag full of candies of all flavors: sweet, salty, sour, and of course, spicy. In Chongqing, spicy was the ruling class of all tastes, and Amos, despite his obsession with pop music, was a Chongqing boy.

Alice and Ruby Red also held bags of local sweets. The three had grown up in the shadow of their parents' friendship. As their families chatted along the boardwalk, they raced to meet destiny. Amos would be the first at his school to try the world's spiciest ice cream. The challenging and strenuous school year had finished only yesterday, and their scores would arrive next week, and this gap would be stuffed with sweets while they hoped for acceptance to the prestigious Chongqing Foreign Language School, a nearly 100-year-old academy full of amazing opportunities.

"Is he really gonna eat it?" asked Ruby Red, nearly out of breath.

"Of course he is! Amos is crazy!" Alice said and rolled her eyes. They were on babysitting duty *again*.



*Alice quirked a brow and peered long and hard into the Storyteller's eyes for any sign of mockery or teasing, but he was telling the story with focused intensity. Again, she wanted to ask how he knew, but her voice caught in her throat.*



"We're here," Amos called, hopping atop a wooden bench to scan the crowd. He was only a small sprint, through a sea of children and grandmothers, to the front of the line. Amos hopped down and weaved like grass in the wind.

Alice grinned as Amos crammed to fit inside unorthodox crevices between humans, like an alien or a bug. "What a weirdo," she said, dissolving into side-splitting laughter. Ruby

Red blushed from her arched fringe down to her chin, but they followed close enough to keep him in sight. Quite shortly, the trio stood at the front of the line. Amos wriggled a mountain of cotton candy obnoxiously under the nose of old Mrs. Pi.

“What’ll it be, girls?” Pi asked them, squinting at them as her round glasses slid down the long, winding road of her nose.

Amos gave her a deep, manly cough, blinking back the salty tears of a sensitive poet boy.

“Or boys, whatever, quick.”

“Vanilla,” said Alice, rubbing a hand through her pixie hair.

“Strawberry,” said Ruby Red, blushing harder and biting her lip.

Amos’ eyes were wild. “Spicy chili oil ice cream,” he said breathlessly. “Respiro Del Diavolo.” He waved his left hand and jiggly mass of rainbow cotton candy, tracing an intricate sigil of conjuration magick to summon the spicy treat. Breath of the Devil was a brand-new, imported version of spicy Chongqing ice cream stuffed with Carolina Reapers, the world’s hottest chili peppers. Developed by Aldwych Café and Ice Cream Parlor in Glasgow, Scotland, it was the world’s spiciest ice cream. Mrs. Pi had refined it and introduced it at this year’s Chongqing Spice Festival. At approximately 1,569,888 Scoville units (500 times hotter than Tabasco), she’d become an instant local legend. The ice cream was so hot that it could only be sold to legal adults by government decree after signing a *death waiver*.

Mrs. Pi glared down at the boy. He was four feet and change and wafer-thin, with long, shaggy straight hair that fell to the bottom of his neck in the back. It hung unevenly around his tanned face in the front with fairy wisps at the side that almost, but not completely covered, huge, slightly pointy ears. Behind thick large, coke-bottle-lens glasses, Amos’ comically wide eyes bulged, and his mouth stretched into an obnox-

ious ear-to-ear grin. The bombastic boy stood on a crate in a bright cherry-red bathrobe over striped blue and white pajama pants.

She sneered as if offended by the sight of him. “Oh, no,” Mrs. Pi groaned as the crowd grew quiet and leaned forward to listen carefully. “You've gotta be 18—”

“—and a healthy, wealthy, wise adult, or in the accompaniment of a flying Unicorn,” Amos said with a smile.

Mrs. Pi shook her head, “No, you have to—”

“Yes, sign a waiver,” Amos squawked dismissively but quickly pulled the corners of his mouth up into the painfully-imitated approximation of a charming smile. His left hand slipped into his bathrobe pocket and produced a folded piece of paper.

She accepted the form with obvious annoyance, shook it open, and pushed her glasses against the bridge of her nose to scrutinize it closely. “You are *not* 18, boy,” she said.

“It's for my dad,” Amos said. “He's a doctor, and he's on a work call, life and death stuff you see, but he can wave at you.” Amos waved, laughing as his father's thick hair blew about madly in the wind. His mother's intense gaze settled on him for a moment, and the adults waved back.

He caught his reflection in the shop window and froze - in a rare moment of self-awareness - at how absolutely ridiculous he looked. He was painfully childish, in pajamas and a bathrobe, with a face only Picasso could love. All his best-laid plans seemed foolish as he ran his hand through the bird's nest of hair, wiping the sweat from the back of his neck. The kids in the class were right. *A funny-looking bookworm ...weirdo— it wasn't going to work. They're gonna call me a liar.*

Mrs. Pi considered the signed waiver and the nodding faces and waving hands of Amos' guardians less than 100 feet away. The crowd of faces pressed closer, many holding paper money or mobile payment apps at the ready. This was *good* for business. “Don't you try it, boy- it's too spicy. Take it straight—”

“—to my dad, who will reward me for being a diligent and responsible young man,” Amos said with a very innocent grin. Mrs. Pi shuddered and averted her gaze. She knew his type.

The momentary dance with his demons passed as Amos realized that it was going to work. His eyes blazed with ambition, and he saw himself as he wanted to be seen- a teenager, college-bound with long fiery streaks in his mane and a gold earring. His childish awkwardness had become the hallmarks of an eccentric fashionista - he still wore the preposterous red robe, but he rocked it like a warlock. The bouncy mass of cotton candy was a ball of swirling purple tendrils, aglow with deadly eldritch power—*Yaa queen*.

Amos grinned with absolute confidence and winked at the bewildered Ice Cream Madam, who got to work, if only to get rid of him as soon as possible. Amos was used to having that effect on people.

Amos swiped his mom's mobile payment app in front of the terminal. Their cones were a reasonable 8 yuan each. There was an audible gasp from the crowd when Mrs. Pi rang him up, “Yours is 24 kuai,” but he just smiled and scanned the terminal. The shop buzzed and chimed with confirmation, and young and old faces pressed forward, waiting for the dramatic reveal.

Suddenly, a chubby, fluffy grey cat that resembled his grandma's cat Thunder peeked out from under the crate, focused on a small, dangling fuzzy bunny tassel on Alice's purse that blew in the wind. Amos could see it hypnotized by the fuzzy bunny. Its butt wiggled as the cat crouched down very low, unblinking. Amos glanced around but did not see Grandma.

“You know, Alice, although we're best friends,” Amos said, “I think you're too...serious.”

Alice quirked a brow at him. “We're not best friends, Amos. So, what are you on about?”

“When it comes to not liking cats,” Amos said, “splish, splash, your opinion is trash.”

She shook her head, “oh, no, you—you are a fast-burning dumpster fire, *Great wizard, Amos the Amazing*,” she said sarcastically, “and you're not going to—”

“Change your mind?” Amos finished, and Alice scowled. Amos knew that she hated how he always tried to outsmart her and finish her thoughts.

Mrs. Pi handed the vanilla and strawberry to the girls and then went to work on her masterpiece. Red licked the strawberry cone in an orderly swirl, keeping the ice cream from dripping as she slowly tasted it. Alice took big bites from the top, letting it dribble onto her hands before she licked them clean.

She counted off reasons on her sticky fingers. “First, cats are smelly, and they're dirty; they're often disease-ridden—”

The fluffy grey cat's eyes became dangerous slits and it crouched very low.

Amos leaned forward and whispered to Alice, “I think *they are* amazing. You know, cats don't '*sleep*' like we do.” He delivered these facts in his best 'old British documentarian' voice. What was his name? Attenborough? *Yeah, that was it.* “The truth is cats are inter-dimensional beings and regularly visit places we cannot.”

Alice bit her lip, alarmed. Amos knew she hated when he got creepy.

“Their eyes can also detect wavelengths of light that we can't pick up, enabling them to see energies, spirits, elementals, and more.”

Alice's eyes bulged at the mention of spirits. She also *hated* ghosts.

The cat froze, fixated upon that floating, soft rabbit tassel. *Almost there*, Amos thought.

“The same way dogs are our guardians in the physical world; cats are our protectors in the spirit world,” Amos said. “This is why cats were regarded as sacred in ancient Egypt...” Amos reached out and wiggled Alice's bunny tassel. In a flash,

the cat leaped from under the bench up and into Alice's lap, claws and teeth thrashing at her purse.

Alice yelped, and brought her hands up to protect her face, throwing her ice cream cone into the air.

A moment later came the scream. “Ahhhhh, who did that?”

Amos peered into the crowd. Shoving towards them came a red-faced, balding man with an ice cream planted onto the top of his shiny, sweaty head. Vanilla cream rivulets already streamed down his furious face.

The smoky ball of fur hopped onto his lap and purred, while Alice cursed and held Ruby Red by the hand. The two of them melted away and Amos grinned. *Perfect*. “Are you Thunder? How did you get here?” Amos glanced around but couldn't see Grandma anywhere.

“Hey, kids, stop!” The angry, dripping, bald man chased the girls down the boulevard.

Amos whipped out his ukulele with a smooth motion, dropping his bag of treats onto the crate at his feet, and with two zips, he swung the instrument over his shoulder. He glanced at Mrs. Pi, who was still drizzling the reddish spicy-hot sauce into his ice cream bowl.

He gave a quick strum, tuned the pegs, and played a few chords. Then he thumbed the three-chord progression, an upbeat melody that sounded like his Papa's favorite old-timey pop songs. He began to sing.

“Even in the sun, you know I keep it icy,  
You could take a bite, but it's too damn spicy....”

Amos played the popular classic teen-pop parody as children cheered and grandparents applauded. Amos took a bow, basking in the glory and adoration of strangers. Mrs. Pi placed the bowl of ice cream, red and creamy, dolloped with a drizzle of spicy chili oil, on the counter, and the crowd leaned in closer, waiting for him to take a bite; its stuffed Carolina Reapers twinkled dangerously.

Amos was fixated on Mrs. Pi's hypnotic chili sauce when

he realized he'd need one free hand to navigate the crowd back, so he stuffed the cotton candy into his treats sack. It instantly melted around the various candy bags, like a sticky spider web. *Oh well.*

Without warning, Amos' mom, a beautiful young woman in a fresh fringe cut, looking too young to be Amos' mom in her favorite netted designer dress, appeared beside the cash, waving and smiling. “Hi darling,” she said. She clapped her hands and grabbed the *Respiro Del Diavolo* spicy chili oil ice cream. “Mom tax! I’m trying this,” she giggled and opened her mouth to taste it.

“No, mom!” Amos cried, trying to grab it, but she dipped away from his wiggling fingers. His mom always had a sixth sense for trouble, but it didn’t always work out in her favor. Amos gasped as time dripped like sticky ice cream from a balding man's head.

“Amos! Look at you,” Mom said with a laugh as she dipped away from Amos’ clawing hands. “If we're not careful, you'll give up becoming a doctor to join the circus.” She jabbed a delicate spoonful into her mouth, and there was a moment of confusion before her tears started welling up.

*This was going to be worse than when she tried wasabi—way, way worse.*

Amos' mom made a wild and surprising sound. Amos took the bowl from her limp grasp. The crowd rumbled as everyone in the front explained what was happening to those behind them or pushed closer to get a better view. Amos' mom began to choke. Her face was as red as his cherry bathrobe. Her eyes, lips, and cheeks were already puffing up like Aunt Grace after a trip to the 'Beauty Doctor.'

“Oh god, Amos, what's h-hurppening? What's happening to my moufff? It feels rike a chemical burn...” She slurred and rubbed her hands against her eyes.

Amos cried out again, “no! Don't touch your eyes--.” But it was too late. The hands that held the bowl were now rubbing the spice right into the back of her eyeballs. Time froze, and

Amos didn't know what to do for one long, desperate moment. He had his legacy, the spicy ice cream in one hand, and a phone to record it for the internet in his pocket. His mom shrieked, and very slowly, painfully, he chucked the ice cream away, grabbed a bottle of water off Mrs. Pi's counter, popped it open, and poured it onto his mother's face.

"I'm melting," his mother screamed in a desperate, hilarious voice, and Amos' mouth curved into a grin, despite himself. "Help me, I'm melting," and then she began yelling in tongues. *It broke my mom*, Amos thought. Amos wanted to help her but then remembered his promise to the bullies and pulled out his phone to record a video of his mom's antics for his classmates.

"**AMOS!**" His father yelled in a voice that tolerated no further shenanigans, and the crowd hushed. Papa cut through the line with the quiet confidence of an ER room surgeon even in his T-shirt and shorts. He led Amos' mother away by one hand as she cried into his shoulder, and he grasped Amos by the arm. "What have you done now?"

"I, well, actually, it was Mom. She wasn't supposed to—"

"Quiet!" his father snapped, furious, taking the phone out of Amos' hands with a simple but confident Wushu twist that left no room for argument or debate. "Let's go."

*Amos was defeated.* Like his friends, the record-setting spice and his bag of candy were abandoned. They were back on the street, and a self-driving hydrogen-powered auto cab dropped out of the sky a moment later, and his father ushered them inside. In deep contemplation in the front seat, Amos sat quietly while his father tended to his mother's swollen face and spicy tears in the back. Amos snuck one good look, and all he could think of was: *PUFFER FISH*. He knew he would be in big trouble, and he might never get to taste the Devil's Breath. So much planning...wasted.

They arrived much too quickly at the hospital and hopped out of the taxi. Papa brought them back to an exam room and sat Amos down on a chair.



“You are going to sit here, and you're going to be quiet. *Don't. Touch. Anything.* After this, you're going to Grandma's.” Papa jabbed him ferociously with his index finger. “Don't say a word. Just nod.” And that was the last thing his Papa told him. The cool as a cucumber surgeon was uncharacteristically hopping mad.

Amos nodded, holding back steaming hot tears from running down his cheeks as long as he could. Today had turned out pretty bad, but tomorrow would surely be worse.

CHAPTER 3  
NO RELIEF IN WAKING



“— **A**nd still, the frightening natural phenomenon happened at 2 pm across the region. Just 50 minutes later, the bright red sky had returned to normal. Meteorologists predict that a low-pressure system may move in and prepare for heavy rains and flooding. No one is quite sure what caused the bizarre weather event, nor has any official—”

Papa switched off the car radio. Amos turned to him hopefully, but that hope soured like spoiled milk in the sun when Papa kept his eyes on the road, jaw clenched shut.

Despite being a spicy Chongqing girl, it turned out Mama was violently allergic to the world's most dangerous peppers. They'd left the hospital finally to get some rest at home. Mama was still puffed up in the morning and was receiving supportive oxygen. Papa made him pack a bag of clothes and a book. *One book!* About ancient philosophy and morals, no less. There was no phone or games, and they were off to Grandma's house.

The phone rang through the car's bluetooth system. Amos listened long enough to figure out it was Aunt Grace who was concerned about his mom and pretty peeved at him. Aunt Grace, a schoolteacher infamous for fits of sleep while

standing up in the middle of a lecture, was judging *him*. Amos groaned and tried to magick his father happy, his mother well, and the GPS to take them to Happy Valley Water Park. Not a single good wish seemed to influence their destiny, though, and as the two-hour trip to Tongliang Village wore on, his thoughts grew darker, wilting into silent tantrums and pity parties.

Typically, Amos would look out the window and wonder about the creatures and people he could meet as the city dripped away in their rearview mirror. Today, he sat and stewed. Matching his mood, the city's clear skies began to darken with Kraken-cruel, foreboding nimbi they raced closer to Grandma's house. They arrived too soon, and Papa drove up the road towards the humble little home of Amos' grandparents.

Airy anvils gathered over the glimmering sphere above Grandma's house. Yesterday's cardinal red sky had faded, and the terrible winds of change had blown in. It began as a whispering in the air. Amos strained but couldn't quite make out the words. A bully breeze battered the trees and fluttered up inside his cherry red housecoat, billowing his balloon sleeves. Long, lean giant fingers raked the churlish clouds. A short, round old lady dressed in overalls and a wide-brimmed sunhat greeted them in the driveway when they arrived.

“Are you coming in, Treasure?”

They got out of the car, and Amos dragged his bag from the back seat, strapping into the bulbous snail-house.

“Sorry, Mom,” Papa said as he gave her a quick squeeze. “Daisy needs me back at the hospital. Just dropping off *the boy*.”

“Come in for a bowl of noodles.” Grandma patted Papa's stomach. “You're too thin.”

Lightning cracked the sky, and moisture droplets began to drip on Amos' head. He stood by the car, hoping perhaps for a last-minute change of plans and a trip to Pizza House.

Defeated and dripping, he was as soggy as a bowl of left-behind cereal.

“Where's Dad?” Papa asked, looking around.

“Oh, he's off working down the way,” said Grandma.

“He's gonna work himself sick in this weather,” Papa said.

“Let's get inside,” Grandma said, looking up at the darkening sky. “Hurry now!”

Amos crept like a snail, struggling against the wind as the rainfall became more intense, and heaved with all his might to shut the front door behind him. A wall of rain moved over the oak tree and heavy drops drummed against the windows; the sound of a military court-martial.

Amos followed the adults into the kitchen, hovering invisibly like a spirit. Thunder greeted Amos with a quick rub on his legs and scampered away and out of sight. Rufus followed Amos in from the yard and shook his wooly, white Pyrenean mountain coat dry. He crept under the kitchen table, near Amos, with his paws over his expressive chocolate eyes.

“I've got to go back to work,” Papa said, turning around. “I'll be back in a few days.”

“The roads will be rough. Take a rest,” Grandma pleaded, but Papa shook his head.

“If I don't go now, I'll be stuck here all day.”

“Be careful, Treasure.”

“Be good, Amos,” Papa said, finally giving Amos a glare with a wagged index finger. “Be good or else.” And then he was gone.

“Hey, Grandma,” Amos said. “Were you and Thunder in the city yesterday?”

“No, we weren't. If we had been, maybe you'd have stayed out of trouble,” Grandma snapped and walked to the window as the red hydrogen-powered smart car backed out and drove away. Grandma spun around, and her face was as cruel and cranky as the weather. Amos fought back a stream of hot tears. “Drink some hot water and eat some noodles. When you're done—”

“Go play around the house and eat some of your delicious candy?” Amos finished with a grin.

“No. Take your bags upstairs and unpack. Then come down and do some chores to earn your dinner.”

Amos, hungry despite the pit of sadness in his belly, scarfed down the cold spicy noodles on the table, chugged the warm glass of water and scurried for the stairs.

“Wash the dishes, Amos. I’m not your housekeeper.”

Amos froze and turned back with a dramatic sigh. When Grandma didn't capitulate, he stomped to the sink and ran the water, making a perfunctory effort to wipe the chili oil from the bowl with his hand.

Grandma shook her head. “Use the cloth, silly boy,” gazing once again down the road. “It's oily, and you need to use soap.”

*How does she know?* Amos thought. *She's not even looking.* He used the blue rag and a squirt of lemon-scented dish soap to scrub the bowl clean.

Amos crept up the stairs to his dad's old childhood room, lay in the single bed, and cried. This was going to be the worst summer ever. So much rain fell that the beating on the tin roof over his head blurred into the long, whirring roar of a helicopter. He wanted to be anywhere else. He whispered a plea to the spirits to send him away. “Please help me,” he said. “If anyone is listening, take me away, get me out of here.” Nothing happened, and so Amos stared at the ceiling and waited.

After a while, Amos opened his backpack and fished out the dog-eared book his father had given him. He opened to a page about Confucian philosophy and the uncarved block, curious why the paper bookmark, a hand-drawn Chinese poem, had been nested here. He began to read, which was one of his favorite activities, but the writing was so dry that he blinked repeatedly and gave up. Instead, he stared out at the growing storm.

The stygian sky was bleak and sorrowful. Only a glimmer

of light crept in from the hallway in the gloom. Amos stared into his shadowy reflection pressed against the glass.

A crash of lightning struck the tree in front of their house, and the booming of the thunder was like a bomb exploding. For a moment, it was as bright as a sunny day, and then everything became gloomier, darker, and more hopeless...



Alice listened to the tinkling pearls of rain drumming onto the café window like the glassy clinking of a champagne flute, lilting and clear. She realized she was chewing on her nails, and stopped, but her guts twisted in anxiety as she tried to piece together her connection to this Storyteller and his story... *to Amos*. A sheet of rain passed over the bookstore, and the roar intensified, like the phut-phut-phut that ripened nuts make when they hit the ground.

“Oh, it's really pouring outside now,” she said, gazing into the worsening storm. It snapped and crackled like bracken pods in a bush fire.

“Nature's white noise,” the Storyteller said. “Is it good timing? Or story magick?” He winked at her, oblivious to her twisting tentacles of uncertainty.



Thunder crashed, rumbling through the house like a cannon's mouth, and the furry grey ball Grandma was so fond of hopped up onto Amos' lap, startling him from his reverie. The cat stared at him intently, one eye an ocean blue and the other a chocolate brown. They exchanged a long, intense glance.

“Don't be scared, Thunder,” Amos said, rubbing her furry belly until she purred like a rumbling engine while his broiling waves of anger dulled into an abstract bitter gloom. When Thunder finally had enough and hopped off him, Amos

picked up his book again and read a couple of pages until his eyes became very heavy.

He snapped his head up at the sound of scratching at the door, which had somehow gotten shut. Something with claws wanted in. Dreamily, he floated to the door and twisted the handle. He wondered where it would lead for a moment, but it was only the hallway in Grandma's house. A light down the hall provided a soft glow. Thunder lay at his feet.

“Hi, Thunder, how did you get....oh, well,” Amos mumbled, climbing back under the covers. With one eye, he peeked at the ceiling and the corners where it met the walls, but they danced in odd hexagonal patterns and froze, awkwardly splayed when observed. Thunder meowed, walked into the closet, and meowed again, this time longer and more guttural.

“You smell something? Is it a dead mouse?” Amos called out from his blanket fort.

The scratching continued until Amos built up the courage to see what the bother was. Outside was an endless black void. Amos crawled on the ground after Thunder into the shadowy recesses of the musty closet. Her paw was hooked on a coin-sized nook. The boy helped the cat free her trapped paw, and she leaped away with a grateful meow. He found the nook again and pulled on it.

A hidden compartment opened up with a whoosh of stale, hot air and dusty secrets. Inside, he clutched a grubby old wooden trunk a little larger than a shoebox.

He dragged it out of the closet and managed to spring the latch with a bit of effort. He wrapped his fingers around the cold metal. It was a silver ring and a pendant on a chain. They both bore the mark of a triple spiral, like three trees, connected together. Underneath and padding the chest was a folded and dusty old robe. Amos put the necklace over his head and shook the robe out.

Dust danced around like stars and constellations spreading across the endless abyss of deep space, catching the faintest

hint of glimmer from the hallway. Unlike his towel-soft bathrobe, this robe was sleek and shiny. He slipped into it and spun as it billowed around him. He studied the full-size mirror and marveled: Most impressive, he thought. *He was a wizard!*

Amos grinned. Costumes always gave him a chance to be something special. As he continued to stare into the reflection, a pulsing in his temples made his eyes twitch, and then a dull ache quickly spread across his forehead. Amos gasped. His face had changed. He was older, wrinkled and his hungry eyes were ancient and sad, like a warrior who'd seen too much war. They were malicious and hungry as they studied his reflection, changing color from dark chocolate to a murky, glowing amber. A cold shiver of sweat dripped down Amos' spine. The hair on his neck and arms tingled. Amos tried to turn and run, his heart beating like a snare drum, but he couldn't move a muscle.

"Be careful what you wish for...." drawled the voice in the mirror. Amos' mouth contorted into a horrifying grimace, exposing razor-sharp fangs. Amos groaned as a viselike pressure squeezed his skull. The mirror shattered, leaving behind a choking emptiness, a clinging void, and an old skeletal visage that uluated in madness. Amos, nose to nose with the wraith, released a soul-wrenching scream of agony. It was the desperate, sanity-shredding howl of one who realized too late that they were not alone in the universe.

All around him, spectral shadows swirled, holding him down on the bed paralysed, but try as he might, Amos couldn't move a muscle.

Suddenly, Thunder hopped onto his chest, meowing, and the wraiths and spirits scattered into the umbra of dusk. Somehow free, Amos scrambled, and with a start, rolled right out of bed to fall face-first onto the ground.

Painful pricks exploded through his noodly limbs as he flopped to his feet, holding the edge of his bed unsteadily. Without his glasses, the ghostly shadows flickered ominously around the gloomy room. His heart raced as he pawed franti-



cally for the bedside table, and he swatted his glasses into the air. Amos dived after them, scrambling for their comforting steel frame, utterly terrified to grasp something in the dark that might grasp him back. He caught them, landing awkwardly back into bed. Gasping, Amos looked around, but all was still. *Could it have all just been a dream?*

“Amos...Amos?” Grandma called him to dinner. He blearily tiptoed on pins-and-needle legs into the hall and down the stairs. The kitchen was steeped in a familial glow, jarring compared to the nightmare he had emerged from. He inhaled a heady cloud of spicy carrots, greens, spicy meat and potatoes stewing. Grandma served him a bowl, and Rufus sat by him, large paws warming Amos' feet.

“Where's the pizza and french fry shop around here?” Amos asked.

Grandma frowned at him. “Eat your soup. You look terrible.”

Amos put his head down, slurped his soup, and a drop of blood fell into his bowl.

“What's wrong with you?” Grandma pinched his nose so hard that his eyes watered. When she pulled the tissue away, it was painted a deep crimson and soaked with his blood.

What *was* wrong with him? “Excuse me, Grandma, I'm going back to bed,” Amos said. “I don't feel well.” He pushed his half-eaten soup forward and stumbled up the stairs. A nearly full moon watched him from outside, bursting through the dense cloud cover illuminating the dusty old room. Very vulnerable and alone, he hid under his covers, tossing and turning, until he finally fell into a restless and terrible jaunt through dark and unforgiving dreams.

CHAPTER 4  
THE SEED FAIRY



The following days passed without disaster if only because Amos gritted his teeth, ate his vegetables, and promised to be an ordinary boy if it made the nightmares stop. Sadly, it didn't. Amos slept fretfully. One morning, just as he was waking from a restless sleep, something hooked his consciousness and snatched it to the dark depths of his dreamlands, where Amos found himself wearing the same artifacts he had discovered in the first episode of this nightmare. In a strange land, he hid from packs of vicious, tusk-mouthed savage warriors hunting for his blood. The dissonant whispers of demonic voices crept from the shadows all around him. "You're in over your head, boy," croaked a harrowing voice behind him. Spun around, holding the pulsing artifacts, the necklace, and the silver ring so tightly they cut three swirling circles into each of his hands' smooth, unworked palms.

"I'm waiting for you, and soon it will be too late to run or hide," came the wretched whisper. Once again, those captivating eyes, a dull amber, ancient and hungry with malice, held him frozen in place.

Amos awoke, screaming. His bruised brain quivered, trying to grasp the slipping sand to focus on the nightmarish

grains as they faded into fleeting stars. Grandma came and sat beside him, placing a warm cloth on his head. “Both of my kids had restless leg syndrome as children. I’m not surprised to see you kicking up a storm. But they did grow out of it.”

Amos groaned and reached for his glasses on the bedside table.

“Don’t feel bad, Amos. You are a *mostly good boy*.” Grandma patted his head and left him to gather his thoughts before coming down for breakfast.

As he moved about the house, Amos saw tall shadows, black shapes with large wide-brimmed hats in every corner, and avoided looking in the mirror when he washed his face and brushed his teeth. As the powerful summer sun penetrated gaps in the curtain, crepuscular rays warmed his face, like arrows from the heavens. Today would be different.

He stumbled in a daze down the creaky stairs to find a bowl of rice porridge on the table. Despite his sour mood, it was warm and delicious. He blew into it, fogging up his glasses with warmth and humidity. He wiped the fog clear with the corner of his t-shirt and set them on the table. The world around him swam in large, undefined splotches of color.

“We’ve got lots to do today, Amos. You’ve got to help me feed the animals, and then we’ll take a walk.”

“Why can’t you have service droids like a normal family?” Amos whined.

“I don’t need a robot to feed my animals or clean my house,” Grandma scolded. “Too much reliance on technology will erode your ability to pick up after yourself... you don’t want to end up a giant alien head with little chicken arms and legs, do you, boy?”

“Okay, Grandma,” Amos said with his hands up in surrender, and he didn’t interrupt again as she droned on about whom to feed, where to find the food, and how to go about it. Lost in a daydream, Amos held onto flashes of a castle high on a cliff overlooking an angry sea. He fought hard to keep the fleeting images burned into his brain so he could ponder

them later in greater detail. They mostly slipped away like sand through his fingers...except the image of him atop a mighty Dragon soaring through the sky. Amos yelled, arms out, mouth agape, and eyes pools of astonishment. He flew over a fantastic world, bubbling in magick and wonder, as capacious as the sea.

Grandma reached up and patted Amos on the shoulder, and his visions turned to ash in his mouth. He strained his mind, but the dream, as vivid and lifelike as it had been, was now long-gone, and he only held onto the impressions of an amazing adventure.

He finished his soup and walked outside, squinting painfully in the glare of the humid summer morning. A strange rustling in the trees caught his attention. Amos froze, his heart pounding like a jackhammer. His curiosity finally won over his fear and, emboldened by the light of day, he went to investigate the shrubbery by the edge of the yard.

“Who’s there?” Amos called and waited, tense and ready to run. Nothing moved. He lingered under the bough of a large tree. Minutes crept by. Still, there was no more sound. “Must be nothing, after all,” he whispered and turned around. He counted down from three and then spun around, hoping to catch a glance of whatever had originally made the noise. But there was nothing there. *Or so it seemed.* He trudged back to the house and saw Rufus next to Grandma, ready for a walk in her wide-brimmed sun hat.

“Ready?” She asked.

“Sure, I guess,” Amos said. Rufus wagged his tail happily and bounded along with her, and Amos followed, stomping white bunny slippers on hard-packed clay under the penetrating glare of the simmering Chongqing sun. Amos marveled that, unlike other cities of the world, Chongqing only had two seasons: winter and summer and was often called the furnace of China for its reliably regular broiling heat. Rufus, a leashless dog (and not at all a person), shied away from clothes; unlike the fashionable pups in the city. The

countryside air was deliciously fresh except for Rufus' musky fur that effused a not entirely unpleasant dankness that reminded him of rafting down white water currents with Grandpa.

"Hey," he asked, turning to face Grandma, who looked more than a little like a magical mushroom peeking out from beneath her towering sunhat's brim, "where's Grandpa?"

"Oh," Grandma said. "He was up at dawn and off to clear some brush. A family up the road needed some help, and he never says no," she laughed a little quickly and continued down the way.

Colorful flowers bloomed; their sweet scent heady as trees swayed in the gentle breeze. Barely any cars passed them on the dirt road as they plodded along. Rufus got excited and chased a passing kitten and stomped in a large mud puddle. Grandma frowned as Rufus shook off the water, beaming Amos a ridiculously happy fuzzy doggy grin. They hopped back to avoid being soaked.

"Rufus!" Grandma chastised the old silly dog.

"Where are we going, Grandma?"

"Oh, to a special place...the ancient town," Grandma said.

"Anju," Amos said, remembering it from summer visits growing up.

Grandma smiled softly, lost in memory, and said nothing. They walked along curving roads for what seemed like hours. Amos knew the earliest record of Tongliang in history books was in the Spring and Autumn Period, and the Warring States Period. He had spent at least one afternoon - but likely a few - marching up and down this winding road in the roasting summer sun, pretending it was 329 BC, and he was King Wei of Chu. He had destroyed the state of Ba—now, Chongqing City—and named his concubine son as the marquis south of the Pujiang River. Today, however, he had no mood for imagination and games. He was quiet and sullen as they finally arrived, sweaty and thirsty, and passed through the great

bowed stone gates. The curved roofs and carved wooden buildings characteristic of Bayu style showed characters from ancient history, but Amos was too glum to be impressed.

They marched along, as if walking just for the sake of walking; marching towards the inevitable, towards the pointless tragedy of war. Amos stared at clouds, trying to decide what shape they resembled. He saw a dragon, a fox, a robot, and a sword. They mosied on, finally stopping to rest at an old stone bench. Grandma sighed and patted Rufus' head and offered Amos some water from a large metal thermos. Amos sat sullenly, lusting greedily after all the snacks on display up and down the street. Just when he was convinced Grandma meant to starve him, she opened her sack and produced a bag of sticky rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves.

"Here, Amos," Grandma said and opened the bag. He wiped his hands on his fashionable designer cherry red bathrobe, the only thing he planned to wear all summer. He took one of the sticky bamboo wraps and began to untie the string that held it together. At first, it was complex and messy, but his annoyance melted away when faced with the complexity of the knot. He unwrapped the leaves and bit into the sticky rice, enjoying an explosion of sweet red bean paste in the center.

Amos gazed at Grandma and smiled. "Thanks," he said, chewing with his mouth full. "Delicious."

"Slow down, mind your manners," she said. "You're not a wild animal. We've got enough to eat."

Amos looked away, as an awkward wave of heat rushed over him. He *hated, hated, hated* being told what to do.

"I mean, you're a city boy. You're supposed to be the cultured one, right, boy?" Grandma laughed and patted his back.

Amos blinked rapidly as a single tear formed at the corner of his right eye. He wiped it quickly with his sleeve and gazed at Grandma with such a pitiful expression that leaked the mirth from her face.

“There, there,” Grandma said and patted his back. “You are so sensitive, such a soft boy. You must learn to be tough. The world is hard.” She opened her bag of vegetables and said, “do you see all this?”

Amos nodded.

“What do you see?”

“Beans, sprouts, lettuce, spicy peppers.”

“And this bag,” Grandma pointed to the sack of rice.

“Rice,” Amos said, an eyebrow quirked. He sniffled.

“Now go bring over one of those pretty little flowers.”

“Grandma, what are you getting at?”

“Fetch it, and you’ll get a treat.”

Amos ran over and grabbed a fresh yellow daisy. He broke it off at the green stem. “A daisy,” he said.

Grandma shook her head. “Don’t just do things for the offers of candy, boy, do them because it’s good for your family.” When he looked confused, she shrugged. “Oh, well. See that weed growing over there? Go get me one.”

Amos huffed and puffed but ran over to pluck a stalk of wild grass and ran back.

“Is this what you wanted? Now what?”

“Look at them all, boy.”

He squinted and shrugged. “It’s green stuff. Okay, candy now?”

“Where did they all come from?”

“The vegetables from the old guy with the hair combed over his bald spot.”

“They all came from seeds. Someone planted them, and they grew up with enough sun and water.” Grandma regarded him. “What do they do?”

“Um, the vegetables are for eating?” Amos said with a shrug.

Grandma nodded. “What does the daisy do?”

“It’s pretty, like Mom.” Amos grinned.

“What does that one do?” She pointed to the weed.

“Um, it grows,” Amos said.

“Can you eat it?”

“No.”

“Is it pretty?”

“No?”

“It’s a weed, boy,” Grandma said.

“It’s grass. Why do you call it a weed?”

“A weed,” Grandma said, “is a plant that grows where it is not wanted. It just soaks up water and sun and doesn’t do anything for anybody.”

“Maybe it grows for itself, Grandma,” Amos said and smiled, tucking the weed into his pocket.

Grandma shook her head in disbelief, but Amos was used to evading her lessons. They lingered at the bench after snacking, and Grandma rubbed Rufus’ head while they peered around with old eyes. Amos watched them, wondering how Anju had changed. “Have you been coming here for a long time, Grandma?”

“Yes, Amos, all my life. This town is a thousand years old or more.”

“What was it like here before Anju was built, Grandma?”

“Oh, you’re funny!” Grandma furrowed her brow, but Amos’ ridiculous expression made her laugh.

Seizing on her moment of weakness, Amos groveled, begging, “Let’s get a treat!”

Grandma nodded, exhausted from Amos’ mental gymnastics. “I suppose we can.”

Amos bolted up like a bat out of hell, grabbed her hand, and dragged her towards a vendor that sold Tang Yuan of various varieties with an assortment of traditional and modern toppings. A very short beggar, like a hunchedback dwarf in robes, was lying in the street clutching a bowl, and Amos glanced at him and maneuvered so he would not have to make eye contact. Grandma surprised him by marching up to the little man and saying hello.

“Bless you, it’s a hot day to be hanging about,” she said and dropped a couple of yuan notes into his bowl.



The little man bowed his head and thanked her. “Bless you, Grandmother, may every day be fortunate, and may luck arrive when you need it most.”

Amos had never wondered before what it would be like to be child-sized for one’s entire life. But for a moment, his mind wandered until he stopped in front of a counter full of fruits, nuts, and candies that could decorate the glutinous rice dessert bowl, and the idea flitted away, awkwardly, like a blackbird fighting out of a paper bag. Amos jerked around as the man called him.

“Hello, boy,” a large, hairless man said in a slow, lumbering voice. “What will it be?” Without eyebrows, a particularly round and shiny head, a slightly grayish complexion, and the slow and purposeful way he puffed and waited on Amos to reply made the boy think of a giant, thoughtful sea tortoise.

Amos shook off the dreams blending into his waking life. “I shall have—” Amos stammered, blushing, “I mean, I shall have...” The man’s eyes bulged, almost fishlike, and his forehead wrinkled as if straining to produce the barest hint of an eyebrow. Those strange eyes, wide, wild, and fixed upon him with an intensity that gave Amos the creeps. The man’s mouth opened wide and exploded in the loudest, open-mouth sneeze Amos had ever witnessed. Eyes wide, he plugged his nose and turned and ran out of the shop.

“My Grandma will order,” Amos called from the doorway and waited outside, staring at clouds until she had ordered, paid, and handed him a traditionally topped dessert bowl of sweet glutinous rice balls in a sugary soup sprinkled with berries and nuts.

Amos wolfed it down in under a minute and licked the bowl happily. They walked back to the gate and down the road towards home.

“Are we going back home now?”

“First to the village butcher, and then home,” Grandma said. “Help me carry these vegetables.”

Amos, buzzing from the sugar overload, skipped most of the way to the little town before he sugar crashed. He dragged his feet and the vegetables every step after that, despite Grandma scolding him repeatedly not to let the bag touch the ground.

They walked down the road together along a shady path, past a rice paddy, and then left onto a bigger road. They passed some geese, who honked at Amos but didn't bother Grandma or Rufus. A few minutes later, the road led to some buildings at the edge of town.

"How do you feel, Amos?"

"I'm tired, Grandma," Amos said.

"I guess Tongliang is different than you're used to."

Amos nodded, keeping his eyes straight down the road. It had rained last night, and some of the ground was damp. Other parts were downright muddy. Amos focused on avoiding deep muddy puddles and keeping his slippers dry.

Grandma took his hand in her own. It felt hard and callused—leathery skin, like a city worker's that had once grabbed him for running near a worksite. Amos recoiled.

Grandma guffawed in surprise. "This is from hard work, boy."

"We have a robot for that," Amos said.

Grandma shrugged, "Sometimes it feels good to do a hard job yourself."

Amos' gaze fell on a dark shadowy spot among the trees. For a moment, his heart skipped. Amber eyes gazed back at him, and he could almost make out the glimmer of rows of snarling razor-sharp teeth.

Rufus growled in a low tone, and the vision faded. That's when they noticed a large, raggedy dog at the end of the street. His massive underbite looked cartoonishly frightening, and as they got closer, Amos saw that his fur was balding in patches. The mangy dog didn't notice them; instead, he smelled the wind. He was smaller than the huge, friendly Rufus but looked dangerous in a disheveled chaotic fashion

and puffed up his chest when they approached. Rufus barked and bared his teeth, looking vicious and frightening for the first time in Amos' life. Amos hopped behind Grandma, but the old dog shuffled off, looking lost but happy to get out of their way.

"Oh, Rufus," Grandma said. "I wonder who he used to be?"

Amos' eyes bulged at this. He glanced from Grandma to Rufus to see if there was a punchline to her riddle. Rufus wagged his tail and put his big scary teeth back behind goofy dog gums, and they continued on their way.

*Who he used to be?* The words snagged in Amos' mind as too profound to be discarded. Many wild dogs got lost in the city and roamed around the streets.

*If his parents never came to pick him up, if they were mad enough, could he become a lost dog, too?*

The next block was bustling as locals had set up another market, tarps covered a wide assortment of animals and fresh-grown food. Amos saw large and small fish in buckets and tanks that flopped around in the water. Turtles shuffled over each other, frogs groaned, and feral chickens clucked in cold iron cages. Rows of tomatoes, corn, lettuce, broccoli, and green vegetables were stacked on tables. Farther away lay rows of other foods and creepy crawly things beyond the periphery of vision and imagination.

"Over here, Amos." Grandma, with his soft, boyish hand in her rough, leathery one, led him into the butcher's stall and began negotiating. Amos did not feel thrilled by the bouquet of meat.

He gazed out to Rufus, alert, sitting at the edge of the shop, imagination running wild, back to the closet and what could be behind the fake wall and the hidden nook. *Did Grandma know? And when would Grandpa return?*

It was late afternoon when they got back to the house. Amos

remembered that he was supposed to feed the animals. They must be starving. Maybe a little intermittent fasting would be good for them. He had read that it was healthy from time to time. Suddenly, the phone rang. Grandma answered, then yelled, "It's your dad."

Full of boyish emotions, he couldn't decide whether to scamper or skulk to the phone and looked very funny doing both.

"Yes, well, I'm glad to hear that. Sure, yes, he's here now."

"Papa?" Amos asked, putting the old-fashioned receiver to his ear.

"Amos. Are you helping Grandma around the house?" Papa's voice was grave.

"Yes," he said, rubbing sore muscles. "It's backbreaking work."

"Well, don't be lazy. And keep your stories to yourself. You need to grow up a little. Maybe a lot. Grandma will teach you to be a good boy. Your mom and I have spoiled you too much."

Amos gasped. "When are you coming?" He asked, holding back hot tears at the harsh words.

"Mom is still resting. I'm quite busy with surgeries, so we'll see you in a week. Be a good boy!"

"I am a—" but the line was already dead.

Amos put the phone down, stunned into silence.

Grandma barged in from the back door, full of sound and fury. "The animals are going wild. Didn't you feed them this morning Amos?"

Amos stuttered, suddenly remembering again that he had forgotten. "I meant to—"

"You meant to feed them? Do it now, or you can go to your room without dinner!" Grandma rolled up the newspaper on the kitchen table and came after him, but he was already out the door and heading to the caged pen. He approached a coop of clucking chickens. He couldn't find their food anywhere.

“Baaa,” bleated a funny grey goat behind him in a mocking voice.

“What’s your problem?”

“Baaa,” cried another wild goat. It put its head down and charged at Amos, who scampered back, flipping over a third billy that had come to stand right behind him. He tumbled over its back into the mud.

“Aw heck no,” Amos said in disbelief. Before he could stand again, the goats were on top of him, bleating and butting him. They knocked him back into the dirt. Finally, he screamed, desperate, wild-eyed, and sputtering. The goats wandered off, blabbering gibberish.

Amos noticed Rufus staring at him, panting. He seemed as amused as a dog could be.

Grandma was waiting with her hands interlaced over her apron.

Amos sighed. “Where’s the food?”

Grandma shook her head and motioned for him to follow her to the back of the walk-in pantry, where she kept a large bucket and a smaller metal bowl. “This one is for chickens. That one is for rabbits. You can grab that bundle of hay when you’re done and bring it to the goats.”

Amos made wiggling jazz hands and said, “hayyyy,” in a sing-songy voice. Grandma shook her head and walked away.

Amos pulled on his hair and gritted his teeth long past when Grandma was gone. Finally, he sighed, bent over to fill the small bowl with chicken feed, and then picked up the heavy rabbit food in his other hand. Struggling, Amos held the metal bowl in his teeth. He made it all the way to the kitchen before the sweaty bag slipped through his fingers. Time froze. “No!” he cried, and the chicken feed exploded all over the room. Veins on the side of Amos’ head bulged, and his pulse beat like a jackhammer behind his eyes. Strangely, time seemed to freeze for just a moment. Eyes wide, Amos could count the individual grains as they flew out of the bowl, and

then, all at once, they hit the ground, covering the floor in chaos and nonsense.

“Shut the front door!” He called, shielding his eyes and pulling his hair in abject frustration. Finally, he bent over and began to pick the food up, grain by grain. There must have been thousands. It was a preposterous, absurd, terrible job.

Amos suddenly had an idea—a marvelous idea, a genius, marvelous, exceptional idea. Amos grabbed a handful of seed and carried it out back to the chicken coop. Amos peered around, but Grandma was nowhere to be seen. He opened the gate and sprinkled it, leading the chickens from the pen into the house and pantry, right to the pile of spilled feed. Sure enough, they followed him, starving as they were, to his mess of spilled feed in the kitchen pantry. He watched for a moment, hands on his hips, grinning as they started to clean up the mess all over the floor. *I'm a genius.*

Satisfied it was under control, he went up to wash the mud off his robe and change into a clean shirt and shorts. He picked up his book just to read a page and actually found a passage on Eastern philosophy that was quite interesting. He had read half a chapter on 'intention and art' when he heard Grandma scream in alarm.

He hurried down to see what was wrong. The chicken feed on the floor was all gone, but bags of flour and rice had been torn and scattered everywhere. Chickens were chewing and pooping around what had been a clean and meticulous kitchen this morning. Grandma's eyes flashed like white-hot daggers, and she wagged a finger at him.

“Chickens in my kitchen?” She roared. “You fix this now, or you'll wish you weren't born!” She grabbed the chickens by their scrawny ankles, unleashing a flight of feathers, and left him alone in the chaos.

Amos wished he had the power to snap his fingers and set things right. Instead, he got down on his knees and scrubbed and shoveled the awful mess into a bag. Grandma would walk by whenever he stopped to rest and curse him for being a lazy

boy. Her timing was terrible. He went through phases of anger, grief, denial, and acceptance but he did not leave the pantry until everything he'd fowled up had been fixed. Eventually, he had more or less finished. She came to inspect the work but did not seem impressed.

"It'll have to be good enough; now wash up."

Amos ran up to his room, slamming into a table as hot tears ran down his cheeks and steamed up his glasses. He yelped as a prickling sting ran up his leg, and cool drops of blood dripped down his ankle. He'd never worked so hard, but to Grandma, nothing was ever good enough. It just wasn't fair. That's enough. Without further ado Amos dashed straight for the back of the closet to the thing he had been avoiding these past three days. He'd had just about enough hard work and humble pie.

Amos crawled to the back of the closet, spreading the mess of white flour, rice crumbs, and sticky sugar around his Papa's old clothes. He felt for the nook on his hands and knees with sticky fingers. He scrambled around but came up empty. No nook.

Disappointed, he returned to his feet, backed out, and froze. *What if dreams were like photos but reversed?* He got back down, but he checked the opposite side this time. He found a little round nook. It was real. A little indentation, about the size of a coin, with a little metal ring around it, which he yanked on, but it did not give easily. He tugged on it as hard as he could, and a rush of stale air and musty secrets blew Amos' hair back, and his body tingled with a foreboding flash of curious fear.

CHAPTER 5  
THE DEAD AND THE LIVING



Amos sat stunned as red, dim dancing lights swam in the darkness. His breath was trapped, increasingly claustrophobic in his dizzy chest until he felt tiny little paws scratching and prodding him. The scratch of blood broke the spell, and Amos snapped out of his reverie with a lurching gasp. “Ouch, Thunder!” he cried.

Amos heard Grandma creaking up the steps, with an overbearing chorus of sighs and suffering. Dazed but determined not to be caught, Amos slid out of the closet, brushed himself off, and rushed to stand beside the bed, looking casual.

Grandma popped her head in, “You didn’t shower?” she scolded. “It’s been half an hour already; what were you doing?” Her eyes scanned the room and returned to him, lingering on the fresh cat scratches on his legs. Amos glanced around guiltily, but Thunder was nowhere to be seen. “It’s dinner time! Hurry up!”

With eye rolls of impetuous fury, Amos stormed off to the bathroom. Amos showered, changed into his pajamas and bunny slippers, and stomped to the kitchen. His feet knew the way, but Amos drifted in a snow globe of his imagination. The nook was real. It had whooshed open, and something was



back there in the darkness. Could what he had dreamt been real? *What did it all mean?*

Downstairs, the kitchen table was laid out in a delicious hotpot feast. Plates of vegetables and meats of all colors, shapes, and sizes layered the table around the central steaming spicy pot of bubbling, broiling red chili oil. Amos sat down, grabbed his chopsticks, and went fishing inside. After all the exercise and sun he had gotten today and after his nook-stupor daydream, he was lightheaded, exhausted, and humiliated. Still, the food was so delicious and spicy. It rejuvenated him with the magick of ghost peppers, the secret of Chongqing spice. Still, his thoughts wandered past the closet into the abyss. Amos wolfed down bowls of crunchy lotus root, slices of tripe that looked like old dish towels, and spicy hot beef strips.

“Thanks, Grandma,” Amos said. A tired smile jerked the corners of his mouth into a rictus-grin.

Grandma, for her part, let him eat as fast as he wanted and didn’t complain when he ran upstairs after dinner.

His pounding heart jackhammered in his ears as he crept into the murky closet and felt for the hidden place. He reached in with both hands, jamming one finger into something wooden and hard. The trunk! He dragged it out into the dim evening gloom of his Papa’s childhood room and shoved open the latch.

Amos gasped, his trepidation forgotten, as the trunk creaked open stiffly. Dusty air puffed into his face, and a shimmering glint of metal caught the moonlight. He unwrapped a necklace that held a ring and pendant, both marked with the triple swirls of what looked like inter-connected trees and slipped it over his head. There was something else, a piece of paper folded in half. He opened it, examining the flowing script, unlike anything he’d ever seen. A portent, a mystery? A conundrum. He slipped it into his pocket. He shook the silken fabric in circles, and dancing dirt devils fluttered around the room until the cloak was simply dusty, not dust-caked. With a

flourish, he slipped the silken red robe over his head. Something changed with the sound in the room and how he perceived it. It took a moment to realize that his heart wasn't pounding anymore. It was like everything; his breathing, his heart, and time and space itself had slowed down.

Calmly, he tiptoed to the hallway stairs and listened. Grandma was cleaning up after dinner. If only I could creep down the stairs as silent as a caterpillar, Amos thought, squinting in concentration. When he opened them, he was already at the bottom of the stairs. He peered around in surprise. *How did I do that?*

Amos snuck towards the door, but there was no sign of Thunder or Rufus. Grandma hummed while she washed up after dinner, the contented sound of family life. For a moment, he froze at the doorway.

The hot pot had warmed his belly and washed away some of the indignity of the day. He could picture himself turning around, going to help her put away plates and dishes and the easy conversation of evening chatter. In another world, there was an Amos with no notions of skulking around in a dusty old cloak. Then he blushed, embarrassed at himself, for he was a boy of 12, a prime age for skulking. "Whatever!" he said and prepared to skulk hard. *If you want something you've never had, you have to do something you've never done.*

He turned the handle carefully, opening the door without making a creak. Thunder slipped by his feet and out the door, and Amos padded quickly behind. Outside, Thunder hopped down the way toward the forest. The rusty red moon above was fat and full. Amos whistled at the blood moon as the air pulled him away into the vacuum of night, and then came the crack as the heavens split asunder. It had been warm, and the ground was dry, but a single drop of cool rain dripped down the back of his neck.

Amos followed Thunder around the sweet-smelling lavender hill and around the bend. Amos loved his new cloak, light and sleek, and as the rain softly drizzled down, he pulled

the hood up around his head. Thunder chased a butterfly into a bush and soon hopped out the other side, and they were together again. Lightning exploded in the sky, and the night cracked all around him like an exploding cannon. He barely managed to stay on his muddy feet.

Thunder flew through the air and caught the lovely many-colored butterfly under one paw. Moments later, raising the paw to examine it, the butterfly took off again, off the path and into the trees. Thunder bolted after it. Amos followed, racing down a slippery slope until he came to rest next to a large tree stump under the protective canopy of foliage.

His necklace twinkled silvery, faintly humming with power in the moonlight, and Amos could feel the hair on his neck stand on end. The barrier between his imagination and the unknown blurred as secretive and stealthy things crept. Amos heard a chittering all around him in the darkness, and glowing eyes appeared all around him, like in his dreams. Suddenly, Amos found himself entirely lost in the dark woods, far from home.

Under the canopy of trees, the fresh air was infused with the fragrance of pine and lavender flowers. Amos didn't know that he had stopped exactly over the eighth stone age cultural site discovered in China, dating back more than 20,000 years, along the Bachuan River. They had been full of ancient, beautiful, and almost mystical bronze Dragon lanterns and an entire host of ceremonial stone warriors, a little Terracotta Army. He only knew that as rays of moonlight reflected in a large puddle, revealing pools of glowing, milky orbs, he was not alone. Some said the old Tongliang Ming Tombs were haunted or a thinner barrier to neighboring magical worlds. Right now, all Amos knew was that the many eyes that watched him in the gloom were not of Tongliang, not of this earth, and somehow, as his necklace began to hum with hidden power, Amos knew it was all his fault.

Thunder began to growl, a low, guttural sound, as the singing cicadas caterwauled all around him. The milky orbs

scattered with a low chittering, and it grew darker. A nebulous green fog rolled around his feet, and Thunder hissed and sprang away, leaving him all alone. Amos held his breath, hoping it would soon pass, rammed his eyes closed, and counted back from ten.

When he opened them, his heart skipped a beat as he gazed into the mercurial amber eyes from his nightmares.

A sly, slinky red fox padded toward him, and a shiver ran down Amos' spine. Its beaked nose touched his. Rows of razor-sharp fangs slavered. The fox-spirit spoke in a terrible voice that grated his nerves, rooted in a petrified stupor.

"Hello, boy. I've been looking everywhere for you."

Amos froze, his breath caught in his chest.

"Who...who are you?" Amos stammered.

"I am the gloom, foolish boy. I am the crack in your light. I am the hungry wolf come home for dinner. You couldn't resist playing with your toys, could you? And here I am, to eat your foolish soul." The huli jing lifted its head back to laugh with a terrible callous coldness as tears leaked down Amos' cheeks and dripped from his glasses. The boy who always got away finally knew what it was like to be completely without hope. The fox curled up around Amos, inhaling him like a fine perfume. Its nine shadowy tails fanned out around him like the bars of a prison cell. Amos was trapped in the clutches of a huli jing, a fox-spirit trickster. He now knew that demons were real, and the boy's mind, stretched to its limit, suddenly snapped. The forest was silent, and time dripped like sweat from his brow. The fox licked its lips, savoring his fear, and it occurred to Amos that there could be something worse than death. It pressed its nose against the boy's cheek until a salty tear fell from his eyes. A long scratchy sandpaper tongue licked the side of his face, leaving a sticky, cloudy residue across his glasses. It was at that moment when the fox-spirit brushed against the silver world tree pendant that Amos first felt their spirits intermingle. It was a strange coupling of the fox-spirit's

joy and his fear. The Trickster reeled back and sniffed at the boy's neck.

"You're not *the boy*, not exactly. From here, but not entirely. How peculiar. A strange one, with a strange smell, covered in trinkets you know nothing about," the fox whispered. It sniffed again, curiously. "But you'll do, won't you?" The fox inhaled him like he was a delicious meal. "Yes, you'll do." The Trickster lifted its head back as if in laughter and a guttural, slow, syrupy sound creeped out as its jaw cracked, dislocating. Suddenly, it lurched forward and engulfed the boy's head.

Amos shivered as a numbing tingle spread through him. Slack-jawed, tears rimmed his spectacled eyes, and the vicious, ice cold burning pain spread quickly out from his chest cavity to his extremities. Amos felt some essence—the 'He' part of 'Him'—leaking into the Trickster's hungry mouth. He bit his tongue until the taste of tangy iron filled his mouth. His vision blurred and twisted into a möbius of colors and memories, drawn painfully from his core, a life of experiences draining rapidly out his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. And something else happened too, a twinning of his sensation, a doubling of his eyes. He was both a very hurt, weak boy, and a very powerful, hungry Trickster. One dwindled, while the other expanded hungrily, greedily, bleeding the boy dry.

In the darkest abyss of hopelessness, a small sliver of light shone down upon the boy as the Earth and moon hurriedly parted ways. Feeding, sucking the soul from the boy, the Trickster barely registered a blur of white fur soaring through the air until it collided with an astonishing force that left the Trickster winded, even as the beast tore deep into the huli jing's exposed neck. The beast's savage maw tore through fur, and flesh and blood, to the bone. Amos—no—the fox-spirit yowled and struck out with its vicious tails. The furry white blur held on doggedly, ripping, biting, and tearing, and the two beasts snarled and whirled like primordial forces of nature.

The fox-spirit exhaled a noxious green gas into the beast's

face. Gagging, it finally released its death grip upon the fox's throat. The Trickster shifted forms and drew a long, dark magick-runed blade that dripped with a purplish ichor, and it sailed through the air, and Amos heard a pitiful yelp. On the ground, Amos, spent and hovering between life and death, closed his eyes. He heard the cries of battle and felt a pungent magick envelop him. And then there was silence. After a time, the cicadas and crickets resumed their dance of life, and the creatures finally exhaled. The last thing Amos remembered before the blackness swallowed him was the haunting song of the forest.

## CHAPTER 6

### A SMALL SLIVER



**T**he hula jing's nine lashing tails strike out at the fluffy beast in a rapid-fire assault, caving deep red gashes into its body, but the feral creature only growled and thrashed and tore all the harder. The Trickster could smell the dog's fear, but it was fear for the boy, a protective concern. It would not relent or be scared away, the Trickster knew, reeling dizzily as a crimson tide, its own lifeblood, washed over them both and the world pulsed darkly. It was time to go.

The Trickster focused on a gem that pierced its right ear and conjured a stinking cloud of noxious yellow gas that spewed from its mouth and the hole in its throat. The guardian beast gagged, retched at the putrid haze, and released the fox, who became mist-like. Shadows swirled, and reformed into the shape of a tall, androgynous humanoid. The Trickster kicked the beast with a leather-booted foot, that sent it flying back end over end, and drew a black dagger that oozed a purplish ichor. As it snarled, the wound was torn open and began to bleed again. *No ordinary bite*, the Trickster cursed, pressing one hand to the wound to staunch the flow of blood, as the other tossed the dagger skillfully through the air. It pierced deep into the belly of the beast, who whimpered, standing protectively over the fallen lump that used to be

Amos' body. From its bloody maw came a vicious bark. It would clearly fight to the death to protect the child.

*Amos, now adjusting to life behind strange amber eyes and the dispassionate, calculating coldness of the Trickster, dizzily looked upon the bloody and ragged Rufus. By some artifice he didn't understand, Amos' spirit was contained within, and bound to the shapeshifter. He found himself in a savage yet beautiful forest full of serene majesty. Areas of the woods were recently burnt and scarred by war, but the living forest seemed quick to adapt and regrow. It felt intelligent, cunning, and ferocious.*

The Trickster fumbled in its cloak full of things for a murky reddish vial and managed to bite the cork off. It evaporated like translucent smoke, before being swallowed down in one gulp—the taste reminiscent of the sins of the donor: greedy, selfish, and cruel. A gentle coolness that numbed to the bone magickally stanching the blood flowing through the clenched fist and partially closed the wound. The bleeding lessened but did not stop. One long, delicate finger plucked a rolled-up bandage from another enchanted pocket and applied it to the injured throat. The bandage pulsed and glowed with Elven runes, becoming a second layer of skin. It would hold, for now. A wound like this would need powerful magick to heal. *Curse that damnable beast.*

Amos felt warmth course through him—through them—and wondered what was happening. How had he become a dark passenger in this cursed Trickster. The horrifying wounds began to close—he was grateful—but as he glanced at the motionless boy in a crimson cloak upon the ground, spectacles scattered underfoot, it dawned on him that he was looking upon his own still form. He had been spirited away from the life he knew. He suddenly felt a rush of fear, which like the magick in that flask, somehow fed and rejuvenated the Trickster.

The Trickster reached again into the multitude of tiny pockets and produced a little lantern. Setting it down, it quickly grew to full size and began to glow and whistle, expelling a thick greenish mist. The groping fog wrenched the



edges where worlds rubbed against each other and opened the Foggy Way—the way to An'Yatra. *Home*.

As the smoke cleared, the Trickster emerged in a heavily tangled grove of low, fine-fingered yew trees, a savage yet beautiful forest full of serene majesty. Areas of the woods were recently burnt and scarred by war, and the Trickster stopped to lean against one ancient, sprawling Senator yew that had survived both fire and axe. From its touch, the Trickster felt its tremendous age, thousands of years, and the incredible suffering it had endured as it had worked with its family to repel invaders of the Vale. Some had fared worse and connected via roots, and the Trickster felt the palpable suffering of each and every tree that had been taken from the Fae grove. The living forest seemed quick to adapt and regrow, however, and the Trickster marveled for a moment at its intelligence and cunning ferocity. The grasping boughs shined only a dim hue from the luminescence of alien creepers, but it was enough for the nimble Trickster to navigate what outsiders called The Green Hell - a place particularly unwelcoming to strangers - that the Trickster had once called home.

A secretive shuffling drew their attention to the nearby foliage. A little Vroog—a sneaky, scuttling, little beast—stuck one furry head above the leaf canopy as wide brown furry ears twitched in curiosity. When it saw the Trickster glance in its direction, its milky eyes melted into black pools of dread, and the tentacles surrounding its mouth twitched nervously. All six of its short legs backtracked quickly into the canopy of tree cover. A commotion rustled, quickly disassembling whatever traps the Vroogs had mucked up to catch the unwary traveler, and the chittering things scrambled away; hungry might they be, they were cunning enough to run.

The Trickster donned a shadowy hood and faded into the forest. The second skin covering the wound would not hold for long, and they were far from home. Despite the unwelcome clawing fingers and thorny creepers, the hostile forest

begrudged the Trickster passage. Creatures scurried out of sight and hid until the dark shadow passed.

Alert for intrusions or spies of the Summer Queen, yet oblivious to the curious eyes of the boy on the inside, the Trickster took rest under an ancient yew tree. Long fingers dipped back into the wondrous cape to produce a simple bone flute. The Trickster's cruel, tusked mouth, at odds with the delicate Elven features and eyes like galaxies, played a few haunting notes before slumping down to rest a moment, exhausted.

A cold, wet nose nudged the Trickster's crown of horns and licked its face, bristling against the Trickster's protruding lower jaw tusks. The Trickster's eyes shot open, a feral gaze focusing slowly upon the beast as one hand shot to a rune-carved dagger. It was only a Shantak, a huge bird-like beast with scales instead of feathers, larger than an elephant, with six legs and two pairs of long tentacles that sprouted from the tops of its limbs. The Shantak whinnied and stomped the ground, smelling the Trickster's bloodied face as it phased in and out of sight, moving to and fro with natural illusory magick. The Shantak had responded to the pheromonal call of the bone flue, and the druid Trickster grabbed the beast's neck and painfully climbed onto its back.

Despite its immense size and jaw-dropping speed, the Shantak was graceful and avoided trees and creatures alike. A shadowy blur, it was too fast to be hunted and avoided all manner of predators. As the beast raced through a makeshift path, the Trickster's ears twitched. They kicked at the beast to race forward as a translucent, lumpy, toad-like creature lunged forward, a mass of pink tentacles at the end of its snout shooting out to ensnare them. The bulbous clay giant rose on its back haunches. An eyeless face sniffed the air and brought its feelers up to catch the approaching breeze. The beast roared, spun around, and the Shadow drew a black runed sword. As the mass of tentacles swooped down at them again, the Trickster's blade cut up in a lightning-fast arc, crackling

with power and severing the entire trunk. The lumpy creature roared in pain and fell to the forest floor, but the pair were already long gone.

Their shadows raced across the land, chasing twilight, and soon they were past the forest and around the lake that bordered Hobbleheim and north, by Geardon, through the smallfolk hills of Pook country.

The Trickster, quickly fading from loss of blood, spurred the beast on. The Shantak picked up speed for a sprint along the road to Kronoswons, moving like the wind. They blew by the occasional traveler so fast that in the purplish dusk, the beast passed like a blur, gone sooner than it had come.

A young Pook family was heading home in a chugging steam-powered carriage with a fat basket of fresh-caught fish as the beast raced along the cobblestone road, but so quickly did the shadow beast sail, and so dark was its passenger that only the two young children noticed and sat up straight. Astonished, they felt the sensation of whooshing, blowing their hair back. Their parents, discussing their dinner plans and the best combination of spices for Geardon river fish, never even noticed.

Soon the beast and rider arrived at the modest towers and spires of Kronoswons. Magically barred from entering the grounds, the Shantak could only dump the Trickster unceremoniously at the gift shop entrance. It nuzzled its master for a moment and then turned and disappeared as fast as it had arrived.

*Amos gasped in amazement.* The castle gift shop bore a logo that read 'Kronoswons School of Magick.' Everything seemed so fantastic, yet utterly normal, and Amos desperately wished he was here under any other circumstance. *Am I dead? What will happen to me now?*

The Trickster tried to rise but collapsed with a wet groan, their long flowing hair spilling out of a black-feathered cap.

“Get the Mistress,” the beleaguered Pook giftshop worker cried, and a crowd quickly gathered around them. The shell-

shocked girl held the prone druid with care, shaking in her bloodied apron.

“Who’s that now?” called a woman from the crowd.

“Looks a bit like one of those Slowmorth types....” answered a gruff, bearded Dwarf.

“Is that an Elf? Could it be?” a timid student asked as she dropped a handful of books and sweaters.

“I’ve never seen an Elf before,” replied her curious friend.

“Naw, darling, look at the tusks. It’s an Ork for sure,” the gruff Dwarf answered.

“She’s an awfully pretty Ork then...” said a boisterous first-year.

“She?” came a scornful voice followed by a haughty laugh. “Watch your tongue, foolish freshman, that’s Shugo the Shadow, deadliest assassin on either side of the Savage Sea, a handsome devil he is—” drawled a thickly accented portly Pook in an elaborate gleaming gown.

“That can’t be Shugo! Shugo’s been dead for years!” growled the gruff Dwarf.

“Don’t much look dead to me—” the gilded Pook said.

“Make way,” commanded a stocky, robed Dwarf who carried herself with quiet authority as she pushed her way to the front of the crowd. Wearing the school robes of green and white, all recognized her as Luka Starlight, the school’s esteemed headmaster. She gazed at the druid with smoldering, doe-brown eyes and reached a starshadow-black hand over the druid’s porcelain-pale face to brush away the hair.

The druid’s distinctive amber eyes shot open in recognition, and bloodied lips whispered, “Luka....”

“Asht’arra,” Headmaster Luka Starlight said, shaking her head, leaning heavily on a wooden staff capped with a crystal orb. She wore a sad smile. “You should not have come here, Trickster. You are not welcome. Not anymore.”

The druid’s eyes pleaded for mercy but found no anger or malice in Luka’s eyes, only pity and sadness. Luka stood slowly and whispered, “*porta diastasis*,” as she gestured with the staff.

A third eye opened above her nose and glowed with celestial power, and the crystal cap of her staff sparkled as magical energies gathered around the fallen form. The headmistress of magick commanded a portal to crackle open and engulf the Trickster.

The crowd leaned forward, quiet but intensely curious. A portal to a dark, spired gothic castle ripped into mid-air. It was the Slowmorth Academy of Magick. “I believe this is where you meant to be, and I presume they will tend to you.”

“No, wait—” the shadowy druid tried to stall for time. Unceremoniously, the headmaster’s staff pushed the crumpled form through the portal. For just a moment, as the druid’s consciousness faded, Amos’ beamed to the surface and grasped Luka’s hand. Her eyes flickered with recognition as the word ‘help’ bubbled to the druid’s lips. But it was too late.

The spell pulled them apart.

With the dizzying energy of whirling particles dissolving and reconstructing the wounded druid, the Trickster landed like an old newspaper at the gates of a second magick school in one day. The Trickster’s eyes shut as the crumbled figure slammed into the school’s entrance.

Amos sunk deep into a dark place, a dreamlike place.

The portal closed, and that was that.



## THANK YOU

Thank you for checking out this two-chapter excerpt of the Solarpunk Fantasy novel *Amos the Amazing*. It was a labor of love by author Jorah Kai and an incredible team of editors, artists, and contributors, and we have a lot more in store for you after this book. We hope you are interested to learn more about Amos and his story.

The eBook goes on sale on October 31, 2022, at all major distributors and some library services, and there is a paperback edition also. If you are interested in preordering *Amos the Amazing*, you can check out the Amazon link here:

My Book

[www.amazon.com/dp/B0BKK13NKC](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BKK13NKC)

And the paperback link is here:

My Book

[www.amazon.com/dp/1959604872](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1959604872)

If you prefer alternatives to Amazon, all other links are here, including B&N, Apple Books, Kobo, and more:

<https://draft2digital.com/book/953982>

It would be fantastic if you could mark yourself reading *Amos the Amazing* on Goodreads and leave a review here: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/new/63117223-amos-the-amazing> as well as review it on Amazon or your platform of choice! It makes a huge difference for new books if you review

them and share them with your friends, and every review counts to help pass the SOLARPUNK message on.

Thanks so much for the gift of your time and attention, and we hope you have a wonderful day—cheers, from your friends at More Publishing.



## ABOUT THIS BOOK

No one ever wonders where they're going to run to after they've run away to the circus. I did, and for me, at least, it was to China. I had spent the better part of my childhood - which, in Peter Pan fashion, lasted a good thirty years - playing festivals until the faces blurred together, and the sound of excited shouting became the expressionistic Jackson-Pollack patina that formed the bedrock of my daily life.

It may sound awfully exciting. In fact, it had its moments, to be sure, and even now, recalling those days, months, and years with the rose-colored lenses of nostalgia, they were the best of times. They were, however, also the worst of times. A Prince on the weekend, standing atop a million-dollar light and sound rig, blowing fire, playing my newest songs on shrieking speaker stacks while artists and Faeries mixed with Orks and the things that go bump in the night, often turned to dust in my mouth by Monday.

Still, those nights were defining ones for many, a right of passage, and often spent rubbing shoulders with unbelievable characters, both regionally and intergalactically. I mean, we were all a little like the Lost Boys and certainly no stranger to a bit of magick, but some stories are more unbelievable than others. One night I remember a run-in with that roguish space captain with a killer smile and a huge, shaggy best friend, who at least once stopped down for a drink at a watering hole on a scummy blue planet where I happened to be doing my thing. We tussled a little over a girl, if you can believe it. You probably wouldn't believe that *I won*.

I left school to play gigs - and then quit gigs to finish school and always wondered about the roads not taken, when, for example, I supported my best friends, The Root Sellers, to prepare tracks for gigs at the Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010 Olympics and Paralympics, but ultimately decided to stay behind and finish a degree in Poetry and Creative writing, while world leaders danced to the beat of our drums without me. If you're reading this, it's a fair guess that the writing thing worked out, so that's always a plus.

Eventually, even having a good time gets tiring, and one can only eat so many excellently prepared cheese plates before we crave a new horizon. Mine was a trip to China, Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing through a college I was hanging out at because it seemed like a good idea; it's what people do. Often, they hang about at colleges and dream of doing something once they've moved on. Chongqing was a very hot and spicy place, full of excellent food and some of the nicest people I've ever met, and when they told me I should stay, I listened, and the rest, they say, is history.

Years went by, I got married, and I had a big loving family here, which is pretty remarkable since I came from a small family and was an only child. Around 2016, we started taking our high school students to the countryside to teach rural primary school students in mountainous villages - like Tongliang - and I got to see the city boys and girls learn all about the rigors of countryside life, even as they taught the very curious young rural children about Canada, English and some other things that I supported them in. At the end of the week, the children all lined up and bawled their eyes out that we were leaving, and it was terribly sad, but we promised to return next year. For a while, we did, and then we didn't.

In 2020, mere months after an epic European trip with my wife where I promised to kickstart my faltering and fairly shelved writing career - I had several binders and drafts on a shelf, and that was about all I had to show for decades of writing classes and a lifetime of dreams, something big

happened. A lockdown, a virus, and a global pandemic had begun. As the first Canadian journalist on the scene for an early lockdown in China before it was rightly recognized as a pandemic, I was a curiosity back in the west, and I had a column on a fairly prominent national news page where millions of people read about my daily escapades making banana bread, gorging on scientific podcasts, and trying to share what I learned with the west so they could be prepared for what was coming. Some listened, many laughed, and quite a few argued with me for having the gall to try to help them at all. That diary became a book, won a few awards, and was considered a humble bestseller for what it was. It showed me that when pressed to the fire, a writer could burn white-hot, and those papers and binders could become a real book. I promised to repeat the process.

After a couple of years of talking about viruses and parents feeling sad for children at home without friends and school, I thought of Amos again, the composite of myself and all those children learning about the countryside. I had tried to write his story in 2018 but realized he'd been too old and too mid-journey, and I went back and imagined how it all really began. We got a call one day, and I was asked to meet some university students in Tongliang, a place I knew, sign some books and read a poem, and generally just be there, being me. I drafted an outline for the first "origin" of Amos' book and then drafted a chapter that seemed like one they would enjoy, and then I read it to them. ***They loved it.*** They wanted to know more. They wanted to hold my story in their hands and savor every word. I met Dr. Gao then. She told me I had done a little bit of magick (yes, real ***magick***, not the rabbit-out-of-hat-on stage fluff), and she and her daughter promised to help me bring this cross-cultural Western and Chinese fairytale to the world. It was June, and I was told if I had a book done by September, her students would read it as part of their literature class. So I worked all summer and had a messy, leaky draft by the first day of September.

With Abantika, Erin, and Garrett's help, we got my draft into good shape. The students read weekly sections of it for an entire semester - and all seemed to love it. So I kept working on it, and eventually, we got maps, illustrations, and a beautifully painted cover, and it really became my love letter to all the children's books and magic and fantasy I read growing up. As it's come close to publication, and a Chinese version is slated to be released in early 2023 by a big-time Chinese publisher where it will, with a little luck, become a major blockbuster, a lot of people seem excited about it, including some people from Tongliang. I hope those children, now grown up, at least a few years older than the kids who blew bubbles and smiled and cried when we left, will enjoy it and remember a little bit of the magick of their childhood. Really, it's all about magick, and I hope that's ok with you.

I set it in the near future because, at this time, much of the world is experiencing record-high temperatures, weird weather, and a slew of other problems I'd rather not dwell on but instead dream that we have already solved. I thought, why not give them something optimistic, encouraging, and SOLAR PUNK to read? Maybe some of these children will become engineers and figure out how to use hydrogen cars, solar power plants, and huge carbon sink forests to save *our beautiful world*.

It's a good wish. If you're reading this in the future, you'll know whether it worked out or not. I hope it did. If you're reading it in the near future and we're still not sure, I would really love it if you could share this book with your friends and leave reviews and comments online and help every young dreamer fall in love with the idea that *we are going to save our planet*. Our planet would really like that too.

In the end, I would like to say I'm sorry I never had a chance to finish the book. A lot of writers never feel their work is done. We just have to let it go. And then there's Patrick Rothfuss, but for the rest of us who hope to release more than one book a decade, it is painful to know we could have done

more. I hope his fans finally appreciate the loving dedication he puts into the years of revision when that elusive third book comes out. If you are from the future, which you likely must be, I hope it is finally done. Civilizations have risen and fallen in the time it took to get from book two to book three, but many of us know that it will be perfect when it comes out.

For my own story, it's been incredibly interesting to write and translate simultaneously for the Chinese market, and I am really pleased to see this version, as imperfect as it might be, come out in my own native English while I'm young enough to appreciate it. Writing for the deadlines of a publisher, a translator, and hopefully, a lot of readers of all ages around the world, I did what I could in the limited time I could squeak out of a busy life, but I did my best. As Mildred would have been happy to remind me, it's the best I could do.

I do want to give a special mention to the true villain of this novel: straight quotations; unlike the curly smart kind that is now in vogue in book publications, they are generally out of fashion for those that don't type on typewriters. You'd think, then, that it would be easy to set a modern computer to use the modern curly quotes, and that would be that. Not so. It seems straight quotes have got a grandfathered clause into the computer world and the best we can do is have a crack team of fairies sprinkling fairy dust around liberally that at least temporarily tames the old quotes and transforms them into the smart, bouncy, curly kind. But every time I've turned around, those blasted quotes have turned back, grown up like weeds, or invaded like a pack of rampaging Vampire Trolls, and I'm sure, despite my best efforts, some of them remain in the book to this day. They really have a zest for life that I can only hope to approximate, but they are a continuing source of stoic inspiration, even as I curse them for all the trouble they make.

A hearty thank you very much goes out to the artists who colored my words, Adrián Ibarra Lugo and Randall Hampton, both of whom I discovered through the really supportive

fantasy community around Critical Role, and to Fan Yuelin, a brilliant and hilarious 10-year-old girl who loves to doodle monsters, this book wouldn't be as visually compelling without you. Also, Midjourney, what a wonderful and all-seeing, all-powerful AI you are. Please be kind to us in the future.

That's it, and that's all. In perpetuity, in life, and in the dream, I thank you from the bottom of my heart to the tips of my oft-mad but generally well-meaning toes.

Your friend,

Jorah Kai

October 2022

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Someone once told Jorah Kai to *write what he knew*, but since he was 12 and knew very little, the avid reader set off on a life-long journey to master a variety of esoteric subjects. He's been a lifelong student, martial artist, musician, English teacher, writer, newspaper columnist, editor, web designer, dance music producer and touring DJ, black rock city existential detective and philosopher, fire-breathing gypsy circus performer, standup comedian, and family man, all of which offered many profound insights into the human condition. He now lives in the solarpunk capitol of Asia, Chongqing.

Kai enjoys conversing in foreign languages because it's more mysterious, and he enjoys playing guitar and eating pizza. He has lived at the confluence of two mighty rivers, the Yangtze and the Jialing, with a large and loving family for many years as a human being and forever after as the most immortal of all supernatural beasts, *a writer*.



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