

A very famous folk tale serves as partial inspiration for two of this issue's stories. It is a mark both of that tale's complexity and of the creativity and insight of our contributors what different fruits they've brought from that tree.

Mirror, Mirror

by Laurel Winter

She let me in. I wasn't sure she would. Wasn't sure I wanted her to. Even after I'd confirmed the interview that morning, I half expected her to send me away at the gate. But the glistening metal bars slid into the sides of the frame when I pressed the screen and said, "Katja Kesh for an interview with M. Sherizan."

As soon as I was through the gate, the bars shot back. Four-centimeter bars, spaced less than their own thickness apart, enclosed the entire residence. The only way I could get back out—unless she chose to let me—was as a gas or a liquid. Something in my stomach started feeling all too solid.

Only one path led through the dense greenery. It went at an angle, not at all toward the house that I assumed lay at the center of the massive steel structure, but there didn't seem to be a choice.

The path spiraled through bushes trimmed to form a tunnel. In one place, I saw sap oozing from a newly-cut branch, but there was no sign of any gardener, either human or robotic. The path wound and wound. I knew that it was too subtle to make me dizzy, but that didn't lessen the effect.

There was no warning. One moment I was in a green tunnel; the next I had run face first into a wall of glass. Probably not glass, but one of the clear, unbreakable compounds that had almost replaced it.

Didn't matter what it was; my nose stung and tears blinded me. When I stepped forward again, my hand in front of me, the panel was gone. I stepped into her house.

Not twenty people had been inside the home of M. Sherizan in the last forty-five years, if the media—not just the glitzers and the tabs, but respectable vidjournals like the one I represented—was to be believed. And here I was, snuffling blood into the back of my throat.

The place was made of panels like the one I'd run into. Some were so clear they almost didn't exist. Others were mirrored or clouded or shot with silver webs. Then there were the colored ones, swirled, drenched with clear

hues, opaque or translucent. And some of them were even immense vidscreens.

The floor was glittering silver. I was glad I had decided to wear tights. Even so, a perfect reflection of my pelvic area from below was disconcerting. I snuffled again and wondered where I was supposed to go. Unlike the garden area, there was no one clear path, just a maze of panels.

In looking again, though, my eye did detect a pattern. The mirrored panels led in a jagged line through the others. I gave another experimental snuffle, decided my nosebleed was taking care of itself, and followed the mirrors.

They were set at odd angles to one another, so my reflections multiplied. I felt like touching myself to make sure I was the original. My reflections preceded and followed me, until I came to the end of the mirrors.

After my nose-first entry, I had developed the habit of walking with one hand stretched out in front of me, fingers splayed. So my hand was the first part of me that M. Sherizan saw when I wandered into her room, not sure I would ever find her.

Her room was milk and snow and weathered bones. Whiter than white. The only colors in the world she inhabited—aside from me—were her pale brown eyes and the greenish blonde of her hair. The latter, I knew from my research, was due to a chemical effect of the stuff that pulsed through her arteries and veins.

"Greeting, M. Kesh," she whispered with pale lips. "Will you join me for luncheon?"

"Luncheon? Sure—but I didn't think you—I mean...." I let my voice trail off. How the hell did I know if she ate or not?

She gave me something that resembled a laugh. "Oh, we won't actually be consuming food." She waved a hand that looked like porcelain, activating a sensor somewhere. Seconds later, a bot wheeled in and stopped dead in front of her. "Don't touch the tray," she said. "It