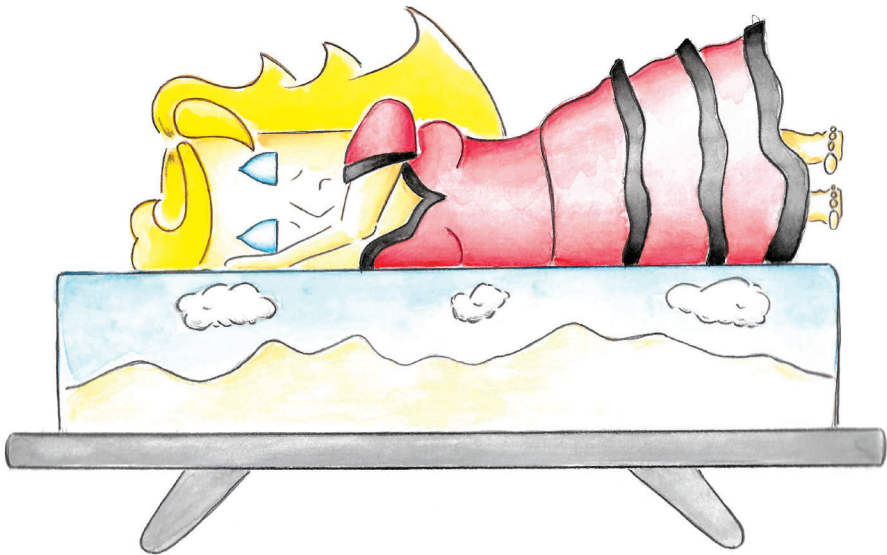


The Rise of the Baker's Dozen

Chapter 6:

Chicarita the Lady Finger



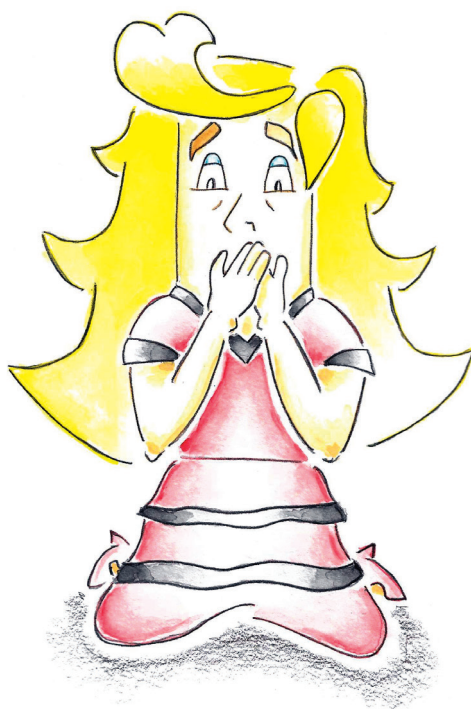
By Arnu Rausi



Avatar
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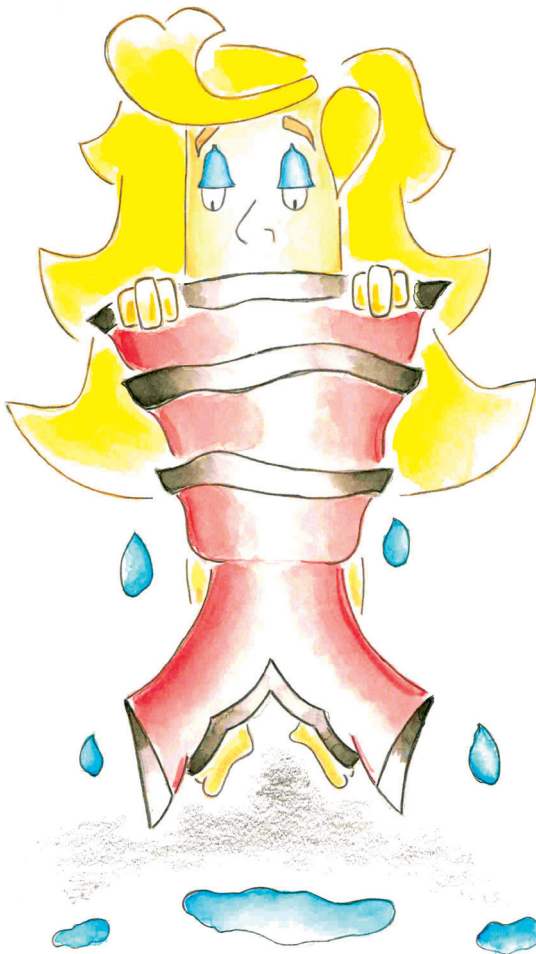


Chicarita
The Lady Finger



Chapter 1

Chicarita found it ironic that her only item of clothing was a flamboyant flamenco dress. The garment was so lively and flowing, the complete opposite of her dull and restricted life. Envy filled her every time she had to clean it, but O failure to complete the task would mean either going to school smelling dirty or in her nightie.





“Chicarita, hurry up. Your father will be home soon,” her mother, Margarita, shouted from downstairs.

Chicarita rinsed the dress, hung it to dry, and rushed downstairs in her nightie. Her mother was already waiting. The two of them stood ready at the door, hands behind back, shoulders straight. Chicarita crossed her fingers and squeezed her wrist. Both of them looked at each other and took a deep breath.

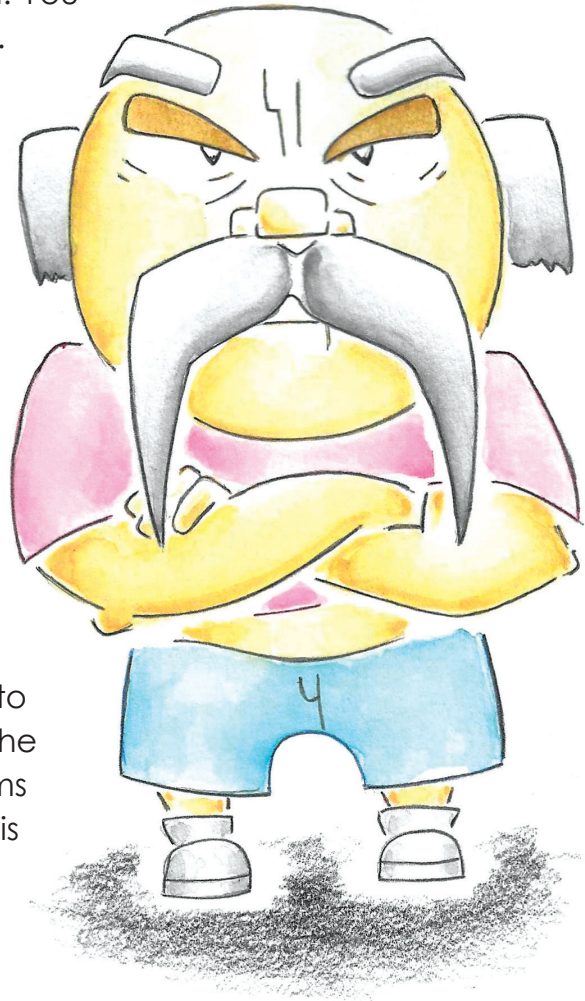
“What will I wear if he says yes?” Chicarita asked her mother.

“Your dress will dry instantly under the never-ending sun. You just worry about your father. The nicer you ask him, the more chance there is of him saying yes.”

Heavy footsteps stomped up the garden path. His grunts could be heard as he approached the house. Chicarita gripped herself tighter as the door opened.

Margarita held her arms open for a hug. “Gary, my love. Welcome home.”

He leaned forward to receive a small kiss on the cheek, keeping his arms crossed. His face bore his constant frown.



"How was your day at the tea factory, darling?" Margarita said.

Gary snorted. "I've been working all day in that hell hole. The last thing I wanna do is talk about it after."

Chicarita stretched out her arms in a gesture of embrace. "I missed you, father."

He pushed past, ignoring her invitation for a cuddle. "Yeah, and I missed the day. But someone's gotta feed this family. Is dinner ready?"

Chicarita lowered her arms. "Yes, Father. I made your favourite."

"Roast potatoes and gravy?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Then stop talking and start serving. I wanna get to the Tea Bar as soon as possible."

If there was a part of her father that Chicarita loved as much as she loathed it was his firmness. He demanded exactly what he wanted and said whatever he thought. She rushed to the kitchen and prepared plates of food with her mother.

"Go put your dress on," her father shouted from the dining room. "You're not sitting at the dinner table in your nightie."

"But Father ...," Chicarita paused as she looked at Mother who was shaking her head, silently imploring her not to put up a fight. "Yes, Father," she said. She rushed upstairs and put on her damp dress. Running back down to the kitchen, she continued to help her mother.

"He wasn't always like this," Mum said. "It's only since he started working at the tea factory that he's become so rotten. Believe it or not, he used to be sweet."

Chicarita had heard these words a thousand times. Margarita made the claim like it justified Father's foul behaviour, or in some false hope that one day, his better self might return.

Chicarita huffed while putting the final touches to the potatoes and gravy. She had spent over two hours preparing it. "Let's hope the food cheers him up."

The three sat at the table, with the father at the head and his two women either side. He munched at his food without making any conversation.

Margarita held his arm. "Are you going to see your friends tonight in the Tea Bar?"

Gary scoffed. "Friends?! What friends?! You can't trust anyone round here anymore. I go to the Tea Bar to drink and that's it."

Margarita kicked Chicarita from under the table. "Our daughter has something to ask you," she said to Gary.

Chicarita's body tensed. She painfully swallowed her food and cleared her throat. "I was hoping I could go to Jane's birthday party tonight. She's a friend from school."

Her father raised his glance. "Who's going?"

"Everyone in our class and some of her other friends."

"Boys and girls?"

"Yes. But her parents will be there."

"What age?"

"sixteen to seventeen, like me."

"What are you going to wear?"

"My Flamenco dress, of course."

So far so good. His moving from one question to the next without saying no was his silent way of saying yes.

He wiped his mouth. "Where's the party being held?"

"In the Bisco."

His eyes suddenly widened. "No way in hell!"

Margarita grabbed his hand. "Why not?"

"Don't be so stupid! That place is full of idiots drinking illuminice-tea. It's not safe for a girl your age."

"What's wrong with illuminice-tea?!" Mother asked. "You produce the drink all day in the tea factory and then drink it all night in the Tea Bar!"

Gary snarled. "As I've said before, do what I say, not what I do. I know best so I make the rules."

Margarita clasped her curly hair. "What do you know that we don't?!"

Gary stared deeply in the eyes of his wife and child, pointing at both of them with the knife in his hand. "I never bring illuminice-tea home because the pair of you are never to drink it. That's all you need to know. You hear me?" He continued to stare and point the knife until getting his desired response.

Chicarita moved closer to her father. "I promise not to drink any illuminice-tea if I go."

His face scowled, stretching his deep wrinkles a little longer. "You must think I'm an idiot! I work all bloody day while you girls sit at home doing nothing! It's my turn to relax. The last thing I want is to be worrying about my daughter and some drunk boys trying to chat her up!"

Chicarita's heart sank. "I don't want to speak with boys. I only want to speak with Jane!"

"About what?"

"Girl stuff."

"Then it can wait until tomorrow at school."

"I have to tell her tonight."

"What could be so important that you 'have' to tell her tonight? All you want is to chat with boys."

"It's not true."

Margarita put her arms around Gary's shoulders. "Just let her have one night out. She deserves it."

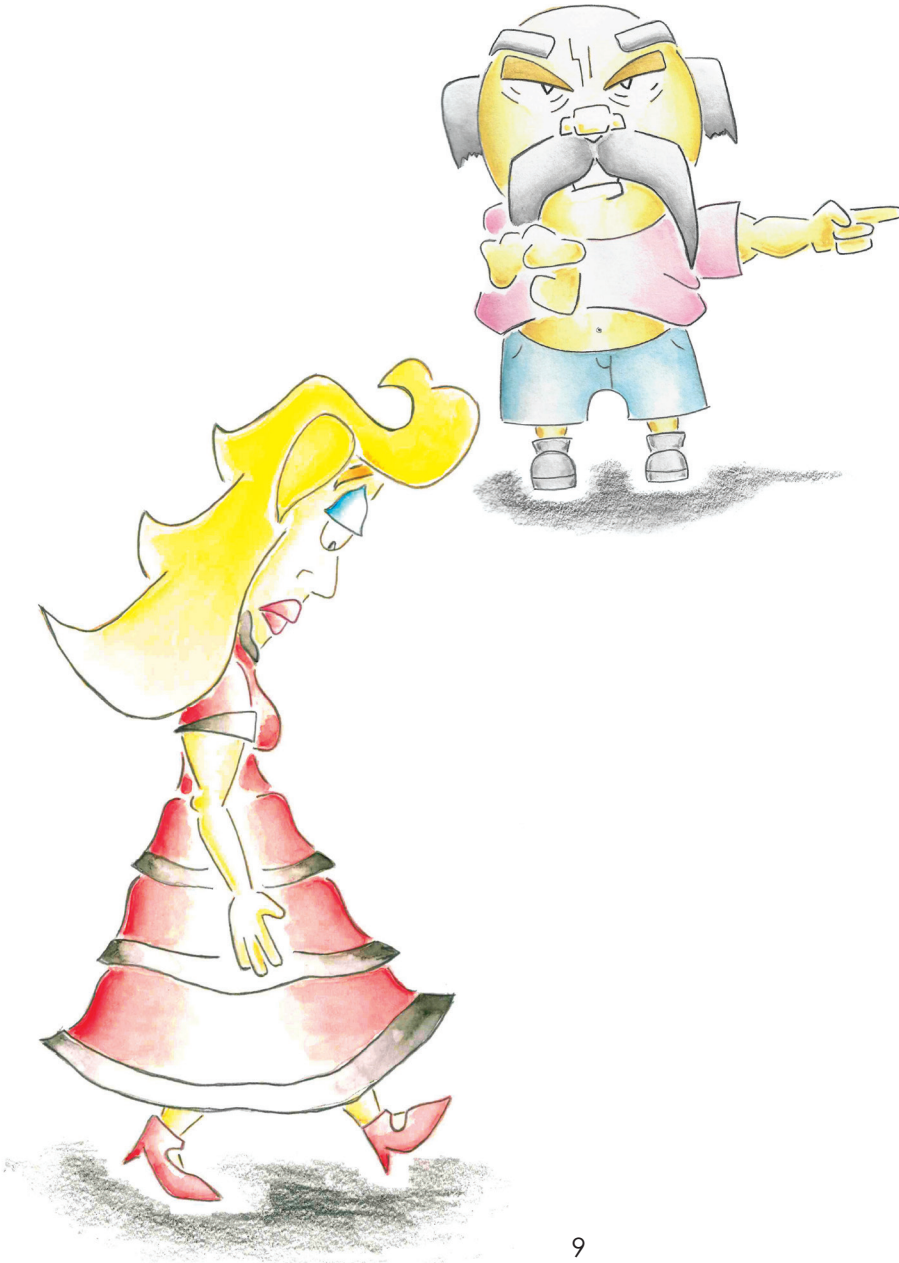
Gary pushed her off him. "No means no!"

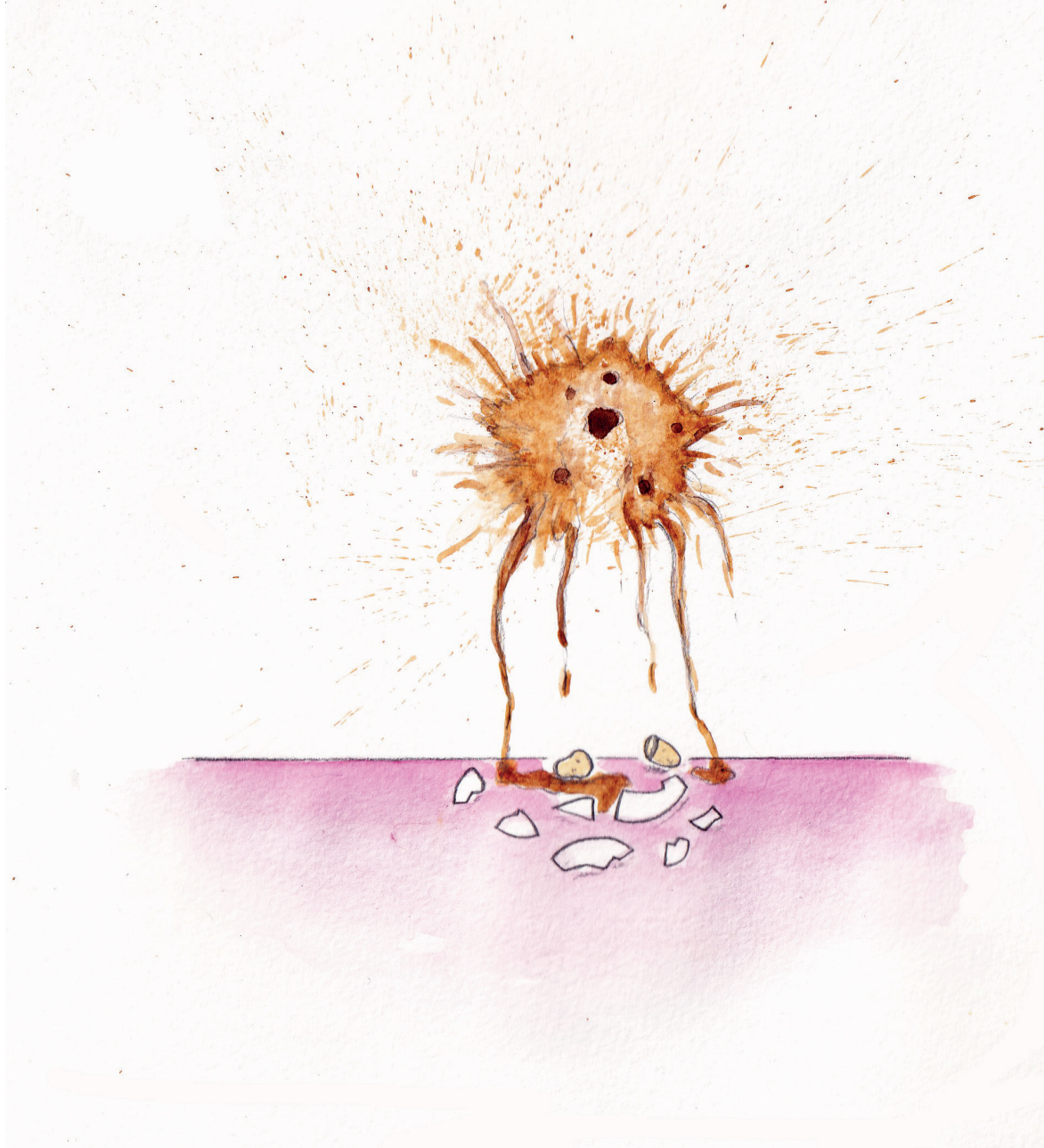
"But..." Chicarita said.

He banged his fists on the table. "BUT NOTHING!" He then stood up and threw his plate of food across the room. Chunks of potatoes, gravy, and the plate flew at high speed. Ahead of them was a white wall, and when spud met brick, the explosion left giant splat stains. The plate shattered into pieces upon impact, along with Chicarita's hopes of attending Jane's birthday party and forewarning her of the urgent news.

Gary pointed at the stained wall and floor. "LOOK WHAT YOU MADE ME DO! CHICARITA, CLEAN IT UP!" I'm going to the Tea Bar. And don't even think of sneaking out while I'm away. The Bisco is next door to the Tea Bar; any word of your presence there and you'll be grounded for every day you live under this roof!"

He stormed out the house and slammed the door behind him.





Chicarita looked at the mess on the wall. The trails of dripping gravy looked exactly like the trails of blood that would soon be dripping down Jane's face.

Margarita rubbed her forehead. "Sorry, darling, We tried."
Chicarita sighed. "It's not your fault."

Watching her father leave in a rage had become a common sight, one she had grown very used to witnessing. What proved unbearable was his constant condemnation and lack of faith in her. He only knew how to criticise and curse and the abuse made her feel like nothing more than a worthless burden. Gary Baldy would say harsh things which were neither meant nor true. However, as he was incapable of apologising, his offenses never left Chicarita's mind.

Chicarita began to weep. "I wish Father would just go away forever and leave us alone!"

Her mother extended her arms.

"Come here,
sweetheart."



Chicarita fell into her mother's sturdy figure and disappeared within her warm embrace. There was something magical about the woman's hugs that could soothe even the most distressing moments. Maybe it was her thick fingers, toughened from years of housework and so firm that it felt they would never let her go. Or maybe it was her brute strength that squeezed her tight, providing the protection lacking from her father. Most probably, it was simply the fact that there was no-one else in the world to comfort her.

"Go put on your nightie," Mother said. "Take off this damp dress."

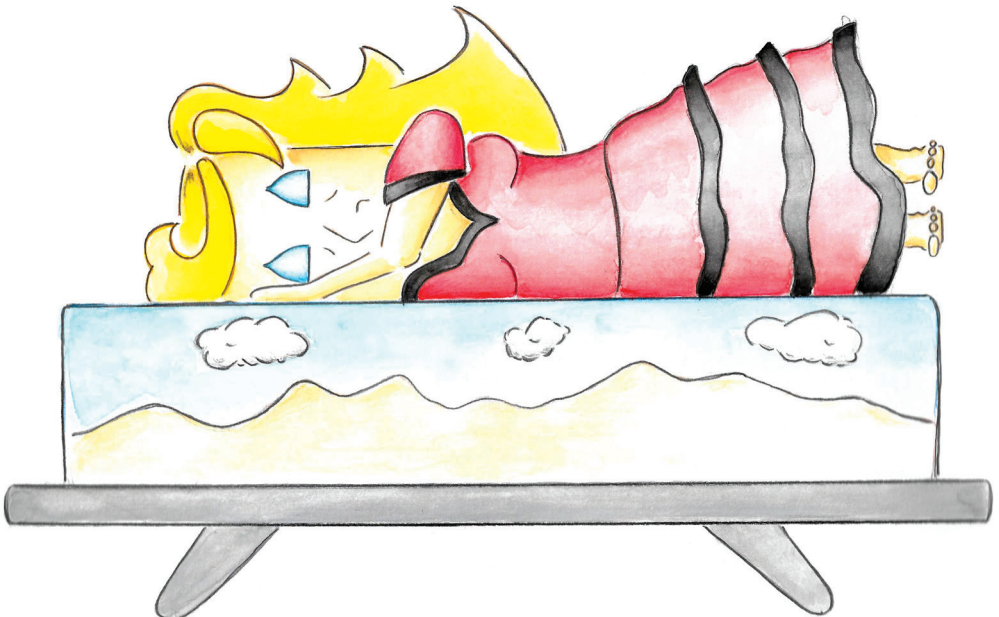
Her wet dress the least of Chicarita's worries. What really concerned her was her friend Jane's well-being. If she didn't warn her soon, Jane would be on her way to the hospital before even having the chance to blow out her birthday candles.

Chapter 2

Lying in bed later that day, Chicarita wondered what else would happen at Jane's party she was missing. She already knew that while dancing to her birthday song and with everyone watching, Jane would slip and fall heavily, hitting the ground head first.

Initially, many onlookers would laugh, until they saw the trail of blood running down her face from a deep cut in her forehead. Her parents would then rush her to the hospital where she would receive six stitches. In the following years, Jane would be traumatised by the scar on her face and would never dance again.

Tomorrow at school, Chicarita would have to pretend she knew none of this and would be full of guilt for not forewarning her friend.



While Chicarita's hours awake were under the command of her father, a far greater power of supernatural order haunted her hours asleep. Vivid and powerful dreams consumed her time of slumber, not only presenting clues to her own emotions and struggles, but also prophetic visions of the lives of others.

Some visions were so blissful that she wished to remain asleep forever. Other dreams would provoke a bad mood for the rest of the day. Once or twice a month, nightmares were so disturbing, she would force insomnia just to avoid the horror.

The dreams relating to her own emotions were easy to accept because they reflected her cruel reality. Struggling to breathe, she would try to shout for attention, but no sound would leave her mouth. Trapped inside a collapsing building, she would run for the exit yet distances stretched and seemed never-ending.

In other dreams, a masked killer chased her. She would try to run away, but a strong gravitational force weighed down upon her, restricting all movement. As the killer inflicted his fatal blow, Chicarita would wake up from the nightmare.

Although upsetting, such dreams made complete sense, directly relating to her real life. On the flip side, however, were prophetic visions of future events with frightening accuracy. She would dream about many biscuits and see moments of their lives before their actual occurrence, just like Jane's birthday fall—and witness every detail, after which she'd have to pretend like she knew nothing.

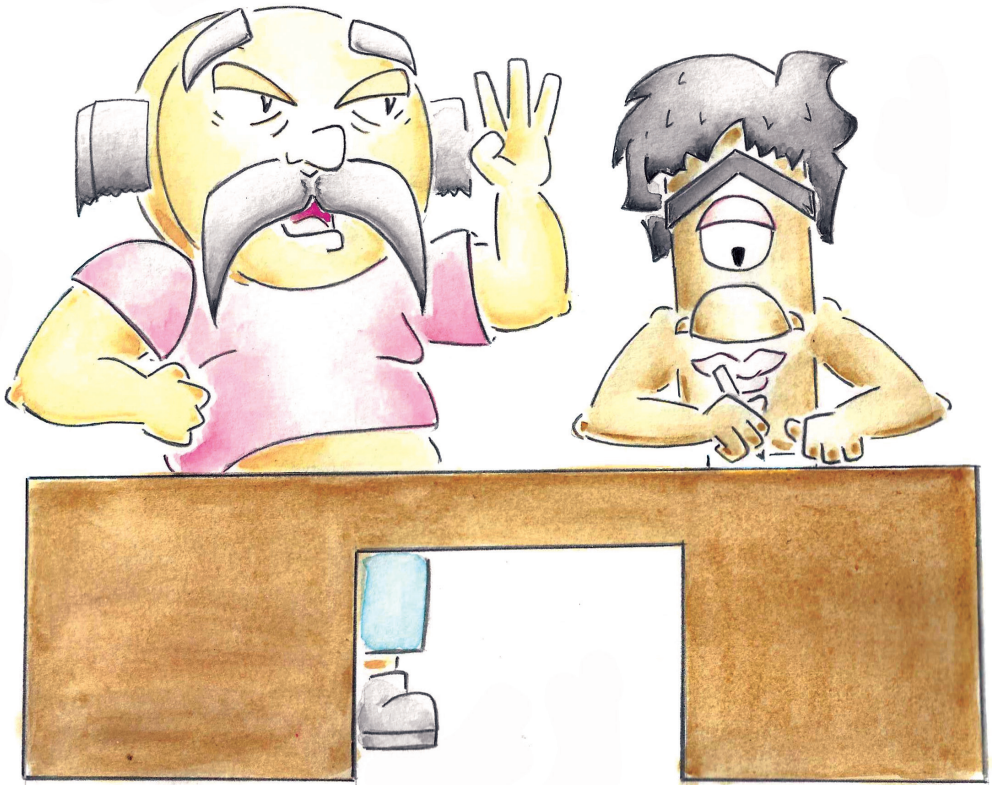
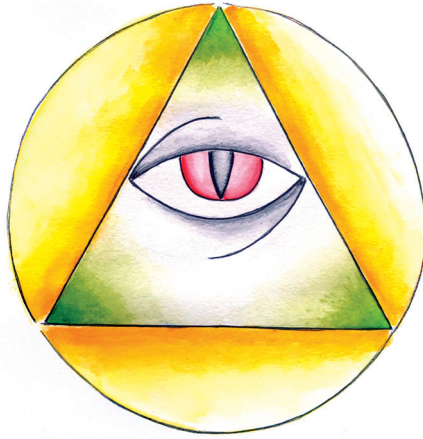
Of all her nightly visions, only one recurred, and never came true, thank God. The surreal images were more bizarre than all the other dreams combined. Standing behind a large wooden desk, her father was accompanied by an adolescent boy. Using his fingers, Gary would teach the boy how to count. Her father laughed, smiled, and even encouraged the youngster as he learned, showing loving sides that Chicarita had never received or witnessed in reality.

As strange as her father's behaviour was, it was nothing compared to the boy's freakish appearance. His face only bore one giant eye under a thick monobrow. Dirt covered his body from head to toe, and his hair was a complete mess. Yet, with all things considered, the boy enjoyed life like there was not a problem in the world, as did her father.

Gary Baldy cared for the mutant child as Chicarita wished he would do so for her. Loving, supportive, and patient, her father's behaviour was as abnormal as the boy's appearance! Maybe craving for her father's acceptance and devotion had caused the dream.

The mutant, perhaps, represented her own strangeness and seclusion from the world around her. The fact he was a boy came as no surprise. Chicarita was sure that her father would have preferred a male child, causing him less bother.

There was one final factor in the recurring dream that caused much curiosity. In the sky was the Sun, and upon it was a giant red eye, centrally positioned over a green triangle. The menacing eye never blinked or took its stare off her father and the boy. Forever present, it observed the moment with as much interest as Chicarita. Was it the father of the one-eyed adolescent?

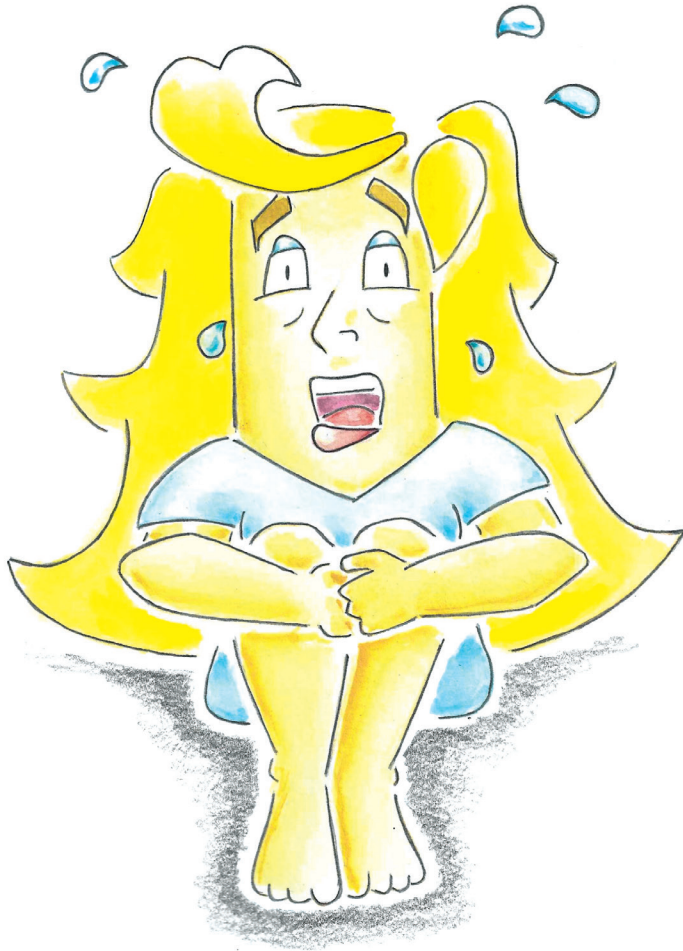


Multiple years of prophetic dreaming made Chicarita more aware of her supernatural ability. However, incapable of sharing her visions with those concerned, her superpower became her nemesis. With her father's dictatorship over her life and her lack of confidence, she was powerless to inform individuals of upcoming dangers, filling her with a burning guilt and sense of impotence. She begged each day for the visions not to come to her, whether traumatic or euphoric.

She kept all her nightly visions to herself, even her beloved mother was denied the truth. With Gary as her husband, Mum already had one monster to deal with. The last thing she needed to know was that another freak lived in the house.

Chapter 3

Chicarita gasped and shot up out of her bed as another horrific nightmare woke her from her sleep. Panting, she struggled to regain her breath. Her heart pounded ferociously, as if it wanted to leave her body. What this vision revealed was not only tragic, it hit closer to home than ever before.



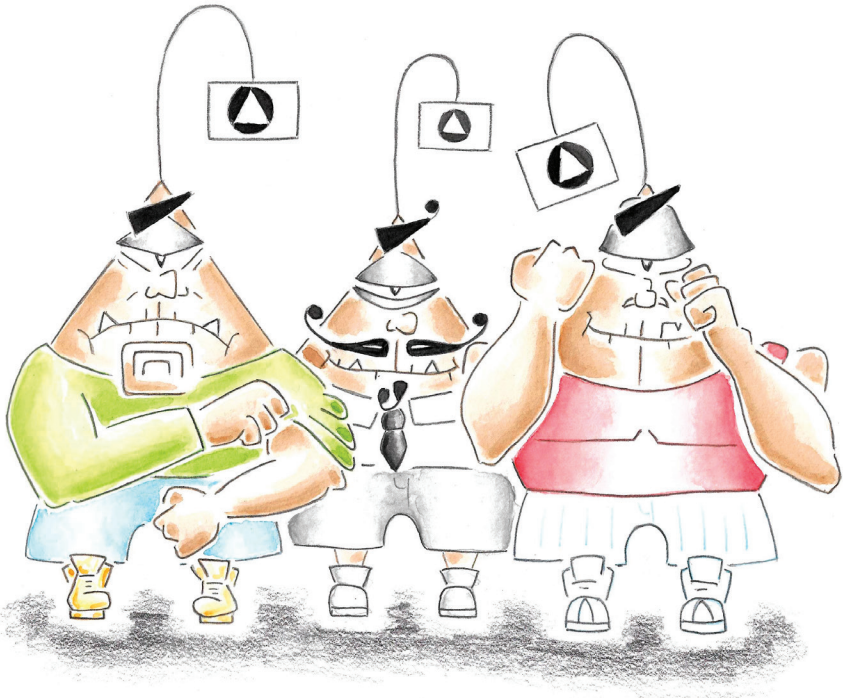
The nightmare took place down the alley between the Tea Bar and the music store. Chicarita had entered the body of her father, Gary, and could see life through his eyes. In front were three menacing looking Teabags, standing side by side and blocking any escape.

With a smack of intimidation covering their expression, they cornered Gary at the end of the alleyway. One of the Teabags in a red tank top held up a picture of Chicarita and her mother together and waved it in Gary's face.

"Leave my family alone!" Dad screamed.

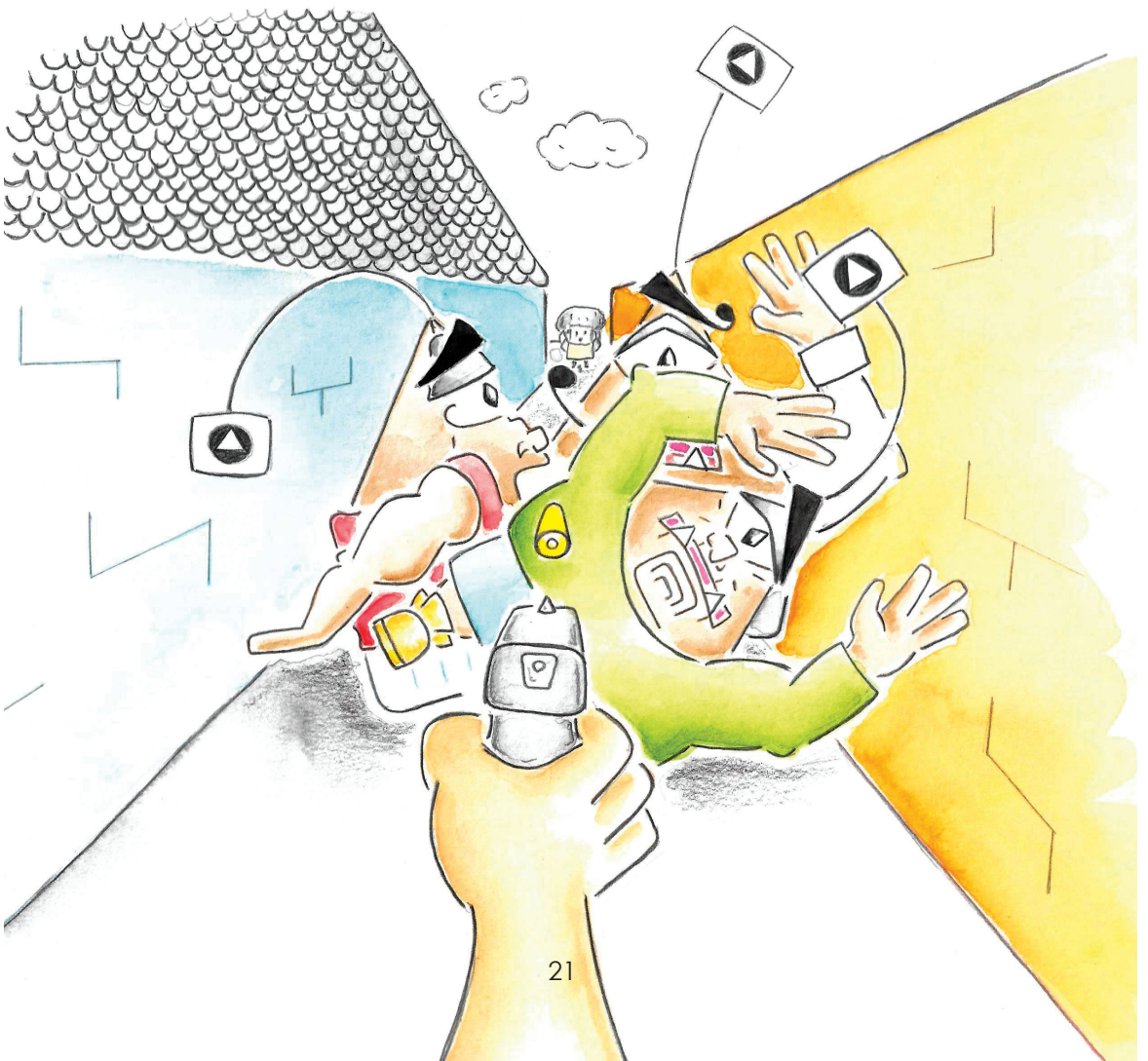
The Teabags laughed. "Oh, come on, Gary. We only want to pop round for a cup of tea!" said the one in the green jumper. With fists raised, the three Teabags loomed closer with a sinister look in their solitary eyes.

Outnumbered, Gary Baldy could never win the fight alone. He slipped his hand into his pocket, allowing Chicarita to feel a concealed weapon. Cautious fingers wrapped round a cold, metal handle.



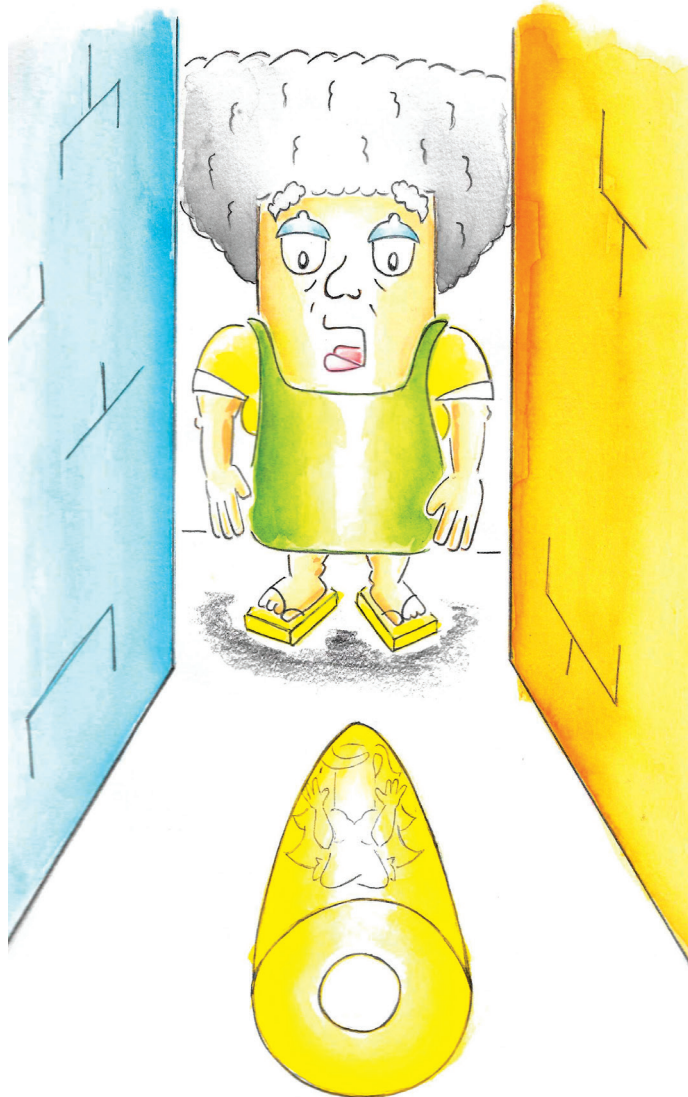
With the three Teabags about to attack, Gary Baldy took out a pistol from his pocket and fired a single shot towards his aggressors. As he pulled the trigger, the whole world came to a stop, and Chicarita left the entity of her father and moved into the fired bullet, becoming locked within the golden shell.

In super slow motion, both bullet and Chicarita crawled out the gun and towards the intended targets. The Teabags all jumped aside, somehow moving faster than the bullet and narrowly avoiding the danger. The shot continued down the alley, still carrying Chicarita inside. Up ahead, an unknown figure stood dangerously within the bullet's path of destruction.



As it closed in, certain features made themselves apparent—wild curly hair and a green apron became agonisingly recognisable, and once the unintended target was identified, time instantly returned to its true speed, propelling the bullet towards her mother, Margarita, at an unstoppable pace.

Chicarita, imprisoned within the bullet, fired directly into her mother's chest. Upon impact, a gong sound echoed. The shock and noise instantly awoke her from the traumatising nightmare.



Chicarita wiped away the sweat and tears from her lips with her shaky hand. She had never admitted her nightly prophecies to anyone, but now her mother's life was at great risk, it was time to confess. She immediately got out of bed and went in search of the only biscuit she truly loved.

Mother was in the living room, alone on the sofa and looking out the window. Chicarita called out her name.

The woman jumped in her seat and returned to the real world. "Sorry, dear. Your father hasn't returned home and I'm getting worried."

Gary usually came home late, but tonight's extended delay was clearly a cause for concern. At least it would give Chicarita the perfect opportunity to talk about her dreams, but before she had chance, Margarita laid out her intentions.

"I'm going to look for him in the Tea Bar," Mother said, sniffing. "You stay here. I'll be back before you know it."

The words sent a cold rush through Chicarita's veins, causing a nerve trembling anxiety. "No, Mother, you can't go! Father is in trouble with the Teabags! They corner and attack him in the alley next to the Tea Bar. They even threaten him with a photo of us! If you go, you will be killed!"

A look of confusion took over Margarita's face. "What are you talking about? How do you know Gary has problems with the Teabags?"

"I saw it in a dream. Please don't go!"

Her mother waved her away. "Oh, Chicarita! It was just a nightmare."

"I promise you it's true! Dad has a gun! He wants to kill the Teabags but he's accidentally going to shoot you!"

"A gun?! Don't be ridiculous! All weapons are strictly forbidden in Biscuitville! Go back to bed."

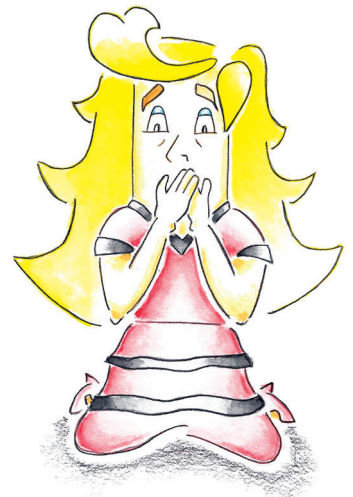
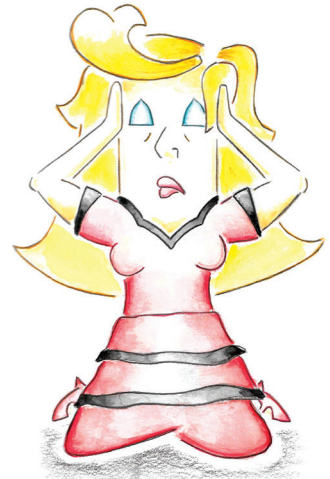
"Just let me come with you, please?"

"No, Chicarita! You stay here. Gary will be furious if he sees you out."

Chicarita ran to her mother and clung to her leg. "Please, Mother, you have to believe me!"

Margarita pushed her daughter aside and made her way to the front door. "Get a hold of yourself! I'll be back soon."

Weeping on her knees, Chicarita watched her mother exit the house. The door slammed behind her as she left, the noise resembling that of the gunshot which awaited her.



Chapter 4

Margarita worried deeply about Chicarita's mental health as she walked to the Tea Bar. She had never seen her daughter so hysterical and feared she may be going crazy due to her father's strict control over her life. She knew the brain was capable of imagining the wildest thoughts, yet being incapable of separating dreams from reality was a sure sign of madness.

Her husband's uncontrollable anger issues were just as wild. Watching him throw the plate against the wall, Margarita knew the problem had reached its limit. She had to talk to Gary before someone got seriously hurt.

Approaching the Tea Bar, Margarita heard her husband's voice coming from the alley. At first, she was comforted to know of Gary's well-being and presence, but after hearing parts of his ongoing argument, his choice of words provoked more concern than relief.

"Leave my family alone!" her husband shouted.

"Oh, come on, Gary! We only want to pop round for a cup of tea!" a deep, husky voice responded.

Laughter ensued from three distinct sources, none of which were Gary's. Margarita panicked. Why had she and Chicarita been mentioned in their conversation? Cautiously, she peeked around the corner of the alley.

At the far end, with their backs to her, the three Teabags made a line in front of her husband, blocking any escape. One teabag waved a small piece of paper in his face. Gary's eyes filled with venom. Margarita took one small step up the alley to gain a better view.

With the Teabags approaching Gary, her husband reached for his pocket, pulled out a pistol, and instantly fired a single shot at his attackers. The Teabags all jumped aside, smashing against the walls and ground. The bullet missed its intended targets but continued on its path of destruction.

Margarita froze stiff. The horrific reality and Chicarita's precise prediction of the event left her in total shock. What on earth was her husband doing with a gun and how did her daughter know?

Time slowed down and everything moved in super slow motion. Her mind jumped between multiple flashbacks, seeing herself as a child playing in the park. Next, she was a young woman in the hospital, holding her precious daughter after the moment of birth. Gary's face lit up with joy as he caressed Chicarita's forehead. Then, she saw her teenage daughter clinging to her leg in the house, begging her not to leave.

She suddenly returned to reality to see her husband pointing a pistol at her and a bullet flying in her direction. Time suddenly returned to its normal speed. She closed her eyes and prepared for her final moment. A booming sound rippled through the air, like the hitting of a gong. She jumped in shock. Surely, it was the sound of the bullet entering her body.

Chapter 5

The moment her father reached for the pistol in his pocket, Chicarita knew she had to intervene. She jumped in front of her mother holding a dustbin lid as a shield at chest height. She stood firm, closed her eyes, and held her breath.

A gong sound echoed as the incoming bullet ricocheted off the metal lid, vibrating her hands and arms. She prayed to God that there would be no more shots.

"What are you doing here?!" Mother yelled from behind. Chicarita faced her. "Saving your life!"

Margarita checked her up and down for any injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so."



Chicarita had waited until the final moment to save her mother, hoping her terrifying prophecy had been a lie. Now witnessing the real event, she realised what an exact reading it had turned out to be.

Up the alley, the Teabags and Gary Baldy fought like wild animals on the floor. Her father lay buried somewhere beneath the bodies of the Teabags. Was he aware he had nearly murdered his own wife and daughter?

Mum grabbed Chicarita's hand and dragged her away.

Once home, they immediately called the police and informed them of the incident.

A female officer arrived within ten minutes. "We have Gary Baldy in jail," she said. "You are safe now."

Chicarita hugged her mother tightly. Anxiety swirled in her gut causing intense stomach cramps.

The police officer took a deep breath. "The Teabags will be pressing charges against Gary Baldy, and both of you are expected to attend the court case as witnesses. While I understand this will be a difficult task, Biscuitville law states that all witnesses of a crime must make an honest statement."

Chicarita's hands covered her mouth. The thought of having to testify against her father made her sick to the core. She knew better than anyone that he was an aggressive man, but what madness had led him to an attempted murder of the Teabags? With his screams of 'leave my family alone', he was clearly trying to protect his wife and daughter, but now they would be part of his prosecution.

Considering the severity of the crime, the court case would surely draw everyone's attention. After living in the shadows for years, she was about to be exposed under the spotlight. She ran to the bathroom and vomited repeatedly.

Chapter 6

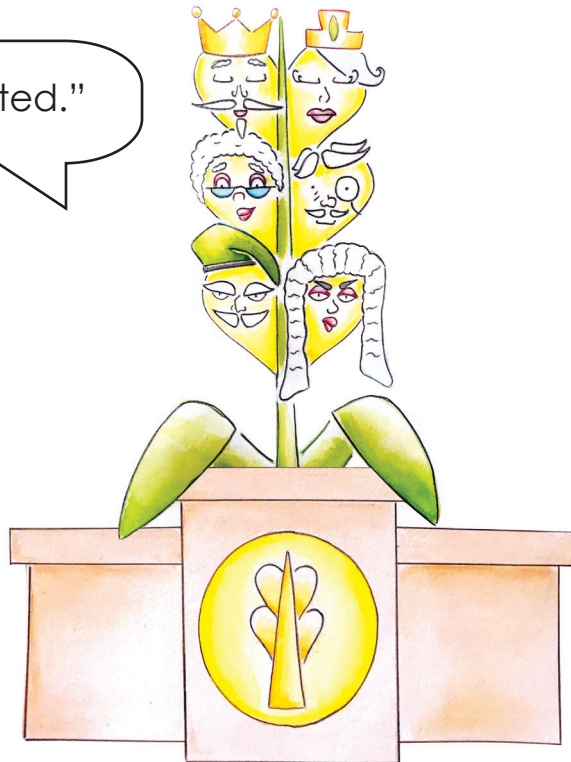
Only one week passed before the court case commenced, yet it had been the longest seven days of Chicarita's life. She had barely slept, only managing short naps at best. Large crowds had gathered outside her house each day, cheering her name, calling her a hero. Her own voice called her a traitor.

All week, she had stayed away from the public by hiding in her home. But now, inside the fully packed court room of her father's murder case, she faced the entire town.

"All rise for the honourable Grand Kernels of Justice," a court official announced.

The six-headed figure entered the room and took their place behind a giant redwood bench.

"Please, be seated."



The huge audience behind Chicarita obeyed. She took a glance to see many bodies filling the public gallery. Their excited faces had Chicarita in wonder. Had they come to support her or just catch a piece of the action?

Her mother, Margarita, leaned over and whispered into Chicarita's ear. "The two lower Kernels of Justice, Linda and the Colonel, act like the prosecution. They will question and scrutinise everything. The middle kernels, Patricia and Bertrand, are the defence, bringing protection and understanding. The final decision will be made by the Crowned Kernels at the top."

Linda began to read out the crimes. Her long white wig and stern stare added to the intensity of the moment. "We are here today for the trial of the Teabags vs Gary Baldy. Mister Gary Baldy, you are charged with possession of an illegal weapon and attempted murder. The punishment, if found guilty, will be a lifetime banishment from Biscuitville."

Each word made Chicarita's stomach twist tighter, placing her on the verge of vomit. How she wished for it all to be just another nightmare.

The Colonel cleared his throat. "We will first hear the prosecution. Le Nag Bag, could you please come forth to the witness box?"

Cheers of admiration called out from the crowd as the Teabag rose from his position.

The Colonel frowned and bashed the gavel. "Order, order! This is a court case, not a sporting event!" The crowd immediately quietened. "Mr. Le Nag Bag, kindly take us through the events of the day in question."

The teabag got comfortable in the witness box next to the Grand Kernels of Justice. "Last Wednesday, around ten pm, I was working behind the bar area with my two colleagues, Butter and Bean. Gary Baldy, who was sat at the bar, shouted at us rudely, demanding more tea. His demeanour was aggressive and displeasing to the other customers, so I kindly requested him to join me outside."

The Colonel scratched his moustache. "Why did you feel it necessary to remove him from the Tea Bar?"

Le Nag Bag nodded. "I am well acquainted with Mister Gary Baldy. He has been our only employee in le tea factory since it opened. He is normally a fantastic worker, yet he has a terrible temper which he sometimes cannot control. I witnessed him throw tools in frustration and shout obscene language while he cleaned le factory. For this reason, I did not wish to cause a scene in le Tea Bar and preferred to have a private conversation with him outside."

"And what happened after you removed him from the bar?"

Le Nag Bag pointed to his two friends. "I had requested Butter and Bean to wait for me outside in le alley. I did not feel secure being alone with Mister Baldy. Once we were all together, I asked Gary what was wrong and if he had a problem with us. His only response was to keep shouting 'shut up!' and 'just give me more tea!' I went to put a hand on him to calm him down, but he became very angry. To my complete shock, he then removed a pistol from his pocket and fired a single shot at us. I am not sure how, maybe it was a blessing from le God, but we all managed to jump away from le bullet. After, we pounced on Gary, removed le gun from his possession, and beat him into submission. With le situation under control, I called le police from le Tea Bar who arrived within le next five minutes."

"It's a miracle no-one was hurt," the Colonel spoke. "Is there anything else you would like to state?"

"No, sir." Le Nag Bag strolled back to his seat.

The other two Teabags, Bean and Butter, were then called to the witness box and accounted exactly the same story, only in shorter and simpler words. Proceeding them were numerous other witnesses who were present inside the Tea Bar at that time.

“Gary Baldy always had a nasty attitude,” one witness reported. “But that day he was especially angry. He hadn’t even waited more than five minutes before shouting rudely at the Teabags for more illuminice-tea. He went outside with the Teabags, and a few minutes later, I heard the gunshot. I ran out back to see what had happened to find the three Teabags pinning Gary Baldy down.”

“I’m surprised this was the first incident,” another witness claimed. “I thought Gary was going to start a fight many times before. He once made a girl cry for skipping the queue.”

The reports were nothing new to Chicarita, who had suffered her father’s ill-tempered ways for years. She even found some comfort, knowing she was not the only one on the receiving end of his anger. But the fact he tried to murder the Teabags for no specific reason filled her mind with doubt. Her father was aggressive, but was he really a murderer?

She had watched the man throughout all the statements, standing in an enclosed section like a caged animal. His feet and hands were bound by thick handcuffs and chains. With his head hung, his gaze had never risen once.

As she stared at her father, the Colonel called her name. “Could Chicarita please come to the stand.”

Gary's head rose. Chicarita quickly looked away before they made eye contact. As she walked to the stand, a great weight fell upon her, like the world's gravitational force had tripled. The packed courtroom held total silence, a chilling tension dominating the air. Her knees rattled as all eyes fixated upon her.

In the witness box next to the Grand Kernels, she felt naked and exposed, and when asked to confirm her identity, she could barely speak. Fear and intimidation crawled through every vein, her breaths shallow as her neck tightened.

She wanted to flee from the room, but the exit was buried behind the waves of bodies observing her. The only sound was the giant wall clock, with each tick followed tock wracking her nerves.



The Colonel looked at her with sympathetic eyes. "Before you tell us about what you witnessed on the night of the shooting, we would like to know about your relationship with your father. Maybe you could tell us a little about his treatment towards you?"

Chicarita instantly froze up. She faced a whole audience awaiting her account of very personal matters. Although it was her father's court case, it felt like her life was on trial. For years, she had wanted the opportunity to express herself and be listened to in a safe environment. Yet, what she got was a public interrogation, an obligation to confess in the most uncomfortable circumstances, and it was absolute torture.

The Kernels of Justice, for all their interest, were only asking her about her life because it was their duty. And looking at the intrigued faces in the crowd, she knew it was the drama that had attracted them to the event. If they were truly sympathetic, they would have stayed at home and given her the privacy she deserved. The torment became too much to bear. She hid her sobbing face behind her hands.

"Take your time," the Colonel said.

Chicarita took a deep breath and regained her composure. "My relationship with my father is nothing nice. He never lets me go out and I feel like a prisoner in my own home. Everything I do requires his permission, most of which is denied. Anything I say or suggest is heavily criticised. He has a very bad temper and I'm always scared of how he will react."

The courtroom echoed with gasps of dismay.

Chicarita looked down at her father in his enclosed area, and for the first time in weeks, the two made eye contact. Surprisingly, the man also seemed close to tears with his eyes welled up. This was the first time she had ever witnessed him so emotional.

Chicarita's stomach again twisted. Being part of her father's prosecution and knowing how much trouble he faced was heartbreaking. More tears poured down her face, soaking her clothes.

Even the Colonel's eyes filled with moisture. "I know this is difficult, Chicarita, but I need you to tell us what you saw on the night of the attack."

She wiped her face. "My father had left the house in a terrible mood, saying he was going to the Tea Bar. As time passed, it became very late and he still hadn't returned home. Margartia was worried. She wanted to go and find him. She told me to stay at home, but I knew something wasn't right."

"How did you know?" Linda asked.

Behind her back, Chicarita squeezed her wrist tightly and crossed her fingers. "I just had a gut feeling." She wished with all her might that there would be no more questions about how she knew.

Silence prevailed, and she took the opportunity to continue her piece. "I followed my mum secretly, keeping a few metres behind her to avoid being caught. As she approached the Tea Bar, she took a look up the alley between the Tea Bar and the music store. I moved behind her, hiding behind a dustbin. At the top of the alley, my father was surrounded by the Teabags. They waved a piece of paper in his face, but I couldn't see what was on it. Gary shouted, 'Leave my family alone!' Whatever was on that piece of paper had my dad seriously worried about our safety."

Many individuals in the crowd grumbled at the claims. It was clearly a complete shock to them that the Teabags were capable of doing anything wrong.

Chicarita cleared her throat. "The Teabags laughed and approached my father aggressively. As they got closer, I saw my father take out a pistol from his pocket. In that moment, I sprinted in front of my mother, holding the dustbin lid as a shield. My father fired a shot at the Teabags but they jumped out the way. The bullet came down the alley towards us and then ricocheted off the metal lid. The last thing I saw was Gary and the Teabags fighting on the floor. Mother and I ran home and called the police."

The Colonel sniffed. "Well done, Chicarita. Your intuition and bravery saved your mother's life. You also stopped the first ever murder occurring in Biscuitville."

The kernels applauded with their large leaf hands, and everyone else in the courtroom joined in a standing ovation.

Chicarita loosened her grip on her wrist, uncrossed her fingers, and returned next to her mum's side, avoiding eye contact with her father.

Up until that moment, she had been separated from reality like a ship in a glass bottle, seeing the world around yet encapsulated in a confined environment. When sharing her story, she had freed herself from the entrapment and set sail on her maiden voyage of liberty. However, as she'd freed the boat, she'd also burst the protective bubble that had previously sheltered her from the harsh conditions outside. The brute force of both experiences crashed upon her like a Tsunami. Ultimately, she was both the ship and the bottle, and while aspects of her character found freedom, others shattered into a thousand pieces.

The Grand Kernels of Justice called Margarita to the witness box. She made her way to the stand and gave her statement. "When I arrived at the Tea Bar, thinking I was alone, I could hear shouting coming from the alley. I immediately recognised the voice of my husband accompanied by three others. "

Margarita sniffed as her eyes welled up. "I poked my head around the corner of the alley. The Teabags lined up in front of Gary, blocking any exit."

Linda scratched her wig. "What was the conversation between Gary Baldy and the Teabags?"

"I heard Gary shout, 'Leave my family alone!' to which one teabag responded, 'We only want to pop round for a cup of tea.' Butter was waving a piece of paper in Gary's face, but just like Chicarita, I couldn't see what was on it. The Teabags started laughing, but Gary had fury in his eyes. Whatever was on that paper made him really angry."

Again, many in the audience huffed in disbelief.

Margarita rose her voice. "I took a step up the alley to get a better view. The Teabags approached Gary with raised fists. It certainly did not look like Le Nag Bag was trying to comfort Gary, as he's claimed. The next thing I knew, Gary took out a pistol from his pocket and fired a shot at them. They all jumped aside, and the bullet came directly towards me. I thought my life was over. I closed my eyes and waited for the worst. I then heard a loud sound, like the hitting of a gong. When I opened my eyes again, I saw my dear daughter in front of me, shielding us both with a dustbin lid. I checked the two of us for injuries but we were miraculously unharmed. The Teabags and Gary continued fighting while Chicarita and I fled the scene."

"Is there anything else you would like to tell us, Margarita?" Linda asked.

"Yes. Gary wasn't always like this. His behaviour has totally changed since he's been working at the tea factory. I don't know why because he never speaks to me about it. All I get is silence or anger."

Margarita made her way back to Chicarita's side and hung her head. Chicarita placed an arm around her and together the two of them silently cried.



Patricia called a change in proceedings. “We shall now hear the defence. Can Gary Baldy please come to the witness box?”

Metal chains sounded as Gary was released from his enclosed area and escorted to the front of the courtroom. The audience gasped in shock—a monster image of the man had already been created by the claims of the previous witnesses, Chicarita's included. Now, the real thing shuffled through the courtroom and appeared even more demonic than the horrid descriptions.

Her father had only been in jail for a week but looked fifteen years older, his face covered in wrinkles while heavy bags surrounded his eyes. Manacles around his hands and feet limited his movement and made him hunch.

He would need one almighty defence to regain his freedom. Chicarita remained faithful, knowing her father's fine ability to stand up for himself.

There had to be a logical reason within his lunatic acts somewhere, especially considering his family was put in danger. At least that demonstrated he held love for them.

Gary took to his place in the witness box, his blank expression that of someone who was only physically present.

Patricia began with the questions. "Mister Gary Baldy, have you heard all the allegations made against you today?"

Her father only stared into the distance.

"Gary Baldy, did you understand the question?" Patricia asked.

"Yes, ma'am," he finally answered.

"Are all these accounts of what occurred true?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The audience grumbled in anger.

"And why did you try and shoot the Teabags?" Patricia asked.

It was the question that had burned away at Chicarita's mind. She stared at her father, who gave no immediate answer. His eye twitched as he stared at the crowd. His focus then turned to Chicarita and Margarita. Tears bubbled in his eyes and his lips wobbled.

His gaze then turned to the floor. "I don't know."

Patricia coughed. "What do you mean you don't know?"

Gary's head shook. "I JUST DON'T KNOW, ALRIGHT!"

The Colonel bashed the gavel. "Gary Baldy, you will refrain from shouting in court!"

"Sorry, sir."

Patricia pushed her reading glasses up her nose. "Is there anything you would like to say in your defence?"

Gary's head remained hung. "No."

Patricia's eyes bulged. "Nothing at all?! What was on the piece of paper that the Teabags were waving at you? Why did you tell them to leave your family alone?"

"I don't remember."

"Surely, there was a reason behind attacking the Teabags?"

"I was just angry," he said. "I don't remember a piece of paper with anything on it. I have nothing to say."

"At least you can tell us about your relationship with the Teabags in the tea factory?"

Gary sighed. "They treated me fine."

The madness of the confession had the whole courtroom gossiping.

"May the court clerk please bring us the evidence," Linda requested.

From a drawer, the clerk removed a pistol in a transparent bag and took it to the Grand Jurors. The sight of the weapon drew gasps from the audience. Chicarita instantly remembered it from her dream.

The Colonel held the gun in front of Gary. "Do you recognize this pistol, Mister Gary Baldy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it yours?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you aware that guns are outlawed in Biscuitville?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you purchase the weapon, Mr. Baldy?"

"I made it myself from construction material I found in the tea factory."

The Colonel checked the gun from multiple angles. "I find that highly unlikely. The design is almost faultless. How did you learn to make a pistol with such skill?"

"I tried different things and taught myself."

"Did you make any others?"

"No, sir."

Chicarita could not believe a word of it. Her father knowing how to make a gun was one thing, not having even the slightest justification for attempted murder was another. Being incapable of defending himself was the cherry on the cake over this gigantic pile of lies.

She and her mother stared at each other in disbelief. Never had they seen Gary so vulnerable and pathetic. He was a man who had always utilised a defence, even when he'd been at clear fault. What on earth had sucked out all his defiance, his arrogance, his essence?

Even the Grand Kernels of Justice appeared in shock. They excused Gary from the witness box and the chained man walked back to his restricted area, the sound of his metal shackles accompanying his every step.

Bertrand addressed the audience. "Would anyone else like to say anything?"

An elderly biscuit in the public gallery stood up and removed his bobble hat from his head before speaking. "I have nothing to say in defence of Gary, sir. But there are a few comments I would like to make about the Teabags."

"State your name," Linda said.

"Dougie McShortbread. Le Nag Bag and I were friends, or so I thought. That was until I discovered his true character. All he cared about was me buying his rotten illuminice-tea. He would say anything and everything just to keep me drinking. That teabag is not to be trusted!"

Le Nag Bag shot up from the bench. "Objection! What does this have to do with le case?"

Dougie pointed at Le Nag Bag aggressively. "Testing your credibility has everything to do with the case!"

"Calm down!" the Colonel spoke. "Dougie McShortbread, your opinion is granted. State your claim."

The old man took a moment before speaking. "I tricked Le Nag Bag into thinking I was sick to see how he would react. When I appeared almost dead, all he did was give me more illuminice-tea and advised me against going to the doctor. After I stopped drinking illuminice-tea, I had heavy withdrawal symptoms including violent outbursts and hallucinations in my house. I asked him if the brew was addictive or harmful, but he denied either possibility. That Teabag can't be trusted! Whatever he says is a lie!"

The Colonel turned to Le Nag Bag. "What do you have to say about this?"

Le Nag Bag straightened his tie. "Dear Dougie, when you told me you were sick, I was extremely worried for your health. I made a special medicine for you, hoping it would improve your condition. Did you take that medicine?"

"No! I threw your foul brew into a sunflower plant pot. And that poor plant died because of your wicked illuminice-tea!"

"That is because my tea was not made for a plant! You drowned the poor sunflower by giving it too much liquid! And let's be honest, Dougie, we all know you had anger problems before you started drinking illuminice-tea. So, please, don't blame my beverage for your already existent problems."

Those in the courtroom mumbled in agreement.

The Colonel bashed the gavel. "Would anyone else like to speak?"

A teenage biscuit with dreadlocks stood up. "I'd like a word."

"I as well would like to have my spell," a winged biscuit with ginger hair claimed.

"I would also like to speak," Coco announced. Even Chicarita recognised the famous singer, although she had never been allowed to attend any of her concerts.

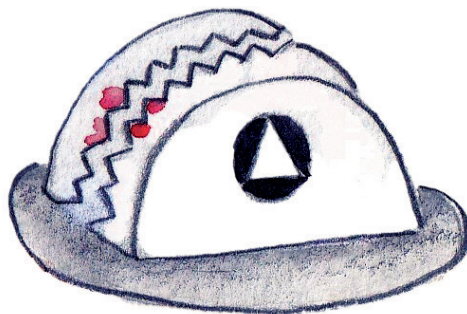
Suddenly, the smirk on Le Nag Bag's face converted into a worried frown.

The biscuit with dreadlocks was the first to speak. "I'm Ringo. I used to work for Le Nag Bag as a D.J, until I broke my leg and I was sent to hospital. While there, like Dougie, I realised how addictive the drink was. I was so desperate for another drink, I nearly lost my mind. I escaped from hospital before fully recovering. Le Nag Bag never cared about my health or friendship, either. All he cares about is his drink."

Le Nag Bag took no time to respond. "Ringo, my buddy, we came to visit you in hospital. Do you not remember how many other medications you were taking when you apparently 'lost your mind'? Before breaking your leg, you had lived a party life and then suddenly you found yourself locked in a hospital room. Your decision was to jump out of the window with a broken leg! I agree, only madness would inspire such illogical actions! But please, consider the many factors occurring at the time. Blaming my tea is just an easy excuse. I feel deep sympathy for you, and I hope we can reconcile our friendship one day."

Ringo reached for something between his legs. "While I was in the forest, I found this device." He held up an animal trap for everyone to see and pointed to a design on the side. The white triangle over a black circle was the same as the Tea-bags' logo on their labels.

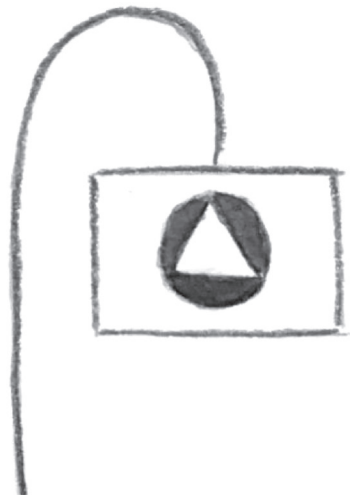
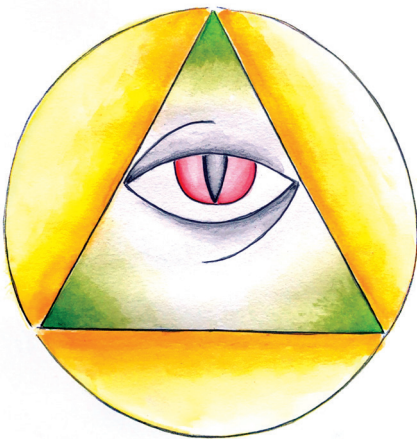
"Hunting wild animals was banned a long time ago in Biscuitville," Ringo said. "Can you please explain to me what this is and why it has your logo on it?"



Ringo then pressed the logo and the trap snapped open. Chicarita jumped in shock. The image of the singular eye over the Sun from her recurring dream flashed before her eyes. The design and shapes matched perfectly with the Teabags' logo. How had she failed to notice it before?

Le Nag Bag shrugged. "I have never seen that trap in my life. For all I know, you could have drawn our logo on le device. I cannot be held responsible for every item which shares my features. If le design on le trap was a big nose, would that mean it was Dougie's?!"

The crowd laughed. Dougie fumed. Ringo sat down. Chicarita blinked repeatedly, trying to remove the image of the eye over the Sun from her vision, but it would not disappear. What was the connection?



Next, a winged biscuit named Chip the Kid Cupid presented himself and his story. "I went to the Teabags in search of bigger wings and a stronger body. They gave me an injection, but only my wings grew. Unable to fly, a heavy depression I went through. I asked for the size of my wings to reduce, yet all I got was rejection and abuse. Their outrageous behaviour has no excuse."

Coco spoke before Le Nag Bag had time to respond. "I went to the Teabags hoping to look younger. Le Nag Bag gave me a special lotion that removed wrinkles and blemishes as promised. But when the soap entered my eyes, it left me blind. They showed no sympathy for me afterwards and left me all alone in the street. I still haven't received any compensation from them, either."

Le Nag Bag held his arms out. "My dear Coco and Chip. Both of you came looking for a service. Chip, you wanted bigger wings. Coco, you asked for a younger face, correct? And did you not get exactly what your hearts desired? It is my fault if you are not happy with the results you requested? The lotion I gave to Coco clearly states on the bottle: 'Do not let soap enter the eyes.' We cannot be held responsible for the errors of the clients. Maybe, they should be more careful with what they wish for."

Mutters of agreement filled the room, and a dirty smirk returned to Le Nag Bag's face. Yet, while everyone else seemed convinced by the Teabag's claims, Chicarita's suspicion of him only deepened. In this case, nothing seemed to make sense, and there was clearly more than just her prophetic dreaming remaining secret.

With nobody else wishing to speak, the Grand Kernels of Justice announced the end of the day. "This court will return tomorrow at nine am for the final judgement," the Colonel said. He bashed the gavel and they left the room.

Many biscuits stayed to discuss the day's drama. They obviously wanted the court case to continue and had enjoyed an entertaining time at the expense of others.

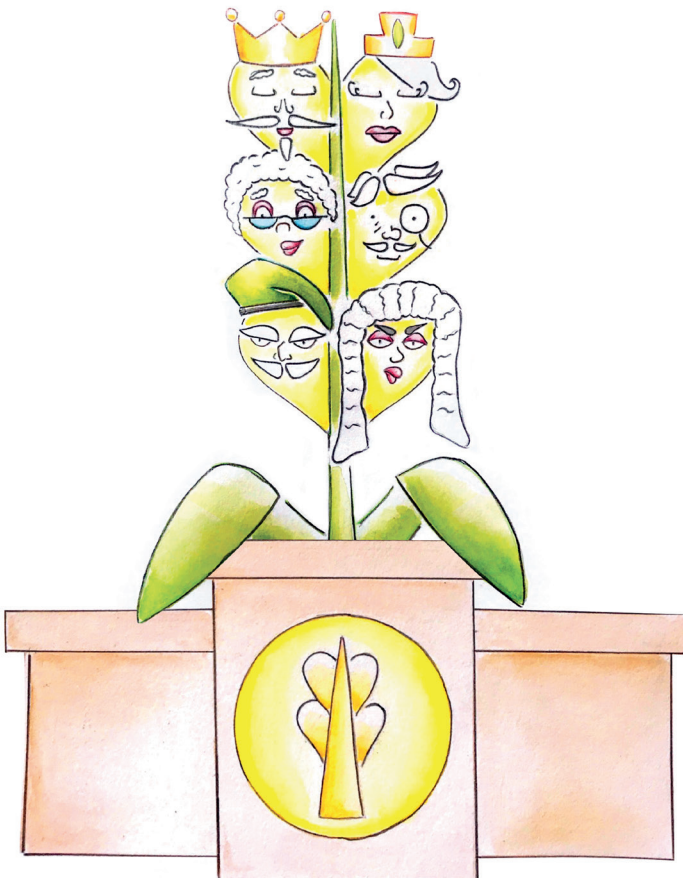
Chicarita wished for nothing more than to go home and disappear from the world. Maybe, her father was right to have kept her confined from this savage place.

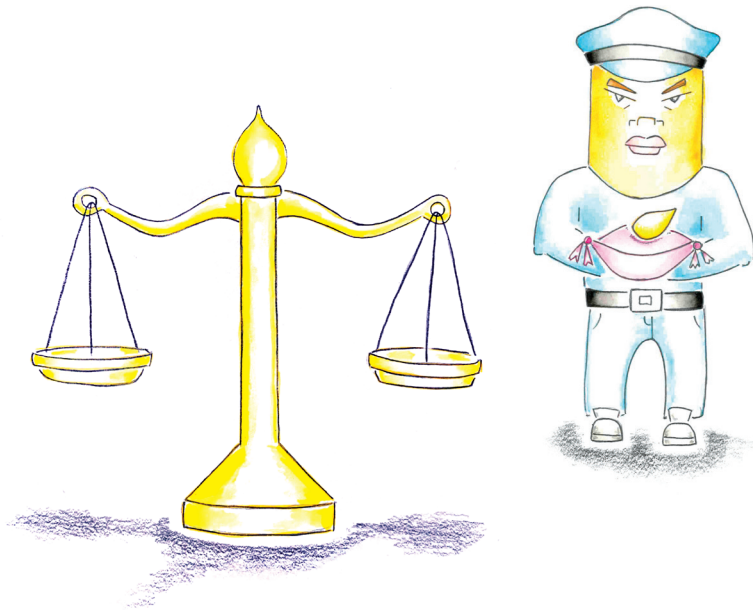
Nerves kept her awake throughout the sleeping hours, offering no chance for prophetic dreaming. For the first time in her life, she wished to have her special power, yet her mind was so filled with doubts and guilt that she couldn't fall asleep. Had she done the right thing? Why had her father been so defenceless in court? What final judgement awaited him? Her head spun in circles throughout the night.

Chapter 7

“All rise for the Grand Kernels of Justice,” the court official said. Chicarita wobbled to her feet as the six kernels entered the court room.

Patricia instructed the crowds to sit down. “Today, we will hear the final verdict of the case of the Teabags vs Gary Baldy. Gary Baldy, you are charged with possession of an illegal weapon and attempted murder. The punishment, if found guilty, will be banishment from Biscuitville, by order of the Grand Kernels of Justice.”





Chicarita held her breath. This was the first time in Biscuitville's history that a crime and punishment of this size had ever been presented. Not only was her father the suspect, but she had also testified against him. While her dad on trial, it was she who felt guilty of betrayal.

Patricia explained the next steps. "The final verdict will be delivered by the two Crowned Kernels. To announce their decision, the Queen Kernel will produce a Seed of Truth from behind the emerald jewel in her crown. The Seed of Truth will then be weighed on the Scales of Justice. If the Seed of Truth is lighter than the opposing scale, the suspect will be announced innocent. Yet, if the Seed of Truth is heavier than the opposing scale, the defendant will be found guilty and charged of all crimes."

All the kernels then closed their eyes. The emerald jewel in the Queen's crown suddenly opened like a door and out came Gary's Seed of Truth. A court official placed it on a pillow and carried it towards the Scales of Justice.

The courtroom held silence. Chicarita squeezed her wrist behind her back and crossed her fingers, wishing that the Grand Kernels of Justice could see something in this case that she could not.

Her father's Seed of Truth was placed on the weighing plate. Almost instantly, the scale holding the seed dropped, proving it was heavier than the opposing scale, meaning Gary Baldy was guilty. The punishment would be a lifetime banishment from Biscuitville. Chicarita would never see her father again.

While the rest of the courtroom muttered in satisfaction, Chicarita uncrossed her fingers and stood up. "NOOOO!" she cried out.

The courtroom returned its focus upon her.

"Why don't you want him banished, Chicarita?" Linda inquired.

Everyone looked upon her with shock, making her question her own outburst. Why would she argue against the decision? She had suffered her father's cruelty more than anyone else. Yet, so many peculiarities in the court case left her in doubt over the verdict.

Intimidation clogged her throat, but she swallowed her fear and spoke up. "Somewhere and somehow, my father has become lost, but that does not mean he can't find himself again. We all deserve a second chance, and with the right treatment, who's to say he can't be a better biscuit? After all, isn't that the point of our correctional facilities?"

The Grand Kernels of Justice leaned towards her. "So what are you suggesting?" Linda asked.

"Can't we give him a prison sentence, away from society but with the chance to redeem himself?"

"Let us ask the Crowned Kernels." the Colonel said.

The two royal looking kernels silently thought about the proposal with their eyes closed. Their constant smile looked out of place under the current circumstances. They remained motionless for a while until simultaneously, they nodded in acceptance to Chicarita's request.

Chicarita exhaled in relief. The Teabags and the audience moaned about the controversial overturn, but the final decision was not theirs to make. The Grand Kernels of Justice had agreed that Gary Baldy would be imprisoned indefinitely until he was again considered a safe citizen. The verdict was finalised with a bashing on the gavel.

“Case closed,” Linda announced. “Our final consideration must be what Margarita and Chicarita will do now that Gary Baldy is in jail. With him no longer capable of supporting his family, they will have no financial aid. A plan must be implemented. What is it you wish to do, Chicarita and Margarita?”

Chicarita's mind was empty. All she had ever wanted was to be free from the restraints of her father. The only thing she knew how to do well was cook and clean, but that spurred an idea.

“I wish to have a bistro with my mother,” she said. “A place where my mum can prepare her wonderful food and I can speak in peace with whoever comes and goes.”

“Then it is decided,” Linda said. “You and your mother will take over the restaurant next to the theatre. The current owner is seriously ill and needs to be replaced. With support from the bank, you will have your bistro.”

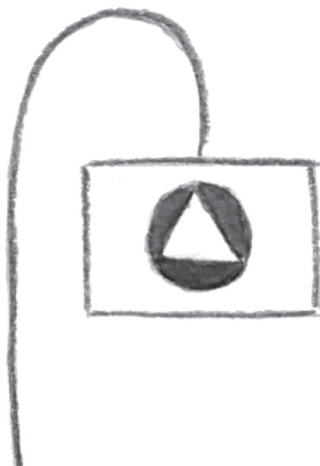
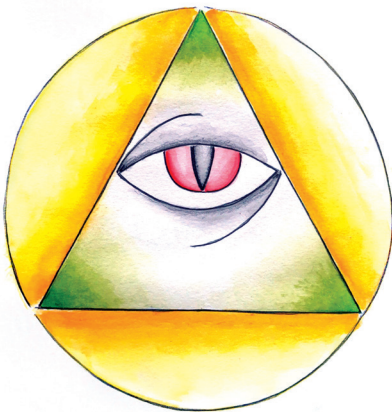
Chicarita turned her attention to her father, who was already staring directly at her. There was nothing to read in his expression, just a blank page leaving her clueless as to his emotions. Within the unknown, however, there was some comfort, as no expression was better than anger and scrutiny.

Was Gary grateful that she had just saved him? Or would it be another act he would resent and condemn? His defence had been so pathetic, maybe he had wanted to be banished. With his eyes fixed on his daughter, he was dragged out by the police and then disappeared behind a door, the sound of his chains fading into silence.

Chapter 8

Setting up the bistro was much harder than Chicarita had ever expected, but with the emotional support of her mother and the financial aid from the bank, it was only a few weeks of work before her idea became a reality. The court case had made a hero out of her, and using her name to their advantage, they called the restaurant 'Chicarita's Bistro.'

Since the day her father was locked up in jail, she awaited an invite or at least a letter from him, yet weeks went by without a single word. His only visits were during Chicarita's recurring dream, which now happened on a more regular basis. Every time, Chicarita wondered what the connection was between the triangle eye over the Sun and the Teabags' logo.





With the bistro finished, Chicarita and her mother stood outside the building, admiring their creation.

Margarita placed an arm around her daughter. "I have a gift for you. Close your eyes and put out your hands."

Mother passed Chicarita a blue box containing a deck of Tarot cards. "These were your great-grandmother's," Margarita explained. "She always believed in foresight, but I was never convinced. Not until you saved my life."

Chicarita ran her fingertips across the box. "What do you expect me to do with them?"

"I thought you could give Tarot card readings to those you have dreams about. You can pretend your special knowledge is guidance from the cards, when really, it's your own intuition. That way, you'll be able to tell biscuits about any dangers while your prophetic skills remain secret."

Tears welled in Chicarita's eyes. "Thank you, Mother."

"Remember, my dear, biscuits will only believe what they want to hear, just like me when you warned about going to the Tea Bar. Don't be disheartened if others don't believe you. If you try to save a million lives yet only save one, you'll still have made a big achievement."

Tears ran down both their faces as they embraced.

In the corner of the Bistro, Chicarita set up a table behind a curtain, making a separate Tarot card reading area. Whenever biscuits she recognised from her dreams entered the place, she would offer readings for free. Some accepted, some refused, some just wanted to eat as fast as possible and return to the Tea Bar. Nevertheless, she could finally express her foresight. Whether biscuits decided to take action over the advice was not her concern. She could free herself from the guilt of remaining silent without her skill being discovered.

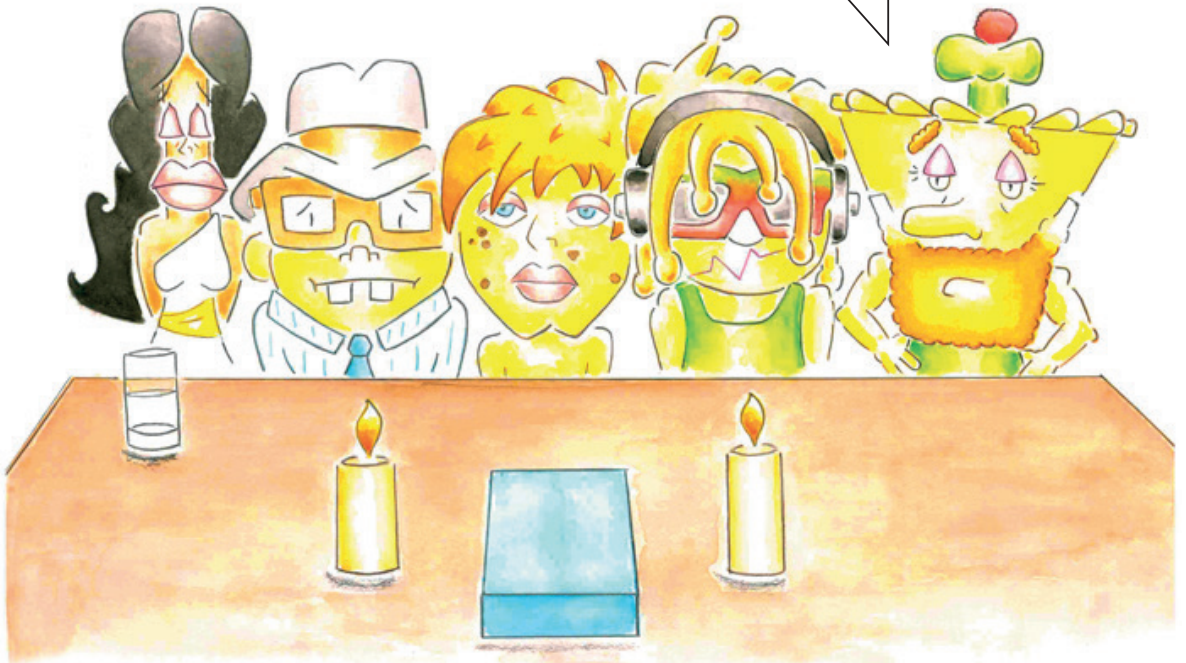
After one of her Tarot card reading sessions, she was approached by a group of very recognisable biscuits from the court case. The five individuals stared directly at her.

The biscuit with dreadlocks spoke first. "Hey, Chicarita. Do you remember me?"

"How could I forget," she responded. "You're Ringo. You brought that animal trap to the court case. The Teabags' logo on it hasn't left my mind." They all stood in front of her, as if desiring a group session. "I only do one reading at a time," Chicarita informed.

There was an uncomfortable pause until an elderly biscuit spoke up.

"Actually, lass, we're here to read you. My name's Dougie, by the way."



Chicarita's stomach twisted. "I don't understand."

Dougie huffed. "We were all present at the court case. After the description you gave of your father, I wonder why you'd have any sympathy for the man at all. But, there must be a good reason why he tried to kill the Teabags."

She shuffled the Tarot cards, avoiding eye contact. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You haven't been seen in the Tea Bar once, " Dougie said. "I have a suspicion that you know more about the Teabags than what you're telling."

"I'm too busy working here to be drinking in the Tea Bar."

Coco extended her hand. "All we want is justice. If we're to beat the Teabags, we're gonna need all the help we can get."

Chip leaned forward. "Their escape from conviction we cannot bear. Please, is there any information you can share?"

Chicarita shook her head. "I don't know anything about them, or my father."

A biscuit with large glasses stepped forward. "We don't wish to cause you any danger. We just want the Teabags to be exposed. Whether this town realises it or not, we're all in deep trouble."

The biscuits stood there waiting for some positive news. Doubt again took over Chicarita, making her nauseous. Could she really trust them? 'Let the Tarot cards decide,' a voice spoke in her head. She split the deck and turned over the top card on the left pile.

Dance of the Butterfly revealed itself, calling her to change her ways. The card's message couldn't have been clearer. 'From crawling caterpillar to fluttering flight, Life's miraculous transformations cannot be denied, irrelevant of how impossible they may appear. Release any feelings of unworthiness that subdue you to fight alone.'

Her decision was made. "Come out the back with me," she told the group. "It's not safe to talk here in public. You'll start a riot."

Chicarita thought her journey would calm down after the courtcase. It seemed, however, to be just taking flight.

