

# I

Once there lived a king,  
Whose son had just been born,  
Struggling from night of Sunday,  
Till early in the morn.

His queen gave herself  
To give their child breath,  
An old soul for new exchanged;  
a young life for cold, cruel death.

The grave loss stung him,  
And tore upon his heart.  
his infant son he cradled  
Then spoke he with a start:

“Oh kindest gift from God,  
Sweeter than the dew,  
Last bastion of my hope,  
My world begins and ends with you!

Already my heart is gladdened,  
Though it suffers still in shock,  
To imagine you at play,  
Or asleep, your crib a-rock

From all of life's misfortunes  
I will keep you safe.  
I swear by your mother, rest her soul,  
That you, not even death shall take.

For I am the mighty Paternas,  
Who the Beast of Briarwood slew!  
T'was I that solved the riddle of Merlin's tomb,  
And from I the dread Sea-Raiders flew!”

As he spoke these lofty words  
Their weight upon him fell,  
Then swiftly called an errand boy  
Who through the realm made tell

Of a call to arms, for all learned men

With wisdom and vitality,  
To fashion for the son of the king  
A solution to immortality.

## II

Soon a college-worth of quacks and cranks  
Descended on the throne,  
Telling tales of tinctures and elixirs,  
Of the fountain of youth and philosopher's stone.

"He needs a draught of distilled mercury," cried one,  
"Seasoned with Mother-of-Pearl!"  
"He must pray the Ave backwards and thrice daily," shouted another,  
"With a blessing from the bishop of Earl!"

All of these so-called scholars,  
(if the word hasn't been rendered dead)  
Were turned away by the king,  
Who sorrowed, and hung his head.

Until one day he called a hermit woman  
About whom he heard many tal by chance;  
A secret and subtle charm-worker,  
For whom the very strings of nature danced.

Soon, his guards drove before him  
With many a rude poke and prod,  
A haggard, knobby-kneed witch,  
Who in patchwork cloak and shoeless trod.

Of white hair and leather skin was the sorceress,  
Of eye a cloudy blue,  
Strange tokens decked her crooked frame,  
And hung from her staff of yew.

She hobbled before the king,  
With nary a scrape or bow besides,  
And like a schoolmarm to a witless child,  
She started the king to chide!

"O mighty Paternas,  
Who the Beast of Briarwood slew,

Who solved the riddle of Merlin's tomb,  
And from whom the Sea-Raiders flew,  
You are the king of many realms,  
But of all things, you are the king of fools!  
It is the decree of nature and God,  
Who fashioned man from dust,  
That souls cast off their mortal coat,  
Leave flesh to rot and crafts to rust.  
I call upon you now,  
In deadly earnest, not in jest,  
To leave nature as she lies,  
And give up this foolish quest!"  
Her tone softened, and began anew;  
"Poor man, I've heard tell of your loss,  
Of the wracking grief you've suffered -  
But you've no use for the trash and toss  
These fools to you have brought.  
T'is true that death is the lot of man,  
But also t'is his lot to sing and dance,  
To hold his wife and child close,  
And live his life, come fate or chance.

If you want your boy to be a strong and patient man,  
wise, generous, and deft of hand,  
Unmoved by fortune or bother -  
What he needs the most of all is a kind and loving father.

## Ancestors

“No, no, no!” exclaimed the director.

In an armless plastic chair much too small to accommodate his considerable bulk, the Director sat, tugging anxiously at his jowls. Before him stood the Chief Technician, resolutely adjusting her glasses.

“I simply don't know what you want me to say...” she attempted.

“What I want you to say,” interrupted the director, “Is that our enterprise here isn't completely sunk!”

“It isn't,” protested the Technician. She spoke deliberately, choosing her words carefully. “All we must do is...adjust to the changing circumstances.”

The two agitated speakers conversed immediately outside of the Department of Biotechnology's main lab, within the greater complex of the New Horizons Research & Technology center. Established a few short years ago by a young venture-capitalist who had made his fortune investing in new energy technology, the Center radiated sleek modernity. A gorgeous glass-and-cement building, the New Horizons was a pioneer in the world of research and scientific education. This is all added to the fact that the New Horizons had muscled its way into the limelight as a member of the top research institutions in the world, all without a penny of public funding.

“Adjust? Adjust?!” exclaimed the Director in frustration, his voice echoing down the empty, sterile halls of the laboratory wing. “How can we possibly ‘adjust’ to what you've given us?”

“What my team and I have given you,” continued the Technician firmly, “Is exactly what you asked of us.”

Cradling his balding head in his hands, the director rolled forward in despair.

“The exhibition,” he whined to himself, “The guests! What am I going to tell them?”

A few yards away, a small green leaf of paper was tacked to the cork board on the wall. This flier was one of the smallest members of its whole family, a wide assortment of advertisements which have hung from bannisters and billboards across the city for months. Some scrawled along the sides of vans and buses, some danced across computer screens prior to videos or articles across the world. Like its relatives, this little paper was kelly green, with illustrations of dense jungle foliage on either side and along the bottom of the image. This foliage parted to frame the centerpiece of the ad; The silhouette of a man, slightly bent forward with a torch outstretched in his right hand, stepping up on a bare outcropping of rock. Along a curving banner illustrated to appear as though it were chiseled from rock arched the words “March of Progress: The First Step, Live!”

“Would you like to have another look?” the Technician hazarded. “I'm sure there's something we can figure out.”

Resigned, the Director hefted himself from the chair which held him, and muttering under his breath, followed the Technician through the door to the main laboratory.

Inside, several rows of black-topped counters laden with technical instruments rose to greet them. Microscopes, centrifuges, scales, incubation chambers, spectrometers, and every fluorometric, chemographic, or electrophoretic tool one can imagine - Gleaning racks of pipettes, beakers, flasks, syringes, graduated cylinders, test tubes.

The finest assortment of scientific tools and supplies money could buy.

As the Technician and Director weaved a path between the counters and workstations, they slid past an implement of science unlike any of its kin on the counters. A massive glass tube stood regal in the center of the room, connected to several tanks hung around the ceiling. Inside, a clear, viscous fluid bubbled around a tiny speck, suspended in the center of the tube.

The two continued on to a heavy metal door on the far side of the room. "LIVE SPECIMEN CONTAINMENT," the door warned in big, blocky red letters. "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY."

Swinging the door open with a metallic thud, the duo came in upon the middle of an English lesson. On a wheeled chalkboard, the alphabet was scrawled on one side, though the writer had clearly miscalculated the space required to do so, as the letters grew smaller and more bunched as Z squished itself between Y and the edge. On the other side, a young man was scribbling simple rhyme-words in a column. Watching him intensely from behind a desk that seemed more at home in a middle school geography class, squatted a man.

At first glance, this man did not appear incredibly unique, if but for the fact that he wore no clothes. His wavy, unwashed hair hung on his head and frizzed out everywhere upon his body. He was thin and wiry. Small, tight muscles visibly moved within his arms as he traced the letters of 'Cat' with his index finger as they were drawn. With face drawn in concentration and limbs pulled in, one could miss the subtleties which set his features apart from a man on the street. For one, his brow was more sloped, his hair woolier, and his nose much deeper and wider. His arms seemed a bit too long, mit-like hands spread wide on the small desk, and his posture recalled a chimpanzee more than any man. Wit or poise did not jump out from his appearance.

The Technician's Assistant paused the lesson in the middle of the word 'Bat' as he noticed their visitors.

"Hey Dr. --, Mr. --" the Assistant smiled, "You caught us right in the middle of class." Aside from the makeshift classroom, a simple twin mattress stretched in the far corner, and miscellaneous colored blocks lay strewn about the floor. On the walls were a collage of handprints, every color of the rainbow. Haphazardly stashed in the corner opposite the mattress stood a long wooden spear and accompanying atlatl, a short stone knife, a box of flint and tinder, several feet of woven rope, and a tunic with two fresh moccasins.

The Director's already substantial frown deepened.

The man let out a cry and smiled widely at the sight of the returning Technician, leaping up to her and shaking her hand vigorously. The Technician returned a matronly smile and shook back, but broke off upon noticing the Director's venomous glare. Straightening, she spoke in an impersonal tone.

"What is the subject's current status?"

Now realizing the situation, the Assistant straightened as well, and in his best approximation of a professional tone, responded; "Steady progress is being made. The subject's abilities for spatial reasoning and complex abstraction have been improving markedly with practice, though we're still working on linguistic potential. Blood testing and CAT scans of the subject's internal anatomy has yielded remarkable results as well. If you'd like, we could draft a full report of--"

The Director interrupted impatiently.

"I fully agree that the information being learned from our friend here is superbly interesting, but if I may ask, have we made any more...practical gains from his stay with us?"

His glare beat down with laser-like intensity on the nervous Assistant. Before now, the poor boy had never met anyone of the Director's rank or stature, let alone withstood a grilling from them. The Assistant chewed his lower lip and stared at his shoes.

"Because it appears to me," continued the Director fatally, "That there hasn't."

"The...items that were supplied to us, it appears that the subject simply does not engage with them."

"Nonsense. Our finest reconstructionists crafted those specifically from our old friend here's time period. There should be no excuses."

The Technician stepped forward, pulling the Director's laser-gaze to target her.

Sir I can promise you, your concerns for the subject's...marketability are completely unfounded, and-

"Don't, take me for a fool!" exploded the Director. "You remember exactly what you promised us for the exhibition!"

"We didn't promise anything..."

"Tall, tan, primal!" Continued the Director with force, "'An ideal example of man in his natural state!'"

He threw his arms violently in the caveman's direction. "This...this troglodyte is what you call ideal?"

The caveman burped and scratched himself liberally.

"Sir...I don't think you understand, we can only estimate..." tried the Technician weakly. This only stoked the Director's fury.

"No, Doctor, I believe *You* are the one who doesn't understand! Bah, I already know exactly what you will say! It's the excuse any grifter looking for free money pulls. You start with grandstanding about the 'incredible fruits' your work will yield, and then when you turn up with bunk, you cry about 'estimates' and 'best-guesses!' Well, we don't deal in best-guesses here."

Stalking over to where the replicas lay on the ground, the Director gathered them up, and marching towards the bewildered caveman, thrust them into his chest.

"These are yours," slowly spoke the director with emphasized syllables. "We made these for you. Why won't you accept them?"

With an animal fear starting to well in his eyes, the caveman frowned and stood tense with the replicas in his hands, unmoving.

The flustered Technician's patience, upon this personal insult to her and her profession, broke.

"You call what we've done here *bunk*?!"

She strode over to the ancient man.

"He is our ancestor, standing and breathing before us! like him or not, he is how he is, and if you or your investors think you can press him into being what's most convenient for you, you're either deranged or deluded."

At this, the Director laughed heartily.

"No, my dear, I just understand how business works." He collected himself, and made for the door.

"Our time here is over. I noticed the little lab experiment you have cooking as we speak, and I believe we can come to an amicable conclusion. You have here the finest bioengineering laboratory in the world, and just down the hall, the world's finest stem cell research center in the world. If certain...liberties are to be taken to ensure the most preferable outcome possible occurs, I don't think our shareholders need to find out."

Before shutting the door, he poked his large head back in.

“I’ll leave you with this to remember, and remember well; New Horizons doesn’t make bad investments.”

With that the door clanged shut, leaving the old Technician and her shaken Assistant to stare, and their old relative to calm himself making new handprints, hooting and agitated.

The evening of the exhibition was one of the grandest in the Center’s short history. Many respectable names in the world of business and science mingled amid champagne and finger food, indistinct. And when every fine suit found their seat, their gasps sounded unreal as, amid smoke and crashing cymbals, a herculean figure strode out. This adonis towered, square jawed, with bulging muscles barely contained in his slim tunic. With a handful of sticks and rope, he deftly tied a dozen types of hunting snare, and when his trusty spear was brought out, he threw it clean through a practice target.

“This, ladies and gentleman,” rang out the gay voice of the Director, “Is no stuntman or bodybuilder. No, this impressive figure before you was the one who tamed fire, brought down hulking mammoths, and with his wit and strength, forged a cold and hostile world into the one we enjoy today. Likewise, this fine figure’s strength and cunning resides in each and every one of us here. I believe, if one were to truly search within himself, he should clearly find this spitting image sitting by a campfire in ages long past, asking him when his own hunt will begin. It is only thanks to our hardworking boys in the lab that we have the immense privilege to put before you all today, each and every one of us, our true, blue, living Ancestor!”