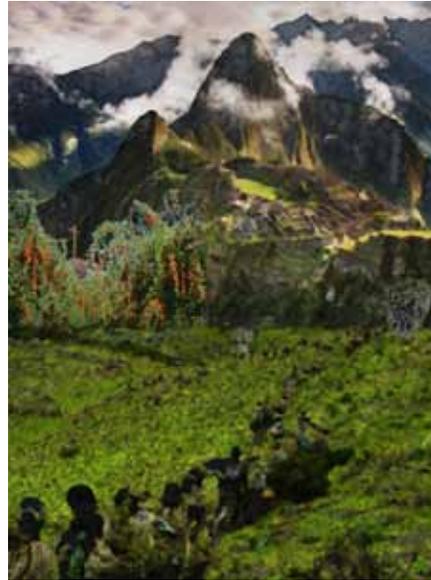


HAI:
THE MOUNTAIN
AND THE PEOPLE

Z SANSONI

The Hai

ByZ Sansoni



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THE HAI

Chapter 1

Wow! What a weird morning! There is a wispy, twirling fog. This is very strange indeed. It is hardly ever misty this high up on the mountain. Hmmm!

This is Hai Mountain. It is the home of the Hai—a people. It is also the only place on earth where the Hai Berry can be grown. It is such a special berry—useful for heating, dying silks with fantastic colors, as an ointment or salve for itches or scratches and many other applications. It is a very useful berry indeed.



Today, on Hai Mountain, it is a very confusing day. It is a day filled with concern. Something has happened with no logical explanation. Something has happened that has not occurred before, at least in the recorded history of the people. The one and only, narrow and dangerous, path to the valley has disappeared! It was there just yesterday! It was there last night! Now it isn't!

Also, it is (was) the only possible way to and from The Valley. The Valley is the home of the Le-Han—a people. You are to understand that the path was not just a path. No, no! It was a life line between the two people. Without the path, the Hai could not get food or supplies. They could perish. And with them, the only source of the world's Hai Berry would be lost. The Hai lost; the Hai Berry lost! No! Inconceivable! Before this day, not to be a thought! Today, it is more than a thought. It is now a distinct possibility! No! Even worse! It's really real!

The Le-Han would not have contact with the Hai; would lose their only source to the healing Hai berry. The Hai would have no (known) way to contact the Le-Han. They are more than residents of the same mountain. They are brethren. They are followers of The Leader. Many of the two peoples are related by blood as well as by their belief. In fact, Mugs, a Valley dweller, is brother to Misty, married to a member of The Hai. Her husband is We-Lo, a well-respected servant leader of the Le-Han.



There is Mugs now. He is very agitated and concerned. Well, one must admit that Mugs is easily agitated! That is not to say that he is worried, because he trusts The Leader. Nevertheless, he is concerned for the safety and survival of all The Hai. Of course, he is especially anxious for his sister, Misty. That concern is real, especially since Mugs is the person who discovered the tragedy of the missing path. “My, my, my”, were the words that came from Mugs when he saw (or didn’t see) the missing path. He looked. He looked again. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The next words he spoke were, “What to do! What to do?” He pauses. He lifts his countenance. “Aha! The Leader will know what to do!” With that thought clearly in mind, Mugs resolutely sets out to find The Leader. He is always nearby, so he will be easily found. This is the easy part. The hard part will be explaining to The Leader how he, Mugs, lost the path!

“Focus on the way to serve! Focus on the way to serve!” Mugs kept repeating the latest teaching of The Leader. It was a comforting thought. But right away, the other thought intruded: “Who would restore the path and save the Hai?” Surely, The Leader would know.

Just then, he spotted The Leader up ahead. There he was. It was not unusual to see him, seated on the ground, surrounded by children. They were clamoring for his attention. He obliged them with his loving smile and enthusiastic attention. It was obvious how they loved him, and even more obvious how much he loved them. He was teaching them lessons about serving. Also, he was giving them treats (dried Hai Berries, their favorite).

The Leader observed Mugs approaching. He gently disengaged from the children, promising to resume their session later. He arose and gave his full attention to the noticeably agitated Mugs. "Yes. What is it, my child?" he asked of Mugs. (Mugs really liked it when The Leader addressed him that way.)

Mugs took a deep breath, gulped and then stammered, "I didn't mean to lose it! It was just gone! I don't know where it went. It's just gone and I don't know where or how!"

The Leader gently placed arm around Mugs. (That was very soothing. But it must mean that he didn't understand what had happened.) The Leader, in his most soothing voice, told Mugs to take another deep breath and to start at the beginning.

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it? The beginning and the end of the story are the same! The path to the Hai is gone! Disappeared! That's it; beginning and end of the story!"

The Leader took Mugs' hand and said, "Why don't you show me?" So, feeling a little more courage (not a whole lot), Mugs started toward the foot of the path, or rather, what used to be the foot of the path. Before they had taken more than a few steps, they were joined by the children, who were always in the mood for an adventure. "Oh, great," thought Mugs. "Now I have the understanding and gentle Leader and an audience of rambunctious children! How will I ever be able to explain so that they understand? What am I thinking? I don't understand. What had been a private conversation between he and The Leader had now become a mission for the children.

As if reading his thoughts, The Leader said, "It will be all right. They just want to help."

Newly comforted, Mugs set off with what was now his troupe. They proceeded to what used to be the bottom end of the path. After much oohing and awing from the children, and a couple of trial steps, it was determined that yes, the path was gone. Also, a funny thing happened (in a manner of speaking, because of course, everything about this morning was turning out "funny"). Mugs, The Leader and each one of the children tried to go up what used to be the path. And as each of them set their foot on the used-to-be-path, their foot immediately slid back to the valley floor. The Leader and Mugs tried again, with the same result. It was as if the bottom spot (what else to call it?) was pushing them back. The Leader experimented once more.

The Leader became very quiet and still. He seemed deep in thought, but more so. It was as if he were there, but wasn't there. Oh, this morning became more and more strange! Then the children became silent—sensing something momentous was happening. Still quiet and very serene, the leader gathered the children around him. He addressed each by name and gently, but firmly, instructed them to return to the village.

"Uh oh," thought Mugs. "This just got huge!"

After being so relaxed in the presence of The Leader, Mugs suddenly became agitated. Well, it

wasn't often that The Leader became quiet and still. It was even less often that he dismissed the children from his presence. This was another wow-moment in a day already filled with too many wow-moments. Things just seemed to get worse and worse.

While the children were departing, The Leader remained mute and motionless. When they had gone, he slowly turned to Mugs.

"Oh, no!" thought Mugs. "I must really be in trouble now."

But instead of scolding him or being angry with him, The Leader placed his hand on Mugs' shoulder, looked directly at him and said, "Mugs, I need your help. In fact, The Hai and the Le-Han need your assistance. Without your aid, all the people could suffer dire hardships. Many could die."

Though filled with self-doubt and a sense of foreboding, Mugs replied in the only way that a member of the people could respond. "Use me."

"I was sure we could count on you, my child. Now, this is what you need to do.

You must take a back pack which I will personally prepare for you and deliver it

to the Hai. This is imperative! The survival of the Hai depends on your

success. The health and well-being of the Le-Han may rely on your efforts."

To himself, Mugs was thinking, "Gulp! No pressure, right? Who am I that the survival of all the people depends on me? Oh, my; oh my, what have I gotten myself into?" Speaking, now, he said, "You know I will try my hardest, but isn't there someone else who is better suited to such a giant task? I am just a humble servant."

Again, The Leader placed his arm around his shoulder. Immediately, Mugs felt reassured (though not necessarily confident).

"Now, Mugs, I would not ask you to embark on such a dangerous undertaking if I doubted you. You have always been a wonderful servant-leader, and I know you will not stop when you are so needed. Trust me as I trust you. I must go prepare this backpack. You must go and ready yourself for your journey. I shall meet you back here within the hour. Remember, time is of the essence!"

With that said, and with his shoulder still bearing the gentle weight of The Leader's arm, the two of them started back to the village. Each of them was deep in thought. Neither spoke to the other, yet each felt blessed by their quiet communion.

What had begun as a weird, strange morning had now become intense! No sooner had Mugs and The Leader returned to the outskirts of the village than the children emerged from wherever they had been waiting. The leader leaned down and picked up two of the children, embraced them, whispered encouragement to each and gingerly let them down. Even Mugs, reluctant to show such open emotion, found himself doing the same with two of the other youngsters. Mugs felt very warm inside at that unguarded moment. Reassured, the children ran off. The Leader smiled at Mugs.

“Hurry now, Mugs. Remember, time is short,” said The Leader. They left each other. Each was deep in prayer.

Back in his room, after a tumultuous morning, Mugs’ mind was whirling. Having never been on such a mission, he did not have the first clue what he needed for this journey. It would be cool up there, so a jacket was essential. Dry socks and clean underwear were basic necessities. “What else, what else,” he wondered. “Pray for guidance,” he reminded himself. He sat—and waited while he prayed for direction. Then, in an instant, it came to him, “Not for me, but for them!”

Meanwhile, The Leader was carefully filling the knapsack with the essentials Mugs would need. Praying and humming, he filled the backpack with:

A bag of dried Hai berries (enough for the Le-Han for 3 days, or fewer days if Mugs had to have a few)

A small jug of clean water

Bandages (just in case!)

A Protection Amulet

A page of survival instructions for the Le-Han (hastily written by The Leader, but legible)

A prayer, also written by The Leader, for protection and grace

A blue shawl (for the leader of the Le-Han), instructions folded up inside

Mugs was packing his little bag—not too heavy, but sufficient for the trip up to the top of the mountain. “What do they need? What can I contribute to their well-being? Oh, there is my own little pot for steeping the dried Hai berry. It could even be useful for him, if he needed sustenance on the journey. Mustn’t forget the heating pellets! I’ll pack all that I have!”

Mugs looked around. What could he have forgotten? One more thing was needed—the new purple scarf he had died with Hai berry juice—for Missy, for a special occasion! “Well,” he thought,

“this was certainly a special occasion!”

“Done,” he thought. It was time to go meet The Leader. It was time to go.

As if by thought alone, Mugs and The Leader arrived at the starting point (or what used to be the starting point) at the same moment. They looked at one another with a deep affection, and on The Leader’s part, concern. The Leader carefully affixed the back pack around Mugs’ shoulders.

“Now, Mugs,” he began. “You know what is necessary. You must get to the Le-Han as quickly as possible. I trust you to find a way to the top. Be careful, but be quick! One more thing—listen to your heart. Go now. Our prayers and hopes are with you.”

Mugs ducked his head under the weight of this responsibility. Nevertheless, he was determined to fulfill this expectation. Out loud he said, “I’ll do my best!”

With that, he set out. But, of course, he didn’t get anywhere trying to use the old path. He was pushed back as soon as he set foot on it. He looked back at The Leader with a sheepish grin. He moved a few feet to the right and plunged into the undergrowth. In an instant, he disappeared from view.

Meanwhile, up on Hai mountain ...

Thus ends the first chapter of the story of the Hai and the Le-Han.

Chapter 2

THE HAI

Missy was kind of sleepy. It had been a strange night, filled with weird dreams. That was very unusual for her. She usually had quiet, peaceful dreams. So, of course, when she woke, it was with an unsettled kind of feeling. Most unusual, indeed! She was loved and respected for a cool, calm demeanor.



Well, that was only the beginning of what was to become an unsettling day; a long, unsettling day! At the very moment that Mugs was discovering the missing path down below, Missy walked to the top of the path (as was her custom) only to find that it wasn't to be found! She stared and stared. But no matter how hard she stared, the path would not appear. Her usual, calm bearing moved a little off center. She didn't panic, exactly—it wasn't her way. But at that moment, for probably the first time in her life, she felt certain uneasiness. In her mind she thought, "There seems to be something almost evil in this—whatever this is!"

She turned to walk back to the village to report her discovery to her husband, the very kind and gentle Hearan. Hearan, being a leader of The Hai, would certainly know what to do (she hoped). Whatever "it" was, Hearan could (would) handle it. She never loved him, or needed him, more than at this very moment.

With that thought soothing her somewhat shaken serenity, she turned and left what used to be the path to the Le Han.

As she approached the village, she heard the welcome sounds of children laughing. Usually, that

sound could lift her spirits right to the peak of the mountain, but not this morning; not this eerie morning. This morning, when she heard their laughter, she couldn't help thinking, "Very soon, those sounds might become sobs. No. No! That must not happen! Whatever else, they must protect the children. Everyone must be protected, but most especially, the children!"

Hearan, as was his custom each morning, was walking out to greet Missy on her return from the path. Immediately, he could sense her uneasiness. There was something in her manner that told him, "Something is very wrong." She looked up and he could see the worry in her eyes. He reached out, took her hand—and her tears began to flow.

"What is it? What is it, my dear Missy?"

She couldn't get the words out. How could she express the extent of the disaster awaiting them? She couldn't! She couldn't.

Hearan gripped her hand more firmly, letting her know that whatever the problem, they would face it together. Missy seemed to calm somewhat. She gathered her breath. Some of her calmness was returning. In just a moment now, she would be able to express the inexpressible. In just a moment she would.

When she began speaking, the words poured out in a torrent: "The children! Ah, the children! The path is gone! The path to The Valley is no more—disappeared. What will become of us? What will become of the children? How can we survive without the assistance of and sustenance from The Valley? How will they survive without the precious Hai berry? What will become of the people, the children? Ah! Ah! Ah!"

Well, this outburst was so out of the ordinary (especially for Missy), that the nearby children also began to cry, "Ah! Ah! Ah! What is to become of us?" They were frightened—not so much because of the path (of which they knew nothing), but because of Missy's uncharacteristic outburst. If Missy was hysterical (by comparison to her normal composure), then something must be really wrong!

Hearan and Missy turned to the children and each gathered a couple of them in their arms, speaking soothingly with words of comfort and assurance. They were reassured, mostly by Missy's return to her usual calm demeanor. After all, they had been around her all of their young lives, and never (never!) had they seen her so un-Missy-like. This was better; much better.

Now, suddenly, they became curious about the root of this flare-up. Those children who had not been picked up had been clinging on to the garments of the grownups, in something resembling a life-or-death grip. Slowly, Missy returned to herself. With the soothing tone and comforting words from both she and Hearan, the children released their holds. Gently, Missy and Hearan then set the toddlers down.

"All right, children, now everything is all right," Hearan said aloud. Inwardly he was wondering if he had just lied. He didn't yet know what had caused Missy to lose her generally sunny and assured composure. Whatever it was (and she could tell him privately), it must be big. In all of the years he had known Missy, and in all of the years of their marriage, never had he known her to be afraid or less than calm. Now, she was both!

Again, Hearan spoke to the children. "Surely it is time for your breakfast. So please get to your homes and have a good, warming breakfast. Be sure to have your Hai berries. Now, go along."

With that instruction from their respected leader, they scurried off, totally confident in his encouragement.

Hearan turned to his wife, and took her hand in his. His grip was firm and she relaxed in the comfort of his grasp. She trusted him, not only as a leader of her people, but also of their family. In that silent communion, they, too, returned to their home. They both allowed the quietness to continue as they went about the morning ritual of preparing their morning meal. When they had given prayers of thanksgiving, they consumed their breakfast—still in that noiselessness. Finally, they settled down with their warm Hai berry tea.

Hearan spoke first. "Ok, my dear. In your own time, in your own way, please explain the cause of your extraordinary behavior this morning."

"Oh, husband, I apologize for my outburst; for my immoderation. I feel so sorry for scaring the children in that way. I would never intentionally frighten them or cause them uneasiness. I would not harm the little ones!"

"Of course I know that, precious one. You are and have been a strong, steadying influence with our people. You serve with such love and patience, that you are trusted and looked up to by everyone—especially the children. So do not express regret any further. I am totally secure in your purposes. Now, tell me."

With that expression of confidence, Missy took a deep breath and proceeded to tell of her discovery: "Well, as is my custom, I walked to the head of the path to give prayers of thanksgiving and to ask a blessing—on the people and on the path. But when I arrived there, it wasn't there! It was gone; disappeared! Consequently, after determining that my eyes were telling me the truth, I decided to consult with you about what this could mean. Really, what could this mean? Is it a sign? Is it a warning? Then, there is the bigger question: what is to become of our people and what about the Hai? What about Mugs?"

All Hearan said was, "Show me."

Together, they walked to the head of the path. Sure enough, just as Mugs was showing its absence to The Leader (down in the valley), Missy was demonstrating its nonexistence to Hearan.

"See! It is gone! Missing! Lost! I was in such hope that I was mistaken, but you can see clearly that it is not to be seen!"

Just as with The Leader, Hearan attempted to put his foot on what should have been the beginning of the path. Just as with The Leader, his foot was pushed back. Missy tried to put her foot to the path, and she, too, seemed to be pushed back. Curious, Hearan tried again with the same result. Again, he put his foot to the missing path and again, he was pushed back. This time, however, he strained to keep his foot where he wanted it. This time, something seemed to push back with even more force. He stood there, contemplating what he was experiencing.

"This is not a naturally occurring occurrence. This is created—by someone or something! We will find out. Come. Let us return to the village. There are procedures we need to put in place to secure our survival and that of the Hai. We will need to have gathering of the other leaders. We need to make plans. Also, it is only right that they should be informed. We'd better get going. It seems that time is not on our side."

To prevent the young people (tots and teens alike) from becoming anxious prematurely, Hearan went from door to door and quietly invited leaders to the meeting hall. The young people were already attending their lessons with various teachers, so they probably didn't even notice the gathering of leaders. Besides, this calling together of the leaders was not unusual. There often were problems of importance to the community which needed addressed. So this impromptu gathering would not seem that extraordinary.

Hearan opened the meeting with a fervent prayer for guidance. All present concurred with the prayer—not only its content, but also its fervency. Because of her discovery earlier, Missy was asked to give her report first. She gave a succinct account of what she had discovered early that morning. Of course, everyone wanted to see the event (or absence thereof) personally. It was decided to postpone that observation until later.

The primary mission was the making of contingency plans for food, water and suggestions for contacting the people in the valley. Hearan stated that the leadership welcomed suggestions from the congregation. What followed was a prolonged period of silence. That is, silence except for the shuffling of feet and rustling of clothes as people shifted positions.

To save the members from further discomfort, Hearan spoke. "All right, that is a big piece to deal with all at once. Let me make some suggestions to get things started, and then maybe that will get other ideas flowing. I think it wise to gather up all supplies, including food, water, and any other item that you might consider useful to the people."

That small suggestion did, indeed, prompt more thoughts of how to proceed in this unprecedented situation. Some of them were: "We could bring dried berries and a container of water from the stream," and "We have some twined rope and netting from the berry field," and "There is wood aplenty around the edge of the village. That could be used for extra heat."

"Yes, yes!" Hearan replied. "Those are all good ideas. Don't stop there. Continue to ponder other means of helping one another. Though time may be short, there is yet much we can do. Now, there is another big difficulty which I have yet to broach. Of the many problems facing both people is this: how do we get the Hai berry from the mountain top down to the ovens in the valley? It has always seemed prudent to have the berry-growing and berry-curing done separately. This separation of tasks gave all of us more opportunity to serve one another."

"Well, until this morning it had seemed prudent," Hearan said under his breath.

Then he continued to the gathering, "There is plenty for everyone to do. We need volunteers for several immediate tasks: someone to entertain, teach and otherwise keep the children occupied, several of you to receive the items brought in for community use, someone else to catalog all that is provided, and a couple of leaders to determine, by what is gathered, just how much time we have."

Talman, among the leaders, and a close friend of Hearan, spoke up and suggested that someone be posted at the head of the now-missing-path. "That would serve two purposes. First, that would provide continuous coverage of any changes that might occur. Second, it would keep the children safe from any possible misfortune that might occur because of the path's disappearance. After all, we don't really have any idea what is going on!"

(On that note, we will leave the Hai to their tasks.)

Chapter 3

THE HAI

Meanwhile, in Elsewhere (that is a real place!), many things were brewing (literally!). Elsewhere is not a place you might have ever been, and had you ever been there—you would not go back.

How to describe it? Sometimes there aren't enough words. Sometimes there aren't enough dark, gruesome, dreadful, shocking, deplorable, wicked words in the whole world to describe a place like Elsewhere. (Actually, there isn't another place like Elsewhere anywhere!) But, one must try.

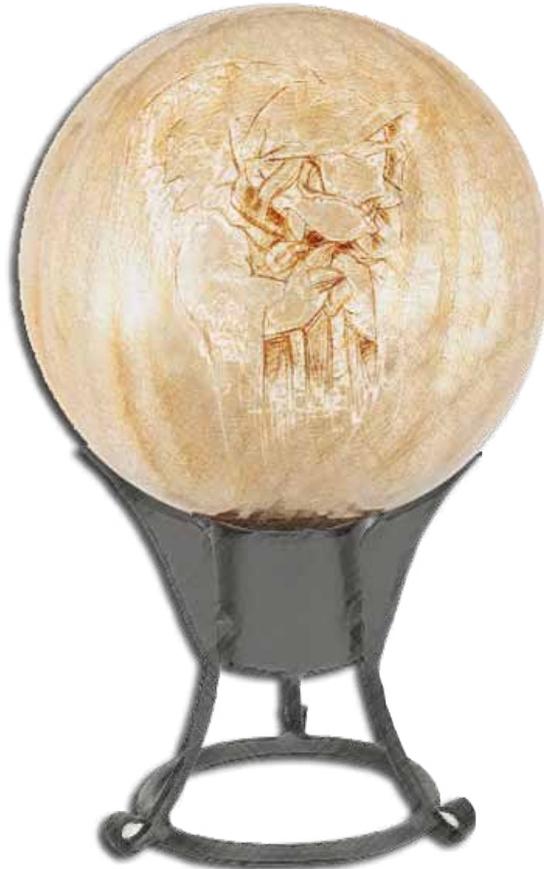
To begin with, try to picture the place itself. It is very dry and warm (not unlike some descriptions of Hades or some other inferno). It is dark and dreary, and even though it is dry, there is a smoky mist that hangs over everything, so that even at midday, the light is murky and gloomy. This creates a spirit of melancholy—even on good days (of which there are few). There is also a feeling of oppression—like dark shadows pressing in, suffocating.

The inhabitants are also dark and dreary, with no time for one another, unless, of course, it was in order to get up to some mischief. For that purpose they were quite willing to collaborate. In fact, their collective mission was to create as much mayhem and chaos as possible for everyone else in the world. Their combined energy was always and foremost for the discomfort and misfortune of others! With so much evil in their souls, it is easy to imagine their ugliness. (Well, that's not quite accurate—they are pretty ugly and that much ugliness is hard to comprehend!) So try to envision the most despicable, reprehensible sight you have ever seen. Multiply that obnoxiousness by a factor of 10. You are approaching a pretty good description of the residents of Elsewhere.

If their physical appearance gives one pause (due to their pure malice), then it is a short leap to discover the evil in their souls! Among their loathsome traits are: malevolence, cruelty, hatred, wrath, sloth, pride, and all sorts of immoral thoughts and behaviors (too numerous and too horrible to mention). Some would call these thoughts and behaviors "antisocial qualities", or "psychopathic tendencies". Still others might call them "sin". Of all their many shortcomings, the strongest and most detestable and most atrocious of all is their greed! Their avarice consumed nearly every hour of every day. No matter what it was, they wanted more; more food, more possessions, more power, more evil deeds, more knowledge, and more money. And the most powerful, overwhelming, and dominant greed of all their many culpabilities was the appetite for possession of anything anyone else had! (This just about brings us back to the rest of our tale.)

(Before that, and as an aside: it is to be noted that these creatures—far from human—are able to change appearance in an instant to mimic cordial, amiable, attractive human beings. They can even feign affection and good will, if it suits their purposes and contributes to overall mayhem. So, in any dealings with otherworlders (as they referred to anyone not a citizen of Elsewhere), they can appear normal—almost pleasant, nearly human!

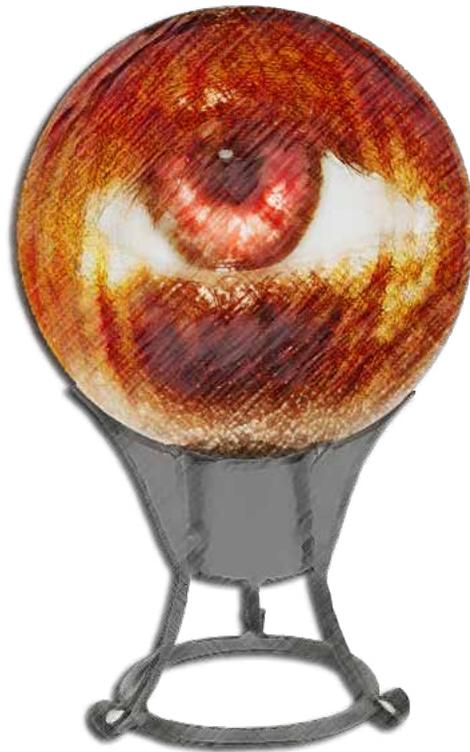
Right about the time Mugs is discovering the missing path at the bottom of Mount Hai and Missy is discovering the missing path at the top of Mount Hai, the inhabitants of Elsewhere are celebrating and laughing and having a ribald time—at the expense of the Hai and the Le-Han. Oh, yes! You guessed it! They are responsible for the misery and upset of these lovely people! In fact, they are overjoyed at the wretchedness they have created!



How do they know what is happening on Hai Mountain? Among their enchantments, brews and magical spells are huge globes “tuned in” to different parts of the world. At this moment, while the Hai and the Le-Han are in the throes of their loss, the denizens of Elsewhere are watching (and enjoying—Nay, reveling in) these events. They are observing every nuance and hearing every word on all of their “Ever-Seeing” globes. What a time they are having, jeering at the discomfort of the pleasant people of Hai Mountain.

Why are they so happy? What does their glee have to do with what is happening there? Well, they caused it! That’s correct! They caused the disappearance of the path. It had taken them years of planning and the development and new and more powerful enchantments. They mused and pondered how to go about it. That is actually the middle of their part of the story. Remember their most avaricious trait is their covetousness. For years they had coveted the Hai berry and the riches that attended them. Oh, how they desired those berries—the only ones in the world! How they sought after them, dreamed of owning them; possessing that unique and perfect control.

Each attempt at gaining ownership (and there had been many over the years—MANY!), had ended in failure and frustration.



Not today! Today the first step in acquiring this dreamed-of prize had been completed successfully. The disappearance of the treasured path between the two peoples had been accomplished. Finally! Finally! Oh, they were celebrating in Elsewhere!

Now, they waited. That was actually step two of their plan. Wait for everyone to die. It didn't matter to them that these precious citizens of Hai Mountain were suffering. In fact, the members of Elsewhere were rather enjoying their torment. After all, they had caused it. So, they waited. (Waiting was not one of their stronger talents!) But this first inkling of success was so sweet—after all the many years of disappointment. They could almost taste the Hai berry!

They had mutual dreams of creating Hai berry wine, Hai berry cakes, and Hai berry money. They were wringing their hands in gleeful anticipation of their final success. All those berries! All that money! Peals of laughter erupted at the thought! They watched Mugs, as he struggled through the undergrowth. They observed Missy, Hearan and the residents at the peak of the mountain make their puny attempts to save themselves and one another! Ludicrous! They had only to wait a few more days, and all of their toil and machinations would come to the only desired outcome: possession of the only source in the world of the Hai berry!

They were slightly chagrined at the thought that it had taken them so many years to come up with such a simple solution. Had they paid more attention to the ways of the people of the

mountain, they would have realized how important the path was. Had they noticed, they would have acted sooner and decisively to destroy the path. When they observed the people, they were actually confused by their behavior toward one another. How could anyone in their right mind (that is to say, their “right way of thinking”) actually be compassionate? And for children!

Of course, it was difficult for them to understand the concept of servanthood, having never experienced even an inkling of the notion. Serving one another! Ludicrous! Concerned for each other! Laughable! Caring for children? Inconceivable! (To chart their thought patterns—a rabbit trail indeed—you would have to consider the following: “What’s in it for me?” “If it doesn’t help me, could it hurt me?” “Of what possible use are children?” and “If they can’t profit me, away with them!”). So, if you were wondering how these denizens could observe the pain experienced by the Hai and the Le-Han, and rejoice, you have your answer! They didn’t care one whit! In fact, just the opposite was true. Their only concern was for the wealth and control that was just within their grasp.

Their leader (if you could refer to him as “leader”), LA Rant, switched all of the Ever-seeing globes to focus on Mugs as he struggled through the underbrush. New and boisterous clamors of laughter sounded throughout the gathering. La Rant pointed at the nearest globe, and with disdain said, “Look at the little runt, struggling vainly through the thicket. At the rate he is traveling, all will have perished before he gets past one obstacle placed in his way! He must be insane, and The Leader (yes, they were aware of The Leader) was even crazier than that for choosing such an unlikely “champion”.



Fresh and derisive laughter again erupted, as the dwellers of Elsewhere enjoyed the sight of Mugs, trying to make headway up into the brush. It was obvious (or seemed so) to the viewers that the struggles of the little servant would come to naught. They could barely contain themselves as they anticipated his impending doom! "Oh, delicious", they thought, "Simply, outrageously delicious!"

La Rant switched the view again, this time to top of the mountain, where he focused in on the latest crop of the Hai Berry—just ripening for the harvest; their Harvest! ? What tool exists for measuring the extent of their greed? How does avarice sound? Is there a gauge for it? How does one calibrate the level of yearning these creatures felt as the fields of the ripening berries came into clear focus? It seemed that they could almost taste the Hai Berry wine! For anyone anywhere but Elsewhere, the pure evil of what they were doing, seeing, experiencing right in that moment in that gathering would have been repulsive! But, as mentioned earlier, there was no other place like Elsewhere—anywhere!

Next, he switched the view again, this time to the valley—to focus on The Leader. Midst boos of derision and screams of, "Down with him! Die, Leader, Die!" could also be heard murmurs of fear, whispers of dread. But, of course, the sounds were soft enough that La Rant not could detect who was murmuring or whispering.

"What?" he screamed! Do I hear some doubt? Is there one among you who distrusts our mission or doubts the outcome? If so, let him come forward! I'll convince him otherwise!"

Then there were cheers and more laughter—at an even higher pitch. Who could doubt when LA Rant was so sure? To increase their fervor La Rant switched the view at ever escalating rates. As the evening of their revelry wore on, the din of their laughter and the clamor that arose calling for the demise of all who lived on Hai Mountain increased massively. Satisfied at last with their complete commitment to the cause, he left them to work their frenzy to exhaustion to unconsciousness.

As the hubbub subsided—well into the night—La Rant went to his private chamber to observe the events on Hai Mountain more carefully. He paid special attention to The Leader. He noticed that instead of being frantic with worry or tense with dread, The Leader seemed calm—even at peace. To himself he thought, "He's even almost as good an actor as I. We'll see how long his composure lasts when children begin dying!" He chuckled at the thought of The Leader cracking under pressure. "What a wimp!" he thought.

He stretched and yawned. He was well-pleased with the day's events. Tomorrow should be even more spectacular! "Oh," he thought, "the next 2 to 3 days are going to be stupendous! Finally, at long last, I'll be rid of the Hai and the Le Han." With that rousing thought, he went to bed. He was pretty excited, so sleep didn't come easily. Nevertheless, he wanted to be ready for the next step in his grand design. He willed himself to sleep. (It was not a restful night.)

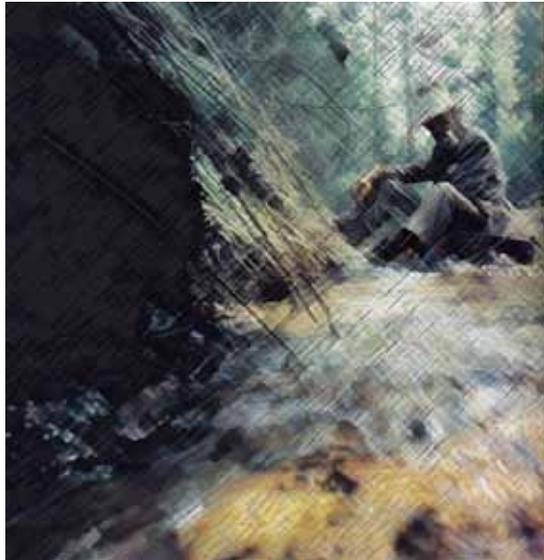
Chapter 4

Mugs

While the residents of Elsewhere were laughing and jeering at Mugs in his struggle to climb Hai Mountain, Mugs was, indeed struggling to climb Hai Mountain. He didn't know that he was being observed. He certainly didn't know anything about Ever-Seeing Globes, or a place called Elsewhere or vile beings in Elsewhere. How could he? He knew nothing at all of avarice and malice, let alone dark arts and black magic. How could he know that he was being ridiculed and maligned when he didn't know there were such creatures having such bad thoughts and desires?

So, unaware of his malignant observers, he struggled on. The undergrowth was so thick that the light of day seemed to disappear. The visibility was so poor that he could barely discern the direction in which he traveled. The only evidence available to him was the pain and cramping in his legs—informing him that he was climbing. As he wriggled onward, he felt uncomfortable—uneasy.

"Oh," he thought to himself, "wouldn't The Leader laugh at him! He of little talent, even smaller stature and the courage of a tadpole, bearing the weight of the Hai and the Le-Han! "He would have laughed had he not been so close to crying.



"Crying!" he thought. "Me? Mugs! Crying? Never! No, sir! Not this Mugs!"

At the mention of crying, a tiny little sob escaped his throat.

Out loud (so stridently that he jumped at the sound) he said, "Oh for heaven's sake! Get a grip. There was nothing for it now but to fight onward (or was it upward?). Yes, upward is more like it."

(As an aside: The citizens of Elsewhere were nearly hysterical with delight at this outburst! Oh, how they enjoyed his distress! Mugs traveled as much, maybe more, side-to-side as he did uphill. Oh, this was delicious. They could almost taste the Hai Berry wine!)

The mountain seemed strange. No one ever tried the ascent without using the path. Well, that is, not until today. Mugs had had no idea of how treacherous and difficult the journey could be. The brush and bramble were so thick, they seemed impenetrable. He couldn't see a foot in front of himself—well, he could see his own foot, of course. He had to tug and push. He didn't really want to break off branches and step on roots. He was getting hungry and thirsty, too.

"Mustn't use up precious supplies. Had to save everything for others," he thought to himself. "Every drop of water and every scrap of food were important for the survival of the people. Just a few more steps, then I might take a little rest. Surely The Leader wouldn't find fault with a tiny rest. Well, maybe he could go a slight bit further. Oh, bother! How did I ever get into this? Surely there were others more qualified to do this task. What was I thinking? What was The Leader thinking?"

Mugs addressed the brush and bramble: "You could give way and make this journey more pleasant. After all, I'm only trying to help. I didn't come here to do any harm."

(At this new pronouncement, the Elsewhere contingent broke into new and louder knells of laughter. They were finding Mugs struggles to be quite entertaining!)

A short time later, Mugs did take his rest. He took a couple of sips of water from the canteen—mindful that others might need this refreshment more than he. (This provided an opportune time for their leader, LA Rant, to switch to another scene—The Leader and other members of the Le Han—as they wrestled with the looming problem of food and water. Again, the Elsewhere crowd were delighted with the anxiety they could sense, or thought they could.)

In actuality, the people were not anxious; not in the way that wicked crowd imagined! The people were concerned for one another, and especially for the children. Those creatures in Elsewhere misinterpreted what they saw and heard in terms of their own devices and desires. This wrong-thinking would be their undoing!

The Leader calmly and quietly laid out the problem to the elders and other servant leaders. He said, "The problems we face are difficult, but not impossible. There is the difficult situation with food and water, of course. The more challenging state of affairs is the trouble in establishing communication with The Hai. With the path gone, we have lost our main connection between our two people. As I speak, though, Mugs is making his way to the top. He is taking supplies, such as we were able to assemble on short notice—well, no notice. It is our hope and trust that

he will successfully complete this treacherous commission.”



(At that, new peals of derisive laughter broke out in Elsewhere. “If only he knew what we know”, they were thinking. “If only he knew!” La Rant again switched the scene on the Ever-Seeing globes. This time they were focused on The Hai and their gathering in the community meeting hall.)

Hearan was explaining the situation to the adults. He was clarifying the current problems they faced. He asked each and every person to consider what they might be able to contribute in terms of solutions.

“I’m quite sure that The Leader must be aware of the disappearance of the path. By now, he must have also discovered its vanishing . While this is a new and disturbing occurrence, I’m confident that with all of us putting our heads together, we will soon have this event terminated.”

(Again, dins of laughter rang out in Elsewhere. What had taken them years to perfect, these wimpy humans thought—THOUGHT—they could solve soon enough to save themselves! Their sides were hurting from laughing so hard. Just then, La Rant, their leader, entered the common room. “All right, you blokes, time to go to bed! You’ve had about enough enjoyment for one day. I’d say we have about two or three days of misery to observe. Or should I say ‘fun’? Of you

go then.” With some good-natured grumbling—if such beings could be described as ‘good-natured’, they slowly made their way to their sleeping quarters.)

While all of this was going on, Mugs was savoring his small rest. He took this first opportunity to open his knap sack and see what The Leader had put in it.

“Hmm. Let’s see what we have. Mm, here are some dried Hai berries. No, no! Mustn’t have these—they are for the Le Han. A jug of water—no, I don’t need that yet. Hmm; this is a strange necklace. It seems to be an amulet of some sort. It is very strange for The Leader to put this in the knapsack with no word of instruction. ”

As he held the amulet in his hand, it began to feel nice and warm. He began to feel nice and warm, too.

“Oh,” he thought to himself. “Could this be real, or was this warmth and well-being just in his overactive imagination? It had been a long, trying day. Nah! I’m imagining this!”

But, sure enough, the longer he clutched the amulet, the safer and better he felt. Without replacing the necklace back in the rucksack, he continued to see what else The Leader had provided. There was a page addressed to Hearan (“Supposedly some instructions,” he mused.), some bandages (“Don’t think about that eventuality! No, do not consider what those could be for!” “Let’s see, what else have we here?” There was a prayer, written by The Leader. (He would read that shortly.) and a blue shawl with another piece of paper addressed to Hearan.

“Boy! This amulet seems to be radiating heat: not hot, but comfortably warm. No, this was no longer a figment of my imagination. This amulet seems to be almost alive in my hand.” (These thoughts were tumbling through his head). “What next? Oh, yes, the prayer from the leader—I need to read it. That is necessary for our success.”

He read: “May our Lord, our God and Father, protect this servant leader, Mugs, and grant him overwhelming grace to complete this mission with which he has been laden. Amen.”

Mugs was awe-inspired by The Leader’s love and concern. “Oh! It is time to get moving again. Better repack everything. (Well, not the amulet.) Carefully, now, do it carefully.)

He took one last sip of water, and one dried Hai berry. Then he set out again, intending to continue upward. But as he took a step uphill, his foot moved to the right.

“Even though it is in the palm of my hand, and it is just lying there, this amulet seems to be tugging at me to go right. Well, that was something,” Mugs was thinking to himself.

Again, he tried to take an ascending step, and again, his foot landed to the right. Giving in to

what now seemed inevitable, Mugs turned right and traveled to the right—and up. The amulet seemed almost purring in his hand. (“Nah! Just his head was playing tricks on him again.”) The journey, surprisingly, took on a sense of completeness, of meant-to-be-ness.” Mugs found that he was humming. He hadn’t felt this good since yesterday—before all of this, this stuff—began. He was really making headway, too. Before long he had come to the brook that flowed from the top of Hai Mountain down to the valley. It provided all of the water needed by all of the people. No one ever stepped into the stream. It was forbidden to walk there, because of the importance of its cleanliness.

But, and this was truly amazing!—that amulet was tugging at him (well, it felt like that) to enter the stream! But he couldn’t. Here he was, having a tug-of-war with a necklace! Up until now, the band had been a real comfort and help to him. Now it was ordering him (it felt like that) to enter the stream. He couldn’t! The amulet insisted! Being tired, and frustrated, and unwilling to let go of this THING—he reluctantly stepped into the rivulet. It was a tiny stream—just sufficient for their needs. And no one—NO ONE—to his knowledge, had ever done what he was doing.

All of a sudden, the amulet allowed him to travel up! And just as suddenly, Mugs started making real headway. (“This just has to be an amulet of protection” he thought.”) Now, he was filled with hope that he could make it to the top in time!

“Yeah!” he yelled. Then looked around sheepishly, and he whooped again, “Yeah!”

He continued heading upstream for what seemed like a long time. Just when he was confident that he was nearing the top, that pesky amulet started tugging at him again. This time, it was directing him to go left.

“Make up your mind,” he yelled. (Oh, dear, was he really yelling at a necklace?) No matter how hard he tried to stay in the stream, going upward, each step took him left! He was nearly in tears. What would happen to the people—the children? No matter how hard he concentrated on going up, his feet kept taking him left!

And, behold! There, in just to the left of his last footfall... No, he couldn’t believe it. But he had traveled it often enough to know it was...the path!

“But how could this be? The path was gone! He and The Leader had seen it (or not seen it) just hours ago!”

Mugs was reeling with uncertainty. The necklace continued to urge him to move left—to step on the path. He did so, and was enthralled with the sensation of a brand new and exciting discovery. The path—or at least, this part of it—still existed! So, he moved upward, on the path. This was exhilarating! He could almost see the village of the Le Han. Suddenly, he could not advance. “Now what?” asked Mugs, to no one in particular (but kind of to the amulet). Just as had happened earlier, at the start of this entire unreal day, the path seemed to push him back.

Gently this time, the talisman directed him to go right again. By now, he was resigned to following these directions. He walked to the right and up, and there, before him was Missy and Hearan. All three of them were amazed to see each other! They were crying (tears of joy this time) and hugging and generally overflowing with emotions.

(The residents of Elsewhere would not be pleased when they awoke!)

Chapter 5

The Hai and the Le Han

Though they had many questions to ask one another, Hearan (bless him) could see that Mugs was very near exhaustion. So rather than interrogate him about his extraordinary appearance, seemingly out of nowhere, Hearan and Missy enfolded Mugs in their arms. Mugs took a deep, deep breath and visibly relaxed.

"Come on, Brother." Hearan said. "Let's get you something warm to drink and let you rest awhile. Answers can come later."

"No!" Mugs objected, pulling away. "There is no time to waste. The Leader said, 'Time is of the essence.' Plus, I have so much to tell you, and..."

At that point, Mugs seemed to run out of everything—words, breath, and energy. Hearan, understanding (at least partially), just put his arm around the little guy and, without further resistance from Mugs, directed him toward their home. Missy prepared some hot Hai Berry tea, and Hearan covered Mugs with a light blanket.

(Mugs was having a hard time comprehending what was happening. Missy and Hearan were acting like they had all of the time in the world; like there were no important questions to be answered; like everything was normal! Even though it was still very early morning on Hai Mountain, Mugs was filled with a sense of urgency!

"What is the matter with them? Don't they know what trouble we're in? And why can't I talk?" These were the jumbled thoughts running through his mind. He was exasperated!

Missy handed him the cup of tea. She and Hearan did not take any for themselves (saving as much as possible for the children), but sat down opposite Mugs, and waited expectantly (but patiently) for him to regain himself. A few sips of the delicious hot brew did wonders for his disposition.

"Just a few sips more," Mugs thought to himself, "and I should be able to speak."

Sure enough, a few sips later, having regained his composure, Mugs cleared his throat (which didn't really need clearing), the words began tumbling out! He related the events of the previous morning: his discovery of the missing path—which wasn't really missing...he could tell them about that later!; his shock and concern; his meeting with The Leader and his subsequent encounter with aforesaid missing path; the fright of the children; his hasty preparations for the journey (for which he had volunteered, but didn't know why!); the backpack prepared by The Leader; the harrowing trip up the mountain; the prayer from The Leader; the Protection Amulet

and its effects; his discovery of the partial path; the zigzagging back and forth up the mountain.



The words kept pouring out, so that Missy and Hearan were having difficulty piecing it all together! At one point, they thought they heard him say that the path was still there. At another, they were certain that they had perceived something of a confession that sounded like he had walked in the stream! Incomprehensible! Then there was that mention of the backpack from The Leader. There was a lot of information to reconstruct in order to make sense of this jumble!

While they were listening to Mugs' heartfelt recounting of the last day's events, the village was beginning to stir. Sounds of people awaking were easily detected.

"Oh, dear," said Missy. "I must go out to greet the morning. In all of these years with the Hai, I have never missed this customary start to the day. I'll be back shortly, my dears." Off she went.

"All right, my friend and brother," Hearan began. "It is time to start assembling the ingredients of this tale. I'm sure that you would not deceive, but, frankly, I am unable to make much sense of what you have said. No, no! Don't worry. We will figure it out together. This much is clear—the path has been tampered with. Is that correct?"

Mugs nodded assent.

"Now, Brother, you mentioned a backpack from the leader. Would that be the pack strapped to your shoulders?"

Another nod of agreement came from Mugs.

“May we have a look at what you have brought? It must be important for you to have undertaken such a dangerous journey—a journey that took you into the night, and through the brambles; into the dark and the unknown.”

Again, Mugs nodded, but this time he actually responded to what had been said with more than a nod. This time, he removed the knapsack from his shoulders and handed it to Hearan, who promptly opened it and removed its contents.

There, laid out before them, were the contents which The Leader so hastily, yet carefully, had intended for their protection and well-being:

- A small jug of clean water (now, nearly empty)
- Bandages (slightly wrinkled from Mugs’ use)
- A Protection Amulet (which Hearan recognized immediately, though not having seen it for years!)
- A page of instructions for the people
- A prayer for protection and grace
- A blue shawl (which when unfolded, revealed a page of instructions with the words, “For Hearan” written on the front.)

Hearan tucked the folded page into the front of his shirt, saying, “Now, little guy, time for you to get a little rest. You have done your part!”

Mugs struggled to object, but the goodness and gentleness of Hearan and Missy were so powerful, that he acquiesced and leaned back in the chair—sipping more tea and wrapping the light blanket more closely around his shoulders. “Somehow,” he thought, “things are going to be all right. I’m glad Hearan is in charge.”

Hearan and Missy moved a little ways away, out of hearing for Mugs. “Here, Missy, are instructions from The Leader.”

Hearan read softly, but loud enough for Missy to hear: “Greetings, my brother and sister in faith. Since you are reading this, I trust that our small brother, Mugs, has completed his journey successfully. I expected no less from one with such a big heart. Here are my instructions. Follow them carefully and with all of the energy and joy that you can bring to this task! There are some in the world who believe that “Might makes right”, but we know that it is the other way around—“Right makes Might”!

1. Call together all of the Le Han and form a circle with the children in the center and pray the prayer of protection and grace.
2. Have the biggest, loudest, most joyful celebration that has ever been known on Hai Mountain—celebrate the safe arrival of Mugs, the wonderful Hai Berry, and the blessing of brotherhood and servant hood!
3. Sing!

Missy and Hearan looked at one another and smiled. “Let’s do this,” they said, simultaneously.

They returned to find Mugs just dozing off. “Not so fast, mister! There is time for rest later. Right now, we have a celebration to attend and create!”

“Oh, no!” thought Mugs to himself. “The strain has gotten to them. Oh, no!” Mugs exclaimed out loud.

“It’s all right. Come on! Time to do right—make might!”

Missy and Hearan, with Mugs in tow, began knocking on doors, shouting for the people to join them in the village square.

“Come on, people! It is time to celebrate. See who has come to us—braving the dark and cold of the night. Our Mugs is here and brings us good news from The Leader. Time to do right—make might!”

The people came together with joy and thanksgiving, and just as he had planned it, The Leader had gathered together all of The Hai at exactly the right moment to join in this marvelous celebration.

(Also, just as The Leader had planned, the residents of Elsewhere were beginning to assemble in their recreation hall—having been called there by their chief. The Ever-Seeing Globes were just being warmed up for the days’ festivities. They were the screen, were There, was an air of excitement and anticipation as they awaited the demise of the people they envied and despised. They were literally drooling with anticipation of the fun to come! But, wait a minute! Something was very wrong! What they were seeing as the Ever-Seeing Globes gave a clearer picture, MADE NO SENSE! What they were viewing was a celebration at the top of Hai Mountain. It was the biggest, most raucous party they had ever seen. How could they be celebrating? Their chief tuned in the globes to the scene at the base of Hai Mountain—to the same boisterous merriment as at the top! That was it—the people must be mad with fear and regret!. But, no—they were laughing. The children were laughing and running around and playing games.)

The festival was in full swing! It had been quite a while since Mugs had made the journey up the

mountain—and certainly he had never made the journey quite like this! Of course, there was always a party of joyful fun when he visited, but this was really over-the-top! He was surrounded by nieces, nephews, cousins, and brothers and sisters of the people. Of course, there was Missy and Hearan, who were always glad to welcome him. But it was in extraordinary circumstances that they were coming together, so the celebration seemed sweeter than ever. He had no idea that what was happening here was also happening down below. The Le Han and The Hai had never had a joint carnival before. The positive energy, the pure joy, fellowship and love that flowed out from the people to one another was exhilarating!

(The energy was so powerful and positive that a very strange thing started happening in Elsewhere. As this joy, love and fellowship overflowed The People, it also began flowing through the Ever-Seeing Globes. Now, these were never meant to transmit anything but agony, gloom, desolation and wretchedness. So, when this great “stuff” began flowing through them, they began to spark and fizzle. The pictures became indistinct and unclear. Their dominant leader tried to shut them down, but he was too late! They began to explode with all of the good that was being transmitted. The denizens of Elsewhere began to scatter and take cover, lest they be destroyed. Their dreams of conquest and glory disappeared midst the sparks and explosions.)

Mugs was having a wonderful time, even though he wasn't sure what all of the fuss was about. He was just glad to be here and to be safe and loved.

Hearan gathered the people together more closely and suggested that they go to the top of the path together.

“Oh, no!” thought Mugs. “Now the children will be afraid and the festival will certainly come to an end!” Those thoughts were under his breath. Out loud he said, “Missy, I almost forgot. I brought a scarf for you. Let's go get it. We can go to the path later—much later.” (He really didn't want the children to be afraid!)

“Oh, silly,” she replied. “The scarf will be there when we get back. Let's go”

So, while The Hai approached one end of the path, the Le Han approached the other—and, behold, the path was completely restored!

(The residents of Elsewhere would not be heard from again. They were so embarrassed at their failure. They were so chagrined at how easily and thoroughly they were defeated, that all they could do was slink away. Though definitely not content, they would have to settle for life without their hearts' desire—The Hai Berry. Oh, the shame of it forever would be theirs!)

Mugs kept placing his foot on the top of the path. Even though he knew it was so, he could hardly believe that it had really been gone (at least, the top and the bottom.)

Now there was an upheaval of good will and joy, not the least of all from Mugs. The path was

back—completely. The People were saved. The Hai Berry was where and with whom it belonged.

The Leader uttered a little prayer of thanksgiving and grace.

“Right makes Might,” he whispered.

