

*This story was written as a submission for MEGAmorphics. The world-setting (containing Sansbury, Kettle Mountain, and other landmarks within this story's context), and the characters of Saolo, Tinda, Ketaki, and Unta Baraña are owned by Sylvan Scott. It may not be edited without express permission of the author.*

## **Volcanic**

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When children asked why the ground shook, their parents would point to Kettle Mountain and the giant temple built halfway up its slope and say, "Ketaki is warning us." When the children would inevitably ask "About what?", their elders would say, "The chaos of power and the danger of ignoring it." And, thus explained, the children would nod (despite not truly understanding) and be silent with faux reverence. Ketaki, after all, was unimaginably powerful and a newcomer to both Kettle Mountain and the settlement of Sansbury, in its shadow. Not wanting to incur the divinity's wrath, they swallowed their questions: frustrated.

However, as explanations went, it was good enough.

For children.

Others did not see it that way.

Saolo girded himself. Hesitantly, he waved across the crowded market to Tinda. His grandmother swatted his hand.

"Sao!" she hissed, "Do not show such familiarity!"

He blushed beneath his apple-hued fur. "But ma-mao, it's just ... Tinda."

The older fox narrowed her eyes. A silent rebuke, Saolo knew it was to be the subject's final word. Grandmother's eyes could still silence him as if he were a kit despite adulthood. Her gaze made spaces shrink to nothing and moments last forever. It was a power to fear as much as Ketaki's.

Across the market, Tinda and his entourage were leaving. The crowds parted with bowed heads and averted eyes.

Saolo thought he saw the leopard's face break its stony mask for just a second. He looked sad: like a lost cub, alone in the crowd. Then the brief moment vanished in the wake of assorted priests and temple functionaries escorting him away. Fifteen minutes later, the ground trembled as if from a passing train.

Saolo, hands full of his grandmother's groceries, looked up along with everyone else.

In the distance, beyond phone and power lines, tawny dark spots lay scattered across the pale, tan-colored vista of an impossibly large leopard's back. They showed up dark as if he had been staring into the setting sun. It was Tinda, looming over the treetops. Booming steps carried him away through the rainforest towards Kettle Mountain's smoky slopes. Saolo and the people of Sansbury watched his tail swish above the canopy as he moved along the newly-built Giant's Road.

Saolo imagined the holy men scampering after the giant: dodging his building-sized, bare paws. It made him smile even though he knew it wasn't true. Doubtless, they flanked their holy charge in SUVs and black minivans. Every step Tinda took was monitored. Already, his handlers would be radioing ahead to clear the way on the government highway.

In recession, each of Tinda's steps made the ground shake a little less.

Saolo wished with all his heart that he were with him. But that was impossible. Ma-mao was right. His lifelong friend had a different life, now. His lover, his fellow student at university, was on a different path.

A much bigger path.

A lonelier path.

He felt anger rise within him, born of his frustration. He looked past the back of Tinda's retreating head at the peak of the smoking volcano. He resented Ketaki and not for the first time. In all of the world, the spirit had chosen Kettle Mountain as a new home. Sansbury was the closest, large town to the smouldering peak. Ketaki's simple choice, that unchangeable decision, had taken Tinda away.

Saolo's cheeks stung with tears. He hefted ma-mao's bags higher so others wouldn't see. Long, vulpine tail drooping, he and his grandmother made their way across the crowded market towards home.

Tinda strode up the Giant's Road towards his still-under-construction home. Halfway up the smoking mountain, the new temple was halfway finished. He could envision its completion but it felt like a dream: unreal and out-of-reach. Only two weeks since it had been complete enough for him to move in and it was easy to see the gilded cage that was to be his. He looked down, catching a glimpse of one of his escorts. Now back to his giant size, it was a challenge to relate-to, or even see, normal-sized people. His vision didn't easily pierce the canopy. Small roads crisscrossed the rainforest but even though the shockwaves of each step made the trees sway, he spied virtually nothing. All he saw was the swarm of tiny vehicles preceding and following him. They honked and alerted people to his coming presence.

It was ludicrous.

*As if they can't feel the trees shudder and the ground, quake.*

The tree-shrouded suburbs northeast of Sansbury thinned-out and, soon, all that surrounded him was the ocean of green, rare patches of ancient basalt, and the occasional isolated cottage. He found himself, as civilization thinned, dreaming about college: the last place he had truly been happy.

Mathematics had been his calling. Numbers danced at his command. He could conquer any problem, construct any algorithm, and it had been good. He was the theoretician to Saolo's practical engineer. It had been in their dorms where Saolo finally confessed his feelings and the two had become intertwined.

Although his paws, now, could crush any of the brick buildings on campus, he couldn't crush the memory of the emotions borne there. But despite his anger at the situation, he felt no impetus or drive to lash out.

Sure, he was angry at fashnarri who surrounded and followed him; he resented them for setting him apart from normal life. But, in the end, it wasn't their fault. He was the Fashnar'ah: chosen by high ceremony to be intermediary between mortal-kind and the newly-arrived volcano spirit, Ketaki.

If anything, he was angry with the gods.

The road, its construction starting two years ago between the suddenly smoking mountain that marked it as Ketaki's new home and Sansbury, wound its way up the volcano's old and weathered southwestern slopes. It would need to support the weight of the Intermediary ... the Fashnar'ah. Still, its construction had to be fast. The other thirty-four spirits that served the All-Mother were not as violent as Ketaki. No one wanted to displease one so powerful and capricious. And, so, temple construction began as fast as possible. The same was done for the road. But mortals, even priests, were imperfect. As Tinda walked, he could feel the granite blocks creak and crack under his mass. He hoped Ketaki would forgive the underlying flaws in the construction.

Occasionally, when he felt a hairline joint beneath his paw pads, his frustration would get the better of him. He would purposely curl his toes: cracking mortar and crumbling the edges of the blocks. At his new size, it was as subtle as he could be to show displeasure and frustration at his circumstances. Elsewhen, he would swish his tail against high tree branches and snap them like twigs to come crashing down amongst his retinue.

He wondered if he would care care if anyone got struck. They were small and insignificant ... and that was just their personalities.

The fashnarri who guided and allegedly "served" him were humorless drones. They spoke in short, crisp sentences and demanded immediate obedience. If he didn't know they were servants of the great spirits, he would go his own way and leave the volcano once and for all.

Let Ketaki rage!

Everyone knew that Kettle Mountain hadn't been active in centuries. Volcanologists had warned that, one day, it may become active again. When smoke began pouring from its peak twenty-two months ago, everyone knew that Ketaki had come to stay and must be appeased. Tinda would not have cared any less for her appeasement had Saolo not lived in the great, angry spirit's shadow.

Ketaki manifested in over seven hundred volcanoes all around the world. And, for each, there was a fashnar'ah serving as intermediary between mortal folk and the divine.

"Ketaki is a selfish bastard," Tinda rumbled.

None of his retinue responded. Half of them had just dodged an uprooted tree his stomping had caused to fall across the Giant's Road and moved up to be more alongside than behind him. All of them were used to his blasphemies by now.

One of the thumb-sized clergy ahead of him looked back and up.

"Noble Fashnar'ah," he said, annunciating the title such that Tinda could hear the capitalization, "surely you know Ketaki's heritage is not in doubt."

"I didn't mean 'bastard' in the literal sense, *mouse*," Tinda rumbled. The man was not a mouse by heritage but he might have well have been, given their relative sizes. "Ketaki has more Fashnar'ah than any other spirit. It's greedy and hateful and short-sighted."

"Ketaki is Ketaki," the miniscule priest shouted.

"Fine. Whatever," Tinda replied. Absently, he flicked a boulder that had come loose from the side of the road with his last passing. "Tell me this, then, priest: why grant a servant great size and power to defend the people from Ketaki's will? Clearly such power can be suppressed to allow me to enter the town without crushing every person and building I see. If Ketaki is so imperious and powerful to demand temples and Fashnar'ah at each volcano in the world, what value do I serve? You say I exist to serve as intermediary and protect the people but Ketaki could take my power at a whim."

"Your power comes not from Ketaki, but the feshnarri."

"Yes, I know," Tinda said, annoyed. "But how could that power be any match for Ketaki? Do you really think your power, or mine, could stand against the volcano spirit? If the clergy can suppress my size and power, it follows that Ketaki could do the same! It just doesn't make sense!"

"You must be allowed to temporarily return to a more reasonable size, great Fashnar'ah, if you are to mingle amongst those you protect."

Tinda rolled his eyes; a scowl formed on his short muzzle. "Then why force me to live apart as a giant? Why not give me the power to grow, when needed, to defend against Ketaki's whims?"

"It ... is the way of Ketaki," came the expected response.

Whenever anyone questioned the will of the spirits or the wisdom of gods, that was the answer. If Tinda had not been raised with a deep, abiding faith in Fashnar he would, by now, be a raging agnostic. Of course, the power the priests held to create a giant servant of the spirits would have kept him from being a complete atheist but he still didn't know why the spirits were so damn capricious and fearful of direct evidence of their existence.

Saolo would have had an answer for him.

Always the engineer, he could take the abstract and make it real. He had also always been more devout than Tinda.

Had Kettle Mountain not started to smoke and initiated the landslide of events that led to Tinda's rise as a local fashnar'ah standing between Ketaki and mortalkind, theirs would have been a religious wedding ceremony. Saolo's grandmother, Unta Baraña, would have had it no other way. But Saolo, too, would have insisted.

A giant tear welled in the corners of his eyes.

Four months. Four months later and they would have been wed. Even the fashnar elite, who opposed marriage between two men (let alone marriage between two different species), would not have been able to defy the non-religious laws of the state. For all their influence and power, the voice of the people had spoken. And that voice rivaled that of the gods.

He approached the base of Kettle Mountain. Ahead, some hundred feet up, was the temple. He lived there, in the open courtyard at the center, under a vast tarp. When completed, its dome would cover him and his blessed air conditioning would return. Until then, though, the long and slow process of providing a divine home for him had to proceed apace. And, even then, he would be forbidden to see Saolo. That domed temple would be his prison.

"Ketaki is a bastard," he rumbled again.

This time, no one spoke up.

"Ma-mao," Saolo asked, "in all the time you were with the temples, did you ever find out why the gods chose who they choose to be fashnar'ah?"

The question had been asked so many times in the last twenty-two months, it had become like a well-worn rut in an old, country road. It always led to the same place and never wavered. The old fox shook her head, nonetheless.

"It is the will of the spirits," his grandmother answered.

"But you served in the temples," Saolo pushed. He slowly put away her produce and groceries while she sat in her massage, padded chair. Unta Baraña was old for a fox; nearly a hundred years. She needed help even if she never admitted it. Even if it wasn't culturally expected of him to live with and help her in her dotage, he would have it no other way. "Why," he continued, "do the spirits demand a mortal be raised to giant status, anyway? We have technology—great scientific achievements—that can do almost anything a fashnar'ah can."

Again, it was an old argument.

But, for some reason, this time ma-mao didn't dismiss it with her usual "will of the spirits" response.

"Because people are fearful," she replied after a pause. She sounded tired as she sipped her peppermint and apple tea.

The response caught Saolo off-guard. "Fearful?"

She nodded. "Fearful. People are fearful: even with their great machines, computers, and rockets. Certainly storms can be weathered and even lava-flows, diverted, but what if they fail? What if the much-vaunted technology falters?" She looked down her grey, patchy muzzle into her cup. "No matter how good mortal science becomes, there is always the awareness that it is *mortal*. It can fail. The power of the gods, though..."

He nodded, a whole new world of questions opening up.

He pondered them, putting away cans of beans behind the older cans and sorting various fruits and vegetables to be put in either the root drawer or the ice chest. Mostly, he pondered why his ma-mao had said something different. Something had changed, but he wasn't sure what. He continued to put away their groceries, leaving some fish on the counter for use in their mid-afternoon meal.

"Tell me," he finally said, "is that why you left the temple?" His whiskers flicked at the audacity of his question. His yellow eyes couldn't look directly at his grandmother, such was the boldness of his question.

"Fear did not drive me from the temple," ma-mao replied with curtness. She scowled for a moment and, then, sighed. "My dear, I left the temple to spend more time with my favorite grandson."

"I'm your *only* grandson."

"There you go, then. I left to spend time with you, especially after your ungrateful parents decided to leave Sansbury to go to ... to wherever it is ungrateful, rigid people go."

Saolo tried not to smile. As devout as Unta was, her daughter—Saolo's mother—had been moreso. Fundamentalist, even. Unta had never approved of her marriage to the pastor's son, either. The two of them were more strict than a hundred high-priests.

"But ma-mao, I was an adult when they left. I could handle it."

She frowned and looked over the rim of her round spectacles at him. She didn't need to give voice to her skepticism.

Saolo let the conversation drop.

He put away the rest of the groceries and began to prepare the fish for afternoon stew. He chopped up a potato, peeled a handful of water chestnuts, and even got some of ma-mao's favorite noodles from the ice chest. He started a pot of crawfish shells boiling on the stove for the stock.

"You were an adult," Unta resumed, "but were without family. They had no right to reject you and Tinda. None. Theirs was an interpretation of holy scripture completely taken out of context. Their outdated, cruel sect doesn't worship the spirits *or* the All-Mother. It only serves to turn brother against brother; sister against sister..."

"Child against parents?" He said it quietly but he knew Unta's hearing was still sharp.

"Parents against child," she confirmed.

They ate lunch in silence.

Midday soup was warming, despite the hot weather outside, and Saolo got to washing laundry while Unta sat in her favorite, living room chair to read a new book. It was science fiction, curiously enough: a genre she never would have read before retiring from her temple work. But being around Saolo seemed to have had that impact on her. Her interest in science, newly-acquired in the last year-or-so, fit well with her religious beliefs. To her, exploring the cosmos was just another way to celebrate the divine. She started reading science fiction novels as a way to explore these new ideas.

Once he finished folding laundry, he carried it upstairs to put it away. Lastly, he took her freshly laundered blanket to her, laying it on the coffee table next to her lamp. She held her newest book, Al Donovan's "Parallels and Parallels", open but face-down in her lap.

"Ma-mao?"

She looked up at her grandson, tears in the corners of her eyes. "Saolo, my dear: you've had to put up with more than your fair share in this world."

"No! Please, ma-mao, don't cry."

"I'm not crying," she snapped, wiping away a tear. Before he could respond, she added, "first you meet the love of your life only to find he's another man..."

"I'm bisexual, ma-mao; I could maybe have found a woman, if—"

"*Tch!* None of that! You are who you are! When your parents left, it wouldn't have mattered if you loved a man *or* a woman. The fact is, you fell in love with a man who was not as devout as they were. Honestly, I don't think they would have been happy with you marrying anyone less than the All-Mother, Herself!"

Saolo sat at his grandmother's feet on the carpet. He coiled his long fluffy tail around himself. He could tell by her scent that she was agitated and nervous. His ears perked forward; he could hear her heartbeat racing. "Ma-mao: we can discuss this later. Your heart—"

"My heart is fine," she said. Her tone was abrupt but loving. She leaned forward to put a hand on his shoulder. "My dear, I left the temple not because of my fear but because of the fears of your parents. They not only feared a love between two men but they also feared that an absolutism was not at the basis of your beliefs. It was the same fear that kept them from visiting the temple to see me, despite my direct involvement with the faith. I, like most of my calling, am not a fanatic; not a literalist. I see behind the curtain and live my life in accordance with the teachings of the All-Mother without holding to them in an unyielding and exclusionary way."

"But I was an adult; so was Tinda. We were fine."

"You still needed family," she said. "And, besides: a mother always cleans up after her children's messes. My daughter left you in a terrible mess." She smiled and leaned back into the mechanical massage of her chair. "Besides, I'm not so sure the spirits literally exist; not as we think of them as doing so, anyway."

Saolo blinked. "What?"

The old fox shrugged. "I've never smelled a spirit," she said. "Never seen one, either: even when my eyes were good. I've *felt* things, sure. But those things - they could be anything."

"But the power; the power to make a giant..."

She shook her head. "Unexplainable by science, perhaps, but not proof of the All-Mother or her spiritual servants."

This was heresy. Saolo's head spun. "Grandmother: what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that the temples have kept the secret of the growth blessing to themselves for millennia. It is something I have participated in. If ever I was supposed to feel the touch of the spirits, it would have been during one of the great rituals. But I didn't. Even in the elevation of a mortal to the status of Fashnar'ah. Never."

Saolo stayed quiet, uncertain what to say. The two sat there, in his grandmother's living room, steeping in the conversation's implications.

A quarter of an hour passed. The left-over fish stew in the kitchen had gone cold; he could no longer smell it over the bundles of dried herbs hanging in boughs from the lintel of the door.

Finally, his grandmother moved to get up. "I'm tired," she said. "I think I'll lie down." She marked a page in the book and set it on the coffee table on top of her blanket.

Saolo walked her to the automatic chair that helped her ascend the stairs to her bedroom on the second floor. After belting her in, he bowed to her in the fashion of a temple reverent.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"For your love, ma-mao," he replied. "And your devotion."

She smiled and patted him on the top of his red-furred head. "There was another reason I left the temple," she said at last.

Saolo raised one brow. "Yes?"

"The ceremony to choose your beloved, to choose Tinda; it was conducted, as always, by the temple. To bestow upon him the power of a giant, the position of Fashnar'ah, was something I was expected to assist with. But I could not. I could not take him from you; not by my hand."

A chill ran down Saolo's chest into the pit of his stomach.

"I could not take your true love from you," she explained, "so I left the temple. I'm sorry, Saolo. I tried

to stop them, to have them choose anyone else, but they said no. They said a man who would only lie with other men had no other purpose in society and, thus, as the only one they knew of in the town, it had to be him."

Saolo looked stunned. "But there *are* others; plenty!"

"But none they readily knew of. And I could not be a party to their decision."

"They chose... They chose and didn't commune with Ketaki?"

"They prayed at that smoking mountain, if that's what you mean," Unta Baraña said, "but, yes: the mortal men and women of the temple made the decision and I refused to have anything to do with it."

With that, she activated her chair and, slowly, began her ascent towards her bedroom. Saolo stayed where he stood and didn't move for a long time.

Hours passed.

Later, he called up the stairs, "Ma-mao? Are you awake?" He heard stirring that confirmed what his sharp nose had already imparted: she hadn't been able to fall asleep. "Ma-mao, I'd like you to tell me more..."

Tinda lounged beneath his tarp and looked at the handfuls of tiny produce his temple servitors had assembled for his dinner. He frowned. If he could return to his old, normal size for more than an hour a week, he could have saved so much money on food. The visit to the market had been for the temple's benefit: to show the great fashnar'ah mingling with common folk on behalf of the priests and priestesses. But all the food he chose was now too small to satisfy him. Instead, the temple kitchens brewed up as much porridge as they could, flecked with meat from the carcass of several dozen ritualistically slaughtered chickens. In the old days it was said fashnar'ah would be served vast feasts every day. Villages who had a fashnar'ah serving as bridge between spirits and mortals would bring endless food, each day, to feed the powerful giant. But that was long ago. That was long before the temples grew, as giants, to become more than servants of the All-Mother but arbiters of Her every word.

It was like eating chicken rice every day sprinkled with a few random bits of taste too small to be fully savored or appreciated.

Tinda hated it.

He hated everything about temple life.

And today, like every day, he had nothing to show for it. He had had no dreams, no visions, from Ketaki. Just like yesterday and every day for the twenty-some months before, there was no divine contact. He had dreams, certainly, but wasn't sure that Ketaki was even invested in his life as servitor. The priests all swore that the day would come when Ketaki's voice would echo in his mind and Tinda, as fashnar'ah, would have to defend the local mortalfolk by fighting back an eruption or landslide. Only those imbued with great, holy power could do it.

It was a responsibility he hadn't chosen, that the government didn't intervene with, and that he resented.

Tinda sighed and ate his meager meal. He imagined stuffing a few priests into his maw to slowly chew until their bones broke and organs popped. He pushed the image out of his head for the thousandth time and leaned back against some construction equipment. Gradually time faded from consciousness into the dark.

Sleep broke like waves against a reef as he started awake.

A rumble shook the ground. Around the edges of his tarp-ceiling a hundred feet overhead he could see the pale, silver light of the full moon bathing the slopes of Kettle Mountain. For a moment, he thought the priests' dark forebodings had come true; that the volcano was starting to erupt. Confused that there had been no vision or dream, he shook the last vestiges of sleep from his mind. Then, the ground shook again.

And again.

And again ... *louder*.

The booms were periodic and rhythmic.

And familiar.

They sounded like his own giant paws when he walked on the Giant's Road ... but these were faster.

And getting stronger.

Tinda stood and reached to grab the edges of the tarp, pulling it away.

While the temple walls were high, even at this stage of construction, they were not so high down-slope as he couldn't see over them. He peered down to where the Giant's Road began, spilling away from the Kettle's base to wind off through the thick rainforest canopy.

His eyes grew wide.

There was a tall, arched colonnade that had been completed to the west that led out around and down towards the front of his temple. He ran for it, causing several priests—already rushing around in a seeming panic—to scatter before his booming paws. He wouldn't have cared if he had crushed them. It didn't matter.

He ran between tall pillars, still being painted with murals showing happy supplicants praying to Ketaki seated upon a flaming throne. He turned towards the front of the temple, ducking beneath a high scaffold, still holding high arches in place prior to being cemented-in. His tail swished, excitedly, and accidentally knocked out a support column. It fell with a booming crash, leaving people running for cover in his wake.

He approached the outer walls and closed, double doors. They were taller than his own hundred-twenty-feet by some sixty more. In front of them stood a cadre of holy guards and assorted priests and priestesses.

"Get out of my way!" he boomed.

"Lord Fashnar'ah: you must return to the temple's center where you will be safe!" one of the high priestesses cried. "Let the holy guard handle this violation!"

"Violation? Do you have any idea what you're saying?" he demanded. His roar, like that of all panthers, was menacing and deep. As a giant, it shook the very ground and instilled dread in the hearts of all temple staff. "Open the doors! At once!"

"No, Tinda," came another voice. It was the priest from the road back, earlier in the week. "You cannot leave! Ketaki has need of you in the temple; not out in the wilds where—"

"Shut up!" he roared.

Spying the tiny man in his nightclothes, he reached down and picked him up. Gripping the little priest in his fist, the tiny man's head sticking out between his thumb and forefinger, he bared his teeth. "You clearly know what's coming and so do I. Do you really think you can stop me?"

The tiny, almost inaudible sound of guns being cocked and readied, caught his attention. He looked down. The holy guard were aiming up at him.

The bullets, he knew, had been blessed. The guard's were armed with curses and condemnations in the name of the All-Mother and all her spiritual court. If anything could harm him, it would be these weapons. Still, hope beat in his heart more than it had in years. Not since Saolo had told him his true feelings that, while he could choose a man or a woman to be his, he chose Tinda as his one-and-only.

Against that resurgence of strong emotion, the holy guard was not a threat.

He roared and, simultaneously, threw his captive priest into the midst of the guard. Some dropped their weapons in an effort to catch the doomed man. Others fired, sending shocks of pain through Tinda's hips, abdomen, chest, and right shoulder.

Despite the pin-prick injuries, he moved swiftly and swept his large, left paw forward in an arc across the temple foyer. He caught all two dozen of the holy guard (and the thrown priest) and slammed them up against the walls in a tumble of limbs and injury. Then, without waiting for any to regain their footing, he surged forward, placed his hands against the doors, and with every ounce of his stone-like muscles, pushed the temple doors open.

The descending temple trail led down to the Giant's Road, before him. The booming continued to approach. Night birds took flight as trees waved and shook. He could see a giant shadow coming closer and closer as the moon slipped from behind momentary clouds to light the landscape.

His heart raced.

The giant, vulpine form of Saolo broke from the treeline and came to a stop at the base of trail.

"Ketaki!" he shouted. "*Give me my husband!*"

Tinda nearly swooned. Despite himself, he smiled and broke into a run down the trail.

"This... This is not possible." The high priest stood before the pair of giant paws that filled his view. He was

shaking, possibly in fear, but more likely in anger. The tiny badger could scarcely bring himself to look up at the two giants standing before the temple's bronze doors. "I say to you: impossible!"

Saolo forced himself not to smile. "And, yet: here I am." He crossed his arms, smugly.

"Not that," the priest sputtered. "Your demands. They are completely impossible and I shall not condone them!"

Tinda lowered himself and crossed his arms over his knees. He knelt to glare at the little man. "You can be replaced, you know," he snarled. "I'm betting they'll be scraping 'priest' off the walls in the foyer for a week."

"This is *not* about you," the angry man sputtered. "This is about divine providence! This is about Ketaki and the great All-Mother's spirits! There cannot be *two* Fashnar'ah; it is impossible!"

"There are hundreds devoted to each of Ketaki's active volcanoes," Saolo reminded the tiny man. "All over the world."

"But only one per appearance of the spirit," the priest said. "And each of them were chosen by the church! How did you even—?"

"I have connections," Saolo interrupted. "But that's not the point. The point is, you run the show because people *think* you run the show. But the power in your hands is only powerful because only you have access to it. I think that's about to change."

"This power comes from the All-Mother, Herself," the man protested.

"Then why did you ask where Saolo got it?" Tinda said. His voice was still low but everyone in the temple could hear the influence of menace in it. To all in view, it looked as if he was enjoying—perhaps for the first time—exercising his might over the mouse-sized world.

"Face it," Saolo said, "even if this power comes from Ketaki, other great spirits, or even the All-Mother, I have it, now. I found a source. And I'm telling you that the two of us shall be fashnar'ah, both."

"We did not choose you," the badger demanded. "And we will not be cowed! The holy guard—"

"Is scattered," Tinda snarled. "Dead or too injured to do a damn thing."

"But ... but it's unprecedented!"

"Then precedent it," Saolo said. "Make a proclamation." His eyes narrowed. "Because if you don't, things are going to get a lot messier around here. Understand?"

The priest frowned. "Is that a threat?"

Tinda curled one toe and flicked dust (actually a hail of dirt and sandy earth) over the defiant priest. As the man stumbled back, Saolo stepped forward and flicked the off-balance man with one finger, sending him sprawling back onto his stubby tail.

"You tell us," Saolo said.

Long moments passed. The night sounds of the rainforest surrounding Kettle Mountain had, largely, returned to normal. But the distant glow of lights against incoming, low-hanging clouds told the story that Saolo's departure from Sansbury had woken the whole town. Every light was on and gleaming beyond the canopy's edge. The priest kept looking, nervously, in that direction as if hoping to see a mob with pitchforks coming to save him.

But no mob was on the horizon.

"Fine," the man grumbled at last. "It shall be as you say. But you must live here, under our guidance, and you shall *not* engage in any unwholesome fornication with each other!"

Tinda growled but Saolo raised one brow and put out a hand to stop the leopard from flicking more debris at the tiny priest.

"It's amusing, isn't it, how he thinks he's in charge?" the fox asked.

"Amusing isn't what I would call it," Tinda replied. "From what you've told me, they've conned the world."

"Yes, there *is* that," Saolo replied. "Which brings me to my second demand."

"Second?" the priest asked. He stood back up on shaky legs.

"Unta Baraña. You will restore her position and even give her status as high priestess serving Ketaki, here. You, little mouse, will step down and go away."

"I am *not* a mouse!"

Saolo flicked him down, again and stopped smiling. "Sure looks like it to me," the fox snarled. "And foxes *eat* mice, don't they?"

Tinda put two fingers on top of the badger's head. "I think foxes like them pressed, first, don't they?"

"I believe you're right," Saolo said.

The tiny badger's eyes grew wide enough that even at their tall statures, both giants could make out the expression of pure terror they'd implanted.

Tinda, it seemed, was more than willing to crush the tiny man and promote the next priest in line to the status of high priest. He'd reacted badly when Saolo told him the things that ma-mao had told him.

While it wasn't proven, they both suspected that a group of priests could invoke a ritual upon them in a way to take their size away. If they wanted to sleep without keeping one eye open, they needed someone watching their backs.

"I will ... do as you say," the tiny badger muttered.

"Sorry: couldn't hear that. Speak louder, speck."

He looked up at Tinda and frowned before nodding emphatically and repeating himself. "I said, it shall be as you demand." He looked at the gathered priests and priestesses. "It is clearly the will of Ketaki." And though he said it with a tone that implied he believed nothing of the sort, his statement seemed to have an effect of finality upon the guard. They slowly lowered their arms.

"Good," Saolo said. "Send your people to bring ma-ma...uh...Unta Baraña here. And if she is not present, and healthy, within the hour, this temple—and everyone in it—will be *pressed* for our amusement." He glanced up at Tinda. The leopard's expression promised that he, above all, would enjoy such an outcome. Saolo hoped he could restrain himself.

The little badger nodded again after taking nearly two minutes to consider.

"It shall be as you demand," he said.

Night passed into dawn and day. The heat and humidity of the rainforest swept up the slopes of Kettle Mountain but, to both Saolo and Tinda, felt like a cleansing breeze.

The formal proclamation did not take long. Word passed throughout Sansbury and across the world that Ketaki had demanded two fashnar'ah to serve at the Kettle Mountain under the restored high priestess Baraña. And despite murmurings about how unusual this was, the former high priest—a sour-faced, elder badger—always remained in the company of the two giants. How could the people doubt such a resounding endorsement? A few times, some said, the old man tried to find excuses to move away. A scowl from Saolo or an odd finger-pressing motion from Tinda, though, and the badger would stand down.

Construction on the temple proceeded apace. It even seemed to speed up once Saolo's ma-mao came to fill her role at the temple. The large, central worship area was modified, though, and decked with furnishings appropriate for the bedroom of a large, married couple.

From then on, when rumbling sounds were heard from atop the mountain and children asked their parents what it meant, they simply said, "Ketaki is pleased and rumbling at the actions of her two Fashnar'ah. They are the most loved in all the world." And, then, oft as not they would look up at the mountainside temple and shudder, imagining their giant defenders, there, untethered by anything but their own wills.

And it was an answer good enough for Saolo and Tinda.

**The End**

## Glossary and Characters

**Sansbury** ... town where Saolo and Tinda grew up.

**Saolo Breme** ... fox, undergraduate in college, member of the Fashnar faith.

**Tinda Obarra** ... spotted leopard; the new fashnar'ah serving as mediary between Ketaki, volcano spirit, and mortal-kind

**Unta Baraña** ... fox, Saolo's only living relative; his mother's mother; his grandmother or "*ma-mao*"

**Ketaki** ... volcano spirit, recently arrived in Kettle Mountain (22 months ago), for unknown reasons; the mountain began to rumble and smoke, prompting the fashnarri to search the nearby villages for a new fashnar'ah and serve to appease Ketaki as his giant servant. The government built the Giant's Road between the new fashnar'ah's temple and the base of the mountain through the rainforest.

**Fashnar** ... animus religion that worships the spirits made manifest within the natural world.

**Fashnarri** ... priests and religious functionaries who appease the spirits and do their will in the material world

**The Fashnar'ah** ... a choosing ceremony to find a mortal demanded as a servant and go-between between gods and mortals; also the title of that mortal, once raised to **Intermediary** status

**Sansbury** ... the small town where Saolo and Tinda grew up before going away to attend college