

The Judgment of Gritty Sax

Brandon M. Dennis

Tova sat on a stump writing a letter. The letter was for a friend of hers who sent her letters all the time, and they exchanged funny stories and witty rhymes. Normally, Tova wrote her letters on a nice, hard surface, but today was an exceptionally beautiful day, and there was no way she could justify spending it indoors.

Her stump rested amongst a patch of clover in a lightly wooded vale. Thin, tall trees dotted the area, and they all bore bright green leaves with yellow edges. Little green birds with blue feet and white feathers on the tips of their wings whistled shrill songs, mostly in defiance of the strong breeze that rocked the limbs on which their nests rested. Tova looked up from her letter and closed her eyes. She inhaled the wind and

smiled, for all of a sudden she was hit with a pleasant memory, or rather, the memory of a memory. She recognized something that rode the winds that day, but her inability to name it caused her to furrow her brow.

She looked west towards the setting sun, the rays of which reached for her from behind the thin trees. She saw a gnarled and crooked stump, much larger than the one she was sitting on. It was then that the memory of a memory started to make sense. The stump was the key. She remembered that she had had a history with that stump, and her inability to bring the memory to the tip of her mind troubled her. Why was this memory so hard to remember? What frustrated her was that it was so close, just within reach, but something was keeping her from fully retrieving it.

She shook her head and looked down at her letter. She was writing with a pen she made herself from a hollowed twig, and she used a purple ink. She finished scratching the last few words of her letter out and she signed the paper.

“There,” she said, “all done!” She blew on the ink to make it dry, folded the letter, and placed it in an envelope.

As she was thus engaged, she thought that she heard a faint rumbling. It could have been the wind rustling through the leaves, but the birds had stopped screeching, and had, in fact, disappeared all together. The rumbling grew louder, and she realized that it wasn't rumbling at all, but chanting, a deep, dark chanting that made the branches of the trees shudder. She stood to her feet and strained her hearing. Presently she was able to pick out the words:

*“Grumpy, bumpy, slumpy doo,
dracky flaky, splatty too!
Grippity blat, drackety flat,
Stompy, bompy, trompy foo!*

*The little one did kick and flay,
And lunge at us in frenzied fits.
She aided our most favorite prey
And shattered us to little bits!*

*Queen she is, of mushroom folk,
For thwarting us that woeful day.
But we think she is a joke,
And so we come, and come to stay!*

*Flitty, blitty, trippy stew,
Happity bappity, rappity dew!
Trickitey splat, grappity mat,
Ronky, bonky, donky boo!”*

At last, Tova grasped the memory that had dangled before her, just out of reach. The air above ground had robbed her of her recollection, and she hadn't visited the Svampoids in many months, but upon hearing the song of the Saxitans, it all came back in a flood. Her trip down the twisted stump, her encounter with

Magsvamp and the Svampoids, her battle against the Saxitans and becoming the queen of the Svampoids—it appeared once again in her mind as if it had never left.

Suddenly a fist made from brown earth-stone shot through the soil, knocking Tova to the ground and showering her with a wave of dirt. Tova closed her eyes and felt herself become buried by layers of soil. She heard a rumbling laughter. She struggled and tried to dig herself out, but all at once she was lifted up and she saw the world spin below her. She saw a hard, craggy, brown mass before her, but she could not focus her eyes. She was held upside-down by her right foot and she flailed about madly, trying to free herself. Again, she heard the coarse, dark laughter.

“Methinks we’ve got her boys, got her good, and no more kicking will she do!” said the voice. She saw the dark mass before her move upwards and soon it

turned into an upside-down face with big fleshy eyes that grinned at her evilly.

“Does it make sense yet, girl?” it said, and as the mouth spoke, it spat pebbles and bits of crumbled stone. “You didn’t think that we’d let lie the queen of the Svampoids, did you? Not even the great dome can daunt us, for we are the Saxitans, rulers of all that rests upon stone!”

With that, the creature laughed the most horrible laugh that Tova had ever heard. It then began to fall apart, and dirt and stone swirled around her, causing her to lose all sense of direction. She tumbled in mid-air, catching a glimpse of a tree and the sky here and there, but soon all she could see was darkness below her, and then the darkness engulfed her.

As she fell she screamed, and the rocks around her collided and crashed in an eerie harmony. What at

first seemed solid below her melted away in a cascade of rubble, and she felt helpless as the Saxitans took her to an unknown destination.

Tova covered her head with her arms and closed her eyes. It was hard to breathe, and she gasped for mouthfuls of air as she twisted and turned in the subterranean maelstrom. When she thought that she could not go on any longer, she suddenly felt weightless. She opened her eyes. A dim, green glow met them, and she hovered shortly in a pocket of time before she fell hard, hit the cold stone floor and tumbled across it.

She coughed. Rocks collided and swirled around her, and she slowly lifted herself up and stood to her feet. She was in a large, roughly hewn stone hall. The dangling strings of roots poked out of the walls and dripped water onto the floor, making the air dank. On

the far end of the chamber sat a gray throne made of stone, and six smaller brown seats rested near to it on either side. Before the throne was a circular depression, and it was in this depression that Tova found herself. Long, bumpy green crystals poked out of the walls here and there, and they emitted a verdant glow that lit the room enough for Tova to see. Crumbled stone poured out of a dark hole in the wall above the throne, and it was through this hole that the Saxitans had carried her. As the cascade of pebbles swirled around her, they assembled into the smaller Saxitans that Tova had defeated in her previous encounter, with a single, large stone as a torso, two long stones for arms and two for legs, and a thin, triangular stone for a head. The chamber began to fill with row upon row of angry Saxitans, and when they

came into their proper form, they clacked their arms together rhythmically.

As the flurry of flying stone finally began to slow, twelve small Saxitans solidified upon the twelve brown seats before her. They distinguished themselves from their brethren by wearing capes made from woven moss. They remained unmoving and the tips of their triangular heads pointed right at Tova. The cascade of loose stone finally became a trickle, and the last bit fell out of the dark opening and onto the gray stone throne. A being emerged from these final remnants, and when he had regained his full form, Tova gasped. It was twice as tall as the other Saxitans. It too wore a cape made from moss, but what startled Tova were the two, fleshy eyes staring at her from within its triangular head, which none of the other Saxitans had. These eyes stared daggers at her.

Tova shook her head and stood up straight, facing the large Saxitan. She puffed out her chest and lifted her chin.

“You all are in a lot of trouble!” she said. “You took me without asking and you have gotten me all bruised and dirty. You have some explaining to do!”

The crowds of Saxitans clacked their arms together furiously and the large one on the throne stood up and raised his arm.

“There, friends, do you see? She is defiant even now! Surely, there can be no doubt as to her guilt. Harken to me, for I am Gritty Sax, the greatest judge of the Saxitans. The trial of Tova the Svampoid Queen shall now commence!”

The audience roared and stomped their legs, and the room trembled. Gritty Sax stepped forward.

“A year ago, this top-dweller destroyed a great many of our number. Our brothers were simply doing that which comes naturally to all Saxitan kind—stomping on things, for it is in the nature of every stone to stomp.”

“Stomp! Stomp! Stompity-too!” cried the audience.

“They were minding their own business, stomping on Svampoids, when this human girl appeared out of nowhere and kicked them to pieces!”

“The naughty miss with nasty kicks!” said the audience.

“Our revenge has been long in the coming, but today it has finally arrived. We shall condemn this top-dweller, for she is a rock-crusher, a stone-basher, and she must be stopped!”

The audience roared and clanked their arms together. Gritty Sax sat down in his throne and the

twelve smaller Saxitans next to him stood up. They raised their hands and silenced the audience, and then began to sway from side to side.

“Shall they who are doomed to defend the creature,” said the twelve in unison, “now stand and take their seats! We call forth...”

At this, the twelve began to tremble and the room grew quiet.

“Triksset!” said the twelve, “and Praxtin!”

The audience booed and hissed and two Saxitans stumbled forward from the crowd and dropped down into the depression. Other Saxitans threw stones at them, and when the stones hit the floor, they promptly tumbled back towards the caster.

Triksset and Praxtin raced towards Tova.

“Oh, what horrible luck!” said Triksset, and he shook his head.

“We’re doomed, doomed forever!” said Praxtin.

“What are you two talking about?”

“We’re your lawyers,” said Trikset, “and it is our job to set you free.”

“But if we fail,” said the Praxtin, “then our brothers will hate us for defending a rock-smasher, and they will destroy us!”

The two Saxitans cried out miserably, but were silenced when Gritty Sax raised his arm.

“We judges of the Saxitans accuse the Queen of the Svampoids with destroying our perfectly innocent raiding party.”

“Oh, the monster!” cried the crowd.

“It is our custom to squash the Svampoids, and any other creatures we want to, and she had no right to stop our fun. But so that no one can accuse our great race of being unfair, we shall allow the queen to

tell her side of the story. Trikset! Praxtin! You shall defend this creature. So, now, what is your defense? Speak!”

The audience grew quiet. Trikset and Praxtin looked around nervously.

“Um...” said Trikset as he stepped forward, “this top-dweller is innocent because...because...she is a dragon!”

The crowd gasped.

“What?” said Tova.

“Yes! That’s it!” said Praxtin, joining his friend. “She is a dragon, with big sharp teeth, and if you convict her, she will breathe fire on you!”

“Yes! Fire! And it will be hot!”

“I am not a dragon,” said Tova.

The audience gasped again.

“Shh! You are ruining our case!” said Trikset.

“Your case is stupid!” said Tova.

“Oh, it’s true, she is not a dragon,” said Praxtin.

“She is really... a giant mole!”

“She’s a giant king mole!” said Trikset.

“And she will dig big holes in us all if we don’t set her free!”

“I am not a mole!” shouted Tova, and she crossed her arms angrily.

“Of course not,” said Trikset. “She is really a giant land lizard monster, with a long, scaly tail, a forked tongue, giant bumpy feet and with an appetite for rocks!”

“Oh, the horrors she could inflict!” said Praxtin.

“We should let her go before she eats us all!”

“You both are fired,” said Tova. The crowd murmured and the twelve seated Saxitans consulted with each other.

“Can she do that?” asked Trikset.

“I don’t know,” said Praxtin. “It has never been done before.”

Gritty Sax raised his arm.

“If the girl does not want her lawyers, then we will not force her, but she must instead represent herself. We judges will find it hard to believe the word of a rock-smasher!”

“Yay!” said Trikset.

“Hooray! We’re saved!” cried Praxtin, and the two Saxitans stumbled off into the audience, cheering all the way.

Tova stood up straight and faced the crowd. She cleared her throat and lifted her chin.

“When I found the Svampoids, their villages were smashed because of you Saxitans.”

“Naturally,” said the fleshy-eyed Saxitan, and the audience nodded in agreement.

“It is wrong to smash things that do not want to be smashed! Your desire to stomp on things doesn’t make it right.”

“Preposterous!” said one judge and “Silly!” said another, and the audience muttered angrily.

“I kicked those Saxitans,” said Tova, “because they invaded the Svampoid villages and were smashing the Svampoids. Every creature should be able to defend itself or help those in need of defense.”

At this, the crowd of Saxitans began to yell angrily and clack their arms together. Gritty Sax stood up and raised his arm.

“Silence! Silence I say! Quiet you rabble! This rock-smasher’s case is a poor one. After all, she is

clearly biased, and what is worse, she has no witnesses!”

“I am a witness,” said a clear, loud voice. All heads turned towards the dark opening above the gray throne. Magsvamp, King of the Svampoids, stood in the opening. His little mushroom arms were poised defiantly on his hips and he looked out over the Saxitans with angry eyes.

“I have been witness to the violence of the Saxitans for years, and I was there the day Tova helped us fight off our invaders. I am a witness, and I say that Tova be freed!”

Magsvamp leapt down from the opening and ran towards Tova, showering green spores everywhere. The judges all conversed with each other noisily, for this was highly irregular, and they didn't quite know what to make of it.

“What are you doing?” whispered Tova to Magsvamp when the little Svampoid reached her. “When they are finished with me, they will stomp on you!”

“This trial is a sham,” said Magsvamp, “and you will need me if you ever want to see the top-side again.”

“But I don’t want you to be harmed!”

“Sometimes we endure great personal loss so that others might be saved,” said Magsvamp.

“Silence! Silence, the lot of you!” ordered Gritty Sax, and his fleshy eyes bulged out of his dark, rocky sockets. The audience quieted down and the twelve judges stopped their debating.

“I am the great judge of all the Saxitans. I gave all Saxitans the authority to stomp on whatever they wish. I sent them towards the Svampoid villages, for

the Svampoids are a nuisance, showering their green spores everywhere and building fungus houses in every crack and crevice! I say when the stomping will end, and as long as I am in power, we Saxitans will stomp forever!”

“Gritty Sax! Gritty Sax! Gritty Sax!” chanted the Saxitans.

“You, Tova, have entered a world you were not meant for. Your ideas of fair, unfair, right and wrong do not apply beneath the soil, where we rocky-folk reign. You kicked our brethren, and so we will kick you, until there is nothing left of you to kick! The trial is over! The judgment is passed! Let us now fulfill the sentence. Tova must die!”

When Gritty Sax finished these words, he and the other Saxitans raised their arms and stretched out their legs. A rumbling yawn creaked throughout the

chamber, and soon the rocky pieces of the Saxitans began to tremble violently. Their arms and legs separated from their bodies, and their triangular heads flew away. The mass of floating rock began to swirl around Tova, and smaller bits lashed at her face. Tova covered her head with her arms as the whirlwind of stone swirled faster and began to close in on her. She shrieked.

Magsvamp pried her arms apart and looked her in the eyes.

“Take me in your hand,” he said, “and cause me to grow!”

“What? I can’t do that!” said Tova.

“Yes you can! You are Queen of the Svampoids and have power over all subterranean fungi. You can make mushrooms grow as tall as you want, and in any shape you desire. I am made from mushroom matter,

as are all the Svampoids. Take me, and cause me to grow!”

“I can’t!” said Tova. “If I turn you into something else, you will no longer be my friend Magsvamp. You will die!”

“I will gladly give my life if it means that the Saxitans can never stomp on my people again. My personal loss will save all the Svampoids.”

Tova grabbed Magsvamp and held him tight. The groaning and yawning of the Saxitans had turned into an evil laughter, and the sharp rocky shrapnel flew about her viciously. In the mess of stone, she saw two floating, bloodshot eyes, and they danced before her mockingly. Her clothes were being tattered, and she had numerous cuts and bruises. She could only endure so much more! She looked into Magsvamp’s black, beady eyes, and he nodded.

“Fulfill your duty as Queen of the Svampoids,” he said. “Don’t let me be forgotten!” With that, Magsvamp closed his eyes.

Tova frowned and furrowed her eyebrows. She squeezed Magsvamp and his body began to swell. She opened her mouth and let out a roar, and then lifted up Magsvamp with one hand. A circle of green light shot out from Magsvamp, and a shower of spores filled the chamber, mixing with the whirlwind of stone. Magsvamp’s body began to grow, and white mushroom filled the room. The fungus spilled out of Tova’s hands and violently bulged outwards in balls, interrupting the swirling stone and sending the shards flying against the far wall.

Tova thrust her arms to the left, flinging the mass of mushroom matter into the Saxitans, pinning them against the far wall. She thrust her arms to the right

and sent out a large puff of white mushroom, which caught the rocky bits, pressing them against the wall. She held up both her hands and the mushroom surrounding her expanded rapidly. The chanting and yawning of the Saxitans stopped, and all that Tova could hear were a few muffled cries, and the creaking of rock scraping against the stone walls.

In short order, the chamber that was once occupied by angry, violent Saxitans was now filled with mushroom. Tova pressed her hand forward and a gap in the matter appeared. As she walked towards the gray stone, her path filled in behind her. She caused the fungus to lift her towards the dark opening above the throne, and when it set her down outside of the room, she turned around. White mushroom matter continued to swell and filled every gap within the chamber, forever trapping the dismembered Saxitans.

At last, the swelling stopped, and all that Tova could see was a white, puffy bulge, slightly protruding into the dark opening. Tova patted it and lowered her head.

“You won’t be forgotten, Magsvamp,” she said.

Tova returned to the Svampoid villages where the Svampoids greeted her warmly. When she relayed the story of the Saxitans and the ultimate fate of Magsvamp, the Svampoids lowered their mushroom heads and spilled spores out onto the ground in sorrow. Tova plucked a mushroom from the Svampoid nursery and held it in her hand. She stood in the middle of the village square and lifted the mushroom high. She caused it to grow, and as it grew, she molded it with her mind. When she was finished, she set it down in the middle of the square. It was a statue, the perfect likeness of Magsvamp. It was as tall

as Tova, and stood in the defiant pose that Magsvamp had struck when he first came to Tova's defense during the trial. Green spores slowly drifted from the head of the statue to rest gingerly upon the ground. The following words were inscribed at the base of the statue:

IN MEMORY OF MAGSVAMP, KING OF THE SVAMPOIDS, WHO
GAVE HIS LIFE SO THAT THE SVAMPOIDS MIGHT LIVE. MAY
HE NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

The Svampoids held a great feast in his memory, and they played games, sang songs and played music on little hollowed out nuts that they used as flutes. Tova watched the Svampoids dance, then she danced with them, and when the day was done, all thought that it had been a fitting tribute to the memory of Magsvamp.

The next day, Tova crowned a new king of the Svampoids, Minsvamp, the younger cousin of Magsvamp, who said that he would lead the Svampoids with all the care and love of his older cousin.

At last, it was time for Tova to go home. The Svampoids all crowded around her and begged her not to leave, but she just smiled and shook her head.

“I’ve got to go, but I’ll be back soon! While I am gone, build more houses, make more Svampoids, and enjoy life now that the Saxitans are gone forever!”

She rode the mushroom elevator up through the gnarled stump until it flung her out onto the grass. She stood up, brushed herself off and walked towards her house. As her life returned to normal, she was often tempted to forget about the Svampoids, because she was so preoccupied with all of her obligations

above ground. But she never did forget about them.

Every week she made a point of visiting the

Svampoids, and especially the statue of Magsvamp the

Svampoid King.