

Whilo stepped outside his front door and walked down the pathway through his garden. He sighed happily at the scent of flowers drifting in the breeze and the sound of the fountain gurgling as he walked by. When he reached the gate, he thought he knew exactly what he was going to do. His gate led out into the country side, and there was one road that led through it. At a point it would split into two roads. Every day, he would take the road that veered left, led onto the bridge over the river and continued on into the little town. He would go there to buy produce and to chat with old friends on their front porches while enjoying the midsummer air. The other road took a sharp right and wound deep through the meadow and into the wilderness beyond. Whilo never went down that road, and neither had anyone in recent years. Further back, when Whilo was a child and his parents were still alive, they warned him not to go down there, or else a big wildcat may wander along and eat him. The oldest man in the town was eighty-seven, and the last time he ventured through there, he was ten. "There's nothing down there," said the old man one day. Brom was his name. "The closest thing to a town was this mean old hermit, but apparently the further back you go, the more unfriendly it gets."

There were no clouds in the sky today and nothing to obscure the light of the sun. It seemed to bring out the fullest of the colors of everything in the countryside. Radiant hues shown from every flower and every tree. As Whilo got closer to the fork in the road, houses began popping up on his left, not much different from his own. They were made of wood and stone and had gardens, and a couple had ponds where ducks would come to settle. It was a very controlled and familiar charm that he had seen every day of his life. He looked to the right. It was wild. Untamed. Caught in the sunlight, the flowers glowed the brightest, and the trees stood the tallest. Flocks of birds rose from their branches and soared in every which way. He couldn't explain why he felt this way, today and not any day before, but he felt an itching curiosity that lead him away from his homely left. He reached the fork in the road and saw the river and the bridge and the bend, on the other side of which was the little town. He saw the unkempt road that led away from everything he knew into a country that only Old Brom vaguely remembered.

The town will be there when I get back. He thought to himself. He scratched his head for a moment, and then he turned right.

He did not know how long he planned to spend venturing out here. He had walked for an hour, and certainly, there was not so much as a woodshed to be found. One would assume no one had ever even seen this place. But it was serene. Quiet. The only thing that could be heard was the sound of birds chirping. The sunlight touching the forest gave it the likeness of silent emerald flames. *This isn't bad at all.* Thought Whilo. *I rather like it, to be honest. I think I'll come out here more often. It's not as though I do anything much these days.* He did not stop, and he came upon a river. The same river from home made a wide curve around the country and made its way out here. *Hmm. How about that?* But something else caught his eye. A boathouse sat on the other side of the river, and a row boat was tethered to the deck. It knocked against the wood as it bobbed up and down in the water. Immediately, Whilo harkened back to Brom's tale about the mean old hermit, and for a brief second, he felt the timidity he had when as a child, he looked down the road that went right, anticipating a wild beast to come running after him. Nothing happened, and Whilo chuckled at himself. Brom knew the *old* hermit seventy-seven years ago. The fact remained however, that someone lived out here and was perhaps at home, seeing that the front door was wide open.

A noise suddenly came out from inside the house, and Whilo jumped. There was the sound of objects colliding with each other and of rummaging through equipment. Whilo stepped over to the edge of the river, and he saw a shadow in the doorway. He waited to see if anyone would come out. A young man stepped through the door, and he carried with him a travel sack. He was no hermit, and he dressed similarly to a townsfolk with a white buttoned shirt and brown trousers with suspenders. He was humming to himself when he caught sight of Whilo staring at him from across the river.

"Hello," said the man with an inviting smile. "What's your name?"

“Whilo, what’s yours?”

“Alder. I’ve never seen anyone come down this way before. Where are you from?” Whilo now came to ease. “Do you know the town of Shane? It’s an hour in the direction I came from.” Alder squinted as he placed his travel sack in the boat. “Can’t say that I do. I go east mostly. From what I heard not much goes on the other way.” Whilo chuckled at that. “You’re not wrong. That’s sort of why I came out here. I’m looking for some where interesting to go.”

“Well you came to the right place.” Alder hopped into the boat and began untying it from the post. “Do you have to get home anytime soon?” He grabbed the oars and rowed over to the bank Whilo stood at. “You’re inviting me to come with you?” He asked Alder as he drew up on shore. “Sure, why not? It’s nice to have company every now and then.”

“Well, I can’t see why I shouldn’t come. Do you have enough rations for two?”

“I’ve packed enough for three.” Alder patted his travel bag next to him. Whilo gingerly stepped into the boat and fell on his face as the boat teetered back and forth. “Whoa, just don’t capsize us, friend! You’ll upset the fish.” Whilo sat up and shook his head laughing. “Sorry, it’s been a long time since I’ve been in a boat...” he looked at the travel sack confusedly. “Are we going fishing?” “No, it’s just that the fish will eat us if we fall in.” Whilo took that as a joke, and Alder began rowing.

The river took them deeper into the forest. Along the banks grew willow trees, their branches draping lazily over the water. Little robins and blue birds flew in and out among them picking remains and flying them back to their nests hidden further back into the forest. A lone porcupine waddled by on the far bank, and on the left hand, a family of beavers wandered down the opposite direction with bundles of sticks in their mouths. The sunlight reflected off of the water, creating a golden ripple in the branches. Evergreens towered beyond the river and from within their shadows, wilder cries from animals unseen could be heard.

“Are you all alone out here, Alder?” Whilo asked his new friend who continued to row them. He shook his head. “Not at all. My family lives in the village just a few miles away. That was our old boathouse you saw when we left. We haven’t really used it in years. However, lately, I just wanted to get away for a little while—see these old sights, explore the old woods again. There’s something about this place that just feels like coming home again.” “I see it.” Whilo reclined back with his arms behind his head. “I rather prefer this place in the wilderness than my own house. However I’m not so lucky as to have a family to need a break from.” “No?” Alder saddened a little. Whilo sighed. “A few years ago, a fever had spread in my town. Nearly a quarter of everyone died, including my mother and my father.” “I’m sorry, Whilo.” Whilo’s eyes became glassy, but he changed the subject as quickly as he’d brought it up.

“It’s funny that you say you live in a village. Old Brom told me that the closest thing to a town out here was some cranky hermit that didn’t take too kindly to him.” Alder smiled. “That certainly was an overstatement; yet he’s not far off from the truth. There is my village east of here, and there’s another that’s a good distance away. Beyond that is the hermit you speak of who lives on the edge of the Goblin King’s land.” Whilo opened his mouth, ready to question him about the hermit he claimed was still alive and the Goblin King he said was real, when he was cut short by the sight of a grizzly bear crouched at the far side of the river. It would not have been so distracting had it not been the size of Alder’s boathouse. Alder noticed that Whilo’s fearful gaze was fixed on the enormous creature, and he laughed. “That’s Malto. He has protected the inhabitants of this forest for hundreds of years. By far he’s the most good-natured beast in all the countryside.” As they passed Malto, the bear looked up at them and shook his head up and down excitedly. “Hi, Malto, good luck fishing!” Alder waved as they turned around the bend.

Whilo could not hide the smile on his face. “Alder, this might be my favorite place on earth.” “I’m glad you think so. To be quite honest, not everyone likes it out here.” Alder frowned a little bit. “Why is that?” asked Whilo. A dragonfly hovered between them and stopped as if to listen in. “If you don’t know

what you're doing out here, it can be dangerous. Careless people have gotten into trouble in the past, and the stories have grown in the telling. Only a handful of people in my village come out here, but only when they need to hunt food for the winter. Hardly anyone comes out here simply to enjoy this splendid world." "Is there anyone else?" Whilo jumped as the gigantic face of a catfish emerged out of the river. Its open mouth was certainly large enough to fit him inside, however it disappeared the second it glanced over at Alder. "My cousin Lilly, comes out here sometimes. She may be fonder of this place than even I." Alder continued as though he had not seen what just happened. "Well, perhaps the three of us should come out here sometime," said Whilo as he regained his composure and sat back down again. Alder smiled. "I'd like that. You and Lilly would get along well, I think."

They had been traveling longer than Whilo had realized. The sun had lowered and turned the sky orange, casting dark shadows over the forest, and the lightning bugs were out. "I suppose we're going to set up camp soon?" asked Whilo. Alder drew the boat onto the bank and brought out his travel bag. "Yes, but we'll turn back tomorrow in case you need to get home. I took you out here, and I don't even know if I ruined your schedule or not."

"Not at all. I have no real desire to go back, however it is probably not for the best that I stay away too, too long. On the other hand, I'll be happy for our next meeting." They set up a ring of stones and made a campfire. They then rolled out mats, blankets and pillows and laid down after having a meal of roasted nuts. Whilo did not realize there were so many stars in the sky.

At home in Shane, the lanterns were always burning in the streets and lights would often remain on in the windows of some houses. Only a handful of stars would appear over his little town. Out here, unobscured by yellow light showed untold millions of stars in the wilderness glimmering like little pearls. It struck him as ironic that in the place he was most familiar with, with the people he had known his whole life: he had felt less at home than he did now, in the forbidden woods with only monsters as

companions and this one stranger he had met only earlier today. But to the sounds of creatures lurking in the shadows he happily fell asleep.

He woke to the sound of a conversation going on next to him. He was too drowsy to sit up, so he listened while his heavy eyelids closed back again. "Oh, hello, Lilly. What brings you out here this early?" "It's not early. It's going on past noon." Answered a young woman's voice, bemusedly yet sadly. "I'd ask you if you were doing alright, but seeing that you're out camping while you should be planning for your wedding, it's apparent that you've run into some problems."

"I'm not running away, Lilly. I just... need time to gather myself before I go back there." Alder did not sound as burden free as he had yesterday.

"She's going to want to see you. She'll find it worrisome that you proposed to her and then just disappeared off the face of the earth."

"Did she say anything?"

"Not yet, but I wouldn't push my luck if I were you." Alder chuckled. "I'm glad that you care about us, Lilly. If she asks, I'll be back home in a week or so."

"Who's this?" Whilo felt something wet touch his nose. His eyes snapped open to find a raccoon pressing its snout against his face. He quickly sat up and looked around. Alder and Lilly were sitting on a log together taking notice of Alder's new companion.

"Don't mind Patch. He doesn't have a concept of personal space, and he gets excited when he meets new people." Said Lilly. She had long auburn hair that went down past her shoulders and green eyes that twinkled with amusement. Patch scurried away from Whilo and climbed onto the log next to her.

"This is my new friend, Whilo. He just showed up at my boathouse yesterday, and I took him camping with me." Alder explained. "Hi...I'm Whilo." Whilo quickly pulled his blanket to his neck, realizing his

shirt was lying next to him. Lilly smirked. "Is it like you to just hop in a stranger's boat and let him take you anywhere he wants to?"

"Apparently so. To be frank, I don't know if I wouldn't do it again, the next time I meet a stranger."

Whilo answered as he slid further underneath his blanket. She got up and walked over to him. "I'm Lilly, nice to meet you." Whilo reached out and pulled his shirt under the blanket with him. "I'm Whilo..."

"I know you are. It's sweet that you're trying to be decent, but your blanket has been down to your waist for the past ten minutes."

"So it has." Whilo threw the blanket off of himself while his shirt was still draped over his neck and struggled to pull the sleeves over his arms. "Alder's getting married? He failed to mention that to me."

"He probably had no intention to." She motioned to Alder. "I did say that I came out here to take my mind off of things." He said weakly. "But Alder," Whilo finally managed to pull the shirt over him. "Aren't you happy about this?"

"It's not like that."

"I get it." Lilly put a caring hand on his shoulder. "I know you feel overwhelmed, but so does Bree. Think about it. The man she had known all these years one day kneels to her in front of her friends and family and asks her to marry him. You don't think that changed everything for her too? You both are feeling the same excitement, sharing the same fear and uncertainty. You two should be there to reassure each other."

"And we will be. I'm not running away."

Whilo was humored by this. "Did you come all the way out here to bring Alder back home?" Lilly shook her head. "No, it's his choice what he decides to do. I didn't even know you two were out here. By the way, I've never seen you before. Are you from the Eastern Village?"

“Shane. I don’t know if you...”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s West isn’t it? I hear it’s a lot fancier than our home.” “Wait, how do you know about it?” Alder asked with a raised eyebrow. “I’ve...been around more than you.” Lilly shrugged. The raccoon climbed up on her shoulders and wrapped his paws around her forehead while chattering. “Alright, alright...” she stood up. “Patch says he wants to keep going. You two can come along if you want, if Alder still feels like running away from his future, that is.”

“You know, I think a big part of why you’re so domineering over other people’s relationships is that you’re trying to live through them. Perhaps if you find a man of your own, it won’t look so bad to you that I deal with this in my own way.”

“Perhaps.” Lilly lifted up her chin and crossed her arms. There was an awkward silence, and then Alder sighed. “I’m sorry Lilly. That wasn’t really fair.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Hey Whilo, you want to come?” Lilly glanced over at Whilo and smiled at him. He stretched and cracked his neck a couple of times. “Where are we going?”

“Patch and I were out here a couple of days ago, and we found this huge cave a little over a mile away, but it was growing dark out, so we headed home. We decided to come back out here again and see what’s inside.” Alder began rolling up his equipment and loading it into the boat. “We have to get our stuff ready first. I promised Whilo I’d get him back home today, and I want to make sure he has time to spare.”

“What do you do that’s so important?” Lilly asked him. For the first time, Whilo took time to think about it. He was not a busy man. His parents had been wealthy, and they left him with enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life. He spent time furnishing his house and tending to his garden, but he



had no obligations. To be honest, he was not sure if he really had anything to live for. "I'm sort of an architect." It wasn't a lie. He'd built a number of extensions to his house, and his neighbors were often impressed with his work. "I wish I did things like that." Said Lilly. "Where we're from, there isn't much going on, so if you're looking for something to do, you have to get creative. That's why I come out here into the woods, because things actually happen."

"So I take it there really is a Goblin King and a hermit that's over a hundred years old?"

"Shane must be completely cut off from the east if you don't know anything about the Goblin King or the thousand-year-old sage." Lilly raised an eyebrow. Whilo shrugged. "Where I'm from, they tell us not to come down here. No one really knows or seems to care what goes on in the east; they just say it's a lot of trouble that's not worth getting into."

"It's funny. That's exactly what they tell us about the West." Said Alder as he finished loading the boat. He had with him some rations for the hike for which Patch reached out his paws from on top of Lilly's shoulders. "Which again begs to question, why do you know about Shane, and I don't?"

"Someone that you don't know told me about it. Anyway, if Whilo has to be home soon, then we should get moving." Alder gave up on his inquiry, and the newly found trio made their way for the cave.

"So tell me about Shane, Whilo. Is it all it's cracked out to be?" Lilly walked alongside him as they went on. "How is it cracked out to be? I wasn't aware that we had a reputation." He remarked. She grinned and tilted her head to the side as though expecting him not to take her answer seriously. "They say it's as close to happiness as a man from the east can hope for." "Is your home that bad?" Whilo had no idea people thought that way about his town.

"We have a whole slew of problems." Lilly answered. "Our lives are about survival and making it to the next season. Things aren't as bad as they were decades ago. But men go out hunting, and rarely come

back. With infrequent game, we typically resort to home-grown vegetables, but lately they haven't been turning out very well." "But if that's the case, how is it that you and Alder fare so well out here?"

"The few that survive out here are the ones that know their way around. Alder and I have been breaking the rules since we were very little. We would go out and explore the woods and come back home to our parents who had been crying over our disappearances and rounding up search parties for us. We did this frequently and against their commands, but seeing that we managed to find our way back without anyone's help each time around, they eventually gave up. Alder's parents even built that boathouse where you met him, so that he had a safe place to retreat to when he came out here. It eventually became the place where our family would get together and enjoy each other's company on our holidays, but that hasn't been the case for a while now."

"Then I guess Shane is all it's cracked out to be." Whilo nodded. "I lost my parents a while back, but we never fought to survive in Shane. Everything we need, we have, and then some more."

"You lost your parents?" Lilly looked up at him with sympathy in her eyes. Whilo nodded somberly. He did not know why he bothered to bring it up a second time, but he seemed to be needing to mention it at every opportunity. Almost as if it were tired of being unspoken for the past ten years. "Since they got sick and passed away, I took up work and continued in it excessively, and I was always looking for something new to do. One day I decided that none of it was enough, so I went down the road that took me here, and so far I like what I've found. I feel like this is leading me somewhere, and I'll be complete when I get there." Lilly brushed her hair back and looked thoughtfully at him. "It's funny if you were to hear it from someone else, and you did not experience it yourself. But this wilderness, where people venture into and fail to return from alive, is a good place. It's not safe by any means, however it brings you to a place of rest that not even the safety of home can bring."

“It is funny.” Said Whilo, “I never expected to feel this way about a place that I’ve been told my whole life would be the end of me if I set foot in. I still can’t quite explain it.” Lilly’s smile was radiant. “You belong here, Whilo.”

They had been hiking for over a half hour before they arrived at the cave. It was off to their left and was obscured by a cluster of evergreens. On their right the hillside steepened into a ravine which dropped off a few stories. They peered into the mouth and inspected the inside before stepping in. The entrance was well lit, and there was plenty of walking space before it grew pitch black. They walked along as far as they could see, but something stopped them. Whilo’s foot pressed down on something soft, and it burst, soaking his ankle. “Patch, did you know the whole time that this was a snake’s den?” Lilly scolded the raccoon as he leapt down from her shoulder and began lapping up the yolk from under Whilo’s feet. “He smelled the eggs, of course,” said Alder as he stepped backward. “We need to get out of here,” Whilo piped up. “I don’t want to know the size of the thing that laid these.”

“Well...we’re too late for that.” Alder had his hands stretched out, signaling the others not to move. Two yellow lights appeared directly in front of them. They moved up and down in unison, starting as low as the cave floor and reaching as high as the ceiling. Wherever the beams were pointed, a large, scaly mass was revealed. The serpent’s coiled body filled the entire cave. A low hiss filled the air, and the snake’s fangs were caught in the light of its eyes. Its top half was lifted off the ground, poised to strike.

“Get down!” Lilly pulled the men down just as the serpent lounged for them. Its long body soared over head as it missed them. It quickly whipped back around to face them, but on her mark, they leaped forward underneath its head and scrambled out of the cave. It chased them out into the open, and the drop off lay directly ahead of them. “Jump and catch the roots, it’s our only chance!” Lilly yelled. There was no time to object. They leapt off of the edge of the ravine and grabbed onto the roots that hung over the side and just barely caught themselves from falling.

Meanwhile, the snake peered over the edge and glared down at them. Whilo could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and his palms started to sweat, causing his grip on the roots to loosen. The serpent maintained its gaze and did not leave the edge. He struggled to find footing beneath him, but as he moved his feet around, he discovered a large cleft that was directly under them. He mustered the will to let one of his hands go to motion to Alder and Lilly to climb down into it. They obliged, and once they were inside, they helped pull him in with them. Patch had been wrapped around Lilly's torso the entire time.

"Careful, there isn't a lot of wiggle room." Alder grunted as they hugged their backs against the wall. Pebbles were crumbling and toppling down beneath their feet. He looked up to see if the snake was still there. "It's looking back and forth... almost as if we confused it. Maybe it'll think we fell and just give up." "If it leaves, then we need to sidle further away from the cave before we climb back up," said Lilly. "We don't want it to just be sitting there waiting for us when we reach the top." Whilo was trembling and struggling to catch his breath. "Friend," said Alder reassuringly. "We're getting out of this. I promised that I would get you home today, and I intend to hold up to it. We just have to keep our heads clear."

"Alder, look up again." Lilly told him. He glanced back up to see if there was any change. He sighed heavily and nodded. "He's turning around. I think we have our chance."

"No, we have to wait. We have to be sure. If it hears us climbing back up before it goes back inside, then we're done." Whilo was staring down into the gulley with his eyes glazed over. "This one's...going in my scrapbook...right next to the one where the brown recluse bit my thumb..." Lilly squeezed his arm and held him back against the wall. "Whilo, I'm sorry. It's my fault for bringing you out here. Just let me get you out of here and we'll call it even, alright?"

“Or maybe it will go better with the time I fell off the roof and broke my ribs...yeah...because in that one I fell...hah, hah...”

“No, Whilo. It won’t go in any of those, because we’re going to get you home, and you’ll forget all about this,” Lilly was fighting to hold Whilo back now. He was clearly going into shock. “Alder, we have to wait for him to come to his senses. We’re going to be here for a while.” They didn’t know exactly how much time they spent hiding in the cleft, but the shadows had changed, and it was slightly chillier where they were. Whilo had stopped rambling, and there was a consistent absence of the giant snake. The only thing that would break the silence was a hawk circling above the forest beneath them.

“Alright,” started Alder. “I think it’s time we try our ascent.” Lilly looked over at Whilo and nodded in order to see if he had come through. He did not say anything, but he grabbed onto a root and helped her up. They made their way a good distance to the left before they climbed back up, out of the desire to steer clear of the serpent’s lair as much as possible.

When they pulled themselves up over the edge, they found nothing. Behind them, they could see the cluster of trees which hid the cave, but the beast had apparently retreated back inside. Having taken deep breaths and brushed the dust and rubble off from themselves they made their way back to their campsite.

“Alder, Lilly,” Whilo said as they drew near the river bank. His voice was heavy with remorse, and his head was lowered. “I’m sorry for holding us back like that. I didn’t know it was that easy for me to crack, and we all could have died.” The sound of the rushing water, and the sight of boat gently bobbing in the river helped him feel more grounded as they sat down on the log together. “Are you kidding me?” Alder slapped him on the back reassuringly. Lilly put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. “We certainly could have died, and that was all thanks to that lousy raccoon, but Whilo, if you hadn’t found that little spot for us we might still be hanging by those roots with the beast looming over our heads. You are the

hero here!" Whilo looked at him, unsure of himself. "You mean that?" Lilly beamed and put her arm around him. "This memory won't fit in your scrapbook of horrors, because you never faced anything like it. We can't accept your apology for cracking up because there's nothing to forgive." At that, Whilo blushed. "It was as if I were floating outside of my body...and I were listening to myself say all of that without having any control over it and watching myself lean forward ready to fall off from the edge..." Alder shook his head. "We have you back now, and that's all that matters." The three of them sat there on the log for a while, enjoying each other's company.

In spite of their grim misadventure, it seemed to Whilo that the woods had become friendly again. A monarch butterfly circled over the river, and the dragonfly from yesterday flew over to greet her. The two fluttered around happily for a few full minutes, but they eventually parted ways, each to their own business. It was now just the silence and the rushing of the water.

Finally Whilo stirred. "I should go home now. I don't want to, but I should."

"Oh...but we we're having so much fun..." Lilly sighed and slowly replaced her arm at her side. Alder nodded sadly, "I have everything ready to go. When we get back to the boathouse, I'll send you off with some dinner."

"I should probably get going too." Lilly got up and lifted Patch out from under the log where he had been cowering away from the others. "I know you're sorry, Patch. It's okay. You just need to be more aware of whose nest you're pillaging next time." Alder climbed into the boat and got ready to untie it. Whilo nodded to Lilly and began to turn away for the boat as well. "Goodbye, I guess." She said. Whilo turned around and she was still standing there with her hands behind her back. He crossed his arms and walked back over to her. "Until next time, of course," he added. Lilly brightened a little. "You mean you want to come back... after everything that's happened?"

“Why wouldn’t I? That was the most excitement I’ve had in years, and I have you and Alder to thank for that. I’ll be glad to see you again.” Lilly laughed softly and nodded. “Just be sure to feel bored sometime soon, alright?”

“Sure thing,” he answered, and extended his hand. She took it readily and shook it, then added, “And remind Alder that he needs to go see Bree before too long. I don’t know how it is in Shane, but where we’re from what he’s doing is bad ethics.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Whilo began to step away again, and this time he did not turn back again.

The ride back to the boathouse seemed quicker than when they had first rowed out here. Whilo did not pay as much attention to his surroundings being enamored with thoughts on the events of the past two days. Meeting Alder, seeing the wilderbeasts, having Lilly save his life twice. He did not know what he was going to do with all of this now that he was going home. Tell his neighbors about this? They probably would not believe most of it. Not to mention, they would not look at him the same way after knowing he had gone down the road that went right. They would be wary of him, the way they had been with Old Brom. But at this point, did their opinion matter to him? He was not sure. Such a change had come over him since coming out here yesterday, that he was not sure who he was to Shane anymore. What would he even be when he came back? Would everything go back to normal?

His attention was brought back to the present moment when Alder drew back up to the deck and began retying his boat. “Well, I know we ran into some trouble there at the end, Whilo, but I’m honestly glad we did this. It was just the distraction I needed.” He helped Whilo out of the boat, and having unlocked the door, invited him inside.

They stepped in through a narrow walkway on either side of which hung assorted gear and camping equipment. It was lighted by two small windows, one on each wall that let in the sun. Shoes were also piled on the floor and coats were draped over little pegs sticking out from the door that led further

within. Whilo had volunteered to help Alder prepare dinner which they now had boiling in the cauldron over the fire in the living room. They both sat in cushioned chairs facing the fireplace, as it crackled with warm colored embers and the seasoned smell of stew filled the den.

“You never mentioned the fact that you were getting married.” Whilo began. “That’s incredible news. I for one am glad for you.” Alder nodded. “I’m very happy.” However a look of sadness appeared on his face that seemed to the contrary. “From what I gathered from your conversation with Lilly, you don’t have the same kind of troubles in Shane that we do. I hope I’m not presuming.”

“No, you heard us right.” “Raising a family in our village is difficult, to say the least. As Lilly told you earlier, hunting is rarely successful, and recently, the Goblin King has put a curse on our crops, so in turn we’ve resorted to scavenging for nuts and berries in the wilderness. That can be a problem if one is not as knowledgeable of the forest as Lilly and I are. Today, you learned firsthand what can happen.”

“You and your cousin seemed to handle the situation rather well.”

“However most people are as inept as that raccoon who got us into that mess. Not that it’s their fault. I’m not saying that, but they were not raised to understand the wood. I would like to teach them.”

“It sounds like Bree is lucky to have you. You might raise the most successful family in your village.” Said Whilo as Alder served them both from the cauldron. The flavor of the soup was unfamiliar. He assumed it came from what Alder scavenged from the forest, but it was an enjoyable taste all the same. “It does me good to hear you say that, Whilo. Believe me, I intend to, and yet... something troubles me.” Alder held his spoon over his bowl, almost as if he’d forgotten to take his first bite. “What is that?” Whilo asked. Toward the bottom of his soup, the flavor became strong and tangy, and he immediately drank the whole thing down. “What if I’m not able to teach her? What if my children don’t learn, and they end up like all the others who were taken?”



“My guess is that Bree is smart enough to learn, if she’s anything like you.”

“She’s brilliant, and she’s even a tutor to the neighbors’ children, but our village and the Wood are two different worlds with their own set of rules.” Whilo nodded and put his bowl on the little table to the side, then stretched out his legs onto the footstool in front of him. “Well, I’ve learned a lot about you in these two days, Alder, and from our little fiasco earlier today, I’d say you’re more than capable of protecting Bree. You were the first one to see the snake, and you stood in front of us. You looked like you were going to take him on head on! Not to mention, you and Lilly were agile enough to dodge it when it attacked; I only managed to slip buy. I would even go so far as to think that Bree agreed to marry you, because she knew full well that you would take care of your family better than anyone else could.” Alder chuckled and finally took his first bite. “Thank you Whilo.” He ate silently for a moment, and their attention was drawn to the crackling fire.

Then after a while, he said something that Whilo did not see coming, “I think that’s why my cousin is interested in you.” Whilo turned to look at him. “Come again?”

“Lilly. She likes you.” Whilo laughed out loud and shook his head dismissively. Alder just continued to eat. “Alder, I don’t know what you think you saw...”

“You were asleep, but when Lilly first showed up, while we were talking, she kept glancing over at you.”

“She said so herself that she didn’t recognize me. From what it sounds like, strangers are a big deal here.” For a second, Alder choked on his soup. “So are pretty boys.”

“Alder...”

“When we set out for the cave, just before she walked over to your side, she whispered to me about how neat she thought you were. Then, after you led us into that cleft and helped us escape the giant serpent, she told me that she saw something in you—something that set you apart from all the others.”

“Oh...” Alder drank down to the bottom of his bowl and laid it aside. “If I’m to be honest, I’d say this is a great thing. Lilly needs someone...someone besides Patch.”

“You don’t think Patch is enough company for her?” Whilo cut himself short, because the remark seemed to sadden Alder a little. “Do you not like her all that much, Whilo?”

“Oh, no, don’t take me to mean that, Alder. I’ve had more fun with Lilly than I had in my entire life. But the thing is, I’ve never had that kind of a relationship with someone. I don’t know what all that entails. And on top of that, I don’t think what she sees in me is really there.” Alder kicked his feet up onto the stool and sighed. “Well, that last thing you said is completely wrong. Lilly teased us for going off camping when we had just met each other, but she’s experiencing the same thing with you. I invited you to come camping with me because something told me to. Something brought you to my river. Lilly said so herself that she wasn’t expecting to find the two of us out where she was going, and yet there we were, and on top of that she’s taken to liking you because of that inexplicable tug.

“This concept is foreign to the villagers in my home, but there is a living spirit in these woods. Lilly and I don’t know what it’s called or if it’s a part of the forest or a mind of its own or...whatever, but one thing we do know is, it’s real. In these recent years, nothing very providential seemed to have been happening, and we became less and less thoughtful of it until now. Its work is unmistakable. We think your arrival might have started something out here, Whilo. Something that involves all three of us.”

Whilo had just been sitting there, listening intently. Then Alder palmed his forehead. “I’m sorry. I just started spouting all of this nonsense, and I’m probably scaring you now for no reason.” Whilo shook his head. “The scariest thing about everything you’re saying is that it makes sense. I felt the tug that you’re talking about. The three of us definitely have something in common that seems to be drawing us together, but I don’t know what that means. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” Alder got up and served himself some more of the tangy soup. “If I know anything about the living Spirit, it puts us in the

place we need to be, and then explains itself later. Do you want some more of this? I have a lot left over.”

“Thank you, but I seriously have to get back home now.”

“Fair enough.” They shook hands and said warm goodbyes, and Whilo started back home as the sun began to set again. When he reached Shane again, he wasn’t surprised that coming home did not feel like coming home. He had that feeling one gets when he starts off on an errand, but can’t quite shake the feeling that he’s left something behind. His first sign that something was amiss occurred when he approached the fork in the road, and he saw a man crossing over the bridge, coming down from the road that went left. When they met at the fork, the man stared at him warily. “Whilo?”

“Hi, Uncle Tom.”

“You went down into the cursed woods. After everything we warned you about? After everything your parents warned you about? What would they think if they could see this?”

“I don’t think they would want the living putting words in their mouths.” Answered Whilo, and he walked back to his house on the edge of town and went to sleep. But it was not as happy as his night under the stars with monsters in the shadows and the lone friend he had made in a day. No one in Shane treated him the same after that.

The months drifted by, and eventually summer turned into autumn. Whilo was not one to pay attention to the seasons changing, but he noticed something today. As he stood on his roof, hammering shingles together on the extension to his house, his eyes were open to the majesty of autumn. The entire meadow was now a blazing glory of orange, red, and yellow, and those evergreens which crowned the mounts in the distance remained a stark contrast to the colors, causing them to shine more vibrantly, and the air was filled with the dry smell of leaves. For some reason he thought of Lilly. The excitement

he now felt for the change in season reminded him of when he first met her what felt like ages ago. Her eyes which were brought to mind by the evergreens. Her auburn hair which was conjured up by the red shades of leaves all around him. And her radiant smile which seemed to reflect the image of the sun itself. Never in his life had he been caught up in such romantic thoughts, yet he stopped hammering, and stopped for a moment to let the emotion sink in. What was he doing here?

“Oh hello, Whilo.” Said a man who was approaching his house. “Hello, Uncle Tom.” Whilo answered begrudgingly. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to talk.”

“Talk away.” Whilo did not start down the ladder to greet him. The man lowered his head, almost as if to apologize. “I know that I haven’t exactly been warm to you since you came back, but honestly, do you think it’s my fault? I did my part in keeping you from going down there to a place where there’s nothing but trouble. And I can see it all over you that you have gotten into trouble. You don’t talk to us anymore. You just hang around your house obsessively building atriums that add nothing to your home. You’re never happy, and the whole town of Shane is fearful that you stirred up whatever it is that lives down there in those woods. That place took something from you, Whilo, and you were stupid enough to let it.” Whilo began climbing down the ladder. “Whilo, I’m only saying all of this because...”

“You’re right.”

“Come again?”

“The woods did take something from me, and I’m not happy, and I’m stupid for a number of reasons.”

“Nephew, where are you going?”

“Down the road that goes right. I’m taking back what it took from me.”

“Whilo!”

“Tell the family that I’ve been possessed by a spirit, and that I’m never coming back again.” The sound of Uncle Tom’s shouting was drowned out by the sound of the forest calling him back in.

When Whilo reached the boathouse, it was not Alder, but Lilly who greeted him at the deck. Before Whilo could even open his mouth, she hopped into the boat, untied it, and rowed over to him. “Come on in,” she giggled. He gingerly stepped in, with a smile growing on his face. She threw an oar at him, and he almost dropped it into the water. “You’re going to learn how to row.” Lilly said emphatically. “Is this going to help me with something?” He asked as held it in place. “No,” she answered, “It just makes for easy fun.” Whilo placed the oar into the water and began to push it against the water, unsure of what he was actually supposed to do. The boat began rotating in circles, and rocked back and forth violently. Lilly’s laugh was clear and vibrant almost like a wood wind instrument. “You see? Fun.”

“The water...is going to be so cold!” Whilo’s sides were hurting. Suddenly, the head of a giant catfish emerged out of the water and rammed into their boat. In one split second, Whilo was convinced he was about to die, and then the fish was gone. Whilo was now lying on the floor of the boat struggling to get up, still chucking. Lilly pulled him up, the boat rocked again, and they were knocked to their knees in each other’s arms.

It all ended with a dart in Whilo’s neck. His vision blurred, and his head began to swim, and the last thing he remembered before going unconscious was the sound of Lilly screaming.

When he came to, it was no different than when he had been unconscious. He could not see anything. But it was cold. Not brisk and dry as it had been out in the autumn, but damp, grimy. He quickly realized that his hands were stretched above his head and strapped against a stony wall by a metal bar. He tried to twist his wrists, but they wouldn’t budge. It took him a minute to process what had just happened.

This was only something that happened in the stories, his family would warn him about as they sat

around the campfire looking down the road that went right. "Lilly?" he shouted. "Lilly are you alright?" The air going into his lungs as he yelled was sharp and painful. His voice echoed upward as though there were a large shaft reaching high above him. He jumped at the sound of chains rattling from across the chamber. There was the ugly sound of a dry cough, and the weak reply, "I don't think we're fine, Whilo." He breathed a sigh a relief anyway. "Lilly, what happened?" Another cough, and then, "We were kidnapped by the Goblin King's henchmen..."

"But we weren't anywhere near his land, why would he go to the trouble of..."

"That's a good question. We've had a truce with the Goblins for almost nine hundred years, but lately, they've been giving us trouble. First it was the curse that they put over our fields, now they've come scouting our land. There's only one explanation for this..."

"They want to extend their borders..."

"They're going to kill us all; and if they ventured as far as my boathouse, nothing will prevent them from reaching Shane." Whilo shook his head. "No, that's not going to happen. We're going to get out of here, and we're going to warn everybody."

"If we get out of here, I know only one person who can help us, and that's the sage." Lilly barely finished before starting a full-on coughing fit. Whilo's eyes began to adjust to the thin ray of light that trickled through many stories above them. He could see Lilly's silhouette moving across the chamber. Her hands were lifted above her head, presumably chained to the wall as his were. "Lilly, are you going to be alright?"

"Not if we don't get out of here. Whilo, there is a sharp stone lying at your feet. I'm able to reach the floor, so if you kick it over to me, I'll be able to break these chains and come to you." Whilo obliged, and he felt for the stone with his feet, all the while bewildered that she was able to see it. Someone had

removed his shoes, and the sole of his foot felt the jagged edge of the stone. "Aggh, alright, here it is," he shoved it over in her direction with as much force as he could. He could see her struggling to reach it now. Perhaps he hadn't sent it far enough. He could hear a lot of grunting, and then to his relief, "I've got it." Lilly began hammering the stone against her chains, and more quickly than he'd expected, she stood up with her hands moving around freely.

"Those chains were not very strong." He pointed out as she came over to him with the stone in hand. "They're old and rusted, and they're easy to break if you have a strong enough tool." She explained. "It would seem that this isn't your first time being kidnapped," Whilo observed as his hands came free, and she pulled him up. Lilly covered her mouth and coughed again. This time it rose to a frighteningly high pitch. "It's definitely my first, but I learned a thing or two from the Sage who lives just outside this land."

"Did he teach you how to pick a lock?"

"I'm going to need to see the door first."

They both felt along the wall and made a full circle around the chamber. To their dismay, it was all smooth stone. Whilo began scratching his head. "The door must be somewhere above us. This cell was designed so that it would be out of reach to the prisoners, especially in the case that they broke out of their chains as easily as we had."

"But there's got to be a way to climb up to it." Lilly began feeling for holds in the wall. Whilo shook his head. "They didn't throw us down here, seeing that we're in one piece, and they took the time to chain us down here. They must have some kind of pulley system up there that they used to lower us."

"Which means, we could potentially find a way to get it down." There was the abrupt noise of the cell door swinging open from high above, and light from a torch became visible. Then there was the sound of wheels turning and two Goblin voices cackling. "Quick, Lilly, sit back down where you were; I have an

idea.” She nodded, apparently knowing exactly what he had in mind. They resumed to where they had been chained up and pretended nothing had happened.

“I can’t for the life of me figure out why his Majesty wants us to go to the trouble of feeding them when we’re just going to kill them tomorrow. In fact why did they take them back here alive to begin with?”

The torch wielder complained as they continued on down the shaft. “It has something to do with luring the Old Man here. The girl is his apprentice, and I’m not too sure about the other one, but the idea is to get our hostages to cooperate—which they won’t if you keep going on about how we’re going to kill them.” Their voices were carrying fairly well.

After what felt like hours, the dumbwaiter finally reached the prison floor. The torchlight revealed two creatures who stood on two legs like men, had two arms but whose skin was laired with fishlike scales which were the color of scarlet, and ram’s horns protruded out from the sides of their heads. “Alright, you dead-beats. Eat up while you still get to...wait a minute...” A chain draped around both of their necks and abruptly tightened around them. Whilo and Lily emerged from the shadowy corners holding the other ends of the chains, continuing to tighten them as their captors struggled to break themselves free.

The Goblins died at their hands. Whilo pushed their bodies off from the dumbwaiter and grabbed their sword. Lilly held on to the torch, and they began pulling themselves up by the rope. “Do you think the others heard that?” asked Whilo. “We certainly heard their plans for us from down here,” answered Lilly. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

The pulley got stuck in place, and the dumb waiter began swinging back and forth high over the dungeon floor. Whilo could feel his pulse from inside his neck, and he struggled to catch his breath. “This...isn’t looking good.” He stammered. Lilly glanced up and looked around above them. “I see it...I see the door...I think it’s close enough...to climb...” her voice grew weaker as she spoke. In the torchlight,



Whilo could see that her face had turned crimson. It was a look he was all too familiar with. "Lilly, are you dizzy?"

"Yes,"

"Are you sure you're able to climb?"

"I've got no choice."

"Here, give me your torch." Whilo took it from her and motioned her to climb up first. He placed the torch in his mouth and continued after her. Meanwhile the dumbwaiter continued to swing underneath them. They reached the level of the door, but it was just out of their reach. The swinging rope did not have enough momentum to get them across. "The dumbwaiter...s holding us in place..." Lilly observed, but she sounded as if she were nodding off. Whilo looked down, and then he unsheathed his sword. With one strike he severed the rope beneath him, and the dumbwaiter went crashing to the bottom. It certainly would have gotten anyone's attention in the dungeon. He began using his legs to propel the rope forward. It continued to swing back before he could reach his feet for the door, so he continued the motion in order to get it further with each time it returned to the opening. Lilly made the jump first and struggled to get back on her feet. She turned to face him through the doorway and held out her arms to catch him. Whilo let go of the rope with its last return but landed square on his heels and fell backwards.

"Whilo!" Lilly dove and caught him by the ankles. He hit his head against the side of the wall, and suddenly the room was spinning. She managed to pull him back in before collapsing to the floor.

The fluid stopped swimming around in his head long enough for him to stand upright, but then he realized that Lilly was not moving. "Lilly? Lilly!" He put his hand up against her crimson forehead. He barely needed to touch her before he felt it burning up. It was happening all over again. "Whilo...I'm

sorry..." He looked over to his right. A stone staircase wound up and out of sight. There was no telling what was up there, but it was their only chance of escape, if they had any. "Here," he lifted her up and placed her arm around his neck, then held her upright with his left arm and held his torch forward with the other. "We're getting out of here, Lilly, and that Sage of yours is going to make you well."

They struggled up the winding staircase for a good, long while with the torchlight illuminating their path one step at a time. For a while, the only sounds were the rumbling of the flame and Lilly muttering incoherently under her breath. Then a low moan emitted from further up the stairs. They curved up around a bend, and Whilo could not see that far ahead. Strange shadows were moving along the wall as revealed by the torchlight. It wasn't until he was staring it down face to face that he saw it.

An enormous creature guarded the top of the stairs. Its body was similar to that of a bear, but it was covered in black wool and had cloven hoofs. It had a head fashioned in the likeness of a bison's, yet its eyes glowed like red embers and its mouth opened to reveal rows upon rows of sharpened teeth. Before Whilo could move, the creature yelled angrily and slammed its hooves down into the ground. The whole chamber shook, and Whilo lost his footing and tumbled back down the stairs losing both Lilly and the torch as he went.

He hurriedly scrambled back up, withdrawing his sword. The beast reared up on its hind legs directly above her and prepared to bring its front hooves back down with the fullest of its weight. In one moment of final desperation, Whilo lounged forward, snatched the torch, and held both it and his open blade above his head as the hoof came crashing down on top of him. One second, he was being crushed flat against the stairs. The next, the monster was rearing back again and hollering in pain. Whilo wasted no time. He charged forward and began hacking at the creature's hind leg. Its yell raised to a blood-curdling scream as it keeled over backwards and landed with a crash that shook the chamber even more violently.

Quickly, he lifted Lilly into his arms and made his getaway, as the monster continued to writhe in agony behind them. The hinges of the door above them were broken off from the quakes, and the cold wind of the night blew freely through the opening.

They emerged out of a hole in the ground underneath a canopy of evergreens. It was cold enough for snow flurries to coat the ground and crystalize as ice. The air felt as though it were biting down into Whilo's naked feet, and his thin coat did nothing to shield him, but he hoped it would reduce Lilly's fever long enough to get help for her. "Ten miles west..." she muttered. "...sage will help...you..."

Lilly did not think she was going to make it. Whilo remembered sitting alongside his mother and his father's bed as their faces showed with the same violent red hue, and on the day that they died it was as if they knew, "Be good for us...live well...make a family of your own someday..." He had not known Lilly for very long, but she was already more family to him than anyone his parents had left him with. He wasn't going to let her die out here. With the face of the moon in site, he followed it west as far as he could make it.

Even now, as the sensation left his feet and hands and his body ached, he was comforted by the woods. The oak trees, and the spruce and maples stood over them glimmering like silver in the moon's dim light. Nothing could be heard except for the wind, and it made the world feel empty, quiet. When Whilo was the most alone, it would suddenly feel as though he were accompanied by someone else. Someone he could not see. Whilo felt him there when his mother and father closed their eyes for the last time. When his Uncle took him in and berated him for the remainder of his life. When he spent that night in the woods when all the stars were out. Suddenly it felt as if his dear old friend had returned to be here with them tonight.

"Here..." Lilly whispered. It was the first she'd spoken in nearly three hours. But no matter where Whilo turned, he saw nothing. Not a house. Not a shack. Nothing to indicate a person had lived here.

“Tree...over...there.” Directly in front of them was a large oak tree, and as he drew toward it, he noticed that among the roots was a hole going underneath the tree. Whilo did not know if he was doing the right thing by climbing in, but he received no further instruction from Lilly, so he continued. There was a steep drop, and he violently twisted his ankles upon meeting the bottom. Lilly stirred again, but did not say anything. There was a tunnel leading further underground, seemingly affirming that this was right. He lifted her up again, but struggled to walk as pain shot up from his ankles into his head. He didn't know how long he would be following this tunnel.

To his fullest surprise, he came upon a door. It had brass hinges, a knob, and even a traditional knocker in the shape of a lion's head. Well, it can't get much more obvious than that! With a sigh of relief, he took the brass handle and knocked it. From within he could hear low grumblings of a man approaching through a hidden corridor. Whilo tensed for a moment. The mean old hermit.

The door swung open. “I don't know who the hell you are or what the hell you want, but...Lilly!” The man in the doorway was tall, standing well over six feet. He was nothing like Whilo had pictured him. He wore similar attire to what Alder had on the day that he met him complete with the buttoned shirt and overalls. His hair was neatly trimmed as was his beard and both were jet black with streaks of white running through it, and surprisingly enough, he even had on the bridge of his nose a pair of spectacles. He carried with him a lamp which now illuminated his presence. “Come inside, quickly!” he motioned for Whilo to enter.

Inside the corridor was no different than the inside of a rich man's house. The floor was tiled and the walls, paneled. Several framed paintings lined the walls, and here and there was a bookshelf filled with dusty, old volumes with decorative coverings of red, green, and yellow. At the end of the corridor, the man hung his lantern in place and took Lilly into his arms from Whilo. “Go ahead and rest by the fire, son. I have dinner started.”

“Tell me you can save her.” The old man nodded, “You’ve already done that. She’ll be fine in three hours once she’s been properly medicated.” Such a weight was lifted from his shoulders, Whilo felt that he would collapse in front of him, but he chose to do so on the big red sofa in front of the fire place. He was on his way over, when a raccoon ran up to him and began pawing at his legs. “Patch?”

“Whilo! What on earth happened?” Alder appeared out from one of the doorways from the side and rushed to join them. Whilo put an arm around his friend and led him over to the couch. “A lot happened. I’m not even sure where to start.”

“You can start with why you two look like you’ve been buried alive.”

“We practically were.”

“Were there monsters?”

They sat on either end of the sofa in front of the grand fireplace. It cast a warm orange hue over the den. In the light of the fire and with the gentle sounds of wood crackling in his ears, Whilo reminded himself of an old storyteller, telling tales of adventures in his childhood that the parents new were highly fabricated, but still the children listened wide-eyed and captivated. Alder had that same expression on his face, but Whilo wished he’d made the whole story up; because then none of these horrible things would be happening to them. “The Goblins have gone too far, this time.” Said Alder, his face darkened.

“If they’re planning on attacking us—which by now, there is no question—then we need to strike first.”

“Which is what I wanted to discuss with you, Alder.” Came the voice of the old man. Having treated Lilly, he left her alone in one of the guest rooms, and carried with him a pot of hot water. “We can do this over a game of cards and some hot tea. You’ll like the mixture I used; I’ve been perfecting my craft for well over eight hundred years.” Alder nodded and patted Whilo on the shoulder and joined the old man at the side table. He poured a cup for Whilo and handed it to him before dealing out the cards. Whilo

struggled to pay full attention, but Alder and the old man did not get down to the point until long into their game.

They joked and laughed and told stories, and seemed to bond as fast as Alder and he had on the day that they met, for Alder revealed that he had just met the old man today and did not know that Lilly was his apprentice. But Whilo smiled. The mean old hermit was not so mean after all. Two and a half hours passed by, and the old man served them broiled fish from the kettle in the fireplace. It was the most delicious thing Whilo had ever eaten. Finally, he became too drowsy to sit upright on the sofa, and his eyelids began to close.

“Hey,” whispered a soft voice into his ear. His eyes parted. The fire had died down, and it cast shadows over the living room. He could no longer hear Alder and the old man talking. Lilly stood by him. In the dim light, her face was warm and happy. Whilo sat up and rubbed his eyes, bewildered. “Lilly, you’re...” She climbed onto the couch with him as he spoke. Whilo took notice of his blanket, and he removed it and handed it over to her. To his surprise, she drew up against him and pulled it over the both of them. “I never thanked you for what you did back in the serpent’s den.” He said quietly, thinking back on their previous adventure. She leaned her head on his shoulder, brushing her auburn hair against his cheek. “It was a group effort, Whilo. We all owed each other...and I still owe you.”

“What do you mean?” he objected. “You’re the one who broke us free. You took out one of the guards and saved me from falling to my death, not to mention you led us here to safety.” Lilly shook her head. Her eyes widened endearingly. “I’ve never been so scared in my life, Whilo. I thought it was over, but you were there with me. Just the sound of your voice made me feel safe, even though I thought we weren’t going to make it. When I collapsed from my fever, all I wanted was for you to run, but you picked me up and took me with you. You protected me against everything that came in your way. Whilo,

you come out of the pages of a fairy tale.” Whilo could not remember the last time he’d blushed.

Whatever it was, it was nothing like this. “I’m glad we had each other, Lilly.”

She bit her lip and lifted her head up to where her eyes met his. Her long hair fell over his neck, tickling him. “Will we have each other again?” she asked him.

Before he could think twice, he drew her in to where her lips met his. “Yes, we will.” He said, and he kissed her. They laid still there that night as the fire burnt out, and fell asleep comfortably in each other’s arms.

“Bah!” They woke to Alder’s reaction to seeing the two of them curled up under the same blanket. Alder hurried away with his hand over his eyes. “Relax, Alder.” Whilo threw the blanket off from them to break the tension. Alder slowly withdrew his hand as he began pouring himself some tea. “You remember what I told you Whilo?”

“How could I not? You made our conversation all existential that night.”

“I was right though.” “Sure, but anyway, how are you doing with Bree?” Alder nodded. “I went back to her a few days after you’d left. You were right, Lilly. I did scare her. But I was honest with her about what I felt, and she was too, and it all worked out for the better. The wedding will be early in the spring.”

“Alder!” Lilly beamed, clapped her hands, and raced over to hug him.

“Which is why we’re going to sack the Goblin King’s Castle tonight,” Said the old man as he stepped into the living room, “so we’ll all have a home to come back to.”

“But, sir, do we have what we need?” Lilly asked, turning toward him. He pushed the spectacles further up his nose. “I have three heroes with me, and if my whistler works, we’ll have more than what we need to take back that fortress.” The old man motioned to the wall where two swords, a pike, and an axe

hung. "I blessed these with holy incantations; they'll split those Goblins right through the bone, and no one's going to deny they deserve it. Whilo, it wasn't a plague that claimed the lives of so many when you were a child. The Goblin King had long been planning his day of violence against the countryside, and he practiced his weapon against the town of Shane.

"And, tomorrow, he plans to unleash it over all the land. Everyone will suffer the same fate as those who died in Shane, unless we stop him tonight."

Whilo, believed what he was hearing. He had known that he was brought out here for a reason, and Alder, Lilly, and now the Mean Old Hermit only affirmed it to be so.

The four of them sat down and enjoyed one last card game.

The secret passageway that led to the throne room was long and low. For the old man, it was more appropriately a crawl space. They dared not make any sound as they inched along toward the small square opening. From without, they could hear the terrifying sounds of the Goblins laughing and hollering at each other.

Whilo had the clearest view through the opening. Below them was the throne room. Because of the night, there was no daylight shining through, but the lights of torches and of the overhanging chandeliers glowed eerily, revealing the scaly, blood-red forms of the creatures. Their horns shook up and down freakishly as they chanted and pounded on the long dining table which filled the entire chamber. Seated upon the throne was the Goblin King. He was not like the others. His head nearly reached the ceiling, and his broad shoulders stretched from wall to wall. He raised his hand, and immediately, the crowd subsided.

"Tonight, we celebrate, because tomorrow...the day will belong to the Goblins!" There were roars of approval, but the King angrily flicked his wrist, and abruptly, a bolt of lightning materialized in the



middle of the throne room and struck a handful of them dead; what was left was a circle of ashes, and embers scattered in the air. Whilo and the others jumped back, hitting their heads against the stone ceiling and grunting in pain and confusion. The old man just shook his head and hushed them angrily and motioned for them to continue to listen. Whilo was unsure exactly how this plan was supposed to work. Supposedly the old man knew exactly what he was doing.

“Tomorrow,” started the Goblin King again, as those at the table quieted and subjected themselves, “we reclaim what was taken from us all those centuries ago. It was not enough that we lived apart from them in the remotest catacombs of the mountains. The prospect that we lived at all was an affront to them. What we rightfully had to ourselves in the caverns, they wanted to exploit, and without any antagonism on our part they invaded our mines with the hopes of slaying us all. But did they get our mines?”

There were loud cries of “No!”

“What did we do?”

“We killed them all!”

A severe frown grew on the old man’s face. “He’s conveniently leaving out integral moments in this story.”

“How do you mean?” asked Whilo.

“Our ancestors originally settled in this countryside after fleeing the tyranny of the *Emperor across the Sea*. With all of the dark powers at his fingertips, he could toss entire nations into the fiery chasms beneath the oceans. The small band of us that survived only wanted a nice home in which to settle and be safe from his terror. In fact, had we known that the Goblins owned this land we had discovered, we would have set sail once more and looked somewhere else. However, Shalvga, the Goblin King attacked

us during the night and burned down our ship so that we could not escape. We were forced to fight against them year after year and drive them further back, because they would leave us in peace. What he is describing right now is the year that he and his troops were in hiding. They had full intention on wiping us all out once they had fully regrouped..." he stopped, though, and listened as the Goblin King continued his address.

"And we sieged their pretty little castle. No one survived except for one old sage, who went by the name of Arsentex. He caused a lot of trouble for us trying to win his castle back, but he never managed. However, he admittedly delivered a strong blow against us, one year, and we had to settle upon a truce. We would divide the land among us and stay on our respective sides. But we don't answer to the demands of treacherous humans, do we?"

Again, more cries of "No!" rose up in retaliation.

"Every day has led up to this—the day that the humans die, and we be rid of Arsentex forever!"

"Now!" the old man motioned for Whilo, Alder, and Lilly, and the four jumped onto the chandelier. Its rusted chain snapped, and in one terrifying moment, they crashed into the table, and flames erupted all around them. Over the roar of the fire, there were cries of horror and rage as the Goblins gathered outside the inferno.

Whilo was confused that they were not hurt by the flames, but he watched in awe as Lilly and the Sage stood side by side with their hands reaching above their heads, and the encircling fire formed a perfect dome over the four of them. The Old man nodded to her and yelled over the commotion, "Like we practiced!" They assumed a different stance on their legs and thrust their hands forward. Immediately, the wall of fire was thrown back and a number of Goblins were engulfed in it. They crumpled to the floor, hollering in agony while others brashly ran through and attacked the intruders who stood, weapons drawn. The fighting had commenced.

Rays of golden light emitted from the four blades, and as they clashed, it singed the Goblins' scaly layers, and they drew back in worse pain than those rolling around in the fire. When the fullness of the blade met with the Goblins' body, the monsters disintegrated before Whilo's very eyes.

Abruptly, the flames parted, and those Goblins who had been burning now stood up with no visible sign that they had been hurt. The Goblin King rose from his throne with his arms outstretched, and the whole chamber seemed to darken, as his snake-like eyes grew brighter with intensity. "Arsentex!" his enraged cry shook the entire chamber, and rubble came pouring down all around them.

The old man did not bat an eye. "You did not keep your promise, Shalvga, but I did. I said that if you were ever to cross my borders and harm my people again, I would come again and silence yours forever. And now, here I am! I have come to fulfill my honor and prove once and for all that I am true to my word, and that I owe you nothing...Nothing!"

The Goblin King bellowed with his arms reaching above him, and several lightning bolts struck where the old man stood. "Master, no!" shouted Lilly as the air pulsated around them with electric currents.

The dust cleared, the air settled, and the old man was gone. It was now just the remaining three, and the demon standing, glowering over them. His subjects encircled them, and their eyes seemed to glow now as his did, and the room got darker. Whilo stood in front of his friends, sword drawn with no expectation of leaving this place alive.

The Goblin King laughed. "Old fool. He was brash to the very end. He has gone blindly over the edge of the cliff, and he leads the blind to follow after."

"No I didn't." came a voice from above.

A grizzly bear the size of Alder's boathouse tore through the throne room and lounged at the Goblin King. "Malto!" Alder cried out in joy. He, Lilly, and Whilo grabbed onto a rope extended to them from

the old man who sat on top of his back. Malto ripped the Goblin King into pieces, and his remains crumbled into dust. The remaining Goblins tried to escape through the front entrance, but the grizzly bear was already upon them. Soon the entire palace was empty of Goblins.

“So what do we do now?” inquired Whilo, as the remaining Goblins slowly crumbled away into a fine powder. He put his sword back into its sheath and breathed a heavy sigh. The old man looked around a couple times and scratched his head as he apparently gave it some thought. “I’m actually thinking we could fix this place up. Give it a good spring cleaning.”

Immediately, Lilly looked over at Alder and nudged him. “Alder, your spring wedding! You could get married in a castle!” Alder looked around doubtfully. The walls were overriden in vines and cobwebs. The screeching of bats overhead could be heard throughout the tomblike halls. Tapestries hung shredded overhead, stained with what looked like dry blood. A black rat the size of a horse ran past them.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said. “If we can make this place nice and pretty early enough to plan my wedding, then I’ll take it.”

“Sounds as good a plan as any.” Said the old man. “To be honest, I was so caught up in trying to win my castle back, I had no idea what I was going to do with it when I did.”

Whilo jumped as a spider lowered in front of his nose. “I guess we’d better get started.”

They continued to reconstruct and refurnish the throne room and the surrounding halls, and the work lasted all winter. They tore down the vines from the walls along with the battered tapestries. The windows were boarded up with wood, and when they tore those out from their frames, a view of the world was opened to them as rich as an oil painting. The forest was blanketed in snow, and in the center rested a giant frozen lake in which was the reflection of a mountain towering over the silent world.

Whilo helped replace wooden beams that had rotted, and the four of them brought in paint canisters and brushes and began brightening up the colors of the throne room. When the place was all set and polished, they finished off by bringing in new, clean chairs and tables that Whilo had built. By the time the trees were budding with flowers, and the lake rippled with an electric blue, the old, grimy castle was now a palace.

Alder wandered through the halls, bewildered at what they had accomplished. His eyes grew misty as he went on. Whilo took Lilly's hand in his as they watched him. "We did well." Said Lilly. Whilo glanced up and around them and took it all in. "Do you think it's strange that whenever we are all together, the world gets a little better each time?"

She shook her head. "It's just the way it's supposed to be. We're a family. We share the same Spirit, and it continually guides us.

"And Whilo, someday the world will be perfect." She looked into his eyes and smiled warmly, reassuringly. He brushed her hair gently back, and let his hand rest against her cheek for a moment, then put it down as Alder and the old man came along. Alder hugged them both. "It would seem, that this was a very good plan indeed." Said the old man.

Alder married Bree in the middle of spring. The air smelled of flowers blooming once again, and the world was green, and the halls were filled with music and laughter. The villagers all came to see the wedding of the hero who helped defeat the Goblin King and made the wood safe to venture through once again. Alder, shifted the attention to Whilo and Lilly, and they all gathered around the two of them demanding to hear the tale of how they escaped from the Goblins' dungeon. They laughed awkwardly as they took turns trying to explain what happened, but the crowd kept asking questions over top of them and the effort eventually proved useless. The sage had slipped away earlier on in the ceremony.

Thankfully, the music grew faster, and people began coupling up to dance. Lilly took Whilo by the arm and led him off to the side, away from the crowd. As they danced together, caught up in the reverie, Whilo looked deeply into her eyes, and then he saw it: The sun setting over Alder's boathouse. Alder and Bree sitting next to each other on the porch, their two children running circles around them. They stop, because Lilly who is sitting alongside them abruptly jumps out of her seat. I felt a kick! Whilo comes running out onto the porch and hugs her, and everyone is laughing and in tears. Even the mean old hermit is there.

"I saw it, too." Said Lilly, and she kissed him while they were still out of site from the others. The sun was setting over the lake, and a handful of stars appeared from within the orange and royal blue horizon. They appeared to be within reach of the mountain which stood like a gentle guardian over the land. Whilo, Alder, and Lilly came out to stand on the shore and look out upon the sight. "You and Bree look beautiful together," said Lilly. Alder smiled. "Things are looking better, now that the forest is at peace. I feel like I'm ready now." Patch ran up to Lilly, and she scooped him up and placed him on her shoulder.

"I like this place." Said Whilo. Lilly and Alder nodded in affirmation. "I think I will build a house in these woods."

"I'll help," said Lilly.

"Same here," said Alder.

Then the three looked on, and contemplated their future.