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3872 Words

The Beast of Knowledge

By Kathryn Gailey

Leo's mother waved a cigarette-baring hand out the dirty window of her pickup truck. "Bye, Hun," she called as she left the library parking lot in a cloud of exhaust.

Seven-year-old Leo Avalon was left standing on the sidewalk when the dust cleared. Heshifted his backpack as he turned and walked up the sidewalk to the library.

The library sat on a north-facing hill, and above the doorway in large metallic letters was printed "Alexandria Public Library." Leo walked up the path like one returning home.

He entered through the automatic doors and into the brightly lit room. Shelves upon shelves sat filled with books about all sorts of things all free for public viewing. He smiled.

At the front desk sat an unfamiliar Librarian wearing wire rimmed glasses and a disconcerting look. She had curly hair miraculously contained in a tight bun pinned to the back of her skull. "This is no place for children."

Leo gulped. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just tell me why you're here."

He pulled a stack of kid's books out of his backpack and held them up to her. "I'm here to return these."

The woman eyed him but nodded. "Very well." She took the books from him and looked over them. "They aren't horribly damaged." She flipped the first book over and scanned it back into the library's care. "There are some old library books for sale on the rack over there," she said pointing to a rack pushed against the wall. "Some of them are only a few cents."

Leo nodded and went over to the cart of books. He shuffled through until he found one that caught his eye. It was a deep blue book with intricacies engraved on the cover. On the spine of the book was the title *The Beast of Knowledge*. Leo took it back to the Librarian. She was still scanning in books, but when she saw the book something dark flickered in her eyes.

"No."

Leo frowned and looked down at the book. "Okay." He took it back to the cart.

"Wait," the Librarian spoke as if it pained her, "it's yours."

Leo turned back to her the book tight in his grip. "It is?"

"Yes, now bring it here before I change my mind."

Leo gave the book to her. "How much is it?" he asked, pulling out his coin purse.

"It's free."

"Free?" Leo asked. "How is that possible?"

"It's a very special book." The Librarian grumbled. "It chooses its owner."

"Books can do that?"

"Not most, but this one is very special." She scanned the book out for good. "Now go on home."

Leo looked longingly at the row of shelves but did as he was told. "Okay." He glanced back once more before leaving the library.

###

Leo reached a house that didn't look like the rest. The houses of his neighborhood had lush, green lawns and fresh coats of paint. But Leo's home wasn't anything like that. It was probably very nice at one time, but now it was covered in peeling, yellowed paint, and most of

its shutters had been lost to time. The lawn was covered in holes where his mother had been digging, and the grass was yellowed and crunched under his feet. His mom's truck sat parked in the middle of the front yard, not the driveway.

When he entered the house, he was met with a waft of cigarette smoke coming from the open kitchen door where his mother sat with her feet propped up pouring over a map while she half-watched reality TV on a crackling tin box of a TV.

At the sound of the front door shutting, she looked up from the map and leaned back in her dining room chair. "Leo, Hun, is that you?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Back from the library already?"

"Yes, Mama." Leo climbed the creaky stairs to his bedroom.

He sat on his faded bed and pulled the magnificent book out of his backpack. It appeared luxurious in comparison to Leo's drab bedroom, so he cherished it as such. He opened the book, but it seemed to have a mind of its own. When Leo tried to turn to the first page, he found himself staring at the center of the book where a blue, metallic skeleton key sat. He picked it up and watched as it glinted in the sunlight. Underneath the key was a poem. It read.

Down below the hearty home

Lies a creature with little room to roam

Here before you rests a key

And with it you're tasked to set it free

But beware the wrath of those in charge

For they won't understand the plight of this beast at large.

Leo sat looking between the poem and the key. What was he supposed to do with this Information?

"I could tell Mom," he said to himself, "but the poem says not to." He looked back to the book.

His mother's footsteps echoed downstairs. Suddenly, she yelled, "Leo, I'm going to the hardware store!" The front door slammed, and her truck grumbled to life in the front yard.

Leo sat to work taking the key around the house and trying to fit it into every lock he could find. But there were none that matched . . . until he started to look in the back of closets and cupboards. He found a key hole in the back of the kitchen cupboard. The key fit easily inside, and Leo opened it to find a tube going down deep into the earth with a ladder big enough for him.

He climbed down the ladder taking his backpack and flashlight along with him. When he ran out of ladder, he dropped into a room with no light. He shined his flashlight around the room but found nothing but intricately patterned blue metal walls and another tiny door. The key fit for a second time, and with a low groan, the door opened causing the dust to swirl. He crawled through.

This room was different than the other. There was a small light coming from a pipe on the ceiling that he guessed lead to the surface. Though the room was fairly dim, he could tell the room was massive. The back section was shrouded in darkness, and Leo couldn't see a thing. A low rumble rippled through the room, and a pair of gleaming eyes blinked back at him.

Leo watched in a hushed nervousness. He dropped his flashlight, and the sound echoed through the room. The eye's owner must have been the size of a garbage truck, and as the creature slinked forward, the swishing of its tail caused a great wind. Leo's baseball cap blew off.

"H-hello?"

The creature paused, regarding him for a moment before stepping forward. With its outline now visible, it was clearly a gigantic house cat.

"Hi, Kitty."

The cat scoffed.

Leo was taken back. Could cats scoff?

"I am not a kitty, as you called me." The voice that emerged from its throat was female

and ancient.

"What should I call you?" Leo asked.

The cat sat down on its haunches, its height increased by good posture. "If you must call me anything, then refer to me as Agatha, The Knowledgeable."

"Is all of that your name?" Leo asked.

"What? No, that's my title. My name is Agatha."

"Why?"

"Oh my goodness, you are full of questions aren't you?" Agatha bent down to Leo's level, and a low growl ripped through her throat. "But, I've got one for you, runt. Why are you in my sanctum?"

Leo pulled the book out of his backpack. "I got this at the library."

Agatha's eyes lit up at the sight of the book, but she quickly lost interest, "Oh, I've read that one. Reading your own story can be dreadfully boring."

"Your own story?"

"Yes obviously. Do you have anything new?"

"New?"

"For me to read."

Leo's face lit up. "Cats can read?"

"No, of course not. Most can't. But I can, and I need to. You're the new Bringer. So your job is to bring me things to read and learn- new things not old. Can you do that?" Her tone of voice was heavily patronizing.

Leo folded his arms. "You don't have to be so mean. I'm only seven, how am I supposed to know this stuff?"

"Yes, yes but you're fated to be the Bringer. Live up to the challenge and help sustain me. Bring me books."

Leo pulled a copy of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* out of his backpack. "Well, I always

carry this book."

The cat practically pounced on the book. She took hold of it with surprising ease for a creature with no thumbs. She looked over the pages flipping them with a single claw, carefully, as to not rip the pages. She finished the book in five minutes and returned it to Leo's care.

"I have questions," she said when she finished. "What is a crayon? Does such a device hold magical properties in real life, or is this just a work of fiction?"

"Depends on who you ask. I think they're just drawing tools. But my classmate Marcus really seems to believe that if you're powerful enough like Harold, you can do what he does in the book."

Agatha nodded. "Well that was a fine first taste, but I'm going to need something a bit more filling."

Leo nodded. "I'll go back to the library."

###

After another trek in the heat of the Connecticut sun, Leo reached his destination. He entered the library with a sense of purpose heading straight for his usual shelf.

The Librarian stopped him. "Did you meet her?"

"Agatha?" Leo asked.

The Librarian nodded, looking down her nose at him. "What books have you fed her?"

"Just one, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*."

The Librarian gasped, causing the few library goers to look from their respective books.

She whispered, "No, no, that won't do. I knew I couldn't leave this to a child. She needs quality reading, not child play things." She led Leo by the arm to the adult section, all while jabbering away. "Give her this one. Oh, I always wondered if she'd like this one!" The Librarian loaded Leo with a mountain of gigantic leather-bound books.

Leo said nothing, only hanging his head in shame. *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, really? He had to do better. The scary woman was right.

The Librarian turned eying the stack of books in Leo's shaking arms. "That should be enough for a strong, sturdy meal. Come on now I'll scan you out."

Leo followed her to the desk.

"Will you be able to carry these home?"

"I think so."

With that, she shooed him out of the library and onto the sidewalk.

Leo walked down the hot sidewalk. The books were heavy in his arms, and he struggled to keep them in his grip. Could he make it all the way home?

A car approached from behind. Leo expected it to pass him, but it didn't. Instead, it followed at a slow pace. Leo turned to see a small white car with a buff, buzz-cut-haired man at its wheel. The man's concentration seemed to be solely focused on Leo, and Leo couldn't figure out why.

The car pulled up beside Leo, and the driver rolled down the window. "Hey, Kid," the large man said. "What are you, some kind of child genius?"

"No." Leo's arms were shaking. He had a bad feeling about this guy.

"Then why are you carrying a copy of *The Metamorphosis*?"

Oh no. "Well it's because, I uh..." Leo scrambled for words.

"Is it because of The Beast of Knowledge?"

Leo's eyes widened. He stopped and turned to the car was pulled up alongside him. Inside the car the man grinned at him, and his bushy eyebrows sunk down as his face tore into a smile.

Leo ran. He ran off the sidewalk, and through the field, a shortcut home. With the books clutched in his sweaty hands. He could hear the man yelling behind him.

"Hey kid, come back!" The car door slammed and footsteps echoed behind him. Leo ran as fast as he could. He crossed the street which was luckily vacant and into the schoolyard.

The man persisted.

The books in his arms were getting heavy, and he only had a few more minutes before his arms gave out and the books would be scattered on the ground. He ran around an isolated corner of the school to see the playground. Perfect. With the gigantic man on his heels, Leo ducked under the jungle gym. He waded through the maze of poles and tunnels.

The strange man got stuck. Try as he might the stranger couldn't pull free.

Leo escaped down a wooded trail that ended in the back of his neighborhood. The hiking trail was one of Leo's favorite paths to walk. With all of the plants and animals, the forest around him seemed to breathe with life. It had always brought peace to his mind, and now it had saved him.

When Leo got home, his mom was still gone, which was just as well. It was better this way. He didn't really want to sneak around behind her back.

He climbed down the ladder with the books weighing heavily in his backpack. He thought surely they would cause him to fall to his demise, but he didn't.

Leo opened the door to find Agatha pacing.

"Do you have more?" she asked frantically. It seemed the nibble of knowledge had only encouraged her hunger, not quenched it.

"The Librarian suggested these." He pulled the books out and set the stack before her.

Agatha looked over the books. She grimaced. "I've read that one. This one was a bore. Oh, and that one there is just recycled material." She turned to Leo. "This Librarian, she's from the society, yes?"

"Society?" Leo asked.

"The Alexandrian Society. It's the group that I'm allegedly in the care of. They date back all the way to The Library of Alexandria."

Leo shrugged. "Maybe, she seemed to know what your books meant."

"Then there is no excuse." Agatha started to pace again. "No excuse whatsoever. They should've known what year I stopped getting information."

Leo shifted from foot to foot awkwardly. "What do we do?"

Agatha sighed and stopped her pacing. "What books do you like?"

Leo was shocked. No one cared what he thought. He adjusted his baseball cap. "Well, Dr. Seuss books are classic, and I love *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. The ending on that one is so surprising."

"Bring me those."

"Are you sure?" He scrambled for words. "Those aren't smart person books. They don't hold great wisdom or anything. I mean-"

Agatha's voice bellowed. "ALL books hold great wisdom." She lowered her head to his level. "No matter the size or reading level, all books offer a unique perspective, and that in itself is a special kind of magic. Do you understand?" Her voice quieted to a low whisper seeing as her face was much closer to his.

Leo nodded looking into the ancient cat's deep yellow eyes. They blinked back at him. "I think I get it."

Agatha pushed the books back to him. "Take these back in the morning."

Leo put the heavy books back into this backpack and turned to leave, but he stopped. "Agatha?"

"Yes child?"

"I was chased today."

"By whom?"

"A big man. He knew about you."

Agatha's face became grim. "A Knowledge Seeker."

"Knowledge Seeker?"

"Yes, it's a cult-like group that hoards information away from the rest of the world."

Agatha sat down before him.

Leo felt compelled to sit down as well, so he did. "Why would they do that?"

Agatha sighed. "Because they have a warped view on the world. They think that knowledge equals power, like the Alexandrian Society. But, the key difference between the two is that the Alexandrian Society works secretly in libraries all over the world trying to share knowledge - while the Knowledge Seekers hoard and keep it locked away from the world."

Leo nodded. "So, if one of these bad guys is after me, then what do I do? How will I get back to the library?"

"You have parents, don't you?"

"Sort of..."

###

Leo set the heavy books on the countertop.

The Librarian looked up. "Did she like them?"

"Nope." He walked away toward the kid's section. He went to his favorite row and pulled his own version of the classics off the shelf.

The Librarian followed. "What do you mean she didn't like them? How is that possible?"

Leo shrugged in response. He looked over the books he'd collected. "I'd like to check these out."

The Librarian looked over the books. "That's not proper literature. How could you feed her that garbage?"

Leo looked the scary Librarian in the eyes. "Agatha says that all books hold great Wisdom."

The Librarian seethed. "Fine." She checked the books out in a haughty manor.

Leo put the books in his backpack. He beamed up at her. "Thank you!"

Now for the trek home - he knew that his mother would forget to pick him up. She always did. Leo would have to brave it alone.

Sure enough, the minute he stepped outside he was met by the enemy. The hulking man stood several Leo's tall, and Leo was submerged in the man's shadow. "Just take me to the beast kid. Make it easy on yourself, okay?"

He frowned. "You know I can't do that."

"And why not? I could give you something much better in return. How about this?" He pulled a candy bar from his pocket.

"I'm not supposed to take candy from strangers."

The man shrugged. "Smart kid." He opened the wrapper and took a bite out of the candy. "But are you smart enough to make the right choice?"

"I already have." Leo looked for an escape route, but there was none to be found.

"No, not really. There are others like me, and they won't be as nice as I am."

"You're not so nice."

The man smiled. "Exactly my point kid." He held out his hand. "So make a deal with me, before someone gets hurt."

"Okay."

The man seemed surprised. "Really? I mean, you're making the right choice." He bent his hand down to Leo's level for him to shake it. "The name's Neal by the way."

Leo moved like he was going to shake his hand, but instead he ran through Neal's legs and flew down the sidewalk. His feet seemed to almost blur underneath him. He had never run this fast before. Not ever.

Neal thundered after him. It was apparent that he was not going to give up easily. Leo looked for a place to dodge him. He ran through the field and across the street just before the light down the road changed.

The light turned green and Nathen got stuck on the other side of the road as a parade of cars passed by on the way to a baseball game at the school sports fields. Leo was already around the corner of the school when Neal crossed the street. But none of the mattered, Neal was fast.

Within minutes, Neal was on Leo's tail yet again, and he remained so even when Leo tried to lose him in the jungle gym. "I learn from my losses, boy," Neal called as he moved through the maze of bars and plastic with ease.

He was still on Leo's heels when he entered the forest and remained so right up to Leo's house.

Leo ran into the house through the front door. He locked it behind him but that didn't do much. Neal busted through it within seconds.

"There's nowhere to run kid. I warned you!" Neal yelled.

Leo tore into the kitchen and with Neal on his tail. If he could just make it to the backyard, then surely he could find a small nook or cranny to hide in.

But Neal was just too fast. His hand closed around the handle of Leo's primary colored backpack right as he made it out the back door and onto the splintered deck.

"You're minced meat, kid," he growled.

Leo could just cry.

It was at that moment Leo found his saving grace. From around the back door an object swung out above his head and hit Neal square in the face. He was knocked back into the counter where his head hit with a sickening thwack. Neal was out cold, and in his wake stood Leo's frizzy haired mother.

"Mom?" Leo asked.

She held the shovel at her side and there was dirt smeared on her face. "No one touches my son."

Leo ran to her. He couldn't help it. He hugged her tightly, something he had not done in Ages.

She hugged him back but not with the same fierceness. "So, you're the one, the Bringer."

Leo pulled back, uncertain. "Yes, how did you know that?"

She stepped aside to show him the yard, a sight he'd seen many times before. But he now understood it in a new light. The yard was covered in holes. There wasn't any grass anymore because any spot that wasn't currently a hole had been one at some point in time. "You were looking for her, weren't you?"

His mother took a deep breath and nodded exhaling. "I have been for years."

Leo took a step back. "Are you one of them, a Knowledge Seeker?"

She set the shovel aside. "I once was, but not anymore."

"How did you become a bad guy? Why did you stop? Are you a bad guy?" Leo was frantic. His mother had always been weird sure but mundane nonetheless.

"None of that matters anymore." She walked past him into the kitchen. She sat down at the kitchen table, and offered a chair to Leo.

"What do you mean? Of course, it matters." Leo followed her stepping over a passed-out Neal as he did so. He sat down across from her.

"No, what matters is that you're the Bringer, but if you must know a long time ago I was a Knowledge Seeker. But you see, I messed up a big mission and they kicked me out. I knew of the Beast of Knowledge ledged, so I spent years searching trying to get back into their ranks." She reached for her lighter, and then a cigarette and lit it with the lighter. "But you're the Bringer."

"So?" Leo asked.

"That changes things." She took a drag from the cigarette and sent the smoke down into Neal's drooling face. "At least for me it does. I've got your back."

This was a side that Leo had never seen from his mother. "Okay, so what do we do?"

She pointed to Neal who was still unconscious, slack jawed and all. "I'll take care of him, but you've got somewhere to be." She handed him the primary colored backpack.

Leo took the bag and grinned. "You're right, I've got to get these books to her."