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opening extract from

Leven Thumps and the Gateway to Foo

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THE BEGINNING

It was at least forty degrees above warm. The day felt like a windowless kitchen where the oven had been left on high for an entire afternoon. Heat beat down from above and sizzled up from the dirt as the earth let off some much-needed steam. The sky had decided it had had quite enough, thank you, and had vacated the scene, leaving the air empty except for heat. No matter how wide a person opened his mouth that afternoon or how deep a breath was taken, there just wasn't enough oxygen in the air to breathe. The few remaining plants in people's gardens didn't droop, they passed out. And the flags that only days before had hung majestically on the top of local flagpoles no longer looked majestic, they looked like multicolored pieces of cloth that had climbed up and tragically hung themselves.

All this in and of itself was not too terribly unusual, but as the heavy sun started to melt away an odd, wild, uncoordinated



wind began to pick up. Not a northerly wind or an easterly breeze, it was a wind with no direction or balance. It was as if the four corners of earth and heaven all decided to simultaneously blow, creating what the local weather personalities in Tin Culvert, Oklahoma, called "beyond frightening." Sure, people could breathe, but now they were getting blown away.

Trees bent and writhed, whirling like pinwheels as the atmosphere pinched and pulled at them. Rooftops buckled and nature picked up huge handfuls of dirt and spastically flung them everywhere. Cats learned how to fly that evening, and any loose article weighing less than a car was taken up in the rapture of the moment. People locked themselves in their homes, radios on, waiting for someone to tell them everything was going to be okay, or for nature to do them in.

As dusk matured into night and just when those cowering in fear could stand no more, a darkness, the likes of which had never before been seen, began to ooze up from the ground and ink in the gray of evening. The hot windy sky quickly became a thick sticky trap. Animals that had foolishly taken shelter in trees or ditches began to suffocate as the heavy, plastic-like blackness folded over them. The wild wind swooped in from all directions to steal their last breaths and leave them dead where they once whined.

The blackness weighed down on everything. Porch lights burst under the weight of it. If the wind had been absent, a person could have clearly heard the explosion of almost every light and window in Tin Culvert as the fat, dark atmosphere let its full bulk rest upon anything glowing. Homes came alive with screams



as front windows buckled and blew inward. Cars and mobile homes creaked under the force of darkness upon their backs. People cowered under tables and beds trying to escape the advancing crush.

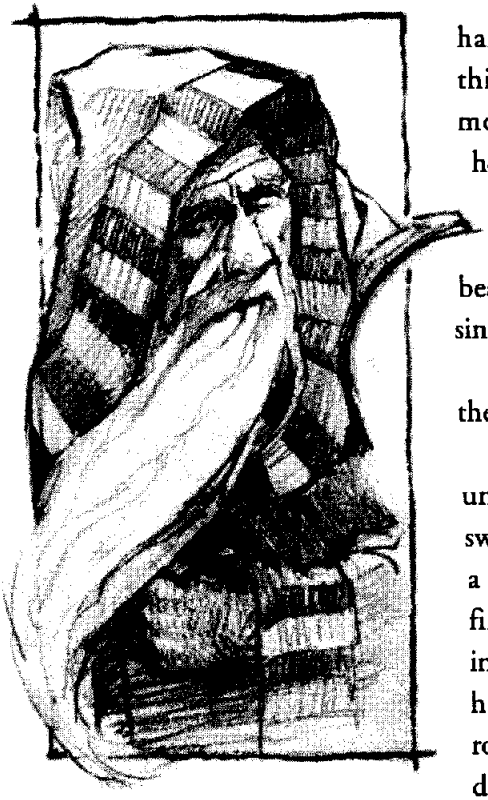
Just when it looked like the end of the world had officially begun, the lightning started. Jagged stripes of blinding light flashed continually against the black sky. Anyone foolish enough to be standing outside would have been able to watch as the lightning moved with calculating accuracy, deliberately touching anything above ground level and quickly setting it ablaze. It moved sideways and upward. The sky became a giant blackboard with heaven scratching out its apocalyptic messages with lightning bolts.

Tin Culvert was dying, and this was the first night of the end of its life. Fate had set its course and was making certain to carry it out.

Even amongst the complete destruction and panic, a person would have had to be dead not to hear and feel the thunder that struck at exactly 10:15 that fateful night. The boom was felt as far as fifty miles away, and the entire sky fractured from light, scribbling one final message—"It is over!"

Lightning bled down on everything, touching and igniting any structure Tin Culvert had ever dared raise. People finally figured out that hiding was no longer a sensible option. Folks set out into the open, desperate to get away from it all.

In the chaos nobody noticed Antsel, a thin, aged man running across the ground at a terrific speed. Electrical static buzzed around him as he flew across the earth. The odd little man had traveled



half the world to get to this spot and now, as the moment grew closer, his heart and soul surged. Fire raged up around him as he moved. His long beard curled and began to singe at the edges.

Lightning flashed in the tumultuous sky.

Antsel's stride became uneven, his face red with sweat and heat. He ran in a pattern, away from the fire and as if he were trying to throw somebody off his trail. The thick gray robe he wore flapped in all directions as the wind became aware of him and started to work him over.

Lightning flashed again.

Antsel stumbled and fell as he looked toward the sky. His knees plowed into the earth as he ground to a halting stop.

Lightning flashed yet again.

Kneeling, he reached with aged hands into his robe and pulled out Clover, a small cat-like creature—the tiny being wriggled and spat angrily.



"Be calm," Antsel ordered, wiping sweat from his own forehead.

Instantly the small furry being relaxed. Clover's tiny body was covered with gray hair. He had leaf-like ears that were thick and wide, and his knees and elbows were as bare as any palm. He had on a tiny cloak that was the color of his fur but shimmered slightly under the light of fires.

"This is it," Antsel whispered with severity. "The shadows will soon be here. You know what you must do. It'll be some time from now, but he will be here, and the girl as well. Be patient."

"Only if you tell me to be."

"Be patient," Antsel insisted.

"I won't leave you," Clover whimpered.

"You *will* leave me," Antsel commanded.

"I will leave you," he answered.

"Now run!" Antsel shouted, setting the furry creature down. "Run!"

Clover looked at Antsel. "You will be proud of me?"

"Of course. Now run."

Clover spat and smiled. He jumped, shivered violently, and ran off on two feet, bucking oddly as he leapt, and was lost almost instantly in the dark. Antsel gazed after him. He knew the risk he took in putting so much trust in such a mischievous creature, but he had no choice. He turned and ran the opposite direction.

Lightning flashed.

Antsel slowed his pace, feeling his age and marveling over the fact that his heart had not yet given out. He reached into his robe and withdrew an object more important than any soul within a



million miles could comprehend. Sweat poured from his neck and wrists, and he could feel his heart beginning to crumble. Antsel held the tiny seed up to the light of the surrounding fires and glanced at it one last time.

Lightning flashed again.

He placed the seed back in his robe and kneeled. He pressed his face to the ground and used his ability to see everything beneath the soil. Every insect, every particle. This was the perfect spot. He lifted his head and brushed the sweat from his eyes. He then began to dig. His old hands bled and trembled as he plunged them deeper into the dark, rich earth. Lightning struck continuously as fire after fire ignited. The atmosphere began to relax, drawing in more oxygen to feed the flames.

Antsel paid no attention.

He had something to finish. He pulled the seed out again and pressed it down into the earth, then worked madly to fill the hole with the soil he had scraped out.

Lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and the howling of the wind increased.

He looked over his shoulder and shuddered. They were here, he could feel it in the wind. Antsel glanced at the ground, knowing that the fate of a thousand generations rested beneath only a foot of soil.

"Grow, Geth," he whispered. "Grow." Antsel patted the ground and dusted his palms. His job was done, and he stood with purpose.

Lightning flashed again, while simultaneously a sickened soul



in another realm breathed a small dark army of shadows out over Tin Culvert. Sabine sat impatiently in Foo, breathing heavily and yet with control, letting his shadows twist down through the dark dreams of men and into reality. His castoffs were darker than the night, black. Like a perverted wind they swirled and billowed as they rushed across the fiery earth, laughing and screeching. Their white eyes and shrill voices gave their two-dimensional forms an eerie depth. Invisible to mankind, they swept the fiery landscape. They were not here to sightsee, however; they were here for a purpose.

Antsel knew the shadows had arrived. He couldn't let them find the spot. Running deeper into the night and far away from what he had planted, he wiped at his forehead with his heavy cloak and clutched his chest in agony. He would not last the night. He accepted this; after all, his mission was accomplished. The only thing he could do now was to run as far as possible away from the ground he had just touched. He pushed himself, darting to the right and turning a sharp left. His legs screamed in pain, and he could feel his heart pulsing up inside him like some sort of red-hot inflammation.

The moans of the shadows roared as they circled the burning town. Like a cyclone they twisted in tighter and mightier, their hollow eyes searching the firelight for the withered form of the old man they had been sent to find. The wind shifted and all together they lifted their heads and looked to the east. Nothing but flames and beyond that, darkness.



The winds shifted again.

Light from the fires reflected off a small hint of silver in the distance. The reflection vanished for a second only to spark up again even farther away. The shadows took notice. Something was running from them. Their restless forms turned toward the dark and flew.

Antsel ran. He could feel them coming toward him now and in a brief moment they were hovering over him, hissing and screeching. His old heart was making his stride short and almost pointless. Sabine's shadows swooped down and wrapped themselves around him, smothering his progress and slowing his gait even further. He pushed with his arms, waving the night away and struggling to go on.

It was no use: they had him surrounded and were pressing their hideous forms against him, moaning and gnashing their teeth. They circled him like a ring of plague. Antsel's purple eyes could faintly make out their inky outlines as they whispered wickedly.

He moved to the east but was stopped by the billowing of a shadow. He moved to the north and received a blow to the side.

Antsel was trapped.

"Where is it?" the shadows hissed. "Give us the seed."

His heart struggling to keep beating, Antsel wiped his eyes, put his palms to his knees, and tried to draw in breath. He straightened and lit an amber stick and lifted the firebrand to just below his eyes. The light from the stick glowed in a sphere around the gathering.



Antsel could see nothing but dripping darkness and thousands of shadows wildly circling him. They moaned, their white eyes even dimmer in the light of the amber stick. Nowhere in the sea of muted eyes could Antsel detect even a hint of mercy. He knew that somewhere in Foo, Sabine looked on with pleasure—his former friend no longer having any thought or feeling for anyone but himself.

Antsel's breathing was shallow and his heartbeat weak. The insistence of the surrounding shadows and the roaring of the fire in the distance seemed fitting to what he knew would be his end.

"Give us the seed," they hissed. "The seed."

"It is in Foo," Antsel gasped at them.

"You lie," they whispered back. "You lie."

"I—"

The shadows had no patience. Screaming, they leapt onto the old man. They clawed at him, searching for the object. Their hands ripped at his robe and body. Their mouths screamed and moaned as they tossed Antsel around like a rag doll. Antsel tried to fight back, but there were too many, and his strength and will were gone. The shadows thrust his face into the soil. Antsel could see everything. He watched the seed, though far from where he now lay, already begin to grow.

The shadows spun him once more and then withdrew with nothing.

Antsel lay on the ground moving only his lips. He murmured weakly, committing his soul to rest and waiting for fate to tell him it was over. He stared up and could see the false face of

Sabine in the thousands of shadows. His soul relaxed and his life slipped away.

The shadows began to moan. The seed had not been found. They knew too well that Sabine, the being who had cast them, would not be happy Antsel was dead. The shadows berated themselves. A few of them began to hiss, "Burn everything. Burn it!"

Antsel might have deposited the seed on earth. Sabine knew this, and even the remotest possibility of that couldn't be ignored. Most of the landscape was on fire, but a few pieces and parts were still void of flame.

"Burn it all," the shadows were now whispering fiercely. They all began to rise and laugh and dance, happy in their fury to carry out such a horrific thing. They swirled and scattered in a thousand directions to do Sabine's bidding. Some twisting together in a massive funnel cloud, they sucked up fire and dripped it down upon everything.

In the distance, far away from the heat and light, Clover stopped running so as to better cry. He stood to his full twelve inches and shivered. The fur over his body bristled in waves. His wet eyes viewed the flames as they devoured the entire landscape.

"Antsel," he whispered, his thin leathery mouth quivering. He wiped his blue eyes with the hem of his small robe, his leaf-like ears twitching to listen to the wind. He turned and continued running. Clover saw no reason to go back. Antsel was gone, and the journey had begun.