

Let's take out a tale. They're right over there, in the Chinese boxes. Are we ready to begin?

Yes, indeed.

They say long ago the world was dark. It was crude and confused, an illusory porridge-like substance that might not even have been a substance, hanging by a precarious thread. The world was just only becoming elemental, humming lazily, disregarding configuration. Then pop, there it was. But it was still dark and icy.

In the middle of all this was Mount Epiphany. Mount Epiphany was not dark, but it was icy, and flashed in the moonlight, which had only recently received its appointment. Moonlight is an important responsibility, one of the most important of all.

Among the mountain residents were two miscreant and intemperate twin brothers. Their names were Zeett and Ca'al. Zeett and Ca'al were the nephews of Boreas, a husky, full-bearded, surly deimorph who had from the beginning been appointed to the position of Chief Blowhard, North Sector. Boreas' salience had been at this time thoroughly waning in light of the groaning continents' creaking tossing and turnings. Earth-shaping is a rather unpleasant sound, as anyone living on a fault line can testify. The world was cracking its joints, yanking the gravity blankets off their bedmates. Further complicating matters, Boreas' had the unfortunate charge of, firstly, initiating his sister-sons into the Hyperborean mysteries, which required a lot of restraint and polite cajoling and empty encouragement, and, second, being his wards, The Chief Blowhard, North Sector was directly responsible for their troublemaking and its consequences.

One night, and at this time it was really just *one night*, that is, daylight was not yet through its preparatory examinations, Zeett and Ca'al were being more annoying than usual. They were with their uncle at the Sign of the Copper Cow, the mythical prototype of all earthly public houses and their attendant billiard tables and dartboards and fried pickles and beer. Boreas was mingling with some of the lesser, secondary deimorphs, godlings of such quotidian devoirs as mailboxes, toothpicks, ceramic glaze, stages of decomposition, lukewarm bath water, the wind direction of campfire smoke, and the spaces within a vacuum. Then there was a crash, a gong, a thrum and a blurb. Boreas groaned: the twins had thrown a stool at the god of chairs.

"You better sit down before I knock you down!" the god of chairs hollered.

"The god of chairs is really the god of *ass*!" the twins cried in unison and danced.

"Am not! That's Gluteus! Don't make fun of my best friend!"

"Zeett, stop flicking my ears!" the goddess of summer afternoons cried. Hot dogs and beach balls were flying about.

The Ocean Lake Kraken was growling and and squirming. "Ca'al, stop trying to stuff me in your trousers!"

"Look! I'm grandpa!" Zeett had constructed a rather obscene apparatus using Bacchus' thyrsus and two fat grapes. He giggled as flowers and rabbits and bees and other intuitive fecundities sprouted up confusedly. Ca'al was now sticking impossible things on Plomphyphus, god of adhesives, bits of carpet shag, cat dander, notebook chits.

The twins then danced and grabbed their other's hands and twirled over to Boreas, who was still groaning into his beer. They grabbed their uncle's beard and tugged and flapped. Dreadful blizzards and squalls crawled out like lice and swirled over the shining bar, freezing everything. The hurricane caught up some of the nearby regulars and now they were frozen in place, mouths gaping in icy wails and Cocytusian screams. Then the twins grabbed a thyrsus, knocking over mugs and bowls of trail mix. Then they inadvertently invoked a couple of the darker forces. There was some brief destruction. A famine struck but wasn't very serious. But at least two galaxies were now no more and somewhere a blue meteor struck the world, causing an extinction event.

This was the last straw. Sheets of ice flew off his forehead. He grabbed the conch shell hanging at his side.

"That does it, you little ugly otters!" He howled and beat his shoulders and tore at his hair. Ice ages puffed out like dandruff, settled, rigidified, sliding and scarring ruin into the panel flooring. "You little brats! Can't I bring you anywhere without you two casting spells and embarrassing me! How I loathe you for leeching my fortunes, my reputation, my right to drink my damn beer in peace! Begone!" He put the conch to his lips and blowing up like a big balloon winded two great bursts. The brothers tossed suddenly up into a polar vortex — with some help from Yaertenaphyxus, the god of dizziness. The gale clamored the brothers about, knocking them together like coconuts, bonking them about the ivory rafters. Then the cyclone sent them hurtling through the silver doors into the snowy street.

"Fah to Uncle BORE-FACE!" Ca'al yelled toward the door. He brushed himself off and glowered over his should. Then he looked at his brother, grinning. "I saw envy's underpants."

"Who needs them," Zeett said. He stood up and looked around. "What do you wanna do now?"

Ca'al also looked around. He snorted. "What a dull and stupid place this mountain is. I'm bored of all of it, aren't you? I'm bored of the wonderful and monstrous." He then became inspired. "Hey, I have an idea!"

"What?"

"Up here we're only a couple of rugrats, right? No one takes us seriously. It's always 'Ca'al, stop doing this, stop doing that. Ca'al, you're just a goddamn pinhead.'" His imitation of Uncle Boreas was very good. Zeett laughed. "Seriously! Come on, why don't we go Down There, where they'll actually be afraid of us!"

Zeett knew a good idea when he heard one and, in fact, had been thinking the exact same thing. "I agree. It's fun to turn the Seasons backwards and steal all of Hours' Minutes' Seconds and hide them, but everything always gets cleared up. You're right, Ca'al. Let's go Down There where we can do some real damage."

They high-fived. This is believed to be the mythical prototype for today's high-five. The brothers worked themselves up into precariousness, a bad and incalculable instant passed, and a terrible and unstoppable avalanche roared forth. The brothers stretched their palms out as the avalanche hardened into a dark obsidian onslaught. At its vanguard were cyrogenetic epochs and ages of ages. They were feverish and fuming. The brothers surfed the aggregation right up to a narrow high road of polished ice. They walked hand-in-hand as the road bent upward and leaping over the mountain's fathomless rift valleys. Then they crossed over spurs and cones and gulches and threw rocks. Now they turned down to the distant gray hills and grassy tundras, distant white dunes flashing under the stars. The road stopped at the Ocean Lake and here the Milky Bridge hopped over. They crossed this. Far below the dark water swelled. Its whitecaps billowing like ghost banners sprayed and foamed against the tumuli. The waves filed in que, awaiting their turn, trembling excitedly, locked in a jazzy funerary step-beat before throwing themselves to death against the flanks of the world and detonating glass shards and all its syncopate bombast back into the deep trumpeting bass at the bottom of the bottomless water. A howling, chuckling blast followed the brothers like a vulture on its wings hovering.

The brothers looked about the World Down Here once they'd crossed the Ocean Lake. They stepped onto the shore. The Milky Bridge misted over and was lost. And the brothers found they were mightly disappointed.

For one, it was warm, hot even. Steams and vapors puffed from little vents in the earth. Moreover, it was violently green. It hurt the boys' eyes. The air breathed like a dish sponge. Most remarkable, however, was the daylight. It was not yet day, and day would not yet come for quite some time. It was more like a phony dawn and the light more like a placeholder and the sun more like a lump of coal that was only meant to keep the hot for the real thing. In spite of this, it was to the boys a fierce and dazzling phenomenon and broke the watery air into little suspended pearls running down unseen threads. In the distant were many black plumes issuing from mean-looking volcanoes. Their cones glowed like the eyes of deer when a hunter shines them. Rock geysers and sulfur baths bubbled and frothed and farted.

"Phew!" Ca'al exclaimed, covering his nose. "It smells like your breath, Zeett!"

"Speak for yourself, harpy-tits. Hey, look!" Zeett pointed. "What are those things! They're like big donkeys with tube-sock necks and eggplant tails! Look how they blink and stare!"

"And what are those?" Ca'al pointed at a stand of trees. They were huge with big furry fronds and globular fruits and pods and seeds. They whistled and puffed out technicolor spores. Squeaking toupees nested in its branches. One tree had fangs and was noisily crunching and slurping the marrow out of some poor devil's yellow bones.

Zeett cried again: "And what's that?" He pointed at a herd of giant turtles with ice cream cones stuck to a giant coffeepot carried on their backs.

There was no time for closer scrutiny. Behind the brothers, that is, left in the wake of their southern pilgrimage, was now a big brilliant blue glacier. It took up half the sky, a new horizon. It looked like a giant birthday cake and it was growing larger and larger. Its fluffy vanilla flat icing crown stretched across the darkening and howling rim. The volcanoes sputtered with a pathetic last puff of ash. The rock geysers slackened and dribbled pebbles. The sulfur vents and rifts burped and dulled to a squelchy, gray ur-mud.

The brothers threw snowballs at the big brutes which only seemed to confuse the poor creatures to death. They ran this way and that and the ground shook. Many stampeded headlong into a primordial bog and shriveled into shoe leather, sunk back into the gestating earth. The hot springs froze over and the brothers wrote their name in the snow.

They were, of course, soon bored. Being at a loss for fresh ideas, the brothers simply fell on every bored kid's tried and trued last resort.

"Let's have a race," Zeett said.

"Where to?" said Ca'al. "Either way, you'll lose."

Zeett shaded his eyes from the arctic sun, which in this climate tasted a little like champagne. He looked far away south. He looked past the keen, ur-cold ice marshes twinkling layer upon layer like rhinestones. A boreal forest swayed and hummed in the gnawing wind. Zeett pointed out a moraine and, at its bottom, a longed raised enclosure or ridge. It glowed in the sun's remaining light, a pink band stretching east to west. It was much like something a moundbuilder would make.

"Down there," Zeett said. "That ridge yonder. See the pink band stretching east to west? Looks inda like something a moundbuilder would make."

"You're finished," Ca'al said very confidently. Then he said, "Wait a moment. This hill is ugly and uneven and full of ditches and sinks and other things liable to give advantage to one track or the other. It wouldn't be a fair race. Which doesn't matter, really, because you'd be finished." He added this last remark very confidently.

"And if either of us were to follow the other's course--"

"--he'd have a smoother and therefore quicker track."

"Too bad Carpetburnius the god of friction isn't here to do something."

It took them 10,000 years to figure what to do. Then:

"The winner shall be whoever shall choose the swiftest track," both said in unison.

Then both said in unison, "Best two out of three." Then both said in unison, "Obviously."

They each selected an ice boulder which to carve out a sled. Zeett's sled was long and slender. On its sides was chiseled in exquisite and masterful relief the Ocean Lake, its dry shores at Epiphany's feet, the starry skies. Ca'al's sled was longer but bulkier and, not to be outdone by Zeett, incising his sled were the Peliades, the purple Hyades, an unsinkable ursus. On the front of both were majestic figureheads, or more like figurescenes, a pair of cities, Zeettown and Ca'laville. One at peace and one at war.

Zeett snorted at Ca'al's sled. He thought it pretentious and too theoretical.

"You just don't understand anything because you're stupid and ugly," Ca'al said.

Zeett sat his sled on one side atop the hill. Ca'al sat his sled further east. He made a show of it, thoughtfully considering the environment and vertical paradigms, testing the wind, calculating the risk of error and irritants. He ceased his performance when Zeett threatened to penalize him for delay of race. They selected their course and of course they argued over who would go first. It of course really didn't matter, since it wasn't that kind of race. This argument took approximately another 10,000 years before Zeett had the audacity to invoke primogeniture status. Ca'al was of course insulted, but to his credit he begrudgingly acquiesced.

"Who cares. You're still going to lose," he said.

The goddess of countdowns was not there to start the race; anyway, her appearance only would have been a formality. Zeett aimed the sled and tottered and tipped over the hilltop. He pushed off like a hurricane. A terrific din echoed over the earth, coming up and radiating out as huge plumes like star-forming gases came up, sending forth flying quasar avalanche debris. Down crashed the boreal forests to become future homes of the sacred mud-people. Dire wolves and giant beavers and aurochs with piano antlers were tossed about, along with other weird and short-lived cervids. The sky blackened, a deep inky pool. It thundered and squalled. Ca'al kept the time with the Minutes still in his belly percolating, hiccuping the count.

"Hic. Hic. Hic. Hic. Hic. Hic. Hic. Hic," hiccuped Ca'al and so on and so forth.

Zeett flew along, sending down granite boulders, scarring forth glacial lakes. Then with a hard bounce and a plop of snow he struck the ridge.

The ridge shuddered and cried. A voice hissed from within. "Ow! What it he matter with you, you crazy, ugly kid? Go away!"

Zeett snapped his fingers at the unfriendly ridge. He decided he would make it a point to send down a few more boulders on his way uphill. He pushed his sled up, scoring and rending a path.

"Slow!" Ca'al cackled.

"Go, jerk."

"Way ahead of you."

Ca'al slid down the hill. Zeett swore. Ca'al was going really fast. Zeett could hear amid the turmoil and glacialization the shriekings of Hyperboreans being swept from their dens. There was a deep lowing groan, then a noisy clattering of flints and adzes, gorgets and pestels and perforated skulls. They rattled like rocks in a coffee can. The songs of the first cave shamans were snuffed out and a mammoth exploded. It was an awful mess. Weird comets in the air showered down weird comet-rain and yetis sprang forth wherever the drops fell. They fled in all directions of the earth to become distant cousins. It became terribly cold. Ca'al slammed into the ridge and rolled out of the sled.

"What the-? Again! And now there's two of you frumpish freckled-faced freaks? Oh brother! Good night! Go away!" Ca'al thumbed his nose.

"Slow!" Zeett punctuated derisively once Ca'al had returned to the top of the hill 10,000 years later.

"Well, what of it? What's the time?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"You ate all the Minutes!"

"Then count, moron!"

"That's the goddess of countdowns' job!"

And so another 10,000 years passed.

"You stupid idiot," Ca'al said. "The world is a tomb of ice. Nevermind! First to the ridge gets the gold. That's it. Ready? On your mark, get set, go!" Ca'al cried with some minor difficulty.

They slid down, sundering the hillsides and leaving great dells and stony outlooks over iron-rich river warrens. On they went. Zeett gained, then Ca'al regained, switching along, dropping back, rocking and flying along the side of their tracks like bobsleds. As they neared the ridge both looked at the other, as kids will do in such precarious scenarios. You have to look. You just have to make sure. And, as is wont to happen, in looking at the other both lost their center gravity. They wobbled sickeningly, turning, correcting, turning back until both bounced into the ridge a third and final time.

The ridge yawped and lo! it began to quiver and convulse. A great cloud of snow went up and came down like napalm. The snow settled many millennia later and there lay a tremendous massassagau rattlesnake. It was old and gray and white and the ridges between its scales were deep ice cuts. Its rattles, clear as glass, shook and thrummed. Its eyes were like dark pools of dark spaces between abandoned and defunct galaxies.

"That does it! You insufferable cretins! Good grief, you're ugly! Ingrates! Through the ages I have lain in blessed brumation, reposed in glorious silence and stassis. I was asleep and awake both at the same time and it was beautiful. You'll never experience anything like it. You have hot blood that stinks. I have cold blood that is the power of stones and river logs. I grow old then I grow young before I grow old again. What a couple stupid kids you are. You don't know the half of it, do you? Well, you've had your fun. You cross-eyed snagged-toothed bow-legged urchins." The rattlesnake was clearly very agitated. Suddenly a great roar rose, crashing. The snake flicked its tongue at the air and hissed: "Oh great! We just wasted 10,000 years and now the world is warming up. I hear a river roaring, a great flooding like when a dam fails. There goes your precious glacier, you ugly sacks of shit."

Granted, Zeett and Ca'al wereimps — in their fashion. But they were not altogether so mean-spirited, at least not like the rattlesnake was. This reptile was plainly without any kind of saving grace. With that thought at hand, Zeett thrust an ice lance into the rattlesnake's entrails. The rattlesnake screamed with pain and twisted. It tried to snap the ice lance from its back. Its lips foamed and a repugnant deep-throated hiss issued forth, fouling the air. Thus distracted, Ca'al then thrust forth an ice-blade, pushing it through the rattlesnake's mouth.

"You killed me, you morons!" the rattlesnake said. It continued its taunts and insults but this only drove the sword further in. Black blood flew about. Wherever the drops fell a shining blue blade of grass sprouted. It coiled toward the sky and, with a last insult unfit for print, the snake crashed backward into a huge oak tree. The lance still in its back pinned it to the tree like a string of Christmas lights.

The brothers pulled the rattlesnake free and tossed its dead foolish body casually aside where it broke apart and rotted. Its bones became the deer, the mink, the rabbit, the coyote, then the fox, the squirrel, the possum, the vole, the muskrat, and so on. The ditch left by this vacancy swiftly became another river and the warm morning air trembled with the power of these new watercourses that today are known as the Paint, the Stony, and the Muddy.