

The Hoard Keeper

Brenden Bogley

First Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2009 Young Writers' Contest

New Market, MD

In a time long forgotten and in a place much overlooked, there once lay a small kingdom. A towering, rocky cliff resided in a location not so remote of this realm and within the bosom of the mound of earth, a great dragon took abode. This dragon's name was Cratheel. It would not have been suitable for me to have said, "This dragon was known as Cratheel," for in truth, the dragon was not properly known as such, save by scarce others. Rather, Cratheel had been bombarded with such names as "the dragon," or "the beast," or "the worm," or "the creature," as well as many other derogatory, overused titles. Nevertheless, he did indeed have a name, being Cratheel, whether anyone knew of or acknowledged it or not.

The dragon had hollowed out a deep hole in the rugged wall of the crag, and in this he dwelled. This place also housed his heaps of jewels, gold, and like objects of such value.

Cratheel was a magnificent silvery green, with a dark orange underbelly. From snout to tail tip, the dragon measured roughly 80 feet long (almost half being tail), and from forefoot to shoulder approximately 20 feet high. The two horns jutting from either side of his skull curved towards his back, providing him with a sleek look. Thick, protruding scales lined his dorsal, running between huge, currently folded wings which resembled huge sails. He was a fine specimen of his kind.

Cratheel now rested among his plentiful treasure, bathing in its company. His tail slowly lapped at the pools of gold. He expressed his content in a sigh and flopped onto his back, steadily wriggling back and forth to burrow his adjusted shape into the pile of wealth he reclined on. Such is how he spent his days, and he would prefer it to be no other way. Most dragons admire treasure, and this love of valuable items was a trait that had not excluded Cratheel.

Cratheel was moments away from dozing off, when a sound other than the clinking of coins and riches penetrated his peace, causing him to perk his ears up and raise his head. The plodding of hooves rose up into his cave from the cliff base down below. The steps were too heavy to be that of a deer (Cratheel would otherwise have emerged for a meal). No, they were the sounds of a horse approaching, and their clip-clopping usually served as a bothersome herald to yet another engagement with a misled, glory-seeking man. The clops soon faltered and came to a halt. Cratheel reluctantly arose from his lounging, shook himself clean of the coins and trinkets clinging to his hide, and steeled himself for the tiresome confrontation.

For generations these events had occurred, each a repetitive sequel of the last. Man had craved the dragon gold for centuries, all the while seeking to reclaim "the long stolen treasures" from days none of them could recall with clarity. Cratheel and his ancestors had ceaselessly been pelted with

soldiers and aspiring heroes throughout the ages, each seeking fame and the wealth supposedly their peoples'. The dragons were not to succumb to this false ownership.

The classic tale of the thieving dragon, while often true, was an ill-becoming stereotype. These dragons had never stolen anything from these men. The wealth was the dragons', and justly so. In a distant time seldom remembered, when man had troubled to comprehend the speak of dragons, deals had been struck, services had been lent, and bargains had been made. The valuables had been the dragons' payment, earned honestly and bestowed willingly. These riches they spent not, rather kept and appreciated. For them the jewels were meant to own, their value prized more than any possession that could have been bought.

The crime of theft lay not upon the dragons, but instead upon the later generation of men, desiring more than their share. The treasure was robbed from the dragons and kept in the custody of man for many a year, the original pilferers having long passed. The dragons eventually managed to reclaim their rewards, but by this time the men had truly believed that the gold was their own, and had blamed these dragons for a crime committed by their own ancestors.

Many attempts had been made by man over numerous lifetimes, lifetimes both of men and dragons, to retake what was seemingly theirs. Despite the dragons' desire to remain away from the men, men would continue to pester the dragons and try to recover the fought-over gold. Over time the dragons had continued to change the location of the hoard, in hopes that the men would leave them be. Unfortunately, the respite they bought was short lived. The men either searched them out or stumbled across their lair, and the assaults began anew. The disputed treasure had eventually passed into the hands of Cratheel, and he had owned it for quite some time. This hole in the cliff he had made was one of his homes he had fashioned after trying to remain hidden, but nevertheless, it had been discovered and intruded upon several times. One of these times was now.

There was a scuffling sound originating from the cliff face near the mouth of the cave. Apparently the cliff was not steep enough to prohibit intruders from gaining access inside. A few moments followed, and then a man came through the opening and into Cratheel's sight.

Cratheel eyed the man, noting that he was the typical interloping soldier type. The man was clad in a brown tunic, under a shirt of mail. He sported a breastplate, as well as moderate protection strapped to his arm and legs. In his gauntleted fist he held an iron shield. He possessed the classic heroic features: curly blond hair, broad build, strong jawbones, and, of course, a cleft.

The man summoned a bold face and swaggered, "Lo, filthy

beast! For many winters have you and your kind plagued us good people. You have terrorized us, when we have caused you no strife." (Cratheel rolled his eyes.) "Many of us, burdened with your oppression, have marched forth to confront thee in combat. None have prevailed thus far, but none have been I, Sir Taren Gembor!"

With this he drew his sword out of its sheath with his right hand, gave a much over-spoken war cry, and charged at Cratheel.

It was useless trying to converse with the human and Cratheel was aware of this, but the dragon still began to try to deter the attacker in his own draconian tongue.

"Be gone, man! I have presented you with no reason for a quarrel," he growled.

The arguing proved futile, as the clueless aggressor continued his misguided vendetta, sword raised in the air. His blade's destination was Cratheel's chest.

"Why do you persist?" Cratheel continued. Before Taren had hit his mark, the dragon lightly swatted him with his massive claw, not enough to damage, but it sent the soldier careening away towards the floor.

"Aha!" he exclaimed as he climbed to his feet, brandishing his weapon. "It's a fight you are looking for, eh monster?" Taren rushed at Cratheel. "I shall grant you a..."

He was buffeted to the ground once more.

He rose a second time, his bravado in check. He gave a shout and swung at his opponent's foreleg. Cratheel removed his leg before the sword fell. Taren immediately went for the other limb, but the great dragon was swift in his evasion.

Cratheel nudged Taren, who stumbled but did not fall. "This human will not desist," the irritated dragon thought.

What followed was the simple matter of avoiding the man's blows while attempting to get Taren to relinquish his impractical attack. Cratheel did not feel he had to resort to killing the man, but he found it frustrating trying to dissuade the human. Cratheel found it credible that even if Taren understood his speech he would not listen to reason.

Cratheel felt the wall at his back as Taren advanced. The sword swung and was deflected by the dragon's talon. Cratheel had limited maneuverability, a factor Taren took advantage of as he quickly recovered from the failed blow and struck his weapon across the dragon's unaware forelimb.

Cratheel snarled in pain as he sharply drew back his leg, examining the wound. It was rather minor, though undeserved.

Cratheel arose on his hind legs, muscular tail thwacking the ground. He extended to his full height, approaching the ceiling. His gargantuan wings flashed open and encompassed the chamber. He furrowed his brow and hammered the man with his gaze.

"LEAVE ME BE!" Cratheel thundered, quaking the entire crag. Taren's courage flickered as he gaped up at the majestic beast, a huge colossus looming over him.

The instant Taren faintly hoisted his sword Cratheel roared a column of flame which crashed down adjacent to the soldier. The human lifted his shield, taking refuge behind its cover. The fire was just close enough to cause Taren to fall back, yet it posed no harm. Cratheel reverted to his fours and spewed his

fire onward, pushing the blaze, along with the man, towards the opening. He was sure to keep the flames wide enough to discourage any further hostile action.

Taren had reached the exit, but was reluctant to leave. The blaze died down, replaced with steam. The man lowered his shield, straightened up and smirked. "You have failed to scathe me, and this folly will end with your overdue defeat, vicious..."

Cratheel slammed down his scaly paw and sent up a shower of gold. With this Taren stepped back, turned, and retreated.

Cratheel stood fast, careful to keep his watch on the door. He carried this on for a small period of time, until at last he heard the horse's hooves clop away.

Cratheel exhaled a long breath, and turned as well, back to his original business of lounging. He sank down upon his shining bed and nestled his head in.

He began to contemplate the aftermath of his newest conflict. He wondered what new atrocity he would be blamed for this time. Cratheel had always been converted into a horrible menace when all he did was protect his territory. Word had reached even his ears of the supposed "crimes" he had committed. He had heard how the heroes described the "bones of fallen warriors in the dragon's den." (They were the remains of his meals, primarily deer, which in case you have not guessed were his favored morsels. He did not slay humans.) He had heard of "the charred armor of his earlier victims scattered about" (Everyone had failed to notice that the suits were decorative, propped up, part of the original treasure. They had never been worn, as it was not their purpose). Men who had challenged Cratheel and came back with any sort of injury, whether it be a considerably sized nick or a bruise, had their damage suddenly transformed into a grisly wound, a worse fate only narrowly escaped. (The times Cratheel had resorted to violence, however little, had only been in self defense.) Cratheel huffed. Surely this recent glory-seeker would claim to have been "enveloped by an overcoming, unrelenting blaze," and that much more despite of "the creature" would be brewed.

Cratheel shifted uneasily as he pictured the newly-inspired revolt that would be led against him.

The people of the realm had congregated in the town square, ready to receive their weary champion at the sight of him on the horizon. Such had been tradition since before the eldest of them could remember. The chivalrous soldier would ride home, and the anxious crowd would jostle about him, grasping him and prodding him for an account of the clash.

Taren and his steed trotted into the community and were swarmed. The company bustled round, querying their routine questions. Taren replied the routine answers.

Before long, an immense shadow descended upon the denizens. Many ogled in horror.

Cratheel soared above the kingdom, eyeing the shocked inhabitants who had just digested the misinterpreted actions of the dragon. Those of the startled people not stunned into inaction began to run about, shouting and scurrying hither and thither in search of their bows and quivers or spears. The

royal guard hastily summoned, they bustled around, trying to swiftly strengthen their defenses in the moment's notice.

In all of the uproar not one seemed to observe the dragon's load. Cratheel clutched in all four of his claws golden masses. Even his tail coiled around and cradled a vast amount of treasure.

The kingdom abuzz with panic and the people continuing with their fortifications, Cratheel plunged into the midst of the square, his wings beating down upon the land. Many brave men advanced to meet the intimidating beast, javelins grasped firm and arrows notched.

Cratheel hovered above the surface and released the wealth he held. A great din sounded as the jewels, engorged chests, coins, diamonds, gold-plated swords and helms, pearls and pendants and gems and all other variations of valuables cascaded down, ricocheting off one another. The men halted their aggressive moves as they stared at the torrent of riches being poured out before them.

When every piece had been added, the majority of the cries had ceased, and all who had noticed this newest occurrence beheld the voluminous heap. Bewilderment had claimed them all, and their gaze turned to their ancient foe. He returned their looks and, relieved of his burden, ascended into the sky and departed, leaving the multitude to gather and examine their award.

As he flew among the clouds Cratheel felt very lighthearted. He had at last discovered a way to gain himself some solace. He had not relished utilizing a portion of his gold in this manner, yet it appeared to be the only way to solve his dilemma. Relocating his dwelling was not an option for Cratheel, for at the moment he did not feel like moving his hoard to another place, and moving to another region entirely was positively out of the question, for this had been the land of his foredragons, and leaving this land was not something he wished to do. No, simply giving the humans some of his own treasure in hopes of them being satisfied was, unfortunately, the best decision.

Cratheel alighted on the cliff face and shambled inside. The remaining riches were still plentiful, and the room looked for the most part untouched.

Cratheel crawled over to his undiminished resting spot and stretched out. He snuggled in, letting the trinkets trickle over him. Cratheel extended a forelimb and plucked a ruby encrusted goblet. He tranquilly rotated it in his fingers, taking pleasure in its craftsmanship.

In the end, the dragon's money was invested in a possible end to the enduring feud. Cratheel's purchase was deemed worthwhile, as the people, appeased with their gift, left him be.

At least for a few generations...

**Honorable Mention – BSFS Jack L. Chalker
2009 Young Writers' Contest**

Welcome to Earth, May I Take Your Order?

Peter Veres, Odenton MD

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Ali Schwartz, Pennsylvania

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**The Balticon 42 audience votes
for the movies screened at
The Balticon Sunday Night Film
Festival were as follows:**

- 12th place *72 Hours From Now*—284 points
- 11th place *Replay*—330 points
- 10th place *Light Sabers*—367 points
- 9th place *Final Run*—392 points
- 8th place *Hugh*—454 points
- 7th place *Memory Sticks*—480 points
- 6th place *Postcards From the Future*—484 points
- 5th place *A Gentleman's Duet*—494 points
- 4th place *Eli*—503 points
- 3rd place *The Ungone*—509 points
- 2nd place *The Toll*—516 points

**Viewer's Choice Best Film of the
Balticon 42 Sunday Night Film Festival,
550 points:**

The End is Night

Dreamland for Insomniacs

Margaret Renninger

Second Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2009 Young Writers' Contest

Silver Spring, MD

Contained within this pamphlet is a sample of a product that will change your life. *Dreamland, Inc.* fabricates the finest dream substitute available. Our secret recipe is based on a translation from the fragments of several ancient Incan texts, and guarantees higher quality dreams than substitutes made from low-grade imaginings or day-dreams.

Indistinguishable from natural dreams even under close examination, *Dreamland* products are guaranteed fresh and 100% unnatural. Unlike other companies, who use pre-dreamed images or simple transcriptions of previous REM experiences, *Dreamland, Inc.* creates each dream from scratch. New manufactured dreams are also more customizable and lack the bitter aftertaste of used shoggoth-produced dreams, or those produced by unethical sweatshop dreaming corporations.

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Many use this feature as a simple way of eliminating nightmares or other unwelcome nighttime visitors, but in truth, it presents a much wider range of possibilities. *Dreamland* products can be used to study while resting, to resolve personal issues, or simply as relaxation aids. In many cases, our products produce results superior to dangerous and often unreliable hypnosis techniques. Also, for customers interested in taking control of their sleeping or resting experience, a *Dreamland, Inc.* apparatus is the perfect tool, allowing users to control the duration of their dream-time and ensure timely awakening.

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Enclosed is a sampling of *Dreamland, Inc.* products, including a preview of our newly released line of Haunting Images. Please consult our catalogue or our website for a complete listing of our products.

Number One

There is a cloudless blue sky overhead, and the clear seawater is cool against your ankles. The sand is powdery underfoot, the kind that drifts lazily upwards every time you take a step. Your pants are rolled up above the knee, and although the water never gets deeper no matter how far you walk, you're soaked through to the skin. Salt water trickles down from your hair and now and again needs to be flicked out of your eyes.

Despite its shallowness, the water is choppy, and in some places, a tide pulls lightly at your toes.

At first, you wander aimlessly, examining the tiny shells and larger flecks of rock occasionally found in the sand. But suddenly, you notice you've dropped the key. You have a large silver-gold padlock in one hand, and you know you had the key in the other. It was just there a second ago, and it was important.

Panicked, you plunge both hands into the sand, feeling wildly about for it. Even so, you're careful not to lose hold of the lock. You might not be able to find it again, and then what would you do?

Looking around for any kind of landmark to use to re-trace your steps, you find none. Only then do you realize how alone you are in the featureless landscape. Without much hope or any idea what the alternative might be, you kneel down to sort through the sand, hoping to come upon it by chance.

After what might have been days or hours or seconds, you feel something bump against your left ankle. It's a small green and blue striped fish. It gives you an odd look, and then smiles, as if to say, 'We're all in this together, aren't we?'

Number Two

You silently explode into the white void. It isn't messy or bloody or gory. You were naked to begin with, so there are no clothes to rip or stain. There's no pain, no real emotion except perhaps relief, or a maybe a little curiosity.

Your bones fly apart, totally disconnected. There are no dangling sinews or capillaries to ruin the effect; your bones simply separate, slowly and soundlessly. The flesh peels neatly off your bones, your hair extends away from your head, and then everything simply floats away. One by one, your hands and feet follow similar processes, expanding and then streaming off in different directions, all the tiny bones becoming individuals, and all the muscles spread out for you to see. You are floating midair in a bright, empty expanse, so there's lots of room for everything to spread out.

Eventually, the skin on your torso slides off, revealing a ribcage that shatters into a thousand pieces. Your inner organs extend, reveling in their newfound freedom. You watch with interest. They've been part of you for as long as you can remember, but you've never known them that well. Now is your chance.

There is an air of unexpected majesty about your lungs, a sense of secrets kept private, even from yourself, being exposed.

You smile with pride at the trust your body shows you. But eventually, everything has left, and gone so far away that even in the empty space, no trace of yourself is left behind except for your vertebrae and your skull.

Your lower jaw disappeared at some point, and your tongue has long since slithered out into freedom, or at least whatever lies beyond the void. You open your eyes wide, and they too escape, free at last to roam. Finally, your spine, loyal to the end, sends a brief undulation before it too separates into the light, floating slowly down, as if the space were filled with honey instead of air.

Number Three

Eyes closed, you savor the wind in your hair, wondering how you could have possibly lived before you could fly. Eyes open, you laugh at the sky and flap your wings once before resuming your gentle glide.

You peer down through the clouds, trying to figure out how far you've flown, but the ground just seems a mass of squiggles and dots. Angling down slightly, you float through a cloud to try to discover where you are.

The curves and lines slowly resolve themselves into colored patches of farmland and forest and town, and you finally realize how far up you are. Twenty, maybe thirty thousand feet up? Maybe more, maybe less. It's hard to be sure. You still don't recognize anything, so you opt for a slow decent, easy to pull out of once you get your bearings.

Slowly, achingly slowly, trees and houses and hills come into focus. Layers of mist peel away and the view becomes even clearer. Now you can pick out the cars and make out which houses have swimming pools. You see the little ant-sized humans going about their business, ignoring your questing flight as they grow larger, bit by bit.

Now you're about level with the tops of the higher buildings. You have yet to see any identifying sign, so you decide to level off and look someplace else. You flap your wings, but your descent, if anything, becomes faster. Now you're only sixty feet up. Fifty-five. Panicking, you flap your arms and your wings and kick your legs. You didn't really want to know where you are that badly. You make violent swimming motions in the air. No use. You're still falling.

Twenty feet. Twelve. You're going to crash, you know you are.

Eight feet left. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Number Four

You're walking home when suddenly, you see your two best friends standing at the corner. They're taking turns playing a game with what looks like a wooden roll-top desk. You have to whistle the correct combination of tones before the desk will open. You know the combination, but you also know that there is nothing inside, so you don't interfere. You don't want to disappoint your friends.

As you pass by, you wave, but they don't notice. They're too busy trying to open the desk. Eventually, you give up and walk on.

And on and on. And on.

After a time, you realize that you should have reached home long ago, and are now hopelessly lost. Picking a new direction at random, you set off and hope to find your way back.

You walk through hedge-lined boulevards and corn mazes and trackless woods and deserts of grass and bare mountains and cities and clouds. You never get tired or sore, just confused and even more hopelessly lost.

You walk to the sea, and having walked everywhere else, you walk under the waves to see if that's where your home is. You smile at the anemones and laugh with the dolphins and wave to the strange tentacled things down there in the depths. But you keep on walking. No one stops you.

It starts to get shallower, and you realize you've started to leave the sea, and are now walking through a river. You follow it until it goes into a pipe, and then you crawl inside to follow it back to its source. But it's dark in the pipes, which branch off in odd ways. The rushing of the river gets fainter and fainter until finally you can't hear it at all. The pipe has become a tunnel, and now it's merely damp instead of splashing wet.

The tunnel walls slowly degrade until finally they're made of dirt instead of cement, and tree roots protrude downwards through the ceiling.

Off in the distance, you can hear two birds singing. As you walk through the tunnel, they become louder. First one sings, then a pause, then the other. Sometimes they have arguments, chirping and singing over one another, and then they are silent for a while.

And then they start again.

Finally, you reach the end of the tunnel. It's a dead end, but you know you can't go back. You feel along the final wall, looking for a clue. The dirt there is loose, only lightly packed. You brush it away with your fingers, and feel an unexpected surface.

Wood. Thin horizontal bands of wood.

The birds outside start singing again, one after the other.

Continued on p. 73

Snow Angel

Helen Zhao

Third Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2009 Young Writers' Contest
Reisterstown, MD

White, mysterious snowflakes sparkle on her pink Disney princess boots and the cuffs of her pants. Delighted, she prances in the piles of snow, marveling at the small prints she leaves behind in its soft cold wetness. Frigid air numbs her cheeks and ears as she laughs and giggles to herself while listening to the sound of each footstep. Crunch. Crunch.

"Daddy!" she squeals, "Watch!" Her father looks up from the shovel, the premature lines on his forehead deepening. The little girl leaps into a drift of snow, screaming in exhilaration from the biting cold, her face rosy and bright. Her father frowns and shakes his head.

She'll catch a cold, he thinks, his mind racing. That meant delays to work, doctor appointments, and worse, the expenses.

"Jilly, stay out of the snow, sweetheart," he calls half-heartedly, feeling a twinge of guilt at the girl's disappointed expression. Most fathers would let their 5-year old daughters run wild in the snow, probably even play with them. Why couldn't he?

Jilly frowns but obediently brushes herself off and plods back onto the asphalt. She tentatively steps like a tightrope walker on the thin division between the snow piles and the driveway. This way or that way, she thinks, her arms spread wide.

She looks up at the gray sky and blinks the icy flakes out of her eyes. This is the first year that she has spent her days in the snow without the company of her mother. Before, her mother had always taken her out to the yard and danced around in the snow with Jilly by her side. Danced until she and Jilly were both too weak to stand and would collapse on the ground, laughing and smiling. Then they would lie in the snow side-by-side, and Jilly's mother would say, "Go on, Jilly darling. Spread your arms. Make a snow angel." And she would make an angel, the world's most beautiful snow angel that shimmered like a real one when the sunlight hit it just right.

This year is different, though, colder and lonelier. There is no more laughter. There are no more smiles. There is no more love. And it is all her mother's fault.

She should have been more careful. Slow down, the doctors said. Too much exertion and you will destroy yourself. Yeah right, her mother responded with a smirk. She was young and full of life, and she believed herself to be invincible. Jilly believed her to be invincible. They were both wrong.

In her mind, Jilly remembers those light-filled days and then the descent into darkness as "When Mother was Here" versus "When Mother was Not Here." For the first, there was cheer and happiness; for the latter there was nothing.

Well, almost nothing. For the past several months, there has still been Mellie to look forward to. Mellie, her friend. Mellie, her imaginary friend. At least she thinks she's imaginary. Her father can't see Mellie. But, then again, her father can barely see his own daughter these days.

Jilly twirls around on the driveway, feeling cold wind whip her cheeks. Then there is a tap on her shoulder and her heart leaps. "Mellie," she exclaims without even stopping. The blue figure stands tall and straight as an icicle as Jilly spins. She waits till Jilly has finished her fun before speaking.

"Hello, Jilly," she says with an attempt at a warm smile. Jilly grins. She turns around to glance at her father's hunched back before whispering behind a hand pudgy with baby fat, "Mellie. Can we go play hide-and-seek in the woods?" Jilly knows she is taking a chance. It is a known fact that the woods are forbidden.

Mellie must be in a good mood today, because she smiles briefly. "Of course. You hide, I seek."

Jilly nods excitedly before darting towards the backyard where the woods lay in wait. She is loud and awkward as she runs, but her father does not even notice. Mellie smiles briefly again, a flicker of cold gladness, a meaningless movement of muscles.

In the shadows of trees, Jilly is both awed and terrified. This is the place where nightmares happen. This is the place for adventure. "Mellie," she cries, "Come find me!" before scurrying to hide behind a bush.

Mellie, swift and smooth, weaves through the trees towards the bush, following the footprints. As she nears, the high-pitched giggling from behind it grows louder. "Where, oh where, could Jilly be?" she wonders loudly.

Jilly pops up. "Here I am!" She falls on the ground in a fit of laughter. Mellie feels her frozen heart thump once and then fall silent.

"Come here, sweetheart," she says, using Jilly's father's endearment. "Come here."

Jilly rises from the ground and moves towards Mellie. She throws her arms around her and sighs. "Yes Mellie?"

Mellie wordlessly takes the little girl's hand and pulls the girl off so they are standing side-by-side. Then, she reaches out her hand as if to a doorknob and plunges her fingers through the air in front of them. A large dark gap appears and widens, and Mellie steps through, pulling Jilly with her.

They are now in a forest just like the one behind Jilly's house, except here the trees are taller, their shadows cast farther, and here each and every branch is covered in ice.

Jilly's mouth is open, but in her heart she is not surprised. She always knew that Mellie was special. "Wow," she whispers and then, of course, giggles.

Mellie's face is impassive. "Come along," she says, pulling the little girl towards a palace in the distance, a palace that Jilly was sure was not there the first time she looked. Mellie's voice is colder, yet as persuasive as ever, and her grip is steel-like.

The distance seems far, but in minutes they are there before the huge glimmering gates. There are no guards, no moat, no blowing of trumpets like Jilly had imagined. Mellie simply pushes the door and it swings open, as if the tremendous amount of ice that makes it simply weighs the same as a piece of cardboard. Soon, they are click-clacking their way down the sparkling halls, until they reach a room so big, Jilly can't see the ceiling or walls. Midway across the room, there is a throne, and someone who seems to be on it. That is the direction in which they walk.

By now, Jilly's feet are hurting, but everything is too magical for her to say a word. Unlike to the palace, everything seems farther away than they appear, and for hours, they walk and walk. Finally, they arrive by the throne. A woman as white and as cold as Mellie with a large cloak made of snowflakes sits, or rather seems fused to the ice-covered chair. She has a crown made of long sharp icicles, some which have broken off. The woman stares down at Jilly, and Jilly squeezes Mellie's unresponsive hand.

"Is this the girl?" the woman asks. Her voice is a whisper. For years it has been a whisper.

"Yes," Mellie responds and then lets go of Jilly's hand. She pushes Jilly lightly towards the woman, and Jilly's heart flinches at the betrayal. The woman glares down at her, eyes boring into her skin, and her wonder flips into fear. "Mellie!" she screams, her voice not even echoing because of the largeness of the room. Tears begin to slither down her face, weaving paths down her chin and neck, and she starts to holler.

The woman cringes, wondering why the child is upset. She glances at Mellie, who shrugs and then looks away. After months of waiting, this is what she finally gets? "Quiet," she whispers as loud as she can. The little girl ignores her and continues to sob.

Her heart is hardening. For months she has waited, hoping, and nothing has changed.

"Take the child away," she orders bitterly before turning her head. Mellie says nothing and then pulls the little girl away to an empty room somewhere. When she returns, the woman sighs.

"Is this all?" she asks. There is a long unbearable silence before Mellie replies, "Yes."

.....
The curse started with her eldest sister's stupid decision. She made a promise, broke the promise, and jumped to her death while leaving her six other poor sisters to finish her sentence. Every 50 years, the eldest of the remaining would become what she was now: icy, cold, and prisoner to this world, unable to leave even the throne. The others would have their freedom, but they'd have blue rigid skin, until, after 50 years, the eldest would shatter like glass and the next eldest would take the throne to wait.

This would occur until someone with enough joy to melt the ice covering their hearts was found, someone with enough hope to slice off their chains and set them free from this world. Someone willing, or not, to come and take the throne forever in their place.

Already, Elise's older sisters were dead, and there only remained her and the youngest, Mellie. This little girl Jilly was their only hope, and already it seemed futile.

Tomorrow was the deadline. She might as well close her eyes and imagine what death would feel like.

.....
The bed is hard and cold, just like everything else. Jilly no longer cries, but she feels all hope leaving her chest. What is this strange place? Why has Mellie taken her here?

There are no answers to her questions, and she finally falls asleep after hours of hysteria. When she dreams, she dreams of her mother taking her hand and rising through the ceilings, back home, back to Daddy. Her father may not love her, but she loves him, and that's all that matters.

There is nothing else to imagine, no other hope to embrace, and she sleeps while in the arms of her mother.

.....
Mellie cannot sleep, neither she nor Elise could ever sleep, and so she leaves this world to enter the one from which she brought Jilly, the one she used to belong to. There, she watches as Jilly's father desperately searches for his daughter, his one last love, and she hears his tears. Once, she would have sympathized, cried for him, but now, there is only scorn and pity. Your daughter belongs to us, she thinks. We need her more than you do.

She leaves with no more love than when she came.

.....
Jilly awakes and suddenly, she knows what she must do. Without a thought, she throws open the door and marches across the large room towards the throne in the middle. This time, she arrives in less than a minute, her determination outweighing the magic. "Hellooooo," she shouts, and her voice echoes. She looks up and sees the ceiling. She looks around and sees the walls. The magic was an illusion. It was all nothing but illusions.

Dreamland for Insomniacs – cont.Number Five

You are moving back into your childhood home. The furniture in your old room is set up exactly as you remember it, but you're still unpacking. A stack of three or four cardboard boxes sits in the corner. None of them are labeled, so you open up the top one to see what's inside.

At first, the box seems mostly empty, holding only a few things you lost. Your favorite toothbrush that mysteriously disappeared. A few plastic pieces that went to that game you had. The plush toy you got for your birthday, and never loved. Even a couple of your baby teeth.

Gradually, their number seems to increase, giving way to other lost things, like that final report you weren't able to turn in on time. Cracked and broken crayons give way to blunted pencils and inkless pens. Here, the hairbrush that was never there when you needed it, and there, the check you swore was in the mail.

Finally, you sift through these familiar objects to find ones that you don't recognize. Oddly shaped keys and strange cog-wheeled mechanisms. Other things that look like the remains of uncommon sea creatures, and serve some unrecognizable purpose.

Confused, you delve deeper into the box, reaching down further than the cardboard sides would suggest possible. Before you reach the bottom, you notice that some things from the top are no longer there. You pull back, and try to grab hold of some of the familiar things before they're lost again, perhaps this time forever. But they always seem to shrink just out of your grasp. Your depth perception isn't working; something is wrong.

A sense of urgency comes over you, and you frantically try to save any memento, past or future, from oblivion, but ultimately, you fail. For the last time, your fingers scrape against the flat cardboard bottom of the box. It is utterly empty.

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Snow Angel – cont.

The woman is waiting. She looks tired, weary, and Jilly notices that all but one icicle on her crown has broken off. This, for some reason, encourages her, and she steps to the throne with her head held high. "I want to go home," she states proudly. "My mommy is waiting for me. My daddy is waiting for me."

The woman stares as she always does at the little girl. "You have no mother, Jilly," she says unemotionally, unsympathetically.

The little girl does not hear her words. "My mommy is waiting," she repeats.

There is a pause in which every particle of the room seems to be waiting for the woman's answer. Jilly, too, holds her breath.

Finally, she says, "No. You must stay here. You need to free us." A new tone of desperation enters her voice. "We need you to escape. You're our only hope!" A tear trembles in the corner of the woman's eye, and this makes Jilly want to cry again. The woman sees this. The tear slides down her icy cheek. "Help us, Jilly," she whispers, soft as a sigh.

Jilly looks down at the ground and remembers her mother's words. Spread your arms. Make a snow angel. Her bottom lip trembles. She mutters at the ground, "I want my mommy."

At this moment, Mellie suddenly appears. Her skin is so blue that she appears to gleam. "Your daddy has forgotten you," she says.

Jilly doesn't hear her. She doesn't hear anything but her mother's words. A snow angel, make a snow angel, darling.

The ground is trembling, the entire world seeming to shake. The ceiling has shrunk to only a few feet above their heads; the walls are closing in like a cage. The throne on which the woman sits is crumbling, and yet so is the woman. "No!" she shrieks before collapsing into the rubble. Mellie screams and falls to the ground, cowering. Through it all, Jilly stands there, her small little self, muttering over and over again, "I want my mommy. I want my mommy."

The palace has fallen in on itself, and the white sunless sky is visible now. But Jilly does not see it. Still, she stares at her feet, oblivious to her surroundings, the changes.

The ground, once covered in permafrost, has now turned a deep rich brown, and green buds are poking through. The sky is fading, the air is changing. Her house appears, and there is her daddy, sitting on the front steps, waiting for his daughter.

He sees her. He shouts her name. And finally she looks up.

She runs to him, and as he envelops her in his arms, she sees, behind him, two translucent figures smile and wave at her before fading away. The sisters, Elise and Mellie, released at last. She pictures her mother, leading them up to wherever it is they go, her face beautiful as she tells them about how she and her daughter Jilly used to make snow angels in the front yard of their house. Spread your arms. Spread your wings.

She presses her face to her father's chest. Her heart beats fast as she says, "I love you."