

Mad Scientist Journal Presents:

Fitting In:

Historical Accounts
of Paranormal Subcultures



Edited by Dawn Vogel and Jeremy Zimmerman

MAD SCIENTIST JOURNAL PRESENTS

fitting IN

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PARANORMAL SUBCULTURES



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AND Dawn Vogel

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Edited by Jeremy Zimmerman and Dawn Vogel

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A TIME FOR QUIET

**An account by Quiet Moss,
AS PROVIDED BY TIMOTHY NAKAYAMA**

I was so on edge that I only realized the bird was there when it spoke up. "They are ready;" it chirped.

"Thank you;" I said.

The brown tree sparrow nodded solemnly before taking to the air again, heading straight for the place from which it had come: the top of the hill.

I took a slow, deep breath and began walking.

As I crested the hill, I saw the three of them, gathered together inside a ring of trees. I approached slowly, and they turned, almost in unison. The largest of the three natukkong nodded and gestured for me to come closer.

"You are the petitioner?" he asked, his voice pure, bell-like.

I nodded and bowed.

"We three are the Council of Raub;" he said. "My name is Dawn-to-Dusk:"

The one farthest away from me shimmered. "I am Sunlight-Through-Trees:"

"And I am Raindrops-on-Leaves;" said the other, a very faint, barely discernible echo trailing every word.

Our kind grows in size the more power we possess, a trait

common to other earth spirits as well. Dawn-to-Dusk was clearly the most powerful among the three. The other two natukkong were similar in both size and age.

"And you, petitioner?" Dawn-to-Dusk asked. "What is your name?"

"I am Quiet *Moss*:'

"How old are you?" Sunlight-Through-Trees asked.

"Thirty-nine:'

Dawn-to-Dusk smiled. "Very young:' He paused for a moment, as if contemplating something. Then he nodded. "Tell us your story, Quiet *Moss*:'

I was nervous, having to tell my tale in front of these three wise and powerful natukkong, but it was a tale I had to tell if my journey was to have any meaning.

I started off with my birthplace, Sungai Lembing. Before my time, the town had been a bustling hub of human activity. The humans had grown wealthy and fat from the mining of rich veins of tin deep under the ground, while the local natukkong grew big and powerful as more of the humans streamed into town, hungry for the riches made by those who came first.

Then I told them about the Sungai Lembing of today: a sleepy little town, the tin mines now silent and still, only a small number of its original population remaining, its glory years well and truly behind it. Many of the natukkong left too; only Baba, Mama, and a few old ones decided to stay put.

Finally, I told them about my decision to leave Sungai Lembing. The little town could barely sustain the natukkong that remained, and

I had never been one of the town's natukkong to begin with, having lived in the forested hills outside the town for all my thirty-nine years.

I ended my story by asking that they consider my petition to make a new Home within the town of Raub.

A moment of silence passed.

Raindrops-on-Leaves was the first to speak. "You say your years were spent in the wilderness. No dealings with humans?"

"Some passed by;" I said. "Explorers mostly, but their numbers are few. None settled within my *Home*."

"And you want a change now, is that it?"

It is one of the big distinctions among natukkong: how involved we choose to be with humans. There are two groups. The natukkong in the first group choose to have nothing to do with humanity, building their Homes in the wild places, in the jungles, swamps, mountains.

Natukkong in the second group live side by side with humans. This is a lot more challenging than living in the wilderness. Two different folks sharing the same space? Things are going to get a little complicated.

I used to be in the first group. Now I was in Raub to join the second group. Why would a natukkong *want* to make that change? Why go to all the trouble of sharing a Home with those humans, when there was far less hassle in just living in the forest, with the birds and mouse-deers and crocodiles.

The answer is power. It is what our kind must consume to stay alive. The land itself is a source of power, and since natukkong are earth spirits, we can tap into the land's power. So a natukkong can set up Home somewhere in the wilderness and gather the power emanating from that spot.

But another source of power is humans-specifically, their belief in us. The greater the number of humans who believe in a natukkong, the more power that natukkong draws from them.

Why the need for more power? Because natukkong believe that the more power we gather for ourselves now, the more we'll be able to enjoy the Great Beyond. Different natukkong prioritize this to different degrees.

For me, I was at that age where I wanted to explore, see more of the land, try new things. Baba and Mama had been making observations

about the people of Sungai Lembing for years. I'd never gotten to know humans, but I wanted to know them. And I was honest enough to admit that the added power was a nice bonus. I could send some back to Baba and Mama and keep the extra to build up my supply for the Great Beyond.

So when Raindrops-on-Leaves asked whether I wanted to make a change, there was only ever going to be one answer.

"Yes:'

"Are you ready for this change?" she pressed me.

"I do not know whether I'm ready;' I admitted. "But I do know that I have not come all this way just to be afraid and not even trY:'

Sunlight-Through-Trees shimmered. "I like your attitude, Quiet Moss:'

"You're saying yes to his petition, then?" Raindrops-on-Leaves asked of her fellow council member.

"Yes;' Sunlight-Through-Trees replied.

"But where shall he set up Home?" Raindrops-on-Leaves asked.

"I think there are a few suitable spots;' Dawn-to-Dusk chimed in. "Ones with not so many humans, so that he won't be overwhelmed. Secluded. Quiet. A good place to build a new Home. Hmmm. I know just the right spot!"

I'd made it! Baba and Mama would be so proud.

I didn't realize until much later that there was more to Dawn-to-Dusk's choice than the relatively smaller number of humans living there.



The first thing I did was to stretch my senses out, to see just what they'd given me.

The humans lived in two main areas, where old houses wound tightly around narrow roads. A row of even older shop-lots offered

food and trade. More than a few abandoned buildings dotted the area, relics from an earlier time now fallen into disuse. There was a touch of greenery. That was about it.

By the time I reeled my senses in, I'd counted slightly more than five hundred humans living in the boundaries of my new Home. Very small, but very manageable.

The second thing I did-observe. Now I had plenty of time to observe humans up close and personal, and come to my own conclusions.

Not all humans believed in us. There were many beings and entities in this world fighting for the humans' beliefs, who fed on those beliefs, for sustenance and power, just like natukkong. I couldn't really begrudge them for acting in their own interests. Besides, there was enough to go around for anyone who put in the work. Belief was an eternal spring-it never ran dry.

Belief also came in varying degrees. Some thought of us only once in a long while. Then there were the devout. They placed red-painted shrines and altars inside the compound of their homes or outside the buildings where they worked. In these shrines sat an idol in the shape of a human, dressed in opulent raiment, surrounded by various offerings, such as betel nuts, betel leaves, lime, fresh flowers, raw coconut, or other fruits. A pair of white candles and three joss sticks stood before the offerings, to be used for prayers.

To be honest, though, all that red altar business, the idols and offerings-we natukkong don't need any of that. These things are just a means for the humans to wrap their heads around our existence. It was familiar to them, comfortable, a generations-old tradition.

I listened to their prayers. I was curious to hear what humans wished for.

Prosperity was by far the most popular. Good health and good fortune were pretty high up on the list, as was protection before the start of a journey.

The big question after all this was: how was I supposed to go about amassing power? The natural features of my new Home didn't lend themselves to obtaining much power from the land. In fact, my old place near Sungai Lembing gave off more power.

But I now lived with over five hundred humans. The gains were there, waiting for me- I just had to figure out a way to increase my standing among the humans.

I was pretty sure that the way lay in the humans' prayers. See, the way I figure it, natukkong gain power from humans believing in us. So there seemed to be two ways of strengthening the humans' belief. I could either get more of the humans to start believing in me, or strengthen the belief of those who already believed in me.

Out of the two, the first one seemed a lot harder; humans do not change their beliefs easily. The second seemed easier because the belief was already there. I just had to add to it.

But what could I actually do? We natukkong have an exhaustible supply of energy and can only do so much to manipulate the physical world. My energy was only a fraction of what an older, wiser, natukkong-like Dawn-to-Dusk-would have. I decided that I had to use it in the most efficient possible way. If I focused my efforts on those humans who had the potential to yield the most belief, I would get the most out of every drop of energy I expended.

With that in mind, I studied the humans, trying to figure out which of them would see the greatest surge in belief if I worked on their wishes.

I soon narrowed it down to three targets.

The first was a wealthy man. He was always wishing for more success and prosperity in his business. If I made things go right for him, I hoped that he would mention to his many acquaintances, friends, and family how I'd granted him good fortune.

That second was a meek young boy, who recited the prayers but whose heart was not in it. He dreamt of being popular at school. With

him, I was hoping that being young and impressionable, he would be unable to keep his secret and end up spreading the word among the other children.

The third was a writer who was always pining for sweet love. My hope was that some newfound interest from the opposite sex would engage her inner muse, spurring her to work her belief into poetry and prose to inspire other humans.

The time came for me to work my natukkong ways.

The wealthy man I gave a dash of luck, just enough to tilt the opinion of anyone dealing with him from a neutral outlook to a favorable one.

For the boy, I wove gossamer threads of wit and clarity around his mind. He now had the right words to amuse, delight, and impress all his classmates.

I cast a minor glamor over the writer, bestowing a small boost to her presence and confidence.

My gifts were only temporary. Humans wanting permanent gifts would have to deal with very powerful entities, few of whom were benevolent or generous.

Exhausted from my efforts, I curled up and waited.

Things did not go as I'd hoped.

The wealthy man credited his smarts and charisma alone for the successful deals. The only thing he did with his newfound wealth was to splurge on more baubles.

The boy's popularity at school soared, but he had no confidence to do anything about it. He wondered when his classmates would find out that he was a fraud.

With several men showing signs of interest, the writer's focus was less sharp than it usually was, leading her to work less on her words and more on a possible relationship.

In short, nothing went as planned. I had failed miserably. When my energy returned, I gave it another shot, with different humans.

The results were exactly the same.

By then, nearly two months had passed. I was not doing well at all. The lack of power did not bode well for the coming months.

Frustrated by my utter lack of progress, I decided that I could do with a little help.

Dewy Cobweb only had a few years on me, but he'd been living in Raub for a while. I invited him to my Home.

"Hey, Quiet. How's it going? You settling in okay?"

"Hey, Dewy. Actually, I'm struggling. That's why I asked you here. For advice, if you have some to spare:'

"I guessed as much;' he said. "You're looking a little less substantial than when I first met *you*:'

"It's been two months, Dewy. I can't seem to get more belief from the humans:'

Dewy nodded in empathy. "If you've never worked with humans before, it can be a little frustrating:'

"It's *very* frustrating, I expend all my energy, but get nothing in *return*:'

"Hmmm. Tell me what you've been doing:'

So I told him. He listened attentively throughout. After I was done, I asked, "What have I been doing wrong?"

"Well;' he began hesitantly, "I think it's all in the approach. What you did? That's a pretty traditional way of viewing our living arrangement with humans. Maybe it could have worked a hundred years ago. But we live in different times now. The humans are more numerous now, and they go through their Ages much faster than we do. What works in one of their previous Ages might not work in this one."

"Are you saying I'm old school?"

"I'm saying your *approach* is old school, Quiet. There's a difference:'

"Tell me then, Dewy, what I can do to earn their belief. What's

the proper way of going about it?

Dewy drew closer. "I think there are different approaches to it, Quiet. If there was only one tried and proven way to go about earning the humans' belief, we would all be doing the exact same thing." He looked at me and grinned. "I know that's not what you want to hear. But as far as I've lived with humans, I think it holds true. Look, if you really want to get along with the humans, to find your place in the grand scheme of things, perhaps you might consider this: instead of trying to get the most out of your efforts, why not try understanding the humans. What drives them, their dreams, their friends, their loves. Things like that. To earn a human's belief, you'll have to understand them deeper than you do now. They're a varied bunch, humans, more so than spirits."

"Is that it?" I asked, sarcasm creeping into my voice.

"No, that's everything," he said.



Trying to understand humans may, on the surface, sound like something perfectly doable. But to me, it was a completely different way of thinking. Where did I even begin?

A full day went by before I groaned and gave up. So I set out to do the only thing I could think of: go among the humans, and *truly* observe. In the past two months, I had merely been seeing, drawing on my own preconceptions. This time, I vowed to go in with a blank slate.

I peered into the hearts of families and relationships. In the light of day, I watched them go about their livelihoods. In the darkness of the night, I watched as they dreamt of the future.

I learned that those who prayed out of concern or worry for others were more likely to pray than those who asked things for themselves. Their prayers rang out clearer than the rest. It seemed like shared experiences were important for the collective human consciousness,

bringing them closer together, burning away the extraneous demands and wants.

I gave a man's dying mother memories of her past, freeing her from the pain and indignities of a slow death. I gave a new widow's two young sons clarity and insight into the life of their recently departed father. I wove a circlet of serenity for the mother who worried about her daughter's health; the daughter was in a far-away land, but at least I could help the mother.

I needed to rest for an entire week. By the time I was up and about, I felt a slow trickle of belief coming from the humans. The increase was only minuscule, but my elation and happiness were not. It was more challenging than the previous approach, but it *felt* good. Satisfying. Meaningful. Something that I'd never before associated with humans.

It was not long after this that I met Auntie Chew, the coffee shop lady.

She prayed twice a day, always at the same times, without fail. Her prayers were always the same-gratitude for what she had in her life, and the hope that she and the people around her would continue to live safe and blessed lives.

Auntie Chew was getting on in years, but her energy and passion for life were that of a woman half her age. Everyone loved Auntie Chew; she could not see it, but her soul shone with a glowing, shimmering radiance.

My new path of trying to understand humans dovetailed nicely into my curiosity about Auntie Chew's charmed life. I was intrigued. But there were limitations to observing her as a natukkong. She couldn't communicate with me, so I was a passive observer at best. But natukkong have a talent we share with other spirits—we can assume human form. We're weak in shapeshifting compared to other spirits, but it's a useful talent to have. The only drawback is that it drains a lot of power.

When the next morning came around, I walked into Auntie Chew's coffee shop, a man on the outside, a natukkong on the inside, nervous but excited. I walked slowly but steadily to a table, for I had chosen the guise of a man similar to Auntie Chew in age.

"What you want to order?" she asked. "We still got some egg-tart left. Some kaya puffs and *lobakgo too*:'

"A cup of *kopi-o*, please:'

"Har?" she said in utter disbelief. "Coffee only? Not hungry, ah?"

"No. Just coffee, thank *you*:'

"Okay, okay;' she said as she scurried off to relay the order to one of the kitchen staff. She came back moments later with a brown porcelain cup of hot black coffee.

"You've been working at this coffee shop for many years?" I asked.

Auntie Chew took this as an invitation to chat with me, which was just what I wanted. "You new around here? I been here for twenty plus years. I been here so long everyone seems to know me!"

"Really?"

Auntie Chew and I talked about the coffee shop, the shop-lots, the people who lived in this part of Raub.

When my energy began to flag, I bid Auntie Chew a warm farewell. I crumbled after that, thoroughly exhausted, but happy.

I paid further visits to Auntie Chew and her coffee shop over the next few weeks. She would intersperse bits and pieces of her own story into our discussion, like how she came from the slightly bigger town of Bentong but moved to Raub when her husband passed away. I enjoyed our chats, even though many human practices and traditions seemed so strange to me. But I listened with an open mind.

It was on my fourth visit that Auntie Chew told me about the abandoned theater.

The theater was popular in the late 70s, when men and women, boys and girls would dress in their finest to watch the matinee shows on the weekend, while at night, young men and women would hold

hands and steal kisses in the darkness of the hall as their heroes performed deeds of derring-do on the screen.

She sighed nostalgically. "The last movie I watched there was *The Bride with White Hair*, back in the early 90s. Good memories. But they closed down for business ten years ago. Business was good, then suddenly not so good. I heard a rich man bought it. Wanted to turn it into a bird house. But in the end, nothing," she said. "You know the reason? Ghost!"

"Ghost?"

"Yahl That's why no bird house. Too many 'things' inside:"

"Is it true?"

"I don't know whether true or not, lah," she admitted. "But you know, sometimes, when I have to pass that place to go to the marketplace, I see a face staring out at me from the windows. Like a small child's. I think maybe a child died there. Then it makes sense. If a ghost is inside, no birds will come! They can sense ghosts too!"

The thought of there being a ghost wandering somewhere in my Home was deeply disturbing. Natukkong are spirits; we're part of the cycle of life and death. Ghosts are aberrations because they exist outside the cycle. They're beings that should be somewhere else, but for whatever reason, are unable or unwilling to move on.

"This theater? Where is it?" I asked.

She told me, but then added, "Why you ask?"

"Sounds interesting. Might have a look:"

"What?" she cried. "Go there for what? Nothing to see, lah! Only ghost!"

I hoped she was wrong.



The humans might have thronged its halls once, but those days were long over. The theater stood there, surrounded on all sides

by abandoned shop-lots and flats. I couldn't sense a human soul anywhere nearby.

As I made my way toward the entrance, barred by a padlocked and chained foldable steel gate, I suddenly experienced the strange sensation that I was being watched by someone or something behind me. I spun around, but there was no one and nothing behind me.

I slipped through the doors, into a wide foyer. Narrow shafts of sunlight streamed in through the dust-caked windows. There was a short set of stairs leading to an upper floor, where double wooden doors stood on either side. The entire place was bare, except for dust and cobwebs everywhere.

There were footprints in the dust. Small ones, like those a human child would make. I extended my consciousness through every part of the building. It took a lot longer and used up more energy than I'd expected.

To my surprise, there was a human in the building, on the upper floor. Why hadn't I sensed them before, when I was on the outside? And what sort of human would live in an abandoned building? Was it a child?

And the air. There was an oppressive feeling to it. It weighed a little heavier, flowed a little more thickly inside this old relic of a building. I was disturbed by this. Something was definitely not right here.

I climbed the stairs. Once I'd reached the landing, I turned right. As I approached the double doors, I sang a few words in the ancient natukkong language, casting a ward of protection on myself.

I slipped through the doors into a large hall, with rows of dusty red seats, all facing a black stage. It was dark and dank. The air was musty and stale, stifling for any human.

Which I assumed was what that small shadowy form on the other side of the hall was, the one moving silently in and out of the spaces between the rows of seats.

Just as I was about to confront it, the small shadowy form stopped moving. It peered at me and said, "You're not my father:'

The shock was in the fact that the little girl standing in front of me had spoken to me. As a rule, humans can't see us- that is why they communicate with us by praying at those red altars. It is why I had to assume human form to speak with Auntie Chew. A human with the Sight is extremely rare.

Her words were another mystery. *You're not my father.* A pure human child who had a spirit as her father?

"I am not your father;' I replied.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

Did her father live here with her? Was her father the wealthy man who bought the theater? But that man was a human.

"Your father is coming back?" I asked.

"He goes away a lot;' she said. "But he always comes back. He brings me food:'

The girl did look healthy, like one who had eaten well.

"Hey, do you want to play?" the little girl blurted.

"Play?"

"Yah!" she said. "My friends and I are attacking the castle!"

"Friends?"

"Yah! They're all here;' she said, gesturing at the empty space behind her.

I'd been in her presence long enough to know that she wasn't the source of the oppressive feeling in the building. I was getting weaker. The enervating pall that hung heavy in the air had been leeching my energy; even the simplest of actions required more energy than usual.

"I can't stay to play, little one;' I said.

"My name's Nadia. What's yours?"

"Quiet *Moss*:'

"Well, Mister Quiet, I guess I'm playing alone:' Then she let out a whoop of glee and dashed up the aisle, imaginary friends in tow.



I went back to the old theater three more times after that.

The second time, the girl was asleep in the same hall, a large threadbare blanket covering everything but her head.

I decided to search for the source of the unbearably heavy sensation in the air. The other hall was a mirror image of the one I'd found the girl in. On the lower floor were four rooms. Two were rooms where the humans had once performed their ablutions, while I couldn't guess the function of the other two smaller, bare rooms. On the other side of the building was a double door, chained and padlocked. I slipped through and found myself in a narrow back alley littered with green plastic garbage bins.

I couldn't locate the source of the enervating pall. Tired and defeated, I left the girl to her dreams.

The third time, I found Nadia on the lower floor, in one of the two empty rooms. She sat on the floor, eating a pile of human food.

"Hello, Quiet! You came back:'

"Father left not too long ago:'

"He brought you food?"

"Yes;' she said. "I'd offer you some but I know you can't eat this food:'

"How do you know?"

"Father can't eat it either:'

Sensing that I was on the verge of discovering something new, I said, "Your father. Do I look like him?"

"No;' she said, giggling, "but you both have a glow about *you*:'

"Glow?"

"Yah;' she said, chomping into a ripe banana. "Like light around your *body*:'

That probably meant that her father was a spirit, just not a natukkong.

"Besides food, what else does he do when he comes back?"

"He teaches me things," she said. "Like the alphabet and numbers. Sometimes he plays with me. And he tells me stories too!"

It sounded like her "father" was a benevolent spirit.

"How often does he take you out?"

The girl gasped. "Out? No! Father says it's too dangerous out there!"

This was a sign in the opposite direction. Why was the spirit lying to keep her in this old theater? My very first thought was that he was feeding on her. But why go to all the trouble of bringing her food and teaching her new things?

"I told Father about you," she said, then giggled. "He thinks I have a new imaginary friend!"

"Oh. So you do have imaginary friends," I said.

"Doh," she said, sticking her tongue out. "I know they're imaginary, lah. I'm the one who created them!"

A new thought struck me. Could this "father" of hers be the source behind the oppressive air saturating the inside of this theater?

There was only one course of action left for me.

"When does your father usually come back?"

"Don't know," Nadia said. "Maybe once a day. Sometimes every other day!" She eyed me shrewdly. "You want to meet him, huh?"

"Your father sounds interesting!"

"He is! Really!"

"Hopefully I'll meet him next time," I said, a plan already forming in my mind. But I had to leave now—once again, my energies were flagging. "Farewell, Nadia!"

"Come back soon!"



I was convinced that the "father" was the key to unraveling this mystery. All I had to do was lie in wait for him among the abandoned flats.

I settled down and waited.

It was noon the next day before I felt his presence. I felt him enter the cinema, whereupon his presence then became muted and weak. I hurried out from my stakeout spot and slipped through the theater's front doors.

Now that I was inside, I could feel the full force of his presence again. Once I reached the landing, I quietly uttered the words for a protection ward. I glided toward the hall's opened doors.

"Oh, thank you, Father!" That was Nadia.

"Eat up;" said another voice. Expressive and energetic best described it.

From my vantage point by the doors, I could make out their forms, sitting against the wall on the other side of the hall. I focused on the "father"-a slim man, bespectacled and sporting neatly combed-back hair, dressed in a tattered black suit. I had to admit, his shapeshifting talent was much better than mine.

I stood up and glided toward them.

Nadia was the first to look up. "Quiet!"

The spirit-in-human-form's jaw dropped and his eyes widened in shock as he caught sight of me.

"What?" he yelped. "You're actually real?"

"What are you?" I asked. "Why are you keeping this child here?"

"What is a natukkong doing here?" he shot back.

"I don't want trouble;" I said calmly.

"Did *he* send you?" he spat, his eyes burning with fury.

"Father?" Nadia said, her voice trembling. "What's going on?"

"Get behind me, *sayang*;" said the spirit-in-human-form. Nadia's face scrunched up in confusion, but she obeyed him.

"Look, I think there's been some kind of mis-" I began, but just

then a huge ball of force slammed into my chest, and I was thrown backward.

Urgh. I was not hurt; what I had been hit with was made for pushing objects away, not for wounding. I reached out to grab him. He leapt nimbly up onto the back of a chair. I followed up with another swipe; a blur of motion later and he was up in the air, leaping over my blow with ease.

Which worked just fine for me. I whispered a stream of words in the ancient natukkong language, and a hundred tiny white glyphs materialized in the air beside me. With one flick, I sent them spiraling up into the air toward him. The glyphs slapped onto every part of his body; he fell to the floor with a dull thud.

"Father!"

"It's okay, Nadia; I said as I approached.

"What have you done to him?"

"Just revealing his true *form*."

There was a crackle of energy as the glyphs lit up, did what they were supposed to do, then faded from sight.

Where before there had been a human male lying on the floor, now there was a small, curled up cat-like creature. It was a civet, a creature that resembled a cat, but with a longer body, shorter legs, and a much longer tail; there was a black band of fur across its eyes, and a combination of black bands and spots along its body and tail.

I know civets. They make their homes in the forest. Spirits whose main body came in civet form however...

"Bajang!" I hissed.

Humans who have been corrupted by the Sight are known as *dukuns*. They hate spirits, seeing us as nothing more than potential minions who can be dominated to serve at their beck and call. Their studies into black magic grants them the power to cast various malicious cantrips and spells, chief among them spells of servile enthrallment that can bring a spirit under their control. Spirits give

dukuns a wide berth, even those powerful enough to resist their spells.

A *dukun* often has familiars. A *bajang* is one such familiar. It is brought forth into existence through an arcane ceremony that involves the body of a stillborn child. Stealthy and nimble, *bajang* are often used by the *dukun* for spying or scouting.

The *bajang*'s favorite food is human children.

"Have you been fattening this girl up all this while, *bajang*?" I growled.

The *bajang* got up, tottering uncertainly on his short legs; the glyphs of revelation also drained a small amount of the target's energy.

He placed a paw on the back of a chair to steady himself. Nadia stood up to help, but he gestured for her to remain as she was, on the floor. He then glared at me. "Who are you to judge me, *natukong*? If you intend to harm her, I'll char your ass!"

Something was amiss. Why did the *bajang* appear to be genuinely protective of the girl?

'I'm not here to harm anyone;' I said. "I just want to know why this girl, Nadia, is in this theater, and why you're keeping her *here*:'

He scrunched up his cat-like face, about to shoot off another fiery retort, but then seemed to think better of it and said stiffly, "So you're not sent here by *him*?"

"I don't know who you're referring to;' I said. "My name is Quiet Moss. This theater became part of my Home months ago. I came in and discovered the girl. I was surprised when I discovered she had the Sight. But I was more surprised to learn that she has a spirit for a father:'

"Your Home, you say;' the *bajang* said. "But why did you check out this theater in the first place?"

"One of the humans told me about this building. She thought that a ghost walked its halls. I came over to discover the truth:'

"And you found Nadia:'

"Tell me;" he said, "did you feel her before you entered?"

"No. I only sensed her presence once I entered:"

"Did you find that strange?" he asked, giving me a pointed look.

"Yes;" I said, "but I didn't know how to explain it. I experienced the same with you. When you entered the theater, I felt your presence weaken considerably. But when I came in, I could sense you as I did outside:"

He nodded. "One last thing. Do you find anything strange about this theater?"

I knew he was leading me somewhere, I just couldn't see where. "The air. There is something-" I trailed off as I searched for the right word. "-wrong about it. It drains *me*:"

The bajang smiled satisfactorily, as if he had given me all the clues I needed to solve the puzzle.

"You know why the air in here is like this, don't you?" I said.

He nodded. "It's the reason why Nadia can't leave:"

"She said you told her it was dangerous:"

"She can't leave this theater because there's a curse on it:"

A curse. That would explain the enervating pall in the cinema. But curses are not something I, or most natukkong, are familiar with. Curses involve the dark arts, or black magic. Natukkong were earth spirits, our power came from the land. The two are diametrical opposites.

The bajang on the other hand, being a creature created by such dark arts, had to be far more knowledgeable about curses. So I asked him to tell me the whole story.

"This theater was doing very well in the past;" he began, "but fifteen years ago, a man got envious of the theater owner's success. He paid a *dukun* to cast a curse on the theater. Five years later, the curse had taken its toll and business slowed to a trickle. Eventually, the humans stopped coming. The owner sold the theater to another human. This second owner tried to turn this place into a birdhouse.

But the swiftlets would have none of this foul curse! They locked the building down and no one has done anything to this place since then.'

I nodded, taking it all in.

".About five years ago;' he continued, "before the curse spread and seeped into the surrounding buildings, someone dumped a baby girl at the back entrance. I don't know how she got in, but by the time I noticed, she was already inside and sound asleep:'

"Wait. Where do you come into this?"

".Aiyoh;' he lamented, "I was just going to get to that part, lah. You see, the *dukun* who brought the curse down upon this theater? He was once my master:'

"You say that like it's in the past;' I said, trying to keep my tone neutral. "Is that the way of things?"

The bajang sighed. "He *was* my master. He made me. Used me. Made sure I came here every few weeks to check that the curse was in place, that no other had come to dispel it. Not that they would have succeeded if they tried. The curse is very powerful:'

"Wait;' I said, "You keep on saying that this *dukun* was your master. When and why did you leave him?"

He fell to all fours, his eyes downcast, his expression pained. "I worked for him for more than twenty years. Then he learned how to create toyols. You know, those dead babies? Once he had those dumb bricks working for him, I was surplus to requirements. Said the toyols made better housekeepers and messengers than I ever could. Said he even considered unmaking *me*:'

"Not a hard task for a *dukun*;' I said.

The bajang scowled. "Yeah, well, fortunately for me, the request for the curse on the theater came along, and the master saw the perfect way to be rid of me. He sent me to babysit the curse. Back and forth, over and over. After a while, his attention shifted to other matters, and I was quickly forgotten. I still had to do the whole back and forth thing though, because he never lifted that task off of me. Soon, I grew

weak, as he'd stopped feeding me milk and eggs regularly. But just as I grew weak, so did the link between me and the master. He didn't even care. So what if he lost me? He had his toys:'

"You were free;" I said.

"Yeah. By then, I'd already been checking up on Nadia every visit. She couldn't leave the theater. She'd been born just outside the back entrance, left there to fend for herself, and somehow made her way inside. But because her birthplace was on the theater's doorsteps, her Fate and the curse were intertwined. It didn't want her to leave. It could continue feeding on her life force, bit by bit, keeping itself strong, as long as she lived. I tried every trick I could think of. But I couldn't take Nadia out of this place. I was no match for this wretched curse. So I did the best I could. I brought her food, taught her things a human child would learn from their parents. I just couldn't give her what she needed the most. To be free from this place:'

Nadia, who had hitherto been listening with rapt fascination to the bajang's words, got up on her feet, her face wet with tears. She went up to the chair, gathered the bajang in her arms and pressed her wet face to his body.

"I have to admit;" I began, my voice quiet, "when you told me what you'd done at first, I found it hard to believe. After all, you're a bajang, and all spirits know that *dukuns* are fallen into Evil:'

He looked up at me, the tears running down his face his own. "I cannot change the circumstances of my birth;" he said. "But I can change the circumstances of my life:'

I sighed. I had gotten everything so completely wrong.

I was thinking on ways to help Nadia when I heard a strange whooshing coming from the center of the hall. There was a green mote of light there, dancing about in the air. It grew bigger and bigger into a pulsating green disc of light that merely bobbed in the air. There was a sickly smell upon the air as well.

"It's the curse! It's the curse!" the bajang wailed.

"The curse?" I said. "But why's it appearing now? Don't curses just... exist?"

"I told you this is a powerful curse!" he moaned. "It trapped Nadia in here. Now it's coming for us!"

"That doesn't make sense!" I said. "You've been coming here for years. And I've been coming here for the past few weeks. Why would it come for us now?"

"You're dense!" he yelled shrilly. "Can't you see what's going on? It saw that we expended our energy in that little battle, and it's been biding its time ever since, waiting for our energy to ebb. Now it's shown itself, and come for us. We're nothing but food for it!"

The green disc of light bobbed in the air a few more times then cut through the air, throbbing with malevolent energy.

Before I could react, Nadia threw herself in front of us, into the green disc's path.

"Don't you dare harm Father and Quiet!"

"Stand back, Nadia!" the bajang cried as he leapt straight toward her back, intending to topple her to avoid a collision with the curse.

The bajang might be quick and nimble. But us natukkong aren't so bad ourselves.

I stretched out my body and shoved bajang and human aside, sending them stumbling into a row of seats.

"Leave them alone;" I said softly, staring right into the green disc's light. "And get the hell out of my Home!"

I reached out and enveloped the curse, anchoring myself firmly to the floor, summoning every measure of power I could from the land beneath me. I felt the curse writhing and squirming beneath my grip before numerous tendrils shot out and wrapped around me, draining my energy. But I wasn't about to let go. The curse was powerful, but it got greedy. It had materialized to feed on us, to destroy us-but that also meant that *we* could now destroy *it*.

Baba and Mama's faces flashed before my eyes. Sungai Lembing.

Aunty Chew's face too, her will to soldier on even when Fate had been cruel and Death had taken her loved ones. Dozens of other faces as well, of the humans who shared my Home; faces and numbers to me when I first came, but now I *knew* them. Dewy Cobweb's words came back to me. So too did those of Dawn -to-Dusk's, Sunlight's, Raindrops', and all the other natukkong who had wished me well even though I was the new guy, even though I was a foolish young natukkong who knew nothing.

This was my Home. This was my Place. This was where I was meant to Be.

I dredged up every last bit, until I was on the verge of being merely a vessel and conduit for whatever energy came from the land. The Great Beyond was beckoning, but I hung on, determined that my one last act upon this world would be to make Baba and Mama proud that their little boy had done what was right.

There was a light touch on my body.

I felt the bajang's energy-bitter but surprisingly warm-flowing into me, lending me strength. It surged wildly, a thing of entropy, but I brought it under my control and joined it to my own.

"The name's Gombak;" said the bajang.

I could feel the curse giving way. But it had been here a very long time. I could feel its power coursing through me, lashing me with a fury born of hate, envy, and black magic. Its presence corrupted, blighted, destroyed.

Another light touch-a small but strong hand.

Despite the white-hot pain racking my insides, I smiled to myself. The curse had dark and ancient power. But I had something better.

I had hope.

I shouldn't have been surprised though-she was perfectly healthy despite being in this accursed building for years. Her energy was even more chaotic than the bajang's. It was raw and without direction. But it was also warm, sweet, and invigorating. I reined in

its wild flow and channeled it into the conflux of energies pouring from me.

There was a scream that threatened to tear at the fabric of my very being. I couldn't tell whether it was mine or the curse's. I didn't care.

I could see nothing, but I heard the walls crumble, the windows shatter, the beams snap. Instinctively, I wrapped my body around the girl and bajang. I held them close as the world unraveled and collapsed around me.



"Hey, Quiet, you hurt?"

I could feel someone poking and prodding my body. I guess I had to be grateful I could feel anything.

"VerY:' I said. "Now stop doing that:'

A high-pitched squeal of delight came from my side. "You're all right!"

I pushed myself up. The theater was no more. The entire upper floor of the theater had collapsed, leaving only huge chunks of concrete, steel cables, wood, and bricks behind inside the foyer and out on the streets. Nadia was dancing excitedly among the rubble, joy and happiness radiating from her face.

"It's so *light* out here;' she said. "Everything's so beautiful:'

Gombak leaned against my body and gave me a pointed look. "I'm guessing we'll have to get her used to living in the outside world, huh?"

"We?"

"You and I:'

"Oh:'

I tried to get up, but I couldn't. It was going to take a while before I could.

As I lay there, feeling the gentle wind go straight through me and soaking in the warmth of the sun, I thought I saw something to my right, beyond the ruins of the theater.

A large figure stood atop one of the shop-lots, a tree sparrow perched on its wide shoulders, silhouetted against a clear and blue sky and the glorious blaze of an afternoon sun. The figure nodded. It was a proud nod that said *well done*. Then it faded from sight, and there was only sky and sun.

"Hey, Quiet. Any ideas where Nadia and I could shack up for the time being?"

"Give me a moment... Gombak!"

Well done. Hah. I guess that was all right. Better than what I was expecting. But that was the old Quiet Moss. A nai:ve Quiet Moss. Hah. I wondered whether it was time for me to change my name.

But that was neither here nor there.

Right then, Quiet Moss suited me fine.

There was no need to worry. With friends by my side, I can do anything.

Baba and Mama would ask me about my work.

I would tell them about my life.

Things got a lot more interesting from then on.