

Beelzebub

by J.A. Pak

When I first saw Beelzebub, I wanted to laugh.

Beelzebub was like a naughty child, lying high on a golden palanquin with huge jeweled goblets of wine in both hands—oh, how he loved to drink, most happy, most entertaining when drunk and full of life. He was only four feet high. His face was rectangular, as if a clumsy craftsman had chiseled him from solid stone. His arms were short and his small feet nimble, always beating out a tune. I've never seen anyone like him in all these many years. He was always smiling, always chuckling, even in anger, even in malicious mischief. At first glance, he seemed to be wearing the most spectacular of crowns, a mist of sun jewels encircling his head. But it was not a crown. The jewels were dragonflies, buzzing lazily, Beelzebub's hair a golden meadow. How dazzling their colorful wings were. Each wing like a sprig of galaxy light.

One day, while losing myself in the delights of the city, I suddenly became homesick. I longed to see my kinfolk, longed for my mother sea. My Fin. So I dressed myself in the most seductive attire and went to see Beelzebub.

"Clever Beelzebub, most powerful Beelzebub, you can find my sealskin. You can return it to me. It would be so simple for you. And I would do anything in return. Anything, my lovely Beelzebub."

"Oh, my lovely creature. Oh, my lovely creature. Yours is a lovers' quarrel. Lovers' quarrels are dangerous things. Best not to get involved in lovers' quarrels. Live and let live, eh? Now, how can I distract you? Have you been to the floating flower market? And you've seen all the wonders of the temple? The levitating chariot is quite fun. Tomorrow, during the first day of offerings, I'll be riding the chariot *and* throwing lightning bolts from my fingertips! My first time doing that trick—I'm getting nervous just thinking about it! So many things can go wrong, and you never know with crowds. Incredibly difficult keeping the populace entertained. I know! How about this, my beautiful Ula? I will grant you any *other* wish. You

must have other wishes? You children tend to have so many! I will shower you with such lovely things, you will forget all about your old sealskin. Oh, no, no—do not cry, my dear lady, do not cry."

Trying to please me, Beelzebub broke out in a hilarious song. As he sang, he drank and danced and pretended to lose his balance, doing backflips around the room. He was the best of court jesters and I laughed to please him, my broken heart burrowing deep within me.

A week went by. And then Brenn came to me in a smoldering fury.

"Do you think I would not know of your plotting?" he asked. "Do you think you can use Beelzebub against me?"

"Oh, Brenn, give me my sealskin. I beg you. I will do anything you ask. I miss my home so. Cannot you see it, Brenn? I must go and see my home. I promise I will return."

"You will not return. You will forget your promise. You will forget me. I am sick of you. I will never love you anymore. You will have your sealskin back. But only after I have my immortality. Not until then."

Beelzebub was deeply upset. He tried to make peace between us.

"I meant no harm, no mischief," he said. "I thought if I could just tell him how homesick you were, he would relent. Oh, you see, you see! One must never, never get involved in a lovers' quarrel. Too dangerous. So dangerous."

Beelzebub gave me a pretty bracelet and comforted me. Then he turned to Brenn.

"Now what can I give you, my boy? What does Brenn desire? A golden sword? Here's a dagger crusted over with gemstones. Very pretty. Won't cut through an apple, but very, very pretty. Humans bring me the prettiest things. I love being a god. So much fun. Does my greedy little heart so much good."

"Please, Beelzebub, please, tell him what he wants to know," I begged. "Please, Beelzebub. Tell him how to become immortal. Then he will give me back my sealskin!"

"Immortality! Immortality!" Beelzebub sighed. "I do not understand the craving for such things. It is like desiring to eat

sweetmeats that you have never tasted. What if the sweetmeats disagree with you, eh? You cannot throw it back up with a nice burp. Here. Let me show you something much more fun!"

Beelzebub dismissed all his servants except the Sweet One.

"Now observe."

Beelzebub raised his hand. His hand seemed to disappear. He seemed to be searching for something, as if he could see a box that we could not. Finally his hand reemerged, but holding a small glass bottle of blue liquid.

"Ambrosia," he said. "The best that I can do for you, my boy."

He took a swig from the bottle and then passed it around. Oh, I wish I had some now for you to try! How unlike it was to anything else on earth. The drink had no taste, not like the taste that we know, of salts and sugars. If Beelzebub's ambrosia had a taste, it was the taste of beauty, of all the beauty in the world. I felt most awed.

"This was brewed for the last big feast," Beelzebub said. "The wedding of Houghxydthvarioum and Sthinna. Before so many of us went into Chrysalis. We all thought Houghxydthvarioum and Sthinna were being very silly. A wedding? What was the point when Chrysalis was so near? Not that any of us ever stayed married. But they had never before been wed and wanted the novelty. Find out what it was like before it was too late. Alas, there is very little ambrosia left. And, of course, no more will be made. How fortunate that I had the good sense to steal a casket. Enough of this! What's regret but a fool's bread? Let us drink and enjoy ourselves! To Houghxydthvarioum and Sthinna! To my dear friends here and now!"

"How did you do that?" Brenn asked, excited with that hunger for knowledge which so obsessed him. "How did you create it out of air?"

"Create it out of air?" Beelzebub repeated, laughing. "My friend, if I had created it out of air, I would indeed be a god. Observe again."

He held out his hand. Suddenly he was holding the most beautiful gown I had ever seen. Spun from some unknown metal, light as a

spider's cobweb, encrusted with a powdering of jewels that blinded the eye.

"For you, my lovely lady," Beelzebub said.

"Really? Mine? To keep?" I asked, breathless.

"To keep? Oh, no, no," he laughed. He was a miserly sort, a real hoarder. "But you may wear it if you like. For our banquets. After all, a feast should be for the eyes as well as the mouth. And I do so enjoy feasting upon your loveliness, my dear."

"If you are not creating it, it must have been here all along. How do you make things unseen and then seen?" Brenn asked, puzzled.

"I do not make things seen and unseen, my friend. Ah! Must I spell it all out for you? I thought you were cleverer than that, my boy." Beelzebub paused. It was clear that he was torn. The exuberant Beelzebub wanted to tell us everything but the greedy, sly Beelzebub wanted to remain quiet. "Perhaps you have guessed that I have much treasure? Too much for this world. Too much to carry with me. So I keep them hidden in secret places, safe places. Places in other worlds. I have the key, the knowledge to open and close the doors to these worlds. In this way I keep my treasures close to me. It is with me wherever I go, safe from any thief, any army, because only I have the key."

"I do not understand. What worlds?"

"Do you think this is the only world? Creation is tumbling with worlds, sometimes stacked one upon the other like pieces of oat cakes. You poor creatures seem locked in a box, unable to see what is so clear to me."

"Will you teach me? Show me these worlds! Let me through the doorways!"

"For what purpose? To steal my treasures? Come now. Do not be angry. This knowledge will not show you the way to immortality. And that is your one purpose, is it not? For now? Who knows what you will want once you have immortality," he laughed.

"Are there others like you?" Brenn asked.

"Awake? Maybe one or two. The others are all in Chrysalis."

"Chrysalis?" Brenn queried.

"We walk like humans for millions of years and then we cocoon ourselves, like caterpillars—marvelously pretty things, caterpillars, eh? Even at our most populous, we were not many. A thousand of us or so. And a good thing. We couldn't live together. Terrible things happened. Fights, wars, petty jealousies, festering wounds, murder, treachery, lovers killing lovers, brothers killing brothers, sons killing fathers. Daughters killing everybody! We brought out the worst in each other. And when other life forms came along, the things we demanded of them! Blood sacrifices, war—just to show each other what power we had, what devotion we could inspire among dumb creatures. And for what? Alone, we are quite jolly. But never put us together. I become quite another creature, an ugly creature, among my own kinfolk."

He would not say more.

Grim, Brenn packed a bag full of provisions and went up into the mountains. Beelzebub and I thought he was sulking.

"Good riddance!" Beelzebub proclaimed. "Now only we jolly folk remain!"

We had a wonderful time together while Brenn was away. Sweet Beelzebub made me his high priestess and we played all kinds of amusing pranks on his worshippers. During one full moon, we turned that great white stone green—oh, the hysteria we caused! When the dull winter days came, we sent brave warriors on mad goose chases looking for fantastical beasts. Sometimes messengers from anxious kings would arrive seeking advice and we'd make the oracle spout complete nonsense, just waiting to see how the kings' wise men would translate it!

But good Beelzebub wasn't all pranks. He had a deep affection for his people and did his best to help them. His sensible advice prevented wars, and during famines, he brought in food from other parts of the world. As a god, he blessed the people with yearly miracles.

"Humans, I find, need to believe in the divine," he would say. "Otherwise they get so depressed and suicidal. No fun."

I adored my days spent with Beelzebub. He could almost make me forget the sea.

After a year away, Brenn returned. He had a present for Beelzebub. A liquor he'd brewed, a liquor the color of rubies, dancing like flames.

"My offering to the god Beelzebub," Brenn said. He bowed deeply, graciously as he presented his gift.

"My dear Brenn! What is this? What is this? It looks most promising."

"It is ambrosia," Brenn answered. "At least my interpretation. It took me a year to gather all the right flowers, to distill the freshly fallen snow a thousand times. I am not foolish enough to think that this ambrosia resembles in any way the ambrosia of the ancients, but I hope it will please you, Beelzebub."

Beelzebub drank his glass greedily.

"Oh, this is most delicious, most intoxicating, my dear Brenn. Triggers a delightful effervescence in the soul. I have underestimated your gifts, my boy. Underestimated them most erroneously. My apologies, my deepest, most sincere apologies. I feel suddenly a thousand different selves, all happy, all blissfully happy in all its many stages. So many delightful ways to be happy." He sighed and fell back on the cushions. I think he was singing. The air was vibrating like rain. He drank several more glassfuls. Brenn waited patiently.

"I shall make you my Master Distiller," Beelzebub said, sinking very deeply into his pillows. "Master Distiller. Must be careful, or all you will end up as is the heads and tails of hate, my friend."

He seemed to understand what was happening, what Brenn was doing.

"If you want to avoid death, think what feeds life," he babbled. "Death, of course. Look around you. From the lowly worm to the cosmic universe, life comes from death and death from life. Everything you eat, my friend, is death. Animal, plant, you kill to eat. It's impossible to eat anything live. The moment life is in your

mouth, it flees and you eat death. Life from death, death from life, you're stuck in the cycle. So what to do?"

"Break away from the cycle."

"Find a way to eat life. Now my darling, my darling—" He reached for my hand. I went to sit by him. "My darling is as close to an immortal as any creature."

"Ula is immortal?"

"Immortal?" Beelzebub chuckled. "No. Not immortal. She's just stuck. You've stuck her. By taking away her sealskin. Without her sealskin she is held the way she is, mummified by your poisoned love. And you, it seems, with her."

"You're immortal," Brenn said.

"Oh, no, no. Don't look at me with those hungry eyes, my friend. Even the gods cannot escape the scissors of Fate. I am not immortal. I am part of a race that lives inside a different time than yours. For you, I seem immortal, because seen through your time I live for millions of years. Not that you are always aware of us. We live in stages. First as dust, than as you see me here. Soon, I will reach my chrysalis stage, cocooned and unnoticed for another million years before I become like the air. You will only feel me as pressure and force, an occasional dance of light, and I will not care one iota about you. To me, you will be like dust, the whole human race like a spot of ink."

Brenn now accepted the truth. Beelzebub was not immortal. He did not know the secret of immortality. But he was as certain as ever that the secret existed.

Beelzebub was not angry at Brenn for his treachery. He was as good-humored as ever, treating us with magnificent hospitality. He did not know the secret of immortality but he knew the secrets of many, many things, plants, minerals, animals, of sky and earth. These things he slowly taught Brenn, and with his clever ways Brenn began to manipulate this knowledge to extend his life. He no longer needed me every seven years. But he still needed me and he would not be satisfied until only he himself was the gateway to life.

