

# They Play in the Palace of My Dreaming

by Gerard Houarner

*Never leave your place unguarded, the totem of the unborn fetus said.*

*Carlos woke, startled, from the dream. He turned on the bedside lamp, stared into the murky fluid of the jars containing the fetuses of two girls taken from mothers killed in traffic accidents. What are you saying? he asked, stroking each jar's cool glass of each jar. He searched for the glimmer of a response in their tightly-shut eyes, a twitch of curled fingers indicating a direction to take, a pulse in their visible hearts stuttering a secret in code. But those were tricks for the dreaming world. In the waking world, they remained dead flesh.*

*My body, Carlos decided. I must guard my body.*

*He opened his dream journal and hastily scribbled his thoughts.*

*The totem warns me. Someone is coming for my body. Must be careful. Who? Clarisse, angry bitch. Who else. Is she going to break into the apartment while I'm in trance? Does she suspect what I'm doing? Is she going to send someone after me?*

*Carlos put the book down, hands shaking, no longer able to write. He turned off the lamp and closed his eyes, but could not sleep. His mind raced past the dreams he had to dream, the risky flights to be taken and the nightmare depths to be scraped, beyond all the work he had yet to do, to the promised land of his own paradise he was so close to completing. He wandered the halls of his future palace, frustrated by imperfections, but finding comfort in the certainty that it what he imagined and what he was would become one.*

*Soon, he crooned, comforting himself, soon.*

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"I have no intention of asking for visitation rights," Carlos told Clarisse, who sat across from him at the restaurant table, mouth hanging open. "I don't want or need any contact with them, and the less I have to do with the whole lot of you, the better."

"Now that's not necessarily what you want—" his lawyer began, but Carlos cut him off with an abrupt hand gesture.

"You wanted an informal setting?" he told both his and Clarisse's lawyer, sitting across from each other. Their fingers twitched, as if eager to jot down notes, to take down names of waiters and nearby-diners as witnesses to an accident. "You got it. Lay it all out on the table. I don't know how much simpler I can make it."

A busboy appeared to remove their salad plates. The lawyers downed their drinks. Carlos finished his tequila and waved for another. Through the background murmur, distant shouts from the kitchen and the clink of cutlery sounded, like a crew working on a ship skirting a fog-bound coast. A waiter served a plate of steaming lasagna at a nearby table and hurried off.

After taking a deep breath, further expanding her already enormous belly, Clarisse responded. "It doesn't matter what you want or need. It's what the twins want and need that's important. You're the father. They need their father."

"You mean, they need his money," he said, laying on the ice in his voice.


"At the very least," she replied, matching his tone. "But they also need the man who wanted them in the first place, the man who couldn't stop talking about his twin girls, his angels, his saviors, how they were going to change his life, make his dreams come true—"

"Please, Clarisse, it's too early for a sweet dessert," he said with sarcasm.

"You made me have them, you son of a bitch," she said, leaning forward, hand on a water glass. Her lawyer raised his hand, ready to grab her wrist. "You put your voodoo shit in our food, you made this thing happen, and now you walk away? You think you can sweep into my life, change it all around to suit your particular fantasy, and then just walk away? I don't even







care why you're doing it, Carlos. I'm just telling you it's not going to happen."

"I'm sure we can arrive at a suitable figure for child support and alimony," his lawyer said, giving Carlos a hard glance to silence him.

"Yes, I'm willing to write the checks," Carlos said, "isn't that all that really matters?"

"And what happens if you disappear on one of those jungle drug-hunting expeditions of yours?" she said. "What happens if you have an aneurysm during your favorite pastime, a mind trip up your own ass?" She picked up the glass, giving her lawyer a slight smile, took a sip and set it down.

"I'll agree to automatic child care payments deducted from my pharmaceutical dividend account, and I'll even lock myself into gaining prior approval from your lawyer for any stock sales affecting that fund. As for alimony, well, you'll just have to trust me on that. But I am willing to pay for the life insurance your lawyer proposed I take, payable to you." He accepted the tequila a waiter brought to the table and downed it in one gulp.

"So you really do want to buy me off, shut me up, send me off," Clarisse said, sitting back. "And what are those girls going to do for a father? Am I supposed to wave your books and videos in front of them? See, this is your father, great white hunter of universal truths, shaman to the corporations, provider of herbs and roots that'll cure cancer and heart attacks and will let you live forever. Yes, he promised us safaris and adventure, he said he'd show us miracles in the desert and paradise in the jungles, but I guess he wanted to keep it all to himself and he left us. Sorry."

"Why don't you spread your legs for the bartender," Carlos said. "I think he has the hots for you, and he looks like somebody who loves kids."

Clarisse screamed, picked up a bread-basket and tossed it Carlos. Rolls and sticks went flying past his head. The lawyers leaned to their respective clients, casting protective arms around their charges. Waiters and busboys rushed to their table. Diners turned, some stood. One young man advanced, face set like stone, until the staff deflected him to the bar. The Maitre'D headed for their table.

"You bastard," Clarisse shouted as her lawyer shushed her. "I believed you. I believed in your dreams. I loved you. I wanted our children. I still do. Nothing's wrong with them, the tests are all fine. I haven't changed. Why did you?"

For a moment, as Clarisse held the line against tears and stared at him with the feral defiance and power that had drawn him to her in the first place, he regretted casting her aside. In other circumstances, she would have made a perfect partner in his life. With her managing his finances and pharmaceutical contracts, he might have doubled his already comfortable wealth. But she had given him what he needed. Anything more was excess. And there was no surer way to spoil paradise than with excess, as so many stories from Adam and Eve to Coyote tales proved.

Carlos shrugged off his lawyer's embrace and stood. "I haven't, either," he said, then nodded to his lawyer, brushed past the Maitre'D and left.

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"Am I a bad man?" Carlos asked Grandfather as the old man took out his drum from the carrying bag.

"You ain't a good one" Grandfather answered. He pulled down a cushion from the couch, threw it in a corner of Carlos' living room, and sat down, back sinking into the angle the walls joining. "What've you done now?"

Carlos took off his shirt, dipped his finger in the jar of home-made blue body paint. Pushing his hand under his trouser waist, he drew his meditation line from crotch to skull, the curves and curls describing his particular journey's path. His skin prickled. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Already, he was slipping into his trance. He smiled, shook his head, sat down in the middle of the living room. Sacrifices were never good or bad, only necessary. He was only being true to his own nature, and there was nothing more important than being true.

"Nothing, old man. Start drumming."

"I believe that." He began tapping the skin, his rhythm reaching into Carlos' waiting heart. "But if you trust that dream, and you're worried about your wife getting to you, why are you pissing her off?"

"I got locks, a gun. I even hired a private dick after that dream to keep an eye on her, in case she hires someone to get to me. She's covered. She doesn't matter. She never did, except as a womb to make what I need."

Grandfather's drumming picked up. Another beat insinuated itself into his initial offering, subtle, like a second drummer joining the song just a thousandth of a second off the established cadence. Carlos felt himself sinking, losing contact with the bare confines of his apartment.

"I remember that drumming," Grandfather said. "Broke a stick and two drums on that one."

Carlos suspended himself, fighting against the fall into deeper states of consciousness, to fix an eye on Grandfather. "You got the medicine you wanted."

"Did some good, too," Grandfather said. "Hell of a thing, a white man carrying a medicine bag from one Indian to give to another."

"You two were just on the wrong continents. Takes a white man to travel in the white man's world separating you two. Takes a man like me to see the big picture, to even know what people like you need from each other."



"Takes an Indian to travel in an Indian's world, like the way you've been doing. And you ain't no Indian." The drum beat remained steady, hovering between waking and dreaming.

"The worlds I travel in aren't all Indian, Grandfather. They're from all over - Australian, Africa, South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Himalayas, and more. Some of these worlds haven't even been traveled through for centuries. Millennia."

"Yeah, you learned a lot from books."

"And more from people like you. Wise men who didn't like sharing all they had, who held things back. But I found out what I needed. Watched, even when I wasn't near enough to see with my eyes. You know how far I can fly, Grandfather? Farther than your eagle self has ever been. Deeper into myself than any fish can swim in the ocean. And I can see into souls, Grandfather. Into the spirits of the sheep around me, into the cramped little worldly creature that is my wife, into the old, regretful sack of shit that pretends to be an Indian shaman, a guide and leader for his people, only his people hardly exist anymore, and what's left are running a casino upstate." Carlos felt a rush of adrenaline accelerate his heart beat, and he focused on calming himself, staying within the boundaries of his meditative purpose. He remained on guard, deciding whether Grandfather was goading him for a purpose, or simply out of his nature.

"You sure talk a lot, even for a white man," Grandfather said, never changing rhythm, keeping the heart-line of sound strong and steady, offering it without threat or rancor.

"You've got something to tell me, Grandfather?" Carlos visualized where he had hidden the gun, and tried to anticipate the kind of attack an old man might launch against him. Poison dart, perhaps.

"No, not really. You got what you promised?"

"After we're through, you'll get your sacred stones and more of those South American seeds."

"I appreciate that. Glad to see you kept your promises. Helps keep the culture alive. But this'll be the last drumming I do for you."

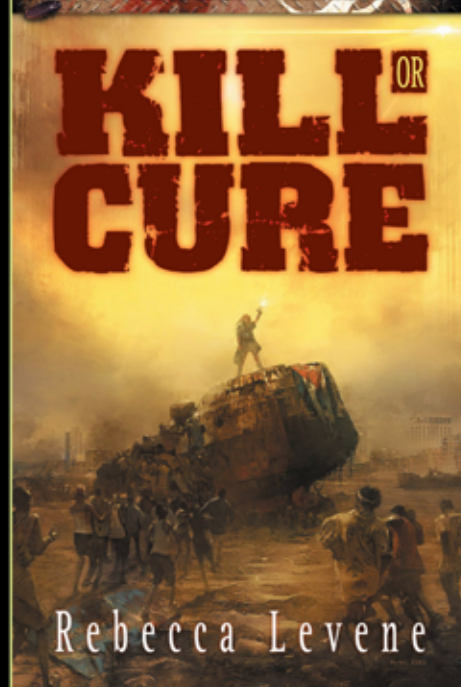
Carlos dragged himself out of the trance, letting Grandfather's thread slip through him, though he remained still. With the old man still drumming, he was certain he could reach his gun before Grandfather could pull any weapons against him. Out of his meditative trance, he was less vulnerable to any of the old man's magic. "Why?"

"Because you're not living in this world. You live in a big, fancy building with doormen and security, but you got nothing in your place. Nothing of yourself. You live in a desert. You find a woman perfect for yourself, plant your seed in her and then throw her away. You're using things that don't belong to you, going places you're not welcome, taking things that don't belong to you. For what? I see blood coming from you. I don't like your totem. I don't like you."



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"But you like what I'm able to get you," Carlos said, waiting for Grandfather to crack.

"Not after today. I won't have a part of anything you do after today."

Carlos relaxed. Grandfather was not an assassin. He was just a tired old man from a vanishing tribe, gatekeeper to dead traditions. He just wanted a final word.

"I'm close," Carlos said, catching Grandfather's rhythm once again, falling slowly into the places he needed to go. "I'll be closer after we're through. My wife never really meant anything to me. Neither did you."

Grandfather grunted, then winced as the sound added an extra, unintended beat to his drumming. "You got gifts, you worked them hard, you've gone far. You see things without the peyote, you hear the powers of the world without fasting or sitting in the sweat lodge. But you don't see what you've given up, where you're heading, what's coming for you. You're crazy with this power. Drunk. "

"That's pretty funny coming from an Indian. Drum, old man. Start the chant. Take me to the place where the world's roots grow. I have foundations to sink." Carlos' head lolled back as Grandfather added another layer, and then another, with drum and then with chanting words, to the delicate pattern he was weaving. The bland sensations and concerns of the material world began to fade. Thought and action merged. Carlos lost touch with the floor. He was flying.

"Don't matter how far down you go to sink your foundation," Grandfather said, interrupting the chant, as if unable to surrender the last word to Carlos, "if the ground they're in ain't solid. You're not a part of any world, white man. Ain't no world going to take you in if you can't even belong to the one you're in."

Carlos flew through Grandfather's words like a bird through clouds.

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He flew and he fell, going higher and sinking deeper. The old man's drumming guided him, and he learned the path he needed to take so he would no longer need Grandfather to show him the way. The universe expanded around him as senses that existed only in his dream state awakened, connecting him to the layers of reality inside and outside of him. He was alive once more, as he only knew to be in this heightened state of awareness.

His totem, the unborn fetus, appeared by his side to note the way.

"Tell me, is what I'm doing wrong?" Carlos asked.

The fetus opened its mouth and vomited blood. The trail of its discharge arced across the sky like an umbilical cord. Carlos looked, letting his vision bring to the here and now the time of his birth, the place of his womb. He watched himself emerge bloody and then blue from his mother, the doctor and nurses huddling around him. He heard his first cry, watched his tiny legs kick and arms wave.

“Alive,” he said. “Yes, that’s what I’ll be at last. Alive.”

The dead fetus turned, breaking the stream of blood. The vision faded. Carlos continued on his journey.

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Early on, he had taken one of his teachers to the Palace. So soon after the discovery that he could do such a thing through his facility for attaining deep trance states and voyaging out of his body, the Palace was still only a crude construction, drawn from comic book and fantasy movie images, a Baroque set for a costume drama rather than a living extension of himself. But it was a start, and he was proud of what he had accomplished: constructing an out-of-body extension of his self, a separate and distinct aspect of his self, like his totem. But unlike the totem, which arose spontaneously in his first initiatory rites into the world’s mysteries, the Palace was designed by him, and he left parts of his self there to sustain it, give it life. Already, he was building coruscating walls from memories, glowing ceilings from dreams. Fountains gushed with his desires, and every song he ever loved echoed in its endless halls.

The teacher, an ancient Laotian hill tribesman, cried out in revulsion at the sight.

“Where do you take me?” he asked, pulling away from Carlos as they traveled in spirit form. “That is the place you must keep to yourself. Never show me, anyone else, that place again. And stay away from it yourself. Are you mad? Is that all I taught you? To journey into mind, but not into the world? To forget the universe around you and dwell only in yourself? Give up this madness. It will kill you.”

Wounded by his teacher’s words, Carlos gave up his studies with the Laotian shaman, instead. But he took one piece of advice from the encounter: he never shared the secret harbor of his soul with anyone else again.

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He passed the secret, sacred place again, the Palace of his Dreaming, as he followed Grandfather’s voice and drumming into the deepest root of his self. His paradise moved now, like water flowing restlessly, ceaselessly, through structures rising, falling, curving, and shifting through a geometric maze of shapes in a kaleidoscopic dance. The scents of his mother’s perfume rose from its towers, and the smell of baked cookies promised him hearty satisfaction in the Palace’s deeper reaches. His nipples rose along with his sex at the thought of his bedrooms, playrooms where thighs parted like grass to reveal warm, welcoming burrows in which he could nestle, and thrust, and lose himself in explosive exultation. His haven pulsed with its own life, with his spirit. It was almost ready. His dead fetus totem veered towards the Palace, eager to fly through archways and corridors, to taste and feel and hear the pleasures he had hoarded and scavenged and saved for himself. It wanted to play, to live, as if it had been truly born and set on path free from his service.

“Deeper,” he told the totem. “The Palace must be bound deeper in my soul, or else it will



fade away when my body dies.” And then where would I live, he thought, not daring to ask the totem such a question.

Under the Palace he dove, following the tree-like roots springing in wild profusion from his perfect place’s belly, which twined with Grandfather’s pattern, a tribal road map through inner realities, to reveal new depths he had never before been able to reach. Neither he nor his Palace had been ready. He forged into the primal darkness beyond his birth, into the formative soup of his gestation, to the moment of his conception. In this void, where distant echoes of his mother’s life came to him, the flavors of her nourishment, the smell of the air she breathed, the music she listened to, Carlos found the spark that was his father’s seed and his mother’s egg: a cellular memory, passed on with growth, with the formation of organs, bone, muscle, and spirit; a fragment of the universe’s afterbirth; a shadow waiting for light in the darkness.

“Here is where I began,” Carlos said, and made the moment real and true inside him, an image that was more than illusion if not quite material reality. And in that metaphysical realm of shaping his own universe, Carlos sank a root from his Palace. “Here is where I will live forever.”

Here is where you’ve been running away from, his totem said. Here is the perfection from which the pain of your birth came.

“This is where I was whole,” Carlos said, agreeing with what he believed his totem said. “From this I will heal.”

But the totem dead fetus turned black and decayed, opened its eyes to reveal empty sockets, peeled back skin to release loose muscle and droplets of thick, greenish-white liquid. A breath echoed through the void in which Carlos floated. An exhalation. Like his mother’s, dying of cancer in the middle of the night, letting loose the air in her lungs through dry lips, her mouth and eyes, the doors to her empty husk, remaining wide open.

Carlos snatched at the line of Grandfather’s drumming and scurried back up to more familiar territories of his spirit.

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“Fuck,” Carlos cried out, jumping to wakefulness. He was up on one knee before he oriented himself to the hotel-Spartan glamour of his own apartment. Grandfather had already packed his drum and was standing at door, talking on Carlos’ phone.

“It’s your wife,” the old man said. “She’s in labor. She wants to know if you can take her to the hospital.” Putting a hand over the microphone, he said, “Your detective called a few minutes ago and left a message saying the same thing.”

“Damn.” Carlos smiled, feeling relieved as he shed elaborate plans for a discrete hospital visit. Human nature sometimes did simplify things. She still wanted him. “Tell her I’ll be right there.”

Grandfather stared at Carlos. Frowned. "Tell her your own damned self," he said, tossed the phone to him and left.

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"I knew you'd come around," Clarisse said, sitting in the passenger seat of Carlos' Lexus. Her hospital bag was in the back seat, and her Sade CD had filled the awkward silence between them since he picked her up at their old house. Hands resting on her belly as she leaned back on the head rest, seat pulled all the way back to accommodate her size, she appeared at ease, in control of herself, her life, her world. And his place in it.

"Of course." He offered her nothing more than his profile. He wondered if he should have checked her bag and jacket for a gun, in case his totem's warning was still relevant.

"These are your kids," she said, patting her belly and beaming. "Your blood."

"I know." She was feeling more comfortable with him. More confident. The time was coming for him to make his move.

"And I knew when the time came, whatever her name was or whatever deal you got involved with was going to come in second. I know how much these kids meant to you. You could never abandon them. Or me."

"They'll be with me forever."

She glanced at him, sucked in her breath, turned a shade more pale. "Damn these contractions." After a few breaths, she laughed and pointed at his hand hanging loose from the wrist as he leaned his elbow out car door's open window. "I'm the one who's going giving birth to twins, but you're the one who's nervous."

He noticed he was shaking and balled his hand into a fist. Time, he told himself.

Clarisse's smile faded and she turned, opened her mouth, then winced. She breathed deeply to deal with pain, then said, "Right. I forgot. You get the shakes when you spend too much time out of your body. Or in your head. Or wherever you go when you're not in this world. Well, that'll stop once the twins get here, you better believe it."

With his free, shaking, hand, Carlos took the pin-sized thigh bone of a fetal child, sharpened at one end, out of his jacket pocket. He put his hand against his chest, pointing the stick at her. In his mind, the road to the hospital continued to reel in under the car; superimposed on this moving picture of the material world was his vision of her womb, ripe with spirits eager to be born. For a moment, he wondered if he should pull over. But the possibility of Clarisse getting out and making a scene on the highway kept him juggling two realities at the same time. He called up his own meditative gumbo of Australian, African and Asian soul-stealing trance states and settled into a floating state of consciousness between his two perceptions of reality.

As good as he knew he was, Carlos decided he could never try such a tactic with a mature,

or even a freshly born, spirit. The fact that the souls of his twin daughters were innocent, without the experience of any assault or trauma to place them on guard, was the only way he could hope to complete the ritual while safely negotiating the material world.

He smiled to himself, admiring his audacity. It was what had made him conceive the notion of his Palace of Dreaming to begin with: sanctum in life, destination in death.

“What are you doing?” Clarisse asked, between moans. “What is that thing in your hand?”

“I was going to call it a blessing stick, in case someone saw me doing this in the hospital,” Carlos said, breaking into a grin as he juggled his reply with the road, thickening with traffic as they approached town and the hospital, as well as his self-projection into her womb. The souls of his children responded to his touch, instinctively reacted to him as a guardian spirit and leapt into the circle of his psychic embrace.

Slowly, carefully, he led them away from their bodies. Having so little experience in them, they were easily lured away by his strong, confident presence.

“Well, I hate to tell you, but I’m not feeling particularly blessed right now.”

“You’re not being blessed.”

In the moment of Clarisse’s stunned silence, Carlos broke the twins away from their bodies, led them out of their mother’s womb and into the ether all around them. He let out his breath, relaxed back into his seat and dropped the focusing bone.

“What?” Clarisse asked, giving him a weak slap on the arm. “What kind of game are you playing? Are you trying to scare me? Distract me from the pain?”

“I’m just getting what I wanted,” he mumbled, the Palace of his Dreaming filling his vision. He struggled to maintain contact with the material world, to keep his foot on the brake, watch his speed, check the other cars. The Palace loomed, full with his every possible self, pleasures delayed and not consciously imagined, journeys yet to be taken. It tugged at him, enticed him with its endless possibilities for his fulfillment.

Carlos fought to resist the allure of his own creation and led the souls of his twin daughters down along paths already taken, to the foundations of his Palace, where living souls were needed to sustain its reality. Here, he told the twins, as he bound them to his creation with tricks and spells and all the spirit-discipline he had gained in his years of experience and study. Here you will stay. With me. Forever.

He hesitated when he realized that, since they had never been born, the moment of their birth could not be tied to his, as he had originally intended. Even better, he thought, that they were never born. Their souls are pure. They know nothing of any life, other than the womb’s dreaming. They are ignorant of birth’s pain, of the agony of separation.

Let my dreaming be yours, he told them. Stay with me forever, and you will never suffer. He tied them to him through the power of his conception and theirs, through the



bond they shared in blood, in their mutual knowing of the all-encompassing, all-comforting world of the womb. They reached out for the Palace, and he let them, wanting the raw energy of their life to infuse his domain with fresh power.

“YOU’RE GOING TO KILL US,” Clarisse screamed.

Carlos snapped back to the car, realized the highway had gone from express to local and he had just passed through an intersection against a red light. Blaring horns faded as the car sped on, rushing towards the back end of a tractor trailer.

Never leave your place unguarded, his totem dead fetus said, swimming urgently into his vision, obscuring his second-sight view of his Palace.

Of course, Carlos thought. To Clarisse, he said, “That’s the best idea you’ve had since we met,” and drove his foot down on the accelerator.

What better way to guard the place of his body than to kill it, bury it, put it beyond the reach of any enemies? All he had to do was shut the door on the material world, where he was vulnerable, and commit himself to the land he had built for himself, the universe of his making where he was an immortal spirit, untouchable, and happy.

As the back of the tractor trailer rushed up and Clarisse screamed and pummeled his arms trying to shake his grip on the steering wheel, Carlos touched on the only regret his change of plans would leave him. He would never set dead fetus twins free from their jars, never release the totem of the dead fetus from his service. He had not planned on keeping the totem. He would not need it in the self-sustaining perfection of his own, self-enclosed world.

But perhaps it would make a nice souvenir.

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He banged on the gate to his Palace once more, but no one answered. He walked back to where the dead fetus rested under a dead tree with pale, white bark and maggots boiling among its roots. Beyond the tree, the road to the gate faded into nothingness. All there was to see was the Palace, ever-shifting, each moment of its existence an act of rich creation.

An infinite monument to perfection, forever out of his reach.


“They won’t let me in,” he said, sitting by the tree. The maggots chewed on his insubstantial flesh. He welcomed the hint of sensation.

“There’s no reason for them to do so,” the dead fetus told him. “I warned you.”

“Stupid warning. Obscure. Easily misunderstood.”

“Only by the deluded.”

“You’re not so obscure now.”



"You're dead. We speak the same tongue."

He looked in through the Palace windows, caught a glimpse of his twins – vague, insubstantial forms, not married to the limitations of a material self-awareness. He noted some of the interior color schemes had been changed, and the lighting dimmed as if mimicking the pre-natal environment.

"They're playing in the Palace of my dreaming," Carlos protested.

"You let them. You bound them to the place, then abandoned them."

"It was only for a moment."

"Enough for them to look for you, and find their own way in."

"They shouldn't have been able to do that."

"You shouldn't have been able to create such a place. But you were blessed, you had gifts, and they are your children. Why shouldn't they also share your gifts? Why shouldn't their gifts be even greater than yours?"

"They should respect me. I'm their father."

"You're their creator."

"I created you. You respect me."

"I have no choice. I have no power."

"It's not right. It's not fair. The Palace is mine. It is all that I am."

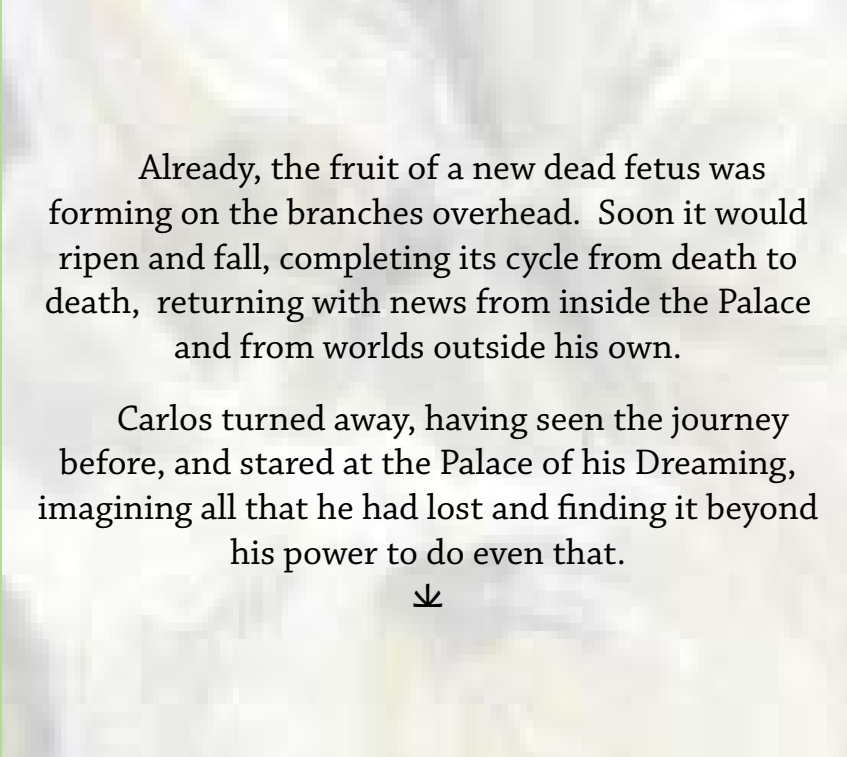
"They must find it very comforting. They must believe it is you, and that a ghostly imposter knocks on their door wanting to share their comfort and pleasures."

"They should be generous with their gifts."

"They only follow their nature."

"Look, now they're dancing."

"Yes, the music must be very beautiful. Very beautiful, indeed." The dead fetus totem turned on its back. Skin fell away. The maggots leaped on to the raw, exposed tissue, burrowing into barely formed organs. Within moments, the carcass sank between the tree's roots, consumed by the frothing pool of dead flesh eaters.



Already, the fruit of a new dead fetus was forming on the branches overhead. Soon it would ripen and fall, completing its cycle from death to death, returning with news from inside the Palace and from worlds outside his own.

Carlos turned away, having seen the journey before, and stared at the Palace of his Dreaming, imagining all that he had lost and finding it beyond his power to do even that.

