

Ackleburro had bewitched herself with the help of the grimoire. However old she was, the siren call of mythical game, appearing on every page, roused instincts that did not belong to her. Nurse Ackleburro, you see, was a sheep. A sheep keeping watch over the son of Sir Bagel, Sr and his wife. They were the hunters, after all. They were tigers. These instincts belonged to them, as did the preoccupation with hunting, a preoccupation hoped to not infect the latest generation of Bagels.

Ackleburro ushered Bagel Jr. to bed without a worry. She was confident that with so much video game experience, the very sight of mature sophisticated literature would put him to sleep. She didn't want to fall asleep herself, though. She expected a little excitement out of her evening, so she read aloud the book that launched the Bagel parents on their great hunt, and ended chapter one with a hearty, "Whoever bursts his belly will inherit his hoard of immortality."

"Wowie Hosannah. How sharp should the stick be?"

Ackleburro hadn't been so startled since her sister scored a scholarship to Berkely. Not that she was impressed with that or anything.

"Why are you awake?"

"Because I'm not asleep. But that sounds like a fun thing to pop." He pulled a bamboo shoot out from under his mattress. "I've been saving this for a rainy day. You think it's sharp enough?"

Ackleburro closed the grimoire. "I think you'd best put all those naughty aspirations to rest. Slay them with that weapon of yours, if you must." She got up and left the room. "Oh, foolish, foolish me. You could have read Ducky and Bunny instead. That would surely have sent him to sleep."

"Don't be crazy." Bagel was only a step behind her. "I've seen you try to study those kid books. You'd be asleep yourself before you got past the first page. Besides, I can hunt those things too. Well, there's no bedtime for me now. You'll just have to try something else."

The one something else that she felt like doing involved spanking him to sleep, but she didn't have the momentum for that. Her energy budget was low. She checked the barren walls of the Bagel foyer for inspiration. For all the hunting they did, these walls were barren of heads and trophies. Surely, they'd collected enough beasts to start up their own zoo, or run a deli for a year or two, whatever their end goal was.

But all that there was on those walls were the portrait of Sir and Dame Bagel, casting hungry eyes upon those who observed the portrait, almost as though you yourself were on the couple's hitlist. Ooh, how fierce those tiger instincts burned behind those eyes, even through the barrier of paint and canvas.

Bagel Jr. admired his parents, but all it gave Ackleburro was sinister company. "I'd better make certain your sister is asleep. I can at least do a half-decent job of sitting you two: Sitting one of you."

"Depends on how many hours she sleeps." But Bagel didn't linger. Sitting in the foyer with no one to talk to was what senile seniors did. Bagel had ambitions; like other adventuresome children, he kept a list of things he wanted to do before he died under his mattress. Like father, like son, he had to navigate through a tomb of dead mice, chipmunks and toucans before he found it. Those animals came up so often they weren't worth putting on the bucket list. The cosmic lantern and its immortality-filled belly, however, would be something that only came once in a lifetime. Or once in a natural lifetime.

Bagel Jr. figured he could finish his list if he had infinite time. How long might it take to mount all those rats and junk, or hunt the rest of the creatures in the grimoire? Taxiderming his sister's dolls would be the latter quarter of the battle, the first three getting past her frothing protection of them. Or ripping out all the pages in the grim, now that would be quite an achievement. He knew the ending of his list: bursting the lantern's belly.

Where was this big bloaty beast? Bagel searched every corner of the internet. Speaking of corners, that's where a lantern summoning ritual directed him to go with a lit candle. Not just any corner, and not just one. Every corner of the house. It seemed that the immortal lantern sought mortal mates, so Bagel stationed flames in every corner he could find, except in Firoozeh's bedroom. He hadn't learned the quotient between two halves of infinity. He also wanted to avoid an interrogation.

Nurse Ackleburro was so engrossed in the grimoire that any minute it would swallow her up. Once it did, Bagel would take another look through it. What other game might supplement the accomplishment of his bucket list? He'd have to turn a l   page ever so tenderly, lest she see right out of the page and scold him back to bed. He'd deal with that when the time came, however. The immortal belly of the cosmic lantern was at the top of his priorities.

That night, the lantern, belly and all, explored the valley, field, and mountain for an eligible young maiden to add to his harem. Pretty young things these days were so mortal--not that he preferred them otherwise--that they got sick of waiting around for him to write his will and leave his fabled jewelry closet to them. What usually happened, and this is all in the grimoire, was that an upper-tier food chainer would subjugate and devour those lower down the line. He would then deem her a menace to his harem and boot her from his collection. It rarely held any more than three women at once. He needed to find someone more durable. He thought he did on the night of Bagel's summoning.

Anything that glowed like a celestial halo was sure to have the longevity of a rich woman's parrot, but not too much longevity--the only commitment he was giving was to his own longevity.

There, over the hill, deep in the Marsh -- like a beacon of light, some edificial entity radiated in answer to all his prayers to himself. He bumbled his way over with his harlot-sack wide open like a trick-'r-treat bag. He slipped through the window, making sure to sweat plenty of oil to slip in with the greatest of ease. He bounded upon, not a candidate for his harem, but a tiger cub kindling a rather dodgy-looking interest in arson.

The lantern cleared his throat.

"Oh," noticed Bagel, "looks like I didn't need to light up any more corners."

"Ooh, I shun corners, the most sinister aspect of any house," shuddered the lantern.

Not another moment went to waste on the pleasantries. Bagel unsheathed his claws and tackled that marvelous cortex of lengthy living, ready to vacuum up whatever came out. This went on for a few seconds before the lantern window-wiped him off with his tail.

"And what pray is the meaning of that?"

Bagel poked the belly in confusion. "Don't tell me that thing is invincible, too." Because he certainly knew the difference between immortal and invincible.

"Why, you're one of the hunting animals, here to harvest the fruits of my labors. Under no circumstances. I searched ages and eons for this endless lifespan."

"Shush!" interrupted Bagel, digging around in his toybox for somethin sharper. "My baby sister and babysitter might want a share. I don't want to share."

"Neither do I. Fine, I'll just refuse telepathically."

And that's exactly what he did, not realizing that telepathic communication was not one of Bagel's school subjects. Bagel would have preferred the big galoot not refuse at all, and he prodded the thing's belly bubble, failing to weaken anything except both their individual patience. The lantern spat out a bit of flame, missing his target and incinerating the bedsheets.

"Hey, look what you did! My bucket list is under there!"

"Look what I did? Look what *you* did." The house was on fire. Bagel's ritual had amassed more blazes than had his bedsheets. Nurse Ackleburro ran by with an infuriated Firoozeh, who held her breath as though trying to evoke some supernatural control over the flames.

"Bagel Bagel Jr, come out at once and sistersit your sister while I salvage what I can from this catastrophe!"

Hey, would you look at that? Acky wasn't swallowed up by the grim after all. Didn't mean Bagel was any closer to obeying her though. He was after the lantern like a piñata. While he'd been marveling at Ackleburro's break, however, the lantern noticed he was getting warmer, and even more bloated. The many years contained in his belly were expanding. He clambered out the window, already a tight squeeze tightened by the swelling year-hoard wind. After much scraping and scuffling, he made it out, but not with his entire hoard of years. Three left through the usual exit. They burned up with the rest of the house before Bagel could catch them, so they didn't really elongate anyone's life.

When all was burned to the ground, Ackleburro dug around for the grimoire. If nothing else survived the fire, she must find that precious catalogue.

"Nurse, this is no place to window shop," said the fireman. "If I were you, I'd comb some of that soot out of your wool hair. It's just unbecoming of you."

Bagel never learned about the years, for what form do such abstract things take before the eye? He dug around for his list so he could add "rebuild my house." Maybe the nurse found it while he was trying to do his popping. He turned to ask her, but she was already taking off in her mobility scooter.

"Where's she off to?"

"You rubber-skulled nimrod," scoffed Firoozeh. "Isn't it obvious? You think she'll let you have any immortality after the stunt you just pulled? Our nurse is old. She's too close to death to give it all up now."

His skull wasn't too rubbery to get crackin' on that quest of his. Firoozeh stood shaking her head and sighed. What has the world come to, with all their chasing after creatures that might not even exist? First Mommy and Daddy, then nurse, now Brubber? She walked up to the fireman to pine for apple juice.

Apple juice--the very drink that Bagel asked of at the nearest tavern. Shifty eyes darted his way, quick to return to their whiskey and poker, bringing with it a bit of gossip on the steadfast cub. "That's the Bagel boy, be it not? He's up to take the trail his old man tread, only against the grunts and heaves of his old nurse."

Bagel looked out the window, and sure enough, there was Acky on her way, armed with instincts not belonging to a sheep. Bagel wasn't quite old enough to seethe, but he did hiss the way kittens tend to do, when a mysterious stranger put his hand on his shoulder.

"I can even up the score."

"Um, no offense, mister, but you look like the kind of guy Mom warned me about. Do you mind if I gnaw off this hand of yours? I could use the good luck."

He snapped, but his jaws closed on mere air. The secret agent had moved his hand to safety, much to Bagel's annoyance. He wasn't really a secret agent. "Bunko man" is more like it. At any rate, there was a big ballooned-up lantern that needed popping, and immortality that needed bequeathing. Bagel was out the door (without any apple juice, now that's impressive, now, isn't it?). Nurse Ackleburro was in.

She was a woman of whisky whenever off-duty, and the poker table called her over like a siren. But liquor was her caffeine, and she set her sights on bursting the cosmic lantern before did Bagel. Now, would it be quicker to upgrade her scooter, or go straight to the lantern's cave?

"I can even up the odds," said that very same secret agent. "I know a shady shadowman who tampers with age like a time traveller."

Ackleburro scoffed at first. "Sounds like the man responsible for the uninvention of the rolling pin, like in that Gaiman story. What was it called, now? Signs and wonders?"

The agent turned down his trench coat collar, lifted his fedora, and folded his sunglasses to reveal a chihuahua so plain and unremarkable that Ackleburro had to wonder why he felt the need to get all masked up for the day.

"And pray rich teen idol whose purse did you crawl out of?"

"I crawl from no purse," barked the runt. "At least I don't need... ah, my manners, my manners." He assumed the lotus position and hummed until Ackleburro decided it was a waste of time. She was about to drive right out the door when she heard a promising prospect: "Don't you want to cut your age in half and give the rest to your rival?"

She stopped. What would a fifty-year old Bagel cub look like? He'd be her senior if her age were cut directly in half. She might be a little faster then. "All right, ya snapperin' wee one," she said, temporarily turning into a Dutch pirate, so eager was she to turn the odds upside down. "Show me this man of yours."

The chihuahua led her behind the bar, through the kitchen, into a lounge with a silvery neon glow. There, a llama with his eyes glued shut. Also, a pair of lit birthday candles stuck out of his nostrils, and they dripped upon a litmus sheet as he moved his head around. In her mind, this was no way to create any sort of artistic masterpiece, but enough time with Firoozeh taught her that the wisdom of the young wasn't always on the same page with her own generation.

This guy wasn't young, though. His beard was white, and tufts of hair grew out from his ears. Well, she wasn't in tune with art culture anyway, thank the lord. "Hello? You, candle-fellow."

The chihuahua held up a paw to beg her silence, and started whistling in wild, oscillating tones, almost as if trying to reach U.F.O.s. The llama responded with his own brand of whistling, which went from the "ring-around-the-rosy" tune to a complicated sonata. Ackleburro whistled a little herself, and the llama peeled his eyes open.

"Jumping Jehovah," he exclaimed. "Am I in Baghdad?"

"We need some years taken off," said the chihuahua. "Half of them, to be exact."

"And this will make me younger, and the tiger older?" she checked.

The llama stood and dug around in a bureau drawer until he found a bonnet, a bib and a pacifier. He tossed them to the nurse.

"Put these on, crawl into that cradle over there and don't come out for forty minutes. And be sure to wet the bed."

She looked at the cradle, complete with a mobile and rattles and chew toys. She tried to tear the thing in half. "I will do no such thing! If I were young and agile enough, I would belt your front loins, the both of you!" She stormed out, as stormily as she could when her scooter was her only means of mobility when she sort of felt, I don't know, deadish. Certainly younger, but deadish.

She passed by a mirror, and dead was exactly what she was, as if she had crawled straight out of a cemetery. "Wha... what have you done to me?"

"Well, you wanted half your years taken away, didn't you?" explained the llama, brandishing a box with the label, 'customer #265' on it. "Now you're a forty-year-old zombie. We'll give the extra forty years to that tiger cub when he comes by."

"Over my walking dead body. Give that here!"

While the crony old nurse was wasting her time, her rival finally found the Cave of the cosmic lantern. It was well polished and sanded to eradicate and sharp surfaces that may have invaded his belly, set free his years. Bagel followed the tunnels up to the bedroom, where the lantern was packing a suitcase.

"You're not getting away that easy, Cozy," said Bagel. "I've got you where I want you, and now I'm gonna pop you!"

"You foolish twit," said the billowing dragon. "I farted out three of my immortal years on the way out of your now burned-down house, and if I don't replace them, then I'm going to disappear for a total of three years at random, and shoot me if I know which three."

"Oh yeah? Well the only disappearing you'll do is after I blow that belly of yours to smithereens!" He jabbed it with a bamboo shoot. Nothing doing.

"Stop that!" Cozy walloped the thing away. "That didn't work in your bedroom, and it won't work here. Midget tiger. You didn't even bring a butterfly net. Look at how woefully unprepared you are."

"A butterfly net? Why would I--"

With a bang and a flash of light, there was no cosmic lantern. There were no immortal years fluttering around either, or any evidence of the big bloated beast having even exploded in the first place. Bagel could only conclude that this was one of the moments that the Cosmic lantern was fulfilling his three-year disappearance. He said three years, just not three years in a row. Bagel set his spear down in a corner. The old beast would be back. Bagel could wait. In the meantime, he'd need to get a net.