

Charles Shaver

www.ifezine.com

ifezine@gmail.com

ESCAPE FROM THE COTTONWOOD CHAMBER

by

Charles Shaver

Word Count: 33,750

ACT I: THE BIRTH OF XIAO-TEP THE ANKH-FISH OF 100,000 SORROWS AND
BEAUTY

PROLOGUE: WHEREIN XIAO-TEP IS BORN; ANGERED, HAPI COMMANDS LEI-
ZI TO PRESENT TO HIM THEIR FISH-CHILD UPON HIS BIRTH AS A MEAL;
XIAO-TEP FLEES FOR HIS LIFE

CHAPTER 1

Few know of the Celestial Garden; its red-lacquered gazebo with white filigree wood lattice; its brass bells tinkling when touched by the wind; the massive and ancient willows; continually blossoming apple and peach trees; the flaming tiger lilies and royal violet snapdragons surrounding it and all of this surrounded by a stream encircling the garden like a little moat flowing, river-like, counter-clockwise. It is a place of sanctuary

and solitude for all the gods of all religions of the entire universe. It connects the Heavens, the Vanir of Asgard, every river, time and the stars of all galaxies.

Some of the gods secretly know the Celestial Garden to be the hidden womb of all love.

It is here that Lei-zi, the goddess of thunder and wind and consort of the legendary Huang-di, would come to rest and meditate in peace. One day, while meditating, the river god Hapi entered the Celestial Garden and spied on her. His deep belly and sagging chest surged with passion for this new beauty he had never before seen.

Sensing him, Lei-Zi broke her meditation and looked up. She smiled courteously, yet was apprehensive. His head adorned with bedewed water weeds told of his holy status, but she did not recognize him.

He smiled at her, his mouth wide and full. Seeing her painted alabaster face and prim silk coat, he bowed at the waist in the hopes of tapping into her tradition.

"Excuse me," his voice flowed effortlessly, timeless in tone and mystique.

Lei-zi stood, bowing deeply as one of equal or higher status deserved.

"May I join you?" he asked.

"It would be my honor," she smiled sweetly. They sat on a bench of green marble carved by the hands of the Cosmos, stone lions acting as the feet.

"If it is not so bold," Hapi spoke, "I have never seen a goddess so beautiful as you."

Lei-zi smiled, blushing and hot in the cheeks. "You are too kind."

"No," said Hapi. "The Cosmos were too kind when they led me to you this day."

They would meet time and again in the Celestial Garden. A splendid romance blossomed.

And so it came to pass that Lei-zi sat one day, waiting for her lover in the Celestial Garden. Her eyes jerked with every sound, every rustling bough. She smiled happily at the news she had for Hapi. She smiled at the small, swirling movement in her belly.

"My beloved," Hapi came through the dense thickets and beautiful brush to sit by his lover's side upon the bench where first they met. "I've good news."

"I, too, have news," Lei-zi responded.

"This year will be a good crop for my people. I will not flood them. They build for me a temple in my honor."

"I, too, grow a small temple in your honor," Lei-zi took Hapi's hand and placed it on her belly. He felt the small movement there. His eyes grew wide, then he squinted.

"It's not mine!"

"Of course it is! Who else-"

"You consort with men and gods alike. There are a million that could be the father!"

"Hapi!"

Hapi shook his head.

"You are the only one," she explained. "What grows in my belly has the form of a fish. Who else?"

Again, Hapi shook his head. "We cannot. No. We cannot."

"Cannot?"

"That thing that grows in your belly is the unholy abomination of two gods from different worlds. He cannot be allowed to come into being."

"But I feel him. He's yours. I feel his fins and tail and his swimming like a well-trained athlete. He is yours and mine and there can be nothing unholy of that."

Once more Hapi shook his head. "He cannot be allowed to live. Our meeting here would be looked down upon by all the gods, perhaps the Cosmos themselves. And the men. How could we rule them if they attained the knowledge of our mixed child?"

Lei-zi had never seen Hapi act so cruelly, so decisively. "But he's ours..." was all she could say.

He grabbed her and held her by the shoulders. His eyes peered deeply into hers and softened like gentle lapping waves as he spoke to her.

"Listen to me. Our child's life would be one of scorn. He would be an outcast, neither of your world nor of mine. He would be something different entirely and would belong to a world unmade. He would have no place. Not here, not with our kind, not within the hearts of men. His life would be moot and full of pain."

Understanding, Lei-zi said, "We'll hide him."

"For an eternity? Impossible!"

"Then what shall we do?"

Hapi's eyes grew stern. "Upon his birth you will send him to me. Only your most trusted servant must be sent with the child. No other. And he must be discreet. I will take the child."

Hapi stood to leave.

"And then what?"

Hapi looked down on his lover. "I will dress him in salt and spices and make of him my meal."

CHAPTER 2

For days and days Lei-zi cried, raged and did not sleep. Monsoons destroyed fishing villages, thunder and rain flooding the lands. The seas swelled and churned under her wrath.

The fisherman, Kanaka Nui, found his family starving because he could not go out upon the waters and bring home to them their staple meal. In one of Lei-zi's momentary silences, he snuck out in his canoe in the hopes of catching a mere few fish to help his family survive. Once out on the waters, however, Lei-zi awoke and raged once again.

"Oh, heavens!" cried Kanaka Nui sitting in his rocking canoe, hanging on for dear life. "Why do you wage such an ambitious war? My people starve! I starve! We need to fish to live! Please, tell me, anything that you wish I would do to appease you."

Lei-zi heard his words and though she did not answer him immediately, though she did not cease her thunder instantly, the seeds of a scheme began to blossom and grow within her.

Kanaka Nui tried very hard, paddling with all his might, to reach the shore. He prayed he would make it home safely for, if he was taken by the waters, his family would surely all perish. As long as he was alive he could bring them hope.

Finally, Lei-zi ceased her sobbing. The skies cleared just a bit. Thunder and winds became distant as she appeared before Kanaka Nui as a cloud.

"Brave fisherman," she said to Kanaka Nui. "I should not be waging a war against you, for you are not my enemy. My enemy is my own lover, whose child I now carry within my belly. I am enraged by his hatred for our yet unborn child. But, if you lend to

me your aid, my heartache will cease and you will be able to return to your family safely and with food."

"Anything," said Kanaka Nui. "Anything you ask, I will do! What is it you wish, O Cloud Mistress?"

"I will temporarily cease my showers for three days. In that time, paddle your canoe north into the mouth of the river and catch for me a fish. A carp, preferably. If you turn over the very first fish you catch to me, I will cease my showers all together."

Kanaka Nui accepted the offer and immediately set out, paddling north towards the river.

For three days the skies were clear and the sun shining. For three days Kanaka Nui did sweat profusely under the glaring sun, searching for fish. Each day passed and hope slipped from him. Hunger waged another war within his stomach. He feared his family all dead or, fearing that he may have been taken by the sea and facing starvation, may have taken their own lives. He sobbed as the sun began to dip westward on the third day.

Then, at dusk, his keen eyes caught the movement of a fish. He drew his canoe closer to it, paddling softly. He grabbed his net, flung it, and caught the biggest carp he had ever seen! He pulled it over the side of the canoe and unraveled it from the netting. It was longer than two men are tall and speckled. The flesh smelled of dense meat and the scales gleamed in the setting sun.

Kanaka Nui's stomach growled. "Surely," he spoke to himself. "If there is a fish such as this in these waters, I could easily catch another before sunset. Then I could keep

this massive, beautiful carp all to myself and stay my hunger and feed my family. I could give the second fish to the Cloud Mistress."

Kanaka Nui's stomach growled. He pulled his knife from its sheath. He looked at the setting sun, then to the lone cloud floating high above him.

"No," he spoke. "If I eat this fish, I will be alive, but without much honor or dignity. Without such things, a life is valueless. I would rather die than go back on my word."

He put away his knife and lifted with great effort the grand carp high above his head, pointing it towards the lone cloud. The carp magically lifted from his hands, floating into the heavens.

As he watched it fade from sight, he heard a thunk on his canoe's bottom. Looking, he found tens upon hundreds of fish leaping from the waters into the canoe. He smiled and knew the Cloud Mistress was rewarding him for keeping his word.

CHAPTER 3

Little Xiao-tep, son of Lei-zi and Hapi, was born and in his place his mother sent with her most faithful servant the large yet ordinary carp to be eaten by the father. Hapi accepted the carp as his son and ate him and never again thought of the matter, nor did he further pursue his affections for Lei-zi.

But time passed and Hapi's longing for Lei-zi's gentle touch grew.

Xiao-tep was born a beautiful butterfly koi, grown fully to a size larger than even the carp that had been sent in his place. He was white and gold and orange in color with a bold ankh resting atop his forehead. His fins were long and flowing and white. His eyes were sparkling blue. Born with attributes from both parents, he could fly, swim, float across land and speak every language. His mother loved him immediately and named him Xiao-tep from the Chinese word 'little' and for the Egyptian sage Imhotep.

Lei-zi spent all her time with her child, teaching him the ways of men so that one day he could leave her side and exist among mortals in peace and without the knowledge of the other gods, most especially Hapi.

On occasion, however, Xiao-tep would ask his mother about his father.

Years passed and Lei-zi one day brought Xiao-tep to the Celestial Garden. Xiao-tep played in the swirling stream, flew a kite and slept on the bench there.

"Mother," Xiao-tep asked. "What of my father? Who is he? Is he alive? Mortal? Perhaps he is dead?"

Lei-zi's face grew forlorn. She grabbed a small willow branch and broke it off, dipping it in holy oils and allowing it to drip into the stream like tears.

"The willow is the keeper of sorrows," she told Xiao-tep. "Take this small branch and I will tell you of your father. Let the willow cry for you."

Confused, Xiao-tep took the branch.

"Your father is Hapi, the God of the River Nile. He is a heavy man, though handsome and gentle towards me. Our love blossomed here in this quiet garden. But when I became pregnant with you, he felt your existence may be an abomination upon the Cosmos. He... he..."

"Go on, mother."

"He feels it is best if he has nothing to do with you."

This made no sense to Xiao-tep. He shook his head, but before he could ask a single question, Hapi came bustling through the brush and into the garden.

"Lei-zi!" said Hapi. "It has been ten years and though we are gods and ten years mean nothing to us, my love for you has slowed time to a crawl. I yearn for you once more."

Lei-zi's eyes grew wide with terror. Xiao-tep looked at this stranger, his father.

Hapi looked at Xiao-tep and asked, "Who is this? Another consort? He is so young. He's barely ten years of age-"

A slow realization came to Hapi. "Insolent wench! How dare you defy my commands?"

Hapi raged. Xiao-tep and his mother grew fearful. Hapi ran at Xiao-tep, his hands outstretched to choke his fish-son.

"Hapi! No!" cried Lei-zi.

Xiao-tep heard the words. He looked at the stranger. "Father?"

Hapi attacked him, but Xiao-tep wiggled and wiggled through Hapi's clenching fingers until he was free.

“Get back here!” raged Hapi. “I’ll eat you alive!”

"Xiao-tep! Flee! Save yourself!"

Frightened, hearing his mother's cries, Xiao-tep obeyed. He dived into the swirling stream.

"Xiao-tep, no! He can reach you in the waters!"

Hearing this, Xiao-tep leapt from the stream and flew, higher and higher, the willow branch in his possession and dripping fast after him. Hapi screamed after his son as Xiao-tep faded into the Heavens, the willow's tears scattering like stars.