

Chapter 1

Foreverwhere

The Eel

The Eel was a resident of a very dark, unknown ocean, who lived in a deep, dark cave. Anyone acquainted with the Eel would say that he was a homely, yet fun guy. It was also known that sometimes the Eel, he would come out of his dwelling to gather seashells for his collection, which he kept down at his abode beneath the waves. At other times, when the Eel wasn't looking for seashells, he was busy counting the minutes.

He also took upon counting the sand grains on the bottom of the ocean, and kept close records of his progression. The figure he had reached thus far was very long indeed, and had consisted of many smaller numbers. The Eel always mused upon taking a nice vacation, as soon as his task was done.

It was a gray day when the Eel crawled out of the waves onto the damp shore, to acquire new specimens for his collection. He smacked his lips and, squinting, he tried to adjust to the daylight, as faint as it was. He stood up, and then dove again towards the sand and began crawling along the water, face skimming the ground. Maundering quietly, and disporting himself into an occasional laugh, he paused every so often to examine a plausible candidate.

“Nice...” he whispered as a new ocean-candy occasioned upon his path. It was purple. He smiled, licked his lips, and the shell was placed in the collecting basket. Another seashell caught his attention not so long after. But, well, it didn't measure up. And it was not as pretty as the other one was. The Eel, you see, he held his standards pretty high. He examined the shell for a moment (he still liked to give them the benefit of the doubt) and then, tossing it aside he said: “No sir.” And that was that. He kept on crawling along the lonely shore.

The Hobster

For a while he crept on, and was about to turn around and return to his blue abyss- as exciting findings were scarce, at best- when a pair of legs appeared before him.

Clothed in long white socks, the legs emerged out of two black shoes. The Eel stopped, and sat up. He licked his lips and examined the creature to which the legs (and the black shoes) were attached.

“Who are you?” The Eel asked.

“I’m the Hobster,” proclaimed the Hobster. The Hobster wore a big black hat. He had two long white ears, and a long white nose.

“What are you doing here?” asked the Eel.

“I am pondering.”

“Oh. I see,” said the Eel. And then, “Would you like to see my seashell?” But before an answer was even given, the Eel was already rummaging through his basket, and then extending his hand he exhibited his latest discovery.

“It’s very purple,” the Hobster said, and the Eel was swathed with excitement.

“I can see you have an appreciation for the finer things in life,” he said.

The Hobster shrugged his shoulders, “I was only stating the obvious.”

“I have many more. And they are all very pretty,” boasted the Eel.

“Lovely,” replied the Hobster.

At that the Eel put his shell away, and took a few long moments to stare at the Hobster.

“What is that?” he finally asked, pointing at the Hobsters’ hat.

“That’s a hat,” said the Hobster.

“Well, what does it do?”

“It helps me ponder.”

“I see,” said the Eel. “What do you ponder?”

“Many a things,” said the Hobster. “Things of importance, and things of little importance.”

“Oh.”

“Would you like to join me?” asked the Hobster.

“Yes sir,” said the Eel, “I think I would.” For pondering seemed, oh, so intriguing.

So he sat himself by the Hobster.

Pondering

They sat there for some time, and then the Eel began counting. For a little while nothing else happened, but eventually the Hobster asked the Eel, “What are you doing?” “I am counting”.

“What are you counting?”

“The minutes.”

“Interesting,” said the Hobster.

Once more they sat quietly while the Hobster pondered, and the Eel counted, his fingers fully engaged in the act. The waves churned to foam and crashed onto the shore, and there was nobody there at all. No one but the raucous seabirds who squabbled and fought, blue crabs and sand pipers that scurried hectically along the water line.

Finally the Hobster asked, “Have you ever noticed how clouds drift?”

“Do they really? I never knew they did that.”

“Oh yes, they do. But I am not sure where to. I have been pondering that for a while now.”

Additional pondering and counting subsequently ensued, and were interrupted when the Eel had decided to go about some pondering of his own.

“What is that?” he asked.

The Hobster followed the Eel’s gaze.

Far in the distance, down the empty-stretched shore, something bobbed up and down.

“I don’t know,” said the Hobster.

Ema

They looked at the moving thing approach, and when it was sufficiently close, they could see that it was a girl. She wore a plaid skirt and had a ribbon in her hair, and she was skipping and whistling. And when the girl stopped by the Eel and the Hobster, the Eel asked, “Who are you?”

“I am Ema,” she answered, “With one ‘M’.” And then, “What are you two doing here?”

“We are pondering,” replied the Hobster.

“And counting,” the Eel added.

“And where do you all come from?” Ema inquired.

“I must have forgotten,” the Hobster said, “because I don’t think I come neither from here nor from there.”

“Everybody comes from somewhere,” Ema said.

“So where do *you* come from?” The Eel inquired.

“I come from a land far away. And I skipped all the way down here.” After a moment she added, “Well, no use in just sitting here and pondering, of course. Are you two coming, or what??”

“Where are you going?” The Hobster asked.

“The Magician’s Tour is coming here today, and I am going to see the show. But we ought to leave now, we don’t want to miss the one and only presentation, you know.”

The Show

The three began making their way down the ashen-gray coastline. Ema led the way, skipping at the head of the procession, whilst the Eel hurried low on his legs behind her, swaying this way and that, basket hanging from his hand, and the Hobster, well, he tried to keep up with the both of them.

Gray clouds churned and boiled across the sky, and the squealing birds keeled into loops, flailing and floundering in the blustery air, and flapping above the earth. After a fair amount of skipping and swaying and trying to keep up, the three finally caught sight of a small gathering in the distance. There were vague sounds of music, and then a booming voice announced, “Welcome to the great tour!”

“Hurry...” the Eel whispered urgently.

“You must not believe anything you see, and if you do not believe, then you absolutely must not see!!” Continued the voice.

At last the three had reached the outskirts of the crowd that assembled all rapt in awe before a small, elevated stage.

“The show is utterly forbidden for persons with asthma, weak hearts, eye infection, and short memory,” it continued.

The crowd stood argus-eyed and stared at the empty stage. There was the sound of drums that grew louder and louder and with it the tension in the air grew thicker and thicker. Then a cloud of smoke deluged the stage and once dispersed, the Magician was finally revealed to all. The crowd was delightedly surprised.

Dressed in a red suit, a long black, draping cape, and sporting a tall black hat, the Magician bellowed, “Welcome to the great tour of the Magician!”

The crowd clapped and whistled.

And then the show began.

And this is a good moment to mention that the show, well, it was rather brief. It lasted for just about the shortest time it would take one to consume a lemon on its whole. And the recorded shortest time for such an affair, is, for all intents and purposes, not very long. However, you could find no complaints amongst the attendees.

It was the most unconventional, controversial- and later on the most talked about- show ever. Indeed any nonconformist would have enjoyed that aberrant presentation of the physics-defying demonstration. For the Magician, he took pleasure in breaking the rules. And he wasn't one for tradition.

The crowd stood spellbound the entire short time. They were hijacked by the Magician's maverick performance. They were amused and so very much bemused. They Ooo-ed and Aha-ed.

And then it ended. And everybody went on their merry way. The stage was folded into a small suitcase. And that was that. And the Eel, he was the first to clap when the show ended, and the first to congratulate the Magician. Because, he was that kind of guy.

“Wonderful show!” He cried.

”Well, well, if it isn't my friend the Eel,” smiled the Magician, “how is that lovely collection of yours?”

And the Eel was so very excited, for that, he thought to himself, was the exact kind of query one wants to hear from an old friend on their long-awaited rendezvous. “It is just as fine as the last time you've seen it,” the Eel promised.

“I am a big fan,” said Ema to the Magician. “Your name travels far.”

“I appreciate your lovely compliments.” The magician said, his voice low and deep. “I adore it when people adore me.”

Then, turning to the Hobster, the Magician said, “I trust that you loved the show as well?”

“There were many things to reflect upon,” the Hobster said, “I might have to ponder that for a while before I can answer your question.”

“Well don’t think too much,” the Magician said, “The good things in life are missed if you egg on them too long. And now my friends, we will have a feast, for, you see, magic can make one very hungry. But first, we must locate the appropriate spot for this kind of thing. Because,” he paused, “a feast cannot take place simply anywhere.”

A Feast

So a hunt for the suitable location was launched. The Magician led the way, hands crossed behind his back, cape flapping about as an unbound sail. The rest followed. For a while they paced down the beach, and for a while nothing happened. Evidently, the art of detecting the appropriate site for a banquet was not a simple one. But finally the Magician stopped, and they all stopped short behind him. He took a long whiff, stuck a moistened finger in the air, and said, “No. Something terrible had happened here once. We cannot dine at this spot.”

And so the search continued. However, before long, the party came to another stop. The Magician counted steps, and carefully inspected the ground. He tasted the sand, tasted the air, and then finally paused and clapped twice. “Here.” He declared. And then, “Please step back.”

Once everyone stepped back, the Magician drew a wide circle in the sand, and clapped three more times. Subsequently a big table crowned with 5 chairs appeared in the circle. There were plates and glasses and food, and all present were invited to take a seat and dine.

And so they ate and drank their fill, and at the end of the meal, not much time was given for rest, for the Magician, he wasn’t one who enjoyed waiting, and it wasn’t in his character to encourage any wasting of precious time. “And now,” he said, “a little game.” “Oh dandy!” the Eel exclaimed.

“What kind of a game? And how little is a little game?” the Hobster asked, “I don’t remember whether I have ever played a game before, but surely, I have *heard* of them.” “It is a game that is called The Game,” explained the Magician, “and if you are an elephant, are carrying dangerous, hazardous, or other precarious materials, have gum disease, and are under 18 and/or pregnant, you shouldn’t, wouldn’t, and (under no circumstances) couldn’t, participate in it.”

The Game

The Magician clapped twice. After his first clap the table disappeared. Following his second clap, the assembly was- for lack of better words- teleported to, well, somewhere. It’s hard to say where that somewhere was, however they were now all standing on a very small (and, in this context, small would be quite a generous word) one-legged isle. Its trunk plunged slender and long down into a black stygian depth. All around them single-legged islets soared out of an ocean of darkness, and desolation seemed to be the primary -if not the only- resident of the place. It was all rather empty and quiet, and except for the hollow wail of lamenting winds, nothing could be heard. Ema was impressed.

The Hobster, on the other hand, was not. “I do not think I can tolerate this for long,” he said, and then crouching as low as possible, he pulled his big hat down over his body, until only his legs showed underneath it. “Please tell me when this game is over,” he pleaded.

Sitting down, Ema dangled her feet over the rim, staring into the nothing. “I have never been so high above the sea,” the Eel said. Far below and all around, dismal and insatiated winds cried their loneliness only to be heard by no one. “560 billion light years ago this was an ancient sea,” said the Magician, “and a cold sea it was, and very far from everything. So far, that even the sun couldn’t reach it. Thus on its horizon the sun never rose and the sun never set. And ancient, insipid creatures had lived in it,” the Magician continued. “Then one day everything turned upside-down, and the cold, distant sea fell to somewhere even farther and even colder, spitting out everything it contained. Including the pale white creatures.”

“And where is it now?” the Eel inquired, gazing into the nothing that was once a sea, cold and remote.

“It is said to be inside a bubble floating between distant orbs. But then again, it could be anywhere at all, really.”

Before long, it became time for games. The rules were delineated in plenary as follows: Cheating or chewing (of gum, or anything else chewable, including but not limited to thoughts, your own tongue, or any other part of your body) was not allowed. “We’ll be playing Hopscotch,” announced the Magician, and Ema was delighted, as anything that had anything to do with skipping surely sounded tasteful to her gaming pallet.

With a yellow chalk, the Magician drew the proper diagram on the ground, and all was set. “Now,” he said, “I am sure you will all be pleased to know, that the winner of this game will serve as my assistant, on the night of my upcoming last and final show.” “Well, that is a serious cause to play for, and we must play to the end, or to death. Whichever comes first,” Ema proclaimed.

The Hobster whimpered under his hat, as death and games were thrown into one sentence, and the Eel, well, he wasn’t really sure what was going on.

“There is one more thing I neglected to mention,” the Magician said. “You must play with,” he paused, “your eyes closed.” And with a wide grin plastered on his face, he picked a small pebble from the ground, and tossed it in the air to catch it back again. “Now, shall we start?”

Then the game began. Needless to say things were hairy on the miniature precipice. Edges were closely cut. Violent winds swooned from above, lashing angrily at anything vertical. Balance and faith and much more, were continuously tested. But blindfolded and hardly at ease, they played all the same. The Hobster hid inside his hat, and kept asking for updates on how everybody was doing, and who was leading. Four rounds were played, five, six, and the skies stained to darker gray, and swelled with clouds. “Looks like it is going to storm soon,” said the Magician peacefully, looking at the sky.

Six additional rounds, seven, and then a sloppy jump, and the Eel went over the cliff, plummeting into the black.

“Oh dear!” cried Ema.

“What happened?!” the Hobster yelped from within his hat.

Stooped over the rim, Ema stared into the black and shook her head. “Poor Eel,” she mumbled, “I did kinda like him.”

“I would love it if someone would tell me what was happening!” the Hobster pleaded in panic, but before anyone could speak again, storm clouds coagulated suddenly into clots of black ink above them, Spreading like weeds across the sky . The air smelled wet, and crackled with electricity.

Then there was thunder.

And then the thunder was not thunder, but more like a growl. Dowsed in fear and all sorts of imagery of genuinely bad scenarios, the Hobster inquired, “What was that?” He pulled his hat up, uncovering eyes wide with terror. “More horror, and more horror,” he whined.

Then another thunder, which was more like a growl, split the air in half. Heads turned in every direction; eyes poked holes in the sky. And finally, the source of all that trouble- or at least, the source of all that growling- was revealed: a sea monster flitting through the rumbling air roaring boisterously and all, and heading in their direction.

The Hobster yelped and pulled his hat down over his body again. “Please tell me when she’s gone,” he cowed from within the hat.

“She’s gone,” said Ema after a moment, for the monster, diving behind one of the crags, had disappeared.

For now.

A relentless wind thrashed angrily this way and that, its tongues as sharp as whips. The sky above -took to mayhem, and to copes of black and gray clouds that drew so near and so low and so quick- was nothing but an ominous mess. Everything broke into chaos.

After a few moments spanned, the sea monster dove full speed up the isle's stem just to reappear before them, close as a spit of a plum seed.

"Where is it?" her voice tore through the general rumble.

"Where is what?" Ema asked.

"The sea!" The sea monster roared, "The cold ancient sea, where is it? Have you taken it?"

"We have not," said the Magician.

"Where is it then?" she roared.

"It isn't here any more. That's for sure," the Magician chuckled.

"Pity," lamented the sea monster.

"You came to the right place at the wrong time, my friend," the Magician said. "You are 560 billion light years late."

Thunder exploded everywhere followed by lighting.

"Has it been that long?" the sea monster mused.

"There are plenty of other seas to go around," said Ema. "I am sure some of them are in dire need of a sea monster."

But the sea monster was not condoled, and shook her head. "That won't do. I have to find *my* sea," she explained. "There is something I forgot there when I left, you see. Something I need to find again..."

Cold drops began falling heavy like marbles and sharp like needles from the blustery heavens.

"Well," said the Magician, "perhaps this will be your lucky year."

"Perhaps," said the gloomy sea monster. And with a boisterous growl she plummeted down into the abyss below, and disappeared.

As cold-pinching rain and an angry storm were hardly the setting for games, the Magician- much to the Hobster's relief- announced that it was time to depart. "Farewell," he said, "perhaps we shall see each other again someday, or, perhaps, we shall not." He then clapped his hands, and in the next moment, the Hobster was sitting on the beach, where the Eel roved, searching for shells.

"Oh dandy!" cried the Eel in surprise, "you're back." And then, "Where is everybody?"

The Hobster shook his head, and then standing up and brushing sand from his paws he declared, “I don’t know, and I don’t care, and I am going home.” He then turned around, and left.

“But who won?” mumbled the Eel.

But things were not complicated in the Eel’s world. One moment things existed, and the next, they were gone. It was all the same to him. And life went on. So he shrugged his shoulders, and dragging his basket behind him, he plunged into the water and dove down to his own home.

Beneath everything lay his cave, and next to it, a crooked sign read in crooked letters: “Where the Eel lives” with an arrow pointing to the cave drawn under. For a few moments the Eel stood and gazed into the ghostly, watery sky, and then sat at the entrance of the cave, and began counting.

Many, many miles above, a small boat was arriving at the shore.

Chapter 2

The Witch and the Grawlump

Urgent Matters

The sun was warm, and hung bright and big in a blue sky, when a boat arrived at the slushy shore, kissing the sand softly to a halt. A Witch (a small one) jumped out of the boat, and drove a cudgel into the sand. She secured the craft with a rope that she tied to the pole, and then stood there and examined the boat. It was very small. Just a single-person type of craft. It was painted green, and had a little mast and a tattered, wind-stricken, quondam-white sail. The words: “The Vessel” were etched in white on both sides.

Now, as far as the Witch goes, well, she was a small one, and although fashion and other sorts of societal codes never applied to her, she did, indeed, wear a long pointy hat and a long, dark dress. Her hair, long and black and woven with silver threads, continually hovered about her face like the floating seaweed on the waves. She was not a bad Witch. She was just, a Witch. And she smelled like tales, and time, and places far away.

It was a long time coming, but she finally came to a stop. Many long days had passed since setting sail. Alone on her Vessel, and sailing into horizons that never ended, she would play her old wooden flute under the brilliant, coruscating stars of some warm hazy nights, nothing around her but the company of blue ripples and random thoughts. Now she was standing on the shore, looking at her boat, waiting for someone, as per the scheduled meeting.

She checked her watch, just to be sure. But there was some time. Time was never an issue for her. She always had time. And so, she sat on the sand, and built a small sand castle. She rose to check on the rope, and returned to the sand castle. She dug a small moat around it, and added a couple of steeples. Then she began playing her worn-out flute. She played an old sailor’s song she had once heard on one of her many journeys, and continued on to one she had put together entirely on her own. Then

she slipped the flute back into her pocket, and from a different one produced a small green bottle. It had a note in it.

The Witch bottled out the note, and spread it flat on her legs. She had recovered the bottle from the lap of the ocean, precisely 7 years, 11 months, 3 weeks, 6 days and several minutes ago, while passing by the shore. It was floating in the water, waiting to belong. Waiting for a boat.

And so a boat came by, and on its board the Witch. The Witch had fished that bottle out of the water, and read the note that was folded inside it like a wrinkled scroll. Written in black letters, it said:

“Urgent. Matters of great importance. Meet me on this shore in 7 years 11 months 3 weeks 6 days and several minutes. Don’t be late”.

The Witch looked at her watch again. They were late. Whoever wrote the note was late. But she didn’t mind. She could wait forever. Time was always on her side. So she waited. She sat. And waited. For quite a while. Then she leaned back down, legs sprawled out, hands under her head, and whistled cheerful tunes about a sea star or two. She once came to an ocean whose sky was a shining wallpaper of sea stars. They kept on falling from the heaven, burning and spattering noisily and hissing in remonstrance against the ocean’s cold water.

She now looked at the clouds, which drove listlessly across the blue sky in trains of white clumps, as the ground began to suddenly shake. She sat up at once and looked about her. The ground trembled and shivered terribly, and then- spitting sand all over the place- a head emerged out of the ground. It had wet bulging eyes and it stared directly at her.

“Shhh!!” It hissed, “no whistling!” It looked around nervously. “Gotta keep quiet...” Then a creature crawled out of the hole, and motioned at the Witch. “Come now, we must go somewhere a little less-” he scanned a quick anxious gaze down the far-stretched sea shore “-open.” He added, “Oh, and bring the note with you. We don’t want to leave any evidence behind.”

The Witch was not sure what was so wrong with the nice, open seashore, but she did not mind following the creature to wherever it was he was more comfortable. After all, she carried this note for quite a while now. It did not matter where they were, really. The creature scuttled across the shore, keeping low and close to the ground. His long flat nose was jabbed in the air, sniffing, and his long, thin frayed hair fluttered behind him as he ran. He stopped occasionally to see if the Witch was keeping up. She wasn't. Not really. The creature was not slow.

“Come, come, we must hurry, we must be swift,” he called.

The Witch halted with her hands on her knees, gasping arduously. She held out a long thin finger. “Be with you-” she said, panting, “-in a minute.”

“No, no... no time for minute!” the creature cried in reproach.

The Witch took a deep breath, and started again after the creature. They ran on, passing pearl-white sand dunes, and continued further to firmer grounds where troops of barbed plants stood guard at the borders. Then came grass, ensued by the forest.

The creature plunged into the woods, and did not even stop to look if the Witch was still behind him.

She sort of was.

He kept on running through the thicket, leaping lightly on thin legs over frozen waves of protruding jumbo roots, between giant fans of hemlocks, and on into the cool dark. All frantic and hectic, the creature, he carried on with this implausible running spree, turning this way and that, and then- once removing a rock that corked the access to a long tunnel, through which he limberly crawled- he came to a stop at last, and perched under a giant blue mushroom. He sat crouched scanning the surrounding with a great deal of suspicion.

A long time spanned until the Witch finally crawled laboriously out of the tunnel herself. She sat by the creature, that is, not so much sat as collapsed. Over-exercised and spitting laborious exhales, she leaned against the heavy red trunk of the mushroom, her

hair floating wildly about her head. And then they both just sat there; the Witch panting, and finding herself thinking about caramel taffies, and the creature stooping and absent-mindedly plucking grass off the ground.

Finally the creature spoke. "I am the Grawlump," he said, "and now that we know each other, you can talk. But not loudly." His eyes ran frantically all over. But when there was only silence and the Witch did not speak, the creature said keenly, "So now you tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"About the matters."

"What matters?"

"The very urgent ones," the Grawlump whispered impatiently.

"The ones from the note?" The Witch asked.

"Yes, yes, yes!" the Grawlump's eyes lit up with hope.

"How should *I* know what the urgent matters are?" the Witch said.

The Grawlump's eye's widened with fear.

"Look, it says in the note: *Urgent. Matters of great importance*. Which implies that the person who wrote this note, should know what the urgent matt-" She tried.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no..." the Grawlump cried, his voice soaked with despair.

He paced edgily around the mushroom, stuffing his hands in his mouth, biting his fingernails, biting his hair.

"What are you doing?" the Witch asked.

"You see, I don't know what the urgent matters are either. I was hoping you, or whomever found the note, would tell me..."

"You don't know what the urgent matters- which *you* alluded to in *your* own note- are?" asked the Witch.

"No no no... oh no, oh no..." The Grawlump cried, and pacing again in circles around the blue mushroom, he ran fumbling fingers through his long thin hair.

"Well, then there is no crisis. If you don't know, then nothing is urgent anymore, and there are no matters to worry about," the Witch said peacefully.

"Yes, yes, but you see," the Grawlump drew very close to the Witch, "that's the thing," he said, "the urgent matters may still be out there, hovering above our tiny pathetic lives

like a preying bird.” He whimpered, “They may be waiting somewhere, waiting to happen, like a ticking time bomb,” he spat excitedly, “and they may even be,” he looked at the Witch closely, whispering, his eyes big and glistening, “really, really big ones. Even bigger than what we can worstly imagine. There may be some matters. Very urgent ones. Very urgent matters, indeed, lying around somewhere, just waiting to occur. And if we don’t know what they are, if we don’t tend to those urgent matters-” The Grawlump sniveled in fear, hunkered down and pulled his ears into his mouth, “then something worse than the world ending might happen...” he finished with a hopeless whisper. “What could be worse than that?” the Witch asked.

Hell

“Here,” the Witch went through her pockets, “I suggest you eat some chocolate.” She held out a small ball of chocolate in her hand. Without premeditation the Grawlump took it, and stuffed it in his mouth. Almost immediately, white strands of steam burst out of the Grawlump’s snout, his belly inflated, and before he could realize what was going on, the Grawlump was soaring high, very much like a hot air balloon.

The Witch on the other hand was very much on the ground, and missed the latter events altogether, due to the fact that in that instant she was just very much occupied with attempting to recollect where that piece of chocolate came from.

“Too bad I had only one of those hell-ball chocolates,” she mumbled to herself. “I’d have to pick up some more of those, from wherever it was I got it from last time.” She muttered, “but where *did* I get it from?”

The Witch reflected, tapping on her nose, “perhaps it was at that floating candy shop.”

In the meantime, the Grwalnump was gliding ever upward.

“Or maybe I got it at the- oh!” the Witch jumped to her feet when finally realizing what was happening. She jumped as high as she could, and got a hold of an ear. However, the lean Witch did not help in bringing matters back down to the ground, and

now they were ascending together; Witch dangling and holding onto the Grawlump's long ear.

They hovered up along the big blue mushroom. They rose above the brush and the giant leaves, and then they soared along the very long trunk of a very gnarled and warped tree, and were caught by one of its contorted branches. The Witch grasped the branch, pulled herself down, and sat holding onto the ruffled Grawlump. She produced a string from her dress and tied it to the Grawlump's ear. Then she fixed the other end onto the branch. "There," she said satisfactorily.

The Grawlump was now lulling in the air, helpless and unable to communicate (on the account of the inflated abdomen), but nevertheless tied down to a spot. The Witch tapped on her nose, attempting to exhume any kind of information concerning that hell-ball from the depth of her memories. "It probably came with instructions," she muttered, ruminating.

"Hang on," she said to the Grawlump, who, as things turned out, had nothing else to do, but to hang on. The Witch went through her pockets. "Super," she chuckled, holding out a floating pen (a plastic pen containing a tiny glass boat which slid back and forth as the pen was tilted). "I completely forgot about that," she mumbled. There was also an old watch that didn't work, an anti-wart gel (it is known that witches are more prone to warts), a bubble gum wrapper, and a shiny silver-gold bumper sticker. "There it is!" the Witch cried triumphantly. "The instructions. I knew they had to be here somewhere."

The bumper sticker read:

"Consuming this product (chocolate hell-ball) is ill-advised."

"Um," the Witch cleared her throat, "let's not use the instructions," she said. And then tossing the sticker behind her shoulders she asked, "I don't suppose you have a pin on you, do you?" The Grawlump- now hanging upside down, long ears and thin hair dangling- shook his head.

“Cause if you did,” the Witch said, “we could poke a hole in you and- you follow?”

A loud noise was heard. It came from below. A door opened, rusted hinges squeaked, then the door slammed in a loud bang.

Thump.

Bump.

Then nothing.

Then a very small animal was standing before them.

“GO AWAY. IT’S *ME* TREE!” the animal shouted, although the animal, he was very small.

“We would love to go,” the Witch began, “but,” she pointed at the floating Grawlump, “there is a slight problem.”

The small animal stood and stared. He had big eyes, big bushy eyebrows, and a small cunning look. He wore a red sweater and big red gloves. He also held a frying pan.

“WELL, WHATEVER SILLY CRISIS YEE ARE ‘AVING, IT IS NOT MINE TO DEAL WITH, AND YEE MUST GET OFF ME TREE AT ONCE.” And then sneezing stridently, the animal nearly lost his balance.

“Well-“ the Witch started,

“SHOO, GO AWAY!”

“The thing is,” she tried again,

“NOW!” he cried, “I WILL NOT TOLORATE T-” and then he sneezed again, holding on to a small twig to keep from falling. “LOOK, I ‘AVE BEEN TRYING TO SLEEP SINCE TWO NIGHTS AGO WITH NO SUCCESS, FOR ALL THE SNEEZING AND THINGS, AND WHEN I FINALY MANAGE TO CLOSE ME EYES, YEE COMES ALONG AND WAKES ME UP AND- WHAT’S WRONG WITH ’IM?” He finally inquired, pointing at the Grawlump with his frying pan.

“*That’s* the problem,” the Witch replied.

“WHAT’S ‘E DOING?”

“He is hovering,” she said.

“WHY IS ‘E ‘OVERING?” the Animal asked, but before the Witch managed to reply, the Animal, he suddenly threw his hands round another branch, gulping what

seemed to be a whole lot of air for such a small animal. He puckered his nose, waited, and waited with his mouth open wide, and when nothing happened he released the air and let go of the branch with a long sigh of relief.

“NO SNEEZE,” he mumbled. But as he finished speaking, the small animal burst out in a violent sneeze, which almost sent him off the branch he was standing on.

Then he asked, “WHEN IS ‘E GOING TO STOP ‘OVERING?”

“There is no telling,” replied the Witch. “But if you had a pin somewhere, we could probably poke a hole in him, and end all this at once.”

“NO PINS,” the animal asserted.

At that everyone exchanged long looks. And then, a loud thump was heard, as the animal’s frying pan hit the Grawlump’s head. “BUMP,” the animal said, and then continued swiftly onto sinking his teeth into the Grawlump’s tail.

Without delay, and with a long hiss the air escaped, leaving the Grawlump flopping and lolloping like a flat tire.

The Grawlump sat up on the branch, somewhat mystified by the new sensation of growing a second head and the throbbing pain that came with it. “What did you do that for?!” he spat dismayed, glaring at the animal.

“DO WHAT?” the animal grinned.

“Hit me with your grimy frying pan!”

“SO THAT YEE WOULDN’T FEEL ME SHARP LITTLE TEETH BITING INTO YER UGLY TAIL!” the animal replied.

“Your teeth are *not* that small, and my tail is *not* ugly.” The Grawlump protested.

Feeling his head as the bump grew bigger and bigger.

The animal smirked as the poor Grawlump rubbed his head. “I CAN HIT YER NOSE WITH ME FRYING PAN IF YEE WANT, SO THAT YEE WON’T FEEL THE BUMP ON YER HEAD,” he chuckled.

“No, thank you,” the Grawlump piped, gazing defiantly at the animal.

But as stares were exchanged once more, the animal’s eyes grew bigger and suddenly, his body froze, and inhaling air like mad, he seemed completely possessed. The Grawlump stared in horror as the crazed animal continued inhaling, as his eyes grew bigger and bigger. Finally, erupting in a violent sneeze, shaking branches and tree-

the Animal headed straight to the ground, accompanied by a very surprised Grawlump and Witch. The trip was brief, and once on the ground, the three took a few moments to make sure all their limbs were intact.

“And that’s that,” the Witch said, brushing off leaves and soil and pieces of giant blue mushroom.

“What about the urgent matters?” whispered the Grawlump.

“WHAT ARE YEE TALKING ABOUT?” cried the Animal impatiently, waving at the Grawlump with his frying pan. “WHAT IS ‘E TALKING ABOUT?” he turned to the Witch and added, “AH, FORGET IT, IT IS NOT EVEN WORTH THE TROUBLE OF EVEN CONSIDERING YER POINTLESS QUESTIONS. NOW STAY AWAY FROM ME TREE!” And then he was gone.

The Grawlump quivered and, biting his ears, he let out a long despondent sigh. “We are doomed,” he mumbled, his voice full of despair, “we are so very doomed...” He cried. “Oh the terrible, terrible, terrible things...” Not even two moments had passed before the Grawlump began circling the mushroom, grumbling and muttering out loud.

A Perfectly Normal Idea

The Witch tapped on her nose, and sank momentarily into thoughts. “I have a perfectly normal idea,” she finally maintained. At that the Grawlump quit circling, and dashed to the Witch. Normal ideas sounded like solutions, and solutions generated hope. And the Grawlump, well, he could use some of that right then and there. “Do tell,” he said all ecstatic.

“I came to a conclusion, that you ought to go out on a journey.”

“A journey? I have never done that before.”

“There is not much to it,” said the Witch, “and journeys are particularly useful in situations like when folks have an answer and are looking for the question, or vice versa.”

“But how will I go about it?” the Grawlump asked.

“Take The Vessel.”

“The *Vessel*?” the Grawlump whispered. He was not certain what that was, but it sounded like something one should not mention or discuss out loud.

“My boat. She will take you wherever you need to go,” the Witch explained.

“Is it not very dangerous? Do you not attract all sorts of diseases on journeys?”

“One can never tell what will happen in one’s journey. But generally speaking, journeys are relatively safe. They are not more dangerous than, say, looking a big person straight in the eye,” said the Witch. “Besides, the Vessel will take good care of you.”

“I would like to go,” said the Grawlump, “yes, I would very much like to go, and I shall leave at once. I mustn’t falter.” Suddenly there was hope again. “That *is* a perfectly normal idea indeed.” The Grawlump was ecstatic.

Clasping her hands and standing up, the Witch said, “let’s get you going then.” And so they headed down to the shore, the Grawlump rushing ahead, stopping every so often and pressing on the Witch to hurry up. But the Witch was everything but hurried up. In fact, she gradually idled (she already had her share of running for possibly the next ten years or so). Thus the Grawlump grew finally tired of waiting, and simply disappeared as he ran towards the beach.

When the Witch arrived at the shore the Grawlump was already sitting in her boat, biting his ears. “I am ready!” he announced as the Witch finally appeared. Therefore the Grawlump was schooled with all the necessary information an individual must obtain before setting out on a voyage: “There are no rules to journeying,” the Witch began, “but there is one thing you want to keep in mind,” she said. “If you wish to come back to the place where you set out from, then you must always remember what that place was.”

And that was the beginning and also the end, of all the necessary information an individual must obtain before setting out on a voyage.

“I am ready.” The Grawlump confirmed once more.

At that, the Witch untied the rope that anchored the Vessel to the shore, and tossed it into the bow. She pushed the boat into the cold water, where the ripples welcomed her with a gentle embrace, and stood watching.

“See you sometime later,” she said.

The winds seized the boat, and carried her fast into the ocean.

“Fare well!” the Grawlump waved to the distancing shore, his thin hair dancing behind him on the winds.

The Witch stepped back onto the dry land, and sat down. She looked at her boat cradling and rocking away on the waves, until she became nothing but a small spec on the horizon, until she finally vanished altogether. Then the Witch took out her small wooden flute, and began playing.

She played until night fell on the long empty shores of the land, and the stars pierced bright, tiny holes through the vale of dark skies above. Then, lying down on the sand, legs sprawled out and folding her hands under her head- she looked at the stars for a while, and wondered about how her final journey would be like. At that her thoughts wandered off and she fell fast asleep underneath a canopy of dreams and stars and unknown worlds.

Chapter 3

The Forest

Away For a While

It was sometime in the morning. The sun was warmer now, and the skies were not gray. The Witch awoke to the soft susurrations of somebody talking, or rather, counting. She rubbed her eyes and sat up, brushing away sand from her dress. There was an eel equipped with a suitcase and a basket creeping along the shore, and counting very quietly to himself.

Immersed in a world of numbers and eel-thoughts, the Eel crept past the Witch, entirely oblivious to her presence, and then continued up the shore towards the forest. He walked past the dunes, past the thorn plants, and then on to where the earth crusted solid, and the forest began. That is where the Eel was headed. He was moving into the Forest today.

He was all packed. He had a suitcase. He had his seashell collection, and he had hopes for what living in the forest ought to be like. He had closed his cave, down and far in the depth of the underworld, placed a sign saying: “Away for a while”, by the one that said: “Where the Eel lives”. And he was ready.

He plunged onto the cool shadows of leaves and boughs, and crossed a rope bridge that swayed over a very dark swamp. He hopped over six rocks that lay bathing in a clear stream, where a small family of Stifflings hurried frantically on their way to somewhere, incessantly blinking and conducting indecipherable conversations of all parties talking at the same time*.

He passed by the ‘Fir Trees that Will Never be Chopped Down’ patch, where a large sign was placed, reading:

* It is a well-known fact that no one had ever managed to make any sense out of a Stiffling’s conversation, although the question whether they themselves are actually able to understand each other, is still open, at large.

Fir Trees that Will Never be Chopped Down Patch.

No chopping down please.

And there was a guard equipped with a whistle and a ticket book (to fine anyone who tried to do otherwise), to ensure it.

He hurried on past an oversized dragonfly nest, and was followed by ten of them for quite some time after, and had arrived at the Hobster's house by twelve o'clock in the afternoon, full glee, and jovial thoughts.

He stood before the small red house and its three red steps, holding his suitcase and his collecting basket, and announced: "I am here!" He was there. For a few long moments nothing happened, and then the door opened and the Hobster and his big black hat appeared at the entrance.

The Eel put his suitcase down and waved at the Hobster. "Hello!" he said. "I came to live in the Forest."

"You have?" said The Hobster in wonder.

"Good idea, isn't it?" the Eel said.

"Well," the Hobster began, "you, *do* realize it is twelve o'clock in the afternoon."

"It is?"

"And you do realize it *is* a Tuesday."

"Is it?"

"Yes," the Hobster answered, looking around. "Well, I guess Tuesday is as good as any other day for this sort of thing." He paused, then added, "would you like some cold lemonade?"

"Oh dandy!" the Eel piped.

At that the Hobster turned to get the drink, and the Eel, intending to follow him inside, hopped onto the stairs. However, the moment his green foot touched the first step, he heard someone yell at him. And that someone seemed quite displeased. The Eel stepped back and peered at the stairs. There were two small vicious eyes peering back at him in the space between the first two steps.

"Oh, that is Neembelina," explained the Hobster, "she lives under the stairs."

"She does?" The Eel bent over to take a closer look, and when yelled at again, took another step back.

“I would exercise caution,” the Hobster warned him. “She bites.” And then, “you can use the small ladder on the side.”

The Eel followed his suggestion, and climbed onto the porch with his suitcase and basket.

“She has a secret,” the Hobster told the Eel as they walked into the house.

“She does? What kind of a secret? Is that a big secret or a very small one?” the Eel asked.

“Oh, I do not know. She never told me.”

The Eel was disappointed. “I wish I knew what kind of a secret she had...” He sighed, and then putting his suitcase and basket down, he took a look around. But there wasn’t much to look at. It was quite a small house. Adequate for the accommodation of about one Hobster and his oversized hat, and not much else. And the Hobster only kept in his possession what he needed for pondering.

He maintained a small sunflower garden outside, with sunflowers that grew so tall that their yellow crowns swayed above the rooftop. That is where the Hobster conducted most of the pondering. There was also a chair there. But it was not so much of an ordinary chair. It was very long, and was swathed entirely in green rubber. It had a round prop from metal to support it from underneath, like the trunk of a big mushroom. Its back piece could move up and down, and it had two big armrests.

The chair was already there when the Hobster moved into the house upon which he stumbled one day, standing in perfectly livable conditions and conveniently vacant (except for some weird looking equipment and tools, which the Hobster gave to some rabbit). So he painted the house red, and then, with the help of an ever-eager-to-help forest-coop (a large bluish animal, with a poppy-seed sized brain, who would do anything for a gift- a simple rock, or a stick, would do), he moved the chair from within the house to the outside. He thought: *why waste such a lovely chair inside the house, if you can put it outside?*

He then made his sunflower garden around it, and discovered that the chair was rather good for all sorts of reflective activities. It said: “Dr. Green” on the back of the chair, but the Hobster was not really sure what that meant.

“That is a nice house,” remarked the Eel. “Can I move in with you?”

“Well,” said the Hobster, “space is scarce, as you can see.” He poured the cold lemonade into tall yellow glasses and added, “the room under the stairs is already occupied, and I

am fairly certain Neembelina would not care to share it with anyone but herself.” He reflected upon the matter for a few moments while drumming on his lips. “What if the space under the sink is currently unoccupied, would that do?”

A brief investigation revealed that: A) Apparently the space under the sink *was* inhabited before (as a few used paper clips, and some old tea bags showed), and B) It was *not* occupied at the moment.

Yes, it would do.

Nicely.

Thereupon, the Eel placed a sign by the sink’s door saying: “The Eel’s new (for now) home” and moved in.

When Stars Fall

When night fell over the Forest, the Eel and the Hobster went out to sit on the veranda. The Hobster sank into thoughts, and the Eel went through his seashells, conducting his routine cleaning.

“This one is no good,” the Eel said, tossing away an old specimen.

“How many do you think there are?” The Hobster asked, looking at the sky.

“I have exactly thirty one and a half seashells (one broke, but it’s still one of my pride and joys).” said the Eel with pride.

“I meant stars,” said the Hobster.

“Oh,” said the Eel, “in that case, there are seventy three stars. I counted.” He said.

“Off course, there are less when one falls,” said the Hobster.

“So then there would be seventy two.”

“Have you ever seen them? Stars that fall?” The Hobster asked.

“No.”

“I have seen one, once.” The Hobster mused, “but I don’t seem to remember where or when.”

“Why do they do that?” the Eel asked.

“I am not sure. I think they just do.”

“Where do you think they fall to?”

“I don’t know,” the Hobster replied. “But it gets very hot, and you have to cover your ears, because they make the loudest noise when they fall.”

“I would like to collect them.”

“It won’t be an easy task finding a fallen star. And you would have to wear special goggles, for they will be very bright,” he said, then added, “I might come with you if you ever went to look for one, one day.”

For a while they kept on sitting out on the veranda, looking at the vast heavens, and when the autumn chill crept into the air, they both went back inside. It was the last days of summer. The air had gotten colder at nights, and new winds began blowing into the dreams. The moon seemed bigger and colder, and restlessness crawled through everything, with change hovering above like an upcoming storm.

Chapter 4

The Girl Who Forgot How to Sleep

Winter came to the valleys and mountains, and covered the forest. The snow began falling, and it seemed as though it would never cease. Finally, on one cold winter night, it did.

It was quiet and still, and the light of a full moon fell gently upon the snow-clad pines, and the downy white clothed everything, soothing every sharp angle. As the last flake of snow fell upon the earth, a girl stepped out into the cold night. The moonlight lit her way, but between the trees and under their stooping branches it was dark. It was late, and all was asleep. But the girl could not sleep, for she forgot how.

Thus plunging deeper into the sleeping forest, she shuffled through the snow, moving from shadow to light, and back to shadows. From time to time something cracked or broke between the trees- a branch snapping under a heavy weight for instance, sending a small avalanche to the ground. But even still, the forest stood swaddled in silence, commandeered by the fallen snow.

The girl kept on, delving deeper into the woodland. She did not know where she was going, and did not- on the whole- care. She just walked on, and the night walked beside her, full of secrets. At length a stream rushing in its frozen vein crossed her way, clear and glistening under the full moon.

She began walking along it, listening to the water spit and gurgle. After some time the girl stopped. She stood and looked at the water gliding by white caps of snow that reminded her of melted ice cream, sliding upon drifts of broken-glass-like ice. Then a conspicuous sound whisked passed and, frazzled, she turned to search for its source.

Twigs snapped, and then a whisper, “Psst,” followed by two, big, watery eyes, and a whole lot of brown hair bouncing everywhere; an animal stared at her from under a bush.

“Hello,” the animal said.

“Hello back,” the girl said in response.

The animal crawled out, and hesitantly, he asked, “Can I come with you?”

The girl shrugged her shoulders, “if you want.”

The animal clasped his little black paws and said, “just so you’ll know, I am very shy.”

The girl just smiled.

“But I have a nice whistle,” the animal added, peering at the girl through a fountain of hair. After a moment the animal said, “I think you should see something.”

“What is it?”

Pouncing into the snow, the animal whispered, “Something nice.”

And nice things, well, they sounded nice. And a girl who forgot how to sleep could go for some nice things on a cold, lonely, sleepless night such as that night was. So she joined the animal, and together they walked along the banks of the stream.

For a while they ambled in the shadows of trees, but eventually the trees began to dwindle, until there were none at all. Then there was nothing but the sliver of water in a desert of white, and the light of moon, reflecting brilliant and bright.

“What is your name?” the girl asked.

“My name is Neeptytoo.”

“Don’t all measles hibernate this time of year?”

“They do,” Neeptytoo said, “but I am not a typical measles. I won’t miss the snows for anything.” He added, “and what is your name?”

“My name is Tiptoe.”

“And aren’t all girls sleeping now, at this time of night?”

“They are,” said Tiptoe, “but I forgot how.”

The Willow

And so they walked on, and then walked some more, and then finally, they stopped. Rustling quietly in the wind and bent above the water before them, a lone willow stood. Its long leaves swayed to and fro, brushing water, brushing snow.

“Nice,” said Neeptyoo, “is it not?”

Tiptoe nodded approvingly, her blue-black hair shining under the light of the moon.

“Sometimes I come here when I need to recall something which I cannot remember anymore,” Neeptyoo explained.

“It looks like a good place for that sort of thing,” affirmed Tiptoe.

“The fairies used to live here, a long time ago,” said Neeptyoo, “but one day they had to leave, and their willow stayed behind, by this stream.”

“Where did the fairies go?” Tiptoe asked.

“I don’t know,” Neeptyoo replied. After a moment he hopped to the tree and climbed up to the highest branch, where he sat waiting for Tiptoe.

“Are you coming?” he asked.

For a moment Tiptoe just stood and looked at the tree; it was colossal. Its boughs coiled and twisted, and that canopy of supple leaves seemed like feathers of a giant bird. She then climbed up the tree-trunk, and sat by the mease, dangling her feet and looking at a valley of white below.

Lazy winds ran cold fingers through the branches, eliciting moans of protest from the old willow. In the trough beneath them the stream chimed and jingled, and nothing else was heard. Then something flickered in the distance.

“What is that?” asked Tiptoe.

“It must be a fire butterfly,” Neeptyoo whispered.

Even as they watched, the scarlet spatter of crimson flames drew nearer, taking the form of a butterfly as it did. It spun and flailed, its wings a blazing fire beating silently in the air.

“The flames”, whispered Neeptyoo, “are as cold as the snow.”

Drifting ever closer, the butterfly finally landed on a branch before them, flames climbing from its body in bright long whips, licking its wings. They watched silently, until a cold draft of air sweeping through the branches carried it away back into the night. It sparkled and wavered as it soared, and then it was gone.

The great willow swayed in the wind, almost whispering, almost singing, and at that peaceful moment, there was nowhere else but there. The water bubbled in the brook below them, and as snow began falling gently again, forgotten things were suddenly remembered once more, and sleep fell on the world, bringing with it dreams and rest for those still awake.

Chapter 5

Shadow

It was very late at night, well after midnight- when the Eel finally found the courage to open the sink's doors. He stared nervously into the dark. There were noises, well, everywhere. Stepping out into the darkness, he scuttled across the floor to the wardrobe where the Hobster was passing the night in deep ponderous dreams.

"Endurance, endurance," the Eel mumbled to himself as he tapped on the Hobster's hat, shooting nervous glances all around.

The Hobster sat up, tilting his hat away from his eyes. "What is it?" he asked.

"There are noises," the Eel whispered.

"Are there?" said the Hobster, startled, "of what kind?"

"The angry kind."

"Where?"

"Everywhere..."

As they listened on, the Hobster promised the Eel that it was only the wind. But when the Eel was not convinced, the Hobster proclaimed that he needed his sleep in order to be able to think, pulled his hat down, and sent the Eel to bed closing the wardrobe doors behind him.

But outside a riled-up gale buffeted, and the forest groaned and moaned and shook. Inside the Eel stood before the closed wardrobe doors, and nervously tapped his fingers together, wondering whether leaving the ocean was a dire mistake. However, his attention shifted quickly back to the more pertinent issue of those unsettling noises, and the Hobster's slumber was interrupted, yet again. The Hobster tilted his big black hat up, and shot a sleepy one-eyed stare at the Eel.

"Um," the Eel began, "there are still noises."

"Of course there are," said the Hobster. "And they will probably go on for a while. That's just what the Forest does." So the Eel was sent off again to spend a sleepless night under the sink.

The white sun was plastered mid-sky on the following day when the Eel went about roaming outside the red house. He felt particularly intrepid since surviving the previous night. He was ready now, he thought to himself, for anything the Forest had to offer.

He scampered around the house, smelling the flowers, inspecting the small pebbles and stones (saving the prettiest ones in his collecting basket), talking quietly to himself. He walked through the Hobster's garden of sunflowers and marveled at their tall yellow crowns, then sat down at the front of the house, and began counting his new pebbles. It was quiet and peaceful, and then someone shouted.

“Hey!!”

At that the Eel jolted to his feet, looking around.

“Hey!!”

It came, so it seemed, from underneath the stairs. And so, matters were investigated. Stooping over to inspect under the red steps the Eel was met with a cunning stare, a pair of small eyes, two red braids that jutted out to the sides, and a blue dress.

“Who do you think you are?!” Neembelina screeched.

And the Eel replied: “Um... No one in particular.”

“Are you mighty?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then go away!” she shouted.

“But I am very brave,” the Eel then said, somewhat proudly. “There were hoards of horrible monsters here last night. And I braved them all.”

“I didn't see any monsters,” Neembelina said.

“That's because you are very small.”

Neembelina eyed the Eel closely for a long time, and then asked, “Can you deal with terrible things?”

The Eel blinked. “What kind of terrible things?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“Come closer,” Neembelina whispered, and when the Eel did just that, she said, “something is following me.”

“What do you mean, something is following you?!” The Eel cried.

“Shh!! Not so loud!” Neembelina piped.

The Eel looked around wildly, but all he could see were trees and stones and other forestry things. “Where is it?” he whispered.

“Behind me,” Neembelina replied, “but only at certain times and places.”

“What does it look like?”

“It doesn’t have eyes,” Neembelina smiled mischievously.

“That *is* terrible.”

“I am going to bite his toes,” she declared, “but we’ll have to catch him first.”

“Maybe it’s a spy,” suggested the Eel.

“That is *not* a spy,” said Neembelina, “all spies do, is bunker.”

“Then perhaps it’s a giant cricket,” the Eel suggested once more.

“Giant crickets only come out at night to play cricket when there is no one else around.”

“Then what is it?”

“See for yourself.”

Coming out of her secret little place under the stairs, Neembelina made a run across the yard, and stooped behind a large boulder.

It didn’t take the Eel a long time to dash after her and dive behind the rock himself.

“I saw it,” he whispered, verging on panic. “Something *is* following you.”

“Bolts and lightnings, I told you!” Neembelina yelled, her eyes flashing.

“It is a black thing, that has no eyes,” the Eel corroborated.

“We must fetch it, before it catches *us*,” Neembelina determined.

“But how are you going to catch it?”

“I am not going to catch it, *you* will,” Neembelina said, grinning slyly at the Eel.

“The Eel? Oh, no, the Eel can’t do such a thing. It is not an Eelish thing to do at all,” he mumbled, staring at Neembelina wide eyed.

“I thought you said that you are brave.”

“The Eel *is* brave. Very, br-” he mumbled.

“Ok, so on the count of *one*,” Neembelina whispered, “we both run to that cranberry bush over there,” (pointing) “and you will jump on the thing, seize it, and make it suffer until I come and make it suffer even more.”

“But... the...” the Eel started.

“One!” Neembelina yelled suddenly, and grabbing the Eel by his hand, they jockeyed together from behind the boulder and dashed across the small sunny clearing.

“Now!” she yelled, and the Eel dove into the dust behind Neembelina, grasping an armful of air.

“Did you catch it? Did you teach him a lesson?” Neembelina piped from behind the cranberry bush.

The Eel stood up, brushed off the dust from his tail and joined Neembelina behind the bush, reporting a failed operation. “He is too elusive,” he explained smacking his lips. “Then we shall think of something cunning,” Neembelina said. “Are you cunning?” she asked the Eel.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“Well, then, obviously you are not. Because people who are cunning *know* that they are cunning. Now, let me unveil my sly new plan.”

After revealing her grand new plan, Neembelina hunched down and whispered, “On the count of one,” then without delay she cried “one!”

They bolted out from behind the cranberry bush, and ran into the brush, tripping over a person who was taking a nap.

“Scissors!” cried Neembelina, “what are you doing?!” she shrieked furiously as she stumbled to her feet.

“Just sitting here,” said the person.

“Who do you think you are?” Neembelina demanded, “you have rudely interrupted a would be well-executed cunning operation.”

“I’m just a Witch,” said the Witch.

“Ha...” Neembelina muttered. A few moments elapsed as Neembelina studied the Witch, wondering if perhaps this information could come in handy one day. “What kind of a Witch?” she asked, “A really bad one?”

“No. Just a Witch.”

“Too bad,” lamented Neembelina.

“What plan are you all executing?” the Witch inquired.

“There is something terrible following her,” the Eel whispered.

“And we are going to tackle it,” Neembelina added.

“What kind of a terrible thing?” the Witch enquired.

“Something that has no eyes,” the Eel whispered, “black, and thin.”

The Witch looked around. “I don’t see any thin black things with no eyes,” she said.

“It only comes out in the sun.” Neembelina explained. “Perhaps it is because it’s too cold for it in the shade. Would you like to see it?” Neembelina smiled, the sly kind of smile.

“I don’t mind,” the Witch shrugged.

“Are you not terrified? Does your blood not freeze with terror?” Neembelina asked eagerly.

“That is not my style,” the Witch proudly declared.

Somewhat disappointed, Neembelina said, “Then here goes, but don’t say I haven’t warned you.” She jumped into a pool of sunshine patched on the forest’s floor, and immediately back to the shade again.

The Eel hid behind a tree.

A drowsy afternoon calm laid upon the forest, and in the backdrop only the birds argued noisily in the trees. The early autumn air was still and warm, spiced with the smell of change, and was restless with anticipation.

“Well?” Neembelina chirped.

“I didn’t see anything,” the Witch said, her hair floating about her face.

Reappearing behind a large flower, Neembelina inquired, “Nothing at all?”

“Nothing. Unless you are talking about your shadow,” said the Witch.

“What shadow?”

“Your shadow,” the Witch replied.

“My shadow? I never got myself one.”

“You don’t have to get it. It’s just there.”

“Rats!” Neembelina spat. “How can I rid of it?”

“You can’t. It’s a shadow.”

“Can’t I catch it and put it in a sack?”

“No.

“Beetles!”

“Well, I guess if you stick to the shade, then it won’t be there,” the Witch explained.

“Too bad I can’t sink my teeth into it,” Neembelina grumbled.

“I am sure you will find other things to sink your teeth into,” The Witch replied reassuringly.

Happy to be not involved (again) in (more) potentially dangerous things, and reminding himself that if things get too hairy, the ocean is but a silly song away, the Eel decided to seize the opportunity and change subject, “Do you live here under this tree?” he asked the Witch.

“No,” said the Witch, “I am just waiting here.”

“Waiting for who?” the Eel asked.

“I am waiting for the Grawlump. He went out on a journey to find out about some urgent things.”

“Urgent things?” That sounded important. The Eel uttered, “I wish I knew what those urgent things were.”

Then restless and annoyed as ever, Neembelina interrupted, “Well, I would love to stay here and chat some more until everybody’s eyelashes fall off, but I have more important things to do, so I am leaving.” And so she left, darting off into the forest.

“I wonder if the Hobster would know about them urgent things,” the Eel mumbled. “He might, because he ponders a lot. And folk that ponder a lot know a lot of things too. So he might.”

All around leaves began changing colors. The forest grew impatient. Restless winds sifted through the boughs, swirling through the dead leaves, causing doors to slam, and lonely souls to feel even lonelier. This caused the Eel to sigh heavily. “I think I shall go to rest now,” he said, “all that running around makes one feel terribly tired.”

“I will do the same,” said the Witch. “Unless I shall come across things that will occupy me otherwise.” And then, “So long.” And the two parted ways.

Chapter 6

The Dreadful Green

The Eel frolicked happily through the forest, as oblivious and nonchalant as can be, and arrived at the sunflower garden as the Hobster embarked upon renovations.

“Hello,” said the Eel.

“Hello yourself,” the Hobster responded, clearly immersed in deep thoughts. “Do you think it is better to place these pebbles at the eastern corner, or rather leave them where they are?” he asked. The Eel looked at the pebbles and then at the eastern corner, back at the pebbles, back at the corner, and then back at the pebbles again. “This is a hard question,” he finally said. He then found himself staring at the green awkward chair, that stood covered in an outfit of rubber in the center of the garden. “This chair is perfect for sunbathing,” he remarked, “did you build it yourself?”

The Hobster shook his head, still occupied with assessing the pebbles’ state of affairs. “It was there when I moved in,” he said distractedly.

“I wish I had found it,” the Eel mumbled. He moved his hand gently across the chair’s rear metal plate, and was surprised to find an etching on it. “There is something written here!” he cried.

“It says ‘D r dot Green’,” the Hobster explained.

“What does it mean?”

“I am not certain. It’s an abbreviation of some sort, and it could mean many things,” the Hobster uttered. “I thought about it more than once, but could never come up with anything.”

“Do you think it could be Drama Green?” asked the Eel.

“I suppose it could be. But it wouldn’t make much sense now, would it?”

The Eel shook his head. And they both stared at the etching.

“Driftwind Green?”

The Hobster shrugged his shoulders.

“Maybe it’s Dripto Green?” the Eel tried.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know. I am just trying.”

And while the tall sunflowers swayed above them in the gentle wind, they stood staring at the back of the chair for a little longer, cocking heads this way and that, drumming on their lips, shifting weight from one leg to another, until suddenly the Eel sucked on his breath and covered his mouth with terror.

“Maybe...” he said in a low voice, “maybe it’s-” then whispering even softer he added aghast, “Dreadful Green... a Dreadful Green.”

“Dear me,” the Hobster mumbled.

He didn’t like that option, or the sound of it for that matter. But he had to admit that it did make a whole lot of sense. After all, the chair *was* green. And one could only assume that a chair owned by a Dreadful Green, would be- what else if not- green. Golly, it made so much sense it was simply mind-boggling.

The mystery was finally solved.

“That is so terrible,” the Hobster mumbled. “The Dreadful Green, hence- the green chair,” he said, fidgeting. “How did I not think about this before?” Oh, how proud did the Eel feel at that moment.

“I hope he is not planning on coming here to fetch his chair and gobble up all my sunflowers, and who knows what else,” the Hobster mused.

“That *is* dreadful. So very terribly dreadful,” the Eel muttered.

“I think I shall lock my wardrobe doors tonight,” the Hobster said. He didn’t feel like dabbling in garden décor so much any more. So mumbling something about trimming down the lilac bushes, he disappeared behind the house.

The Eel stayed at the garden of sunflowers and stared at the metal plate. That was something horrifying. ‘D r dot Green’. Dreadful Green. *Maybe*, he thought to himself, *they didn’t have enough letters to complete Dreadful. Maybe they only had enough for just the ‘Dr.’ Or maybe, he mused, the Dreadful Green just ate up the rest of the Dreadful and simply left the ‘Dr.’ in place, so that no one would be able to tell that the chair belonged to him, and he could sneak up in the middle of the night and gobble up all the sunflowers, and who knows what else.*

Now, that was a scary thought.

The Eel shuddered.

How cunning that Dreadful Green was, and how impolite.

That night bedlam broke outside of the red house. The wind was pretty much everywhere, stirring things up. The branches knocked against the window, and the sunflowers brushed against the rooftops. The Eel sat up in his bed under the sink, eyes wide as saucers, listening to all this in horror.

When the rain started, he joined the Hobster- who was not sleeping either- in his wardrobe. Distant thunders roared and exploded and crackled, and the entire world seemed to be in mayhem outside.

“What was that?” the worried Eel asked.

“I don’t know,” the Hobster said.

“I hope that it is not the Dreadful Green,” the Eel whispered, horrified at the thought.

“I hope not also,” the Hobster mumbled, and sank into his big black hat.

The following morning brought blue skies and white clouds that sailed peacefully across the amicable heavens. The sun shone bright, making last night’s raindrops glisten like tiny crystals. It was a cheerful morning, like all mornings that follow a storm. The Eel went outside and stood on the front porch. He sighed and stretched, and then climbed down and tapped on the stairs.

“Who is it?” an irritated and seemingly preoccupied Neembelina inquired.

“It is the Eel.”

“Then go away!”

“I have something important to tell you,” said the Eel.

Neembelina’s eyes appeared between the first two steps. “How important?” she asked.

“Very,” the Eel said, “very, very important.”

Neembelina ran from underneath the stairs, and stood staring at the Eel with her hands folded on her chest. “Well?” she said impatiently, “what is it?”

“We have found out, or rather, *I* found out, to whom the chair belongs to,” the Eel said proudly.

“What chair?”

“The one in the sunflower garden.”

“Well, to whom does it belong to then?” Neembelina asked.

Bending over, the Eel whispered, “*To the Dreadful Green. With a capital D.*” (According to the Hobster that detail was highly important, for a Dreadful Green with a capital ‘D’ was much more all around dreadful, than a Dreadful Green with a lowercase ‘d’. Indeed that Dreadful Green was cunning.)

“Splinters!” piped Neembelina, “did you see him?”

“We did not, but he could come in the middle of the night and swallow all the sunflowers up.”

“And then he could scoff us up too along the way,” Neembelina remarked.

“How mortifying is that?” The Eel smacked his lips.

“Then we should go and snatch *him*, before he comes here and snatches *us*.”

The Eel had reservations about this (particularly about the ‘we’ part).

“Maybe it is not such a good idea,” he said nervously.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“No.”

“Then that is what we ought to do, *right now*,” Neembelina declared.

“Now?”

“You don’t want to go look for him when night comes, do you?”

The Eel just stared at Neembelina.

Then, feebly, he uttered, “But where would we go?”

Neembelina glanced around with her hands on her waist, and then said, “To the north of course. I am sure the Dreadful Green wouldn’t want to live in the south.”

Suddenly they heard noise coming from the lilac bush. But even as they stared at the bush, the branches suddenly parted and a ball of hair appeared between the leaves.

“Excuse me,” said Neepytoo, “I did not mean to eavesdrop on you, but I couldn’t help overhear your conversation.” And then clearing his throat and clasping small black paws together, he asked, “Do you mind if I tag a long?”

“If you want,” said Neembelina dryly, “but it might be dangerous.” She added, “You could have your tail bitten off, and a gnarly giant might step on you, or a maddened Gummie might bite you, or worse...”

“What’s a Gummie?” asked Neepytoo.

“I don’t know,” said Neembelina, “but I am sure he won’t be nice if you anger him.”
Then shrugging her shoulders Neembelina said, “Anyway, now we go.”

And off they went. To the north, of course. For surely no Dreadful Green in his right mind would want to live in the south. Plunging into the dew-clad Forest, they shuffled between the mealy trees, rummaging on through the thicket. Before long they hit upon a well-treaded trail and took it north, until they came to a fork splitting to the northwest on the one side and the northeast, on the other.

A discussion regarding these options was inevitable.

“Which way should we go?” Neepytoo asked.

“There are always too many options,” the Eel mumbled. He glanced back and forth between the two roads and said, “We should take the prettier one.”

“And what if that one leads to a terrible monster?” Neepytoo asked.

The Eel trembled. “Then we should go the other way,” he said, while thinking to himself that the non-nautical world is indeed somewhat unfriendly.

“But how do we know which one is which?” Neepytoo continued.

“We sniff,” Neembelina asserted. “When one doesn’t know which way to go, one sniffs.” She stuck her snout in the air, turned this way and that and then announced, “This way.” And ‘this way’, they went.

“How did you know where to go?” the Eel asked. “I could never make such an important decision.”

“That is why you are not me,” Neembelina said.

“What do you suppose the Dreadful Green looks like?” Neepytoo asked.

“Green,” Neembelina replied.

“I bet he has a dreadfully long, sort of... um,” the Eel began.

“Eyebrows?” Neepytoo suggested.

“Yes! Dreadfully long sort of eyebrows and, big bits of, uh...”

“Big bits of glass?” Neepytoo asked.

“Yes!! Bits of glass!!” the Eel cried, “Bits of glass stuck in his green skin.”

“Why does he have bits of glass stuck in his skin?” Neepytoo inquired.

“Because of all the windows he broke through, whilst smashing down people’s houses,” Neembelina explained.

“Oh,” Neepytoo said. “How deplorable.”

As they passed through a tree grove, black boughs and red leaves arched low above them heavy with fruit. “I bet I could eat one of those fruits without dying,” asserted Neembelina, and quickly climbed one of the trees, shaking a branch. Fruit rolled onto the ground, and Neembelina climbed back down, sinking her teeth into one of them.

It was devoured quickly, and Neembelina sat down- very much not dead- and grinned.

“How does it taste like?” Neepytoo asked.

“Like fruit,” Neembelina answered.

“Do you think we can also eat this fruit without dying?” the Eel asked.

“How should I know?” Shrugging her shoulders she said, “You can try. But if you do die, then don’t come around blaming me for it.” And while Neembelina stretched out on the ground, tucking her hands under her two big red braids, Neepytoo went about eating from the fruit himself.

“Why, how lovely,” he said, “it does taste like fruit.”

Then the Eel began mumbling.

“What are you doing?” Neembelina asked.

“Counting things,” he answered.

“What things?” she insisted.

“The dots in the air,” he continued to explain.

Neembelina gazed into the air and even squinted and tried real hard to see. And then she became irritated. “I don’t see any dots.”

“That’s because you have to practice. A lot. And then you can begin counting,” the Eel said.

“Well I don’t have time for such miniscule affairs. I have more important things to do,” she said, grimacing.

At that the three sprawled out on the ground, peaceful and thinking of nothing in particular.

Insects

They rested languidly for a while; drunk from the warm breeze and the fruit, when suddenly Neembelina sat up with a start.

“Boulders!!” she cried, “What is that?!”

The Eel jumped to his feet, “What is what?!” he shouted.

Standing up, Neembelina said, “That!”

In that moment they could all clearly hear a loud buzz. It was faint and far, but grew louder by the minute. “How terrible,” the Eel whispered. They walked over to where the tree grove parted and opened into a wide field of tall grass, and stood glancing around. But they could see nothing.

In the field before them only the grass swayed, dancing in the autumn breeze.

“It’s getting louder,” Neeptytoo said, his small black paws clasped together.

“It’s most likely just a machine. A big useless machine.” Neembelina uttered, frowning.

“What kind of a machine?” Neeptytoo asked.

“A machine that makes a lot of noise,” she said.

“What is it good for?” the Eel asked, smacking his lips.

“For making noise,” Neembelina replied. “They use them when it is too quiet.”

“I don’t like those sorts of machines,” the Eel mumbled, as the sound grew terribly close.

They stood and stared, and saw nothing.

“It’s everywhere,” said the Eel in alarm.

And even as they stood listening, a black cloud of buzzing insects suddenly washed over the field.

“So strange,” whispered Neeptytoo, as they watched the flight unfold from under the fruit trees. “I wonder where they are all going.”

“Maybe they are running away,” the Eel suggested.

“But what from?” asked Neeptytoo.

“Maybe from the Dreadful Green,” the Eel squeaked.

“We should keep going. It seems like the situation is getting out of control,” said Neembelina. “We must get a hold of that Dreadful, and bite his tail.” She added, “I would question one of them insects, but it seems like they are in a big hurry, and I certainly don’t have any time to chase anybody down right now.”

“Certainly not,” agreed Neeptytoo.

“No time at all,” said the Eel, who was glad that any sort of bug-related encounters of the third kind, was not going to take place.

“I have more important things to do,” said Neembelina. “Now let’s go.”

The Bayou

They got back on the trail, and continued north. The grove of fruit trees slowly dwindled down and was replaced by some tall white birch trees. The ground was covered with a fiery mat of reds and yellows and flames of orange leaves. In the wan light of the afternoon, the forest seemed on fire.

Utterly infatuated and completely beside himself, the Eel scampered, marauding the forest's floor. He packed his collecting basket with leaves until there was no more room. Then he piled them under his arms. However, since walking was made difficult this way, he had no choice but to leave the loot behind.

The air became thicker and somewhat warmer now as the day faded away, and tall shadows stretched behind things, as if spying on the passers by. At some point the Eel stopped and declared with a grin, "That is the furthest from the waters the Eel has ever gone in his entire life."

After some time the ground became softer under their feet, and the air developed a very foul smell. All around them trees stood white and naked and sickly looking; gray bark peeling off their lean bodies and hanging from their trunks like patches of dead skin. Between their leafless limbs clots of algae hung, sticky and thick.

"This place smells like a happy day, yuck!" muttered Neembelina as they proceeded deeper into the marshland. In a little while they found a crooked, broken sign stemming out of the yellow mud. It said:

Bayou

"Why do you suppose it says that?" the Eel asked.

"Because they had a broken sign, and needed to write something on it," said Neembelina.

"Obviously they had nothing better to do with their time."

"Or maybe they wanted to scare us, so that we wouldn't want to go any further," the Eel suggested

Neepytoo stared at the sign.

"In any case, that sign doesn't scare me," Neembelina said. "And I am," she continued, "unimpressed!" and then she walked into the marsh.

They all followed her, their little feet and small tails leaving little feet and small tail inscriptions in the soft, desolated marshland behind them. It all seemed awfully gray, and from time to time a lonely cry of a bird would sound somewhere in the marsh. Shortly after, they came to a bridge that spanned over a bubbling quagmire, and from that point the land calloused its skin harder again, and all-around happier trees and green brush inhabited the landscape.

“That place seemed so lonely,” Neepytoo said once away from the bog. It appeared as if they had lost the trail back in the marsh, or rather, as Neembelina put it- that the trail had lost *them*. But they were finally met with a small river and walked along it. They continued north, and after some time decided to cross to the other side. They found a shallow point and, hopping along rocks, they crossed the river, nearly annihilating an entire family of Stifflings as they jumped onto the other bank, scattering the Stifflings- who were yelling and blinking and talking simultaneously- all over the place.

“We do apologize,” said Neepytoo to the Stifflings. “It wasn’t in our intention to tramp on you like that,” he continued as the Stifflings gathered again, mumbling things and talking together:

“Very rude”

“Very impolite”

“Almost got trampled upon”

“Almost got crushed”

“How very rude”

“So impolite.”

They all jabbered.

“We are on a very important mission, and we have no time for such small things as yourselves,” Neembelina said.

“A mission?”

“What mission?”

“Do tell!”

“We’d like to know!”

The Stifflings yakked.

Neembelina grinned. "It's a secret," she said.

"A secret?"

"What secret?"

"Will you divulge?"

The Stifflings inquired.

"I'm not going to tell you," piped Neembelina, "cause if I did tell you, then it wouldn't be a secret anymore, now, would it?"

Yakking and intertwining through each other in a chattering cluster, they huddled together and talked amongst themselves for a few moments. Then they turned back to face the three and said:

"If you tell us"

"Your secret"

"We'll"

"Tell you ours."

Neembelina looked at them suspiciously.

One has to be careful with trusting a Stiffling.

But she had a weak spot for secrets. And she was especially susceptible to the kind of secrets that you weren't planning on revealing.

"*You* have a secret?" finally, she asked.

"Yes"

"Yes"

"Yes."

They all jabbered.

"Another secret!" The Eel cried. "How exciting," he said.

After another full minute of additional scrutinizing Neembelina finally gave in. "Well, fine," she uttered. And then covering her mouth she whispered to the Stifflings who huddled around her. As she finished, they all mumbled and wowed and oaed, talking fast and simultaneously and moving around each other.

"Now," said Neembelina, folding her small hands over her chest, "you must tell us your secret. And hurry up, we have a Dreadful Green to catch, before he comes here and makes a big babbling mishmash out of you." The Stifflings began mumbling

incoherently again, moving around, gesturing and waving with their hands. Then they stood in two rows, blinking and staring at the three. “Well what is it?” asked the Eel who stood waiting, consumed with curiosity.

“We know”

They Stifflings began,

“Yes?” the Eel fidgeted.

“Of a-”

“A-”

“A-”

“A what?!” the Eel squeaked.

“A hidden place”

“A place”

“Hidden”

“Somewhere near”

“Somewhere here.”

They said.

“And somebody”

“Someone”

“Lives”

“Someone lives there.” They finished, and stood wide-eyed and blinking, and uncharacteristically quiet.

Then long stares were exchanged.

“Is that *it*?” Neembelina finally inquired with exasperation.

The Stifflings nodded enthusiastically in confirmation.

“Well, *where* is that hidden place then?” she asked.

“We can’t”

“Can’t tell you”

“Can’t”

“Can’t tell,” they all said together.

“That’s another secret,” they explained.

“I wish I knew where that place was,” mumbled the Eel in disappointment.

“Well, we can’t”

“Can’t tell.”

“That’s a secret,” the Stifflings said, and then, blinking and talking together they turned around and scattered swiftly into the woods. “Pesky little creatures,” Neembelina muttered in exasperation again. “Our secret was ten times better than theirs.”

“Much better,” the Eel agreed.

“Well, let’s go. We have more important things to do,” said Neembelina. “They gave me a headache with all their yakking anyway,” she uttered and began walking.

The Tale Of All Creatures Who Can’t Jump Very High

And so they turned back to their way, and began marching down the riverside. Grass reeled along the banks of the river, probed by troops of purple flowers. Berries clung in blue clumps in the underbrush by the water, and tall gray birds skulked silently among them, flying hectically as the three passed by. A felty layer of dark-green moss clothed the ground, crawling upon rocks and tree trunks, and pitcher-shaped plants came dangling down from the tall canopy above.

They walked silently for a while, when suddenly a melody drifted to them. It was sweet and sad and full of memories, telling about everything and nothing in particular. They stopped in their tracks and listened. “What is that?” asked Neembelina. “It is lovely,” Neeptytoo said as they stood listening, his big, brown, watery eyes searching the air. This called for an investigation.

They followed the thread of bittersweet notes, which led them away from the river and into the forest. Up and far the trees mounted all around them, and between their tallest branches hundreds of cobwebs glistened.

At last the thicket broke and opened onto a small glade. The Witch sat in the center, propped against a tree, playing her wooden flute.

“You again!” cried Neembelina.

“Nice tune,” said Neeptytoo, “what is it called?”

“It’s called The Tale Of All Creatures Who Can’t Jump Very High,” the Witch replied.

“Can we come and listen?” he asked.

“If you want,” the Witch said.

Everyone sat gathered around the Witch, resting their limbs. “I wonder where all the notes go after they leave your flute,” said Neepytoo as the song was concluded, its last note ringing away into the dying light of day.

“They just sail on the winds, completely asleep,” said the Witch, “until another melody needs them and calls them back again.”

“So how far do they travel?” Neepytoo asked.

“Some stay very close, and lie asleep inside a hollow tree or under a rock,” said the Witch, “and some go very far, and are carried away onto the highest mountains, and into the deepest valleys.” She added, “I once found a very lost note in the middle of a very far sea, and gave him a ride back to land.”

“You should have caught him and put him in a jar, and hid him under your bed,” piped Neembelina.

“He wouldn’t have liked it. Notes need to be outside, free in the air,” the Witch explained, “but, anyway,” she continued while rising to her feet, “it’s getting cold here. I suppose I am going to look for a different spot for camping before night comes.”

Even as they stood talking, a thin chill began permeating the air, and they all decided to join the Witch and look for a warmer place to break camp for the night.

Volcano

Darkness swelled quickly in the veins of the woods, hungrily swallowing any loitering light. Walking was not easy for the trees grew close together, and the dense canopy made little room for the light of the moon to wiggle through. And then, unexpectedly, the woods opened up onto a steep slope. There were no signs to warn anyone about it, and when this topographical discrepancy took them by surprise, they all found themselves tumbling down the hill.

When they reached the bottom, they were all covered in mud. Neembelina was not happy about it. She staggered back to her feet and brushed the dirt off her blue dress. “Bolts and scissors!!” she piped. “This is the perfect example of very bad architecture. And whomever designed this place,” she paused, “should be-”

“Oh my!” Neepytoo cried suddenly.

Turning around to follow his gaze, Neembelina slapped her hands on her thighs, “Well, what do we have here?” she grinned.

Before them rose a small earthen mound. At its summit tongues of fire danced, lambent against the night sky. “A little fire mountain,” said the Eel in awe.

“This is a volcano,” the Witch said, “and it must be the smallest volcano I’ve ever seen in my entire life.”

“It is a lovely little thing,” said Neeptytoo.

“We can camp here,” the Witch determined, “and it will keep us warm at night.”

At that, they all sat against the volcano wall. There was some talk about the need to strategize in order to detain the Dreadful Green, and when all conversations died out and the weariness of the day took its toll, the Witch took out her wooden flute and played a song that was reserved especially for these kinds of occasions. By the by they all fell asleep; blanketed in the warm melody and the warmth of the volcano, and feeling just fine.

Sam

On the following morning, a gentle wind blew through the valley, carrying bird chatter, notes and other things. They all awoke to the sound of construction. When matters were looked into, a boy was found on the other side of the volcano, occupied with a hammer and a pile of wood.

“Hello,” said Neeptytoo to the boy.

“Hallo!” said the boy in surprise.

“What kind of a thing are you?” inquired Neembelina.

“I’m just a boy,” the boy answered.

He was a very thin lad with a lot of shabby yellow hair. He wore a poncho and short slacks, and his thin legs descended into a pair of big black boots.

“My name is Sam,” he said.

And Neembelina, she thought it was quite all right, “Because,” she said, “if you say it backwards it would be *mas*, which sounds like *mess*. And that makes your name not entirely wasteful.”

“Well, thank you,” he said.

“What are you doing here, Sam?” the Eel asked.

“I live here,” Sam smiled.

“Ha!” the Eel was quite impressed with that. “You live here by this volcano?”

“I live *inside* my volcano.”

“That is *your* volcano? Entirely yours?” the Eel was even more impressed, “and you live *in* it?” Now, a fleeting thought about his cave in the bottom of the ocean produced another fleeting thought, deeming his little cave, well, somewhat dull in light of this.

“I wish I had a volcano all of my own,” mumbled the Eel.

Neembelina thought the concept was quite brilliant as well. “I presume you could throw all sorts of things into it, and burn them completely,” she remarked. Then stated, “We are on a very important mission.”

“What kind of a mission is that?” asked Sam.

“An important one,” said the Eel.

“We are bounty hunters,” Neembelina explained.

Bounty hunters- the Eel liked the sound of that.

“Who are you looking for?” Sam inquired.

“We are looking for a Dreadful Green,” said Neembelina. “Did he pass through this valley, crushing all the flowers and leaving a trail of tears behind him?”

“I don’t believe I’ve seen any Dreadful Greens around here recently,” said Sam, “nor have I noticed any kind of trails of tears, or large volumes of crushed flowers. But maybe I just missed all that. I was quite busy lately.”

“Well, we are going to look for him anyway, and you can come along if you’d like, but don’t blame us later if your tail gets burned off.”

“That is fine. Because I don’t have a tail,” said Sam, “but I believe that if you keep looking in this area, you’d only find the Outlandish. He is not green, and I don’t think he is dreadful or anything, but he is quite big.”

“The Outlandish?” asked Neepytoo, “What is that?”

“I can show you if you’d like,” Sam said, “he’s not that far from here, and we can always take a shortcut.”

Everyone agreed that it was a good idea. As Neembelina put it, “I guess we could always chase the Dreadful Green a little later, especially if we have more important things to do at the moment.”

Brushing his long shabby hair from his eyes, Sam put his tools away and led them through the valley that lay doused in morning shadows and nightly dews. Before long they arrived at the shore, where the zesty aroma of the ocean joined the soft susurrations of rolling waves and wet salty winds. In the skies above them gray shreds of clouds sailed swiftly- refugees from a distant storm.

Walking along the water line, they tattooed the wet sand again in boots and tails and small feet marks, leaving them to wash away behind them an instant later, like fleeting memories. They marched on, each attending to their own thoughts, and before long they could all see a big sort of thing propped against the horizon.

“There he is,” Sam announced.

“Does he have toes (in case we need to step on them)?” Neembelina inquired.

As they approached, the big black stain in the distance grew bigger until it finally molded itself into a huge whale that lay motionless on the shore. “Is it dead?” asked Neembelina. Sam promised her that he was very much alive.

Above the whale some sort of a mechanical structure towered, at its top a pair of old bicycles mounted, bolted down into the tower’s rusting frame. A small creature sat on the bicycles, laboring on the paddles with great effort. Down on the ground a pump drew water from the ocean, hauling it up the shore through a long pipe, and then pouring it on the whale.

Even as they all stood there and stared at this technological wonder, with a loud kind of squeak, the bicycles suddenly gave out. The pump stopped pumping, the water stopped running, and the creature (who’s name was Vim) on the bicycle became extremely distressed. Mumbling and swearing under his breath, he hurried to climb down.

“Excuse me,” he said while passing through the gawks, “I need to fix this machine,” he grumbled, “*again...*” And then he went about pulling on levers, pushing buttons, and releasing pipes. Then mumbling, “Useless contraption,” Vim climbed up again to his throne, and back to the excruciating paddling, the pumping and the hauling.

“I wouldn’t want to be him,” said Neepytoo.

“IT’S FOR A NOBLE CAUSE.” A voice bellowed from above, blowing their hair and tails away. “SURELY YOU KNOW THAT WHALES MUST KEEP THEIR SKIN MOIST AT ALL TIMES.” The whale’s voice resonated down their backbone, crawled under their feet like an earthquake, rumbling through the ground. An enormous brown eye opened and gazed at them, and they stared back into it, which was like staring into infinity.

“I AM THE OUTLANDISH,” boomed the whale.

“Not to sound rude or anything,” said the Witch, “but wouldn’t you feel a whole lot more comfortable in the ocean, rather than on land?”

“OH,” the Outlandish began, “IT IS TOO COLD FOR MY OLD BONES IN THERE,” he spoke slowly, “IT IS TOO DEPRESSING, AND WAY TOO LONELY FOR SUCH AN EMINENT ORGANISM SUCH AS MYSELF.”

“The outlandish is the oldest and wisest being on our planet,” Sam noted. Then with a loud rusty moan of protest, above them the bicycles jammed again. Vim came climbing down the ladder, spitting and complaining. “That’s my life,” he grunted, “paddling, fixing, paddling, fixing.”

Levers were pulled once more, buttons were pushed. Loose screws were tightened, and other tight screws were loosened. “Maybe you need new bicycles,” Neembelina suggested. “My aunt’s uncle’s grandfather’s second cousin’s grandmother’s nephew’s sister’s sister who is much, much, much, much bigger than me, has a good pair of shiny bicycles that took her all the way to the moon and back once,” she said. “But she would never give them to you.”

“Sorry,” the creature mumbled as he continued dabbling with mechanical parts. “No time to talk now,” he said. “If you have any suggestions, please write them down on a note and put it in our suggestion box, which-” he muttered, toiling with a stubborn bolt, “should be somewhere around here.” And then he hurried and climbed up the ladder again to continue propelling.

“Did your sister really go to moon on her bicycles?” the Eel asked.

“It isn’t my sister,” Neembelina retorted, “it’s my aunt’s uncle’s grandfather’s second cousin’s grandmother’s nephew’s sister’s sister.”

“How is the moon, then?” he asked.

“How should I know?” Neembelina spat, “it wasn’t me who went there.”

“IT IS VERY WHITE AND FAR,” bellowed the Outlandish, “AND THERE IS A HIGH PITCHED NOTE RESONATING THERE INCESSANTLY, AS IF SOMEONE BEGAN PLAYING A MELODY AND FORGOT HOW IT CONTINUED, LEAVING THE NOTE HOVERING IN THE AIR, WAITING FOR THE REST OF THE MELODY TO TAKE HIM WITH HER.”

“What a miserable note,” said Neepytoo.

“If I could ever get to the moon, I would play the rest of the melody for him and set him free,” said the Witch.

“That is a nice idea,” smiled Sam.

“Maybe someday. Maybe on some other journey,” said the Witch.

Armies of black were gathering fast in the sky, and the ocean’s mien turned morbid and dark, and its waves crashed restless against the shore. A storm was coming.

“We should probably head back,” said Sam while looking at the sky.

As the first few drops made land, farewells were said and they set out on their way back. “You are welcome to come and stay at my volcano,” said Sam as they walked away. But everyone was quite tired, and the Eel was rather happy when Neembelina declared, “Well, I forgot I have some very important things to tend to somewhere else.”

Nobody mentioned the Dreadful Green any more. After all they looked everywhere for him. So the unspoken general assumption was that he was probably taking a sabbatical from crushing and destroying (for surely everyone needs rest, even Dreadful Greens) far away from there, and off the record- the case was closed. They each took a shortcut to their own home as night fell upon the world.

“I shall dream about lonely notes and moons tonight,” said the Eel to Neembelina as they stood by the Hobster’s house. “I won’t,” piped Neembelina, and then quickly, she disappeared under the stairs. The Eel sighed, and knocked on the Hobster’s door. “I am here,” he said to the Hobster as the door opened, “but, I think I will go back to my cave tonight.”

For his heart swelled with longing, and the undercurrents lured him back with their inaudible pleas. He felt that he had quite enough of the outside world. *Things*, he thought to himself, *are much simpler under the waters*.

So on that night the Eel departed. He trotted quickly via the woods, basket and suitcase dragging behind, tracing his way back to water. Finally he emerged out of the trees, and stepped onto the white sand and the blue night that opened wide before him. “Sweetness!” he cried with joy.

Above him the borderless heaven spanned, descending down only to meet a far horizon bathed in darkness. Mirroring the lonely moon above, footsteps of white light glistened upon the waves, and everything was just perfect. The Eel sighed with relief. He walked into the water, and then turned around to the sleeping forest, crying, “See you some other time!” And then he turned around and melted into the waves.

Chapter 7

Chaos

One day winter finally came. It was six o'clock (and eight minutes) in the morning when autumn vanished, and winter announced itself to the world. It severed all strings of anticipation which anchored fall down to everything, and cast its weight upon the waiting world in showers of white that accumulated quickly on the ground, covering the last reminiscence of green.

Everything was quiet and still and the air was clean. The winds subsided, things slowed down, and a sense of relief imbued all. Neepytoo woke up to the soft hissing sound of falling snow. He sat up, listening, and then poked his head outside, jabbing his thin black paw into the tumbling white. As he looked up snow fell gently on his wild brown hair, and he thought to himself that he was probably the luckiest of all the measles, for he was awake now when this was happening, and all the other creatures, he thought, were hibernating and missing it all.

Then he thought that he ought to wake Tiptoe up, for she would surely enjoy it as well. So he stepped out, and made his way to her abode. He took his time sauntering through the avenues of white, and was quite happy.

When he came to Tiptoe's house, he tossed a few small pebbles at her window, until her sleepy head appeared in it. "Will you come outside to play?" Neepytoo asked. She rubbed her eyes, and squinting against the glare and the cold air, she said, "Wait a tick," and disappeared into the house.

She returned a few instants later, and climbed out the window and down the orange ladder, wearing her big, pink, fuzzy boots and a brown dress that ended just above her knees. Icicles glazed her purple-black hair to white, as the two shuffled through an

indolent winter morning. “Perhaps we should have some hot cocoa if the Hobster is already up,” Neeptyoo suggested.

Tiptoe too thought that this was good idea, and so they made their way to the Hobster’s house. He was sitting on his veranda when they got there, holding a steaming cup of hot chocolate, evidently pensive. “Greetings,” said Neeptyoo, pouncing in the snow, “nice morning, isn’t it?”

“It is,” said the Hobster, “but I think I made an error in calculations. It seems that my estimation for when winter will arrive was incorrect.”

“When did you predict it would come?” asked Tiptoe.

“I think,” said the Hobster, “that according to my count it was to report 3 days, 40 minutes and 26 seconds from now.” He sighed, “I will have to re-check my system.”

“Or perhaps,” said Neeptyoo, “your arithmetic was quite accurate, but it’s just that winter got a bit confused and arrived earlier than expected.”

“Perhaps,” considered the Hobster. After falling into momentary contemplations, he asked, “Would you like some hot coco?”

“Well, that is just a good idea,” Neeptyoo said, and the two climbed up the stairs.

“Hey!” somebody yelled from underneath the staircase, “What’s all this talk about hot cocoa? And why is there so much fuss and racket around?”

“It’s the first day of winter!” Neeptyoo explained. Neembelina’s fiery red head popped between the steps, as she examined the world’s new look. She jumped up the stairs and then onto the porch.

“So how long is it going to stay on the ground?” she inquired.

“Long, perhaps,” the Hobster said, “or maybe very short.”

“Well which one is it?” she insisted.

“There is no telling,” the Hobster said slowly, “in some places, it stays forever.”

“Rats! What an awful idea!” she spat.

But soon hot chocolate (made of real chocolate) was dispensed, and everyone sat and sipped, enjoying the clean air and the fine morning. Finally Neeptyoo said, “I suggest we conduct a race.”

“What kind of a race?” Neembelina inquired at once.

“A sledding race,” he answered.

“I haven’t gone sledding in a long while,” said Tiptoe, “I hope I didn’t forget how to.”
“You’d remember,” Neepytoo reassured her, “it’s like riding a bike or collecting buttons, or brushing your hair. Once you did it, you’d always remember how to do it again. It’s that simple.”

“Well let’s go then!” Neembelina peeped, jumping onto the snow. “And I know the perfect slope for it too,” she smirked.

The old man

Reaching Neembelina’s perfect slope was laborious, but indeed, there were no better slopes than the one by the volcano. The volcano flickered red and yellow, smoking spires of gray smoldered before them as they stood at the top, where the woods ended so abruptly and the land dove into a slant.

The long slope was crusted with a layer of new snow, flowing downwards in a flawless torrent of white. They were all set. Except...

“We’re forgetting one small thing...” Tiptoe said.

“What is it?” Neepytoo asked.

“Sleds.”

“Sticks,” grunted Neembelina, “there is always something to take care of, just when one is ready to do something.”

“Perhaps Sam will be able to help. He knows this area well, and he’ll probably think of something,” said Tiptoe. “He seems like someone who can think of things.”

“Then let’s go get him,” Neembelina squeaked, and then folding herself quickly into a small ball she dove into the snow.

Down the hill she went, as quick as lightning, picking up speed as the hill skewed. She rolled on, and the snow clung to her like peels of a big white orange, until she was nothing more than a seed inside a gigantic snowball rushing down.

“Oh, my,” Neepytoo whispered.

Impelling forward, the snowball revolved on the axis of an angry gravity. It spun down the hill and dove into the woods, and then, indecorously, it vanished out of sight all together.

“Let’s go find her,” said Tiptoe, and the two made their way down the hill, only stopping at the volcano in order to call upon Sam (it’s always good to have someone who can think of things in your company). They found him reclining against his volcano, making animal figurines out of wood. Soon thereafter the three of them were heading into the woods, where silence lay lavishly amongst the trees.

Tracking down the snowball was not a hard task. The tracks stood out like a mouse playing a mandolin (because everyone knows that all mice prefer the trumpet), and burrowed into the celibate blanket of snow that stretched untouched and perfect under the stooping branches- leading them into the forest.

On the tracks continued.

And on.

And on,.

And then they disappeared into a cave. “This is odd,” noted Sam as they stood at the gaping mouth of the cave, “I have never seen this cave before.”

“This is very much like Neembelina,” said Neepytoo, “always disappearing into places that never existed before.”

“Well, let’s go in,” Tiptoe ordered.

And in they went. Darkness and echoes were the sole inhabitants of the cavern, though they walked blind, rendering themselves easy prey to anything else that may have lurked in the darkness.

“Neembelina,” whispered Neepytoo, “are you here?”

But there was no reply. Only a lonely ricochet that answered back in a question:

“Are you here?”

Here?

Here?

He?

He?

?

There was no telling how wide the cave was or how tall. It seemed as though they were treading through an enormous space at times, but an instant later as if the black

walls were constricting upon them from every side, threatening to crush them. At last this perceptual trickery ceased, and they could feel warmer air breathing against their face.

Then they heard a shuffle and after that, "Hills and holes, what a ride!"
"Is that you, Neembelina?" Neepytoo whispered.
"Who else would it be?" Neembelina piped, "of course it's me!"
"What's in here?" inquired Sam.
"Who knows... I just got here," they heard Neembelina saying, "but we should find out. Because there may be a spy hiding here, and we may want to fetch him."
"Maybe we should find out what is *here* first," said Sam.

They kept on going, but it was warmer now inside the cave and a slur of light counseled their way, radiating from somewhere ahead of them. It wasn't long until the tunnel opened into a large chamber. Half lit, it mimicked loyally the insides of a shell. The glassy, orange, porcelain-like walls coiled upwards in a helix, supported by a massive white pillar at the center. By that pillar stood a person.

"I wasn't expecting guests today," the person said, "but, oh well."
"You don't look like much of a spy," Neembelina stated in disappointment.
"Who me? Oh, I am not a spy," said the person, "at least, I don't think that I am."
"So what are you doing here then?" inquired Neembelina.
"I just stand here," the person uttered, "and sometimes people come."
"What people?" she insisted.
"I don't know, just people."
"What do they come here for?"
"They ask things," said the person.
After a moment Sam said, "I have never seen this cave before."
"That's because it wasn't here before!" bellowed the person. Then so as to explain he added smugly, "I can transport this cave anywhere I wish."
"Golly," said Neepytoo, "you can really do that?"
"Of course I can!" roared the person. "Don't be silly."
"So who are you, if we may ask?" asked Tiptoe.
"I am just an old person."
"Well," said Sam, "we shan't be bothering you anymore. We'll be leaving now."

“Do as you please. But you might just miss a good opportunity to see something, mmm... well, intriguing,” said the old person. And since everyone thought that missing an opportunity to see something intriguing would be a shame, they decided to stay.

“Well, where is it?” pressed Neembelina.

“There is a door here somewhere...” mumbled the old person, searching the walls, “to some Extraordinary Machine...”

“Lovely!” Neepytoo exclaimed. Now, *that* sounded intriguing. “What kind of a machine is it?” he asked.

“Another silly question!!” raged the old person. “Didn’t I just say that it was an extraordinary one!? Oh, there it is!” he cried. They were all surprised to find a door behind them standing on its own, fixed to no walls.

“I am positively sure this door wasn’t here before,” Sam noted.

“Of course it was there!” boomed the old person. “Just because you couldn’t see it, doesn’t mean it wasn’t there.”

Neembelina darted to stand by the door.

“Now there is a sensible being,” said the old person. Then he added, “There may be a long line so you should get going now. Besides, I have no desire to stay here any longer. You are all so boring.” And with that he opened the door and motioned them in. They all went through the door, following Neembelina who did not have to wait for a second invitation to go in.

“Bye now!” the old person grinned, and the door closed behind.

Extraordinary Machine

On the other side of the door they found themselves in a long line of people who stood there in stark silence, barefoot and wearing white robes and lined up orderly behind each other. “What is this place?” squeaked Neembelina.

At that moment the person before them turned to them with his finger to his lips. “Shh,” he whispered and then turned back.

“How very odd,” uttered Neepytoo. Sam looked behind him to search for the door, but it was gone. “Figures,” he mumbled. Slowly and in rote the line inched forward.

They could not see where it began, for behind them people kept on coming seemingly out of nowhere, and ahead of them there were only more people just standing.

“I can think of a few ways to make them move faster,” Neembelina said, a devious smile plastered upon her face.

“Excuse me,” said Sam to the person who stood before them. The person turned to face him, his eyes staring and blank, looking but not seeing. “I was just wondering,” Sam began, “what are you all in line for?”

The person gawked at Sam, his eyes hollow and his gaze empty. “I don’t know,” he said.

“How odd indeed,” muttered Sam. “Well, how long have you been waiting here for?”

The person moved his head slowly, as if trying to remember something he never knew to begin with. His pallid stare met Sam’s eyes again. It was like staring into time; there was no beginning there. There was no end.

“I don’t remember,” he said quietly, and moving robotically he turned back to his place.

“Maybe they are waiting for an ice cream sale,” suggested Neembelina. “My great, great, great, great, great aunt’s uncle’s brother’s grandfather once waited two hundred years in line for a new brand of ice cream.”

“What kind of ice cream was it?” asked Neeptytoo.

Neembelina shrugged her shoulders, “I don’t know,” she said, “he died of old age, just a day before he reached the head of the line.”

“Perhaps there is another way out of here,” Tiptoe supposed.

“Let’s go!” screeched Neembelina., “This place smells funny, like forgotten secrets.”

Before long they broke off the line, and began pacing along the chamber. Water wept down the auburn walls, and the pungent musty odor of time chaperoned their every step.

Escape was unfeasible.

As they hurried on they found no exits or entrances, or anything else for that matter but blank stares, empty faces and endless questions. The silent flocks gazed at them comatosely.

“Are we going to be trapped here forever?” Neepytoo finally asked.

“Yes,” stated Neembelina as a matter of fact.

“Of course not,” disputed Tiptoe. That was when they heard someone laughing behind them. Turning around, they saw a short, mealy creature with cherry eyes and an ample smile.

“Looking for something?” the being asked, and his voice echoed Spring in that forlorn place.

“We sure are!” Sam chuckled, running his hand through the mop of his shabby yellow hair in relief.

“So, what is it that you are looking for then?”

They all exchanged glances. “I think we are looking for the extraordinary machine,” Tiptoe finally said.

“Then you are in the right place,” the creature said. “Nice to meet you, happy days and happy birthdays, I am, Big-a-bee.”

“What are all those people doing here?” Neepytoo whispered nervously, staring at the line through a waterfall of brown hair.

“I can only assume that they are waiting in line,” Big-a-bee answered.

“In line for the machine?” Neepytoo continued.

“I don’t know,” Big-a-bee said, “you’ll have to ask them.”

“Then how do we get to that extraordinary machine?” asked Sam. “Is there a door here somewhere?”

“There is.”

“So where is it?” exclaimed Neembelina.

“It is right here.”

“Where? I can’t see it,” she grumbled impatiently.

“Of course you can’t,” Big-a-bee said, “you can only see what you already know to see. Can you think of a color you have never seen before? Of course you can’t.” Big-a-bee chuckled at the risible blank stares that darted at him.

“Then how do we go through the door, if we can’t see it?” asked Sam.

“You just have to forget everything you know. Your mind has to go blank.”

“Like those people?” Neepytoo’s voice cracked as he sidled a glance at the line.

“Maybe,” Big-a-bee grinned, “but don’t you worry. It will probably come back.” Then he said, “now close your eyes and think of your very first memory.”

As they followed his instruction (choices were a thing of luxury at the moment), Big-a-bee snapped his fingers and asked them to reopen their eyes. Thereupon they were led through the nearest entrance that vanished as soon as they walked through it, for their memories were back.

“Welcome to the extraordinary machine!” Big-a-bee announced. “Now, wait here a moment or twenty, and you shall be serviced.” He put his paws to his chest and bowed before them, his red hair bouncing in all directions. Then he smiled widely and dashed away, disappearing around the corner.

A quick look revealed that they were standing on a ledge that stretched out as far as their eyes could see, flanking a deep chasm, from which the group could make out the tips of vent stacks and pipes extending from the dark industry below. A rail was fixed into the walkway between the moving traffic of people and the sheer drop. A gnarly grid of overways and bridges mapped the entire vicinity, permeated by a wan, dirty light. Outlying in the distance, gigantic bolts pulled up and down into massive red nuts by long joints of metal. Below them they could distinguish endless transparent bluish capsulated vehicles, hovering inside horizontal glass ducts that came out of infinite pigeonholes all along the walls.

Cognitivity

The colossal structure commanded the visitor’s attention, and they all stood wrapped in awe. For it was, quite extraordinary. “I wonder who built this machine,” Neepytoo mused, his gaze fixed upon the enormous metallic joints that went up and down in the distance.

“That would be Chaos- who is also sometimes referred to as Random- of course,” a voice came from around the corner. A condensed oversized person succeeded the voice. He wore an official red uniform and wore an official black hat, and around his neck

dangled a very much official golden whistle. He also wore tall boots (with lots of buckles and things) that some would argue seemed, quite official. He was obviously an officer or some authorized personnel.

With hands crossed behind his back, he strode briskly and parked himself before them in the most official manner. “Chaos,” he stated, “or- as some people know him- Random, is the one who built this Extraordinary Machine.” He added quickly, “I am the bureaucrat. I take care of things.”

“You might want to install doors that actually act like doors in this place, if you don’t want people to feel like biting their own toes,” piped Neembelina.

“We do not bother with such minuscule details here at The Machine,” said the bureaucrat, “and we do not occupy ourselves with such cumbersome tasks.”

“So what *do* you do here?” asked Sam, running his eyes around the premises.

“We take care of things,” answered the bureaucrat.

“But what does this machine actually do?”

“I cannot answer this inquisition,” asserted the bureaucrat. “You will have to address the question to Chaos himself.”

“Bureaucrats...” mumbled Neembelina, “they are never good for anything.”

“Where can we meet Chaos?” asked Neepytoo.

“You cannot meet *him*,” the bureaucrat stated monotonously, “he can only meet *you*.” He cleared his throat, paused, and with an officially gloved finger he tilted his black hat away from his eyes. “He is randomly everywhere, and anywhere, and nowhere and anytime,” he said.

“My,” said Tiptoe, “he must be a very confused person.”

“I do not possess this kind of knowledge. I am just an official,” said the official. “And now I must give you your service tickets.”

He cleared his throat again and proceeded to produce a folder from his uniform’s pocket, handing them each a small ticket. “You are now official guests of the Extraordinary Machine,” the official declared. Then he added, “you are asked not to think of elephants in pajamas or count to four, and of course, not to sweat. However, if you do feel the need to do so, please be sure to use one of our sweat disposal facilities located,

for your convenience, at the blue and orange stations,” while, very officially, pointing his guests in the proper directions.

He cleared his throat once more, tilted his hat and clasped his hands importantly and authoritatively behind his back. “Happy endings,” he said, then pivoted sharply to his right and marched away down the pathway.

The group examined their tickets, and were quite baffled by what they found. “My ticket only has some holes in it...” mumbled Neepytoo.

“Mine says ‘Cognitivity’,” Sam mused.

“I have a picture of an arrow,” Tiptoe said as she displayed her ticket to them.

“And I shall eat mine!” announced Neembelina, and then quickly shoved her ticket in her mouth and swallowed it.

“Oh my,” whispered Neepytoo, “you won’t have a ticket now.”

“Of course I will,” chuckled Neembelina, “only that it’s in my stomach instead.” She grinned, “I was hungry.”

“So what should we do now?” asked Tiptoe.

“I guess we can take a peek at this machine,” said Sam.

“Are we allowed to?” Neepytoo asked.

“We don’t care,” piped Neembelina, “we are completely independent and unboring and we take orders from no one.”

Thus they began walking down the aisle, their attention fixed upon the hovering vehicles that fired out of the wall from hundreds of ducts, far below their feet.

“What are these for, you suppose?” asked Neepytoo.

“Maybe they carry potatoes from one place to another,” suggested Neembelina, and skipped her way to the front.

The passageway stretched out, infused by dirty yellow light that made all things appear obscure. The gigantic joints kept on pulling and working the gray bolts up and down in the distance. Unremitting loud noise showered over all, keeping the vicinity doused in the general pandemonium of the immense organism, which was the Machine.

Above all conducted the monotonous voice of a telecaster, bellowing out of triangle-shaped speakers. “Carrots,” the speakers spat, then, “square one eighteen. Seventy three.” And after just a moment, “Molecular reassignment.”

“What is that all about?” wondered Tiptoe.

“Maybe it’s some kind of a game,” said Neepytoo.

“Maybe it’s the lottery,” offered Neembelina, prancing at the front.

Then, suddenly, they found themselves standing between four concrete walls that dawned on them quickly from above, confining them to the spot. Confused and surprised they stood inside the chamber. “Oh oh...” mumbled Neepytoo. They could see nothing at all, and the walls offered no doors to the probing fingers.

“Wait,” said Tiptoe, “I can feel something on the wall.”

“Well, what is it?” piped Neembelina.

“It seems like,” Tiptoe began, “I think its, switches. Four swit-” she attempted to say, but a deafening voice exploded abruptly from the speakers above their heads.

“Please do not count to the number four. Thank you,” the speaker roared.

“Beetles!” screeched Neembelina, “that nearly blew my head off!”

Moving his hand across the walls, Sam could not find anything else but the four small switches.

“You know,” said Tiptoe, “I didn’t actually *count* to four, I only-”

Again the speakers bellowed above their heads, kindly reminding them “Please do not count to the number four. Thank you.” They all covered their ears.

“I just said the number. I didn’t count to it,” mumbled Tiptoe.

“I suggest avoiding even *thinking* that number,” said Sam.

“So do you suppose we should turn one of these switches on?” asked Tiptoe.

“Just don’t turn on the wrong one,” Neepytoo mumbled.

“Here goes,” said Tiptoe as she flipped a switch on.

There was the nagging suspense of silence, and they all held their breaths and waited for something to happen. Then they heard a ‘click’. And then there was silence. Then nothing happened.

And then a round hatch opened above their head, and from a blitz of white light a large drop of liquid chrome trickled in, forming into a tall shiny solid oval as it touched the ground. Thereupon a door suddenly opened in its center, and a set of stairs folded down to the floor. Then it stood there and waited.

And they all stood there and looked at it, also waiting. Finally Neepytoo asked, “do you suppose we should go in?”

“Of course we should,” said Neembelina, and without lingering further she skipped up the stairs and onto the silver platform in the center of the chrome oval.

The rest of the group looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and followed her up the stairs (because their other choice would be- well, they had no other choice). The staircase cascaded promptly back up, and the door closed as the last one of them set foot on the silver platform.

For a moment they were clad in complete darkness, and then the darkness gave way to a ring of small blue lights that lit up inside. “Please fasten your seatbelts,” a voice instructed.

A quick inspection established one definite fact, and another probable fact:

- A. There were definitely no seatbelts to be found.
- B. They were probably done for.

In fact, there was absolutely nothing there but the ill shine of the blue lights and the print of their silhouettes tattooed on the black walls, projected far to the top of the oval.

“Can you find any seatbelts?” asked Neepytoo. “I can’t see any seatbelts here.” “Well that’s *your* problem,” the voice was heard again. Then, without further notice the vehicle surged upwards with such velocity that locked them to the ground. It moved up faster and faster, and then suddenly, it stopped, and they were sent piloting up inside the chrome vehicle, only to collide violently back down to the floor.

“Scooters!” cheeped Neembelina.

“I told you that you should have fastened the seatbelts,” the voice said.

After a moment the door opened, and the staircase folded down to the floor. They did not hesitate to leave.

Unnecessary thoughts

They stepped out of the vehicle and once all on the ground, the staircase folded up, the door closed, and the transporter melted into an opening in the floor. They were standing in an enormously large vacant room. There were no doors and no windows, and a desert of silence suffused its insides. Bright lights flushed the room white, and vast

lofty walls stretched wide on all sides, climbing up and far to end in a high-arched ceiling.

They stood in the center of it, reduced to the size of a bug. “Well, if you like big white rooms, that’s the place for you,” said Tiptoe.

“What ever this place is,” said Neembelina, “it isn’t very hospitable. They don’t even offer you any water here.”

Just as she finished her sentence, a table suddenly emerged out of the floor, and on it were four glasses of water.

But before they had the opportunity to even think about reaching for the glasses, a very small door- nearly knee high- suddenly opened in the wall facing them. A corpulent, round creature with flat, four-fingered hands, and four-toed feet wrapped around his balloon-like body had wheeled idly out of it. The door closed behind him and was absorbed back into the white.

The creature stood up and stared at them, that is, not quite stared, for this creature, well, he had no eyes. But eyeless as he was, somehow he managed to fix a watchful gaze upon them, and it was rather daunting even more so. He wore a white, rubber fish-skin suite that clung tightly to his round body, and had a big red fan-like collar that spired high behind his head.

“I wouldn’t drink it if I were you,” he warned. “You never know what they put in the water these days.”

Everyone just stood there, gawking at him.

“He has no eyes,” Neepytoo whispered to Neembelina.

The creature’s head swung sharply at Neepytoo’s direction, arresting him with his eyeless stare. “No, I don’t,” he asserted firmly, “but I can see better than any of you.” Then he added, “I am the Violent Creature. I am with the Violent Creatures Squad, or, VCS, for short.” His gaze was aimed at Tiptoe and Sam at that moment. “But do not worry. I do like to be tickled once in a while. So you can’t say that I am entirely violent.”

“Um,” Sam finally began, “we are not completely sure what we’re doing here. You see, we were walking down the passageway, when sudden-”

“Do not worry,” the Violent Creature interrupted, “I don’t know what I am doing here either.” A fit of broken laughter coursed through his body, and then stopped as abruptly as it started.

“This is a collection station,” indifferently, he said. “A toll booth, if you’d like. We do need to maintain the Machine, you know.” Another wave of hysteric laughter convulsed his round body, and then just stopped.

“So what is the, uh, *toll* that you collect?” Tiptoe asked suspiciously.

“Simple,” he said. “You just need to give me one unnecessary thought, which I’m sure you are all blessed with.” He chuckled then added, “Now, please sit.” When four black chairs surfaced up suddenly behind them, they all exchanged quizzing looks. But when eyeless, violent stares darted generously in every direction, everyone just had the feeling that it would probably be better if those chairs were occupied, and sat down. Soon thereafter four glass tubes descended from the ceiling above each of the chairs, stopping only but a hair away from their faces.

On the following moment, long thin neon-blue plant stalks came down the glass tubes, and halted close-petaled at the end of the cylinders, shimmering in blue glow. As they stopped, the petals opened, revealing a bright orange flower with a thin spike in its center. A blue drop trickled out of the spike, and dissolved into dark vapors that stole hastily into their nostrils.

With their next exhale, the dark, wispy ribbons trailed out of their snouts and into glass vials, where they turned into small purple beads.

“Congratulations!” exclaimed the Violent Creature. “You are now one unnecessary thought free. And now that we took care of this,” the Violent Creature continued, “you can go back to your meaningless existence, to further produce unnecessary thoughts and pollute our cerebral space.” He finished and spun on his heels. In this instant the entire wall before them turned into water. “Good bye!” waved the Violent Creature, and stepped into the wall of water, disappearing into its dark curtains that re-solidified as soon as he vanished into them.

“Now, let’s leave!” Neembelina spat, “I need *all* my thoughts, and I am not giving them to anyone, as violent as they may be.”

“I am all for not staying here more than necessary,” said Neeptytoo, “but how do we go about it?”

These matters were not discussed further, for under their feet the floor began to suddenly bend as if made out of rubber. It warped and curved at the edges first, and then the entire surface bent towards the center forming an enormous funnel. They were poured into the hollow in the center like grains of sand, and into a spiraling tunnel they slid, plummeting down a corkscrew. As the spiral ended, they were spat like apple seeds out of an opening in a vast concrete wall, into a big shiny bubble that carried them into the open air.

Befuddled and disoriented they sat secure in the lap of the globe, now hovering high above fields. It was the afternoon hours and the rays of a dosing sun saturated the air with warmth, spreading a quilt of glaze upon all, looking to linger a little longer before retracing back to her nightly slumber. Beneath them cherry trees reeled in islands of pink against the blue tapestry of sky, against clusters of white clouds. Behind them stretched the concrete wall, which extended out and far and gray to every side, producing more spheres that emerged out of endless duct-holes to join in the hovering flight in the sky. Pierced by the shining arrows of sunlight they floated, glistening like a thousand glowing planets. Some carried passengers, and some were occupied with none.

And so they were cradled in their hovering vehicle, and for a while they were stirred onward upon invisible currents, sailing through the endless sky. It was a welcome break, and they all sat back, looked at the colorful world passing indolently beneath them, and discussed the different possible uses for the bubble (utility craft for Russian spies for instance, a storage container for useless things which don't fit in any of your closets, drawers or burrows, and so forth).

But their respite was short lived. Because before long an ample shape towered high before them in the distance, and that meant that something was about to happen. They were drawn towards the shape as if pulled by an unseen magnet, rushing in a stream of air to spill into its round black open mouth.

Tinted white and decorated with arches of red, a domed cement structure stood towering above the green field, gulping the hovering bubbles eagerly. They were swallowed into a vast channel and hovered slowly downwards, coated in the half-light

that permeated the tunnel until coming out into a brightly lit terminal, where they resumed descending to finally land on a round platform situated on a long docking pier. The port swam with moving bodies and hastening feet, trafficking to and fro- a tumult of noise and motion and colors. Everywhere in the terminal passengers arrived, only to leave again.

Gray cement parapets bearing large round gapes in their center inclined sharply from ceiling to ground, dividing the pier into different landing stations. People around them streamed fervently along the pier, negotiating the terminal in a torrent of colors and assorted clothes, that produced a vibrant collage against the gray platforms of the terminal. All along the quay blue capsulated vehicles ingested passengers into their lucid bodies, shooting out into the distance.

Through the rushing crowd the four walked, not knowing to where, but feeling like they should, since everyone around them conducted themselves in such a direct manner to their destinations. Above it all augmented the telecaster's voice: "Tangerine," it announced, "Wave velocity, Cellular, Fusion, Creepies, Metamorphose," and concluded with "X."

The four looked at the moving traffic around them. "Maybe we should ask someone where everybody's going," suggested Neepytoo.

"I don't want to go where they go," grunted Neembelina, "we have more important things to do."

They kept flowing with the river of traffic along the terminal's inner wall. "Stations G Delta, Dock 16, Gamma B-505, and the one on the left are out of order. Do not attempt any use of their transporters," the speaker's voice rose above the clamor. "Please keep moving," it kept on, "we have no interest in having you here for too long." "We could jump into one of these vehicles," suggested Tiptoe.

"Arrow, Cognition," the telecaster bellowed, "Some holes, and," it paused, "we forgot what the last one was." Suddenly they heard somebody whisper hoarsely behind them, as to attract their attention: "PSST! Over here."

"Is that meant for us?" Neepytoo asked.

“Obviously,” snickered Neembelina, already poking her head through a crack in the cement wall. “We are the only normal people here,” she said and went in. Tiptoe followed her through the gap, and the rest joined behind them.

Blueberry

The crack in the wall led to a long dark hallway. The terminal’s commotion faded behind them as they walked down the long corridor. It ended in a black wall that bore a round opening in its center. A red lamp was fixed above the opening, glowing shyly upon the blue curtains of water that doored the gap. Under the lamp a small rectangle of red rubbery-liquid was fixed, and in it the word ‘Bounce’ was inscribed in black letters. But ‘Bounce’ soon dissolved and ‘Cognitivity’ appeared thereafter in black against red. Then the red light above the door turned to green.

“Well,” said Neembelina, “I don’t know what your plans are, but I am going through.” Assertively, she stepped through the water-door and vanished behind it. The rest followed.

A big amphitheatre waited on the other side of the door, and at the bottom of the stairs, where a stage should be, lay a vast pool of dark purple water, shaped in half-crescent. It was quiet in there, and triangle-shaped lamps that hung on the tall walls suffused the room in purple light.

“Makes you want to clean up your bedroom, doesn’t it?” somebody said behind them. It was a person dressed in a tight black suit, with black eyes that burned bright in a white face. “I always love coming here,” he said gloomily, looking down at the purple pool. A silent moment spanned and then suddenly, he broke into hysteric laughter and ran down the long stairs, launching impudently into a procession of backflips and cartwheels. He stopped at the bottom (or rather, the bottom stopped *him*) and stood motionless with his back to them.

“It’s a detour in time,” he said, then added, “ice cream and ants always go together.”

“What is he talking about?” Neepytoo whispered to Tiptoe, but she only shook her head in confusion.

The person turned around, hands crossed behind his back. He looked at them silently, his big black eyes laughing in the pale frame of his face. “You look like a bunch of fish caught in a butterfly net,” he chuckled, ran back halfway up the stairs and sat down, hugging one knee. “Twelve thirty,” he mumbled quietly as if to himself. Then getting up, he bent down to stand on his hands and climbed this way up to the top, jumping back to his feet when reaching the last step. “I’ve been impolite!” he declared once at the top. “You haven’t introduced yourselves to me!”

Then, eliciting into guffaws he ran to the right, came back, ducked down and stood on his hands. “Pianos,” he began, “are falling,” pause, “and nobody is-” then he leaped to his feet and, laughing panicky, he bowed down deeply before them. “An avid aficionado of antique cars, quondam flower child with a sticky attachment to anything formidable, a romantic bon vivant and the service coordinator for anything you need, at your service.” He clasped his hands, “I am Chaos.”

“Oh, how exciting!” exclaimed Neepytoo, “it is nice to finally meet you.”
“What is this place?” asked Sam.

“This,” Chaos began, then turned around and skipped down the stairs, “this is Blueberry.” He said as he reached the bottom. Sitting down on the last long step while cradling his chin in his hands, he stared at the dark surface of the purple water. They all followed him down.

“Blueberry?” continued Sam.

“It’s our unnecessary thoughts reservoir,” Chaos explained. Then he stood up quickly just to lie down on his back. “Dolls can be scary sometimes,” he added.

“Spoons!” cried Neembelina, “I am getting confused just from listening to you.”

“Isn’t it randomly chaotic?” Chaos smiled.

“So you are the one who built the extraordinary machine?” asked Tiptoe.

“I am.”

“What does it do exactly?”

Chaos got up, and while walking on his hands alongside the pool he declared with levity, “Anything you want.” He then jumped to his feet and ran back to them. “Shh...” he whispered suddenly. With finger to his lips he pointed up.

They looked up.

High up in the ceiling a round shaft had opened, and a long thin wire decanted through it towards the water. Even as they watched, the wire broke into a long chain of small round purple pallets. One by one the pallets entered the pool, followed by a graceful pirouette of ripples that crawled across the water. As the last bead slipped into the dark surface, Chaos clapped his hands.

“How wonderful it is, probably, to be a mirror in a very busy street!” he cried, and then he flounced along the water line and back, going this way and that, squatting down, standing on one hand, crossing his legs in the air and holding his chin in his other hand.

“What were all those little purple things?” asked Tiptoe.

“Those were the unnecessary thoughts,” he explained.

Pointing at the pool Sam asked, “And what is that for?”

“This is so that we’ll be able to make something completely useful out of them unnecessary thoughts.”

“Like ginger breads?” piped Neembelina.

“Perhaps,” said Chaos, “or, the maintaining force of the Machine.”

“There must be a million pearls down at the bottom of this pool, or some other useless treasure,” mused Neembelina, staring at the water. “And I am going to dive in and get it.”

“I wouldn’t touch the water, if I were you,” said Chaos.

“And why is that?” she squeaked.

“Because you’d simply evaporate.”

Mulling the idea over in her head she said, “You’re telling a fib.”

“Perhaps,” said Chaos, “but do you really want to find out whether I am?”

She didn’t. She had better things to do.

“Barber shops sometimes lurk in street corners after a cold December rain,” Chaos announced, then yawning he added, “I am very sleepy, I think I will go to watch the butterflies dance right now.” Then he began walking up the stairs.

“Wait,” called Tiptoe, “what do we do now?”

“Whatever you want.” He paused then said, “but whatever you do, make sure it is what you really want. You won’t be able to come here again.” Then he turned around and resumed ascending, disappearing into the water opening at the top of the stairs.

The four looked at each other, engulfed in the silence that doused the reservoir. “Well,” said Neembelina at last, shrugging her shoulders, “I know what I *don’t* want, and what I *don’t* want is to stay here forever.”

“I am sure there is another door here somewhere, or some other way to leave,” Tiptoe pondered.

“Well, I am not waiting for nobody!” declared Neembelina, “I am goi-”

“Shh...” interrupted Sam, “can you hear that?”

“Hear what?” asked Tiptoe.

While they stood listening, the group detected a faint suggestion of sounds, woven together into a muffled melody.

“Where is it coming from?” Neepytoo whispered.

At that moment they could clearly hear the nasally wail of trumpets, and the thunderous roar of drums echoing festively between the tall cement ramparts of the reservoir. But the sound trickled in from every direction, and they were unable to tell where it was coming from.

As they stood there listening, the wall at the other side of the pool suddenly evaporated into nothing. Blinding light stormed in, hugging every corner, dusting the darkness away with long impatient fingers. Before them, as if the wall never existed, a carnival was taking place in all its might. Colors twirled on a wide plateau, and the melodies poured out of trumpets and horns, drums and flutes. Clowns dressed in bright outfits danced and jumped, and jugglers conducted over a jungle of clubs and colorful balls that flew in all directions.

A bridge of metal suddenly unfolded from the other side of the pool, cascading plate after plate and arching over the still, purple-black water, to finally anchor its last platform into the floor at their feet. “One can tell that these are some very angry people, who ate too many fire crackers,” peeped Neembelina, staring at the tumult on the other side of the bridge.

“They seem quite cheerful to me,” said Tiptoe, who already began crossing the metal bridge.

The Extravaganza

The colors swirled brighter on the other side, and all was even louder, peaking into sheer mayhem. They turned to look behind, but the bridge and the reservoir had already disappeared to leave them standing on the wide plateau, in the midst of some very wild festivities.

Before them a tall neon sign flickered “The Extravaganza” in big red letters. A person dressed in a very tight white suite, dancing and holding a tray full of tall glasses with orange drinks, leaped precariously in their direction, and then bowed deeply and extended his tray before them.

“I am not going to drink any of these!” proclaimed Neembelina, “I am not in the mood for having my stomach explode.”

“My dear unimportant person,” said the server impassively, “you are uttering nonsense. There is no such thing here. This is the Extravaganza!”

“What are all the celebrations for?” asked Tiptoe.

“Well, nothing!” roared the server. “Absolutely nothing at all! Not everything has to be about something, does it?”

“Then you should all go home, and think of a reason for all this,” grumbled Neembelina.

“We never go home,” stated the server.

“Never?” Neepytoo’s eyes hung a lengthy look at him.

“We can’t stop the Extravaganza.”

The trumpets blared long notes that suspended in the air above it all. The clowns folded their supple limbs into impossible positions, entangling themselves in scarves and ropes.

“If you are not going to have any of those drinks, then I shall go and offer my service to sensible beings who will,” the server said, and then sharply, he turned to go away.

Sam called after him, “is there a way out of here?” And the waiter- evidently surprised by this inquiry- paused and said, “there is the Pendelonium of course. Isn’t that why you’re all here?”

“Where can we find it?” continued Sam.

“What an odd question that is. Just go through the sign of course, where else would the Pendelonium be?” the server excused himself boastfully, and with a long jump, he went on to serve his orange drinks to others.

“Do you know what the Pendelonium is?” asked Neepytoo. Sam shook his head. “I don’t. But we’ll soon find out.” Under the neon sign they walked, crossing the gushing river of incessant music and colors and utter disorder of the Extravaganza.

The Pendelonium

Leaving the clamor and clatter and explosion of noise behind, they entered a garden. They passed under a torii of white stone and dove into silence. A narrow path led them through a stream of red water and islands of round rocks. The banks were clad in white snow-like sand, and bravura of colorful fruit-bearing plants and blooming flowers, speckled the garden between the rocks and on the shoulders.

The music had long died out behind, and only the jingle of the flowing water accompanied the silence. They ambled slowly through the garden. Even Neembelina, at the head of the tour, did not haste and stopped to examine the things in the garden.

“Interesting place,” noted Tiptoe.

“Quite,” assented Neembelina, “but the Extravaganza was like drinking a very potent juice then going on a rollercoaster ride.” She squeaked, “my grandmother’s uncle’s sister’s niece’s nephew did it once, and the outcome,” she paused, “was not so pretty.” She crouched by the red stream and gazed into the water.

The garden was lovely indeed, but the path walked them rather soon to its end, where a white desert of sand lay. They walked through another torii, and stepped onto the empty terrains of the desert (a discussion pertaining the ‘shoulds’ and ‘shouldn’ts’ of continuing further into the desert had preceded, and was resolved quite quickly in the unified conclusion, that anything was better than going back to- as Neembelina put it rather eloquently- “the party of your nightmares”).

Two long railings outstretched far into the wasteland, forming a path. Nevertheless, that did not stop Neembelina from arguing that they better abandon the obvious, and seek a detour (for detours were obviously better than the main roads). But

she was persuaded (fairly quickly) to leave those unorthodox plans and adhere to the suggested trail, after Sam, somewhat pensively had remarked, “who knows what lives in those sands. One can never tell in this place.” No, she had better things to do than to be “gobbled up by a not-so-mighty mighty earthworm”.

So the procession followed the thoroughfare, keeping between the long railings. All around them the sea of white sand lay, as vacant and uncompromising as a desert can be. A white sun plastered up in the empty heavens above, spread unkind heat that seared the air, and sent it vaporizing into wriggly fumes above the sands. Strangely enough though, things were quite all right on the trail.

The walk was easy enough. The heat was not felt between the railings. The sun was not as blinding, although fairly bright. A debate was taking place as to whether or not clocks were necessary commodities in today’s society. The opinions were divided, of course, ranging from ‘It’s just as necessary as cucumbers’ (it is understood that in this context, cucumbers were not so necessary) to ‘Well, it helps.’ But the dispute was terminated when they reached the end of the trail. Because at the end of the trail stood a troll.

Article 49

“Hello,” said the troll, “and welcome to the Pendelonium.” He smiled and kindly asked them for their service tickets. “I must scan them before you enter the Pendelonium.”

“Well,” chuckled Neembelina, “that’s too bad, because I ate mine.” The Troll reassured her that that was something which happened quite often, actually. And since that was the case, the scanning machine was carefully modified to fit the carriers of tickets. He continued to explain to her that she would simply have to enter the scanning machine, herself.

“Please keep your hands folded, eyes closed and legs straight,” he instructed as she was put on the belt of the scanning machine. “And please,” he reminded her, “do not whistle. It will send the machine into crazies.”

A few moments later Neembelina emerged out of the scanning machine, all smirks and cunning looks, crying “Firecrackers! What a spin!” then added, “There was a loose screw inside, but there is no need to worry, I helped it out.”

The Troll did not seem to mind the latter remark. However, he did hand them all a contract which he called “Article 49”, and asked the guests to sign it. “So that we all have an understanding.” Once the technical matters were settled they were allowed to continue, and into the Pendelonium they went.

Now, the Pendelonium, it was something quite fantastic indeed. But further details cannot be disclosed. Because when things come down to details, the Pendelonium, you see, it has rules. And according to those rules no information regarding the Pendelonium can be distributed in any manner, whatsoever. It was all delineated in the above-mentioned Article 49 (which all visitors including, but not limited to, small creatures must sign before boarding), enforcing those regulations. Rules are rules, and as to refrain from breaking those rules, no further information will be dispersed. Unfortunately, anyone who wishes to possess supplementary knowledge regarding all this, well, they would just have to find out for themselves (after signing the contract, of course).

It can be mentioned however without breaking any rules, that some very interesting things had happened, which was grand. Because after all, interesting things were exactly the reason why they were all there in the first place. It is also common knowledge that the Pendelonium is the last stop of all stops, and thus things came to an end, and it was time to go back. And since the Pendelonium is what it is, they were back home in no time.

And back at home; the snows towered in soft angles, like something sweet that melted in the sun. Everything glistened under the moon, and the night was quiet and peaceful. They all fell asleep and fell quickly into dreams, each in their own dwelling.

Chapter 8

Foreverwhere

Strange things

The days passed, dissolving into weeks that turned into months. The cold departed, and warmth permeated all. The Moot was dreaming of something dreadful and quite terrible (just the way he liked it), when a loud sound from the outside woke him up. There was a crash and a loud bang, and then the Moot- he was wide a wake.

Then someone yelled something outside, in a very cheerful manner. A very short pause and then there was the sound of a melody, or more precisely the sound of a flute playing a melody. The Moot sat up and felt terrible. He didn't particularly like to be woken up from such a dreadful dream. Especially not by a cheerful sound like that. "That sounds happy. I hate happy things," he grumbled.

He also had a terrible headache, which did not contribute to his overall mood at all. He decided that something had to be done about all this cheerfulness outside. *I mean, what is that all about?* he thought to himself. *People shouldn't be going about their lives being all happy and oblivious to everything, as if nothing important is happening.* He kept mulling these thoughts over while pulling his big black boots on, *because there is going to be a terrible cataclysm soon, and it is going to swallow the entire earth up, for sure.*

He knew those things because he was a scientist. A very dedicated scientist. The Moot grabbed a pile of papers from one of his shelves, and then a pencil from his desk. *What is all this?* He thought, *all those folks out there, living like nothing is happening, collecting stamps, and sweeping their porches and making terrible sweet pies, like the world is not coming to its end soon.* Then he stepped out into a notably bright, warm, and sweet day.

There was no mistake- spring had sprung. And that made the Moot all the more annoyed. He hated spring.

“What is the meaning of this? Can’t a person get some good sleep around here these days?” he boomed, exasperated. “I was having a rather horrible dream, which, I liked quite a lot, mind you.” Before him on two big gray rocks, bathing in a puddle of sunshine and lounging by the pond, sat the Witch, her flute, and Neeptytoo next to the two.

“Oh, hallo!” cried Neeptytoo. “We did not know anyone was actually sleeping still. It is the first day of spring today!” he smiled, and his eyes smiled even more. “You shouldn’t be cheering so much,” the Moot barked. “I just happen to know a lot of things about a lot of things, and therefore I know a lot of reasons against being cheerful.”

“You do?” Neeptytoo asked.

“Oh yes, of course I do,” declared the Moot, “I know a lot about the physics of the magnetic flux rope, structures, waves and instabilities, and since I possess all this knowledge, I urge you to stop feeling happy.”

“What did he say?” Neeptytoo whispered to the Witch. But the Witch just shrugged her shoulders, moistened her lips, and kept on playing, a rather happier tune. “Ah, you are all useless,” the Moot mumbled, and then added out loud, “In short, we are all going to die.” At that he grunted and walked away.

That was no appropriate atmosphere for an important scientist such as himself, to study and observe. He had to go somewhere quieter, and, less happy.

* * *

A little further away from there, Sam was in the midst of preparations for the big Spring Fest that he was setting up in honor of the first day of the spring. Word about the Fest spread quickly through the forest, and the event was much anticipated. The party, as rumors whispered in the wind, was open for all, discluding really scary things and monsters. But- the rumors indicated- if the scary things or monsters were to behave nicely, then they would be permitted in the celebrations. According to some gossip there were going to be unusual fireworks, a cake of eighty stories high, and- it was whispered

through the grapevine- the little volcano will be blown up to bits in the climax of the feast.

Sam of course, had no plans for such things. But rumors as rumors are, they never consult anyone about their reports. He did, however, mention that every attendee should bring with them something edible.

Now Sam took a break from the preparations. He sat at his tree stump by the volcano, ran his fingers through his shabby yellow hair, and sighed.

“I heard you are preparing a Spring Fest.” From around the volcano came Tiptoe. “You heard right,” Sam confirmed.

“The entire forest is buzzing about it,” said Tiptoe. “They say you are going to give everybody a very expensive red gem, as a present.”

“Alas,” chuckled Sam, “they’ve ruined my surprise. How did they find out about the pirate loot that I keep inside my volcano?” They both laughed. But from a bush across the garden, someone was whispering: “You see? I told you.”

A long wooden table stood across from the volcano, snaking around the corner to disappear behind it. “Did you make this?” asked Tiptoe.

“I did.”

Sitting down next to Sam, Tiptoe mentioned how glad she was that spring has arrived, and how the air smelled like an unopened present. Sam smiled in agreement, and said that he had a feeling some strange and perhaps wonderful things were about to happen.

When Tiptoe asked what kind of strange and wonderful things he was thinking of, Sam couldn’t say exactly what it was, because it was just a feeling. So they both sat quietly, and enjoyed the first-day-of-spring air, that smelled just like an unopened present.

After a little while Sam said that although things were almost done, he still had to go to the Inn in order to get some lanterns for the party. For surely the celebrations will extend into the wee hours of the night, and perhaps even into the next morning. “Would you like to come along?” Sam asked.

“Why not?” Tiptoe smiled, and the two departed and went on their way.

Monster

The Moot wandered through the woods for quite a while now, looking for a quiet spot that would accommodate such a prominent scientist as himself, where he could sit and entertain his scientific thoughts and revelations without interruptions. But such a corner had yet to present itself. And that was in part due to the fact that at times, he merely forgot where it was that he was going, and sank deep in his terrible and beautifully horrifying predictions. And at other times, well, the forest was just so sunny and sweet and frantically spring-like, and, alas, so very quiet-corners free- that it made the Moot's head throb.

He was grunting and grumbling and complaining out loud, as he had just passed a rather large family of Stifflings that hurried across his path, all of them talking at the same time, waving their hands, gesturing in large motions, and intertwining amongst themselves. And they almost made him trip and fall.

“Another flock of irrational beings...” grunted the Moot. “Don't you know you are all going to die soon?” he yelled after them. Of course they couldn't hear him, because they were all chattering simultaneously in a very loud and hectic manner. But even if they could hear him, they probably would not care. It was spring and everyone was merry, and everything was filled with hope and all that was not bad admonition.

The Moot kept on toddling between the thickets of the forest, and finally, after a lengthy time of roaming about, he found what seemed to be a joyless, noiseless and, springless corner. So he sat down with his papers and pencil, and delved into calculations and chartings and forecasts of some very ominous events. And for a while nothing else happened, and the Moot was left alone to his dark forebodings.

Broad green leaves sheltered him from all sides, and his corner was cold and sunless at the moment, just the way he liked it. According to his most recent calculations, the sun was heading straight to earth and would crash into its surface in about thirty- or, was it the earth that was heading towards the sun? Rah, The Moot could not remember. Where did he put the sketches that would have explained it all? *Either way*, he thought, *there is going to be a fabulous catastrophe, which will wipe everyone and everything off the face of the planet. How terribly wonderful*, The Moot thought.

Of course, he continued contemplating, there is a very strange anomaly in the aura of the moon. The sun's magnetic field shifted today, indicating that the solar maximum of earth's magnetic field being the cause of various sorts of devastations. He sighed. There are going to be some very strange things happening.

And then twittering commenced. And it was as loud and offensive as any spring twittering can be.

“You... pudding heads!!” he yelled at the birds, “you have no respect for science, whatsoever!” But the chirping continued even louder.

“What’s all this? I mean, what is that all about?” he kept on, “you think you are going to save yourselves by singing like a bunch of brainless fools?” The birds continued whistling louder and louder.

“Well, I have news for you!” he boomed. “You are just as safe as this rock here. Because none of you are safe!” And the birds continued their singing all the more vehemently.

“So you might as well be quiet and, and stop squandering my precious time here on earth, which will- you might want to take in consideration- be destroyed soon, and let me think of things that you, flat brained beings, can’t possibly fathom!”

Then it was all silent. The Moot was quite surprised, and well, rather proud of himself and his obvious charisma and clear leadership skills. It was the epitome of his entire existence. He went on to say, “Well, now that you got your senses back, I will continue with my dreadfully important job.” Or, rather, he *intended* on saying so. But something occurred to him just then.

He undeniably spoke out loud, but he did not make any sound. His voice disappeared. *That is awfully strange indeed*, he thought. He then cleared his throat (soundlessly), and went on to mouth, “How awfully strange indeed!” But that was again a futile attempt in producing sound.

He was sonically inept. But then he realized, so was everything else. It was all abnormally quiet. Then he realized, it was rather *too* quiet...

He looked around and listened. But there was nothing to listen to. It was as if all sounds were simply muted. There was no rustling of leaves in the breeze, and none of the usual sounds of all the creatures of the woods. There was just a big soundless void.

It was all so silent.

It was all so noiseless.

It was all so rather strange.

Of course, he suddenly realized, it all makes perfect sense now! he thought. *It is starting... The magnetic fields are collapsing, and that causes a change in the structure of the atmosphere, which is changing the moisture in the air, which creates a disturbance to the sonic fields! And that-* The Moot was about to reach the conclusion of his brilliant scientific revelation, however, before he had the time to further reflect upon this aberrant phenomenon, a monster suddenly appeared amongst the broad leaves, sauntering listlessly through the forest.

The monster had a large pink mouth that was open wide, and very small ears (the Moot was taking notes). She strode slowly through the thicket, passed by the Moot and into the forest, and disappeared into the brush. And then, summarily, the sound was back.

The Moot sat there for a moment or two, and forgot about cataclysms, and wavelengths and volcanoes. He had a new interest now. There was some strange connection, he thought to himself, between the sound suddenly disappearing and this ample-mouthed monster. And, mulling the idea over in his head, he stood up and hurried after her.

* * *

Back outside of the Moot's den, sitting on the gray rocks by the small pond, the Witch concluded her recent composition, 'When Suddenly There Is A Rock In My Shoe', in an impressive three-octave overture. Clear-watered and tranquil the pond lay, decorated with wild ferns, purple clematises and green bamboos. Big yellow-cupped lilies resting atop platters of green leaves swayed gently on the water, and the wind breathed languidly through the ferns, caressing the water, drawing ripples.

A small water nymph crawled out of the pond into a lily cup. She flapped her wings dry and sat listening, her long, black hair dripping water. When the Witch's 'When Suddenly There Is A Rock In My Shoe' came to a closure, the small water nymph clapped enthusiastically. "That was the best spring tune I have heard in a long time," she said.

The Witch thanked her and then rested her flute on her lap, sinking into thoughts. “What is your name?” asked Neepytoo. “I am Gwendolyn. I am a water nymph,” said Gwendolyn the water nymph. “You are perfectly lucky to have wings like you do. I can imagine how wonderful it is to be able to fly,” said Neepytoo.

“Yes. I suppose it is,” mused Gwendolyn. “But my wings don’t always work. It is kind of, unpredictable.” She sighed then added, “actually, most of the time they just don’t work. But I don’t think of it much. Water nymphs don’t need to fly often.”

Gwendolyn, the water nymph, asked the Witch to play another spring tune, but the Witch said that her flute was empty of melodies, at least for the moment. Then she continued to say, “I am going to set out to the shore, to await the Vessel. I think it is almost time now.”

“Time for what?” Neepytoo asked.

“Time to travel,” the Witch answered. “I shall be leaving soon, and my Vessel always knows to come for me at exactly the right time.” Her hair traveled silently around her head, rocking atop unseen waves. And somewhere in the depth of her eyes, you could tell that she was already somewhere else. For when longing seizes one’s soul, imbues the dreams and the heart, there is nothing to do but abide its irrefutable demands. She stood up and said, “It may be my very last voyage.”

“How exciting!” exclaimed Neepytoo.

“Indeed. I have the feeling that it will be quite interesting.” She then turned and headed to the shore, where she would await her Vessel.

“I wonder where she’ll be traveling to,” mused Neepytoo.

“I really wouldn’t mind going on a journey myself,” Gwendolyn the water nymph said.

“Water nymphs never really travel too far from their pond. I’d be lucky to go far away and see things that no other nymphs have seen.”

For a little while they were both lost in thoughts and places far and great, and at length Neepytoo asked Gwendolyn about Sam’s Spring Fest, and whether she was intending on attending.

“Why, yes, of course I am going,” said Gwendolyn. “I heard that there would be a Giant Bob there.”

“What’s a Giant Bob?”

“I am not sure,” uttered Gwendolyn, “but it seems like the forest folks are quite excited about the fact that there is going to be one at the party.”

And then the two decided to follow the Witch to the shore, to find out whether the vessel had dropped anchor yet.

* * *

Creepies

Deep in the tropical depths of the forest, Tiptoe and Sam were making their way through the undergrowth, where thick Teak trees grew tall and copious to a dense canopy, and fallen logs lay across clear streams, covered by red mushrooms, ferns and moss. Fighting its way through the opaque roof of the forest, bashful sunlight entered through the cracks, illuminating the thicket below.

Armies of spiny lizards crept through the underbrush, plunging into pools of sunlight, and curtains of hanging roots drooped from the tall meaty trees, dangling like silent bells above all. Big, turquoise mushrooms, as well as red and blue plants emerged out of the green foliage, outlining waterfalls that cascaded down black cliffs, to spatter boisterously into streams that veined like spider webs through the forest.

“I think I might take a holiday soon,” Sam announced while ducking under a fallen log. Following behind him, Tiptoe asked, “What would you do on your holiday?” “Perhaps I’ll go somewhere else, somewhere I’ve never been before.”

“Then it would have to be somewhere very far from here.” They crossed a stream, skipping on gray rocks.

“I think you’re right.”

“I would like to do that one day too,” said Tiptoe.

“You could come along, if you’d like. I wouldn’t mind,” said Sam bashfully.

Tiptoe smiled. “I might just do that then.”

After sauntering through the dense foliage of ivies and ferns, and moss-covered tree trunks for a while, Tiptoe finally asked, “How far is the Inn?”

“It shouldn’t be too far,” said Sam, “but then again, one can never know. The Creepies change the Inn’s location on a whim, according to their mood, or the weather, or the way that the surroundings smell, or a combination of all those.”

“So it might not even be there?”

“Perhaps, but, it was there the last time I was there. So, at least there is one chance for it still being there.”

But the matter had unfolded rather quickly, when plunging a little further into the forest- they heard a fervent discussion:

“You’re ugly!” Somebody cried.

And someone else retorted, “No, *you* are ugly!”

“Well, if I am ugly,” the somebody said, “then you are ugly-*er*.”

And the other someone cried, “*you* are uglier!”

“No, *you* are!”

“No, *you* are!”

Unmistakably, Sam determined, they were heading in the right direction. Sure enough, at the heart of a small glade stood two small Creepies, with their short spiky red hair, long cork-like noses, and big eyes. They were having one of their “conversations” (Sam explained that it was a normal thing).

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” one of the Creepies said.

“Yes I do!” the other one cried.

“How can you? You are stupid.”

“No, *you* are stupid.”

“No, *you* are stupid.”

And so it would have continued if Sam hadn’t interrupted. “Hello,” he said. At that, the two Creepies abandoned their- what they liked to call- ‘exchange of ideas’, and turned to look at Sam and Tiptoe. For a moment or two they just gazed at them and then said, “We know you. You are the boy who helped us build our Inn. The boy with the hammers and the nails and the ideas.”

Sam smiled, and then turned to Tiptoe and said, “These are Tik and Toot.” And Tik and Toot kindly reassured them that in case that they were terribly lost, they were welcome to stay at their Inn until they were no longer lost.

“But you won’t be able to have any blueberries with your pancakes. Because we don’t have any,” said Tik.

“We don’t have blueberries because you managed to get them all spoiled,” Toot piped.

Tik said, “No, it was *you*.”

“Not me, *you*.”

“You’re stupid.”

“*You’re* stupid!”

Sam had to interrupt again, “We are not lost, but we would love to borrow some of your magical lanterns.”

“So, you don’t want blueberries with your pancakes?” Tik and Toot asked together.

“Perhaps another time. Right now I must finish the preparations for the spring Fest.”

“Aa-ha! We have heard about the spring fest!” cried Tik.

And Toot asked, “Is it going to be the kind of party that everyone will talk about for two hundred million years?”

“Perhaps,” said Sam.

“Well, then,” said the Creepies, “you can have the lanterns.”

Thus they all made their way to the Inn (ensuing an intricate ‘exchange of ideas’ that went along the lines of, “Follow me.” And then, “You will get us all lost, you mophead. You should all follow *me*.” And so forth).

* * *

Moving as silently and as stealthily as possible (not an easy task at times, considering his choice of footwear, i.e. big black boots), the Moot crept from one tree to another, from shadow to shadow as he sleuthed after the monster. Everywhere he went, silence followed.

Then he thought to himself, *Well, why bother trying to be so careful and so quiet, if there is no sound. Ah...*’ he chuckled. But then another thought climbed up the back of his mind. *Of course there is always the possibility that I am just going deaf...*

He did not particularly like that idea. And, being largely beside himself and scattered in thoughts, the Moot took a long, absentminded step. Then the Moot realized that he must have stepped on something, or someone, for that something, or someone was biting the back of his leg.

Now, the Moot would have very much liked to shout at that something or someone (that is, if he *could* actually shout), because that something or someone, had rather sharp little teeth. He twisted around and shook his leg, and then stumbled and fell on his rear end.

A small person was sitting in the brush before him. The person had red hair, small angry eyes, and wore a blue dress. She seemed very crossed and rather truculent.

“Do you realize that you just stepped on me? What kind of an idea is that?” Neembelina piped. The Moot sat up, delectably baffled and so very happy to hear her screeching at him. “I can hear you!” he cried in relief.

“Well, good!” Neembelina bellowed. Standing up and crossing her hands over her chest, she continued, “So I can be sure that you’ll hear me warning you, that if you do that again, I will bite your tail off.”

The Moot looked around, but he could not spot the monster anywhere in the periphery. But there were birds chirping, and wind breathing in the foliage, flapping of wings and rustling of leaves, and all those general forest noises once more. And the Moot had never been so happy to hear it all.

“Have you seen the monster?” he whispered urgently.

“What Monster?” Neembelina’s eyes lit up again with interest.

“The monster,” the Moot replied, “white, big mouth, small ears.”

“No,” said Neembelina, irritated, “I have only seen the back of my eyelids, until you decided to come here and tramp on me with your big clumsy feet.”

“Well, there is a monster here that makes everything silent, and I must follow it.” And swiftly, the Moot set off again after the monster, while Neembelina rushed after the Moot.

“You mean,” she caught up to him quickly, “that everything becomes silent when she comes?”

“Exactly,” the Moot affirmed. “And that could mean many things for the geological and geophysical world, and could have many consequences of course, as far as the issue of solar explosion goes.”

“Whatever,” grunted Neembelina, “now, how do we fetch this monster? She must show me her wiles. They could deem rather useful for someone like me.”

But the Moot wasn’t paying a great deal of attention to Neembelina. He was busy trying to trace down the monster’s track. But the task proved easy. There were clear signs of a monster passing in the foliage: broken branches, trampled grass and torn leaves. Furthermore, the monster was somewhat slow, and thus the two caught up to her rather quickly.

Ducking behind a tree trunk and engulfed in a bubble of silence, they watched her go. Neembelina tugged on the Moot’s coat, and mouthed, “Where is she going?” Reading her lips, the Moot shrugged his shoulders. Immersed in thoughts of great scientific importance (and the occasional scribbling of those thoughts on one of the papers in his satchel), he stole closer and closer to the monster. And Neembelina, ever so zealously, crept after him.

The monster sauntered on into the green, unnoticing, and so it seemed, uncaring. There was more stalking and stealing from tree to bush, to tree to bush. But eventually the monster stopped, and sat under a blooming cherry tree. And just as she sat down, the sound was restored.

“How fitting...” mumbled the Moot.

“What’s fitting?” Neembelina said aloud.

“Would you lower down your voice?” whispered the Moot. “If I may remind you, we are dealing with a *monster* here...”

At that moment the monster spoke, “You can come out,” she said. “I know you are there. You are louder than an army of Wookopies.”

“She knows that we are here,” the Moot said in a low voice. And so, poking his gray furry head from behind the tree trunk, the Moot surveyed the scene. But the situation proved rather simple: right across from them stood a cherry tree, and under the cherry tree sat the monster whom, essentially, did nothing.

“What is she doing?” whispered Neembelina.

“Nothing,” reported the Moot.

“Nothing?”

“Nothing at all.” The Moot scribbled something in his papers, paused, and then scribbled again.

“What are you writing?” Neembelina whispered.

“What?”

“What are you writing?”

The monster spoke again, “There is no need to whisper. I can hear you well enough.”

“She can hear us,” the Moot mumbled.

“Don’t you have better things to do, than follow a lonely monster?” the monster asked. Neembelina cocked her head to the side and knotted her hands on her chest. “She has a point,” she said, “we do have better things to do.”

“Yes, but,” plunging again into world of angles and wavelengths and crashing orbs, calculations and predictions, the Moot lurched from behind the tree, waving his stack of papers before him. “This is a fantastic phenomenon! It is simply implausible!” he cried.

Thoroughly lost once more in cataclysms and multi-dimensions, he continued in a frenzy, “Tell me now, do you cause this outstanding eradication to frequencies by triggering the probabilistic occurrence in ELMs? Tell me, do you alter the electromagnetic radiation wavelengths, and does it crash the hysteresis nature in the flux-gradient?”

He stood there wide eyed, and awaited the monster to enlighten him with some horrifying details of this strange abnormality, hoping for tragic endings, supernovas, galactic explosions, and, well, general sort of tragedies.

A moment of silence elapsed. The monster stared at the Moot, and then looked at Neembelina, and asked, “what is he talking about?”

Neembelina shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t ask me.”

“The magnetic fields, and the change of frequencies in the radical wavelength!” continued the Moot.

“I think he wants to know, how you do the thing that you do with the sound,” explained Neembelina.

“I swallow it,” said the monster matter-of-factly.

Another silent moment passed.

“What do you mean, you swallow it?” The Moot was clearly not prepared for that sort of simplistic answer.

“Everything is so very loud,” the monster sighed, “and I can hear it all. I can hear sounds before they are even generated. I can hear your thoughts before you even think them.”

“You can hear what I am about to say, before I even say it?” the Moot went on rigorously.

The monster confirmed.

“So, no electromagnetic alternation?”

“No.”

“No collapsing of wavelength infrastructure?”

“No.”

“No general sort of tragedies?”

“No.”

And that was that. In obvious disappointment the Moot said, “Oh, well then, I guess I shall return to my important life to study metaphysics, and leave you to your,” pause, “whatever it is unimportant beings do, at critical times such as these.” Tucking his papers into his bag, the Moot turned on his heels and walked away.

Grumbling under her breath, Neembelina hurried after him. “Is that it?” she demanded.

“Is that it, what?” the Moot asked absentmindedly.

“Are you not going to interrogate that monster?”

“Negative.”

“You are not going to lecture her about your unexciting ideas?”

“Um... That’s correct,” he said. “Now,” scanning the forest for adequate crannies for important scientific work, the Moot regarded mischievous Neembelina with little interest, “If you will excuse me, I will go delve into the metaphysics of space and motion and the

wave structure of matter, and let you people flounder ignorantly and happily in your jaded, trivial life, until some festive tsunami comes to swallow us all up.”

And he took off into the woods.

* * *

In the meantime, on their way to the shore, Neeptyoo and Gwendolyn discovered a new trail in the forest. Crusted with the velvet pelt of moss, curtains of hanging roots draped into walls, forming a long, dark corridor. Cool and shady and saturated with the wet aroma of moss and soil; the hallway carried them inside its dark passage.

“I have never seen this before,” said Neeptyoo quietly.

“Neither have I,” said Gwendolyn the water nymph, “But it has obviously been here for quite some time.”

Neeptyoo continued to say how “unpredictable and delectably wondrous” the forest could be sometimes. “One can never know what will come across one’s path, the next time one goes fishing for tadpoles, for instance,” he said.

“I once dove into the blue hole in my pond, and came out through an entirely different pool,” Gwendolyn stated.

“How strange,” said Neeptyoo, “what kind of a pool was it?”

“It was purple.”

“Huh...” mused Neeptyoo, “a purple pool...”

“And it was quiet, very quiet in there.”

“Where was it?”

“I am not certain,” said Gwendolyn. “I didn’t stay long enough to find out. There was nobody there, and it seemed so lonely, so I just dove right back in, and came back out through my own pond,” she said. “I think I remember little beads like pearls, on the bottom of the pool. There were probably millions of them there.”

The two walked slowly through the corridor, which finally opened abruptly into a clearing in the forest, where yellow flowers dotted the grass, bathing in sun. In the center of the glade stood a tree-stump, and on it sat a beast. He stared at his feet and seemed morbid and deflated, and was so wrapped up in thoughts that he did not even care to look up when Neeptyoo and Gwendolyn had approached.

Gwendolyn said, “It’s a beautiful spring day, isn’t it?”

The beast took a long, dramatic breath, and sighed a long, dramatic sigh. And then dramatically, he said nothing. But after a few long moments and while still looking down, he finally uttered, "I guess. I would not know."

"Why is that?" Neeptytoo asked.

"I am too serious," the beast explained. And then looking up, droopy-eyed he added, "that's what they call me Scuffle, the Seriously Serious Creature."

"Well," said Neeptytoo, "nobody can be so serious that they don't notice how fine this day is."

"*I am,*" insisted Scuffle, the Seriously Serious Creature. "You see, I could tell you what I think about this, what you call beautiful spring day, but, it would most likely take me a few days to labor upon this question, and process the different angles and thoughts and my general disposition about the matter. And by then, the weather may or may not be completely different. And," he paused dramatically, "my answer may or may not be relevant, and so very extraneous."

"Well, perhaps you just need to, um, do something important, like, collect buttons," suggested Neeptytoo.

"Or, fix frayed sweaters," added Gwendolyn the water nymph.

"Or sail over some lonely mountains with a hot air balloon."

"Or take care of an orphan Stiffling."

"Or try to remember all the interesting nooks you have ever seen."

"None of that would help," complained Scuffle, "I am just a very serious creature." He sighed, a very dramatic sigh. "I am so serious that it takes me three days to answer when somebody asks me how I am doing. Because of course you must understand, that I take those sorts of questions quite seriously."

"Of course you do," said Neeptytoo, "it makes sense."

And Scuffle, he looked at Neeptytoo with big eyes, and said, "It does?"

"Certainly," asserted Neeptytoo, "if one is a very serious creature, then there is no point in one not taking things very seriously, is there?"

"Well, I haven't yet thought about it this way."

"It is only logical," added Gwendolyn, "you wouldn't expect a tree owl to act like a rabbit, would you?"

“Or an umbrella to act like a table,” said Neepytoo. “Either way,” he continued, “perhaps you would care to join us, we are going to the beach to find out whether the Vessel has already come for the Witch.”

Then, sighing a deep dramatic sigh, Scuffle packed himself up and said that he would join them, for the idea wasn't entirely bad at all. And so, the three plunged back into woods and proceeded to the shore.

* * *

The Inn

Deep in the forest stood the Inn, covered with ferns, moss, the long shoots of climbing plants, and crowned with a ring of giant mushrooms, which towered up to the eaves of the roof. Inside, a fervent dispute was taking place.

“You sponge-brain! You have lost our lanterns!” Tik piped, rummaging through closets, zigzagging from one storage space to the next (practically all places at the Inn were potential storage spaces, and furthermore, the dimensions of any location did not stand in direct proportion to its capacity. A simple matchbox for example, stored a large 3-legged table, an old hat, a birdcage that was missing a door, bicycles with no wheels, and a fuzzy glove).

“No, *you* lost them, you cucumber-nose!” Toot grunted, running around, opening and closing doors.

“You are the one who was supposed to store them last time!”

“When?”

“Then!”

“When then?”

Sam cleared his throat, suggesting that perhaps they could get the lanterns some other time. There was no need to make a fuss, he was sure he could find something else to use.

“No, no, no!” both Creepies cried.

“They should be somewhere around here,” Tik said, “we just have to find where Toot had stuffed them.”

“Where you stuffed them.”

“No, you did.”

“No, y-”

“Perhaps we could help,” Tiptoe interrupted. This could go on forever, so it seemed, and they would not let them leave without the lamps. Tik and Toot stopped and looked at each other, and then nodded. “We never need any help.”

“Never,” said Toot.

“Ever,” continued Tik.

“Never, ever, ever,” they said together.

“But if you feel the need to help us-” began Toot.

“Then you can help us,” Tik concluded.

The two shrugged their shoulders, and went on about opening doors, rolling rugs, and unsealing jars. Reinforced with Sam and Tiptoe’s aid, the search had extended even into the spare rooms of the Inn (the spare rooms were largely built underground, where tunnels and rooms and quarters spread into a maze that, so it accrued, kept on changing itself by constantly eliminating certain rooms and building others. Chambers disappeared, and new ones appeared everyday. Luckily, none of the occupied rooms had ever vanished, except perhaps, for that one incident entailing an old lady and her twenty suitcases and poodle. But no one remembers that incident anymore. That lady, we must understand, was highly disliked, and that sort of unfortunate fate, unfortunately becomes the fate of highly disliked persons).

Finally, after a while that seemed way too long, the lanterns were found. “Well,” said Tik, “next time *I* will put them away.”

“If *you* will put them away, then we’ll be sure to lose them, in addition to three other important items!” argued Toot.

“As far as I recall, *you* are the one who-”

Sam clasped his hands as to interject again, “shall we expect you at the spring carnival?” The argument ceased, and Tik and Toot exchanged looks and nodded. “We think you shall,” they said. “Definitely,” they added. “Probably,” and after a moment, “Especially if lots of nutty things are bound to happen.”

“Well, I can’t be sure what will happen,” said Sam, “but I think it is very likely that everyone will have a good time.”

“Then it is very likely that we will come,” the Creepies said.

Sam and Tiptoe thanked the two for the lamps, and plunged again into the forest to trace their way back.

* * *

After repetitive failing attempts to convince the obstinate Moot of the necessity of a more thorough investigation of the Monster, and then, finding herself blurry-eyed and almost bored to tears with the Moot’s rambling about his “exciting” catastrophes and the crumbling of infrastructures and multiple dimensions, Neembelina declared, “Well, if I would have to listen to anymore of this hogwash, my head would fall off!” She then turned around, and dashed into the woods.

She roamed in the forest for some time, but found nothing interesting in particular to stomp upon, bite, or scare, and so she decided that the best way to utilize her time would be to take a nap. But as she prepared to burrow under a pink bush, she suddenly heard voices coming from somewhere near.

Entertainment! She thought, and waited not a moment longer to check on the matter. Tucking herself into a small ball, she rolled across the forest’s floor; a flash of blue and red, quick as lightning, and popped out of the brush like a cork of an excited champagne bottle- right in front of Scuffle, the Seriously Serious Creature, who was occupied with thinking very serious thoughts.

“Who are you?” Neembelina demanded.

“I am Scuffle, the Seriously Serious Creature, if you must know.” the Seriously Serious Creature asserted.

“Too bad for you,” said Neembelina, “being too serious makes your skin purple. That’s what happened to my great, great, great, great aunt.”

“Hallo Neembelina,” said Neeptytoo, “we are heading to the shore, would you like to come along?”

“What are you going there for?” asked Neembelina.

“We are going to find out whether the Vessel has come for the Witch yet.”

“Is she going out on a journey again?” Neembelina continued.

“She is, and this time, it is her last journey. The journey of all journeys. Exciting, is it not?” asked Neepytoo.

“Quite,” Neembelina uttered. “Well, I have better things to do than to stand around and small talk with you people, so we better get a move on.”

The forest offered nothing less than a cacophony of fragrances that exploded conspicuously into an aromatic cocktail; the sweet perfume of blooming lilacs and lilies blended with the fresh scent of moss and wet soil, damp leaves and bark. As they approached the seashore, the spicy scents of cedar and pine and everything that is forest slowly dissolved, giving way to the smell of salt, seaweed and fish.

Along with the shrieks of gulls and the whisper of tumbling waves, the melody of flute surfed upon the sea-stained winds. “I know this tune!” cried Neepytoo, “this is the ‘All Journeys Began Somewhere’ tune.”

“Do you think that means that the Vessel has arrived?” Gwendolyn the water nymph asked.

“Maybe,” said Neepytoo.

“Or maybe,” piped Neembelina, “it’s just that the Witch had nothing else better to do, than to play that song.”

By the by, the forest met its end. Bright green sheets of grass reeled onto the cliffs that hung over an unquenchable, hungry sea. Bleak and lonely the cliffs stood bathing in the uncompromising winds, silently watching the birds swoon and dive, watching the surf slosh against their heels, watching the moons dawn and disappear, the tides rise and fall. On the edge of the black cliffs sat the Witch playing her flute.

Before them the vast ocean lay, stretching far into the horizon where sky became water, and water became sky. Below them the shore shone white and empty. The Vessel had not yet arrived.

“Perhaps she is lost,” proposed Gwendolyn.

“The Vessel is never lost,” proclaimed the Witch.

“Maybe a sea monster ate it,” said Neembelina.

“Mind you, sea monsters do not exist,” stated Scuffle (in a very serious manner).

“Well, that is just what *you* say,” Neembelina huffed, “because it just so happens that my grandmother’s grand auntie was gobbled up by one, about a hundred years ago while treasure-hunting in the north seas. Now, what do you say to that?”

“I’d have to see evidence, photographs, a sample of soil, fur and tail, and of course listen to witness testimony (if possible), before further considering the matter. After that it could take anywhere between two weeks to two months to get back to you with a serious answer,” Scuffle said composedly.

“Goblin’s toes...” Neembelina uttered.

“So when do you suppose the Vessel will come?” asked Gwendolyn.

The Witch shrugged her shoulders. “Everything has a time. We just have to wait until it is ours.”

* * *

Foreverwhere

Back within the guts of the woods by the little volcano, preparations were nearly coming to an end, as the lanterns were hung on the tall branches of the trees, and clay jars with fruit drinks were placed atop the long wooden table. Wind toys were set all around in the ground, and white night flowers, with their long milky octopus-like tentacles and silky black eyes, stood close-eyed on the table, waiting until nighttime to unfold.

“I think things are positively done,” Tiptoe asserted cheerfully.

“Nearly,” said Sam.

“Is something missing?”

“Mugs,” he said, “It’s always the little things that one tends to forget. But we can go to the shore to collect some empty conchs. They will do.”

Before long, the two had arrived at the seashore and began amassing shells into whicker baskets. But even as they prepared to head back, they were surprised to hear voices of excitement traveling down from the cliffs above. Following the commotion, the Witch and the rest of the group had suddenly come to view, as they descended from the cliffs and made their way to the sea. The two watched as everyone passed by.

“What’s all the commotion?” asked Sam as Neembelina passed by. Neembelina knotted her hands over her chest. “The Vessel has apparently arrived,” she said. “*I-*” she stressed, “would have never waited so long. *I* would have found myself a different ferry by now,” she declared and dashed towards the water. Indeed, in the distance, something sat cradling on the waves.

The Witch stood silently at the water line, her long, black dress flapping about her ankles, her thin, long hair dancing silently around her face in silver ripples.

“You should take in consideration,” said Neembelina as Sam and Tiptoe approached, “that it *might* be just a small alien spying craft.”

“Pardon me,” said Scuffle, “a what?”

“A small alien spying craft.”

“I must stress how extremely illogical that would be,” stated Scuffle.

“That is the Vessel,” said the Witch, “and she is bringing the Grawlump with her.”

“I wonder where he’d been for such a long time,” said Neepytoo.

The boat soon slid unto the wet sand, and one wind-stricken, frayed Grawlump jumped out of it.

“Have you found what you were looking for?” the Witch asked.

The Grawlump nodded, his eyes gleaming. “I now know about them urgent matters. Oh yes. Yeeeesss siree...” he said eagerly, “and there is no time for wasting time. There are things that require some urgent tending.” He tapped his fingers together and swung his gaze quickly across the shorelines, and then declared, “Now, I go.”

And then, he went. And was swallowed by the woods.

“So how urgent are those urgent matters?” asked Neepytoo.

“Urgent matters are boring,” muttered Neembelina, “they are never as urgent as one makes them to be.”

There was a short moment of silence, after which Neepytoo asked, gazing at the travel-worn Vessel: “So what is next?”

“This will be my last journey,” the Witch stated.

“Where will you go?” Tiptoe asked.

“I have come to a decision that I shall travel to Foreverwhere,” said the Witch quietly.

“I have never heard of such a place,” said Scuffle, “Where might it be?”

The Witch leaned against the green wooden boat, and stared into the ocean.

“It is nowhere, and everywhere,” she said slowly, “It is never and always.”

That sounded like a rum place, if there was ever one.

“Do you think there will be room for some extra travelers on your Vessel?” Neeptytoo asked gingerly, and summed everybody’s thoughts all together.

“There isn’t much room on the Vessel, but it is possible to tie another craft to her,” said the Witch.

Everyone was quite elated at the possibility of joining this unusual journey, to some obviously unusual place. All sorts of ideas regarding that ‘extra craft’ were proposed, but the discussion ended when Gwendolyn mentioned a ‘very big rainbow-colored umbrella’ she saw floating one day, down one of the streams in the forest.

“But that was a long time ago, and who knows where that umbrella might be these days,” she said.

At that Scuffle cleared his throat, and said that such an umbrella just so happened to glide down the stream by his lair a long time ago. It then banked, he said, somewhere not far from there as it was caught by the reeds. Inside its colorful cap some small creatures lay curled up and slept.

“Well,” Neembelina said impatiently, “where is it now?”

“I believe,” Scuffle, the Seriously Serious Creature said, “it’s somewhere in my lair.” He added, “I thought it might come in handy one day, if and when some serious issue ever arises.”

There was a buzz of excitement amongst everyone, but the spring festivities were taking place that night, and the journey had to wait.

* * *

When the company arrived at the little volcano, guests had already begun trickling in. The air purred with chatter and anticipation, and the table grew heavier as good eats continuously flowed in. An array of fruit and drinks imbued the air with sweet aroma, and between the cutleries the night flowers began unfolding, as darkness slowly seized the blushing sky.

Shadows were cast long and black, and the moon rose high above. Soon enough all the people and the small beasts and animals of the forest cluttered the periphery. The lanterns were lit, emitting lush colors, and above all hovered a medley of robust scents and loud chatter. The evening was long and merry, and at night fireworks torched the skies.

Then, without any warning, the ground began to suddenly shake. A low rumble drowned every noise, followed by eerie silence.

All awaited.

Suddenly the Volcano gurgled and whirred, and unexpectedly, a gush of smoldering lava ruptured from its peak, trickling down the short slopes, then flowing into bridged channels that ran through the ground between the guests, to end in a wide circle. With this colorful swan song, the Volcano ceased forever, falling into an eternal sleep.

Content and tired and satiated with food and drinks, the guests began to gradually depart. Some folk who came from far away, set up their hammocks under the canopy of lush trees, and others found themselves unoccupied nooks and pits in the ground and spaces between things, and huddled into a very deep sleep.

An Ending and a Beginning

Glowing red and orange; the lava twinkled in the channels against the inky-gray skies of the exiting night. The wind toys flapped and rattled as new winds swirled in through the rising morning. Sitting down with a long sigh, Sam plummeted into his own hammock by the smoking volcano. "I think things went quite well," he said with a wide yawn. Tiptoe smiled and sat next to him. "I'll say."

For some time they sat on the hammock, and watched as brilliant colors spread across the canvas that was the heavens. On the horizon the dawn sketched the new day, and somewhere under the golden gloss that dyed the skies bright, far away places and far off lives hid.

The gentle notes of a pleasant melody softly drifted upon the morning air.

"The Witch," Sam finally said, "she must be leaving now."

"We should go to find her," said Tiptoe.

The two followed the melody to the shore, where everyone was already waiting.

“Finally!” piped Neembelina, “we were getting tired of waiting.”

“We are leaving now,” Scuffle stated.

“And you can’t bring anything other than yourselves with you, otherwise we will drown. And I won’t jump in to save you,” said Neembelina.

Sam ran his hand through his tattered hair. “I haven’t thought of things yet,” he mumbled.

“Then it is time to decide, for The Vessel is waiting,” the Witch said.

“The Volcano is now dormant, it said its farewell,” said Tiptoe, “and at some far away place, an adventure is waiting.”

“And it’s a fine day to begin an adventure, too,” smiled Neepytoo.

For a few moments Sam stared at the forest behind; at the swaying trees, the shadows, the flowers, and then he finally turned and smiled. “Indeed,” he said readily, “it is a good day to start a journey.”

The Vessel was waiting, rocking on the waves. Her tiny ragged sail flapped in the sultry winds, and the immense rainbow-colored umbrella that was tied to the Vessel, bobbed up and down behind the tiny boat.

“All is ready,” the Witch said. She plunged into the waves and waded in the water to her boat. They all followed her and climbed into the umbrella. The skies were bright and clear and the morning sun now shone white and warm, sending sparks across the water. Caught in the breath of the morning breeze, the Vessel leaped into the waves. Petite and graceful, she glided across the glistening water towards the pallid sun, into the far horizon.

They waved goodbye to the island and the forest, to all the beasts and the animals, to the memories and their distancing past. And as they sailed further away from the shore into the big blue, into the undefined and distant dreams, they could see a svelte pillar of smoke rising to the sky, as the little Volcano breathed its last breath goodbye.

The END

In the cool depths of the forest a man was opening a red door, entering a red house. He walked around the red house, moving things, probing at other things, scrutinizing, making noise. In the closet, the Hobster woke up. He stretched and rearranged his big black hat upon his head. Then, stepping out, he stood and gazed at the man, contemplating offering lemonade.

“What happened here?” the man demanded, “Why is my office painted red?”
“Who are you?” the Hobster asked.

“I am Doctor Green,” said Doctor Green, “who are you?”

For a moment the Hobster just stood there and stared, and contemplated, as he was quite the skillful contemplator. But when the horrifying realization finally dawned on him, the Hobster cried, “Dear me! The Dreadful Green!” He stormed out of the red house and took off into the forest, leaving Doctor Green- a board certified dentist- scratching his balding head, standing in his office and wondering what that was all about. *I didn't know I was **that** bad...* He thought.

And that was that.