

the ORACLE

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The Man awoke within his small limestone home. He stood and moved to the window, staring out to view Athens. A slow feeling of trepidation flowed into his heart.

“Today I speak to the Oracle,” he thought.

The Man emptied his chamber pot and put on his tunic. Walking into the next room he noticed his Father, who was already awake and sitting quietly at the table. The Man didn't want to see his Father, not today. It was painful to look at the old man, especially his hands. Hands that once made the finest pottery in Athens, that once were strong and sure, now sat shriveled and spasmodically jerked. It had all started with the hands.

The Father was an artist. He crafted graceful amphoras and curved hydrias. This provided well for his family and they lived comfortably. Very slowly, the Father's hands began to rebel. They started to shake and twitch at odd times. Often these twitches would ruin the pottery as it spun on the wheel. Worried at this curse the gods had inflicted upon him, the Father went to the Temple to sacrifice to Athena. The tremors and twitches continued to get worse. The curse seemed beyond the powers of the Goddess of War and Wisdom. In desperation, the Father petitioned the goddess Hygieia and her children, Asclepius and Epione.

The Man wished that his Father had never sacrificed to Hygieia. For while Athena seemed unwilling or unable to remove the curse, this infidelity angered her. She made the curse spread. The Father began to have trouble swallowing his food and started losing weight. He began forgetting simple things. Soon he became angry and impulsive. He would smash the precious pottery, yelling at his son, his wife, the gods, and the fates. Lately he just sat staring into space.

For years the Man watched his Father crumble like a forgotten marble temple falling into disrepair. Bricks crack, pillars fall, and censures sit long cold. So too did the Father's muscles atrophy, his mind became dim, and while his body remained, his mind had mostly flown.

There the Father quietly sat. The human ruin, cared for by the Man.

“Today I speak to the Oracle,” the Man mused once again.

Despite his disdain for spending time with his Father, the Man worried about leaving him alone. Sometimes the Father would walk out the door, wander, and become lost. The Man had

spoken with his neighbor, the bronze-smith, who said he would keep an eye on the Father.

The sun was still rising as the Man stepped outside. He looked at his small and shabby hovel for a moment, and then turned his feet towards the Temple.

When his Father's curse kept him from making the pottery that provided for the family, they became destitute. To survive they sold off their possessions, and finally their home; driven to live on the streets. During this time the Mother was taken ill with the coughing-sickness. She died soon after. The Father didn't even realize his wife was gone. The Man, however, decided to try and make things better. He began to shape clay, like his Father, but with an inferior talent. Nevertheless, it had provided the small home they now lived in.

“I am improving,” the Man thought to himself. “Perhaps one day I'll be better than Father! It depends on what the Oracle has to say,” he reminded himself with dread. The thought of the Oracle made his heart race. It was already beating hard from the exertion of walking from the city slums up to the Temple hill.

The sun was at its zenith when the Man finally stood before the majestic fluted pillars of the Temple. Slowly striding forward, he entered. His fear of the Oracle was momentarily tempered by the awe-evoking surroundings. A Priest approached the Man and found him a place in the supplicant line. There were many inquirers today.

The sun was well on its descent when the Man finally stood before the Oracle. She sat on a simple stool. Her eyes were cloudy as they gazed toward the Man. A pungent sulfur smoke rose out of holes in the ground around her. This was smoke from Athena's fires. Their wisdom blessed the Oracle with her visions. A Priest was standing to the left of the Man.

“Speak your question,” the Priest prompted.

His throat dry with fear the Man whispered, “Do I carry my Father's curse?”

The Oracle took the Man's hand in a strong grip. She produced a needle and pricked his index finger. Squeezing the wounded finger, three red droplets fell into a bronze basin below. The Oracle lifted the basin and sniffed the blood. She poured in a milky liquid while chanting quietly. Setting the basin down once more, she pushed along its edge, causing it to spin. Faster and faster, creating a tiny whirlpool in the center.

Then raising her hands, she fixed her white eyes on the bowl and its swirling pink liquid. The Oracle inhaled deeply, sucking the smoke of Athena's Wisdom deep into her lungs. She then began

a new chant.

“c...a...g...c...a...g...C...A-G...C-A-G-C-A-G-CAGCAGCAGCAGCAGCAG...” Each pronounced letter rose in volume and fell faster from her lips.

The Priest furiously recorded everything onto a parchment. Finally, the Oracle screamed the last chant and fell silent, her empty eyes open wide. With horror the Man turned his nervously sweating face towards the Priest. The Man paled when he saw the Priest’s somber expression.

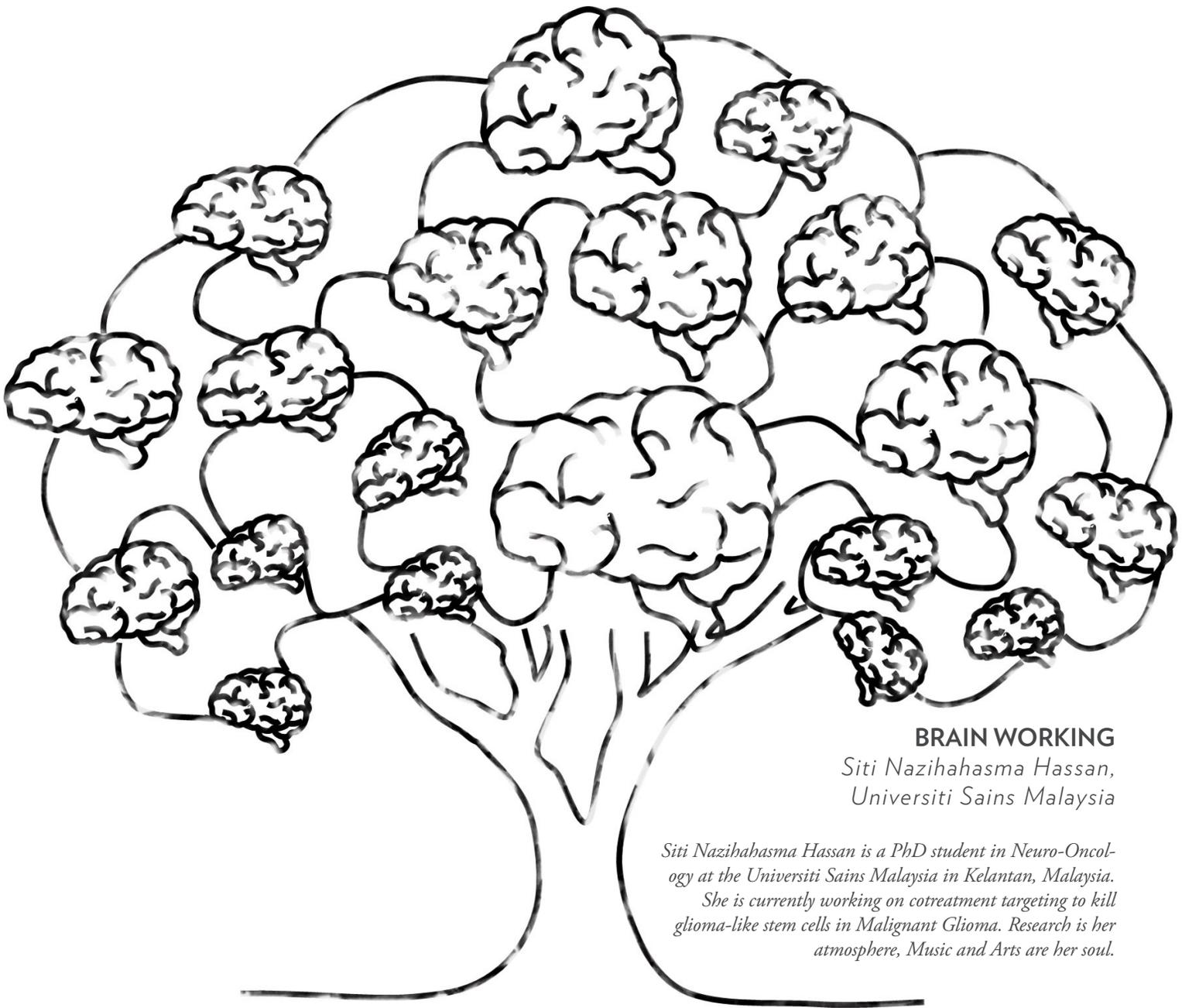
“41 repeats,” said the Priest.

The Man’s thoughts whirled as he was pushed aside by another supplicant.

“41 is enough to doom me,” thought the Man as he stumbled away. “I carry the curse. How long until the gods release it?” The Man thought about his small home, his budding pottery business, and all his hopes for his future. He was going to lose them all, just as he was going to lose his mind. It was only a matter of time.

The Man left the Temple...sorrowing. ■

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BRAIN WORKING

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