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Stories from Elsewhere: A Novella

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Stories from Elsewhere: A Novella”

written by

Andrew Crook

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the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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STORIES FROM ELSEWHERE

A Novella by Andrew Crook

I.

A Few Odd Occurrences

It's certainly rare to see people with animal heads while walking down the street, but it has been known to happen. On the occasions when a person *does* see someone with an animal head, they think something along the lines of, "Oh, what a quaint performer!" or something equally as posh and oblivious. Peter, however, was a man who didn't trust his own reasoning. Not if he could help it. So, when he happened to see a person with an animal head while walking down the street one fine Saturday, he paid attention. There it was, down the alley: a tall man in plain, amorphous clothes with a massive lizard head where his face should be. He seemed to be listening to the man who stood opposite him. This other was big as a linebacker but, thankfully, human. Peter pretended to himself that he had gotten an itch in one of his eyes so he could justify rubbing them. When he opened them again, the man with the animal head was still there, animal head and all. From where he stood, Peter could hear the voices of the men in the alley. Rather, he could hear that they were speaking. The noises of the city kept him from hearing the words. He felt a miniature war rage in his gut. On one side, the soldiers of morbid curiosity. On the other side, nerves. Curiosity won in the end, however, and in an action with consequences Peter had no way of understanding, he edged into the alley and squatted behind a garbage can.

"—have to calm down. Nobody's going to notice you. Remember when my tusks started coming in last winter?" It was the voice, Peter thought, of the human one (who now seemed more aptly described as human-looking).

"Yes," said the voice that must belong to the lizard-headed man. The voice was hoarse and high-pitched, like that of someone recovering from laryngitis.

“Do you remember what happened?”

“Yes. Nothing happened.”

“Right. It’s going to be fine. Nobody’s noticed us yet, and I doubt they ever will.”

Peter heard a sigh. “You’re right,” said the lizard. “But I wish we were home.” The other man started to say something, but the lizard stopped him. “Here home, I mean. Indoors.”

“As do I. You’re right: this is not the best circum—”

He made a noise that Peter thought was a roar at first. Peter peeked out from behind the garbage can to see the linebacker screaming in pain, a short wooden rod stuck in his shoulder. In a show of strength that Peter gaped at, the man took the end of the arrow and ripped it from where it landed. The lizard then let out a screech. A second arrow had planted itself in *his* shoulder, sending him to his knees. Peter watched all of this without realizing the potentially mortal danger he was in. He felt disembodied, as if he were watching all of it happen on his television screen.

Dark red spots began to color the concrete below the linebacker’s body. “Where are you?!” he roared. The answer came in the form of a man falling from one of the buildings that made the alley. Everything he wore looked golden, and he was holding a golden bow at the ready, a third arrow already nocked. When he spoke, Peter thought he sounded used to giving commands. “Slitherlink and Bristlebone,” he said. “You are under arrest for desertion and the unlawful entry of a foreign earth. Remain still and prepare for extradition.” Then he said, seemingly to no one, “Take them.”

Four more people, these ones dark and difficult to see, appeared in the alley. Peter could have sworn they walked out of the walls. He couldn’t make out any of their features, and the more he tried to, the more they looked entirely black. Two of these people grabbed ahold of the lizard’s (Slitherlink’s?) arms, and the other two took the arms of the linebacker (Bristlebone?). Both had stopped making noise the moment the dark people appeared. To Peter, it seemed as though a

mute button was pressed. The Golden Man replaced the arrow he had nocked into his quiver and slung his bow over his shoulder. He took something from a pouch on his waist—it looked like some sort of chalk—and used it to draw a thin, white circle on one of the alley’s walls. He replaced the piece of chalk in his pouch. Then, he reached out with his index finger and tapped the center of the circle he had drawn. Peter heard a *whooshing* sound as the portion of wall inside the circle became gray and began swirling. It looked like the aerial view of a tornado. Then, turning from his prisoners and the dark people as if they weren’t worth his time, the Golden Man said, “Send them back.” He took a book, perhaps a ledger, from his pouch and began making notes. The dark people threw first Bristlebone, then Slitherlink into the swirling gray circle on the wall, neither even trying to get away. When they had finished, one of them turned toward where Peter was hiding. The realization that he was not, in fact, watching all of this on television rushed upon him, and he ducked fully behind the garbage can, hoping and praying the dark people hadn’t seen him. A few seconds passed—enough to give Peter the sense that he hadn’t been spotted, when something grabbed him by the arm and pulled him off the ground. It was one of the dark people. And with a terror difficult to classify, Peter saw that the dark people were, after all, solid black. Like shadows come to life. Fear paralyzed him as they dragged him to the vortex on the wall. He regained his voice enough to cry, “HELP!” but by then it was too late. All he could see was swirling gray, and he lost consciousness.

When their job was finished and the world-door closed, the shadow people turned to find that their summoner was looking at them with a curious, though unconcerned expression.

“What was that cry?”

The Shadow (for in truth there is only one Shadow, and what we call shadows are but branches of the whole) spoke into his mind not a sentence or a phrase, but a picture. First, of the

Shadow noticing the unknown man hiding behind a garbage can, and second, of it throwing the human through the world-door.

“I see,” said the summoner. “I suppose my instructions were not clear.” He sighed. “Very well, you may leave.”

The Shadow people melted back into the whole, and their summoner was left alone. He exhaled, thinking of all the hours of paperwork ahead of him. Ah, well. The price of greatness, he supposed. He strolled out of the alley, smelled the warm aroma of cinnamon in the air, and decided there would be nothing wrong with treating himself to a snack before returning to the drudge of bureaucracy.

2.

A Whole New World

Peter opened his eyes and realized he must have been sleeping. No, that wasn't quite right. He might have slept, or at least been unconscious. But it felt more as if he had begun... *being* again. He was reminded of a time a few years back when he suddenly realized he had been having a conversation. He knew he had been speaking with someone for some time but couldn't remember anything he had said. It was like the conversation had been happening to somebody else, and he was swapped in to finish it off. This was a similar feeling.

A sudden jolt caused him to bounce up, losing contact with the wooden floor for half a second before crashing back down. He landed on his shoulder and an involuntary groan escaped his lips. He heard a voice a few feet away. “Ah, cuss it. Might as well scrap the death trap now and save the journey. You hear that back there? You better hope we don't hit another bad rock, or I'll pull over and torch this bundle of sticks and all'a you in it.” Peter blinked, unsuccessfully trying to process the situation. He looked around. His shoulder already discovered the wooden floor. The rest of his surroundings were mostly wooden as well. Slats of wood surrounded him, spaced far

enough to see through, but not far enough to slip through. It took him a moment to realize that what he was in was a cage. Past the wooden bars of his own small cell there were three other cages. They were sitting on the back of a large wooden cart and arranged in a square. Peter was in the left-side cage furthest from the driver. The cell beside him held only a pile of rags, but the two cages closer to the driver were occupied by none other than the two people (if they were people) he had seen earlier that day (if it had been that day). At the front of the cart was a raised platform on which the driver sat. The driver seemed to bulge with either muscle or fat, though it was not obvious to Peter which. He wore a long coat that may once have been black, but which had been turned by sun and filth into a splotchy, stained gray.

Peter needed to know where he was. There were three options. He could ask the driver, he could ask the lizard-man, Slitherlink, or he could ask... Bristleby? Something like that. The linebacker. The driver's outburst earlier didn't exactly make Peter want to be his friend, and he still couldn't get past the gigantic lizard head. Bristleby it was.

"Hey. Hi. Where are we?" he said. At first the massive prisoner looked as though he might not answer him. The expression on his face could have been anything from indifference to contempt. He did respond, however.

"We're a day or so south of the White Fortress. More than that, neither of—"

"Quiet back there!" said the driver. He added, muttering, "Bleedin' animals. Can't you see I'm trying to drive?"

Bristleby (no, *Bristlebone*) fell silent at the driver's command. Slitherlink hissed. The sound gave Peter gooseflesh. The horses didn't seem to like the noise either, as one of them whinnied and the other blew air out of its nose. Peter turned from his fellow prisoners and instead stared out the back of the wagon. The path they were on was rocky, no doubt about that, but to either side of the dirt path were green fields. Peter didn't know enough about agriculture to tell

what plants were growing in the fields except for a patch of cabbages (or lettuces?) to the right. The sight of food made his stomach groan. There was no telling how long it was since he had eaten. He heard a light *thunk* to his left. He looked, and there as if in explicit response to his hunger was a small loaf of bread. It was about the size of a dinner roll or a ciabatta. He had no idea where it came from, and when he tapped it, the crust felt like stone. It wasn't enough to deter him from eating it, however. He finished it off in three bites. When he finished, a low voice next to him said, "Did you enjoy it?"

Peter turned to the other two prisoners, but neither was looking at him. He turned to the other cage instead, the one with the pile of rags and realized something. A face was peeking out from the pile of what he had taken to be dirty laundry. The face was brown and wrinkled as a nut, and irregular patches of light gray fuzz decorated the chin and top of the head equally. The eyes were dark brown, almost black, and they seemed to twinkle despite the drab surroundings. "The bread," said the voice. (And yes, the man's mouth moved. He was the voice.) "Did you enjoy it?" Peter nodded. "Good. We'll all be eating a lot of it soon. But perhaps we'll find some other sustenance. Ah. No matter. Bread is always good, and I've got vast stores of it. Why, even if we *do* happen upon an orchard or hunting ground, I doubt any of us will want else but bread. It truly is excellent."

"It was all right," said Peter. He had eaten far better bread in his life. He didn't have the heart to disagree with the old man, however. He couldn't imagine the humiliation of being incarcerated near the end of your life with some young person who criticizes your cooking.

"Once," said the old man, speaking low as if confiding a secret, "there was a little girl who ate nothing but bread. It didn't matter what kind of bread. If it was made with grain, she ate it. If it wasn't, she let it be. Her mother disapproved of such a diet. Her hate for carbohydrates was more potent than any liqueur. The mother forced the girl to stop eating bread, so she ran away from

home. By the time she realized there was precious little bread to be found in the wild, she was too far from home to find her way back. Until, on the second or third day of her journey—

“I said SHUT IT! I should just torch all ye and have done with it. Can’t a simple man get no peace and quiet on the open road?” It was the driver. The old man heeded the voice and stopped talking. Peter turned away, and the cart trundled down the path. After what Peter judged to be another mile or two, he turned back to the pile of rags that was actually an old man and whispered, “What happened?”

“Hm?” said the old man from his pile.

“To the girl. The one with the bread.”

“Ah,” said the old man. “Well, I’m not sure. I hadn’t gotten there yet.” Peter wasn’t quite sure how to respond. The old man returned to his rags and, presumably, his nap. When he recovered from his confusion, Peter decided the old man had the right idea. He curled up in one of the corners of his cell and fell asleep.

Peter dreamed strangely, even in comparison to his recent experience. He dreamed that he was standing in a field like the ones on either side of the cart, only this field continued in every direction as far as he could see, unbroken by any road or landmark. Something caught his eye at the edge of his vision, right on the horizon. For a while it was nothing more than a black speck. As it came closer, Peter could see what it was. It was a massive snake. It looked somewhat like Slitherlink (but then all snakes look similar, don’t they?). But this snake was solid black, not green, and it had hungry orange eyes. What was more, the snake wasn’t slithering. It seemed to have sunk its fangs into its own tail, making a circle which moved by rolling. Peter was dimly aware of how ridiculous a method of travel the snake was using, but as the snake rolled closer, ever closer, he began to see its true size. Huge, massive, gigantic. None of those words would describe it adequately. It was the size of a mountain. And it was coming straight for Peter. What else could he

do? He ran. He sprinted. But no matter how fast he ran, the serpent kept gaining. Then, in one of those bursts of logic that rarely occur in dreams, Peter realized he didn't have to run at all. He merely stepped a few feet to the left, and the serpent went rolling past him and toward the other horizon. Amused with his own genius, Peter looked around. He hadn't seen it before, but there, just a few feet from him, was a campfire. And sitting around it were a thousand—no, a hundred thousand people. And because it was a dream, Peter knew exactly what to do. He walked into their midst, sat in by the fire, and began telling them stories.

When Peter awoke, two thoughts occurred to him. The first was that the sky was now black, and more stars than he ever imagined were spattered across it. The second thought was that he needed to relieve himself. Thankfully, the driver decided it was time to stop for the night and made the horses pull the mobile prison into the grass that now lay on the right of their path. He unbridled the horses and hitched them to a stump not far from the wagon. It could have been his imagination, but Peter thought he heard Bristlebone growl. Having finished with the horses, the driver pulled some chains from under his seat at the front of the wagon and opened the old man's cage. The old man put up no resistance as the driver put hobbles on his ankles and shackles on his wrists. With the man now standing upright, Peter could see that what he originally thought was a pile of rags was an exceptionally tattered and soiled overcoat. He also wore trousers and a broad-brimmed hat, both in similar condition to the coat. The driver moved on to Peter. Despite his pride (which, if we're being honest, there wasn't much of), Peter allowed himself to be bound just as the old man was. When he was finished, the driver linked the two together with the chain. Next was Bristlebone, then Slitherlink. Other than a brief hiss of pain or anger from the latter (and wasn't his scaly neck *longer?*), neither put up any kind of fight. The driver pulled the old man, and the other prisoners with him, into the field by the roadside. "Here," he said, and stopped walking. "Well," he said after a pause. "Go on. I won't look, if that's what you're worried about. Schoolgirls,

all of ye." The prisoners understood they were meant to relieve themselves. When they finished, their captor led them a little farther and bade them stop once more. He made them sit in a circle, then took a stake and a mallet from the cart. He pulled the two ends of the chain together and drove the stake through them into the soil below. "Now behave," said the driver, "and I'll consider giving you all something to eat. Maybe." He grinned as if pleased with how clever he was and lumbered away. He built a small fire and began heating himself, all in front of the jealous eyes of Peter and the other prisoners. Peter closed his eyes and tried not to think about how cold he was.

"Thank you," said the soft, whispery voice of Slitherlink. Peter looked up. Now that he got a good look, he realized that what he had taken for a lizard's head was a snake's. The realization didn't fill him with good feelings. Slitherlink's thanks hadn't been directed at him, though. Rather, the snake person was looking at the old man and holding a small loaf like the one Peter had eaten earlier.

"You're welcome, my dear stranger," said the old man. He took another loaf from his formless coverings and offered it to the one called Bristlebone.

"You are very kind," he said.

"Do not think on it. I have much. More than I know how to eat, I'm sure. It is the best bread on this earth, you know. *He* certainly knows." Here he gestured toward Peter. "Tell them, kind stranger. Is it not the ideal bread?"

"It's pretty good."

"You see? You've never heard such praise I warrant."

"Not from any on his earth," said Bristlebone. "Ungrateful children."

Peter's eyes widened. Had he heard that right? *His* earth? As if there were more than one? He supposed it was possible. In some twisted logic, it could even make sense. Slitherlink let out a raspy laugh from his increasingly serpent-like face and the group fell silent. Suddenly realizing he

hadn't even touched the subject and not knowing how else to go about it, Peter said, "So why does your head look like a snake?" Though the slitted pupils of the serpent-man's eyes contracted, he responded amiably enough.

"Simple. I ran out of sacred water."

Peter didn't understand this at all, but he felt as though he should and therefore asked for no elaboration. With any luck the shapes of people's heads wouldn't come up again. As long as the snake spoke English, he could pretend there was nothing odd about him at all. Then again, was the skin of his arms becoming greener? He decided it must be the starlight playing tricks. Nothing strange at all. The old man gave Peter another roll. He nibbled on it to show the man that yes, indeed, it was an okay roll.

When the four captives had their fill of bread from the raggedy man's coat, Bristlebone cleared his throat. "Shall we begin?"

"Aye," said the old man.

"Yes," said Slitherlink.

"Huh?" said Peter.

"Very well," said Bristlebone. "If there are no objections, I'll begin." He paused, presumably to allow for objections. "Thank you. I'd like to begin with a myth, though not one commonly heard in this region..."

3.

A Story of Locke

Long ago, there was a king named Glump Sixtus. King Glump Sixtus ruled over the kingdom of Glump, and his castle was on Glump Hill, just outside the town of Glump. Glump Sixtus was not a bad king, but he wasn't a good one either. He rarely left his bed, and when he did it was only to relieve himself or to eat his meals. After years of this lethargy, the king's wise men

held a council to decide what should be done. Two parties emerged. One, bordering on treason, suggested that King Glump Sixtus should prematurely abandon his office, leaving the young Prince to become a (hopefully better) King Glump Septimus. The other group believed that all the king really needed was a good cheering up, and his upcoming birthday would be the perfect opportunity to give the king a gift that would shake him out of himself. After tense discussion, the wise men voted, deciding on the birthday gift by a mere two votes. To ensure their plan's success, the wise men sought the help of the king's own jester: Locke, called Trickster. Trickster was honored. He assured the wise men that the king would be shaken out of his reverie as soon as the birthday came. Further, he suggested they should leave everything to him, so they would not have to trouble themselves over such a project. The wise men agreed to the arrangement. They gave Trickster an unspeakable amount of gold to accomplish his task and sent him on his way.

Trickster, now carrying more money than he had seen in his life, began to plot. He left the castle and wandered into the streets of Glump. By a stroke of luck, he ran across a man who had drunk rather too much. The drunk let slip a rumor that there were a pair of warlocks in town—brothers they were—named Brokka and Heitris. While warlocks as a rule are loath to provide their services, Trickster knew that they, as much as any man, loved gold. After a long night of searching, Trickster found the pair enjoying a night in the Green Glump, a popular bar. He asked, “Which of you is the better magician, good sirs?” Each of them said, “I am.” Trickster, who had expected the response, said, “Well, then. Since I must know for sure, and since I have been entrusted with a mission for the sake of King Glump Sixtus himself, each of you must work me a magic. Whichever of you I deem superior will then work a magic for the king. The reward shall be,” he paused for effect, “lucrative.”

The warlocks retreated to the laboratories they had set up in their camp and got to work. The one named Brokka was the first to complete his magic and present it to Trickster.

“And what is this?” said the jester.

“It is riches beyond imagining,” said the warlock, handing him a medium-sized golden coin.

“It looks like a single coin to me,” said Trickster, “Why, the reward I have in my purse is more than this coin.”

“Do not be deceived, sir. Cast the coin to the earth.” Trickster did as Brokka said. When the coin hit the ground, it split into four pieces equal in size to the first. “Excellent sir,” said Brokka, “each of these new coins will perform the same trick when cast to the ground, and each after that, and each after that.” Trickster giggled and rubbed his hands together.

“Very nice,” he said, “It will be difficult for your rival to do better, I think.”

Another week passed before the second warlock, the one called Heitris, presented his magic to Trickster.

“Another coin?” said the Trickster. The gift Heitris brought him was identical to the one Brokka had given, save that it was silver instead of gold.

“Cast it to the ground, my lord,” said Heitris.

“Perhaps it will split into five equal pieces?”

The wizard shook his head. Trickster sighed and cast the coin to the ground.

Where it landed, there appeared a massive chariot hitched to two pure white horses. “Yes,” said Trickster, “this is certainly beautiful. Await my decision.”

All that afternoon, the warlocks waited to hear who would be granted the honor of designing a magic for the king. They spent most of this time in the Green Glump drinking and boasting to each other. Then, after hours of waiting, Trickster appeared in the doorway.

“Well, who is it?” said Brokka.

“Aye, who is it?” said Heitris.

Trickster looked at both, seeming to deliberate one last time. Finally, he pointed at Brokka. "You will be the one to work a magic for his majesty King Glump Sixtus. Return to me in seven days with the magic you choose to grant your king."

Brokka and Heitris retired to their camp, and while Heitris, angry at his loss, climbed into his bed, Brokka entered the tent that served as his laboratory. He worked through the first night without sleeping, eating, or leaving the workshop. The second day and night, he did the same. Neither did he leave the tent during the third day or third night. On the fourth day, he finally slept, though he stayed in the laboratory while doing so. When he awoke, he became aware for the first time since he had begun working that he was both hungry and thirsty, so the warlock sent for food and drink.

When the food and drink arrived, it was carried by the most beautiful girl Brokka had ever seen; servant, princess, or otherwise. Sunlight seemed to dance through her hair, just as she seemed to dance through the air. Her eyes sparkled, and her rosy lips seemed to carry a permanent flirty smirk. Brokka became enamored. "My lady!" he said. "My most beautiful lady, I thank you that you have lowered one so exquisite as yourself to the position of my servant. It is a grace I do not deserve. Stay and enjoy this meal with me!"

The girl nodded, blushing, and set down the food and wine. The two enjoyed a fine meal, and for those few moments Brokka counted himself the luckiest man on that earth. When the meal was over and the time had come for the girl to depart, Brokka said, "I understand you must go. Please, I love you so, take anything from my workshop for yourself. I lament that I cannot give you a better gift."

The girl blushed again, but she chose her gift quickly (a rabbit figurine that could hop and eat and behave exactly like a living rabbit) and left, never to be seen again.

At the end of the appointed seven days, having never once left his workshop, Brokka finished his magic and returned to Trickster. "Here is the magic, my lord," he said, holding forward a simple-looking knife with a wooden handle.

"You brought me something I could steal from a fishmonger? After a week? I confess I am disappointed, master warlock," said Trickster, knowing that the knife must contain some secret. He could feel the magic in the blade. Almost smell it, like the metal tang before a rain.

"If you will pardon me," said Brokka, making a short bow, "what I hold is not a mere knife, but a bolt of pure magic, shaped like a knife at present. Take and throw it. You will see."

Trickster took the knife from the warlock and weighed it in his hand. Except for the magic-smell, nothing at all seemed odd about it. "At that mountain, my lord," said Brokka. "Throw the knife at the mountain." Trickster looked toward the mountain Brokka indicated. He raised the knife to his shoulder, breathed out, and threw it.

Light filled his vision. A crash and roar battered his ears. The smell of burnt air filled his lungs. In the distance, the violent light struck the summit of the mountain and cleaved it in two (this is why the mountains are two, and are called the Twin Mountains).

Brokka stood tall. "I call it the lightning bolt," he said. "You may call it back to you any time you wish. Trickster opened his hand, and it sparked with hungry light. In the time it would take to blink, the knife was back safe in his hand. "Excellent, warlock," he said. Then he paid him an exorbitant amount (though only a third of what Glump Sixtus had given him) and returned to the royal court.

On the king's birthday, the wise men were nervous, infuriated even. Trickster had still not reported success to them, and they were becoming worried the king, with nothing for his birthday, would fall into an even deeper lethargy than before. Some were prepared to hang Trickster the

moment he showed his face. However, he arrived just before the king was to take the throne, and his neck was saved.

“Your highness,” Trickster said, “I have brought you a gift in the hope that it may restore your joy in life. I present it to you now.” He took a small rabbit figurine from his pocket and held it out to Glump Sixtus.

“What do I care for children’s toys, Trickster? Take it from me,” said the king. Then, the figurine brushed its ears back and hopped from Trickster’s hand and up the steps to the throne. Glump Sixtus couldn’t help but giggle. “Why, Trickster,” he said, “I have changed my mind. You have brought me a most excellent diversion.” He petted the rabbit on its porcelain head. It squeaked in response, and the king howled with glee.

From that day on, Glump Sixtus was not much better as a king, but he was much happier. His wise men were satisfied with the result, and they granted Trickster a home of his own in the royal city so he would no longer be forced to live in the servants’ quarters. And that is how Trickster, the mere jester of King Glump Sixtus, came to own a manor in the city, a coin that reproduced itself, a coin that became a ship, and, most impressively, a lightning bolt. To this day, if Trickster is bored, he may ease his boredom by throwing the bolt a few times from the roof of his manor. And that is why we have thunderstorms.

4.

Interlude

The old man clapped as if at a rousing aria. When Bristlebone had begun the story, the old man had removed a plain green notebook from within his coat. As his fellow prisoner told the story, he had taken notes feverishly, obsessively even. Now that the story was over, he stuffed the notebook back in his coat. “Bravo!” he cried, though not so loud as to wake the driver, who had

fallen asleep beside his campfire during the story. "Bravo! An excellent story, stranger. I am glad to have heard it."

"Yes," said Slitherlink. "It was well-told, friend. I regret I have not heard you tell it before."

There was an uncomfortable pause of which Peter became aware too late. The other three were looking at him. They wanted him to say something. He was supposed to compliment the story, he realized. "It was certainly a story," he said. He had never been great at compliments. He wasn't sure he quite understood the story either. If he were being honest, he'd have to admit that Slitherlink's head distracted him for the greater part of the storytelling.

"You see?" said the old man. "Rare praise indeed! Oh and it is true, it is true!"

Despite the old man's assessment of Peter's praise, Bristlebone glared at Peter, Peter thought in annoyance. To annoy somebody as large and imposing as Bristlebone was not anything he ever wanted to do. To perhaps appease him, he said, "I mean, it was a pretty good story."

"Perhaps you'd like to give the next one?" asked the massive storyteller.

"Oh, I couldn't. I'm not much of a story person really. I'd love to hear more, please. Please?" He was suddenly aware of how dry his mouth was. Slitherlink made a hissing noise Peter thought sounded like laughter. Ugh, even the half-person, half-snake thought he was pathetic.

"Everyone tells a story," said Slitherlink. "That's how all this works."

"My friend is correct," said Bristlebone. "You must tell a story eventually. It may as well be now."

"Fine," Peter said finally. "Let's see. What story could I tell? I don't really know many."

"Any story is fine," said the old man. "As long as it's a story."

"All right," said Peter.

Here goes. I'm going to tell a story. Let's just do Hansel and Gretel, I remember that one. Why not. So let's see. There were two children. Their names were Hansel and Gretel, and I think they were Danish or something. They got lost in the woods somehow. I forget how or why. But they found a house made of candy. They started eating the house since, you know, it was candy. But the witch who lived in the house caught them and kidnapped them and planned to eat them, but they killed her. Then they found their way back home. I'm pretty sure that's the end.

6.

Interlude

"That..." said Bristlebone, "that wasn't very good, human."

"Hush," said Slitherlink. "He clearly doesn't understand this tradition. Perhaps he doesn't know any stories worth telling. We should be gracious."

Bristlebone grumbled, and Peter felt heat in his cheeks. He hadn't even wanted to tell a story in the first place. They didn't have to treat him like that.

"Will you tell the next story?" said Slitherlink, looking at the old man. "You seem as though you know good ones."

"I would love going next, yes. But I have so many stories, it will be difficult to choose. Let me see..." He began flipping through his notebook. Peter saw him stop at a page, read a few lines, then move on to a different page, apparently discarding the story it contained. Just as Peter felt himself becoming annoyed with the old man, he stopped at a page for good. "Ah," he said. "This is the story of the boy who couldn't die."

7.

The Boy Who Couldn't Die

There is a valley, undiscovered by most, where there stands a tower. From the outside, the tower looks just like any other. The bulk of it is a cylinder of hewn stone rising fifty feet. Atop the

tower is a conical roof of red shingle, and at the base of the tower is a heavy oaken door. The geography near the tower is such that sheer cliffs rise on two sides of it, while dense, misty forests lay on the other two sides. For as long as the tower stood, there were always two guards: one standing at the north side of the tower, the other at the south. Each pair of guards was sworn to secrecy and a code of silence, and each pair served five years at the tower's base.

The tower guards at the time of this story had already served three years together. It was a quiet three years, with only one trespasser to turn away. The guards did not know each other's names. They had, in fact, been forbidden to mention their names to each other. Most other topics they could have talked on were off limits as well. The only real topics of conversation they were allowed were ruminations on the weather and decisions relating to their duty. The guards had many rules besides their code of silence, as well, many of them strict to the point of madness. Over the years they would serve together, guards would eventually become familiar. With familiarity comes trust, and with trust comes a confidence that minor rules can be broken without repercussion. This is why the rules were so strict: so that at the end of five years, the only rules broken would be minor ones. No guard ever broke the major ones such as leaving the tower unattended, or speaking with the Prisoner.

These current guards were some of the best the tower had ever seen. Three years in, neither guard had broken a single rule. Morning after morning, day after day, and night after night they protected the tower with a stalwart faith. Faith that they were necessary. Faith that they were useful. But no perfect record can last forever. For one day, the guards failed in their duty.

Gradually, so that they couldn't tell when they had begun hearing it, the guards noticed a creaking, scraping sound coming from the valley on the north side of the tower. A cart, perhaps, or a sledge? They knew it couldn't be for them; their food supply wasn't due for another month. Each guard put a hand on his sword and waited.

The scraping noise continued for some time before either could see what was making it. The north guard watched as a horse ambled out of the misty forest, pulling a covered wagon behind it. Sitting on the wagon and holding the horse's reins was a man wearing a battered fisherman's coat and hat. He was old, wrinkled beyond belief, his skin the color of coffee with the smallest amount of milk. The north guard called the south guard over, and both drew their swords.

"Who goes there?" yelled one.

The man dismounted his wagon without answering.

"Who goes there?" yelled the other guard.

The old man sighed as if he didn't want to be bothered. He said, "Wouldn't you two like to sleep now?" And though neither said anything aloud, both guards' bodies and minds answered with a resounding *yes* as they hit the ground, already dreaming.

The old man tied his horse up to the nearest tree, using an elegant little knot that was much stronger than it looked. That done, he strolled to the door of the tower, near which the guards were slumped. He bent down and spent a few moments rummaging through the guards' pockets before he found what he was looking for: a heavy iron key. He pushed the key into its door until it stopped. He turned the key. It wouldn't budge. He frowned and tried to turn it again, harder this time. A creak. A groan. Then... *SHNKT*. The lock turned. He breathed a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat from under his hat. Then he set each of his hands on one side of the double door and pushed.

With a creaking, groaning, painful wail, the door opened.

Inside the tower, the old man could see the evidence of walls and staircases and rooms and tables. None of those populated it now, however. Inside, it was nothing more than a hollow tube, as if it had lost everything that once defined it. Now, there were only three things in the tower. On the far wall was a pile of foodstuffs and other supplies necessary for minding the tower. From the

walls and ceiling, a mass of chains descended. And finally, hanging above the very center of the tower's floor, supported by the chains decorating the interior, was a young man pale with lack of light and thin from hunger.

"Good morning," said old man, as if he were meeting someone for breakfast. "It's nice to meet you."

The young man stared at him, then said, "You as well." His voice sounded like sheets of paper being rubbed together. "Are you here to help me or to hurt me?"

The old man shrugged, acting as if he were talking with a friend. "Help you, of course. I've got a price, though."

The chained man thought longer than he expected. Despite his state, intelligence lit the young man's eyes. He wouldn't agree without knowing what he was agreeing to. "What's the price?"

"Relax. I will retrieve you from the tower if you promise that after I do, you'll tell me a story."

The young man made a sound that wasn't quite intelligible. He could have scoffed, or he could have sneezed. "Fine," he said. "I agree."

"Good," said the old man. "Just a moment." The old man pushed his hat back on his head and looked up at the tangle of chains coming from the walls of the tower. He followed their paths with his eye until he could see where they were coming from. The chains ran from the young man to the walls and ceiling, and from the walls and ceiling to a mechanism near the door. The old man fiddled with it until he figured it out. When he did, he let the chain out until the young man was lying on the floor of the tower. He then used the iron key he had taken from the guards outside to open the heavy lock keeping the chains together and around the prisoner. Together, they pulled

the mass of iron off him. Without the chains covering him, the old man could see the boy had a faint glow to him, almost golden.

“Thank you,” said the young man. The words were so raspy as to almost be unintelligible. Except for his voice, though, he seemed completely unharmed by the chains. “If you don’t mind,” he said, “before I tell you your story, I’m going to go outside and have a meal.”

The old man grinned. “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The two men took some salted ham from the tower’s stores, and the old man retrieved a jug of water from his covered wagon. They ate in silence, the young man enjoying the taste of the air almost more than he enjoyed the taste of the ham. For even when one has been denied more than the barest meals, absence of air and light is a truer starvation. It was a long time before the young man spoke.

“You said you wanted a story?” The water had made his voice stronger already.

“That’s right.”

“Any guidelines?”

“Whatever story you want to tell. It’s what we travelers do these days.”

The young man nodded and took another drink of water. “Then,” he said, “this is the story of me.”

The old man removed a notebook and pencil from his coat and prepared to write.

8.

The Boy’s Story

Years ago (I’m not sure how many years. Many.), I was a blacksmith’s boy. My name was Ethan. I lived in a small town far south of here with my mother, father, and one brother. I don’t remember the name of the town. I... I don’t remember my father’s name either. My mother was Sarah. My brother... Jonah. He was Jonah. We always had enough to eat, since many of the

townspeople were farmers, and they always needed smithing. Sometimes they needed latches, sometimes horseshoes. That kind of thing. It was good. And I was learning my father's work.

Something I remember about my father: he was a penny pincher. As far back as I can remember, he had the same prices. Never changed them. He never offered loans, and never provided his services unless he was paid first. He was fair, though. You have to be when you know everyone in your town. He never charged a customer more than he should, but he also never charged less. He was always fair, and he never changed. To go along with this tendency, he kept meticulous records and perfect inventory. I once saw him drag a man down to the shire reeve for swiping a penny nail. Of course that was his right. He didn't have to be generous.

One day a woman nobody had seen before came into town wearing nothing more valuable than rags. She stayed in the town for a few days, but nobody was sure where she lived. She looked like any old widow, but the townspeople all avoided her. I know I did, whenever I could. There was something about her that drove people off. It wasn't her smell or her look or her voice. It was more like an aura. Something surrounding her that nobody wanted to experience.

A week went by and life didn't really change at all. It didn't take long for the town to ignore the hag as if she didn't exist. But then, that Monday I remember it was, I was tending the smithy alone when I noticed her standing at our door. As I said before, I always tried to avoid her, but it didn't seem right to turn an old woman away. So, I said, "Ma'am, is there anything I can help you with?" She just looked at me and nodded once, a big nod like little kids do.

"Can I have four horseshoes, boy?" she asked. Her voice was soft and smooth, but something about it—I don't know what—chilled me.

"Yes, ma'am," I said, "if you have the money for it."

The old widow looked heartbroken. She said, "I don't have any money. Please, boy. If you'll give me the horseshoes, I'll repay you."

“You just said you didn’t have any money.”

“Aye, you say true,” she said, and she came closer. I could smell something sour and rotten on her breath as she spoke. I tried not to wonder what it was. “But I have other things I can give in return. Magic things, you see. And if you give me just four horseshoes, I’ll repay you with something like that.”

I didn’t want to anger my father, and I knew that if I gave away four horseshoes, he’d know about it. I didn’t have the money to pay for them myself either. Horseshoes were expensive in those days. But the old woman looked so sad, so hurt. As much as I didn’t care to be around her, I couldn’t stand to send her away without what she had come for. I went to the back of the smithy, leaving the fire untended for a moment, and pulled four horseshoes off the iron studs. I gave them to the old widow, and she smiled an ugly

(evil?)

smile.

“Thank you kindly,” she said, and tucked the horseshoes into her coat. She looked at me for a long time, and I started to become frightened. She looked like she were contemplating something terrible. Finally, she said, “Take a coal from your fire.”

“Why?”

“I need to pay you for the horseshoes.”

She said it with such conviction I didn’t feel at liberty to argue with her. I held the tongs and picked a coal from the forge. “Set it down,” she said. I placed it on the anvil and set the tongs where I had gotten them. The widow walked to me, standing on the opposite side of the anvil from where I was standing. In one motion, she gripped my left hand in hers harder than any vise and clamped it over the coal.

The pain felt impossible.

I tried to scream, but no noise would leave my throat. I don't remember falling, but I became aware I was on the ground. The widow was nowhere in sight. I'm not sure how long I lay there, my mouth open at the ceiling, trying to form a scream that would never come. My father found me when he returned home. He tended to my hand with care, but it was weeks before it stopped hurting. I kept expecting him to scold me for giving away the horseshoes or for trusting the old widow, but I suppose he decided that if I had needed to learn a lesson, the widow had already taught it to me. The widow, by the way, was never seen in our town again. I thought the affair was over, the moral learned, and the tale told.

It took me a while to realize the widow truly had given me something in return for the horseshoes. I began to notice that in situations that should have resulted in injury, I was never hurt. Once I lost my balance climbing in the woods and fell at least twenty feet. There wasn't a scrape. Another time, as I was fitting shoes on a mare, the horse kicked me in the head. I should have died. I convinced myself the hoof had barely touched my hair. At first, it was easy to dismiss things like this as a collection of close shaves (literally, once). But one summer evening, in a moment of carelessness, I fell into the forge.

I felt nothing but a mild warmth.

I didn't believe it at first. No, that's not quite it. It was more like I didn't realize there was anything to believe. I just knew both that it was impossible and that it was happening. I don't remember a precise moment of clarity, but when I woke up in the morning, I knew I was immortal.

I started experimenting with my ability, keeping everything secret to avoid any awkward conversations about suicidal tendencies. Nothing I tried could harm me. Falling from heights barely excited. Knives wouldn't penetrate. Wild animals couldn't do more than slobber on me. And when the plague swept through, taking the animals, the townspeople, and my family with it, I

remained healthy. I couldn't very well stay in my hometown, now a ghost town. I journeyed through the hills and forests, each danger on the way confirming my inability to be harmed. It took me until my fortieth birthday to conclude that I would never grow old. I learned that I wasn't exactly immortal, however, the few days I attempted to do without food or water. That experiment lasted no more than a day in each of the few cases I tried it.

The rest isn't much to tell. I didn't see the witch hunts coming, and when they came, I had become too comfortable where I was. A nosy neighbor spread the word that I had been living beside her for nine years and not aged a day. I've been in this tower ever since.

9.

The Boy Who Couldn't Die, cont.

Ethan took a drink of water. "I'll be more careful now. There's nothing like a couple of centuries in chains to put a man on his toes." He looked back at the tower. The old man couldn't quite decide if the expression on his face was sorrow or fear. Perhaps it was both. Ethan turned to the old man. "You wouldn't be willing to take me along as a traveling companion, would you? I'm afraid I've no idea where we are."

The old man smiled. "I would like nothing better," he said.

The pair untied the old man's horse and climbed up onto the wagon, the old man at the reins, Ethan in the wagon itself. The old man issued a clicking command to his horse and it took off into the mist and the trees, the tower and dozing guards safely behind it.

"I don't know your name," said Ethan.

"You can call me Bookkeeper."

Ethan grinned. "All right, Bookkeeper. Has the world changed much since I was in it?"

The Bookkeeper smiled. "Oh," he said, "not much."

10.

In the Mountain

The mountains had always been difficult to cross. The scarcity of legitimate roads, unpredictable nature of the weather, and prevalence of sheer cliffs were the most manageable issues. The Bookkeeper had been taking these mountain paths for ages. As such, he knew the best paths to take, the places to avoid, and the natural shelters that could be used in case of thunderstorms. The typical issues of mountain travel were not the ones that worried him. What was *in* the mountains... Those were the real difficulty.

There had been legends about them for longer than people could remember. Most of these legends were short, that so-and-so, the baker's seventh son, had disappeared on the mountains and never been found and no, it wasn't a snowy or rainy day and yes, his family mounted an extensive search but no, his body had never been recovered. *They* had taken him. At this pronouncement, all the people around would nod their heads and close their eyes, and each would utter a silent prayer. Then they would continue their lives, hoping that *they* didn't really exist.

They did exist, however, and the Bookkeeper knew it.

"Why do you look so nervous?" The Bookkeeper was jolted from his thoughts by Ethan's voice.

"This is a dangerous place," he said. "It pays to be attentive."

Ethan closed his eyes once more. "Let me know if you want me to take the reins for a while," he said. "I don't mind it. You've been driving the wagon since we left. You need a break."

"Maybe after the mountains. You don't know the terrain."

They rode in silence for a while longer, the wagon tracing a winding path up the side. It would take them two days, more or less, to reach the place where they could begin their descent on the other side. It would take longer than the upward journey—about three days—but it would be

safer, for the western side of the range had fewer cliffs than the eastern. And there would no longer be any danger of running into *them*. The travelers reached a plateau as the sun was going down. The Bookkeeper stopped his horse and said, "We'll camp here for the night."

Ethan began unloading the supplies. He found a cave and, thinking it would be an excellent shelter for the night, began setting up camp at its mouth. "No," said the Bookkeeper. "We'll make camp over here tonight." He indicated a spot closer to the edge of the plateau. "The cave is a bad idea."

"What if it rains?" Ethan said. Clouds had been gathering in the sky over the last hour, as if convening a war council.

"It's a risk we'll take. The cave is a bad idea."

Ethan shrugged. "Whatever you say." He brought the things he was carrying to the place the Bookkeeper indicated and began setting up camp once again.

When fully set up, the camp consisted of a fire, two sleeping bags, and a chest filled with foodstuffs. Ethan and the Bookkeeper sat near the fire. Nearer, in fact, than they had the rest of the journey so far. The mountain air became colder with every foot they hiked. They ate a small, yet adequate meal. It was enough to live on, anyway. The Bookkeeper expected Ethan to want more to eat after being released from his tower. Ethan, however, seemed grateful for the chance to eat at all. The tower guards must have given him enough to live on, but not a bit more.

A groan escaped the mouth of the cave. It was a howling sort of groan, almost like the sound a starving dog might make. "Must be a wolf in there," said Ethan.

"Mm," said the Bookkeeper. "I hope so. This high up, there are other things it could be. A lot of stories are told about these mountains."

Ethan grinned. It was obvious he thought the Bookkeeper was exaggerating. So far, the only remotely dangerous creature they had seen was a particularly territorial raccoon. Besides,

even if they did come up against anything truly dangerous, Ethan couldn't get hurt. It was no wonder he seemed so unconcerned with the idea of danger. Instead of chiding the Bookkeeper, however, Ethan said, "And what are some of the stories?"

"Some say," said the Bookkeeper, "that these mountains are home to werewolves. The father of werewolves, even, the foul Lycaon."

"Others say," he continued, "that the fabled creatures of the mountains are not werewolves, but are vampires, those lords and ladies of exsanguination, unloved by the looking-glass, enemies to the sun. 'Foolish!' cry others. These are the ones who claim the mountains house only one being, a man-eating, shapeshifting ogre. Still another sect says, 'You've got the size correct, but the shape is all wrong. A dragon lives in the mountains.'"

"And what do you say about it?"

"I?" said the Bookkeeper, pretending to be shocked at the question. "Why, I merely convey the tales of others, and I have no opinions of my own."

"Fine then. What do 'still others' think?"

"I'm glad you asked, young Ethan. The fact is, there are many theories as to what type of being or beings reside in these mountains; as many theories as there are creatures on this earth. Some actually think there is nothing but a mother bear and her cubs. Ridiculous, of course, but it seems valid if you live far enough away and haven't heard as many stories as I have. There is one theory, however, which I find not only sensible, but most likely. It is that theory I will share with you, in the form of a story."

"Go on, then, tell it!"

"Yes, one moment."

The Bookkeeper went to the wagon and began rummaging through his things. Ethan rightly assumed he was searching for one of his journals. Ethan poked the fire with a stick. It hadn't

taken him long to learn about the old man's journals. He originally thought there was only one: the one he had written Ethan's story in. Riding in the Bookkeeper's covered wagon, however, he discovered a chest filled with notebooks, and each one looked the same as the others save in color. Almost every night it seemed the Bookkeeper would remove a different one from the chest and read it. He hadn't heard him read the same one twice yet, and he put the number of journals somewhere around eighty.

"Hrrm," said the Bookkeeper.

"Something wrong?"

"I can't seem to find the story. I must have left it at home. Silly mistake."

The groan came again from the mouth of the cave. It was louder this time, and Ethan felt the hairs on his arms raise.

"Perhaps it would be bad fortune, in any case," said the Bookkeeper, and returned to his seat by the fire. After that last groan, Ethan was inclined to agree.

The rest of the conversation that night was idle. The two men sat by the fire and commented on the weather, the foliage, the size of the mountains; all of which they had discussed many times before. The Bookkeeper didn't care for meaningless talk, however, and after half an hour the pair stopped talking altogether. Despite the clouds, the rain never came, and they were able to sleep under the night sky, which made up for the sparse comfort the hard ground could give.

Ethan awoke the next morning much more refreshed than he expected to be. The mountain air must have done him some good after decades of imprisonment. A bird was chirping in a tree somewhere, but Ethan couldn't see where or what tree. A bluebird, he thought. How he had wished to hear birdsong again! He stretched his arms above his head, feeling two or three

joints pop in the process. Yes, he decided, this is what he had missed. The outdoors, being able to wake up properly, the perfect solitude of nature.

(solitude?)

Ethan sat upright and looked to where the Bookkeeper had lain his mat. The mat was there, as expected. The Bookkeeper was not.

“Bookkeeper?” he said. Then again, louder, “Bookkeeper?” There was only silence in return. Still, he listened for a reply. Then, he was struck by how silly he was being. Just like a child. He laughed at himself. The Bookkeeper was almost certainly off hunting for firewood or extra provisions. Yes, that was it. Therefore, Ethan rose from his mat at leisure and readied himself for the day’s journey as calmly as ever he did. He was enjoying a small breakfast, only a strip of some cold jerky they had taken from the tower’s stores, when he remembered the cave and the story the Bookkeeper had wanted to tell. With an uneasy glance to the cave in the mountain wall, Ethan considered what may have become of the Bookkeeper. Hunting for wood? Probably. But what if the mountain people, or person, or thing had found him in the night and taken him? What then? Again, Ethan chided himself for how silly he was being. The Bookkeeper couldn’t have been taken by whatever was in the mountain. *Why not?* Asked a voice in his head. *Why couldn’t he have been?*

Because, Ethan replied, *Because there isn’t anything in the mountain. The old man made it all up.*

You don’t believe that. Did he seem like he was lying?

He was talking about vampires and ogres! If he actually believes any of it, he’s a complete lunatic. And if he’s a lunatic, won’t you be better off without him?

It wouldn’t be the strangest thing. After all, aren’t I immortal?

Ethan stopped arguing. "Touché," he said aloud. Whatever being or beings lived in the cave, they were a potential threat. What should he do about it?

He decided to wait fifteen minutes for the Bookkeeper to show himself. He judged that to be enough time to retrieve firewood. After all, the Bookkeeper had already left when Ethan woke up. If there was no sign of him at the end of those fifteen minutes, Ethan would have to look for him in the cave, however far back it was. Satisfied with his decision, Ethan sat and waited. Before even five minutes were up, he took a lamp from the wagon and lit it. He entered the cave.

After the nearly constant darkness of his tower, Ethan thought the darkness of a cave would be easy to deal with. It was not. He had traveled no further than ten steps into the cave when he realized there was no longer any light coming from outside. That couldn't be right. He hadn't turned once; he was still practically in the entrance. Daylight should be streaming in from behind him. Nevertheless, the only source of light was his lamp. He looked behind him. Where the mouth of the cave should have been there was nothing but darkness. He forgot all about the Bookkeeper for a moment and investigated. He began walking out of the cave and, sure enough, in a few steps the light was streaming into his eyes once more. He took a step back. Darkness. "Weird," he said. He didn't have time to consider the implications of such weirdness, however, and turned his back on the outside, letting the sunlight disappear as he continued into the cave.

A groan just like the ones he heard the night before echoed around Ethan. It was much louder inside the cave, and it seemed to be coming from everywhere. He reassured himself that it was just the wind playing tricks on him and continued. As he walked, he kept one hand on the wall. He was completely lost, and knew nothing of the mountain passages, but he knew if he kept one hand on the wall he could never be completely without hope. *Unless you fall*, said a voice in his head. He pushed the voice to the side and continued down into the dark. Something hit his head and he winced from reflex even though he felt no pain. He reached up to find what hit him.

It felt mostly smooth. He held up the lamp to see. Sure enough, the ceiling of the cave was getting lower. He would have to crouch from here on. He did so and continued forward. Once or twice, his head brushed the ceiling. He hoped it was because he was coming unbent, and not that the passage was lowering.

In just a few paces, Ethan had to drop to all fours. The ceiling wasn't cooperating with the size of the average human, and he was forced to crawl to avoid scraping his head. The lamp, too, was becoming increasingly awkward in the tiny space, and Ethan had to consider holding it by the glass which contained the flame. He knew it couldn't burn him, but he put off holding it until there was no other option. He didn't think he'd ever get used to the way he was. Further on, the passage seemed to contract more. If it shrank too much, the only way he could carry the lamp would be at a parallel to the floor, meaning probable death for the flame inside. Ethan didn't relish the idea. Darkness, like failure, was not an option.

Suddenly, the ground disappeared from under him, and Ethan found himself sliding and tumbling down a rocky slope. He had enough presence of mind to wrap his body around the lamp. No matter what was at the bottom of the rock slide, if his light source went out, he would be done for. He landed on his face at the bottom of the rocks and tried to recover his wits. Even with his *gift*, the bouncing, concussive force of the fall had jostled him, and his ears rang. He looked around but could only see the dim flame of the lamp. If possible, he thought it was darker where he was now than in the tunnel. But that wasn't all it was, was it? Ethan had always heard darkness defined as the absence of light, and he had never experienced anything that contradicted that idea. Darkness was a *nothing*, easily usurped by the smallest light. This darkness, however, was a *something*. The darkness in whatever chamber he had tumbled into was not a mere absence of light. It was the presence of darkness. He could almost see the flicker of his lamp actively striving with the darkness. He felt sweat on his brow, and despite his best efforts, his hands began to

tremble. He knew his eyes were open, but the flame of the lamp began blurring in and out of his view. Could it be dying? No. No, it wasn't. It couldn't. His breath quickened. His throat began to feel cold, and he had a dim, detached thought that he was hyperventilating. Now he couldn't see the flame at all. Now he was blind. Now he was suffocating. Now his heart would burst. Now he knew his father never loved him and his mother actively hated him and he was an idiot for giving away free horseshoes and he should have burned when he fell in the forge it would have been better and he should have starved himself long ago and the Bookkeeper thought he was a curiosity all he had wanted was to know why the failure was locked up and how he should have died long ago and now the old man had abandoned him how could he have been so stupid it had been a mistake to even come here why had he kept going (useless) why had he tried to squeeze through the passage (stupid) why had he protected the lamp (failure) it would only die soon anyway and he would too (idiot) and...

Ethan passed out on the floor of the cave.

A shadow, one you couldn't have seen for the darkness (for shadows are still there in the darkness, although they can't be seen) peeled itself from the wall and approached the unconscious body of the young man it had been watching. It bundled him in its arms the same color and substance as smoke. It carried him into an adjoining room and placed him on the floor next to the other human they had found that day.

The Bookkeeper awoke and felt like something had changed. He couldn't quite figure out *what* felt different, though. He was still in the oppressive darkness he fell asleep in. He could still sense the shadows that were loitering here and there in the caverns and tunnels. He heard breathing to his right and knew that Ethan had been caught too. He sighed. That wasn't good. He may have been able to get himself out eventually, given good luck, but with Ethan? He wasn't sure he could get them both out. Darkness was not an easy enemy.

"Ethan," he said. No response. "Ethan," he said again. Still, no answer but the steady breathing of someone deep in sleep. He considered shouting to wake him, but he didn't want to risk the shadows coming. He could feel some nearby. If the shadows realized they were awake and talking, their chances of survival would drop to zero. He said the name a little louder. This time, he heard the young man stir and grumble. "Ethan. Wake up."

"Hm?"

"Ethan, you have to wake up," he said. The Bookkeeper heard him shuffling around some more.

"I'm up," Ethan said.

"Good. Are you hurt?"

"Of course not."

The Bookkeeper smiled. "That's good. Listen carefully. Are you tied up? Can you move freely?"

"I don't think so," Ethan said. Then he said, "No. I'm not tied. Where are we?"

"Under the mountain," said the old man, "The shadows lured me in. They... Well, they tricked me. They made me think you were down here."

"Do you know how to get out?"

"I know a way," he said. He said his next sentence as if he were measuring the words on a scale. "I am not certain it will work. It is difficult without an open flame."

Ethan smiled. "We have an open flame."

When he arrived at the lamp by a sequence of trial and error, he discovered it hadn't yet been snuffed out. Now all he had to do was wait for the Bookkeeper to give him the word, and he would dash to the lamp, grab it off the ground, and dash back to the old man. He still felt shaken

from before. Whatever had happened to him before he passed out had not yet entirely subsided. He tried to push it out of his mind.

“Go now,” said the Bookkeeper, and Ethan ran. An image of invisible beasts running at him entered his mind unbidden. He used it to push him on, running as fast as he felt he could in the darkness. Finally the lamp was within reach. He bent down, trying to snatch it up and turn around in one motion. He almost slipped on the floor of the cave but managed to regain his balance. His fingers wrapped around the lamp’s handle, the flame casting a strange light over his hand. Then, in a moment, he lost everything. The handle slipped out of his hand. He couldn’t even tell what happened. One moment it was there, he had it. The next he heard glass shattering on the cavern floor as the only light around disappeared.

“Ethan. You need to get back. Now,” said the Bookkeeper. The urgency in his voice terrified Ethan. He ran, finding his way by the sound of the Bookkeeper’s voice alone. He was almost to the Bookkeeper when he heard a noise like a rushing fill his head and felt something trip him. He felt something clawing at his legs and arms. He felt it clawing at his throat, trying to force its way into his mouth. The shadow-thing forced its way into his mouth and filled his throat, and Ethan could no longer breathe.

“Ethan!” yelled the Bookkeeper, “Hurry!” But the boy’s answering call was drowned by the shadow which filled his throat and now body. And even though the black was absolute, Ethan could dimly tell he lost his vision. For the second time that day or night, he passed out.

The Bookkeeper crouched in darkness. Ethan hadn’t answered. The shadow-presence was massing all around. There was no choice. He would have to do it without the flame. He closed his eyes and concentrated. He thought of fire, and warmth, and the first time he heard his father tell a story. All at once, that warmth spread from his thoughts to his body. Then further. He opened his eyes, and he could see. Yellow fire streamed up the walls of the cavern. The shadows were

running, and the Bookkeeper could see the way up and out. But Ethan was nowhere to be found. He was gone. The shadows had taken him. The Bookkeeper lowered his head and began hiking his way out of the mountain.

The rest of his journey home was quiet. There was nobody to speak to, nobody to share his stories with. His journals would have to be his audience for now, as they always were in the end. The old man, and his journals, and his stories, and no one else.

11.

Interlude

"That was lovely," said Bristlebone when the old man finished. "May I ask? Was it autobiographical?"

"Hm? Ah. Perhaps. Yes? Well whichever way it must have happened..." he looked up, trying to remember. "A while ago," he said. He looked pleased with himself for remembering the exact date.

"But, if that's all true..." Slitherlink said, then said something to Bristlebone in a voice Peter couldn't make out. It wasn't his imagination, Peter decided. The stranger looked more *snakey* as the night wore on. His neck was longer, his arms were becoming greener, and blemishes that looked like scales had begun appearing on them.

"That's right," said Bristlebone, his eyes wide. "Bookkeeper, if I may call you that?" The old man didn't seem to hear the question. "Bookkeeper, you mentioned something in your story about the boy being golden, or having a golden shine?"

"Yes. He had a faint glow to him ever since. Fascinated by gold ever since he first saw it. I imagine he loved the challenge of smithing it."

"But we were captured by a—" Well, a golden man," said Peter. "Could it be the same person?" As soon as he said it he reproached himself in his head. Weren't they just telling fairy

stories to each other? Though, he thought, in a funny way he was himself in a fairy story. He looked uneasily at Slitherlink.

“Perhaps,” said the Bookkeeper. His voice didn’t seem bothered much. He spoke with the same faint note of whimsy that he’d had the whole evening. Peter thought he noticed a tear in the man’s eye, however. Perhaps it was just starlight. “I can’t,” said the Bookkeeper, “I can’t seem to remember.”

Bristlebone bowed his head a little. “Do not worry, friend. It matters little. Your ending was sufficient.”

Peter couldn’t believe it. Wasn’t this important to them? He had to speak. “But if it’s the same...”

“I am sure,” said Slitherlink, “that our esteemed guest would not be so bold as to direct another’s story. Especially not a story from one so gracious as our old friend.”

Despite his fear of the snake-headed man, Peter felt his face go hot with anger. “Are you kidding?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“This could help us figure out who captured us, or why they did it. Don’t you want to know? You’re the scariest man or... thing I’ve ever met and you’re too scared to ask an old man to jog his memory?”

Slitherlink didn’t speak for a while. Neither did Bristlebone. Peter couldn’t parse the expression on the former’s face thanks to its reptilian features, but Bristlebone looked scandalized.

“Man?” said the snake-woman.

“Oh,” said Peter. “I didn’t. I mean. Um. You aren’t?”

Slitherlink raised a hand to stop him. "Quiet. No, I'm not. Neither am I human. Perhaps you should listen before you speak, human. We already know who captured us. We already know why. You are the only one here who does not."

Peter couldn't meet her eyes. "Then who? Why?"

She let out a raspy sigh. "It was not the story I had intended to tell tonight. But perhaps it would be for the best."

Bristlebone seemed to growl, and Peter saw a snarl on his face. "He knows nothing of us. He knows nothing of our people. Nothing of our lives, of our traditions, faith, home. He is a guest who has overstayed his welcome." Here he looked at Peter. "And we have sharp teeth."

"Peace, friend," said Slitherlink, also watching Peter. The effect of both staring at him upset Peter. Not on the surface though. On a deeper level, somewhere below even his heart. "What you say is true; he knows nothing. But that is why we must exercise patience." She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she said, "Human, I will tell my story."

12.

The Story of the Wretched King

This story is an old and important one to the people living at the Rim. It was told to me by my father, whose mother told it to him, whose father told it to her, and so on back to its inception. So far as I know it has never been written down, for my people believe still in the power of things that are spoken, and we are all storytellers.

To understand me fully, you must first have some knowledge of my people. (Here she looked pointedly at Peter). I do not believe you have heard of the Rim. Or you may not even have a Rim on your earth. You do not understand what I mean, I see it in your eyes. You must understand the gorgeous terror of that place and the courage of my people for inhabiting it. It is the very edge of all, where only a few people's lengths of uncut stone lie between our earth and the

endless abyss. It is a rite for the young ones of my people, when they come of age, to make pilgrimage to the Rim's peak. When they arrive, after hours of climbing, they kneel and speak into the void whatever they will. None are permitted to know the words another has spoken at the peak, and it is a grave sin to inquire of another's words. Then they begin the journey back to the caves, where they are welcomed as adults instead of children. All this happens in reverence, for our proverb says, *One is a fool who respects not danger*. I have told you this so you may understand the story I will now tell, for it is the story of why each of us makes pilgrimage to the summit, and it has been told for generations, and it will be told for generations more.

Ages ago, there were no beast-folk. There were only humans and beasts, as well as the mystical folk of the wood. The beasts were treated as they always have been (and still are), with the humans using them as labor, comfort, or meat, and there was not a beast on earth with the slightest inclination toward language.

During this age, the humans were at war with the fair folk of the forest. It had been a long and grueling war; so long in fact that five generations of human kings had risen and fallen since the war began. As such, the current human king had no way of knowing the reason for the war, and the king of the wood could no longer remember it after these five human generations. Nevertheless, the war must go on, for in those days the only force that rivaled human stubbornness was faerie stubbornness. Since neither side really had the heart for war, however, it continued only in the form of small raiding campaigns and infrequent sieges. These never lasted longer than a fortnight, and they only ever resulted in two or three real casualties.

The human king during this time was named Calivus, and he was growing old. Introspection accompanied his age, and as he sat at court one summer, he stopped listening to the briefings given by his guard captain. He began to tune out his jarls, his dukes, and his wizards. Then the unthinkable. He began to consider an armistice. He knew he could never speak this

aloud, especially not at court. The king is supposed to rule all, true, but such a goal as peace would have him instantly declared unfit to rule. He would be sent to the asylum. The king considered for a long time what he should do, keeping his own counsel. Finally he made his decision. He disguised himself as a beggar, and under cover of night he slinked into the woods to offer peace. As soon as the fair folk saw the human slinking through their wood, they filled him with arrows and left his body for collection at the edge of the forest. Therefore the prince ascended the throne, and the war entered its sixth generation of human kings. King Cativus's son was named King Pegius, and he was much younger, much crueler, and much more ambitious than his father had been. Even before his father's death he harbored a hate for the faerie, and the killing only intensified that hate. In his first day sitting at court, mere hours after his father's interment, King Pegius announced his intent to win the war, slaughter the faerie, and raze the forests in which they lived to the ground. His announcement was met with heavy applause, and later that day the ranks were bolstered with new men, the quiet forges were lit, and the wizards began anew their research into faerie weaknesses. After a year of preparation, King Pegius began the genocide for which he is now famous.

The wizards (through unspeakable means) discovered that a certain metal they called iron caused the fair folk intense pain while also stopping them from using magic. Pegius ordered his forges to cease the production of bronze weapons and outfit themselves for the preparation of this new metal. Not only this, but he ordered one third of the forges to produce not iron weapons, but iron fencing. In summer—the black summer we call it now—Pegius had his men place miles of iron fencing on the border of the forest. Ranks of men stood, a black sword in each man's hand, as the king himself lit a torch and set fire to the underbrush at the edge of the wood. All that followed was grim slaughter. The fire killed most of the faerie. Some survived long enough to find the forest exit, but the moment they touched the iron fence it set them aflame. They burned just as quickly as

the trees. When the fires faded, Pegius and his soldiers marched into the new wasteland. Any of the fair folk who yet survived were speared with iron, bursting into red flame and burning, like all the others, into grey ash. Undoubtedly some lived, and perhaps still live even today. But since that great purge the influence of the faerie people has been felt only in stories like the one I tell you now.

Pegius was satisfied with his work. His people became nervous, however. They did not much like the idea of a king who could kill without batting an eye. But the heady nationalism stemming from such a successful end to such a long war quieted them and they gave their king all their loyalty. Given time, perhaps, they would have revolted. They never received the chance though, for they were free of their king the next fortnight.

A prophetess came to seek audience. When she arrived in town none could tell. But when the sun reached its zenith one day, she was standing patiently at the gates of the king's castle, asking to be heard. She wore a tan cloak, cheap and worn, but unstained, untorn, and impeccably clean. In her hand she carried a rod. Her face was shielded from view by the cowl of her cloak. The guardsmen knew she was a prophetess as soon as they saw her and opened the gate without delay. It is a sin to keep a prophetess waiting longer than she must, regardless of her purpose. She strode as only the truly arrogant or truly humble do, paying no attention to those who marked her steps. She entered the court without introduction and addressed herself to the king at once. Only a prophetess is permitted to do either. These are the words she spoke:

“Pegius, son of Cativus, you have committed a great atrocity in the eyes of heaven. You have annihilated a learned and glorious race whose time was not yet gone. You have stained the forests and painted them black. You have soured the taste of human offerings, and you have spat in the faces of your fathers and your fathers' fathers. Have you a defense?”

Pegius frowned. He said:

“You will address me as *Your Majesty*, dog. The insolence! Spat in the faces of my fathers? I have upheld their names and dressed them in honor after their time. I have preserved my people forevermore, for who can tell what would have become of them if the beasts of the forest had been allowed to live, having killed my father with impunity. You will leave my court at once. You are no longer a prophetess in my kingdom.”

“I am not prophetess by your power, king of man. You shall know what it is to be a beast of the forest,” said the woman. And she performed a miracle. She held forward her rod, and as she did so, the king was transformed. His mouth and nose came forward. His limbs became covered in hair and placed themselves differently. His ears became pointed. He grew a tail. The court wondered, for sitting on the throne was not their king, but a gigantic hound, mangy with disease, snarling with anger and fear. “Begone,” said the prophetess, and the King-Beast as if compelled bounded from court, castle, and the eyes of men.

At this point in the tale, there is a gap of years. Nobody knows what the King-Beast did or where he went. Nobody even knows how long the gap is. All the stories tell us is that he wandered, living as a hound and killing as he pleased. There were no forests in his own kingdom any more. He had seen to that himself. Many believe that he hid in the western deserts or journeyed far south to one of the swampy peninsulas that stories tell of. There are myriad tales of the King-Beast during this gap. It was the fashion not that long ago for small towns to claim that the King-Beast had lived in a wood near the town. These stories, however, were almost all untrue.

The specific happenings are immaterial. All importance is rooted in one idea. That across these unknown years, something in the King-Beast changed. Something replaced his bloodlust. Perhaps it was being ostracized. Perhaps he fell in love. Still perhaps he simply grew bored. But one day he came to the mountains at the end of everything. One day he came to the Rim. He stopped killing. He lived quietly, taking shelter in the stones and trees he may have crushed and

burned only a few years earlier. He lived among the peaceful non-magical beasts of the area. They took to him naturally, just as young scholars gravitate to the learned. He taught them the human-speech and before long, he had a perfectly articulate following of hounds, rabbits, foxes, owls, and even snakes. It was a good life, and it lasted until the King-Beast felt a call to the summit of the Rim. The call was felt so deep in his soul he could not ignore it, not even to eat or drink, and so he began climbing the mountain at once. The journey was arduous, but he made it. When he crested the peak, he was stunned, for standing at the Rim was the very prophetess who had been the agent of his transformation so many years before. She spoke to him:

“I understand you have changed, human king.”

“Why do you mock me? You were the one who changed me, and I have not been king since.”

“That was not the change I meant. How are your new subjects?”

“I have no new subjects. What games are you playing, messenger? Why have you called me here?”

“I meant the beasts you teach. The ones at the base of the mountains. You are their king, you know. They would fight and die for you. As for why I have called you; you have fulfilled your sentence. Your punishment is no longer necessary. I will transform you into a man again, if you like?”

The King-Beast was staring at the ground. Mere years before, he had called her a dog for not treating him like a king. Now that she called him one, he was not sure he deserved it, nor that he wanted it. Perhaps he had changed. This was the first time he acknowledged the possibility. As for becoming human... Why, wasn't that what he had wanted since he was first transformed? He wondered.

“Messenger,” he said, “perhaps you would grant me a lesser gift than my transformation. My subjects, as they think themselves, would never trust a man to lead them. The bonds of their beasthood are too strong. Instead, I ask that you grant *them* a way to appear human. I would have them experience all the possibilities of life, just as I have.”

The prophetess closed her eyes in thought. (Or so it seemed. She was truly a messenger, and perhaps she was receiving a message.) When she opened her eyes again, she said:

“Very well, King-Beast. If you desire it, on your way back to your subjects you will find a sacred spring. The waters of that spring will allow them to appear human if they should wish. But you will never be allowed your humanity. Is this what you choose?”

“Yes,” he said, without any hesitation.

“Very well, it shall be done. You may return.”

Return he did. And, just as promised, he stumbled upon the sacred spring. When he arrived back with his subjects, he led them to the spring and told them what it offered. They all chose to drink from the spring at least once in their lives, for its effects were temporary. A few of the speaking beasts, taking vast amounts of the spring water with them, decided to learn what it was like to live among humans as one of them. The majority, however, stayed at the Rim with the King-Beast, where they established their own civilization distinct from that of the humans or the beasts.

That is the story of the origin of the beast-folk (and indeed of the talking animals as well, for we are one people), and that is why our young mark their adulthood by making pilgrimage to the Rim’s summit. To commemorate the miraculous conversion of the King-Beast from one who would raze the forests to one who would live in them and for them. And the elders say that is the meaning of the void past the Rim. To look into it is to look into the potential darkness of a person, and to stand on the earth while doing so is to find a foothold, a shelter against that darkness. For even if it takes a prophetess, one may always find a foothold.

13.

Interlude

Slitherlink paused and took a drink from her cup. A thin, pink tongue emerged from her scaly non-lips and flicked across the water's surface, lapping up droplets. "That was the first part of the story," she said. "But there is a second part. I pray you listen."

Peter did listen.

14.

The Story of Our People

In the year 1503 we have the first recorded killing of a beast-person by human hands. Browntail was the name of the victim. She originally took the form of a squirrel, but accounts and drawings tell us that she made a stunning human. She was working as a barmaid at an inn near a town called Fryer's Grove when it happened. By that time, most humans knew of my people, and since Browntail had been living at the inn for years she felt comfortable. Safe. Sometimes she would even forego drinking sacred water. The bushy tail and pointed ears she sported when she neglected it amused the inn's regulars and often netted her extra tips. On the eighth day of the first month of 1503, a patron named Jeck Harrow came to the inn with a full purse and various appetites. He drank, swore, and laughed with vigor. He challenged a man to a fistfight, won, and took all the money the man had. He spent it all on drinks for him and his friends. As the night passed, his boldness only grew. And when Browntail brought him what was perhaps his ninth ale, the man pawed at her dress. He told her what he wanted, but she didn't want the same thing. Browntail was used to speaking with, and declining, rowdy patrons, and she had no reason to think Jeck Harrow any different from the rest. So she brushed away the offer, adding a flirtatious smile so the drunk didn't feel wholly cheated, and turned to retrieve more ale for her customers. As soon as she turned her back, he grabbed her tail and pulled. She spun and scratched his face with

her nails (by this time not unlike claws). He cried out but didn't let her tail go. He pulled her to the ground. Hard. So hard that when her head hit the side of the bar on her way down, it split, spilling red over the inn's already ale-stained floor. None of the stories people tell about that night know whether it was that wound that killed her, or one of the dozens Jeck Harrow rained on her lifeless body as she lay on the floor, or one of the hundreds Jeck and his friends inflicted after they dragged her out of the inn and into the streets. In fewer than three weeks, town criers across the kingdom were informing the public about the killing, all of them agreed in their conclusion. The filthy non-human had gotten what was coming to her.

By 1505, it was obvious to any attentive being—be they human, beast-folk, or a yet-surviving faerie—that Browntail's killing was by no means an isolated incident. Inspiration infected the scum of humanity. Chance may be fickle, but Inspiration is treacherous. Jeck Harrow became a symbol of salvation, and the jilted, cheated, and wounded of low character turned to his example. In some communities it became a crime to be a beast-person. Those suspected would be isolated for days without food or water. If nothing but starvation and dehydration resulted, they were set free. If they grew a tail, revealed scales, or unfurled wings, they were sentenced to death. The method of execution: the only one suitable for such animals. The very style of beating used by the impeccable Jeck Harrow in 1503.

In 1547, King Alric IV ascended the throne. He is the same type of man as the now-legendary Jeck Harrow, only he is also a subtle man. When he took the throne, he assessed that his kingdom was possessed of two problems. The first was the surplus of beast-folk, who must be put down. To fix such a problem, however, would require the full use of the royal army, and using the army was out of the question, because of the second problem. The neighboring kingdom was far wealthier than his. It would take a full-scale invasion to put it in its place. For a while, Pegius wasn't sure what to do. If he put down the beast-folk, he would be praised, true. But then how

would his people see it if he didn't go to war? Would they think him a coward? Unthinkable. If he led the invasion to victory, he would be immortalized not only as a warrior king but as the wealthiest king of his time. But ignoring the plague of beasts in his homeland could cost him dearly. Surely the animals would band together to overthrow him. So *that* alternative was unthinkable as well. The king agonized over the decision for months before finding a solution. He summoned a scribe to the throne room and dictated an edict. It read as follows:

By order of His Royal Majesty Alric IV, Lord of the High Lands and of the Southern Swamps and of the Western Deserts and of the Sea to the East, it is hereby decreed that all Beast Folk residing within His Royal Majesty's lands shall be soldiers of the Royal Army. All who do so and successfully complete ten years of service to His Royal Majesty shall be rewarded with gold and citizenship. Any failing to report to His Royal Majesty's Barracks within the year shall be executed. Signed, His Royal Majesty, &c. Alric IV.

Of course, many of us reported to the castle, though we knew the promise of riches and citizenship was likely false. Some defied the king and sought refuge at the Rim. I was not brave enough to join them, then. In service of Alric and his wars, Bristlebone and I saw dear friends die every day. Some we only met during the war, but others... Others we had known as babes. We were allowed only enough spring water to maintain a humanoid shape. Our claws and fangs were too useful to do away with. Both Bristlebone and I knew when we couldn't take any more. With the help of a beast-man named Talonjaw we stole enough of the spring water to appear human for a few days, and we left in the night. We lost ourselves in a wood, and found ourselves on your earth, human. Without a steady supply of sacred water, though, we knew we would be found eventually, and we were right. And if I'm not mistaken, that brings us to when we met you.

The Rest

"I had no idea," said Peter, when the story was finished. "I'm... I had no idea."

"How could you have?" said Slitherlink, waving a hand dismissively. "After all, on your earth there are only humans. There would be no occasion for such a story."

Peter thought he heard the Bookkeeper chuckle. It was the first noise from him in some time, and Peter had thought him asleep. Now that he looked, he could see the old man had been writing the story, like the ones before, into his journal. He closed the journal and said, "That's everyone. Time to sleep."

"Yes," said Bristlebone, looking up at the sky. "It will be day before long, which means continuing down this cursed bumpy road. If we don't sleep now, then we never will."

"I agree," said Slitherlink. Peter responded only by lying on his back. The manacles and hobbles made it difficult, and the position he finally found wasn't exactly comfortable, but it would do. *I wonder*, he thought, *if this has all been a dream, and I'll wake up in my apartment. Dorothy and Toto. And you were there and you were there and you were—* and then he was asleep.

Peter dreamed strangely again that night. His dream wasn't so much a string of events as it was a string of images. There was an orb, and it was spinning. Then the orb was a snake biting its own tail, just like in his earlier dream. Then his vision was filled with fire, and the fire became a book, and the book became a rose, and the rose became the spinning orb. And on, and on, into the vanishing point.

"Rise and shine, beauties. Toilet time." It was the driver. Peter opened his eyes and blinked the sleep out of them. He had the strangest dream... Couldn't remember it now. Something about a...? No luck, it was gone. Oh well, that was the way with dreams, he supposed. The driver hoisted the three of them up by the chain and told them to relieve themselves in much the same manner he instructed them the day before. He loaded them up into the three cages at the

back of his cart, and with two whips to the horses they were back on the road. "We'll get to our destination today," he said. The pleasure in his voice was unmistakable. "And you'll all get what you beasts deserve. Won't be long now."

The ride was uneventful. The most exciting thing Peter saw for a good few hours was a dead cow in one of the fields they passed through. After a while, however, the countryside began to shift into village, and village began to shift into town. He didn't care for the change, as people came out of their houses just to see the prisoners taken to the Fortress. Every so often a rotten fruit would sail through the air and splat against the wooden bars of one of the cages. Slitherlink got the worst of it, as she looked the most beast-like. Since they had finished the round of storytelling the night before, her arms had become shorter as if they were trying to hide in her torso. Speaking of her torso, it was longer now, and thinner, and her legs looked as if they were trying to fuse together. She was as close to a snake as you could get without being one, so most of the insults and produce were aimed at her. Bristlebone, whose nose had come forward and began to look more like a snout, received a little less abuse, but not much. Not that Peter avoided the jibes. Even though he looked (indeed *was*) entirely human, by association the crowd assumed he must be a beast too. A tomato (gratefully not rotten) sailed through the bars of his cage and hit him in the chest. Oh well, he thought. Might as well make the best out of a bad situation. He ate the tomato for his lunch.

Finally they arrived at their destination: the White Fortress. Peter wasn't all that surprised to find that it was more of a greyish tan. The wagon passed through a ring of guards which began their work of keeping the public away from the culprits. The driver stopped the horses just short of the door. One of the guards near the door shouted to someone above him, and within moments the great iron doors of the White Fortress opened. Standing in the doorway was the Golden Man.

"Finally," he said. "The portals the shadows use are so inefficient. Pity I couldn't just have dragged our deserters back with me. We might also have avoided *this* unfortunate incident." He gestured in Peter's direction.

"Yes, sir," said a guard.

"Go ahead and take the snake first. We can't have it finish reverting and slip through its bars. It's a wonder it hasn't done that already."

"Yes, sir." Two guards opened Slitherlink's cage and took her through the iron doors. She put up no fight.

"Driver, you've done well. Once everything here has been taken care of, you may return home. I'll send an officer with your usual fee for two prisoners."

"Three," said the driver. "What about this poor sod?"

The golden man shook his head. "I never asked you to transport this human. Two."

(Two? Three? Why did that seem wrong?)

"Say two and a half? For I did have to look after him, and how was I to know not to transport him if there was no word?"

The golden man considered this. "Fine. Two and a half it is. Is there anything else?"

"Not as I know of."

"Good. You're free to go once the soldiers have taken the other beast. As for this one..."

The Golden Man strode confidently to Peter's cage. This was it. The end. He had seen too much.

He knew it. Dear Lord, he thought, if this is a dream please let me wake up as soon as possible.

But all the Golden Man did was unlock the cage and open the door. "There's a portal back to your earth on the second floor of this fortress. The administrative offices. Up the staircase, to the right. You'll see the sign." Was this some sort of sick joke? "Well," said the golden man, "go on."

Peter crawled out of his cage. He looked around. Without saying a word, he scurried into the

White Fortress. As he entered, he looked back at Bristlebone, still in his cage. He looked sad. Not angry though. Purely sad.

Peter followed the Golden Man's instructions. Up the staircase. He had never been more scared in his life. To the right. What if somebody thought he was a beast-man? Administrative offices. There was the sign, painted onto the wall beside what looked like a rather light wooden door. Feeling somewhat stupid, Peter knocked. "It's open," said a voice from inside. Indeed it was. Peter entered the administrative offices to find a man in robes standing at a desk. Painted on the desk was *Reception*. "May I help you?" said the man.

"Um. Yes," said Peter. "I'm meant to go back to my own earth?"

"Ah. Right this way." The man smiled and led Peter down a short hallway and into a side room. The room contained only a large mirror without ornamentation. "Just think of a mirror from your own earth," said the receptionist. "And hold your breath. Some people say it helps. Have a nice day!" And he left, closing the door to the mirror room behind him.

Peter sighed. Sure, he felt sorry for Slitherlink, for Bristlebone

(...and someone...?)

But it was time to move on. There was nothing he could do anymore. So he looked into the mirror and thought about standing in his apartment's bathroom. And there he was. There were the countertops. The sink. The toothbrush, the reading glasses. The shower behind him. His own reflection in the mirror. Its eyes were filling with tears.

Epilogue.

Peter was riding the subway when the hobo beside him tried to strike up a conversation.

"You know," said the vagrant. "A while ago crime was much worse than it was here. Then they cleaned up the subway and it got better."

"Is that so?" said Peter, wondering why the hobo didn't see he was being ignored.

"Aye," he said. "All my stories are true, I say. All of 'em."

"That's nice."

"It is, isn't it? It's good to tell stories."

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes I do. Very much. Else you forget things."

Peter was amused. "What if you forget the stories, then?"

"Ah, well. Then we're in trouble. That's why you should write 'em down. That way you can't ever forget 'em. You can memorize 'em too. But I write 'em down in my journal. Seems to work the best."

"I see."

"And," said the old man (and there was something different in his voice), "if you want to help them, tell their stories."

"And whose would those be?"

"You remember. You just don't think you do."

Peter finally turned to look at the hobo. There was nobody there. He looked around. Nobody but business-class folk. He tried to push away the man's words. They made him uncomfortable in a way he couldn't define. After careful consideration, he issued his verdict on the matter.

"Hm. Weird." He kept thinking about the episode the rest of his way home, however. When he arrived, he found a pen and pad and sat down at his kitchen table.

If you want to help them, tell their stories.

The pen began moving, and his hand followed.