

Tiffany of the Fae

A Scary Faerie Tale

By Craig Marshall

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For Rob, Courtney, Trinity and Tiffany –
my wonderful children

Magic is real.

Thanks to my sister Jill, for reading to me when I was a child.

– It isn't the faraway tree, but I hope you like it anyway.

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She said "Whoop," brownie said, "uh."

She skipped and he danced.

"Whoop hoooo!" there was no end to Tiffany's exuberance, or the brownie's capacity to match it "whoop" and "hoo", Tiffany tried jumping like him. "It's much too hard to jump."

"But it is fun," he said with a smile.

Tiffany in Faerieland.

“Time for bed Tiffs.”

Tiffany stayed at her Father’s every weekend. She had a bedroom of her own. There was a bed and a dressing table, it was nicely decorated, she had nice expensive curtains and lots of dolls.

They had been colouring pictures most of the evening, in the living room.

“Five more minutes,” pleaded Tiffany.

“No, it is time for bed now. You have already had five more minutes.”

Fathers can be mean, thought Tiffany. She frowned. Her father smiled, he had a warm smile. She found it hard to keep a frown on her face when he smiled like that. She climbed into his arms “Okay Dad, goodnight.” Kiss. Hug.

She climbed into bed, lined her dolls and teddies in a row, then lay down and waited for sleep to come. Sleep either comes too late or too early. She stared at the curtains, and watched the street lights attempt to illuminate her room.

Quietly a speck of light appeared in the upper most corner, near the ceiling. It was bright despite its size. It bobbed a little, then stilled. What magical creature could this be? Tiffany’s father often read her stories about pixies, brownies and elves. Her imagination flared, she thought of all the possibilities.

The speck began to bob again. Tiffany’s heart quickened. Then the speck bounced to the left, then a moment later it returned. For the first time Tiffany felt afraid. *What if this was an evil creature?* She pulled her quilt up to her eyes.

In the living room her father hummed gently.

She bit her lip and told herself to be brave. The light gently moved around the room, weaving and dipping gradually until it reached the floor. It moved between her toys. Her toy clown smiled (or did he leer) and her rocking chair seemed to have formed an eye. The roaming light lit up her toys one by one, perhaps investigating each one.

Then without warning it whizzed up to the ceiling. There it zigzagged for a bit, decreasing in speed. Then with a suddenness, which made little Tiffany gasp and hide beneath her quilt, it accelerated. *Zigzag* – she found it hard to follow. It came close to her nose at one point, perhaps it didn’t want to scare her. Then it stopped zigzagging.

It flew around the room very fast, and circled. It circled and circled, and then it circled some more, and then stopped.

It grew. It grew larger and larger. It was still very small, about the size of a thimble or pea. Tiffany watched it carefully; blink. She watched it move, it pulsed, it grew larger and then shrank suddenly, then it grew again. Blink. Blink. The spark now had form: wings. Tiffany’s tongue glued itself to the roof her mouth.

It has wings. I can see them I can really see them. The faerie drew closer, definitely a faerie – female, pinched face, two small dimples in her cheeks and a nose which was too long. Wings – crystalline, fluttering behind her. Faerie dust, very fine faerie dust sprinkled on her quilt; the faerie hovered and twinkled, her radiance magnificent.

“Are you...” whispered Tiffany. “Are you real?”

“Oh yes,” the faerie curtsied, “very real, and very pretty.” She gave Tiffany a piercing glare. “Are you real?”

Tiffany giggled, “of course I am.” The faerie drew closer, an inch away, and pinched Tiffany nose.

“Ow!”

“Well, you feel real,” the faerie smirked. Tiffany rubbed her nose, still amazed that she was actually talking to a faerie. “A faerie has to take precautions you know. Imaginary people aren’t allowed into Faerieland.”

Tiffany thought glumly: *How can I go to Faerieland? Dad would have triplets if he came into my room and found me gone.* The faerie looked at Tiffany thoughtfully as her wings beat a hefty breeze over her shoulders. She raised a finger “one second here equals five hours in Faerieland.”

Tiffany felt perplexed. The faerie heaved a mighty sigh. “You could be gone for five whole hours, but when you return only a second would have passed.”

“Oh Tinkerbelle!” Tiffany clapped her hands together in delight.

“My name is not Tinkerbelle!” the faerie was furious, she must have been. Unless of course Faeries usually turn red when they shout. “I am Binkerbelle!”

The faerie – Binkerbelle whizzed over to Tiffany’s dressing table and gazed at her reflection. “I guess we do look alike.” She lifted one of her pigtails, “my sister is much bossier than me, but I am much prettier.” She tweaked the end of her nose with her finger and thumb and disappeared.

Blink.

Then she reappeared a few feet from Tiffany with a wand in her hand. She pointed it at Tiffany. “Whizz bam!”

“Whoa...” Squeaked Tiffany.

“Yea” replied Binkerbelle and then the world flipped. Stars appeared, danced, swirled and rotated around Tiffany’s head. Then the colours came, they slipped out of her ear. A peculiar experience – *fizz bam pop*. Then a mist descended, pink and sweet (it touched the end of her tongue). Tiffany closed her brown eyes for a moment then opened them again.

“Oh my...” her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. No bed or quilt, no bedroom or mirror; bushes, plenty of bushes and singing fruit. The fruit were as large as melons, yellow and huge and they looked like strawberries but had mouths.

Singing fruit is surprising to see, but not as surprising as a giant caterpillar.

“Hello.” It coiled its body around itself. Tiffany leapt into the air, surprise and fear mingling. “Fancy a bite?” It showed her its sharp glistening teeth, and Tiffany thought: *no thank you.*

Tiffany thought that it wanted to eat her. Its teeth looked sharp. Instead, it lowered its head and munched the floor. Tiffany realised that she was standing on a half eaten leaf. *Perhaps everything here is giant sized.*

Munch munch agreed the caterpillar with a smile.

“Well, I guess it is time we were on our way. We can’t stand around here all day. We have a rainbow to catch.” Binkerbelle lifted into the air and swivelled gracefully, then manoeuvred around a bush and disappeared.

Being magically transported from your bed into faerie land is exhilarating. Being left alone in faerie land with a gnashing caterpillar with sharp teeth – sharp enough to eat ...

“Binkerbelle!” yelled Tiffany. Her voice was very loud, and particularly clear. The fruit on the bushes quivered, and the branches on the trees shook around her.

A moment passed, and then another. The caterpillar continued to munch, gyrating his lower jaw vigorously. Tiffany listened for the faint sound of fluttering returning wings. The birds twittered back and forth. She thought she understood a little of what they said (“Hello jack, how are ... *tweet tweet* ...”) They flew around her, a flurry of feathers, and they whispered: “But you are part of us now. The moment you came here.”

Or was it the wind that whispered?

The leaf beneath her feet trembled, and her shadow wobbled. Wings grew, they sprouted from her spine, forming and shaping ...

“Oh my...” She gasped, then they finished growing.

The caterpillar finished his meal and the end of the leaf fell. Tiffany lifted effortlessly into the air, then darted off after Binkerbelle.

Flying wasn’t easy, but it was fun. She bumped into things, leaves and moss. Nothing solid. Binkerbelle was very fast. Tiffany was a quick learner and drew steadily closer.

The birds whispered a little, telling her which way to go. Great red branches with broken yellow leaves, and below them red mushrooms, acres of yellow spotted red mushrooms raced beneath her as she chased after Binkerbelle.

She found it hard to absorb all the new sights in Faerieland. Was that an elephant? A large creature ambled leisurely through the undergrowth, and then flew away – butterflies do that. Elephant butterflies are known for it. They are lighter than air, and they can bellow. One did. Tiffany covered her ears.

The colours of the forest were spectacular. Each blade of grass was able and very willing to shimmer. Blue and green, fading from one to another and back again. The whole land spun on an invisible wheel. The sun sometimes hid behind the clouds, and when it did so the land turned scarlet.

“Flying is great.” Tiffany opened her arms, feeling the breeze lift her, tasting it on the tip of her tongue, feeling it slip through her hair. Binkerbelle was still ahead. Tiffany drew closer. *Whoosh!* Binkerbelle sped upward and disappeared between two leaves (each leaf had an eye in the centre which blinked).

Binkerbelle flew quickly, dodged intuitively. “Come follow me.” This time Binkerbelle’s voice echoed and was much closer.

Tiffany muttered to herself, “If she tells me to follow her one more time...” She grinned though, this game was fun. Finding Binkerbelle was hard at first. She listened to the noises of the forest. The insects buzzed as they walked over every surface. *Tap tap ... scrape*. She could hear their wings flutter. No sign of Binkerbelle and no sound either. The birds sang and chatted. Then, as she flew from leaf to leaf she noticed the dust.

Binkerbelle tapped her foot on a leaf impatiently. Tiffany drew closer. Binkerbelle lifted into the air and shouted: “Come follow me!”

Tiffany tried to follow but Binkerbelle disappeared again. Then came a whisper on the breeze, “come follow me.”

“Over here!” A bellow from the east. Tiffany changed direction.

A roaring sound, a thunderous howling: was it a lion? A millipede scuttled across a branch, its rhythmic limbs rolling forward, each leg following the other in hot pursuit. It raised his head, bowler hat balanced precariously: a nice smile.

Then she was upon it. A great rolling river, pink and glorious. A thousand purple fish laboured upstream. Each was at least a foot long. They glistened in the sunlight, leaping, winking, laughing and shouting: “Hayloo” (it’s all they ever said).

“Hayloo” this time the sound was further away.

“Soon we shall be having even more fun.”

Tiffany smiled broadly. “I am already having so much fun.”

Then the forest quietened, even the fish stopped laughing. A rainbow fell – silent and colourful. One minute not there, then there. The river rushed by, reflecting the rainbow’s wonderful colours. The rainbow waited for them. Patient and still.

Tiffany felt more than a little afraid. A rainbow up close is strange because of its solidity. Its colours sing and are purer than angel dust. The heart is the listener of the rainbow’s song, but it is hard to remain afraid of something so beautiful.

Binkerbelle walked toward the rainbow, to the very lip of the river and gazed upward at the vast expanse. Then she floated upward.

The rainbow faded just above the river.

Tiffany’s eyes were on Binkerbelle. The sight of a faerie is special. The sight of a faerie in front of a rainbow is breathtaking. The colours passed through her outstretched wings refracting, splintering into a thousand variations. The many colours sprinkled across the landscape painting the grasses and the trees with different colours.

Binkerbelle placed a dainty shoe (a faerie shoe is made of the finest lace) on the surface of the rainbow – *zoom zoom* and then she shot upward and out of sight.

Tiffany used her wings to lift off. Her wings fluttered, she could feel the gentle breeze on the surface of her ear. She told herself: “I will just take a look.”

The rainbow smelt of candyfloss and ginger biscuits. Looking often leads to touching – Tiffany felt her foot edge forward. The rainbow called to her: *I must carry you.*

She placed a toe on the surface. It was enough. *Away!* Propelled along the surface of the rainbow and up. *Whoosh:* across green and yellow, sailing higher. Above the cloud, through the clouds: and they tasted of... she didn’t know ... something delightful – peppermint and strawberries and with a hint of something indescribable.

The great rainbow is high and curved. Tiffany looked up. *How wonderful you are.* She hurtled across the surface of the rainbow travelling as fast as a rocket.

She had never skated, never tried. She skated now. *Am I moving? Or is it the rainbow which moves?*

Skating, skating, more skating and then... *whoosh*, even faster, much faster; no fear, she darted upward and along the colourful stripes. Red, yellow and blue, passing from one to another in a heartbeat.

Then the world slowed and music, very quiet music began. The beats and rhythms increased in tempo and volume. The music lifted her soul. She danced. The music echoed her joy and caused it. Her limbs and torso pursued the music as a kite pursues the wind, and yet the wind carries the kite. The rainbow lit up and pulsed to a beat.

Behind the dance music, barely audible, and as quiet as the buzzing of a hidden bee in a tempest: the sound of an all male choir, rich and deep. She listened carefully. As she did so, the two different types of music merged.

The colours and the music merged. The time between the two, like the limbs of dance partners expanded and contracted with perfect timing. She passed into the orange, dropped below the surface. The colour had substance, like syrup. She wanted to touch it, to reach out with her hand. The orange flowed around her, allowing her forward motion to continue. She glided, somehow aided by the liquid.

Then they arrived, and they had startled staring bulbous eyes. Fish! They blew silent kisses but could not send them *via* a palm. They were without palms or lips. They did have large luminescent eyes that stared and blinked.

Blink blink, blinkety blink blink.

Fish: Pink and blue. Tiffany turned around: orange, red, green. A fish for every colour. Their tails swayed in time to the tempo. In time, as one, in an ocean of orange they swam.

She pushed herself forward. Time sped up. They swam with her.

She passed through the many different colours of the rainbow, first though the orange and then into green. The fish followed, turning from one colour to another, each fish exchanged colours with another. An orange fish, previously unseen (but as important as the others) exchanged his colour with a green fish and instantly regretted it. He followed in the wake of the others. His bulbous eyes blinking. It was all that could be seen of it. *Blink blink. blinkety blinkety blink.*

The fish kept pace. They blew bubbles from their nostrils and stared. Green everywhere. No escaping it. Tiffany felt as if she was in a prison. Every direction was the same, no up or down, left or right.

The bubbles didn't stream behind the rainbow fish. They travelled in front, and even gained a little on Tiffany. Tiffany tried harder. She sped up, and finally after a monumental effort pulled away from the bubbles and the fish.

Forever green, forever green – rainbow madness. It has been reported by the Goblin Inquisitor (a newspaper widely distributed throughout Faerieland) that a troll by the name of Burt (NFA) stumbled into a rainbow. He was propelled upward immediately. He landed well but sunk quickly into the green (it could have been worse. He could have sunk into the red. He was spotted a few days later, drinking tea in his boxer shorts minus a sock and playing tiddlywinks with three goblins.

Tiffany looked behind her. The bubbles had fused together, making one huge bubble. The bubble was too close to her. She sped up. The bubble leapt forward, and encompassed Tiffany completely.

Having captured her the bubble descended through the green. She stood and stared. Placed her palms on the inside surface of the bubble. The fish surrounded her and stared at her. They blinked in unison. She felt sure they were trying to say goodbye. Their eyes told her that she had misunderstood them. They had sad eyes. She shouted to them “sorry”, and prayed that they heard her.

The bubble glided through the bottom of the rainbow and continued its descent. Binkerbelle waved to Tiffany. The bubble burst just above the treetops. Binkerbelle quickly flew upward to join her friend.

“Where have you been? I have been waiting ages.” Poor Binkerbelle was clearly distressed. Her wings were wilted and her forehead wrinkled.

Tiffany hugged her. “I am okay. I am just so glad I am back here with you. I got sucked into the green and there was...”

Binkerbelle’s face turned white. “This is terrible news. How did you survive it?”

“It was terrible at times but it wasn’t all bad.” Tiffany tried her best to reassure her friend. Before she could say any more Binkerbelle linked arms with her and whispered into her ear, and told her how very sorry she was for putting her in danger. As their feet touched the ground Binkerbelle waved her magic wand. A magnificent carpet unfolded itself and spread out evenly across the rich green grass. Bowls began appearing across the carpet, filling every available space. Each bowl was filled with jelly and ice-cream. Tiffany smiled, she couldn’t help it, ice-cream and jelly were her favourite.

“You have upset me so,” complained Binkerbelle. She reached for some chocolate syrup and licked her lips. “I thought you had been abducted by a gorilla or something worse.”

Tiffany patted her shoulder gently, “now now don’t be silly.”

Binkerbelle looked at Tiffany seriously, “I know I know, there is no such things as gorillas.”

Tiffany laughed, “Of course there are gorillas.” She reached over for another bowl of ice-cream, each one was a different flavour.

“Are you sure? Binkerbelle lifted a large spoon to her lips. “I mean, gorillas... well they can’t be real right?”

“Yes yes yes!” Tiffany giggled, “they are real.”

Binkerbelle seemed a little confused, “They are real, and they were in the rainbow?”

“No no no!” There were no gorillas on the rainbow!” Tiffany’s eyebrows lifted and her mouth fell open. She thought: *I think I am going to pop*. She felt pure frustration for the first time in her life. How did the conversation involve gorillas in the first place?

Binkerbelle smiled. Tiffany rolled her eyes and fell to the ground, and pretended to have death throes. “Please no more, no more. I can’t take any more,” she pleaded.

BOOM BOOM, and then BOOM! The trees shook and the leaves shivered. BOOM BOOM! Tiffany felt afraid and shaky. The ground around her heaved and shook. The animals fled. Their ears laid flat across their skulls. Their eyes bulged with fear. She was a faerie and faeries were supposed to be brave. They weren’t the type of creature to flee in the presence of danger.

Binkerbelle scarpered. Disappeared, ran away – flew away to the top of a very high tree, and hovered behind a leaf. The booming came closer. CRUNCH, “My foot!” a loud voice proclaimed. “Ow” a large tree crashed to the ground. “By gum!” Tiffany didn’t know what a “gum” was, or who had shouted it. Whatever it was it must have been big.

Then the giant appeared. He was definitely a giant and he wasn't happy. He hopped around holding his left foot yelling constantly. The foot he hopped with had a shoe on it, but the other was sockless and shoeless. His toes wiggled and the base of his foot arched. Stuck in the sole of his foot was a huge thorn.

The tallest of the trees were both standing upright and majestic. He gripped one with his left hand and one with his right. He then swung himself forward, with one big pull and thrust. The pain was forgotten for a moment, and then at the last moment remembered. "Owwwwwwwwww!" He howled louder and longer. He howled and howled then toppled onto his back.

Tiffany flew upward and waved at him. He didn't see her. She waved with her whole arm. The giant simply howled louder.

She made a decision. She flew into his large eye at full faerie speed. His eye was huge, easily as large as a plate. "Ow" he pushed a palm against his now red eye. It was then that he noticed her. He bleated a lower "Ow". She was such a diminished little thing, he didn't want to frighten her. He didn't want her to hurt him either. "Why you hurt my eye?" He breathed in mightily. Nostrils huge and wide, two great goliath chasms that were mighty, impressive and hairy.

She knew it. She knew what he was going to do a moment before ... Then he did it quick and deep. She flew upward and to the right. She flew hard and true, but still it was a very close thing.

"Uh uh uh," and "choo!"

"Now shush, I'll help but you must be brave and quiet." The giant closed his lips tight and flicked his thumb in the universal signal for "ok".

She flew down and inspected the giant's foot. The thorn was in deep. Tiffany gripped it with both her hands and pulled with all her strength. It wasn't enough. Tiffany knew that it wouldn't be enough. "Binkerbelle!" – it was Tiffany's turn to roar. Binkerbelle was at her side in a moment. They both grasped the thorn and pulled. *We can't possibly help this giant*, thought Binkerbelle. *We just can't, faerie magic doesn't work on giants*. Tiffany wanted to help the giant so much. Small tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

"Ohhhh," the giant began to sob, his whole body shook gently. This time Tiffany focused the whole of her mind on doing one thing: moving the thorn. Her little hands grasped the thorn. She felt how strong it was. She pulled mightily. Her hands began to glow a little. She kept her eyes closed. She remembered what her father had always told her: *If you want something enough, and believe it with all your heart, and try your best, then it will happen*. Her arms began to glow. Then her whole body did too. Her eyelids lit up from within. Her whole body filled with energy. Then unexpectedly the thorn came free, sliding out in one motion.

The giant leapt to his feet, uprooting a tree. Then he shook the ground and laughed. It sounded like thunder. Tiffany and Binkerbelle panicked a little and flew upward quickly.

"Wow!" shouted the giant with joy. He raised his fist in triumph. "I mean, wow and double wow!"

– A happy giant.

"You did it. You said you would and you did."

He swung his head back and forth. "Oh my, you are clever." He looked to the left and right. "But where are you now?" Faeries are small, giants are big and perhaps it is more difficult to see a Faerie if you are a giant.

Binkerbelle flew in close to the giant with her arms on her hips. She yelled at him, red faced and angry. The giant cupped his ear with a huge hand, "What?" He tried to keep his voice quieter. He could see that this wasn't the little faerie that had helped him. He pursed his lips and blew gently. Binkerbelle tumbled through the air, her head met her toes and vice versa. She disappeared, and reappeared by the side of the giant's ear with a megaphone in her hand. "I said, stop making so much noise, and stop laughing so much. You are hurting my ears!" he reached a hand to his ear. She disappeared and reappeared by the side of his other ear. "You are still too loud!" she yelled.

"OWWWWW STOP IT!" If his roar had shape and size, it would be the size of a house, compared to Binkerbelle's matchbox yell.

She reappeared at his other ear again. "I said: you are still much too loud!"

This time the giant roared and shook the whole forest. The pink rabbits ran for their lives. The butterflies grouped together and sped for safety. Every animal and magical creature fled. Most of them were creatures which Tiffany had never seen before. She felt sad to see them run.

"Stop that yelling!" Tiffany's face turned red, "be kind." The giant looked at her, clearly puzzled. He had fuzzy hair, and some fuzz on his face too.

"I am kind. I am the kindest giant you will ever meet. I always try to do nice things." He spoke sincerely. His bushy eyebrows quivered, and even danced. Tiffany had never witnessed dancing eyebrows before, they were great to watch. She even tried a few movements with her own eyebrows.

"You are feeling better now I see."

"Oh yes," the giant replied – eyebrows dancing, lips smiling, head tilting a little. "You are a little thing aren't you and very brave too." He breathed in deeply. Tiffany panicked. She thought that he was going to blow out suddenly. He breathed out slowly instead. "I would like to thank you." He tried to speak quietly. "You have been so kind. If there is anything that I can do for you, you need only ask."

"Well, I have been taught that you should treat other people the way that you would like to be treated." She remembered her father saying something like that to her once and thought it very wise advice.

The giant winked playfully. "I would like to be bopped on the head a few times with a rock. Does that mean that I should hit you with a rock too?"

"What I mean is. I think you should stop stomping around the forest, and making so much noise. You really are frightening all the forest creatures."

The giant's expression slowly changed. Now he was embarrassed. "Well, I guess you are right. I will promise to respect the animals from now on." Then he said: "Would the two of you like a ride on my shoulder? I will be able to show you the many sights of Faerieland, but from a giant's point of view."

They both thought it a grand idea (grand ideas come in many different shapes and sizes.) They flew up to his shoulder. Which took a great long while, and then they sat themselves down comfortably, curling their toes into the loose fabric of his shirt. He smelt of nature, bushes, flowers and bad breathe.

He walked. *Bang wallop*. The ground shook, the birds scattered. The animals fled in one direction, a few misinformed creatures collided into each other. Some magical creatures were unable to get hurt, they covered their ears and closed their eyes instead. A giant tortoise tucked his head into his shell, and withdrew his paws.

“Look where you are going!” yelled Tiffany, appalled at the damage being caused. “Stop knocking over the trees! And stop frightening the poor animals, look at how frightened they are!”

The giant seemed genuinely upset. “I can’t help it. I am so large.” He was very big. His shadow stretched for a full mile.

Tiffany wasn’t having any of it. “That is no excuse. Do you think that because you are large, that you have less responsibility?” The giant looked at his toes, and tried to submerge them into the soil. He dropped his bottom lip. “You are more responsible if anything. You should be looking after the creatures of the forest. Not scare them!”

A group of miniature trees crossed their path. They had arms instead of branches and legs instead of roots. They were a full three foot tall. One of them smiled as he passed by. “We are off to a great firework festival,” he explained, whilst waving his arms frantically above his head. Each of them swivelled and continued on their way, mumbling to themselves quietly, “Scorpavier, Scorpavier” and disappeared into the shrubbery.

“Could you let us down please?” asked Tiffany. The giant knelt. The two of them flew to the ground and looked up at him.

The giant leaned forward, brought his face nearer to them (and his bad breath). “Thank you missy, you have been so kind and have taught me a lot.” He had a pleasant voice and a sweet smile.

Tiffany gave him one last piece of advice. “You must continue to be careful, and when you walk, walk quietly. Try to be conscientious.”

The giant nodded. “Oh yes, a very good idea that is.” Then he walked away on tip toes.

A little later Binkerbelle and Tiffany sat together, and watched the sun descend. The clouds turned crimson and the sky changed to candyfloss pink. Binkerbelle slipped her fingers into Tiffany’s hand. “Your magic is so powerful, it influences everyone you meet. You touch their hearts and make them want to be better.” The sun sank a little more, and a great shadow covered the land. Tiffany leaned her head against Binkerbelle’s shoulder. She shut her eyes for a moment and smelt her sweet perfume. Binkerbelle whispered: “You know, no one says goodbye in Faerieland.”

Tiffany opened her eyes a little. She could see her bed, mirror and dolls and she could hear her father whistling contently in the other room.

Tiffany and the ladybird

Houses are houses are houses are houses...

... and roads, concrete roads and an incessantly chatty little girl with a pot bellied man. Tiffany was the little girl and the slow plodding gentleman was her father.

"Faeries must be somewhere, it stands to reason." Tiffany said this as if it were the most obvious piece of knowledge that anyone could possess.

"It does," agreed her father.

Long wings, and short wings, faeries are all different. In that way, they are like people.

People's faces are not on the surface of houses; there are faeries on the front wall of a house they pass – the silhouette of faeries. Her father pointed them out to his daughter as they walked hand in hand. She noticed them and smiled, pleased that some people had the good sense to paint them on their wall. Her heart thumped inside her chest, and a heat suffused her face. "Faeries must live in another place," she whispered to herself.

Her father smiled and said: "Well, perhaps they live in another world, heaven maybe. Perhaps faeries are able to cross over, and come here sometimes. Maybe they are like little angels."

It's a nice thought and they both give it careful consideration. Tiffany chatted a lot, more so to herself than to her father. Her father is sometimes a good listener but not today. His mind keeps wandering. He is remembering cleaning Tiffany's room, collecting up all the faerie dust.

"Hurry up Dad, George will be waiting for us." They both hurried towards the big white dilapidated building, it had a great big wooden fence around it. Tiffany hurried and skipped quickly down the path and her father ambled after her.

By the side of the busy road George waited for them. He is very tall and has branches coming from his body. "He is special." she brushed her fingers across the surface of his bark. The wind blew gently through his branches, rustling them; they spoke to her, to her heart.

"You can give him a hug if you like," suggested her Father.

"Would he like that?"

"I feel sure that he would." Tiffany's father's eyes grew bright with anticipation.

The little people gathered in George's branches and watched the father and child hug the tree, then watched as they departed. They danced through the branches, their small furtive bodies sliding across leaf and sundry. Then as the father and daughter disappeared around the bend the little people fled from the branches and scuttled over the large wooden fence. They ran together, pixies and other curious creatures, dodging nettles and flowers. Some rode on the backs of butterflies, those were the small wiggly little people. Others ran and were able to keep up.

They followed the pair, from behind the great fence. They kept themselves hidden. People are easy to follow because they make so much noise. Even when the little people are far away, they can hear the big people trampling everything in their path; some of the humans pull faces, horrible ugly faces and they shout at each other. Little people as a general rule don't like humans, especially the humans that live in cities. City people are more often than not the worst kind of people. This is a city, this city is called Newport. These two people are kindly and imaginative. Their auras sing, and can be heard by the little people, it is a sweet sound. The little people are more than careful, they have to be, people can be mean. Humans often have rough vibrations, jagged vibrations and must be avoided. Some haven't, some try very hard to be kindly, but people are changeable, and shift into nastiness easily.

They follow. The wind pushes against their faces and sings in their ears. Some play musical instruments as they run or fly, most make their music through movements alone; their very limbs create music. They sweep forward, disappearing for moments at a time and then reappearing. They wait upon a bush, each branch aglow with preternatural presences.

Tiffany's father ambles down the street with his little chatty daughter by his side. The grey heavily clouds cover the whole sky like a huge moving blanket. The father is warm inside, and there is a mysterious light in his eyes. Tiffany feels excited too. They walked faster, feeling more excited with each step, silently loving the adventure they were on.

They turn down a small corridor of trees which has a path running through it. Blackberry bushes are everywhere. The bushes are vacant of blackberries but full of promise. They walk together hand in hand. The cars can still be heard roaring down the road behind them. Nature is calling: a sweet music can be heard, a flute or lute.

"Listen, can you hear it?" her father whispered.

She could hear it, and this time she could really hear it. Her mouth opened wide and her eyes grew round (they formed three "O" shapes.) Her nostrils flared, "Is it ... is it them?" Her father didn't know for sure. He asked himself: *could it be?* Then they turned around another bend.

They heard a growl which also sounded like a hoot, it was a strange configuration of the two – a gurgle, the kind of sound a T-Rex would make if it ate a tractor. Then they saw it on the path ahead, it sat on its hind legs, lolling a gruesome tongue full of petulant sores. "ROAR!" – this time it sounded like a ferocious dog. The father placed himself between Tiffany and the creature. It looked like a dog, except it was without hair and its teeth were needle like. It roared again. Christopher (Tiffany's father) yelled at it and placed a foot forward, perhaps hoping to frighten it away. Its eyes changed colour, turning from yellow to red as its tongue flicked out, and with each roar-gurgle and it stamped its paw to the ground.

An assortment of little people flowed over the nearest fence and attacked the dog creature. They swooped down and hit the creature hard and fast: each of the little ones were a different colour, some held small swords and shields, they struck the creature... *one two three*. Then they attacked in unison, hacking and slashing. Two elves sat on doggie eyelids, forcing him to screw his face up. He tried to slap them away with his tongue: he shook his body and flipped his tongue upward to his eyes. The two little people, who happened to be elfkin (that is to say they were akin to elves) were fierce, and their expressions were determined and brave. They attacked the dog vigorously, pulling its ears and slashing at every part of its body. They hacked efficiently, flying up and down its torso causing havoc to its furless hide. Doggie stamped his feet creating humongous sparks, the sparks leapt up from his paws and struck several of the little people as they swooped downward. Tiffany cried out and thrust a palm outward to ward off the horrible sight. Some of the little people fell, having been hit by its rolling flapping tongue, some were hit by flailing spittle and some were hit by sparks caused by his romping thumping paws. As they descended their comrades caught them, wove magic – air magic and levitated the bodies over the large fence. The creature decided to flee. The Faeries chased it a little way, waving their wands in anger.

“It is a fierce opponent but no match for us.” A miniature man stepped forward. He looked like a man, he had a crown on his head and a miniature trident in his fist. Beneath the knees his legs were shrouded in a dense cloud, which swirled clockwise. Tiffany glanced at the cloud from the corner of her eye, watching small silent strips of lightning leap within it. He flew towards them with a broad smile that opened to reveal a toothy grin. “Pleased to meet you both.”

Christopher felt himself being pushed aside by an invisible force, a gentle force. The little man floated toward Tiffany, drifting past her father without a second glance. Tiffany performed a curtsy (she thought it a very strange thing to do. She had never felt the need to do one before). She gave him a warm smile too and felt sure that he must be a king.

“Your exploits in Faerieland have travelled to my ear.” He pointed to his ear. Tiffany felt an inexplicable urge to gaze into his ear to see if an exploit was still in there. “You have become a friend of the little people.” She felt her cheeks redden and couldn’t help giving him another of her best dimpled smiles. Then he turned toward her Father, “and Christopher you are most welcome to share the little peoples’ company too, on account of your persistence in maintaining our existence. You have denied us not, and thus your nobility precedes you.”

The little king bowed deeply to the both of them, then turned towards his people and gave them a wave. They were talking to each other excitedly. One was banging a drum. “Oyyyyyyyy!” hollered the king. His shout was very loud, it echoed; somewhere a mass of bees buzzed angrily.

They quietened immediately. The little man with the drum (he looked to be more of a miniature scarecrow really) bit his lip and stilled his hands.

Somewhere (perhaps in the place where all the bees were buzzing from) there came a loud growl. Tiffany yelped and looked to the sky, expecting it to be lit up with lightning. The growl sounded like thunder. The king shuddered deeply, and turned pale. "Time to move." He stamped the trident into the mud beneath his feet. The leaves on the trees and bushes quivered. Appearing in front of them a portal opened, it split the air in two – two worlds juxtaposed. "Come" he said. He led them through the rift holding the father's hand in his left and the daughter's with his right. As they passed through, Tiffany looked back for a moment and witnessed fifteen hairless dogs with tube like tongues, racing towards them. "Not today," he said quietly and pointed his trident towards the dogs and mouthed a mysterious word. A green bolt struck the first dog in the chest propelling it backwards. "Chupacabra," he muttered beneath his breath. "Will they ever give up?"

Tiffany peered around her, she was in a different place. She was within a house a very lovely house. It must have been a house because she could see out through the windows. Around her were chairs of various sizes, which were nicely painted, each with splashes of various colours. There was a table too, an elongated shiny surfaced piece of art garnished with cups and saucers. Far more extraordinary than anything else was the creature in the corner. It was an overly large ladybird. She sat comfortably minding her own business, knitting furiously.

The king leapt on to the table (it was then they realised just how small he was: a thumb sized – *a very large thumb sized* genie like man.) "Everyone take a seat," he shouted and gestured with a palm to the chairs. He wouldn't have been able to sit in the chairs himself, they were much too big. Tiffany watched her father take a seat hesitantly. He looked over his shoulder at her and winked. She knew that he was checking, making sure that the portal had closed. She seated herself confidently and looked around. The king smiled at her kindly and opened his arms wide, ready to burst into a gregarious rambunctious speech.

– A sound behind them. Christopher was nearly out of his seat, his face of alarm. He imagined another portal opening and a thousand Chupacabra running growling and spitting electricity. Tiffany rolled her eyes, and giggled a little, she reached a hand up to her mouth to stifle it. Elves came through the windows. The windows opened by themselves to let them in. They stepped through, leaping to the floor, each of them wearing a grin as wide as a river. They took various positions, some sat cross legged and others knelt. One rested on his shoulders and placed his legs in the air, balancing himself. Tiffany wanted to laugh but thought he might take offence. The large ladybird sniggered loudly, and didn't seem to care who heard it. She also winked at Tiffany knowingly. Everyone else simply stared at the clever elf.

A humming began. Tiffany's heart beat furiously for a moment. It lifted to her throat and trembled her knees. The humming was beautiful, exquisite. At first it was difficult to know where the music emanated from. One moment it came from the walls, then the windows and then the ceiling. Tiffany stilled her mind as much as she could. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then slowly opened them. The ladybirds mouth was moving, her lips jittered minutely.

Tiffany knew in her heart the ladybird was making the music. Did her eyes move behind the lids? The music became sweeter, somehow sweeter. The elves began to sing one octave at a time, higher and higher but very lightly.

The music continued for an hour, easing their unease, lifting their hearts, soothing their souls. The king had been affected as much as everyone else. He stirred himself awake, and licked his lips. It was then that Tiffany noticed she had shrunk and now was smaller than the king. It was true of her father also, he had shrunk and was now a head shorter than the king.

“This is rather strange,” Christopher explained. He looked at his oversized hand, it was still too large for any useful purpose. The music continued and Christopher again listened and became quickly immersed within the tempos. *It is so strange that I now find this so natural.* His hand gradually became the same size as the rest of him. He didn’t notice the sudden shrinkage, so engrossed was he in the tide of the music and lyric. *Ah that’s better,* he looked about himself. *But how did we change?* he scratched his head undecidedly.

The ladybird stopped her knitting. *Click click* – her needles had been having a fine time. *Fizz bam* and now they had stopped altogether. Everyone stopped chatting, and became still. Windows opened again and some Faeries passed through. They settled themselves down as their faces became relaxed and dreamlike. It was not the time for speaking: when the ladybirds knitting needles stopped it was time to be quiet and still. It was easy for them to be quiet, faerie wings were naturally silent. They perched quietly on the table, behind cups and saucers and watched carefully. Faerie eyes are sharp eyes and miss very little. Tiffany was smaller than most, though the faeries were the same size as her. She admired their wings and wished she had her wings again.

The ladybird placed her knitting needles down on a small table by her side. Her eyes became glazed and a little distant. She had large eyes, they were black with a mixture of deep purple in the iris. She extended her mandibles, extended and rubbed them together. The music begins. A beat and a bass combined with the sound of angels singing. Each face was enwrapped by the music. The ladybird shell-like wings fluttered and changed colour. They wept. At first Tiffany wondered why everyone was so sad. Then she realised they were crying from joy. They were happy and content. Their eyes shared the same expression as the ladybird. The music filled Tiffany also. She felt her toes tingle and there was a curious itchy feeling on both sides of her shoulder blades.

The faeries take to the air, their wings flutter hastily. The pixies stand to their feet and clap gently, rhythmically. The brownies laugh gently, even their laughter is harmonious. Tiffany wondered why everyone was acting strangely. She noticed that her father was crying. Smiling also, he tapped his feet on the chair seat. He slapped his hands on his knees and wore the broadest grin.

Then she felt it. It began near her toes, a wonderful feeling rising through her whole body. It passed through her knees and climbed to her hips. *Wiggle wiggle* – she wiggles, there is no help for it. There is the need to move, to dance! She does so, and why not? Thought and action are no longer separate from each other. Before she could think, before she could wink, she was already moving. She danced around the room, feeling her feet flit across the surface of the floor and table, around every corner and across every edge. The music lifted her entirely off the ground. Her wings were laid flat across her back (she had them, they had grown!) She didn’t need her wings, not in this place, the very air suspended her. The brownies and pixies (the brownies are a type of pixie but you shouldn’t tell them: *shhhhhh*) lifted into the air – the song lifted them. The music propelled her around the room. She listened to the music and the sweet voice of the ladybird. Three brownies are moving swiftly too. She flies, they do too, each of them twist and slide between each other.

Christopher listened to the music, he has lost himself within the rhythms. The pixies held guitars and were playing them energetically. Others played the drums and another played a bass. He had never heard such amazing music, the riffs ran into each other and blended.

Tiffany danced and danced and forgot herself, and yet somehow became more herself. Her legs followed the music around the room. They moved of their own accord as her mind raced across lands she had never seen before. She slipped through portals into worlds where dragons fought each other in skies leavened with gold. She danced along the fringes of a silver pool. As she did so she observed her reflection, and within its silvery hue a great phoenix mounted the sky. It raised its mighty wings lighting up the heavens. The pool changed colour from silver to gold. Beneath the golden wavelets creatures born from resin hatched and swam to the surface.

Then she came back, with a whoop and a suddenness. Her body was still shifting through its many graces and movements, and now her mind directed it. The ladybird had begun knitting again, and the faeries had flown. The room was emptying by the minute – the song had ended.

Faeries and elf-kin are able to move fast enough when they feel it a necessity to do so. A minute shifted passed itself, and then another. Some of the little people stayed. They settled down into the saucers, making themselves comfortable. One was an ant with a neat little bowler hat that sat on his peculiar large head. He nodded frequently and spoke to another creature. The other creature was a caterpillar with a pipe (as opposed to a caterpillar without a pipe.) He was multicoloured and smiled from one side of his face to the other. Tiffany moseyed on over, careful not to look conspicuous. They spotted her, and welcomed her with smiles and soothing gestures.

“You know nothing,” said the caterpillar. He spoke through his teeth as he chewed a smoking pipe.

How rude, thought Tiffany. She noticed that the ant was noticing the caterpillar and was feeling good about being noticed in return. The caterpillar was feeling good about being noticed whilst noticing. He spoke and curled his body around himself. “To know nothing is a very profound thing to say. If you can spare a thought towards the nature of nothingness. To know nothing is impossible because to think of nothing is impossible, unless you are able to empty the mind through meditation. Yes it is a profound thing to say.”

The ant was clearly impressed by the wisdom of the caterpillar and expressed his appreciation with a multitude of quick little nods.

The caterpillar continued: “indeed, the state of nothingness is sublime if it can be reached. Perhaps it is what human speak of as Zen.” The caterpillar puffed on his pipe between words, he did so quickly, and breathed steam out through his overly large nostrils. Tiffany inhaled the smoke accidentally, coughed, frowned and made ready to leave. She didn’t like the smell of tobacco. He puffed again. This time there was a different smell. Now it smelt of peppermint and calamine lotion, not so unpleasant. He brought the pipe up again to his thick puckered lips, sucked deeply and exhaled again. “Zen is the supreme appreciation and awareness of the moment, a true perception of how things actually are.”

“And yet,” explained the ant. “Nothing and no one could possibly know in any true sense the true attributes of nothingness? Is it not the space between words which gives the word meaning? Does silence have the same attribute also? To know something in its actuality would require an infinite mind.” The caterpillar heaved his torso upward and wiggled his arms. The ant took this as a good sign and to continue “To know a thing in itself would require a mind that was able to perceive everything in the universe at once. Anything in and of itself can only be understood in relation to everything else. It is for this reason that we know nothing about the universe. The ant then added another morsel, almost as an afterthought: “Or indeed anything in it. The humans seem to think they know how things are.”

The caterpillar smiled, "Yep, they continually pat each other on the back and compliment one another's cleverness. Especially the teachers in the very clever schools they call universities." He scratched his head thoughtfully and pondered. "They discover a new thing and throw out their old ideas. Which is a good thing to do. Then they begin to slap each other on the back again. Expounding on their cleverness again." He lifted one of his arms, raising up a finger. "Then they purport that they are again in possession of truth".

"Do you think..."

"As often as I can," replied the caterpillar promptly. He wobbled his chin as he spoke.

Indignant, the ant pulled a face at the caterpillar. "What I meant to say, before you interrupted me, was that if I was to give you a certificate confirming your cleverness and obvious teaching skill. Then, if I was to give it to you, and then you were to give out similar certificates to others confirming their cleverness. We would then, in no time at all create a university."

"Why would we want to do that?" asked the caterpillar.

The ant simply stared at the caterpillar for the longest time. Then found an answer. "Why, to prove our cleverness of course!"

"Indeed. It is as you say. There is no use in being clever if no one knows it." The caterpillar was in complete agreement, although he gave no outward appearance that he was. "They have a problem, these humans. They don't know how to think. Many of them have knowledge, but they don't know what to make of this knowledge. If one of them decides to think something independently of the rest, they often shake their heads and browbeat the exponent."

The wind picked up outside. Christopher listened to it. The sound was gentle against his ear, and distant against his mind. Tiffany listened to the conversation between the caterpillar and the ant and enjoyed it. She didn't understand it. This somehow didn't matter. The ant's face was very nice to look at. His smile too. The caterpillar was bold and friendly and a little bit frightening. He curled his tail around his torso and stretched. Tiffany watched their faces and enjoyed every expression and nuance. She clapped her small hands together and laughed. They smiled at her.

Christopher slipped behind her and slipped his hands into hers. They listened. They listened well, for a while. Then the caterpillar scuttled off into a corner, and buried his head in a book. The ant simply smiled and tipped his head and hat.

A rabbit walked in through the door, a magic door that suddenly appeared in the wall. He held a large hat in his hand-paws. The hat had two holes in it. Two of his three fingers filled the holes, three big furry fingers. Tiffany watched wide eyed, she couldn't believe it – she loved rabbits. She could never get near to a wild rabbit. They kept running, disappearing into a bush or around the corner of a log. She had seen some very queer business recently. Now here was the rabbit blinking and staring about itself.

The ladybird gave the rabbit a little nod. The rabbit stepped forward. He was fidgety but very careful. He stood at a respectable distance and waited.

The little king puffed out his chest, and breathed in deeply. "We did fine today, we have increased our patrols..." He didn't get the chance to finish the sentence. The ladybird raised a palm, six of her fingers reached for the ceiling. He stopped his dialogue. As he did, his lips flapped for a little while. Her expression became stony, one moment as soft as heated butter, the next hard as granite. The little man-king wasn't used to being told what to do. His mouth fell open, and perhaps even, perhaps maybe, he looked a little dishevelled.

“Nothing is right” stated the ladybird. She was sincere, everyone knew it. The rabbit knew it, he took his spectacles off and watched the proceedings very carefully. Things are not as they seem. Ladybirds are able to sing and enchant the mind. Humans are able to shrink. Dogs... well dogs are able to do most anything they need to do, all they need do is howl. Humans are able to change and become faeries. Everything changes. Nothing remains the same...

Tiffany simply peered at the rabbit from the corner of her eye. She wanted to see his eyes. Would they be pink? He had dark glasses on. What was behind the glasses? He pulled his hat over his ears, and pulled it down a little, then straightened it. His ears poked out fiercely, proudly. The ladybird called him over with a wave of her hand.

“We need to know,” The ladybird started. “We need to know how they are getting through. They keep getting through and now there are more than ever. We were caught by surprise today.”

The rabbit nodded, his ears bobbed. “Yes lady *Mar*.”

She eyed the rabbit, knowing he was good.

“Something needs to be done.” He said simply.

“Something,” she agreed, “Definitely something.”

Red car yellow lorry, red car yellow lorry.

Everyone had gone home. They had simply upped and left, a few at a time and quietly. Tiffany hadn't noticed them leaving. The ladybird continued to knit (did she ever stop?) and sat very still, in a comfy corner. Not everyone had gone, the caterpillar still sat in the corner reading a book

“I guess it is time for us to go.” Tiffany’s father directed a whisper into her ear. She felt his fingers slip between hers. She didn’t want to leave this magical place. “I know,” he whispered gently, coaxing her to follow him.

Walking over to the window he thought of something. *How do we become big again?* A simple enough question but it was undeniably an important one. Eyes were on him; the ladybird. *Trust me*, she whispered into his mind. *Trust me*.

That was good enough for him. *Click click* – her needles didn’t miss a beat.

He was determined to leave quietly, and to not look back at the ladybird. He couldn’t help giving a furtive glance back. She offered him a quick wink. *Did I see her wink?* He thought. *Or was that just my imagination?*

He couldn’t help grinning as he opened the window. The smile remained alive as he leapt. Tiffany in tow, she had a smile too. As they descended they grew. They grew in a moment.

Always keep your wits about you. There is no truly safe place.

They landed on their feet and heard the sound of the traffic rush into their ear drums. Tiffany placed her hands over her ears to protect them from the sound. They walked onward, watching the traffic pass them by. The pavement was familiar, a friend. Normal. After the events of the evening, normality was a strangeness in itself.

Somewhere the sound of flute began. Tiffany looked upward at her father, a merry twinkle in her eye. The flute reminded her of them.

Red car yellow lorry red car yellow lorry.

They turned away from the road, and proceeded down the path they had taken earlier. A man now stood where the dogs had been. He smiled at them in a kindly manner. He sat comfortably on a rock (Christopher felt sure the rock hadn't been there before). "Hello there," greeted the stranger. His accent was strange, perhaps liverpudlian. His tone was kindly and eloquent.

"Hello there," returned Christopher. He didn't like the stranger. There was something about his bow tie. I mean who wears a bow tie?

"Magic is all around," stated the stranger. He opened his white gloved palms to the air in proclamation of this fact. In the centre of his left palm, wondering why everyone was staring at him, sat a frog. The frog wondered how he might fly. As he pondered the secrets of the bird the white gloved hand threw him into the air. His froggy legs changed into wings, his bulbous eyes changed too, and shifted to the side of his head. Then he took flight. The floor disappeared. He heaved himself heavenward to the clouds.

Tiffany thought it was splendid. "Oh how lovely."

"Indeed," explained the man. "It is magic."

"It is," agreed Tiffany.

Something was quite wrong. Christopher felt very sure that there was something very wrong with the situation. When you become an adult, and if you are lucky enough to have half a brain (he was fortunate in this respect) you also know when someone was trying to sell you something. He didn't know what the strange man was selling but he didn't want any of it. He stepped forward, blocking the man's view of his daughter. The stranger's eyes flashed wide with fury. He withdrew a slim rod and directed it at Christopher.

There was an intense flash followed by excruciating pain. Christopher cried out. Pain laced through his arm and shoulder, and then across his chest. He crumpled to his knees. A tremendous weakness enveloped him. He felt his eyes roll back in his head and then a blackness raced toward him. The stranger cried out in triumph. His face became boyish and crazed.

Watch his eyes. Tiffany watched his eyes. What spell would he be using next? Would he use his wand or would he use a vocal spell? The utterance of a spell if done quickly and precisely could be just as powerful than a spell being directed through the wand. Her mind became clear and relaxed – actively passive. Her feet pointed inward followed by her knees, her centre – perfectly balanced. The birds song dimmed measurably. She felt rather than observed an invisible bubble surround her. She considered that it was this bubble which dimmed the bird call. She understood perfectly what was about to happen, she knew that it would be her who would win. She would either out spell cast him (though she didn't know a single spell) or find some other way to defeat him. She had no doubt of her success, a thousand pages of spells fluttered through her mind (where they came from she didn't know). She understood that the utterance of a spell and not merely the understanding of a spell would be required to successfully cast it.

His eyes flashed. He reached for his wand. She was already moving. She lifted her right hand and flipped it upward. Abruptly, a force struck him. It was invisible, it struck him across the chest and face. He lifted a hand to ward off the blow. The hand that he had lifted, the one which contained his wand felt the brunt of the force also. His arm moved in a great arc, catapulting his wand from his grasp. The wand disappeared into some bushes. It changed as it slid through the foliage, camouflaging itself, becoming identical to the fallen branches that surrounded it. The force lifted him into the air and pushed him backwards twisting his torso. He righted himself in midair, flipping like a cat. His teeth transformed into fangs and his eyes became blood red. He threw a fireball at her. She reached down with her left hand. Her fingers became rigid – like an *eagle claw*. Her other hand lay limp and was extended toward him.

Tiffany didn't know what she was about to do, she felt strong and without fear. She gripped the floor with her feet, positioning her centre of gravity. She pushed her weight through her toes. The fireball flew true, it hurtled straight toward her. She felt a surge of energy pouring upward into her left hand, and then with her right she made a curving motion. The fireball curved at the last moment, forming a crescent in midair then turned. It flew back at him. His blood red eyes widened, fear crept into them. He fled, very quickly upwards and away. *He has a tail, a red long slithery tail*, she thought. *And doesn't it wiggle as he flies?*

The Faeries came, they flooded over the fence. They swept her father up into their tiny arms. The king came to her, he floated up to her face. "We will make him well," he smiled reassuringly. "We have the best healers." His face turned suddenly very sad. "I am so sorry that we didn't come sooner, that we couldn't prevent..."

Tiffany's eyes softened. She touched his little hand. "It is okay."

"We will take care of him." He opened a portal with his trident. Tiffany walked through and appeared in her garden. The little king flew upward to the door knocker and swung it down. Then disappeared.

Tiffany's mother opened the door and protruded her head from the doorway. "Where is your Dad?" She wore a quizzical expression.

"He waited by the corner for the door to open. He said he was in a rush to get back." *Please get well daddy, just please get well*. She reached out with her mind as best she could. A doubt registered at the back of mind, wanting to be heard: *If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride*. That was one of her father's favourite sayings.

She needed to be brave. She needed to look normal. She nibbled her lower lip and entered her home. Maybe it would be okay tomorrow.

Mc Noodle

The day smelt nice. The kids outside were saying naughty words. They didn't care if anyone heard. The bed was nice and warm. Her teddies, their eyes twinkled. Sunlight slipped in through the curtains.

Her sisters shouted below, they were in the living room having a good time. When Courtney was mad she either made a lot of noise or none at all. Trinity yelled and screeched. No one could screech as well as Trinity. She had autism, and yelled when she was tired. But when she smiled, she lit up the world and when she laughed it was always with joy.

Please Daddy be well. Please –

She scuttled down the stairs, and rustled around the corner. Courtney pulled a face at her as she walked into the room. She wanted to scream at her, or complain to her mother. Today was different. It felt strange – sometimes Dad didn't come over for days. Today Dad couldn't come over, even if he wanted too. She wanted to cry. She held her tears in, tightened her resolve. She told herself to be brave. It would be what Dad wanted her to be.

They took off at noon, Mum, Tiffany and her sisters. Rob stayed behind, he was too sleepy. He had been busy last night chatting to his girlfriend over the internet.

They were on their way, laughing and chatting along the pathway, over the footbridge and toward the shopping centre; an iron fence to their right, cars roaring down the road on the other side. Trinity ran on, it was perfectly safe. Trinity loved to run and be free. She so often needed to hold Mum's hand.

They walked to the fast food joint. She loved the words: *fast food joint*. She had heard the term: *fast food joint* on a television cop episode, and thought it was funny. They were going to have a lot of fun. Having something to eat with her family was always fun. It was *their* time out. Occasionally a family needs time for themselves, a time to shake the cobwebs away.

Their shadows lengthened as they walked. They were fascinating to watch. They stretched and shifted across the different surfaces. She waved her arm, and watched her shadow arm do the same. Mum's shadow legs seemed very long one moment and then short. Her hair was funny too, there looked to be a little man on her head ... a little shadow waved to her. That was nice – shadows can be funny. She shrugged and waved back. The shadow waved again. She looked behind her and looked up at her mother's head and sure enough there was a little man there. He was dressed in brown clothes, which included a hat, shirt, socks and shoes. A shoe rested gently on the curve of her mother's ear. When he smiled she noticed that his teeth were misshapen. He seemed proud of them. He showed his *grimey's* at every opportunity – crooked teeth are a must if you are a brownie. Then he shifted once more into nowhere, again – appearing in front of her eyes, then with a wink... gone.

“Look where you are going Tiffany,” warned her mother. Tiffany did so. She knew that it was the right thing to do when you walked down the street. Cars were more dangerous than crocodiles or sharks. *Best noodles from FARMER CHILES!* That’s what the sign said. It was in the distance, but its great red large letters beckoned them all. It was true too, the noodle eating establishment was very good but Tiffany preferred chicken nuggets.

They arrived. Courtney walked like a little lady, after all she was nearly thirteen. Tiffany skipped, and Trinity decided to collect the brown leaves around the outside of the eating establishment. “Come on Trinity, time to have something to eat!” her mother shouted to her.

“No, I want to get leaves.” She replied. It was a simple argument.

“Right, I will eat it then.”

“No!” she screamed. “Don’t you dare.” She turned for a moment, evaluating the distance to the door. Mum was not going to have her meal, it wasn’t right! There were so many leaves to be picked up outside, and she needed to pick them up, no one else would. She bent down again and scooped a bunch of leaves and shuffled them into her pocket.

The very thought that her mother would eat her meal made her run and swoop beneath her arm. Trinity smiled gently, she knew it was a game. She joined her sisters at a table and waited patiently.

Tiffany watched for the little man that only she could see. He would appear, she felt sure. She looked under the table, she thought he had been pulling at her lace. She checked the room, maybe he was sitting by someone’s side or in their hair.

Nowhere to be found. She slumped forward with her hands on her chin, brown eyes settling somewhere between the ceiling and the sign in the distance that said: “DO NOT ENTER CLEANING IN PROGRESS,” or rather, because the words were so distant they looked more like this: DO NOT ENTER CLEANING IN PROGRESS. Her mother was now fifth in the queue, she tapped her foot impatiently.

This was going to take a while.

There he was. Behind the mirror. Well, not behind it. Inside it. He looked to be tasting some tasty noodles. His gaze was downward and fixed. He stared into his pot noodle, desperately seeking a stray piece of curly bit in the gravy. Then he looked up and caught Tiffany staring at him.

“Oh hello,” he said mischievously.

Tiffany mouthed, “hello” – she didn’t want to draw any attention by speaking the actual words. He walked forward, stuck his head through the mirror’s surface. Then he leapt onto the table, skidded around the edge with one foot in mid air, wiggled and then leapt again (He seemed to like leaping) and landed in front of Tiffs. He tipped his hat to her, almost as an afterthought.

“Hello there, I am Mr Mc Noodle.”

Tiffany giggled into her palm. “No you’re not.”

“Well, of course I am. Now let’s not argue at our first meeting.” He was abrupt and a little bossy. She nodded in agreement. He nodded back – it was an acknowledging nod. She nodded again, acknowledging his acknowledgement. He nodded once more, perhaps to end their nodding session. She didn’t want him to have the last nod. So she nodded again, just to end their game of nods. Now they were really nodding against each other. Mr Mc Noodle seemed to be winning, his hat shook three or four times with each nod he made. Tiffany giggled, she liked the little man.

He crossed his legs and sat down on nothing. It was a clever piece of magic, no doubt. Tiffany could tell it was magic, she had the feeling, it rippled around her.

“You knocked that prince right off his feet with a flick of your wrist. You are most marvellous.” His tone was matter of fact. He looked right at her, into her eyes. His face was as serious as a butcher. “Everyone is talking about it. It was truly a masterful piece of magic. And the way you directed his spell back at him.” He shook his head. “Masterful.”

If anyone had turned their head they would have the thought: *it is strange that a little girl was nodding and talking to herself*. Accept, when she gave it a little thought, she knew that no one could see her. If they were to look her way, their eyes would not focus on her. Tiffany understood that this was another piece of magic. It was a clever piece of magic, it was – a grand piece of magic, in its way. Simple, but perhaps no other spell could be more practical in such circumstances. Trinity eyes twinkled playfully, she blew into her palm. She wasn’t fooled by such an illustrious piece of brownie magic. She did it quickly, she lowered her hand and released her breath. It wiggled across the table, moving around a menu rack and knocked the little man from his invisible seat.

He toppled. He struck an arm out to catch himself but somehow missed and landed on his tummy. He clearly wasn’t used to falling. His hat came off, which for a brownie at least was a horrifying experience. As the hat tumbled off, as it clipped his shoulder on its downward motion, he attempted to swipe it mid-fall, yet failed. With his failure he revealed to everyone (“everyone” being Tiffany and Trinity) his bold patch. Brownies don’t like bold patches, they laugh at them uproariously.

He looked behind him. Trinity laughed but was it at him? He couldn’t tell, her eyes darted everywhere. They twinkled back for a moment, it was her trick. She directed a little stare at him. He was back on his feet again. She kissed her palm and blew. Another little spell perhaps. He leapt back with one hand on top of his hat, to keep it on. Thankfully it was not a spell. Trinity couldn’t contain herself anymore and laughed loudly. It was a wonderful whimsical sound, a delight for the ear. The little man laughed with her, he couldn’t help it, nor wanted too. Trinity couldn’t help herself either, she held her stomach with a palm and laughed some more. Poor Courtney didn’t know what to make of her two sisters, sometimes they could be quite mad. She smiled though, it was nice to see them happy.

“She is a rare one, and not ungifted in magic,” stated the little man in an appreciative tone.

“She is. She’s my sister.” That was explanation enough.

Mum came back and sat down. The food arrived, held in a waitress's hands. The little man ate with them, complaining often. “NO NOODLES!” he shouted. He shared Tiffany’s dinner, but didn’t like chicken nuggets. No one heard his occasional out bursts. Tiffany studied him discreetly. She hadn’t seen his type before. He was dressed entirely in brown, he wore a hat, it was larger than his head. He wore a raggedy suit which had room enough for three cats (miniature cats.) Everything was exactly the same brown colour, there was no variation in hue. His eyebrows wiggled as he ate. He kept one eye on Trinity. He had leapt onto a plastic coke container and sucked a little coke through a straw. Trinity grinned. He had the distinct feeling that she was planning another prank.

They all finished their meals without incident. They left through automatic double doors, and as they made their exit, Trinity slipped a brown leaf into the little man's hand (which is a remarkably skilled thing to do.) "For you," she whispered, "it is brown like you." He felt a large piece of sunshine melt his heart and travel up to his face.

"She really is something." He shook his head in bewilderment.

A car travelled past, a limousine. A window slowly rolled downward, in the darkness a shadowy face could be seen, and the edge of a hat. Tiffany felt a cold shiver ripple down her spine and down her arms. The little man stood on Tiffany's left shoulder with his chest pushed out, he knew the danger. He held his wand ready, the tip of it was illuminated ready to be used. The man in the car shifted his head forward and smiled, the slightest curvature of the lips. His eyes were lit by a red inner light. Then, as soon as he appeared he was gone. The car rolled on by.

The little man trembled, she could feel the vibration through her shoulder. Trinity held her mother's hand. "Come on, hold my other hand Tiffs. And Courtney, watch the road." Sheridan always made sure they were safe. Courtney looked up from her phone, her fingers stopped their twiddling for a moment in order to watch carefully as she crossed.

Apples.

The clown didn't mind feeling happy. He was undoubtedly the happiest clown whilst eating apples. He was doing so now leisurely, and with a big sloppy smile. He couldn't eat any apple from any tree, it had to be a particular tree. The apples had to be the right kind of apples.

It is my tree – he was a wood Elf. Scratch that – he had been a wood elf. Now he was something else, something entirely different. Between thoughts that were more than unusual he gently ran a rather large tooth pick up and down his incisors.

Another apple found its way into his claw like hand and his fangs found the succulent surface. He had been sitting on this small log for quite some time, chewing. He was introspecting too, which was unusual for him. He had been a teacher once, in a far off land...

His lower jaw dropped open, ready to receive another lush green apple. *I used to be a teacher, and there was a little girl ...*

"This is my beauty. They are all mine..." He liked to talk to his food as he reminisced. Talking to his food made him feel better, and helped *them* feel better about being eaten. These were his thoughts and he felt quite astute for the thinking of them.

Elf – that was a strange word. He scratched his head and wondered how he had thought of such a word. He hugged himself and giggled. *I wonder what an Elf is?* He stilled himself and listened to the wind. *Maybe if I still myself the answers will come.* He munched on another apple, loving the taste but not understanding anything, nor feeling the need to know anything.

There was a voice. He could hear it between bites. "Hello," the voice said. He didn't know where it came from. "And how are we today" – it was an inquisitive little voice, a very strange little voice that reminded him of pizza and ants.

He decided to watch the sky for a bit. It was bright today. He mustn't take too long watching the sun. If he did so, strange pictures would run through his mind.

"The apples are running out," the voice said smugly. On hearing the voice he had doubted the reality of it. He was a clever clown, not easily confused by discarnate voices speaking nonsense. The apples had never run out. It was absurd to believe even for a moment that the tree could possibly run out of apples. He had sat beneath this tree for a life time (clowns were very long lived) and every time, without incident, every time he reached out a hand and twisted an apple, the apple fell into the palm of his hand, and another grew instantly in its place.

The voice spoke again with sincerity, its tone thick with smugness. It requested that he be aware of the apples, or rather, the lack of apples on the branches. His mind rushed away from thinking about... anything but the voice. He fixed his mind on something much easier to palate, *Elf...* – he giggled again.

No use – the voice continue to mutter in the background, gnawing at his mind.

Images ran through his mind like clouds rushing across the sky on a windy day. His thoughts ravaged him like the torrents of a river. The thoughts rushed along and then disappeared over the edge of – oblivion's waterfall. *Something is so wrong, something is so terribly wrong* – his subconscious mind yelled at him, yelled for all its worth. His soul, ever repressed raised its wings and spoke to him softly. He shivered and bit into another apple. As the juice ran down his throat his thoughts again became tranquil.

Wonderful waterfalls... how lovely they are. I would love to see one again. He couldn't travel to see a waterfall. It was wishful thinking even to contemplate the idea. He would never be able to carry enough apples with him. He would get to the end of the road and run out, and then he would have to run back to get some more. Also, whilst he was away, what if someone stole his apple tree? He had heard of it happening to others.

No, it was out of the question.

"But the apples are going," the voice chirped. "They are all going the way of the dinosaur." He didn't know what a dinosaur was. His only interest was eating his magic apples. He had forgotten everything he was and he had forgotten the world. *What is my name?*

"Look up!" It was unexpected command, he did so. *Surely it wouldn't hurt to do so?* He could munch on an apple as he looked up. He arched his neck and studied the branches. They were so beautiful. One two three, his eyes widened, nine ten eleven. Oh, he was counting the apples in the branches. How could this be possible? The branches had always contained so many apples, apples that were always too numerous to count. Below him, at the bottom of his gaze a creature sat. It squatted like a frog, its bulging eyes amphibian and intelligent. A long tongue flicked outward, upward and along its eyes extricating the mucus it found there.

The clown's face screwed up into a frown. His mouth opened wide, his eyes too. They bulged and his lips became purple. He wanted to throttle this little creature. This creature that spoke of such dreadful things. He looked downward, there it was. It was humanoid, except it also looked like a frog, and yet it was pink. He raised his free hand with the purpose of smashing it into something ... less pink.

"I can get you more apples," said the little creature. It didn't seem to mind that the clown looked evil enough to swat a thousand frogs. He was pleased to see the clown's sharp incisors. He eyed them closely from the corner of his liquid black eyes, admiring how sharp they were and how well they would serve his purpose. He wasn't the least bit bothered by anything. He had a casual way of speaking, the tone of a banker running a tally. "This tree is running out of apples and I am just the chap to help put them back up there." He rummaged through a little sack. He pulled objects haphazardly and threw them over his shoulder. A little iron pot flew past the clown's head, it was a near miss. Then came the kindle, and numerous plant stems, each flew hither and took a flamboyant path settling into a haphazard pattern on the moist soil.

"Well," his voice was considerably nasal, and not at all pleasing. "Pick the stuff up and organise them. The kindle goes beneath the pot."

The clown did so. He was angry at first, then he realised that his need for apples outgrew his displeasure of being told what to do by a frogman. He hadn't realised as of yet that the froggy was just trying to help him. He hadn't realised it at all. Then as he fumbled with the pot it occurred to him that this little pinkie creature had come at an opportune time. He seemed to know what he was doing. He was dressed smartly enough and had a formal manner. Indeed, if it wasn't for the frog then he would be in a whole heap of pain. He was useless without his apples and would very quickly degenerate into a sullen state.

The froggy stopped abruptly, and removed a pair of spectacles from his waist coat, a pink garish waistcoat, and pondered whilst gazing with a languid eye set on a distant unforeseen spot. He had a webbed hand to his lip, and there was a frown upon his brow. The clown was still busy, his efforts directed to steadying the pot on its base.

Without any wilful intention, thoughts caressed the surface of his mind. They were gentle thoughts, as gentle as a rainbow's kiss.

He didn't know, he was in ignorance of his previous state of being. In this very moment, the past galloped up behind him. As it did so, a word came to him – *litterateur*. He had been a Litterateur, he felt sure of it. His addled mind had no memory, but a fugue state persisted. He felt certain that he had been a creature of some sort of which had a degree of intelligence. *Apples apples apples* – the urge to partake in another apple was strong indeed. He resisted. He strengthened his resolve. He would not be denied. Then came another memory, unbidden yet not unwelcome. The urge to eat an apple thrust its way forward again and almost distinguished the memory. He focused: asserting his thought state, cherishing this brief fugue moment.

He had been a teacher, he had been renowned for his patience and kindness. Within his mind's memory eye a book rested upon his knee, and a child – his child listened as he read a story. The child was as delicate as dew, this soft creature had a lush face with eyes that were innocent and intense. He loved to stroke the soft cone shaped ears of his child. They curled upward a little at the ends, like his.

"Oh very dear me," and then more loudly, "Oh very dear me!" said the frog man. The frog man almost yelled, and his gaze became stern. The clown shook his head. He had been startled by the frog man's voice, but he couldn't shrug aside his first real memory.

"I have no Kollagidy leaves. It is impossible to make my potion without them. I must have them, I really must, but they must be fresh. It really wouldn't do to have them not so." The frog man had lifted himself up on his webbed toes. He leapt about a little, mouth agape, soldiering his words, rallying his purpose.

The clown was getting a little fed up with this little pink feller. He raised his hand and aimed for the head, hoping to knock some sense into him. Before he could do anything a ball of light appeared in the centre of the froggy man's webbed hand. This ball of light flew from the centre of his hand and took a direct course to the clown's chest, exploding, thrusting him backwards. The clown's face froze in shock. He flew backwards. Surprise and horror merged, a myriad of expressions danced across his features as he ascended and then descended. He landed with a thump (which hurt a lot). He cracked his head as he hit the floor. He looked upward at the creature, malice glowering through his facial features. Froggy fixed the clown with a blank stare. "Do not try to do that ever again," his voice was keen and low. The clown heart shrank in his chest, he felt frightened and ashamed. How could he be frightened of this little creature?

His legs became heavy, he felt frozen, fixed to the spot. Exerting his now diminished will, he drew himself upward to his feet. He wanted to strangle the little runt. He stifled the thought, it would be much too dangerous to fulfil. He must seek this little creature's weakness. Besides, he needed to have his apples, and this creature knew how to get them back. He felt his withdrawal again, it leached his strength, eating into his muscles and clouding his mind.

His mouth was dry as a coffin. His throat ached deeply and his eyes burned. He looked upward. The frog was there, staring at him with black lustre. Within his darken iris – a silken hue, the merest sliver of yellow. His pink leather skin rippled, as if releasing itself from the burden of bone and sinew.

The clown was canny and knew his limits, and understood that the froggy was much too powerful. It decided to wait until a better moment presented itself.

The pink frogman meditated, motionless. His leathery lips quivered, and his eyelids fluttered. The clown thought it best to remain silent. The frogman stopped his meditational pausing and threw the sack (the one that he had been rummaging through) at the clown. The clown caught the bag with his left hand. "Dip your hand within," said the froggy. "Dip your hand in and see what is there."

He did so. He dipped his hand within, feeling the smooth textured threads. There was nothing within, nothing at all. He looked up perplexed. Froggy's pupil dilated and then contracted. "Wait a moment and the bag will offer you something." He waited as a sweat broke out on his forehead. Beads of glistening water flowed down his face, dripping onto his bobbled shoes. He felt the edge of a curved object. He fingered the bag a little more. His pulse quickened and a lump formed in his throat. Could it be? There was cloth between him and it. He thrust his hand into the cloth hoping to penetrate and coax the object through the cloth somehow.

"It will come when it comes." The froggy seemed to be enjoying the quiet desperation of the clown. He chuckled a little. "Just be patient, the more you push, the further it will resist."

The clown found it hard to control himself. He hadn't eaten an apple in twenty minutes. The apple suddenly popped into his hand, surprising him. He pulled the apple out of the bag and ate it quickly, gobbling it down, drinking the juice, letting it flow down his throat, unaware that in his haste some of the juice spilt down his chin. His head swam for a moment. His mind submerged back to what it had been, memory fading, twisting, melting... then again he forgot who he was.

The froggy was in front of him, a mere pace away. "Now listen up, this is very important," the froggy enthused each word with an important tone. It was a good tone for getting people to do what you wanted. He reached for the collar of his shirt, perhaps looking for a tie that wasn't there. Then he reached up with a long spindly arm and gripped the clown by his chin. "Focus your mind, this is important! I want to get you your apples back but you must do something for me. Get me all the kollagidy leaves." The froggy stared into the clown's eyes, checking to see if the knowledge was going in. "A few is not enough. I need all of them. You will need to go to Kolly hill. It is there you will find them all. If anyone else is there, you will need to dispose of them. Do this and then come back here."

The froggy is mean, no doubt about it. Mean mean mean. The ideas which chugged their way into his brain hurt. He didn't like to think after eating an apple. Thoughts chewed their way into his mind. Ideas and such were really locomotives with teeth, and they enjoyed chewing brain cells. Mr Clown *esquire* wanted to eat froggy, wanted to chew him up, wanted to hurt before he could be hurt by him.

“Go now, otherwise I will go and you will run out of apples.” He heard the little froggy man distantly, a froggy train at the end of a tunnel.

He didn’t linger, he sensed it would be unwise too.

He walked and walked. He delved his hand into the bag, hoping for an apple. Even the curve of an apple would be nice, it would be a comfort to know it was there.

It wasn’t.

He walked. And walked.

Tiffany had waited patiently for news about her father. For something, anything would do. The brownie had hung around, wandering in and out of her room. She had seen him outside also, sitting on a rusty metal box. Someone, possibly teenagers, had broken into the box and successfully pulled wires out. These very same wires fluttered in the wind. Young children ran by, paying no mind to anything but themselves and their games.

Well dressed children, little girls and boys. If there are truly poor children in Britain, these children aren’t them. This is a housing estate, and here clothes are nice and children play, fight and mostly swear. The young children that live in the square generally don’t swear, it is usually their older siblings. They wander in, hands in pockets, frowning, scowling, indignant of the world. There had been a time when they had caused a lot of trouble, that time had passed. There are younger children that swear also, they come irregularly, and when they do decide to roll in, they come in droves, spitting, grimacing and usually kicking a ball.

Tiffany watched the scene. It is a normal day, normal in every boring way.

“Hello.” A voice spoke, it sounded adjacent to her ear, clear and confident.

Tiffany leapt into the air, eyes widening by the moment. The hair on her arms stood to attention too. She landed in a heap on the floor, arms and legs in haphazard positions.

Words turned to laughter, and then to incessant giggling. “It would have been handy to have a pair of wings just then,” said the voice.

“Binkerbelle!” Tiffany couldn’t help getting excited, she hadn’t seen her friend in ages.

Binkerbelle lifted her silver slipper and struck her foot down against nothing. *Tap tap* – strangeness of strangeness her heel tapped nothing and yet made sound. “I have heard that you’ve had some trouble.” Princess Binkerbelle, illustrious and sparkling spoke to Tiffany in a kindly tone. She wore a lovely slightly off set smile, and she had her wand out, it sparkled, it was long and thin and yet looked sturdy.

Tiffany felt alive again, she had been feeling very low but now hope had entered her room. Binkerbelle toppled over, fell over her own foot. A Brownie giggled in the corner, wearing a grin the size of mount Everest. He held his hat in one hand. Binkerbelle lifted her wand, and then she flew – *whooshed* in a wide arc, heading towards Mr Mc Noodles. He disappeared and reappeared on the other side of the room, where Binkerbelle had been. He winked at Tiffany. Binkerbelle waved her wand, and then darted towards him again. She almost reached him. He disappeared in the nick of time. Then he reappeared where Binkerbelle had been. A magical silver cage appeared, surrounding him on all sides. He tried to blink, but was unable.

Tiffany laughed, Binkerbelle laughed too. Tiffany had shrunk and now was the same size as Binkerbelle. She had felt it happen, and felt comfortable with the happening. She had reached a particular size and felt her wings unfurl, they reached up over her shoulders. They flew together, two faeries meeting in the middle, best friends forever – BFFF.

“Okay already!” The poor little man rattled his cage, and reached his arms through the bars. “Come on young ladies, please let me out.” He didn’t like being a prisoner. He squeezed his eyes closed and opened them again hoping he would be somewhere else, which is what usually happened.

“I do believe he is trying to teleport again,” teased Binkerbelle.

“Who is he speaking too?” asked Tiffany. “He can’t be speaking to us. We aren’t ladies, we’re Faeries.” She battered eyes eyelids rapidly to emphasis her point.

The little man pulled a face and it was a good one. His nose wrinkled up and his eyes became slits. “Let me out you horrible little Whatherlings!”

“Oh my goodness,” said Binkerbelle. “Now we are Whatherlings!”

“Oh dear. What is a Whatherling?”

“It’s a pretty young thing that can fly.”

“I must be one then,” Tiffany lifted into the air, and as she did so her clothes transformed, along with her shoes. Now they were dainty like her, and they sparkled and twinkled with her wings. That’s what makes a faerie. It’s her wings, when they shine her apparel become like her wings, elegant and noble – special.

Binkerbelle cupped Tiffany’s hand with her two hands and looked into her eyes, “We will have to go to the Ladybird. I have come to bring you to her.” Tiffany nodded and told her that it was okay for her to do so. She looked around her, at her room, her untidy room (the untidiness of her room was not entirely her fault, Trinity shared her room with her.) and listened to children yelling outside. Tiffany wanted to go with Binkerbelle, and the sooner the better. Besides, she wanted to find out about her father, wanted him to be well again.

“Don’t forget about me,” yelled Mr Mc Noodles.

“Maybe we should leave you up there for a while,” said Binkerbelle with a smile, her nose pointed up at him accusingly.

“You would be breaking the faerie/brownie convention rule number 16.2” he announced. The brownie knew the faerie code well. He waited for Binkerbelle's response. He knew he was right, and that she would have to let him out. But you can't tell what a faerie will do.

“I could turn you and the cage invisible, and hang you in a corner. You would look quite handsome up there.” She placed a finger nail against her lip as if considering her own proposal. His facial features turned from smiley to gloomy. His brow became furrowed and his head bowed a little. “It would be very unlikely that a human would accidently find you up there.” She pointed upward, and gave Tiffany a quick wink. “Then again, the ladybird wanted to see you too.”

“She did?” the brownie looked a little worried. “Maybe you could leave me here a bit, it wouldn’t hurt,” he pointed to the ceiling. “Just leave me up there for a little while.”

“No chance!” beamed Binkerbelle, her smile stretched the limits of her cheek bones. “You are coming with us.” she moved her magic wand through the air creating a “U” shape. Then the cage disappeared.

“Time to go.” She looked at Tiffany. “Okay?”

Wand – smile, a mumble of words, then all three of them disappeared and reappeared but not where they expected to be. Binkerbelle was the first one to voice her concern, “oh!” – a simple word. Her eyes darted to and fro, quick and furtive. When a faerie teleports and then appears at a destination exhibiting worry or surprise it is probably a good idea to be more than a little concerned yourself. Mr Mc Noodles was concerned, he looked about himself, at the flowers, they looked scraggly and unloved, and the trees to his right, their branches dropped low and scrapped the ground in places. It didn’t feel like the human world – ¹*pigeon* world, but it didn’t feel like Faerieland either. This was some place different.

A brownie can taste danger. His tongue felt odd, like liver pate left out in the sun. He hadn’t tasted this taste before, thankfully. He wasn’t in immediate danger, if he had been his tongue would have felt as if it was on fire. He pulled down his hat over his ears, licked his forefinger and traced it around his eyebrows, then tucked his hands in his pockets and stuck out his bottom lip out. Tiffany didn’t notice anything amiss, but she did notice the environment was inhospitable.

“Why have you brought us here?” She wandered forward, one footstep after the other, head turning to her left right and left. The brownie followed her. He considered it his duty to keep her safe. There was no sound, which was a problem, silence is not always a good thing.

“We were supposed to end up inside the tree. We had an audience with ladybird *Mar*”

“We aren’t there,” observed Mr Mc Noodles, “but where are we?”

“I have no idea,” answered Binkerbelle.

Another day, another clown. Accept this clown wasn’t just walking. He had a plan. His plan was simple: eat everyone that comes into his way and get the kollagidy leaves. A simple equation: kollagidy = apples = tranquillity: heaven. It was a simple plan. He walked. The bobbles on his shoes flopped to the left side and then to the right. He had his hat on. It had its own bobble and it wobbled its way with him.

The grass land was lush and his teeth were sharp. He chomped them down. The top and the bottom fitted together perfectly and they made a noise: *chomp chomp*. He growled deep within his throat. The creatures of the forest were scared, the little creatures bounced away. The large ones (a bear in particular) ran away with his tail between their legs. Clown or no clown, he didn’t look like the kind of chap you wanted to get to know.

Chomp chomp – his eyes flashed orange. *Chomp*. Then came the chipmunk – it stood in his path, between him and his kollagidy. He *chomped* and he growled but the chipmunk stood its ground and spoke up: “Get out of my way.”

The audacity –

The clown, more dumbfounded than anything else, arched his head a little to the right. He looked like, for the merest moment, a cocker spaniel. Then he roared. Clowns can definitely roar. The fur of the chipmunk attempted to flee southward. The pretty lines that ran from the bridge of his nose to his tail formed again. The chipmunk had kindly eyes, but they were firm. “You need to stop doing that. Your breath stinks. Phewey.” He held his nose and waved a paw in front of his face to add emphasis.

¹ Pigeon world: a brownie term for the human world.

The clown roared again, this time louder. The problem with trying to roar loud is that you sometimes have to shut your eyes. The problem with shutting your eyes when you have a chipmunk in front of you is that he might not be there when you decided to open them again. If there is one thing that chipmunks are able to do quite well, they are able to shift their furry tail. This one did just that, he lowered his ears and sprinted away whilst the clown finished his roar.

The chipmunk sat on the wall patiently waiting for the clown to notice that he had gone. “Hey Mr Clown, howdeydodee.” The clown looked his way. “Howdeydodee!” He elongated each syllable to lend emphasis. His upper lip fluttered. His eyes seemed to be saying: *come hither, come hither*. He waved the clown’s bag to focus his attention. He smiled, “Hey there, hey there.”

I like this game, I like this game lots. The clown charged. He charged hard. He sprinted towards the Chipmunk, his face enraged and his teeth gnashing – *gnash gnash gnash*. *Oh my goodness*, thought the chipmunk cheerfully. He wasn’t concerned. Not one bit. He ducked beneath a log and disappeared. The clown smashed into the log, tripped and skidded. Fell into his elbows and onto his face and chest. Mud covered him, wet mud. He roared –

ROAR!

Now the clown was really mad.

Roar! Another one – he charged through the forest on all fours, hands and legs pumping. Running on all fours chewing up everything in his sight. Bushes were the first to go. *Chewy* – then he released his claws. Long curved vivacious claws that sliced and diced everything except the chipmunk. The chipmunk stayed alive by way of being spry and precise. For a while the clown didn’t mind missing the chipmunk, sometimes anger is a forgetful emotion. A red haze descended, then for a little while...

Mr Clown you aren’t going anywhere. You have forgotten yourself –

The clown continued his rampage. He drooled a long thin line, from his lip to his right red shoe. Then as he turned his head, he left a singular line of mucus. A perfect line which dangled from his lip down to his shoes, it moved, dripping from one red hard baked leather shoe to the other. He gasped heavily, his green felt tipped lips quivered, then turned orange. His eyes flashed, but otherwise he couldn’t move for exhaustion.

The chipmunk crawled out from beneath the clown’s cone hat, burped into a fur fist and swung down to look the clown in the eye. “Have you finished yet?”

The clown hadn’t finished, he was ready for another bout. At least his mind was, it wanted to do a merry deadly dance. His body couldn’t move, he tried to lift a white gloved hand... No good really, the muscles just weren’t working.

“Now then,” continued the chipmunk, “here’s your bag.” He dropped it at the clown’s feet and leapt forward onto a log. He turned in mid air, wetted a palm and stroked it across the fur on his head.

“When you walk with the shadows you are likely to get toothache.” Mr I-got-some-advice-Mr chipmunk had the chubbiest little smile, and the loveliest little feet. The Clown looked at them, the littlest shiniest feet ... *awe aint they cute*. It reminded him of something or someone...

The clown’s head swam, he felt giddy. For the merriest moment he didn’t know who he was. His head swam like a fish on a large piece of cheese. *What are you going to do?* The clown didn’t know anything. All he knew was this chipmunk could not be caught, would not be caught by him. He felt weak, weak to his marrow and bone.

“You’ve got some problems my little friend,” said the little chipmunk earnestly. The clown listened intently. His muscles hurt, every one of them. He had the bag in his hand. The squirrel, or whatever he was had given it back to him. Now he felt like sleeping, sleeping like a ²*maug* inside a rug. He closed his eyes, feeling the weight of the world pull his eyelids down.

Slap – the chipmunk slapped him across the face, leaving a paw print. “Clown!” furry lips somehow shaped themselves into a type of megaphone. “Wake up!”

The clown did so, with just enough movement to justify calling it a movement (a ³*Groak* wouldn’t have called it movement, it would have called it a “stirring of the limbs”).

There it was. Now he was awake, or at least, a little bit awake. A squirrel (A real squirrel, not a make believe one that only the clowns could see) slipped down a large tree trunk, and took a gander at what might well be a new creature of the forest. It looked to be a very colourful creature. Then, and with very little compunction not to, the chipmunk gripped the clown with both paws and swung him around by his lapels. You wouldn’t think of it as possible, if you hadn’t seen it for yourself, but here he was doing it. Now the clown was awake, definitely awake, he tried to catch hold of the little chipmunk, and did so, around the shoulders. There was no movement, the shoulders were solid and without the slightest give. The chipmunk let him slip to the ground again. Without moment or precious solicitude he lifted his hand, closed it into a fist and swung it down onto the chipmunk.

It was anticipated by the chipmunk, with the chipmunk’s great speed he could have moved out of its path. A simple side step would have done the trick, a one step to the left or right. Instead, the chipmunk simply placed his arms on his hips.

The pain laced through the clown’s hand. If hadn’t been properly awake, now he was. He cradled his hand with the other.

“Now then, now you know who’s boss. Let me just tell you something.” The clown listened, he had no choice. It was a brief lesson. “You are an addict. I can tell.” The chipmunk shook his head gently. I don’t know what it is you are addicted too. I’ve looked into the bag, there isn’t anything in it. I am guessing that there was something in that bag, and whatever was in it, you had it already and now you want more.”

The clown nodded sullenly.

“There you go. Thought so. Nice of you to agree, really. Ever thought of quitting? Might well be a good idea. You would never have to feel so wretched, and you might change back to whatever you was before.”

This last bit sounded very interesting.

“I could become what I was before?”

²Maug [Shookle] a soft dry beetle that enjoys sleeping inside comfy dry places.

³ Groak [Shookle] A tree which has somehow acquired consciousness, not only consciousness but an ability to move independently of the wind. Before the cascading alliance the term: the Groak was considered to have no existence outside youngling stories. This was proved absolutely untrue when the great Orc leader Kashir got walloped into the ground by a Groak in the battle of Gagier.

This was something new for the chipmunk, he had known other creatures change by eating or drinking substances, but this creature in front of him looked very... lived in. There was a possibility that he had been something else, but what kind of substance could change something so irrevocably?

“Well yea, if you was something different than what you are now.”

The clown gave this new piece of information due consideration. Then gave a suitable “ahhhhhh” between thoughts.

“Sobriety and clear mindedness, that’s what I am offering.”

Tiffany didn’t know why Binkerbelle refused to say sorry for landing them in no place. faeries have a habit of not saying sorry and not asking why. She flew, about three foot of the ground. Tiffany walked, she didn’t think this was a place for flying. It looked more than gruesome, each rock looked more unsettling than the last.

There was always hope. Her human heart told her so. She wondered: *does time run differently here? I hope so.* Each minute that passed made it one more minute her dad was in pain, or worse. She didn’t know how ill he was.

“We need to look for some water. I need to caste a communication spell,” stated Binkerbelle.

Tiffany watched her friend hovering, noticed her wings quiver at the tips as she spoke.

They moved through their environment quickly. Tiffany needed to fly and did so, it was the quicker way. Binkerbelle flew west and Tiffany to the east, the brownie insisted on following Tiffany, he was her chaperone, her body guard. To keep up he blinked from one place to another, keeping ahead of Tiffany. They travelled in this way for quite some time, and then, well... then nothing. Nothing changed. Tiffany stopped flying, the brownie continued blinking for about seven hundred yards and then blinked back.

There was a sign. To the left of them. “That’s handy,” jeered the brownie, “always good to have a sign to point the way.”

They walked up to it. It read: **Sorry, no information.** Which on reflection wasn’t very helpful. The sun baked down on their heads, making them all grumpy. Tiffany sulked, she sat down on the hard baked soil, placed her chin into her hands and looked at the floor. It was a silly thing to do really. Her mother would have told her: “Sulking isn’t a productive thing to do.” She did it anyway. When everything seemed hopeless, or when occurrences were mildly upsetting, or even if she simply felt a little down, a sulk was usually the order of the day, along with a glass of milk. There was no milk here so a sulk would have to do.

Some time passed, the Brownie, he sat down, in the exact same position with his hands cradling his chin. She didn’t notice him. When you are sulking it is hard to notice anything. The sky had been blue, now it was grey with clouds that thickened by the moment. Everything was turning from bad to worse. It started to rain. Small droplets at first, then steadily increasing to a down pour. This was not good. Well, it didn’t look good and now both the brownie and Tiffany were getting wetter and wetter.

“Call Binkerbelle.”

Tiffany simply looked at him.

“Sorry, I have forgotten my mobile phone.” She said, hoped that the brownie was aware that she was being sarcastic.

The brownie didn't seem to mind the rain, in fact he was looking upward at the sky, bathing his face in it. Tiffany hated it, but there wasn't anything she could do.

"Send Binkerbelle a thought," said the brownie with his head still tilted back. He began dancing in the rain, loving the feel of it over his body. But, and here was the nub: Tiffany knew what he meant, in her secret heart. Mostly, she understood little of the needs of her secret heart, or even that she had one. Within it, within the kernel of its advocacy there was an adjunctive part which sometimes spoke to her, and it was doing so now.

Once upon a time, there you go, once upon a time – helter-skelter – there was a young lady that didn't wish to listen to her secret heart but the secret heart didn't mind, because to not listen to it is to listen to it. Will the elephant scarper before the white blind mouse?

She directed a thought towards Binkerbelle but it was a dull thought, full of weak dreariness, not a proper thought at all. It was a weak despondent thought full of wistfulness and the dregs of weariness. It wandered around in a greyness of her mind, as flat as a pancake and as sour as milk left out in the sun for three days. Tiffany could clearly see it within her mind's eye, it sailed for a little while, within a grey tilted sky. Then it was gone. She tried again, this time she pictured a resplendent blue and thought of a crab scuttling in the depths of an ocean, pictured it clearly. Then envisioned herself writing a note in a clear precise hand on an imaginary piece of paper. She placed a bell on it, for good measure. Then sent it, through a portal.

Binkerbelle came, it took some time, but she came; she had heard the bell and read the message, it was blazoned across her mind: *come Binkerbelle*. She could not resist a message from another faerie, and not one that was sent so clearly. She had seen the rain, some way off. It was in the distance, a sleet, a grey within a grey across a dismal horizon. This place was not good – something was very wrong here. She needed to work it out.

Everything was too much the same. Nothing but stones. She didn't know where she was. Which was troubling. In her experience a faerie never got lost.

She was flying very fast indeed, blurring by. Yet the landscape didn't change, or seemed not to change. Yet it was changing, although every stone was similar to the next and the one before. Binkerbelle descended and hovered over the top of Tiffany. The Brownie spotted her first. Tiffany was still cradling her chin, sulking and incapable of spotting anything other than the end of her nose (sulking is a very self absorbing process.) The Brownie was aware and ready to attack, to maim and to do some mean and possibly despicable things to his descending foe. Then he recognised Binkerbelle and smiled. Binkerbelle's great wings cast a huge shadow, it was this that finally broke Tiffany from her sulk.

Binkerbelle knew a sulk when she saw it. It was a heavy sulk. Binkerbelle sat down by the side of her friend, eyed the Brownie and signalled for him to sit on the other side. She gestured with her eyes and used a nod. Binkerbelle didn't speak, she simply stared downward with her chin on her chest.

Gradually Tiffany's awareness began to stretch further than the bridge of her nose. She felt the stare of her friend, or thought she did – a *fizzle* and *fuzzle* on the right side of her face. She peered slowly to the right, expecting her friend to be staring at her. She was not, she appeared to be in her own sulk. Then her other cheek began to prickle. Was that the awareness of her friend Mr M Noodles? She turned quickly trying to catch him. But he was staring up at the sky, the rain danced on his forehead making a small drumming sound. He was lost in his own world, lost in it, unaware of her. She looked down at her toes and then upward, her wings arched above her head keeping her sheltered from the worst of the rain.

Both her friends were looking at her, she felt it. She knew they were! They were! She turned her head to the left and right, in quick succession. Her friends were in the same position, or were they? She checked again. This time they were both staring at her with wild grins on their faces. They had duped her! She looked at the bridge of her nose, and then looked back at them. "Arghhhhh!" she yelled, in way of explanation and exasperation. The tension between them lifted. Tiffany didn't know whether she wanted scream or hug them. So she did both.

The three of them looked at the expanse, at the rocks and small stones. Not even sand, or dunes – the sight of a few dunes would have been welcome. She could have run up one and then back down the other side. If there had been a dune then maybe there would have been something on the other side of the dune, or even the hope of something on the other side.

"The problem with this picture," said Binkerbelle. "This place is so flat and forever. I mean, even when I use my faerie sight there isn't any difference."

"Faerie sight?" enquired Tiffany.

Binkerbelle lifted her hand and curled her finger into her thumb, "do this, and then look through it." Tiffany did so, and quickly realised that she had binocular vision.

The brownie wore a frown. He wore it for a while. The two faeries carried on talking idly. Tiffany felt that the Brownie was thinking very hard about something. Tiffany felt things now, in her body and in her being. She used to just look at a person and watch their facial expressions. Now she didn't just see the indications of emotions on people's faces. Now she felt a part of what they felt. Now she felt the rightness and wrongness of things too. She felt the right way to go. She felt what to say and what not to say.

She collected her thoughts together. Tried to reason things out.

I suppose, everyone does it. Though she didn't know whether they did. If someone speaks I can tell if they are lying, I can tell whether they are telling the truth too. More importantly I can tell whether they are telling me the truth but their words are wrong or inaccurate. Sometimes I can tell that a person is lying, but sometimes their words are true, but for a different reason than what they think.

For Tiffany the world was becoming more complicated in many ways, but she was becoming better able to do what needed to be done. Also, the world was become simpler. All she needed to do was do what was right, take the route which was noblest. *Take the noblest route. Take the hard road.*

What was the hard road then in this circumstance?

She looked around her, it was all the same, something was amiss but nothing was a miss. She heard a whisper in the wind. Was that wind she heard? Then the wind came, it whistled around her ankles.

I thought of the wind, and then I felt it, and then it began to happen. She was so near to the truth she could almost taste it.

Mr Mc Noodles was on his feet, he grinned but it was more of snarl. She had never seen him like this before. Then his features calmed.

“You just thought about wind didn’t you?” Cold calm.

Binkerbelle simple looked at the little man a little strangely. “What?”

Mc Noodle was quite excited. He jumped up and down. “Guess what is happening?”

“I think I know what it is happening.” She wasn’t entirely sure, she thought she had an inkling as to the nature of the problem they faced. “Look around you, isn’t it so easy to believe that this is all real? I mean look at the stones and feel the wind. It’s all real isn’t it?”

“Well, duh yea.” Binkerbelle extricated her head several inches from body. She looked at her friends as if they had just stepped off the funny boat and walked into the funny farm. “Of course everything is real. This stone that I am sitting on is killing my butt.” She patted the stone beneath her.

“Look at that stone there.” He pointed to a stone nearby. They did so. “Keep concentrating. Now then, think: *there is no stone.*” They did so, and for a moment the whole fabric of reality wobbled a little. Just the tiniest bit. Or was that wobble just in their imagination?

Tiffany wavered in her belief... in herself and... everything.

“Believe...” Binkerbelle whispered. “Belief is the beginning of magic, the beginning of creation.” She touched Tiffany’s hand. Tiffany reached out her hand and touched Mr Mc noodles hand. They stood their together for a moment. It was time, Tiffany knew it. She trusted her friends. They were here for her when it counted.

“Now is the time,” Mr Mc Noodles whispered.

They concentrated together, three souls in a wilderness of nothingness. *Think: wind.* It was Mr Mc Noodle’s voice, but his voice was in their minds. Binkerbelle’s voice also whispered. Her faerie mind had opened just a little: *Yea...* her mind to their mind, their minds to hers.

One word: *Orange.* They didn’t know where the word came from. Did they think of it together, or did one think of it and then the others did so? Or did the word come from outside of them? An orange formed in their conjoined minds. It became solid. Somehow their minds had anchored the image. All three opened their eyes, and there it was, in front of them, hovering twenty feet from them.

The three of them walked up to it together, reached out their hands and touched the perfectly spherical orange.

They disappeared.

The orange dropped to the floor soundlessly.

A few minutes passed. The stones tumbled across the peninsula (what there was of it.) The wind was a good one, it continued unabated. Then it stopped. The wind stopped – everything stopped. A stone that had flipped into the air, it also stopped. Several stones tumbled across the hard panned desert like surface. They tumbled and then stopped.

Footsteps, the sound of which could be heard clear and crisp. Red shoes walked steadily with some feet in them; red feet and red socks. A red blazer, and then: a red finger pointed to the orange. It was a thick finger, a stubby finger. It obviously belonged to a well nourished person. A face which was much too angular and much too still sat on shoulders which were much too broad. Red hair, a red face, red eyes, a red blazer and trousers, a manicured red finger nail stroked the lining of his trousers. Two horns protruded from the base of his skull. They weren't very big and were easy to miss (he hadn't had a hair cut for at least six weeks.)

The orange lifted into the air and gently floated to the red well manicured finger, then spun on an invisible axis. It spun, twisting faster, wobbling a little in its orbit, and then blinked out of existence. The sky shrank, the hard panned floor shrank too. Everything shrank and shrivelled to a point just beyond his finger, where the orange had been. Then that too disappeared, leaving him there alone, with whiteness, complete whiteness.

His voice purred gently. "Very clever my dears, very clever indeed," he spoke to himself and to the emptiness. He seemed pleased with the events, a smile gently spread across the bottom of his face.

Then he disappeared.

The Illustrious Horsemeister

Another day another dolly –

“He harr!” said the man on the trap, and then he pulled on the reins a little. His horses didn’t mind, they knew he was kind. Two faeries and a strange little feller appeared just to the side of his path. He observed them and his horses did too, they didn’t like them, nor did he. The horses panicked, their lifted their hooves and rolled their eyes.

Tiffany and Binkerbelle, they held hands and grew. It didn’t take them long, but it did take them a little while. The horses calmed as they grew. The brownie didn’t grow, he didn’t need to. They finished their growth and stretched their arms and torso. It was hard work growing so large in such a short period of time. Well it was for Binkerbelle, it wasn’t her natural size.

The brownie placed his hands on his hips and stretched his back muscles. He felt a powerful protective bond with Tiffany. It surprised him how strong a bond he had with his little one. That is what he called Tiffany: *his little one*, even though technically he was the smaller of the two.

“Hello there precious ones,” said the man on the trap. He wondered whether to reach for his gun. He had heard of faeries abducting people and he didn’t want to be the next person to disappear.

“Earth 2012?” asked Binkerbelle. Her accent was strong and her words didn’t sound clear enough. The man on the front of the trap gawped at her. He had old eyes, and a face that carried the chill of many winters. Tiffany took a chance. Mr Mc Noodles held his breath, he knew that this was a dangerous moment. Tiffany walked towards him maintaining eye contact. He looked into her eyes, held her gaze and shifted his hand towards his gun. *I will have to be quick, and make sure that I don’t hesitate.* He licked his dry lips, and scratched his rough unshaven chin.

“It’s okay friend, we won’t hurt you.” She had the softest brown eyes, and she was so young, so very young. He withdrew his hand from the gun. He could never hurt something so pure. He could tell that she wouldn’t hurt him. *I am safe now, very safe; but it is when I feel safest that I should be most wary.* He knew that there was logic to this thought, yet he did not reach for his gun. Old faithful would have to stay in its place for a while. Within her irises and pupils, for the briefest moment as he peered into them she was old beyond her years, maybe even centuries old. It was a silly thought, how could someone so old be so young?

The road was a dirt road. No tarmac here. Binkerbelle had a bad feeling. She felt that she had misplaced time somehow. Or someone had side railed her magic again. She voted for the second option. Someone was messing with her, and messing with her magic. This left her with a chill in her bones and a nasty taste in her mouth. Brownies weren’t the only ones that could taste trouble.

He knew what he was going to say but he didn’t know why he was going to say it. Well he did know, but doing good deeds was not a thing he liked to do. It always rode against his better judgement. He opened his mouth and felt the words tumble from his lips. He watched himself tell the trio that they could hop up and take a ride inside. “And mind the boxes,” he said, almost as an afterthought.

They did so. Binkerbelle couldn't help asking, as she passed him by (her wings were now invisible) "what year is it please?"

"Eighteen sixty three, and shut your gruff up." He grunted, hoping that she would do just that.

"And the world?"

He wanted to strangle her, he didn't know why. *Faerie folk were trouble.* "Why, it's *Pani* of course. Now git!" He hooked a thumb and directed her to the back.

Oh dear, oh very dear me, she thought.

The clown wasn't much happier but he was on his way. *Which made everything okay.* The chipmunk was gone, but the feeling that he was right (that is say, if said chipmunk was actually a he – you never can tell with chipmunks) continued to nag and urge his mind through corridors the conscious mind had no wish to venture.

The real problem were the memories. They were real, he knew they were. His inability to submerge them under a sea of apple-ness filled him with a quiet despair, and the distinct impression that he was falling apart.

He lingered a finger into the bag. Felt around for the fiftieth time, and then thought: *oh poo*, for the millionth time. He hoped that the froggy creature was right about the apples appearing.

He walked and walked and kept to the path. There was no way he was going to take a short cut. He couldn't risk it, there might be another chipmunk in the forest ready to fry his brain with more astute reasoning. He wouldn't be able to handle another chipmunk. One was enough.

His nose fell off.

It bounced right off the path.

It bounced, and then lay unceremoniously on the grass. It was round like an orange, but was red and winked at him. He shook his head and looked again. *I think I am losing my mind.* It was a reasonable assertion: anyone who possessed a sane mind would have thought the same. That's what a winking nose will do to you. The very problem, the one that so inexcusably latched on to his mind like a crab holding onto his cousin as he was lifted out of a bucket, was this: he was still reasoning, and quite amiably. He couldn't be insane, simply because an insane person wouldn't reason so well as he. This was all very well and good, except for one thing. One singular point. His nose had just fallen off. He touched his face and felt something. This something sat in the very place his nose had been. This something was another nose, a smaller variety of nose, yet still a nose – indubitably.

He looked again, hoping that the event was not actually happening. If his nose began winking at him again then he would faint. It would be a relief to do so. At least he would know he was mad.

His head hurt. He felt his face, particularly around the place where his nose should have been. A normal nose was there instead, it felt a little strange and very small. *Normal?* It was quite a petite little nose. *Perhaps there was magic at work here. That's what it is!* He felt better already. Someone was casting magic spells. Maybe there hadn't been any chipmunk at all. Maybe that had been a clever piece of mind magic.

He continued on his way, down the path listening to the clip clop of his shoes. A bear crossed his path, in the distance. He roared, the bear didn't seem to hear at first. His ears pricked up, and then he raised himself up on his hind legs. The clown was without a clown's nose but he wasn't without his roar. He roared again, then he mashed his teeth together. He felt them *chomp* – it was a most satisfying sound. The bear turned tail and ran away. The clown was beginning to feel a lot better about himself.

Then his tooth fell out. A canine, *oh dear*. Something was definitely happening to him.

He walked for many hours through the forest, along a path. Autumn was beginning, beautiful autumn leaves carpeted the floor. Many remained on the branches of the trees bright and resplendent. He left the path for a moment, to bathe in the light as it filtered through the branches and leaves.

The light cast an exquisite yellow on his features. He opened his palm and felt the warmth seep through his skin. He had finger claws, they stretched outward, slim and sharp. He gripped a branch, a branch which had hung down across the path. His strength was prodigious, his claws raked through the bark slicing into the wood itself. *Crack* – the branch broke in two.

A squirrel and a racoon chased each other, playing in the distance. They didn't look so scary, then came a chipmunk. It was clearly unaware of him. He crept up on it. He was surprised at how stealthy he could be. He looked down at the chipmunk, then leant forward and carefully picked it up. It was nothing, not dangerous at all. Such a little thing, he felt the bones of the creature. This one was much smaller than the other. Perhaps the other had been another creature entirely, cleverly disguised as a chipmunk. He let the little creature go.

He looked at his shoes, they were different. He remembered his clown shoes, they had a bobble on them. Now he wore green boots. This was all very strange, he slid his finger down between his ankle and the sleeve of the boot. His long finger cut through the tough boot. It took some time but he kept clawing in one place and then watched it split. *Wonderful*, he thought, *now I have a split boot*. The boot didn't remain split, it began to heal itself, and then moment by moment, and much to the surprise of the clown the boot healed itself to the point where it didn't show any damage at all.

Then the lump came. At first it didn't register what the lump was. It was in his hand. *Oh the bag, oh my goodness!* The bag was beginning to swell. An apple was forming. He could feel it swell beneath the fabric of the bag. It must be an apple. He looked within, and there it was. He pulled the apple out of the bag and held it in his hand. He looked at it, and then turned it a little. Then he placed a finger nail to it, except his finger nail was more of a claw.

It had been a claw, now it began to peel away. It had become brittle somehow. He was fascinated by the occurrence. The nail tipped over and descended to the earth. And beneath it, there was another nail. This one was very different, it was pointed but delicate.

He snapped it off. He didn't like it. It healed straight away, like his boot. *Hmmmmmmmm*. Interesting, he was beginning to see a pattern. Then again, was it a pattern?

Yes it was a pattern, he felt sure. He was changing. It was like the chipmunk said. Something had changed him. He didn't know what that thing was, but perhaps not having that thing, or having that thing was making him change. He felt a little confused. He didn't know whether the change was for the better. It was a little bit frightening. He felt like vomiting.

He didn't vomit.

Tiffany felt comfortable and more than a little tired, and so she slept. Binkerbelle slept also. Mr Mc Noodles stood guard whilst they slept. He felt protective towards them both, especially Tiffany. He could hear something croaking in the bushes, to the left of him. The wheels of trap passed the croaking. He could see their eyes in the darkness, they were bright like little golden stars. The night was peaceful, the road bumpy, each of the jolts shuddered the sleeping partners into a half awake state. They hugged each other to keep warm. Occasionally the cart hit a large stone on the rocky narrow lane. This rolled them forward and even jolted them upward. At these moments, Mc Noodle caught them and pushed them back into a seated position.

He heard their soft purring and knew for certain that they now slept deeply. He looked back to the forest. The eyes of the frogs were still there, floating in the darkness.

The frogs are the friend to all Magical folk⁴

Brownie – Mr Mc Noodles (his kin had nicknamed him Mc Noodles. Reason being: his fondness for noodles at Mc Noodles deluxe noodle cafe) had never known frogs to be so numerous. Their presence was a comfort to him and every faerie and elf kin. The whole forest resonated with an inner fire. He could feel it within his soul, his emotions were bubbling. He took a quick look at the two faeries. They seemed to be sleeping deeply, they had smiles on their faces, comfortable content smiles. Behind them, in the boxes, a small hand poked out, a porcelain hand. He pushed aside the flap of one of the boxes, leant over Tiffany and peeked in. A porcelain doll stared back.

Mr Mc Noodle had been called to protect Tiffany. No entity had called him. Indeed no entity could control him. He had been called by the rivers of his heart. When the stories had circulated that humans had made contact with the little people, something within himself reached out from the depths.

He had heard tales of their kindness. They had hugged George. This was the sign for the little people, it was a great sign. A sign that the tree huggers had perhaps the maturity that was needed for a coequal existence. He was thought to be a little strange by his own kind, due to his fondness of human culture. The little people shunned human kind, as a rule. It hadn't always been that way, in a long distant past humanity and the little people had cohabited congenially.

He had studied humanity, as much as possible, from a distance and invisibly. He had listened to every story. After all, stories were important to the little people. It was their way of remembering. Perhaps it was also true of humans. The little people, when they communicated with each other relived each others' memories. Memories were sacred events. They owned each other's memories. This is the primary reason why the little people had no written language. After all, why read another's memories if you can live them?

⁴Magical folk [Origin: Simultaneous usage in both the dimension of Shookle and Shoopple] analogous term that the little people use when referring to themselves. Often used in reference to giants or anything magical, goodly and sentient.

The brown leaves shone golden, in the middle of the night. A most beauteous sight, every shade of brown cast a different glow. He could see them, across the branches. Their eyes were bright with interest and their wings glowed. He had never seen so many of the little people, and there was so many faeries also. Faeries, thousands of them littered the branches. Their wings sparkled and were so bright. They talked amongst each other and touched each other as they did so, their long slim fingers caressed their friends faces and slipped through silken hair. Brownies ran through the branches, they knew that he was kin to them. Brownies stuck together it seemed, even through the veil of dimensions.

We are through the veil. It was hard to believe that they had breached the veil of dimensions. The implication... he licked his lips, and wondered where events were leading them.

The horses finally came to rest, after hours of walking and pulling. Mr Mc Noodles could hear their exhalations, and there was a distant hustle and bustle. They were in a busy town, he could smell the sweat from the people in the distance. "Yea well..." someone said. The distant sounds were nice to hear. Whilst they were moving through the forest the Magical folk had been there in the thousands, which was fine, lovely in fact. Except for one little inconvenience: he couldn't feel their magic. He could feel their presence. This was a given, every magical being could feel magic around them, but their magical-ness was obliquely missing.

There were no cars or trains, this town didn't seem to have any of the familiar sounds of a city or town. He kept himself hidden inside the trap. Something was not quite right, and he didn't want to step into something which might cause him to say: "Oh diddly o'cockadoodle dum⁵."

The feet of the driver, the driver who had been very kind to have given them a ride, walked away from the trap. He could be clearly heard doing so, and as he walked his footsteps became absorbed into the general kafuffle of other walkers and talkers. The trap had a window and curtain, and it was through this aperture that Mr Mc Noodles peered through. As the brownie observed the outside, he quickly realised that the human civilisation that he witnessed was not as technologically aspiring as the one from his own dimension. There were a few horses, and the few that could be seen were being led by harness or rein. Most people walked. Their leather boots could be seen slurping their way through the watery mud.

Five minutes later he came back, opened the door a little and leaned in. He wore a worried expression. "There are magical creatures in the inn." He wiped his face with a palm.

"All very good then," said the Brownie.

"However, I have something to report." The man scratched his head and seemed a little hesitant, a little bit: this side of nervous. "I am not sure you will be welcome by the magical folk."

⁵Oh diddly o'cockadoodle dum [Origin: English derivative. Shookle] a curse, most notable used by giants, goblins and brownies. It is not known how this term was transmitted across the dimensions. It is widely guessed that there must have been considerable amount of traffic between the dimension at one time.

Tiffany awoke. Her eyes became round – *kiesha*⁶ flowed through her, and with it the knowledge of the conversation. She reached out her hand and received Mr Mc Noodle's and Binkerbelle's hands. Silent lips, minds active clear and precise – they didn't need to speak. Magic swirled around them. Only a faerie eye could see it: twinkling lights and a haze of mist. Tiffany witnessed the lights as they swirled and twisted around her. Then they began to shrink. They shrank quicker than a weasel slipping into a burrow. For a faerie eye, it was slow, every detail of the flow could be clearly seen by her eye and heard by her ear. (*Declock sheekrien saffire*) – it was a mere whisper, she could hear something but could not make out the words. Again came the whisper: *Declock sheekrien saffire* – this time it was clear, just above a whisper. They had now shrunk to the very size that Binkerbelle had been when she had first met Tiffany.

"We shall take our chances," said Binkerbelle. Each of them disappeared into his clothing. Tiffany slipped into a pocket, the left one. It was filled with handkerchiefs and a few buttons. Binkerbelle slipped into his right pocket, she climbed over some coins. Some cloth rubbed up against her nose, it smelt of peppermint and roses. Mr Mc Noodles hid in his hair, and as he did so he became invisible. Maybe he shouldn't have cast a spell. Spell casting can be detected by other spell users, even little spells. He wished he hadn't now. The place was teeming with faeries and other assortment of little creatures. Wooden tables were set up in a large square, and although it was night time, people were selling lots of different merchandise. They were helped by the little people, they arranged every piece on each stall. Teams of them moved large objects, magic was involved, and lots of it. The people who sat behind the stall smiled a little and took the money from the customers, both human and little people.

The man signalled to another man, a man of middling height and exaggerate weight. He came at an ungainly speed sloshing through the mud, skipping across puddles and with a gnome pipe dangling gangly from his lips. It was a mystery how he was able to move at such speed. The man, if he could be called such, resembled a bear. His buck teeth pocked out from his mouth as he smiled. He took the reins and led the horses away.

They began to move, bumping and jumping about within their respective pockets. Mr Mc Noodles took a good look around. From his vantage point, he could see every part of the square. He was fascinated by what he saw. There was too much to take in with one glance. He felt that they had very little chance of being caught. The little people were using magic openly around humans. They seemed to be in charge of the stalls, most of them anyway. A large woman smiled and received money into her palm, from a faerie. The faerie moved the coins from a large sack (large for a faerie) and transported them through magical means into the hands of the woman. As she received the money into her palm, another faerie, presumably the owner of the stall whispered something into the woman's ear.

⁶ Kiesha [origin: Faerie. Dimension: Shookle]: A communication wrought through a bond of tightly knit individuals. Through Kiesha: the communication of emotions, intuition, words and experience is able to be communicated. It is a very pure and versatile means of communication. It is common amongst those which exist within a higher frequency. Amongst denser vibration creatures it is very rare and is usually formed through an intense fear based emotion.

“Oy!” shouted the woman from behind her stall, though she didn’t seem overly anxious at being short changed. Five faeries were carrying the sack, and five faeries stopped. They didn’t turn, instead they looked to the fifth faerie, who was probably their boss. “Oy!” Again a shout. The woman was now standing, waving her arms over head. It was a good show. A few other sellers looked up, flicking their heads towards the commotion. The faeries came back, the leader opened up the money sack and lifted a coin from it, she then flung it at the woman. The woman caught it with ease, an ease that had been honed by a thousand different coin catching opportunities.

He walked, their bearer, he walked and he kept his head inaudibly still as he did so. Hardly anyone noticed. Everyone was far too busy buying and selling. One little boy did see him, and thought that it was a little bit odd that he was walking so stiffly. He had noticed him before, many times in fact, and the man had always without failure walked with a swinging gait. The little boy was just that: a little boy. He was a street urchin, and waited in this very spot every day for the faeries to give him a few coins as they passed. The man passed him by, perhaps much like a soldier would pass him by in the near future, with shoulders straight, one leg following the other – a measured step. The boys glance had already wandered, the man had never given him a coin so why should he award him his attention?

The inn wasn’t nice, it smelt disgusting, like fish, tortoise and a strange antelope creature. Binkerbelle felt quite fortunate to be in a pocket that smelt so nice. She poked her head out for a second, just above the rim of his pocket. She looked over the top, had a quick sniff, and then pulled her head back. She pushed her face against the lining of the pocket, rubbing the whole of her face fiercely into the fabric. She didn’t understand why she was doing so. Half way through the rub she realised the stupidity of the movement, but carried on anyway – doing something rather than nothing was always preferable. The smell affected Tiffany too, she handled it better but not by much of a margin. The Brownie – Mr Mc Noodles simply turned several shades of yellow.

“Hello Bob,” said the man whose pocket they rode in.

“Hello Trev, how are you?” returned a voice.

“Been riding the trap all night.” This was as good an answer as anyone could give.

“We’ll take good care of the horses, don’t you worry sum.”

Those are the words that the three of them heard. Mr Mc Noodles observed the nodding of heads and the shaking of chins. “Is my room ready?” asked Trev. They travelled up a flight of stairs and then another, then swivelled to the right. Pause. Then they heard the latch of the door go to down.

“Oh dear, saintly O’Shea⁷, he of never wavering faith.” Binkerbelle stared at the room. It had nothing going for it – it had a bed *yippee!* They climbed out of his pocket and sat on the bed. The man sat on the bed with his back up against the headboard. Each of the little people increased in size until they had reached their actual size.

Mr Mc Noodles, he of never ending impromptu remarks remained silent. He simply sat with his chin in his hands. Binkerbelle stared at Tiffany for a bit, perhaps waiting for some words to come pouring out. There weren’t any words, just a dull lustre in her eyes and a head downcast and forlorn.

“Well isn’t this exciting!” Binkerbelle was hopeful that her grand words would change their reality, transform it into a grandiose adventure. Their faces wore long expressions, their eyes were as dim as dishwater.

“I am no nearer to helping my father.” A tear balanced in the edge of Tiffany’s eye.

Binkerbelle looked at her friend with an expression laced across her face. The expression was exasperation. “I swear sometimes you say the silliest things.”

“Well, how are we nearer?” She faced Binkerbelle, feeling a little angry.

“The universe leads us to where we need to be. The great faerie in the sky has been guiding us to where we most need to be. Now we are here. Who would have thought that it would be possible?” She seemed to be enjoying the conversation with herself. “No faerie has crossed the veil of dimensions in a thousand years. Now we have. Use your brain, if you have one. I haven’t got one. A brain would require me to be made of matter. I am not, so it don’t matter.” She loved her own joke. Thought it was very apt.

Tiffany didn’t think she was clever or funny.

The man in the bed, whose name was Trev, had fallen asleep. His chin had fallen to his chest. His chest lifted whilst his mouth quivered as he inhaled rhythmically. Mr Mc Noodles fell over, from vertical to horizontal. Binkerbelle looked out of a small window, and gazed outward and down at the market place. Everyone was packing their tables away, the faeries (and there were a lot of them) flew upward together and then headed for the forests. Binkerbelle almost wanted to go with them, she almost cast a spell to announce her presence. *Hello, here I am. It is I, Oh great and magnificent me!* Faerie can be very strange sometimes, Binkerbelle in particular.

⁷ O’Shea [*Shookle*] Fairies like to call upon something or another when they feel an emotion. Instead of God’s or Goddesses, they like to call upon saints. Not always a specific saint and certainly not the saints of fairies (not that fairies consider any of their kind to be saints living or past.) They are willing to acknowledge that the *Tababacalasia* (they who exist in a denser reality) use human vessels as conduits for their mischievous devices (perhaps mischievous is to comfortable a word, perhaps malevolent is a better one.) The human O’Shea, was the minion of one Zekeel. If the myths are correct (which they probably are) he successfully fooled the whole subcontinent of Zachariah. Fairies insult such a minion and refer to his name as saintly, which makes a mockery of his infamy. In that far distant past he pretended to be a man of God. Many believed that he was (and it may even be possible that he thought of himself as a servant of the Great One,) either way he fooled the people. His great evil kept the golden ones from rising to the golden pavilion. Every faerie from that day to this mock his name when they experience a time of crisis, or when worrying or when they have a general grievance.

Tiffany considered sulking. She had the feeling that a good sulk was in order. However, and this was a big however (a *however* in italics if you will), she also felt that maybe she shouldn't, which made her feel like doing it anyway. She was fed up with feeling the way that she felt when she wanted to have a sulk but considered not doing so but then couldn't really help it and then didn't want to show it. She was feeling that way now, it was like being caught in a web, a sticky one.

"What am I?" she spoke out loud, directly to Binkerbelle and it was a question that needed answering. A faerie is a creature of power. Binkerbelle had to answer.

Binkerbelle turned. There was no expression on her face whatsoever. At first Tiffany couldn't hear her. She watched her lips move, and her wings vibrate gently. Binkerbelle had lovely wings, purple around the edges. She even inclined her head forward. Then the words slowly became audible. "You are faerie and you are human. You walk the in-between path, it is a difficult path, or so I am told. I am here for you. Every creature is a being of energy. We are all made from the same stuff. Or so I have been led to believe by the great master within, and the great masters without." She spread her arms wide. "We are of one accord, we are part of a sub matrix which begins with the central core and works its way outwards. We are all vibrating at a different frequency, everything. Humans vibrate at a different frequency than a faerie and it is that which gives the illusion of difference, and indeed we are different from each other but it is not a difference of substance only of frequency."

"Ah so," explained Tiffany. "I must vibrate at a different frequency than either a human being or a faerie then."

"Indeed," agreed Binkerbelle.

"And I then must be a horsemeister." Trev opened his eyes. Had Trev been asleep? They didn't know but he was awake now, his clear blue eyes regarded them.

A faerie is never startled but she can be surprised. "Horsemeister?"

"Yep, that's me."

"We have no idea what a horsemeister is." A purple glow, for the merest moment surrounded Trev. It left him as quickly as it arrived. Aura's can sometimes do that, they appear instantly and then leave quicker than when they came. Tiffany had never witnessed such before, she was blinking at the time when it appeared but was still fortunate to witness it. Binkerbelle and Trev continued to converse:

"A horsemeister is a legendary person who is able to control a horse simply by clicking his tongue. I must surely be one of those if you are a human and a faerie." He made a strange clicking noise with his tongue. "The very idea that a faerie could... well be a faerie and a human being at the same time, is just silly." He shook his head from side to side but kept his gaze steady and fixed on them.

Tiffany changed form – one moment a six inch wonder, the next a little girl. Poor Tiffany felt so tired, she couldn't keep her legs from bending. She tried, albeit for the merest moment, then her chin dropped to her chest. Her eyes had very little chance of staying open, they fluttered meekly then made their descent. Her knees drew together and then she folded into them, curling into a ball. Trev pushed himself back against the headboard of the bed, his palms pushed backwards trying to climb to the ceiling. His top teeth protruded a little, his chin became small and his eyes became large. "Settle down settle down," advised Binkerbelle with a smile.

“But... but...” He couldn’t believe what had happened. An earth person might well find it miraculous to see a faerie, and could be forgiven for thinking: *If a faerie can exist than anything can*. However, for an intelligent being that had existed in this alternative dimension for any length of time, it would be well known and fully accepted that faeries and small folk were a normality. Faeries and other little people were small. There were natural boundaries that could not be surpassed. This had been the accepted way of thinking by king, academia, street urchins and demigods for a thousand years or more.

“I don’t really know what to make of all this,” said Trev with his jaw jutting out a little, bottom lip quivering and a tongue that made a curious *puck puck* sound as it protruded. Concern danced across his craggy features, and his thoughts (which were many and varied) could be seen dickering against each other, manifesting their will upon his face. Binkerbelle simply shook her head and smiled, which was kind of crazy and contradictory.

“That’s the point,” said Binkerbelle. “You aren’t suppose to get it. If everything was laid out in some sort of super plan, a super plan that you could unfold and follow, a plan that was vindicated by some higher power, then there would be many that would simply follow it unthinkingly.”

Trev scratched his head, he smiled as well. It was a nice smile, full of simple kindness. “Let’s get some shut eye.” Binkerbelle nodded. Sleep took him, and this time he really did sleep.

The clown, aka *Mr rabbit and squirrel scarier* didn’t know what was happening but he liked it. Rosy red lips chomped enthusiastically and his painted eyelids fluttered whilst his pupils grew fat with silent wonder as he gazed at his hand. The skin on his hand was changing rapidly, from a lovely green colour to alabaster white... *Lovely lovely lovely lovely ...* His hand became white, he knew it would do so. If he stared at it long enough and if he ate his lovely apples. He wondered (though not overly so) why he ever thought that his previously green hand had been so very handsome. This new one was far better. He cleaned his lips with the back of his white glove like hand. The apple had left a pleasant taste in his mouth – a pleasant after taste that reminded him of his business.

He decided to destroy that which he could. He struck the trees as he travelled, with his fist and feet. As he kicked and thumped he remembered a little: he remembered that he was after some kind of leaf. Then it came to him: it was a special kind of leaf called *kollagidy*. He scratched his head and found a funny shape had grown upon it, at the top. He felt the rounded top and thought: *hat. Hat hat hat...* though he didn’t entirely understand what it meant. He remembered the froggy creature, its blinking eyes, and its puss filled nose and shuddered with the remembrance.

He remembered (especially so) his lovely green apples. It wasn’t hard, he had just had one. He dipped his hand within the bag, or tried too. He completed a movement with his arm which was very definitely a dip. *Most certainly...* unfortunately the bag wasn’t there. He screeched loudly, extremely loudly – it was a mighty screech. Now his throat felt hoarse. His tonsils felt as if sandpaper had been scrapped along them. They were raw (*Roar!*)

The bag did not magically appear.

He skulked his way back down the path. It wasn’t a hard path to follow. By simply seeking out the destruction that he had wrought he was able to back track. He became angrier and angrier as he travelled. He poked himself in the eyes and grumbled as he pulled at his ears.

The clown decided that he wanted to travel as fast as possible. He very much wanted another apple. There was only one way to do that, he needed to find the kollagidy leaves. The only way to find *kollagidy* leaves was to... well, leave the forest. He didn't know how he had come to this green leafy place. He checked his chin for hair, then realised he had never had any kind of hair, not even eyebrows. He checked them to make sure. He ran a finger along the place where they should have been.

He found his bag lying crumpled against the trunk of a tree. "Good tree, nice tree." He patted the trunk gently, reassuring it in easy come lucky tones.

He needed to find some people. He didn't know why he needed to find people. He just knew that he did. Then as he walked he thought some more, which was not a usual occupation for him. He needed to find people because people would know where *kollagidy* leaves would be. Yes, *people*. He would need to find people.

He had the strangest thought. His thoughts travelled along a course that was familiar, at least for him. But the more he thought about people the less he knew what they were. Were they little like squirrels or as big as badgers?

Hmmm

He didn't know. Not a clue, but his thoughts did remain rigid and fixed which was a good sign that they were running on the right track. *My thoughts are like the rails of a track. I don't know where they are going to. All I know is that I must follow them. Light off – a train with no light on.*

He needed to find people and people are what he would find. *Amen.*

– Amen?

He left the path and followed his nose, which was easy to do because it was back in the centre of his face. He checked it with forefinger and thumb, yes it was there, big red and round the way it was meant to be.

There was a scent that he could not miss. It was a far away scent, the scent was a trail that languished in the mist for a while, that rose with the east wind and assailed his nostrils. It was new scent, everything was new to him. For a man with no memory, everything is brand new. The scent belonged to men, he felt sure. He didn't know how he knew this, he simply did.

There were enough flowers around. He cast them aside with a push of his hand. They bounced back and struck his legs lightly as he passed them by. The trees were huge and majestic. He guessed that some of them touched the sky. Some wove and entwined around each other, others leaned over like old men stretching to do a shoe lace up.

He ran, seeking not to smash the trees. These ones were much too strong, and they looked evil. This was okay. He liked evil. Well, some types of evil. It was difficult to run through a forest when you get deeper into it, because it gets denser. He had to be careful. He didn't want to fall again. It didn't hurt to fall. Sometimes it was fun to do so. It would slow him down however, which was bad. If he took his time then he would be able to travel faster, there would be less mishaps.

He felt another apple form in the lining of the bag. *Oh goody.*

He sat down to eat his beloved apples. *Crunch.*

– One two.

He slept. He didn't feel hungry or cold. He felt the dampness against his skin. Beneath his skin he felt warmth. The magic apples empowered him. They warmed him from within, they filled his stomach too. This cold place filled him with a comfortable feeling. It ran through his veins and made him feel a part of the darkness. He felt a different hunger this night. The hunger gnawed at his mind and reminded him of the cruel world and how unloved he was. Deep within he felt an awareness creeping in, slipping in between his thoughts. He dreamt but didn't know he dreamt, everything seemed so real. A little girl stared at him. She stood on a little plinth, and she smiled. She wasn't a nasty dragon, or a great serpent with sharp teeth and a wiry tongue, she was just a little girl. She terrified him. She held the power to destroy him.

He knew this simple fact. She showed him her pearly whites. This sent him screaming. Something snagged his trouser pocket, this prevented him from running. He looked down and expected to see a branch, or some other similar hindrance. Instead, pearly choppers accompanied by a girly smile and arms which pulled at him, that tugged at him with a strength that was unforgiving. Her arms hurled the rest of herself from his pocket. *Argggghhhhhh!* The dream followed him into the waking world. He leapt up, eyes wide open, hair standing on end and a look of absolute terror across his face.

On awaking he pulled out clumps of his hair, he tried desperately to rid himself of her image. There was blood, he didn't care. It steamed across his face. His eyes became black. No white could be seen in that terrible moment. The image remained and could not be pushed down into the darkness of his subconscious mind. The darkness refused to swallow it. His throat tightened and his head screamed. He felt his jaw and throat hurt – an aching dry yearning. He felt his soul open in the darkness and cry. Deep within a secret called to him, gently reminding him that it was there.

A yearning, a desperate yearning to understand. It was within him: a malignant sore festering inside, unreachable. The apples were there in the bag, their heavenly (*or hellish*) presence called out to him. They bulged at the seams, three of them today. *How nice.* He gobbled them greedily and forgot immediately of the memory of his dreams. *Her* voice subsided, fading quickly into the place where all annoying people, creatures or monsters go.

Then he began to walk again. His self inflicted wounds healed quickly. He walked steadily and without pause. He set a pace. He made better ground by keeping a steady pace than if he ran, simply because as he walked steadily he did not fall. Also, he kept a better direction. The man odour grew steadily stronger. It titillated his nostrils preventing him from moving in any other direction.

In the distance – it could not be missed by his ears, his very keen ears – a roaring could be heard echoing. Small was the roaring, as small as the sound of a rodent's gnawing incisors against an acorn. It was a roaring but it had something of a rumble about it. He kept his pace and headed towards it. Behind this distant roaring was the man scent. He knew it was there, his nose told him so.

The mountains stood tall. He noticed them as he left the forest. He stepped out from the forest and wondered about the sky. It seemed so large, the fields too. There was nothing but grass, mountains and sky. The enormity of it surprised him. He surprised himself by his lack of fear. He liked the forest, the darkness of it, the coldness. He had hated the sunshine as it struck the beautiful parts of the forest – the flowers and the bushes liked to radiate their inner luminosity when the sun shone boldly in the sky. He remembered the physical pain their beauty caused him.

Now the sunshine was his friend, it would have caused others to shiver, to fear. They would hate this inexhaustible expanse. He knew it, excepted it and loved the feeling of power it gave him. What other's feared he found comfort in.

He walked.

Chicory or what? read the sign. Binkerbelle touched the sign with her finger by accident. It hadn't looked like much of a sign. It was merely a pole with a little stub on the end. Binkerbelle touched it and the end unfolded into a speaker. The words: "Chicory or what?" emitted from it. The voice (which was feminine) had a professional tone, and it was sweet in a *I told you so cheeky sort of way*.

Tiffany scratched her head.

Binkerbelle did too.

Mr Mc Noodles jumped up and down enthusiastically and accidentally performed a collapsed cartwheel over a little side fence. He poked his head up and looked a little dishevelled. His shirt was askew and a sock had somehow captured half his trouser leg. Brownies are naturally good bouncers and good at falling over and getting back up again without a scratch. He began to bounce up and down again enthusiastically.

"Okay," said Tiffany, and then she said to the little man: "For heaven's sake stop jumping up and down. You are making me giddy."

The brownie – the very clever brownie – couldn't help but dance. Before, and in a time which was not so very long ago, he had slurped chicory coffee from a large cup (a cup of his own choosing) in a restaurant (a restaurant of his own choosing) and now he had the feeling that he would be doing the very same thing very soon. He loved human places (in his own dimension – ⁸*Shoople*) he liked the shops and the marble floors as well as the mannequins. He liked to stare into shiny mirrors and smell clean disinfectant air. He liked to walk between the chairs and hop onto tables. He especially liked to watch people walk by. His very thoughts at this time were: *chicory equals civilisation which in turn equals home*. This was why he had a smile on his face. There was no room for normal rational thought, not when it came to the prospect of experiencing his favourite things.

He stopped jumping. It took some time, maybe five minutes, maybe as many as ten. "Silly man" explained Tiffany with affection. He wanted to laugh, and he did so, a little chirpy laugh, a hiccup of a laugh. "Come on then," cried out Tiffs with a smile. "Let's get a move on."

They had grown big. It was a good spell to use. They had to hide their wings too. Trev had spoken for a little while the other night, about such subjects as the little people in this dimension. "They have a way of doing things differently here," he had said. At the time he had been thinking to himself: *yes they are very mightily different*. "You see ..." he gazed at them and licked his lips. "Faeries over here, especially ones that are in business don't like to draw attention to their magical abilities." They listened because he was right, they knew it. faeries know truth and untruth when it is uttered, unless they have already made up their minds before it is spoken to them. Their minds were entirely open, and they knew they could trust him.

⁸ Shoople: The dimension where Tiffany comes from. There are two dimensions which next to each other. Shoople and Shookle.

He told them that a faerie in this territory would more than likely steal from a human, or trade with one or even cast a spell against others. “It has been known,” he coughed into his fist, feeling a little embarrassed at talking about their kin in such a way. “It has been known for faeries to even rob people and even their own kin.”

Binkerbelle sensed his unease. “You need not feel uneasily. Within the Divine's imagination everything exists somewhere.” She raised her arms to the room. “This was spawned by an imagination. It is what it is, and they are what they are. They are no more our kin than anything else in this realm.” She looked him in the eye. “We have kinship now. I feel that you are bonded with us, though for all the world I do not understand it.”

Trev nodded. He understood. Some things were best left unsaid.

They continued to walk and as they did so they left the world behind. Binkerbelle and Tiffany had grown big, as big as adults. They had left the small town at sun up. Little people passed them by and noticed them. They walked by the side of Trev, talking idly. They felt more confident and at ease in this world. Small folk did not hide themselves here, they interacted with humans openly. This was good but Binkerbelle had the feeling that maybe, in the not so far future they would run into trouble.

Trouble came to them two hours later. They came across a faerie. He had a small caravan of helpers. They could be seen walking towards them raising the dust up on the road. Some were faeries and brownies, some were humans. The leader, he sat on a cushion crossed legged with his hands on his chin. Four faeries carried the cushion, with him sat on it like a little genie. He scowled at them, and then shouted at them. “Get out of my way!”

They didn’t, of course. The faerie, who was male (Tiffany hadn’t seen a male faerie before) attacked them. He whipped out his wand and mouthed a spell. Binkerbelle didn’t have time to react, she was too stunned at seeing a faerie attack them. She had never any kind of faerie attack another faerie before, the very idea caused her to shudder. Tiffany didn’t hesitate, she loved her new friends and didn’t want anything happening to them. She struck out a hand in a sweeping motion. Her magic was untamed and more than a little wild. Wild magic is power, and because of its untamed nature, it is also hard to defend against. The faeries and brownies were pushed back, they toppled over each other. A great wind sprang from nowhere and pushed them back – invisible and powerful, they were caught up in it and tangled. Their limbs became muddled. The male faerie surrounded himself by a bubble and smiled evilly.

He conjured magical little sharks. They appeared in a small bunch just behind them, floating and swimming in mid air. They attacked ferociously. They were magical creatures, made by magic and conjured by an evil mind. Their teeth were real and very sharp.

“Attack!” yelled the little chap angrily. His upturned nose pointed at them accusingly and his lips quivered. Binkerbelle placed a hand on Tiffany’s shoulder to reassure her. A simple communication passed between them – *Kiesha*. Tiffany took a step back and allowed Binkerbelle forward.

Binkerbelle had seen this spell done before, or one similar to it. The best way to fight a conjuration is with a conjuration. She waved her magic wand. Sparks came out of its end point, spluttering and dripping. Live sparks – Tiffany watched in amazement. Her wand looked like a poker dipped in fire. Bright and aglow – the sparks came alive, breathed into existence, palpitating. They expanded and took shape. The sparks had faces and lengthy smiles (or were they leers?) At first Tiffany thought the little flames had hands, then she realised instead of hands they had boxing gloves.

The sharks came, they hauled tail. The smiling sparks raised their boxing gloves and struck the sharks in the teeth. Each one of them moved as if of one accord, and they didn't miss with a single punch. The sharks tried to bite. Their sharp teeth tried to pierce the material of the gloves but kept sliding off. Again and again the gloves smashed into the mouths of the sharks. The sharks snapped their teeth in anger or resentment, and then disappeared. Binkerbelle raised her wand again, ready for the next attack. If it comes she will be ready.

"Humans attack!" the little two inch wonder shouted at the top of his voice. As he did so his face grew as red as a sunset.

Trev puffed his chest out and stepped forward. The humans had been standing in one place watching the proceedings. They carried two large wooden chests (they had large chests too, and two pot bellies.) They put down their chests (the ones that they were carrying. Not the hairy sweaty ones that inflated and deflated at regular intervals) and gave the quartet fierce expressions, the kind of gaze that a dinosaur might give a giraffe.

Trev stepped forward and stared at the men unequivocally. He waited for them to back down, and half hoped they wouldn't. He wanted to show his worth. They did back down, reluctantly. The prince's attitude changed completely as he witnessed his human slaves' reluctance to engage in combat. They were his last resort – the humans failed him. He smiled placidly and bowed expansively. Now the battle was over he appeared a little embarrassed. He wasn't used to defeat and pretended that the conflict hadn't happened. He stepped aside and waved them by. The big men (chests as wide as houses) picked up the huge chests and waited by the side of the path. The male faerie sat comfortably on his cushion again. It was raised up through magical means, a spell cast by the female faeries, as they fluttered at each corner of the cushion. He smiled at the quartet as they passed. Binkerbelle poked her tongue out at the last moment.

They moved on in silence. The man faerie travelled down into the valley, probably toward the town. She didn't think that he would be coming back. She wasn't prepared to take any chances though, she didn't know this place or its inhabitants. No faerie had attacked another faerie (in the *Shoople* dimension) for thousands of years.

They carried on down the path, each one silent and enjoying the day. Tiffany loved the fresh smell of the fields that surrounded the path. There were two fences, one to the left and one to right, each were accompanied by large hedges that ran parallel. The leaves moved with the breeze, drifting gently. Tiffany passed them by, watching the colours dance across the surface of each. The leaves emanated a presence. Tiffany felt it and watched the many different refractions, they spoke to her in a language comprised of light. Binkerbelle noticed the sounds of the wind as it pushed its warm tendrils through the branches. She felt the wind slide across the surface of the leaves. It was as if the skin of the leaves was her skin. Mr Mc noodles simply bounced. He knew what he liked. As he passed them by he could feel the way the wind jostled them. He thrived on the feeling. Each of the quartet experienced the environment differently as they passed by. Each of them understood that they were being communicated too, by the trees and by the whole of the environment.

Mutual experience – their first collective experience; the leaves shone. Trev raised an eyebrow and his face reddened, each of the quartet felt the link – *their* link. They experienced their bond in the same way. They looked at each other, turning their heads for the merest moment.

Tiffany felt as if she was on the verge of understanding something. She had feelings and her feelings were talking to her. It was a familiar feeling, one that she had shared with her sisters when she had been home.

Then a majestic happening: a blend of each of their experiences merged with the other, soaking into their very souls. Each of them experienced a part of the other, experiencing themselves through the senses of their companions. Trev felt Tiffany's affinity with her sisters, and Binkerbelle experienced Mc Noodle's enthusiasm for leaping. An internal wind flittered across their emotions like the fingers of a harpsichordist. Merging their senses, converging their senses, bringing them to the boil and filtering their energies.

A sign appeared at the side of the road (the path had turned into a small road whilst they were experiencing the leaves.) To their left the little path sauntered off and turned into a little pebbled path, very pretty and intricately placed. A sign said: **do not enter**, but beneath it in very small writing someone had written (and do not think about kippers.) Which of course made everybody think about kippers.

“Kippers anyone?” asked Tiffany.

“Ha har-diddy-ha,” said Binkerbelle. “Shall we walk up it?” Binkerbelle had already taken her first footstep along the path. Tiffany laughed as Binkerbelle skipped forward. Tiffany followed, and then Mr Mc Noodle. Trev tried to warn them but they weren't listening.

A net fell from the trees. Binkerbelle was aware of it almost immediately and began to cast a spell. The spell had no effect, it fizzled on her fingertips. Here it was on their heads. Tiffany hadn't been fast enough to think up a spell, instead she tried to remove the net manually. It was like trying to move a house.

Gremlins came forth and caught hold of the net and dragged them off.

“Don' come any further.” A huge Gremlin stepped out of the undergrowth (he was easily five foot tall). He greeted Trev with a smile. His huge sharp teeth hooked over his lips. “Yummy!” it explained.

Trev knew that there was a sword in his bag, he also knew that he had a gun in there too. A gun if fired would attract the attention of every gremlin in the forest. Perhaps the sword would be enough. He doubted if he would have enough time to get the sword. He pulled the bag from his shoulder and let it slide to the ground.

The gremlin gave him no quarter. It yelled, its huge pointed ears stood erect and its sly eyes were unblinking. It produced a large club, a club that had previously been hidden behind its back. *This was not good*, thought Trev. He became very astute when it came to life and death situations, particularly when it was his life or death. The gremlin ran full pelt at him with its club held high.

Nice of him to come prepared. Gremlin eyes grew larger and more fierce. *Breathe Trev*, he told himself. He stilled his mind and breathed in through his nostrils. His body became still, completely still.

It would all depend on which way it swung. *If he swings to the left...* he allowed his thoughts to release. Thoughts have a way of sticking together during combat. Situations changed in combat. Change was the only certainty in combat. He relaxed.

The gremlin was no fool. He waited till the last moment to swing his club. Trev noticed that the club had nails driven through it. The club began its decent, curving a little. Trev stepped back and to the side, and then as the club came to the end of its swing, he raised his arm and struck the creature beneath its chin. The creature's eyes rolled upward into its ugly skull and its body collapsed to the ground.

They screamed as they were dragged. The net grew tighter around them and they closed their eyes. Tiffany thought and understood that there was a solution, there was a way out. It took her half a mile and a chaffed bum to recognise the answer. It was simple. She needed to become human again. She knew she could do it too.

They travelled quickly and silently. Tiffany changed, she became human instantly. Then she used her psychokinetic ability. At first she didn't know why she had decided to become human. What difference would it make? Then, as she reached out her mind, she felt the net around her and pushed. Now that she was in human form she was able to affect the net. The net only prevented faerie folk from using magic.

She pushed with her mind and propelled the net into the trees. They travelled with it, into the trees. Lots of gremlins flew too, but in random directions. They cried out peculiar screams as they struck branches, branches which were filled with monkeys. The monkeys didn't like being disturbed. They gathered in the branches and began pelting the gremlins with fruit. They screamed as they did, in delight. Tiffany reached out with her mind again and gripped her friends. They all hovered in the air gracefully. Then as the gremlins defended themselves against the monkeys' fruit ambush she transformed back into a faerie. Her friends looked at her, smiled and then flew in one direction, as a team.

It didn't take the gremlins long to reorganise themselves and follow the trio. Gremlins have a knack of finding what they want to find. They moved fast but Faeries and brownies can move fast too.

Trev followed. He tracked their prints and made very good ground at first. Then there was a conflict of some sort, lots of feet had moved in different directions. He smiled and took off after the many footprints.

The gremlins moved fast. They understood the forest well and knew every advantageous pathway. They had magic – teleportation magic. It quickened their efforts to recapture the faeries, or so they thought. Circumstances weren't going as planned, the two faeries and the brownie were very clever. The gremlins did not give up, instead they became more determined in their pursuit.

Binkerbelle zapped a few as they came close. Blue blasts and blue bolts streaked across the forest striking the gremlins across their chests. It didn't stop them coming. It didn't stop them climbing trees and attempting to swing their way, climb their way or leap their way to them. They yelled ferociously, gnashing their teeth and screaming. They chatted incessantly in a tongue that was indecipherable. With huge grins and eyes wide with fierce determination they ran with spears raised above their heads.

A blue moon shone above. The clouds hung in the sky lit up from behind – blue.

Binkerbelle and Tiffany shared the same thoughts at the same time: *Rise up through the forest. Get to a place that the gremlins cannot follow.* They couldn't do it, they would have to leave Mr Mc Noodle. This they would not do. Binkerbelle flew to the left of the brownie and Tiffany to the right. They would protect the brownie no matter what.

faeries can speed away from most creatures and leave them with nothing but dust in the eyes. In short, it is very hard to catch a faerie. They could sense their friend Mr Mc Noodle. *We must save him.* She sent the thought to Binkerbelle. Binkerbelle turned to her friend and nodded. They both knew what they needed to do.

A cliff appeared in front of them. Now was as good time to confront their enemies. They both turned towards their assailants. They came. They wore furious expressions, they were long eared and sharp toothed eager would be tormentors.

The universe is a big place, and the gremlins know it. The bigger something is the more gremlins fear it. They have their forest, and everything outside is the enemy. To a Gremlin's mind anything outside is bad. Consequently, everyone in or from enemy territory is their enemy. They set traps in the forest, all over the forest.

Help me! The words sprang across their minds. The letters were like locusts fidgeting in the confines of a small place: *H E L P!* The words came from Mr Mc Noodle. All three of them witnessed an image of a great cage, a huge cage spread through the corner of their minds, falling. Trev held his breath for a moment to stifle a shout, he was behind two bushes watching gremlins squabbling over dice. Binkerbelle felt Tiffany's anger. It was a new emotion for Binkerbelle, faeries do not feel anger.

Tiffany was angry though. *How dare they hurt him!*

She turned. The gremlins were ready for her, they ran at her with spears raised and tongues wiggling in midair. Their grins were wide, their teeth were glistening with saliva and their eyes were wild with excitement. Tiff's legs widened like a gunslinger, she side stepped and struck her nearest attacker with the back of her hand. **Pow!** Binkerbelle was surprised at Tiffany's power. The Gremlin flew backwards into the forest. *Argghhhhh!* He could still be heard as his comrades engaged Tiffany.

Gremlins flooded into the area, forming rows and rows of spear points. Tiffany did not falter with her movements or her resolve. She felt invincible, she weaved through the bodies with a grace of a martial artist, blocking with her forearms and striking the gremlins down one by one. Her movements were efficient and dexterous, their bodies flew from her fists and feet like skittles

The gremlins tightened their lines and charged. Tiffany paused for a moment. She was a small little girl within the eye of a gremlin storm. She cupped her hands together and then blew. Her breathe circled in the palm of her hand, twisting, caressing the skin on her palm. A fraction whirlwind formed. It circled in the palm of her. Then it departed her palm and bounced off the pavement. The gremlins screamed and avalanched toward Tiffany. The whirlwind leapt into being, twelve foot in height. It swallowed three or five of them. Still some made it through to confront Tiffany. Tiffany dispatched them easily. The tornado grew exponentially, tripling in size and power.

Binkerbelle was casting conjuring spells, little cherubs were bashing the Gremlins unerringly on their sharp noses. She seemed to be quiet relaxed, as each new batch of gremlins came for her. She conjured new creatures to dispatch them.

Then the vortex struck her, she tried to cast a spell but couldn't think of any way to counteract it. It was an elemental spell. Every school of spell craft is different. She didn't know much about the elemental school has its origins. She tried to redirect the spell back at the caster, and then realised that the caster was Tiffany. Her last thought manifested in her mind a moment before she was propelled upwards: *I shall have to teach that girl to control her magic spells.*

The gremlins wailed in delight and pleasure. They loved to hunt. The wind came, it swirled around them, flapping their clothes and pushing back their ears. They howled their displeasure and made a low keening noise. Then from out of nowhere the vortex appeared, it slivered towards them at great speed. Their panicked faces expressed the notion: *arhhhhhhhhhhh!*

The vortex expanded as it came towards them, as it increased its speed. Ranks of the gremlins lifted into the air. Their little blue trousers swished around their ankles as they flew up into the vortex. They screamed and gargled as they tumbled upward.

Oh dear, thought Tiffany as she witnessed the forest being swept upward. *Perhaps I over did it a bit.*

Trev finished picking the lock of the cage. The brownie could hardly wait to escape, he leapt into Trev's arms and hugged him. "For heaven's sake..." said Trev with a smile. The tornado appeared at the edge of his vision, it peeled away from them tearing up the forest as it departed.

Binkerbelle cried out. Her cry took hold of all their minds, screaming and trembling their brain cells. Mr Mc Noodle face became distraught, his eyes widened and his mouth opened a little and became tight. He disappeared, a myriad of sparkling twinkling dust was all that was left to show he had been there. Trev simply sat there with a perplexed expression on his face. A moment later Mr Mc Noodle reappeared with Binkerbelle in his arms.

"Come on," said Trev. "Let's get out of here before it decides to come back." Binkerbelle didn't speak. She fell, shrinking at the same time. Trev caught her in his hands. She shrank quickly and finally came to rest in the palm of his hand. Carefully he placed her into his pocket. She felt the cloth of his pocket surround her and fell into it, sleeping almost immediately.

Mr Mc Noodle couldn't shrink. Such magic belonged to faeries , and faeries only.

Trev could move really quickly. He sprinted through the forest. Mc Noodle was barely able to keep up. "Mask your magic brownie. Or you will get us both killed." The brownie had rarely needed to mask his magic, humans in his dimension were easy to hide from. He tried to recall his training from his youth.

Many Gremlins were running in different directions. Their leaders were trying to herd them into some kind of organised ranks but it wasn't working. They ran around shouting shrilly. Mc Noodle wanted to laugh, he raised a hand to his face and muffled it before it could escape. Two Gremlins came very close to their hiding place. Trev stepped up behind them and smashed their heads together. He eased them to the ground, then eyed Mr Mc Noodle.

Brownies are good thinkers, they are good at thinking of two things at once. He, Mc Noodle, whilst keeping quiet and looking out for dangerous traps, was also busy working out how to do a cloaking spell.

Time ... time ... travelling back into his memories ...

"Gargoyle Gerlump!" his instructor shouted whilst hitting him with a huge mushroom. He waved his fist too. In a mildly irritating tone he repeated the words: "Gerlump! Gerlump!" He was a wizened old sod, but everyone knew that his knowledge was second to none. No one understood brownie magic better than Mr Glue of the old hermitage. He could hit you and very often did. He would use an old clog if he was really mad. Sometimes, if you were lucky, he would simply raise his long gangly legs and simply boot you in the bum, with both of legs at the same time (brownies couldn't fly but the most accomplished and intelligent were able to hover pretty well). Yes, Mr Mc Noodle's real name was Gerlump, or rather, Gerloop (Mr glue kept mispronouncing it, and if anyone reminded him of his mispronunciation he would reach down for a clog.) There came a time, after many years in the academy, when everyone, including Gerlump himself had quiet forgotten his original name.

It was during one of these "lessons" that Gerloop aka the future Mr Mc Noodle had disappeared. Mr Glue leapt up in the air and whooped his appreciation. "Now you're talking boy! First student ever, that ever tried to magic his way out of a clogging."

Now all Mr Mc Noodle had to do was to try and remember just how he did it.

Wolf and Gooseberry

Clown – sharp toothed and eager moved across the land as fast as he could. There was no time to dawdle. He felt an urgency. The open fields called to him. He stepped onto the soft green and felt it roll beneath his feet. The wind pushed against his face, chilling him, slipping up his nostrils, freezing his nasal column. It struck his ears too, teasing them, clawing.

The sun was rising. It bled across the horizon. The trees were well behind him, they disappeared into memory. Now he was alone with the plains. The sky hung low, cloudy. The sky had its own plains. The clouds were blistered, rolling and angry. How wonderful they were! Just the sort of thing to keep a clown happy.

The enemies watched silently through their crystal balls, hunched over like hags. They chewed on a few bones and some fleshly morsels.

The problem with clowns –

Clowns are a little preoccupied with whatever is on their minds, or with whatever they are doing at any one particular time. He was oblivious to anything else, if he had been aware, he may have felt a persistent feeling of being watched.

They were watching the landscape, *their* landscape. They had watched the rolling pastures as they ran with their brothers and sisters. With the pack. They howled as they travelled. They liked to eat people – *people, people and more people*, but people never came out this way anymore.

Which was a shame because they were yummy.

There were plenty of creatures, large and small that wandered the plains. Snakes too, big long ones, thin ones and even mammoths. They travelled in vast herds. When they were killed and eaten (by the wolf people) and skinned, the furs were used as carpets and blankets. In the night, under the ground, in their wolf caverns the wolf people snored loudly, comfortable in their knowledge that they were the greatest of creatures.

The clown was oblivious to everything, except himself. He ate his apples as *they* came across the plains.

They came in packs, teeth sharp and dripping with saliva, tongues lolling, mouths panting and howling. They had witnessed him through their round balls. They had found these crystal balls in a deep hole a very long time ago.

They dug deep one evening, after a great war between the human tribes of the east. Some very nasty human war tribes had come together and had ridden horses by their thousands. The wolf people had won. They had fought with tooth and claw against shields and swords. They had greater strength and speed. The humans were slow and cumbersome, and they couldn't organise themselves to save their lives, literally. The wolf people had used their telepathic ability to communicate and organise themselves. They used this advantage to defeat the humans. The human tribes had retreated that day. They could no longer fight. They took their casualties and crawled back to where they came from. The wolf people had driven the humans back, and then in the evenings they had dug their mounds, their wolf burial grounds. Whilst digging they accidentally uncovered the crystal balls.

They studied them well. At first they didn't know what they were. They had their own magicians. No human had been able to cross their lands in three generations. Now the clown trundled across the moor with a smiley lipstick face and boots the size of the moon.

He touched the ends of his boots. "whooh hoooo!" He was unstable perhaps, as mad as a... *What was he? He wasn't human.*

This is the place of the long tomorrow –

He didn't know where that particular thought had come from. He checked behind some trees. Did someone close send these thoughts to him? He checked the night sky suspiciously wondering if it had been those white shiny things that had sent the thoughts. The stars seemed to be twinkling and looked as if they knew a thing or two. He yelled out to them, at the stars; placed his two white (gloved?) hands together and yelled, "hayloooooo!"

They ignored him. He hated them for it.

He entered a grove of sorts. There were a few trees, nothing much to look at. A sign said: HERE LAYETH OMWORTHSON – *a very fine fellow indeed*. RIP.

RIP – it must stand for: really important person. He would let the sign be. Maybe this fine fellow, this Omworthson, had a liking for clowns and apples. For all he knew, this was exactly the case. *Exact indeedy*. He took his hat off for the moment and bowed his head. He hadn't noticed that he had a hat on until he had cause to take it off. *It is indubitably case that I have a hat because it is in my hand*. He placed it back on his head and wondered why he had one. Then he wondered why he hadn't noticed that he had one before this moment. Then he forgot again.

The wolves came –

He smelt them before they were able to smell him. They were bad, they smelt awful. Which was good. He liked them and wanted to be one almost immediately. They wanted to eat him. He knew it. He liked their scent, it was animalistic and hungry. He licked his lips and sharpened his claws, rubbing them together – his long finger nails had turned into claws. They were very long and his teeth were too. He placed his white hands on the floor and snarled. He liked the snarl. It was a good one. His white gloved hands gripped the earth, his claws penetrated soil and sand enabling him to turn sharply (his hands were white, and appeared to be gloved. They weren't. If touched, they would feel silken.) His brightly coloured coat hung low too, scrapping the ground.

He wanted to play. They were many. He ran on all fours, as they were doing.

Night fell like an avalanche. He ran and as he ran he sniffed. His nostrils inflated and expanded. He growled deep. It was nice to run against the wind, he felt the chill press into his purple eyes. His eyes had changed colour to a deep purple. He wasn't aware of this change, or that he had shape shifted, or anything else. He heard the beating of his heart in his inner ear and likened it to a beating drum.

Grouche kimgocc stegn –

They called out with their minds, connecting with each other. They howled and growled. They snarled and drooled. They hunted their quarry. They tasted the air, imagining human flesh sliding between jaw and throat. Humans were more savage than them. The humans thought of themselves as civilised. Human civilisation was a charade.

The wolf men were the ones that had dignity. They didn't pretend to be other than what they were. The humans called them wolf men and that is what they were. They had been changed from human to werewolf. Some had been born werewolf.

They ran faster than humans, their flesh healed quickly. They were better. This new creature wasn't human, this creature could run fast. It wouldn't out run them! Their minds called to each other. They felt their thoughts merge, the filaments of their hunger and delight flowed between them, on a hidden frequency. They were no longer individual, now they were one.

The creature ran, it ran at an incredible speed. *How can something run this fast?* Their thoughts leapt ahead, and other wolf packs joined the fray.

They howled. He growled back at them. He could sense the slope of the land, the grass turned wet and mushy. He could sense them. He knew that he was their match. He would give them their hunt. He would snap their legs with his jaws and claws.

Hundreds became thousands. With wolves at his heels, even a crazy clown gets a little scared. *Scarrrrrrrrrrried!* He ran. He felt their jaws snap at his heels. Felt their fortitude increase. Each individual werewolf grew in strength and bravery as a new wolf joined their number.

He had never felt so exhilarated before. He snapped at the wind with his huge teeth. They were growing longer and sharper by the moment. His mouth too. It had become impossibly wide. He heard their howl and met it with a howl of his own.

Hear that!

They did. Now they were furious. How dare he! He sensed the other wolves ahead of him, their scampering feet, their claws in the soft mud. His eyes caught their long sleek bodies streaming across the waterlogged fields. Their stride looping – *Oh goody!* They were going to eat him. He increased his speed and veered to the left towards the edge of the pack. They ran behind, keeping a steady pace. What a wolf cannot match in speed it is able to run down.

He ran faster than he thought he was capable of. He changed as he ran. His legs and arms became stronger, his muscles three times thicker than they were.

Faster. He ran to the edge of the moorland, the pack behind him, but was not fast enough to avoid confrontation. Their bodies flew towards him, an avalanche of fur and teeth. Their great savage teeth tore at his limbs, stripping him of flesh even as he healed. He turned his great jaws towards them and snapped them shut on their flesh. He tore at their flesh with malicious cruelty and a dark terrifying joy.

Flesh of my flesh, bone, teeth and maw –
Elongated jaw, deep brown eye, low brow,
long body, muscular flank, matted fur – wait
no longer for your meal.
It walks and runs but none command:
the brothers of the ashen agate.

His jaws closed downward and continued chomping. His jaws rendered flesh into chunks. The sound tore into their ears. He chomped them, ate them up as he ran. Still they came. He reached a cliff. He could not dive over. He twisted in mid air at the edge. His body became larger, his jaws became longer, wider and leaner. His wounds healed by the moment. They howled and came onto him, all of their furry bodies becoming one tangled furry mass again.

He ducked his head down and charged them all. His head became a solid as granite, as hard as steel. He charged them. His hat merged with his head as he struck them. Their bodies flew in every direction. Now they gave a different howl. This howl was of pain, suffering and longing. Perhaps it was longing to become. To become what it that they most wanted to be. Perhaps it was simply a howl of pain and fear.

He was becoming. He didn't know what he was becoming but he was becoming. He smiled a bloody smile and ran in another direction. They continued to hunt him, howling their pain and suffering. Howling their anger and... rapture. He loved them for their tenaciousness, for their wonderful aggression and sheer nerve.

He felt where to go. He wouldn't acknowledge that he was being guided by his feelings. He had all sorts of feelings: feelings of woe, anger and resentment. Each emotion pushed him one way or another. There were other feelings too, these feelings also called to him, drove him as much as any other. Perhaps more so. He was becoming.

He entered into a glade. Everything was different in the glade. He felt it immediately, as he passed through an invisible barrier. One moment he could hear the howling of wolves, the next complete silence. There was peace here. He felt wonder. This wonder was a new feeling. He decreased in size as he walked through the invisible barrier, changing incrementally. His mind ticked along, thinking its thoughts. Anger and resentment, pain and woe vanished by the moment. He wondered about the wolves, would they be upon him in a moment? He looked over his shoulder, just to make sure. He could not hear them, not whimper or paw.

No evil can come in here. He thought this was true, and yet he also understood that he was intractably evil and could not be other than what he was. *If I am evil,* he thought, *how then can I be here?* It was a question that had no answer.

He walked and then he came to a house with a garden. A gooseberry sat in an armchair. It had very short arms and legs and a very gracious smile. The clown wanted to feel angry, wanted to feel as if he could eat this little gooseberry. Yet he simply had no urge to do so. There was no inclination at all to gobble down this little luxurious piece of rapturous morsel. Which was a problem, of sorts.

"Howdy doody," said the gooseberry.

The clown simply stared. His mouth had returned to a normal size but still felt a little strange. His eyes were now black, they had changed from purple as he passed through the barrier. He stared at the gooseberry. Inside the clown's mouth, his tongue and gums were black, oily black. His teeth were white, they smiled at the gooseberry. They seemed to be saying: *watch me carefully, you never know what I might do next.*

The clown inclined his head, still a little confused about not having any desire to eat gooseberry. "There is an itch, its right at the centre of my back, said the gooseberry. "You couldn't give it a good itch could you?" The clown stepped forward, walked over, reached behind the creature and scratched its back. "A little more to the left please." The gooseberry wiggled his shoulders. "Please take a seat."

The clown looked behind him. There were two chairs, one to his left and one to his right. They hadn't been there a moment ago. *More magic.* He was beginning to get fed up with magic. He didn't feel threatened in anyway so he relaxed. He felt okay, a little nauseous. He reached for a chair, and as he did so his head swam, his consciousness shifted one step to the left. It was a disconcerting experience.

He felt like he wanted to vomit. He had never experienced such a feeling before, it tasted of fish. It was not a *yummy* feeling. *Wolf tender morsel (flesh of my flesh – bone and maw.)*

He vomited. It came out. It did. All at once. It was too disgusting to think about. Too horrible to contemplate. It pooled around his feet, and the smell of it, *oh my...* it gushed forth. Then came the moments, the in-between moments, the long drawn out moments when the body had nothing within it to gush out. He tried calling it forth from himself, commanding it with his mind, with his whole being. A fruitless endeavour. He closed his eyes and let black tears roll downwards across his white face. The black dew drops slipped across his marble like skin. – *Please no more.* Yet he felt better. His mind felt clearer than before, than ever before. His face changed. Nose, mouth – his nose fell off, tumbling to the ground as it had before, a long while ago. His lips became normal.

“Elf or human?” asked the gooseberry.

The clown simply whimpered. *Just let it stop.* “Help me.” His lips quivered and a little drool, a tendril of something unwholesome dangled from his bottom lip. Then ... “*hoop hoop,*” it whooshed out of him, and “*Arghh arghhhhhh!*”, a stomach gripping wretch the like of which only people who have a disposition to drink copious amounts of alcohol can understand.

The gooseberry turned its head (his head and torso were combined, they swivelled together.) He clasped his hands together (which was a difficult thing to accomplish when your body is extraordinary round and your arms are so very short.)

The clown’s hands quivered, his lips too, they quivered like an electrocuted starfish. His eye lids flapped. He had flipping flapping eye lids for quite some time. He attempted to keep the giant gooseberry in his sights even as his body contorted, even as the excruciating pain eclipsed everything. Time is like an elastic band when an individual is experiencing an extreme body function. At different moments, time itself became taunt and flexible. It stretched.

As he leant downwards, holding his head between his hands, gripping his head between his hands, squeezing it for all of his worth, time became an acrobat. A moment became an eternity and somehow eternity existed within the very moment. He felt the fibres within his brain expand. The movement of blood as it streamed through his veins could be clearly felt. He gargled. It was an unexpected noise. He would have perhaps heeded its peculiar sound on any other occasion, in another less extricating moment.

“So it is an Elf that my eyes witness?” The gooseberry looked at the newly transformed elf. It was so – he was that which the gooseberry perceived. He didn’t have a mirror, he was unable to see what an Elf looked like but he fancied he was one of them. “Or are you?” asked the gooseberry. The clown was entirely gone. Another stood in his place. He was an elf, there was a nobility about his posture. The way that he rested his hands on his knees, the way that he positioned his head. He had been reborn. The terrible clown memories were there, lingering in the back of his mind. They were fading quickly, like a childhood nightmare.

The gooseberry reached an arm out towards a table, a small table, a table that previously hadn’t been there. “Please, eat from my table. What is mine is yours.” The table, although small was filled with wonderful fruit. The elf reached for a pear and placed it in his mouth. *Munch!*

“Tiffany Marie!”

Her mother wasn't there, or rather, she wasn't here. She was there, in another place, another dimension far away. Her father – she remembered him, his smile and his hug. She lifted in the air. Her wings, they usually gave her such comfort but now they didn't. She would swap them in an instant to have her parents back, to have them near again.

She flew. She wondered where her friends were, whether they were okay. She worried about Binkerbelle. She had felt an awful feeling a moment ago, she had felt terror. The feeling dissipated suddenly.

Through the looking glass: Alice had been alone, just like Tiffany. Did Alice have a father and mother, did she have friends? The stories, they grow inside a person, in children, within their hearts. It is a secret place, a wonderful place where there were magic beans. Tiffany remembered the stories, and understood them to be truer than anything. *I must remember my magic*, she told herself. *I must remember the place from which it dwells*.

Destruction everywhere, animals fled. They had made good their escape, predator and prey ran together. The gremlins were persistent, they had reassembled in the distance. She could hear their distant cackling and jabbering.

She needed to move on. This place wasn't safe. She didn't know when the gremlins would be coming but they would be coming. She flew onward, her friends were somewhere. They would be looking for her, and she would be looking for them. The Gremlins would be looking for all them, and they wouldn't giving up.

She could smell their feet. Gremlins had very smelly feet. They can't help it, the smell comes from their boots. They all wear them. Red ones: different red boots for all of them. All of them wearing them, on their feet. They don't take them off, or their socks. They have horrible manners, they brush crumbs of the table as soon as they have finished their food. They think it clever to do so. They do their sums and read out loud, and write very neat little words. They go to gremlin schools and have gremlin teachers. In the evenings, every evening, they go to gremlin cadets. There they learn to march and do wonderful things with spears and knives.

Then they grow up and become grown up warriors and get told what to do and what not to do.

They now had an enemy. Her name was Tiffany and they wanted to kill her. Which is the opposite of nice.

Tiffany flew. The gremlins marched. Trev walked, Mr Mc Noodle toddled along, by his side and Binkerbelle slept in his comfortable pocket.

The clown that was no longer a clown that had been, albeit for a very limited period of time, an elf (at least he thought that was the case) had begun his consumption of the food and didn't want to stop. He wiped his mouth. Everything tasted so nice, each fruit tasted as sweet as anything he had ever tasted. He was hungry. The more he ate the more he wanted to eat. He seemed to be getting hungrier with each new mouthful.

He ate faster, he couldn't stop. So he kept going, and going. However, as he busied himself with the process of eating, as the bowl shrank, another bowl, a previously empty bowl, began to fill up. This all happened beneath his notice.

The fruit within the bowls loomed over the rim. He raised his eyes and cast his pupil towards the bowl. It was a *tricksy* bowl. It was doing strange things that it wasn't supposed to do. He reached out a hand, a hand that used to be white (he felt sure that his hand had been white) and stretched it out, hooking the bowl to him. The fruit in the bowl hadn't quite finished filling up the bowl. It did so, increasing a little in width, bulging with each plump juicy tender fruity morsel.

The gooseberry watched him and smiled gleefully. "That's the way," it purred. "You seem to be so very hungry."

The elf's stomach expanded and his skin became a different shade of green. An elf had light green skin. This is true, yet this new shade of green was different. This new shade of green didn't suit him. The gooseberry liked it however, he clapped heartily. The newly transformed elf was transforming again.

He had become naked. His clown apparel had been a glamour, it disintegrated as he transformed into an elf. It had fallen away. Then another stood where the clown had been. This new being was undergoing a process as well, it was changing into something else entirely. It had becoming round like a gooseberry.

Oh my goodness, his mind whispered to him. What am I becoming?

For a transfixed moment – a mere glamour could cease to be. A glamour had only such power as the perceiver gave it. This unbiased mind was glowering at the bowl with both eyes, as it continued to change. An elf was usually apt at dissipating such illusions, if there was one. He (and he was definitely an elf at this point) wanted to stuff his head into the bowl and simply eat for all he was worth. This thought not only felt like a good one, but it seemed to be the very essence of a logical procedure.

His skin began to sprout little bristles. First he felt the bristles in his armpits. It wasn't painful, a little uncomfortable perhaps. He bit into another fruit and it exploded over his tongue. Now the bristles were spreading along his ribs, and aligning themselves with his vertebrae.

There must be a law against things tasting this good.

The gooseberry on the other side of the table seemed to be shrinking a little, he was becoming less round. He was still rounded, and still smiling. It wasn't an "it" any longer, now it was definitely male. He had a goatee. He was actually giving the elf a little wave with a little green hand which looked a little less gooseberry green than it had a moment ago. The elf wolfed down more food, gorging himself on every tender sweet delicate exotica contained in the bowls.

Was it merely the imagination of the elf as he ate, or was the gooseberry losing his prickles? He attempted to not eat, he pushed away the bowls with a hand. It was a gentle push, lacking conviction. His will faded, he could feel it departing like a vanquished warrior. He pushed himself away from the bowls, with an effort and a grimace. He struck the bowls with his hands, smashing them into each other. They toppled from the table and smashed to the floor beneath.

The fruit bowls magically appeared back on the table, and the floor was again free from debris.

What was the elf becoming? It was a strange looking creature to be sure. The elf felt very uncomfortable around the waist. He looked downwards and was horrified to witness that he was becoming a giant gooseberry!

Don't you want to eat more of me? It was the fruit that spoke, they were the culprits, they seemed to be saying – *oh yea, give me some teeth.* For a moment they had little mouths, little puckered lips and little eyes. They looked at him with eager little eyes, squinted at him. He looked down at himself, at his waist. His skin was tight, his stomach was trying to expand further. He turned and tried to run away.

Running away when you're as round as a ball is not an easy thing to accomplish.

The gooseberry that was no longer a gooseberry laughed. It was a hard laugh, it was the kind of laugh that wouldn't like to be laughed back at. In the place of the gooseberry there was a man, he stroked his goatee. He was laughing at the newly transformed gooseberry as it tried to run away. The running newly transformed gooseberry, a gooseberry that had been a elf and before that a clown, looked ridiculous.

The man laughed.

The creature was now a handsome man. He had managed it, he had managed to transform from a gooseberry into an elf. It had taken him an age to work out a way to escape his prison. Many years ago, he had been in a battle with a wizard. The other wizard had won, and had decided to imprison him within the centre of a ⁹*Gracalo* "No one will ever find you here," crowed the wizard. "The wolf people will be your guards." He then raised a hand and gave him a little wave as he departed.

He had tried to leave but every time he placed a foot outside the grove he found himself back at the centre of the groove. Indeed the wolves were his guards. As long as they were out there in their thousands, no one would be able to get to him.

One person had managed to find their way in, many years ago. He said his name was Omworthson. The little man that had stepped into the grove had been a cheery sort. He had explained his dilemma to the little man, hoping that the little man would be able to help. After all, he had managed to evade the wolves.

No such luck, the little man had simply shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Many years passed by. Many years of walking to and fro, creating long grooves in the earth. Then he had found the answer: to escape he needed to become someone else. He had tried changing his appearance, which hadn't worked (he didn't think that it would have.) Then he had transformed into another creature entirely. It isn't an easy thing to change into another creature, to change the fabric of one's external being. That hadn't worked either. It worked for a bit, he had stood outside for about twenty seconds, but then got teleported back.

Written into the spell, into the very fabric of the spell that kept him in the grove, was a special subroutine which had a copy of the matrix within itself. In other words, it remembered itself. It did not fold into nothingness once the wizard had vacated his occupancy of the grove. The spell had known that he was no longer in the grove. Knowing that there was no consciousness inside the grove, it looked outside, along the circumference of the grove, recognised him, locked onto him, and then teleported him back. It was a most sophisticated spell.

He had figured out a counter spell. All he needed was someone to visit him. Then exchange DNA – the fabric of his being with the visitor. The spell would not know who was who. He could be on his way, free of the spell. He could be in the world again!

⁹ Gracalo – a magical grove, or sanctuary.

Now he was free, finally. It was too much for the now newly formed human. He fell over himself and disappeared behind the table. He laughed as he fell. He gasped as he laughed, laughed as he gasped. Or tried to.

The gooseberry that had been an elf, that had been a clown, spotted the bag beneath the table and understood it to be his salvation. He knew it. He didn't know how he knew it. He just did. A moment later he was making his way to it.

He fell and rolled forward onto his face. There he lay. The laughing man looked over at the stumbling gooseberry and laughed harder. This was too good to be true.

The gooseberry, whilst in an extremely uncomfortable position, looked behind him and saw the man laughing and was glad that was he preoccupied. He had one chance. He headed toward the black bag. He tried to stand but was unable. His stomach muscle contracted, and hurt. So he turned his fat gooseberry body around and rolled instead.

The man mimicked the gooseberry. He puffed out his cheeks and rolled around. The great big green gooseberry continued to roll. He rolled onto his stomach. It hurt a lot. His stomach was full with gas. He burped, and the burp contracted and expanded his stomach in quick succession, propelling him forward unexpectedly, at a greater velocity. He quickly pulled his arms into his body (they had become rather spindly) and he rolled for all his worth.

Luckily he was in line with the bag. The only problem: the man now held the bag. He held it in his hands triumphantly and looked into it. He looked up perplexed. He folded it inside out to make sure that it was truly empty, then he looked at the rolling gooseberry and smiled.

He threw the bag at the rolling gooseberry.

The gooseberry caught it as he rolled, with one clever spindly hand. He dipped within and brought out an apple. A deliciously plump round apple.

CRUNCH!

Faun and twinkling.

Nasty wizard – dark Magic

Tiffany Marie laughed. She could see a faun dancing with a nub of a twinkling light behind him, only a nub – it was the smallest thing. She clapped her hands playfully to his steps, and watched with great big wondering eyes as the light danced. They hadn't noticed her yet. They were clearly having fun. The light zigzagged in time to his steps. There was no music, just the pitter-patter of his feet. When they did notice her, the faun crouched low and the little light hid behind him.

"We shan't go. We just won't!" Shouted the faun. He seemed to shrink into himself.

At first Tiffany didn't realise that the faun was talking to her. She even looked over her shoulder, expecting to see someone step out from behind a tree. The faun had fear in his eyes, and trembled.

She felt horrified that something could think in such a way toward a faerie, toward her. "Please don't fear," she tried to explain, "I would never hurt you." There was something in her voice which spoke of sincerity and acceptance. Nevertheless, the faun didn't trust her. He puffed out his chest and furrowed his brow. He meant to protect the little flickering light that hid behind him. He would give his life for that the light (which Tiffany suspected was a faerie). He yelled fiercely at her and waved his arms. It was no ordinary yell. A force manifested, it slipped from his lips and rode on the ebb of his breath.

Tiffany's faerie sight opened. She could see everything, she could see the river behind him light up, and the trees in the distance looked like decorated sparkling Christmas trees.

From his lips, a wiggly snake like creature, a creature made up of pure energy, hurtled towards her. She placed her palm up, and flicked it aside easily. She could direct energy now with greater accuracy. The snake careened to the left and struck the floor. "Flee!" shouted the faun to the little light. His voice was panic stricken, he puffed out his chest in attempt to appear as menacing as possible.

The little light had its own ideas. Instead of running it came from behind the faun's back and travelled toward Tiffany fearless.

As it came closer, Tiffany saw a myriad of different coloured lights circulating within it. She smiled. "Oh you are wonderful." The faun's facial expression was mixed. Perhaps there was joy there, maybe a little jealousy too. He could tell that the little human considered the little light to be a wonder, just as he did. The light settled in the palm of Tiffany's hand, and danced around the centre. Tiffany formed a little tunnel with her lips and blew toward the little light. There are ways of communication that go beyond words, beyond feelings. The little light flew and settled on Tiffany's left shoulder, then as she turned her head, it flew to her right shoulder. Tiffany laughed aloud.

The faun had somehow armed itself with a bow. A magical arrow which was notched and balanced between his fingers. His face was filled with rage. "Oh shush," said Tiffany. The faun released the arrow, as it left its bow it became a flower. It flew a little way then began to float toward to the ground. He quickly placed another arrow onto his... oh dear, his bow had turned into a tulip!

The little light flew across to the faun, to his ear. The faun appeared to be listening to the little light. He frowned, then shrugged his shoulders and knelt. He opened his mouth. Perhaps his intention was to speak though before he could do so, Tiffany spoke instead. She somehow found the name of the faun even as it left her lips. "Arise sir Bishcip."

He did so. The light flew over to Tiffany. It moved in a straight line, leaving a trail of sparkling dust behind. The faun followed suit, then on arrival he collapsed his legs into a seated position in front of Tiffany.

"I am Tiffany." She gestured to herself with a finger.

The faun spoke up, "I am Bishcip. How do you know my name?"

"That's an easier one to answer. Feaufkr told me." Feaufkr was the light. The light danced, bobbing up and down, succeeding at making a spectacle of herself. Tiffany felt that the light was a female, and also a faerie. She remembered how Binkerbelle had first appeared to her in her bedroom.

Tiffany watched Feaufkr and Bishcip talk with each other, except it wasn't so much talking as it was watching two people stare at each other. The faun made facial expressions to communicate with the little light. Each tilt of an eyebrow, upturned lip, twitch of a cheek muscle and raised eyebrow communicated something. The light danced to and fro, and then did some further bobbing then settled on his shoulder.

"Well, an awkward moment," explained the faun. He placed his hands together, and pulled them to the centre of his chest. He tilted his frame toward Tiffany very slightly. "Sorry for having a conversation and leaving you out of it. It's just that we could communicate far quicker by ..." he gestured with a hand, "by talking in our own way."

He looked toward his friend fondly. The twinkling bobbed gently, perhaps in agreement.

"Feaufkr wondered if it would be okay to accompany you in your travels? That is, if it would suit your purposes also?"

Tiffany didn't know what to make of the two, they seemed to be a little scared of something. She nodded, "As long as you tell me what you two are scared of."

"We can explain our situation as we travel."

They did so, they travelled together. They walked through the day, and as they walked they talked. Mostly the faun talked. He talked a lot. Enthusiasm bubbled out of him like broth from a stew. His words were an unending avalanche. He told many stories, stories with him as the main character. He told them about the time he talked three ogres into selling him three tankards, and how he had sold them back to them for twice the price.

The ogres had caught him romping through the forest (the faun actually used the word *romping*). They thought of the forest as *their* forest. "To think!" shouted the faun. He flung his hands to the air, "just to think ... telling a Faun that he didn't belong in a forest." His great green eyes widened in disbelief.

"There was this poor faun who met these Ogres, and couldn't think of any reason why they would want to throw things at him, least of all a kitchen sink (why an ogre had a kitchen sink is anyone's business.) In the Faun's haste to get away from the ogres he lost his footing on a small mound of shale.

"On some shale, it was beneath my feet I tell you!"

"He slipped, and whilst attempting to catch his balance he slipped again. His hooves kicked up a small storm of dust and debris. He disappeared beneath this dark cloud of dust then emerged gasping and spluttering."

"The ogres stopped throwing stuff at him and laughed. One of them, the one on his right (this ogre had braids with feathers threaded through his hair) slapped his friend across his broad back. His friend hadn't expected the blow, and tumbled onto his face, landing squarely on his chin. He clambered to his feet and rubbed his chin. They both howled with laughter again. At first Bishcip thought they were quite mad. Their howling didn't sound much like laughter at all. An ogres laugh is contagious. The faun laughed too and couldn't help doing so. Soon he was gripping his stomach and laughing as loudly as they were. Seeing a Faun laugh was a strange sight indeed, at least for an ogre."

"The two great lumps of ogre rolled around on the dirt until finally they were coughing and spluttering."

"Bishcip stood up and wondered whether to run. His hooves slipped a little, just for a moment. He caught his balance in time and hoped they hadn't noticed the mishap. The two ogres looked at each other and erupted into another fit of laughter. They had obviously seen his misstep. They couldn't help laughing, and the not helping of it only made things worse. They took hold of each other's big bellies and fell to the ground making extremely loud strange noises. They hooted and gasped. They eventually finished laughing and managed to stand up. One reached down and pulled the other up and the other pulled the other down."

"This was when they began to like him. They smiled at Bishcip, but their smiles looked like they were grinding bones between their teeth. Poor Bishcip had had enough. He had every intention of running. Fauns like goats can travail many kinds of surfaces with ease. He began moving his hooves even as his hooves attempted to move with him. The ogres laughed. They made a sudden movement, the faun thought they were reaching for him. Instead they toppled to the ground and rolled around in the dust. Bishcip felt the ground shake beneath his hooves. He slipped again."

"The two ogres managed to get close enough to catch him, they took a firm hold of him and gently carried him over to their fire. 'You, Mr faun are a hoot. You really are'."

Tiffany loved the story. She couldn't help warm to the chap. He was a good story teller.

Bishcip didn't need any encouragement to tell a story. He spotted in Tiffany a great love for stories and that was all he needed.

He trotted briskly through the forest. He knew the fastest route through the forest (fauns always do). He continued to tell stories. He barely missed a beat or a word. Certainly his breath was measured.

"I sat with them and mentioned how fine their tankards were. They were warming their chins against the heat of the flames. They were impressed with me that day and insisted that I have their tankards. I said I couldn't possibly take their favourite tankards. So instead they sold them to me. Later, in the early hours of the morning as we came to the end of lots of interesting conversations I mentioned to them that I would miss their company but would always remember them. I said: I shall remember you as you are now, with your tankards in your hands. Both of them smiled over their tankards with a few tears in their eyes.

"I asked them what was the reason for their tears?" They said: "We have nothing to remember you by." They wiped their eyes. "I offered their tankards back to them, imploring them to take them and remember me every time they drank and laughed."

Tiffany flew to the top of a large boulder and looked downward at the faun and the small nub of light. The faun raised his voice so that Tiffany could hear what happened next.

"They refused my offer. They said that I would be losing a considerable amount of coin. They pleaded with me to take five times as much as I had given them. I reluctantly agreed."

The faun swaggered his way through the forest, trotting eagerly through the secret forest paths.

Tiffany trundled along behind them, watching the little light.

Bishcip continued to talk incessantly. He told them the story of little red riding Grandma. A fascinating little story about a wicked grandmother who constantly beat a werewolf. "Night and day, day and night she beat the poor creature, stopping only for breakfast and crumpets. She beat the wolf with a big stick and force fed him crumpets. The wolf didn't like crumpets one little bit. Every morning she would let him go with a grin and a promise that she would see him soon.

The wolf ran for his dear life every night. Poor wolf. He felt at a disadvantage simply because he could only change into a human when there was a full moon. At any other time he was, by degrees, half wolf and human.

At the quarter moon, escaping the old woman's clutches was especially hard. His legs changed, they became half human yet still maintained their wolfish demeanour. They were half formed and not good for anything but stumbling. He hated this time of the month.

It was at these variable moments, when the wolf was three quarters man that *she* knew he was weak. He could snap his jaws like any wolf could. He couldn't leap onto his quarry unawares however. Each time he tried he fell short and stumbled at the wrong moment. What use were his jaws if he couldn't run properly?"

"It's a very scary story" assured Tiffany, stifling a pretend yawn. "You happened though the forest just as the grandmother closed in on the poor werewolf and you hoof kicked her."

The faun smiled lopsidedly.

The trees in the wood thinned. Rocks littered the ground around the occasional outcrop of boulders – perfectly rounded boulders. The little light occasionally lifted into the branches, sliding through them, threading her way between every inlet and groove. Life came to the branches as she passed by them. Those that were green began to shine, and those which were half unfurled opened and increased in size.

The birds chattered to each other easily, and the animals came out and were bold. News travelled through the forest. The animals were unafraid of them. They came to meet the twinkling and Tiffany and the faun. The faun, as he trotted communicated with the forest. He was most at home with the animals. *The ¹⁰Fauns had been the keepers of the forests, even from the very beginning.*

That night, the faun disappeared into the forests. Tiffany and the little light slept in the branches. The little light nestled into Tiffany's shoulder and whispered into her dreams, sweetening them.

Satyrs and nymphs danced
– a twinkling girl, a favourite of the moon.
The moon with her three stars, heaved a sigh;
a mighty sign, in the sky – a faun.
It danced in the multicoloured evening sky.

A gremlin – tooth and spear.
A troll lingering beneath the wavelets.
What are they? they that float beneath?

The faun came back and built a magnificent fire. Tiffany encouraged him as only a creature of power can: *"Oh how magnificent the fire looks. Look!"* She hooted as she danced around the faun – *hoot hoot*. She waved her arms over her head and pretended to be an owl. He didn't respond to her antics, instead he became silent and sullen. She wondered what she had done to have caused him such sadness. She hooted again, this time her eyes become a little like an owl and her arms, for a fraction of a moment become cloaked in feathers. It was a behaviour immaculately designed to cause any faun to grin (and if you are grinning now it was worth considering that you have a little bit of faun in your blood too.)

He did not move from his sullenness. His lips curled down and his cheeks followed suit.

The little light, which is a little faerie (Tiffany feels sure) loves Tiffany's antics and shows her appreciation with a little dance of her own. The twinkling is very clever. Tiffany appreciated the effort, and smiled.

They sat down together by the fire with their legs crossed. The faun produced some pipes and began to play melancholy tune. It was skilfully rendered. Too skilfully, Tiffany became so very sad. She watched the centre of the flames, and then switched to her faerie sight. Within the flames sprites danced: salamanders slipped through the flames, and purple ephemeral dragons the size of a finger nail chased the salamanders with silent glee. Little dragons climbed through the flames, in the formation of a figure eight, chasing their tales. A loud thought entered her consciousness: *beware!*

¹⁰ Faun: They that have been created by the God Theodre (along the pathway of Ogrea, that is to say, within the dimension of Shooke, and upon the world of Pran. They are unchanged physically even from the beginning – from that moment to this and back again. They are a friend of the fairies, traditionally devoted to them. It has been mentioned, in remote places that some fauns still looked after the forests.

If someone had poured ice cold water over her head she wouldn't have become more awake than she was now. The hairs on her arms lifted. A shiver ran up her spine and upward across her skull. The faun felt an invisible hand caress his forehead. Or had it been his imagination? The little twinkle quivered minutely. Tiffany knew the little light felt something. She began to bob and weave, chasing the light which trailed behind her.

Faeries are hard to find. Who would be able to find them? Tiffany checked to see that there was no danger, then rose up into the branches of a tree. She conjured a protection spell and waited for the light to fade. Bishcip faded into the environment, merging him with the Trees. Fauns do not sleep lying down, instead they close their eyes and become incredibly still. Little Feaufkr slipped between her fingers and tinkled a little sigh. They both fell asleep listening to the fire crackle below them.

At a distance, a great distance away, on the other side of the forest another fire crackled. This was a much larger fire. Men sat around the fire and ate meat. They laughed at each other's jokes. They were on the border lands. This was a safe land for humans. Here humans shared a peaceful existence, devoid of the little people. Humans weren't always the best of friends but the surrounding woods had always been unclaimed land, and therefore a free land. Anyone could come and go through these forests. It was for this reason why they were without care and worry. The faeries were more powerful in this dimension. In recent memory, for the last two thousand years men and faerie folk had lived together without waging war on each other.

The faun walked toward the camp with his head downcast, with his lips downturned set into sadness. Fauns are somewhat human, though their facial expressions are heavier and more pronounced.

Human scouts had already reported that a faun was in the vicinity of the camp. A scraggly man met him. He walked toward the faun, each footstep heavy and determined. The faun noticed glumly, that the grass withered beneath his feet. This grisly man placed the end of his staff against the faun's chest.

"Halt." It was a whisper. For a faun, it may as well have been a yell. He felt his body tighten up. The staff strummed a hoarse whisper; a thousand souls were trapped within it – they cried out for justice and freedom. The faun didn't raise his eyes, he knew who it was that spoke and didn't want to make eye contact.

This being that met him was human, or appeared to be. His bearded face hadn't been combed or managed in anyway. He wore a robe which had seen better days and his sandals, if they could be called such, were pieced together by a few stitches and a crop of leather. It was his eyes and his eyes alone which commanded respect. They were clear and blue.

The faun looked up. He had no choice, he couldn't resist the feel of the stranger's gaze. He didn't like people. If he had a choice he wouldn't be here. The wizard, which undoubtedly he was, stared first at the down cast head of the faun until the faun raised his eyes. The faun was not fooled (who was?) by this man's appearance. He felt his gentle malevolence, and knew that the wizard would have stood there all day for the faun's head to rise.

The faun felt exposed. His mind, his very being quivered. He stared at the wizard and tried not to flinch. There was only one question that mattered now. "You will give me and my companion safe passage if I give you a being of power?"

There could be no mincing of words. The wizard answered immediately, "As surely as I stand here in front of you. As I have said so shall it be." Wizards are able to use words effectively, perhaps too effectively. After all, words a wizard's stock in trade? The wizard spoke truly. It is the gift of Fauns to know a lie when it is spoken.

The wizard unfurled a map of the forest. The faun gazed at it. Its flat surface had a terrible beauty, a terrible detail to it. Surely it would be an impossibility to pin point the position of this creature of power?

The faun looked up at the scraggly wizard, then gazed back down at the map. The map began to change. As he stared at it, the forests grew in size and transfixed his attention. Every detail was real, birds could be seen fluttering between the branches. He gazed at one particular spot on the map, and allowed his focal point to become relaxed and meditative. Immediately the spot began to expand. As it grew bigger it filled up his gaze. He felt his eyes being pulled to the left and upward. It was a decidedly unsettling feeling. He followed the pull. He allowed the magic that was contained within the map to lead him. His eyes did an unsettling dance, it felt as if another had taken hold of them in an icy clutch.

As fast as a comet his gaze whooshed over vast layers of forests, and zoomed in on Tiffany and her little sleeping friend. As the faun stared wide eyed at the map, the scraggly man became full of motion. He leaped upward on to his feet and yelled:

"Goan!" It was part of the human language, it meant: *awaken!*

The whole camp burst into motion. Men tied their armour onto themselves, leather armour, and then, with the aid of boys who were well trained in the art of assistance, they managed to wrestle on plate armour also. Bow men ran by, a quiver of arrows strapped across the back of each. The faun awakened from his mild enchantment. He looked about himself and his features became stark, his eyes widened and his mouth formed a perfect "O" shape. The scraggly man was gone.

The whole camp was in motion. Every man was well trained, they ignored him as they rode out into the forest. Many used their legs instead of horses. The bow men ran, and the boys who helped the plated warriors dress, ran alongside the horses. Others remained behind, they continued to fold the tents and gather up resources. They would no doubt pack the equipment onto other horses, horses which were wider and proficient at carry things.

The faun followed the plated men. The straggly man had disappeared.

The shadows stretched and clawed their way up the trees toward the darkened clouded sky; raven is in flight – black tail feathers splayed, wings vigorously propelling it forward. A Terrible black beak opened and cawed. Two beady eyes rested occasionally on the furtive movement of large and small animals below, animals which were fleeing its shadow.

Its flight is unrestrained. There is no wind to aid or hinder its efforts. Its flight path is straight. It is a thoughtful bird. Around its neck there was a necklace made out of small feathers and dried out miniature eyes. Occasionally it squawks.

The trees understand that there is a beast amongst the trees that is not part of the natural order. The animals, they are small and know the forest well, they stir into motion as the raven passes by.

There is another in this forest that has power. It is a goodly being, a nurturing twinkling. The animals communicate. It is their way. They pass on information to each other. Within the matrix of the heart of such creatures a secret phoenix awakens. It is this that rouses them into action and communication. Their communication is simple, they sing it out to each other, one to the other throughout the forest.

The little twinkling, with furtive moments pushes itself into Tiffany's face. Her first thought: *the forest is alive.*

Truth – the twinkling is in no doubt that they were in danger. The whole forest vibrated and shouted at her, panicking her.

"Okay okay" muttered Tiffany. "I get it."

The twinkling understood immediately what the faun had done. He had done an incredibly stupid act. He had done it for the noblest of reasons. *Fear* was the culprit. Fear had robbed his heart of reason. He had attempted to keep the knowledge of what he had done from her. Because of the bond between them, such a concealment could not be kept a thing secret for long.

He had betrayed their friend to the greatest of enemies. Even now he did not know what he had done.

The flickering understood that Tiffany was a being of power. Tiffany felt the presence of the raven also, as it hurtled towards them. She would protect Tiffany if she had to. She flew in the opposite direction, towards the river. She felt the river. Tiffany followed the twinkling wondering as to the nature of their peril.

The twinkling quickened her flight, and Tiffany changed from her human form to faerie.

Change again as we enter the water.

How amazing, thought Tiffany. She had used telepathy to talk with her friends. But this was *Kiesha* of a different kind. She felt the malevolence behind her, she felt its raw elemental power.

The river came upon her quickly, its rushing waves, torrents were huge. The twinkling slipped into her hand and whispered: *dive!*

She did so. There was another word came : *change*. A picture of a seal formed clearly in her mind. It was good enough. She told herself to believe in herself. *She could do it*, she could transform into this new form. The twinkling believed in her. Tiffany remembered the ladybird. She knew that the ladybird believed in her also. She leapt –

– and changed. Her form changed, becoming streamlined. She lost her arms, they shrank into her body becoming flippers. Her face changed, she grew whiskers. She dipped her head and dived. The river was deep. At the very moment she entered into the water the twinkling slipped into her mouth (if someone would had told Tiffany, beforehand, that something would be hiding in her mouth before the day had passed, she would have thought the person more than a little crazy.)

Don't reach out with your mind, He will sense you. It sounded like good advice.

She dove deep, and then deeper still. The cold currents pushed against her skin. Within her new form, her instincts guided her. She felt the presence of a shadow behind and above her. She swam to the bottom of the river, disappearing between the huge rocks. She swam fast, somehow finding the knowledge within, instinctively knowing every nuance of her water environment. For the fraction of a second, for the merest titillating moment, she existed within the mind of the magician, the magician that now took the form of a raven.

He felt her behind his eyes, watching him. "Arghhhhh". His rage emanated from his whole being. He shape-changed into man form. He conjured the correct words within his thoughts and channelled his deep resentfulness toward the surface of the water. *This creature has entered my mind!*

She whispered with mind speak to the twinkling. I want to fight him with my magic. I want to sneak up on him.

A large *boom* could be heard and felt through the water. It was a sudden noise made by a tremendous force. The water around them quivered violently and they felt themselves being dragged upwards. She swam faster against the wavelets, attempting to again find sanctuary in the depths.

The dark magician threw invisible huge balls of energy at the waters. Tiffany could still hear the booms, but now they diminished as she pushed on through the water. She came up for air and quickly tried to dive.

Something gripped her by the throat and lifted clear out of the water.

"Little seal I have you now." The man, if man it was, held her by the throat. His terrible fingers clamped her throat. His eyes crunched into a manic expression. She built the power up within her and yelled. Time slowed as her power rippled out from her.

As Tiffany's spell propelled him backwards, his chest crumpled in on itself. Somehow he kept his vice like grip on Tiffany's throat. A tree curtailed his body, smashing his face into his legs. Tiffany was cast upward.

Her consciousness began to fade. On viewing Tiffany's plight, the twinkling cast a healing spell and directed it towards her. It was her greatest healing spell. Tiffany healed quickly. Her throat became instantly healed, and as she breathed in deep she watched the rest of her body heal.

The twinkling felt anger. Tiffany had been so brave. The twinkling flew towards the fallen tree in search of the wizard. He was gone, there was a dark patch on the ground to show where he had been. It was difficult to believe that anything could have withstood the kind of blast that Tiffany had given him.

He crawled. As he crawled he became invisible, and trembled with the effort of maintaining such a spell. Blood spewed from his lips, a dark broth spilled onto the ground and became visible. His eyes blistered red as he wept blood. Hidden behind the fury of his gaze, whilst invisible, he worked his magic. He stood haphazardly to his feet, stumbled and wobbled. Somehow, perhaps through will power alone, or through some other hidden means, he remained erect. His chest began to reassemble itself, piece at a time. He walked away. Where his footsteps passed the flowers withered. The grass turned grey and crumbled into dust, the trees leant inward. He walked and healed himself.

He frowned. He hated to lose, his teeth sprouted inside his gums; a tree fell. He turned and walked. *My will is everything. I will not be beaten.* He walked toward Tiffany, back toward the little girl that had resisted him. The twinkling healed Tiffany, it hovered over her, singing, making a musical sound that only a twinkling s – small faeries are able to make. Tiffany healed. Her wounds knitted themselves together. Birds, thousands of them lined the branches of the surrounding trees. They sang too, making their own distinctive sound. The butterflies congregated together. The beavers lined up on the banks of the river. Their presence could be felt (a beaver in *Shookle* has a formidable presence.) Insects of every distinction there was, and bears also. They rose up on their hind legs (on their bare bear feet – that is to say: they were without shoes) and roared. Even a few mountain lions drifted through the trees, hovering close.

He came, his silken tongue quivering in his black mouth. A mouth that matched his eyes. He mumbled a spell. Tiffany asked the animals to part, she did so with her mind. She didn't have time to think. Sometimes thought is not really needed. She lifted a hand and watched the animals part. She understood that if they attacked they would die. This dark creature, whatever it was, and she thought it most definitely not human, knew nothing about remorse. The creatures parted, allowing her to perceive the monster that came towards her.

And then and then and then ... he opened his jaws and unloosened the bones in his cheeks (so that he could stretch his maw – *oh doesn't he look like a werewolf!*)

Once upon a time there was a wicked magician that wanted to eat a little girl, an exceptional little girl. It's not over yet. The birds pounce on him. They tear down the sky to reach him. The bears too, they ran towards him on all fours.

He bursts into flame. A giant flame.

A giant flame that roars outward and upward. He yells. He is enraged, but he is frightened also. What is this creature, this little girl? She steps forward and thinks of a fire extinguisher. It is a strange thought. Stranger still is the appearance of one. There it was, it manifested in front of her. Tiffany laughed gleefully, *oh yes*. She gripped, and pulled down on the lever. It was difficult to pull. She remembered the thorn in the giant's foot, she thought of the way she had believed in herself and her magic. The plastic handle gave way to the pressure she was applying. Foam came from the nozzle and squirted in heavy abundance, at a rate which no ordinary fire extinguisher could have done. The fire diminished considerably.

He ran at her, though not very fast. It was more of a trot really, and he didn't look impressive, probably because of all the copious amounts of foam that was on him. He barked out strange syllables. Creatures died where they stood. His countenance became malignant, his face crumpled, his eyes became nonexistent. He ran on all fours at her, then, as she smiled, he turned and fled in a different direction. He changed into a deer, a malignant deer, a deer that was fetid and ill begotten. The animals followed his trail for a while.

What spell is this? what little girl can compel the animals to attack? what little girl is able to control so many animals and get them do her will? (of course, to such a creature, the concept of love was entirely known.)

He lurched upward, changed into a raven, stretched out his wings and flew upwards.

The animals flocked around Tiffany, making a perfect circle. Every kind of creature stared at her. Predator and prey sat alongside each other, rivalry forgotten. Tiffany stared at them back, and she thanked them, each of them. A doe or three, with their great brown, soulful eyes, "Thank you," and a badger or ten, they each bowed gracefully from the waist. A freckle of faerie touched each of them on the nose (where the faerie dust came from no one could tell. Soon, because there were so many animals, a great big cloud of faerie dust flew over the top of their heads and blessed them all. Each animal bowed their heads perceptively, and received the bounty. A bounty that was worthy and complete.

The animals were magic now, not merely born of flesh. Now they were something more. Their eyes had become different – the beginnings of consciousness was born within their dark pupils.

They departed and strolled away at a leisurely pace, looking a little dazzled and befuddled – more than a little confused. Can you imagine? One moment a creature of instinct alone, the next, a thinking creature?

He has gone. *He is now gone!* Tiffany wanted to scream, wanted to bring him down, wanted to take flight and hunt him down. It was an improper set of thoughts. The twinkling twinkled by her right cheek, a soft fluttering against that part which dimpled with a smile.

The twinkling had grown a little, was it female? Tiffany looked closer and could clearly see that she was female. There was a slender dainty thing in there, in the light. By taking form, her light had diminished a little. She was very pretty and had gathered her splendour about herself. She wore it, bathed in it. If this was a faerie, then she must be the prettiest, the greatest and also the kindest creature ever. It was her love and light which had healed Tiffany so quickly.

The twinkling whispered, her lips moved, her voice could be heard sighing through the trees.

Oh glory be to those that share their light;
a most splendid splendour. Others seek it
and are without a token to exchange
for the knowledge.
The selfish loose the cost of it,
and are forever seeking
the taste.

Just a tinkering, nothing special. Just a mere thing. Nothing to talk about or exchange vows with...

Tiffany didn't know what the words meant. Who does? Perhaps the wise man or deadly wizard that had hunted her, perhaps he knew. She shivered inwardly, remembering the way he had attacked her.

The forest had quietened. A few feet in front of her the grass had blackened. The forest breathed again. The creatures wandered away, sniffing at the ground and flowers. Tiffany felt emotional and empowered. Her heart began to slow again. She breathed in deep and began to walk. The twinkling followed.

Trev in a suit – Lasers and Demons –

Large Tigress – Unicorn – Large stomping beetles.

He took a wire out of his satchel. It is natural for him to do so. He has done it a thousand times; he has to eat. "What's that for?" asked Binkerbelle (but it was to herself, and said quietly, because she was in his pocket.)

"Human's have to eat." He drew his knife from its sheaf.

"He is a little strange in the head." She popped out of his pocket, leapt, and grew to human size (a human child's size) and appeared by the smouldering fire. She gave Mc Noodle a quizzical expression and twirled her finger to her temple, then pointed at Trev and crossed her eyes.

A boulder behind them, it struck out toward the sky. Broad at the base, narrow at the top. Trev sat with his satchel between his feet, hands supporting his chin.

Mc Noodle sat easily. He sat on a stone with his arms resting on his knees, in the exact same posture as Trev. He smiled easily. Trev reached into his satchel and withdrew another wire. He tied the first wire to the second, creating a loop. His brown dusty coat lay nearby warming by the fire.

"What's that for?" asked the Mc Noodle as he slipped a fingernail between his two front teeth. He pointed to the wire.

"It's for catching small animal." Trev picked his coat up and headed off without another word. He travelled east. Mc Noodle watched his brown dusty boots kick up dust as he walked away.

Mc Noodle liked those boots. They were no nonsense boots. They were boots made for walking.

He wanted some. He clicked his fingers and a small pair of boots appeared. "Wrong sort of boots." He clicked his fingers again and the boots disappeared. He snapped his fingers a third time. This time a very dusty pair of small leather boots appeared. "That's the ticket." He put them on, stretched out his legs and marvelled. They were just like Trev's! There wasn't much of a path but it was enough to walk up and down. He pretended he was on a catwalk as he traipsed up the path, smiling gracefully to his imaginary audience.

#

Trev had taken his satchel with him. The first thing Trev had learnt whilst training to be a horsemeister: *always keep your gear with you, and be ready to use it at a moment's notice*. He didn't have much magic. He had enough magic, he knew a little bit and what he knew he knew well. A horsemeister's skills were thought to be magic. Most of their skills weren't magical. However, when a skill is practiced often enough it appeared to be magical in nature, and this was the case with every horsemeister.

The worlds merge – he didn't know what that meant. He had been told often, by his peers, that he didn't act or think in the way that others did. By others he guessed they meant everyone other than a horsemeister. Were they complimenting him or cursing him. *"You don't do things as we do. You notice that which you shouldn't and notice not that which you should."*

That horsemeister had been wrong, had everything backwards. In fact, through the course of his life he had come to understand that the things that he noticed, and that others did not (or chose not to see) were what made him unique, and what had made him successful at surviving and thriving where others failed.

He was at another beginning –

People carried around within them worlds.

– *Within the universe spins on an invisible axis. Each individual is a world, and when we meet we collide or merge.*

Perhaps he was being a little too philosophical. Yet he knew there was truth to the ideas he had. There had been significant moments in his life ...

He responded to his philosophical thoughts, a long time ago, by deciding to change the significance of one of his lessons. His masters had set the students a task. He decided to reinvent the lesson he was to learn. He needed to defeat three adepts. They were skilled in weaponry and possessed an assortment of deadly unarmed combat skills.

A horsemeister was more than what the word inferred. There were masters of their craft, but what was their craft? Horses? It didn't end there. They had other skills. They were master trackers, masters of armed and unarmed combat, indeed, masters of many crafts.

Trev specialised in close quarter fighting. This was an oddity. The fundamental principles behind the different horsemeister fighting arts revolved around defeating an enemy at a distance. Trev had rewritten one of the fundamental precepts.

It was for each individual student to choose the particular master that they wished to learn from. Also, each master decided what they required from their students. In short, the student chose the master and the master chose the student.

Trev made his choice.

The day had come.

Outside the training ground his opponents were his friends. Inside the training grounds, they were his opponents and enemies. He would need to do what he needed to be and do.

One had a sword, the other had flails and the third had sai. They came as one, as he knew they would. He moved and closed the distance between himself and the sword wielding opponent quickly. His master had spent a year teaching him how to close the distance between an opponent and maintain perfect balance. Movement and balance was the foundation of every martial art.

Although the edge of the sword had been somewhat blunted, it could still do a massive amount of damage. His opponent did not expect such speed, Trev zigzagged and stepped inside his opponent's guard quickly. He applied a wrist throw and curtailed his opponent into the other, the one with the flails, even as the flails began to swing. They both tumbled to the earth. The one with the sai came forward, gripping and turning his two sai in complex movements. Instead of directing a blow, Trev waited. His body held no tension. He took half step back (into a cat stance) then shifted into a full stance, directing his weight and universal energy through his shoulder. The opponent with the sai shifted and felt something collide with his chest. He too dropped to the floor.

He hunted now. He set up the traps. There were three of them. Three traps. They were positioned close together, relatively so. He kept up wind of the animals. He spotted their colours through the leaves. He chased the animals downwind. They heard him, and slowly he manoeuvred the small animals into the traps. Their cries were quietened quickly.

He opened them up and took what he needed, using their skins as carry pouches.

The air had become drier. It was in the air, felt against the roof of his mouth and at the edge of his tongue. This told him that he was near a desert. Night had come. It crept in unannounced.

The desert had touched this place. It had reached out strong tentative fingers, leeching the colour out of the grasses and bushes. There were some trees that hadn't given up the ghost. Their trunks flaked and the leaves (where there were leaves) were brittle and decrepit.

Thoughts merged from his mind to his distant companions. Back towards his ¹¹*keet*.

The word *keet* ... such a strange word to think of at this moment. It was true, they were his *keet*. They wouldn't know the word; it was a *meister* word, only used within the confines of the clan. Now they were his clan, his family.

As he walked he sensed someone watching him. His sixth sense, the one that rotated around his physical ones and accentuated them, called to him. Every horsemeister relied on such a sense, and had developed it to such an extent that it could be used with accuracy.

Trev ran swiftly through the trees, tracking – attempting to pinpoint his observer. The watcher watched, and kept low. Trev moved stealthily through the forest, every footfall as silent as the last. The terrain was unknown, yet his movements were swift and efficient.

Where is he? The observer watched him move and shifted position, attempting to compensate and keep the potential enemy in sight.

Trev zigzagged through the forest, he caught a subtle movement to his left. It was the merest increment of change in texture of the forest. He noticed it. He reached down for his knife and unsheathed it silently. He circled around quickly, relying on survival instinct training and the smallest amount of luck. A horsemeister understood that luck always played a part in every conflict. A horsemeister always used every honed skill to minimize chance variables.

There she was, he snuck in quietly behind her, and placed the index finger of his left hand to the base of her spine, preventing her from shifting back. His right arm snaked around, his knife's edge settled a hair's breadth away from her throat.

He whispered to her, as he tied her arms behind her back. "Move and die." He tied her arms behind her back and quickly lifted her onto his broad shoulders then set off at a brisk pace back toward the camp.

His movements were smooth and effortless. Who could match such a pace? His stride did not rise or fall, he compensated with each step, keeping a perfect balance.

"I will be missed," she whispered. "They will come for you."

These woods were owned. Trev knew this. He had seen small tell tale signs of humans throughout the forest. The signs were worryingly small. An untrained eye could have easily missed the small markings that were left on the trees. He knew from past experience that small markings on trees (designed to merge into the bark of each tree) could direct a person when lost.

Humans liked to think that they owned things, that things could be owned.

¹¹ *Keet [Shooke]* :A horse meister's term which is identical to the concept and actuality of Kiesha. *Keet*: a telepathic like communication wrought through a bond of tightly knit individuals. Through Kiesha: the communication of emotions, intuition, words and experience is able to be communicated. It is a very pure and versatile means of communication. It is common amongst those which exist within a higher frequency. Amongst denser vibrational creatures it is very rare and is usually formed through an intense fear based emotion.

She thought that his breathing had deepened but she couldn't be sure. His skin smelt a little, he smelt mildly sweet. Why a body, that had been running for a while, that had a weight slung firmly across one shoulder, smelled so sweet she didn't know. She tried in vain to guess which direction they were travelling.

He came to their camp in time to see a fire glowing. He laid the girl down, and warmed his hands on the heat of the fire. He produced the meat, and brought out two sticks. His clever hands attached the food onto the sticks and placed them over the fire. He had done so quickly with no slowing of movement.

Somehow the girl got loose. Loose! She ran swiftly away. Trev was momentarily stunned. No one had ever slipped out of one of his well tied knots. She ran as fast as a deer, she sidestepped to the left and right. Clever steps – she ducked and weaved. Trev picked up a rock and threw it. The small rock struck her in the back of the head. She tumbled forward, falling onto her chest. She felt his hands pick her up and carry her back to the camp.

"You are a danger to yourself and others," he said. She didn't see him speak. Her head was participating with her eyes, and each was of one accord, motionless and downcast.

She sat a few meters away from Mr Mc Noodle. She glanced his way. He nodded to her.

"Oh dear not another human," sighed Binkerbelle.

Trev expected harsh words. She refrained from a reprimand. Trev wouldn't have listened anyway. She grew to the same height as Trev, small to big, slowly and gracefully. Her head remained small whilst her body became big, it was a momentary mishap. She gripped her head (which was tiny) with her big enlarged thumb and forefinger and gave it a little twist. It grew instantly.

"You did what you had to do." Her words were aimed at Trev. She eased his mind. She understood. They were *Kiesha*. The word *keet* simmered into her mind. It was his word. She had never heard such a word before but knew it to have the same meaning as *Keisha*.

They were of one spirit, they were merely different aspects of the same diamond. They were *Keisha* – *keet*.

Trev sat quietly and watched the flames. Binkerbelle lifted her arms, and began moving them in a lethargic way – raising her arms and lowering them, they were measured movements, slow movements. The tips of her wings fluttered, yet not synchronously. There was a pattern to her movements. Her lips moved minutely. On closer inspection he could see that each movement was disciplined. She wove a spell. He could not see the weaving, though knew that a spell was being cast. It was a camouflage spell, it had to be. He relaxed a little and allowed the swirling crackling flames to ease his mind.

The night grew warm. The heat of the desert swept over their camp momentarily. Trev hadn't shifted his eyes across the flames. Binkerbelle pretended to sleep, but kept her third eye on the camp. Mr Mc Noodle had fallen into a deep fast sleep. You could tell he slept by his snoring, his lips fluttered gently. The girl slept a little. Then she awoke a few hours later. Binkerbelle and Trev noticed her limbs stiffen a little as she stirred into wakefulness. Binkerbelle shifted her consciousness forward, and settled it in front of the girl. The girl stirred gently. Both Binkerbelle and Trev secretly were impressed by the girl's efforts to hide her wakeful state. No human would have been able to tell that she had awoken. She shifted her awareness to Trev. *Well, almost every human.*

Trev was very different. Binkerbelle now became aware of just how different he really was. She sensed that he felt uneasy. He was restless. His body movements betrayed his mood. She felt his mood.

She watched him carefully. *Kaisha* was a strange sort of magic. Human's didn't share their inner being easily. Yet it was more than this. She was hesitant to push her awareness into the vicinity of his inner being. Many different sentient beings did not share their inner being easily. Faeries were known to share their inner being with vast numbers of their own kind, and with other species too.

She heightened her sensitivity and became still. The night wore on. Trev stood up in one motion. He whispered: "watch her," then walked into the night.

Binkerbelle folded her wings around herself. The night had grown colder.

Trev wandered through the wood, travelling deeper into its depths. He lost himself purposefully. The forest closed around him like a blanket. It was a cold blanket. He walked for many hours, walking until the forest thickened around him.

He felt the forest breathe. The deeper he travelled the greater the temperature dropped. He travelled west. He and his companions had been travelling east, they had kept to the edge of the forest. It had been one of his better ideas. They had been lucky. He felt a foreboding and didn't know from whence it came. He felt an uneasiness which emanated from his inner being. It was wise to heed such a feeling.

He sat down and looked toward the horizon. He sat down on a small plateau and watched the vista spread west. The lush green trees were heavenly. The stars were in their thousands tonight. His *kien*¹² looked for the patterns in them.

– It is the way of things that the future is a hidden vista. We can see possible futures, if our minds become unhooked. We must unhook our minds and become free of attachments. To be able to be in the world yet not of the world. To be in our minds but out of our minds also. The confined thinker is only able to think and respond to the constant flow of life through a narrow gaze. – We are other. We are of the world but not in the world.

Trev remembered his master teacher speak in such a way. His teacher, his master horsemeister, had a name though no one knew it. His teacher was an undetermined age. His thought features were hidden to Trev, and it was this which initially attracted Trev. The master's teachings reached out to his mind through the veil of time and space. Yet he taught him much, even now, with so many years between them.

Trev's inner self spoke clearly in this moment, he listened to the memory of the old man's presence. Old was not an apt word to explain his features. Perhaps *timeless* ...

His face was lineless. His blue eyes sparkled. When he spoke, his eyes shone with an unearthly light. *Unhook*... The words called to him through time. He, the grandmaster had had no students, yet also had many students – he sat by the lake at every moment of the day, watching the ripples on the surface, ripples which had been caused by the smallest of rain drops.

Time stopped whilst Trev sat with his teacher, or seemed to stop.

¹² Kien: [*Dwarven; elven; faerie*]: inner mind, or, inner being.

I am that which I am (Trev loved it when the master spoke. His very words were musical.) There is nothing which is. There is only that which the mind perceives and accepts. Belief has its place, belief is the moment before the conception. Belief is the moment before the moment has happened. The mind when it reaches out to what "is" betrays itself. The mind that creates himself or herself (he lifts a finger for emphasis) from merely the environment is no being at all, he is merely a reflection of the creation of another. We must create from within, we must create from the inner semblance. Yet we must choose to choose in every moment. When we do this, and do this without attaching ourselves to the consequence of our creation, if we do this, then we are able to truly exist in the moment and within all moments.

It was a purposeful teaching.

The images in his mind came alive. The images were memories of events which had taken place sixteen years ago. He opened himself to the memories, realising that he had been repressing so many of them. By suppressing the memories he had been subconsciously empowering the memories, and empowering the creators of the events that had happened. He knew that now. He decided to not attach himself to this fact. He allowed the memories to affect him, to a point, yet within each moment he decided not to attach himself to the fact that he had attached himself.

Onwards, the memories rattled through his mind. His body heated up, rising to flush his face. The memories were painful. *To be in the world but not of the world.* He rode the memories, releasing himself from each attachment even as the memories formed.

A hidden town housing the horsemeisters and their generations, was suddenly overrun by soldiers and magicians. The soldiers were well armed and well trained. They swarmed through the streets and bashed through the doors, rapping on shutters, howling their battle lust cacophonies. The horsemeisters moved swiftly. They destroyed each soldier, as the soldiers overrun the town. The soldiers spilled into roads, houses and alley ways. The horsemeisters moved silently, they were quick and efficient. Some of the horsemeisters came from the roofs of the houses, landing on top of the soldiers. Even the novices were more than a match for most of the soldiers. The great teachers, the masters of the masters were tireless. Each had a different weapon. Staffs, flails, swords of various designs. Spears struck out at the soldiers tearing at their flesh. Each used their weapons efficiently, and with such skill that the soldiers had no real chance to survive any encounters. Yet the soldiers were manic, they attacked wide eyed and without fear. The masters worked together tirelessly, their steps flowing in concert, swords and feet dancing into their enemies flesh.

The magicians stepped forward, holding their staves outward. The staves were talismans of power. Fiery beams erupted from the tips, blasting everything, igniting all within their vision. The magicians destroyed every man impersonally, ally and enemy alike. Trev's teacher fought alongside the other meisters. He seemed so much slower in his movements than they. Yet he didn't need speed, he moved before the enemy moved, anticipating every movement before it was made. His movements were graceful, measured and precise; fluidic, betraying the mind. The Horsemeisters rallied to their comrade, for all recognised that their survival depended on him and their ability to work together.

The magicians directed all their energy beams at this magnificent fighter, knowing that the battle hinged upon defeating him. Their combined will reddened their eyes into glowing fiery pits of malice as they pointed their staves at him.

They wove their magical beams together, brightly shining, somehow entwining, bursting forth onto him. An explosion erupted over his head, pounding down upon him. Its blast radius rippled out, flinging several horsemeisters outward.

An arrow narrowly missed Trev's face. This brought him back to his senses and to his own plight and peril. *Quickly, Quickly run away!* The words resounded in his head, each one a thunder strike. *Run! You must survive.* His master stepped out of the crater, as flames licked at his frame. The flames hadn't hurt him, he wasn't singed, but a black soot covered his face and torso. His lips murmured words and his expression was full of focus. His blue unwavering eyes fixed on the magicians. His murmurings continued as mist bellowed out from his body, expanding rapidly. The mist snaked through the combatants. Screams could be heard in every direction. Tendrils of mist formed into huge hands, hands which snaked around the limbs of the magicians, tearing at them.

Trev ran.

He wanted to turn around and fight. He felt fury at the soldiers and magicians. *How dare them!* He remembered their hoods, each one ebon black and as still as midnight. Each concealed their faces no matter which way they turned. Yet he imagined their red eyes, and their smiles. Their open mouthed grins held another smaller mouth within. A small gnashing internal mouth that spoke diabolical incantations.

He shivered.

He ran. He felt no doubt that running was the right thing to do. His teacher had yelled with his mind and Trev had heard it. As he ran, he extended his mind soul out into the forest below him.

Extending the inner mind was a magical practice, taught by his teacher. He had always suspected that his teacher was more than a horsemeister. Now he felt certain that this was the case. The teachings that were passed onto him were spells. Or rather, the begins of spell craft. The other horsemeisters would have rejected such teachings.

"I hear you."

"I hear your... presence."

Trev looked around himself. *The voice ...* the words sounded as if they had been spoken directly into his ear. Trev tried to remember his training. His heart beat fiercely despite its best efforts to calm himself. *Strike fear into your enemy but be aware that the enemy will attempt to do the same.*

The ways of the horsemeisters had been etched into his being. Yet it had been a many years since he had run from the horsemeisters' town. He remembered the writhing bodies of his friends and teachers. They had burst into flames as the hooded ones laughed.

In the present his heart quickened and he gasped. The memories hurt. Some power outside of himself swallowed him, enveloped him and threw him back through time again, compelling him to relive the traumas of his past.

He heard the cries of his friends behind him. Smoke filled his nostrils as a voice whispered in his ear again: *I come for you little one.* His heart thumped loudly in his chest. This time the pounding was harder, faster. The blood rushed through his veins, crashing. Adrenaline flowed. His temples throbbed. He held his head with hands that shook, with fingers that trembled.

The horsemeisters cried out as the flames lit them up. The flames curled around their faces, melting their expressions. They looked like the festival scarecrows that villagers lit up on the ¹³Eve of hallows. Their howling pierced his mind. He cradled his head with his hands again, feeling tears stream down his face. The heat dried them even as they formed.

He felt his master's prodigious strength flow through him. His mind's eye spun back to the burning horsemeister town.

His master was there. The flames hadn't touched him. His hands were absent of weapons. The flames from the staves struck him, lighting up his visage, yet still his body remained undamaged. A bubble, barely perceived, surrounded his body and limbs. He stretched his stance, resting his weight on evenly positioned legs. He stretched his arms upward and out, in a long slow drawn out movement, then withdrew them quickly to his waist.

Pushing both hands outward, frontward, he struck the air. The wizards flew backwards, their bodies becoming broken husks. Again and again, he repeated the movement. Each time dozens of hooded creatures fell. A hooded being strode forward confidently. He was larger than the others, broader in the shoulders and heavier. With a large thick hand he threw back his hood. A hideous face appeared. A face more akin to a beast than anything human.

It roared defiance at the mist, as well as the horsemeisters. He reached to the floor and picked up a large battle axe. *I am Orc-Canashie and I will rend the enemy.* He had another thought too, a simple thought: *destroy!* He raced into the mist swinging his large axe in long powerful strokes, caring not where or what he struck. The horsemeisters were shadows that surrounded him. They were the shapes in the mist, the enemy. He did not pause, he hurled himself forward and attacked every silhouette, each miss reforged his ferociousness anew.

He prodigious strength did not fail him and his speed and stamina did not falter. Yet his strikes did not connect with anything. The mist began to clear. Slowly the tendrils of mist dissipated to reveal a vacant battlefield, vacant save for one.

The Orc rushed forward with his axe overhead.

The axe fell.

The figure was no longer there. He had moved his body into a serpentine configuration, flowing from one movement to another, performing the beginnings of a dance. The axe ascended again, striking, missing. The master of masters, grew more elaborate in his movements; bending, leaning –

The blade came from the side. A hand, with precision, slapped the blade downward, a foot trapped the blade against the earth. The Orc, with his huge arms, twisted axe, flipping the blade into a vertical position. The foot rose and slid downward to the shaft. The axe blade has been expertly crafted. The Orc growled deeply and attempted to heave the axe upward.

¹³ Eve of the Hallows [*Shookle*]: A festival that is recreated by the residents of villages each year in remembrance of an incident that occurred thousands of years ago. A wicked wizard ran rampant from the wilderness into the towns and through the villages. He burnt everything to the ground. The villagers chased after him, along with the soldiers of that period. He laughed manically as they approached, and climbed onto a scarecrow post and set himself alight. He laughed loudly as the flames incinerated him. The day after had been assigned as a holy day by the whole continent. Every year, at the same hour –the very hour that the maniacal wizard had burned himself to a crisp, villagers lit up scarecrows to commemorate the occasion.

His grin widened and his eyes glowed with a mischievous glee.

The master withdrew his foot. The Orc's eyes widened, even as he realised the cunning of the horsemeister's strategy. The axe split the air, travelling upward. The Orc's strength and unparalleled reflexes saved him. His great frame flexed, his biceps bulged, the axe stopped a hair breadth away from his skull.

The Orc's thick lips formed a cruel smile.

The horsemeister stepped forward as the axe descended again. He thrust his arm upwards, taking hold of the Orc's throat. Again the master of masters had penetrated his defences. The Orc thought: *I guess he don't know Orc very well.* An Orc's neck is made of thick cartilage. The Orc felt like dropping his axe and crushing him with his arms. But his honour had been slighted, he had been made to look a fool. He had almost split his own skull open.

The Orc closed his arms and brought the axe inward with terrifying speed, hoping to carve the horsemeister in two.

The master horsemeister moved. The battle axe's keen blade slipped through the Orc's amour and flesh with ease. For the first and last time the Orc's face showed an expression other than fury. There was a wistful twist of an expression, a mix of surprise and astonishment. His mouth dropped open. His jaws jittered, twitched and crumpled as his knees folded beneath him. The horsemeister's dusty black boots passed by his face as darkness stole his soul. The last sound to be heard was his own death gurgle.

The hooded ones ceased their chattering and incantations and looked at each other, Then fled in different directions.

Trev came back from his memories with a jolt. His first thought was one of thankfulness. Thankful that the vision had ended. He checked his surroundings. He felt, for a moment, as if he was being observed. It was a feeling that he couldn't shake. He stilled his mind and searched the silence for anything untoward. The wind blew gently, causing the hairs on his arms to stand on end. He focused on the presence, the hidden observer. There was defiantly a presence here.

Or some kind of something.

Methodological approach is always the best approach in times of trial. That and intuition. The soldiers of the world are taught to rely on their training. It is a good practice. Occasionally –a master has to rely on intuition too, coupled with right thinking.

He started with a place by the side of the cliff, adjacent to where he now sat. He walked slowly, shuffling his feet forward one inch at a time. He made sure he surveyed each sector in his environment. He didn't know what he was looking for. He was sure that this place had a secret. He had such feelings before, and had often been right.

The Orion's shoe constellation sat in the heavens, the heel bent sideways. The moon is upside down. It was shedding a little light, just enough to allow him to see the ground beneath his boots. He *felt* his way forward. Searching for that feeling, the feeling that told him he was getting nearer.

Tiredness crept over him, slipping beneath his eyelids. He felt like a rodent sniffing across the ground. Sniffing for a morsel. The tree behind him loomed over his shoulder, casting an ominous shade. Its branches reached for him like a witch's twitching creeping fingers. He shivered. He gazed at the tree. It looked as if it had stood for many thousands of years. Perhaps it was enchanted. There were many trees that were inclined toward a magical nature. Trev knew this to be true. This tree had presence.

Come closer. Trev heard its words in his mind. The tone and temperance of the words was reminiscent of his master. The tree stared at him. Were the grooves between the heavy bark, eyelets? Were they staring at him? He took a step closer. His eyes ached as he attempted to see the features of the tree. What looked to be eye sockets, were not. It was merely the shape of the bark, crumpled and distorted in the shadows.

There was something there, hanging on a low branch. A black something.

He began to wonder why he had found this place. Why had he come out here? He didn't know. He stepped forward and took a closer look. If this was nothing, he would head back. Perhaps this had been a fool's errand.

He paused again. Listening to the centre of himself. There was another presence here. The presence was mingled somehow with the tree, they were similar, their energy merged with one another.

He felt and almost heard the cogs of destiny spin like dice on a gamblers table.

He reached out his hand and touched the bag. Its texture was smooth. It vibrated a little, on the tips of his fingers. He opened the bag, and looked within.

Inside there was a nondescript garment, quiet ordinary. He lifted it from the bag and raised it to eye level. It had no distinguishing colours, nothing to give a hint as to its nature. Now that it was in his hands it no longer vibrated. It called to him, it felt familiar somehow. Like it had been in his presence before.

I was a custodian of such garment as this. Now Trev's mouth fell open. His pupils expanded. He slipped off his jacket, followed by his jumper and vest. His teeth rattled in his jaw as the cold set into his skin. Trev wondered if it would fit, it looked to be for a smaller man. As soon as he slipped it over his head the garment grew. It grew to fit his shoulders first, and then it enveloped his chest then spread downward, creeping along his skin.

It moulded itself around every contour of his body, growing into his arms. Then it tightened a little in order to fit perfectly. Now that it was on, he felt warm again. Heat suffused his being. The garment grew a little more, fitting over his hands. Then it spread upward to his neck, stretching past his throat. Trev felt a moment of panic. Perhaps it would cover his mouth! He clawed at his throat, attempting to prevent any further expansion. His finger nails were unable to find purchase, there was nothing to grip onto.

The suit was like a second skin. It slipped onwards, encapsulating his head and jaw. Then it stretched downwards, quickly surrounding his ... nether regions. It slipped across his skin and beneath his trousers. His legs and feet became covered in the garment. Trev slipped his trousers and boots off. The cold had gone, where there had been cold now there was warmth. The garment now covered the whole of his body in a sleek blackness. He looked down at his clothes, and understood that they could be easily fitted over the top of the suit. The word *suit* was a new word for him. He knew its meaning, yet to have such a strange word enter into his mind so naturally was a little strange.

The suit began to transform. It thickened perceptively and then began to change shape, taking on the form of his old clothing, even down to his boots. He lifted a leg and then an arm. He felt lighter. He touched the skin on his face. The suit was imperceptible, perfect.

He placed his clothes in his satchel. Where to put his satchel? The *suit* communicated with him, filling his mind with imagery. In his mind's eye, he reached a hand and touched his satchel. He did this now, and as he did so, the *suit* enveloped the satchel making the satchel transparent.

He placed his satchel within the thorn bush, as he withdrew his hand he noticed that a thorn had penetrated his skin. He felt very little pain. The thorn was immediately ejected from the surface (of what looked like) his skin.

[Internal sub systems accessed: Bio genetic interface accepted. Program parameters adjusted. Defence system active. Internal structure adjusted. Sync complete – carbon organism accepted. Shared resources accommodated and integrated within carbon based organism. Detecting bio agents. Protective bio agents active. Computing further integration: further integration not possible at this time. Successful integration with physical organism accomplished to the value of: 7 – further integration needed. Unable to calculate entire numeric variables at this time. Upgrade needed. Parameters set. Paradigm acknowledged and submerged into quantum matrix. External reality: Matrix eleven.]

Trev heard these strange words in his mind, they swam around in his subconscious. There were many strange words that he had never heard before. Yet the words and their meaning were understood, even though the language was unknown.

He walked over to the edge of the ledge and peered below, into the darkness. The forest was the same in substance as the creatures that existed within it. What a strange thought! Yet he knew it to be truth. The various frequencies of energy ... He glanced at the trees, the very same trees he had seen an hour ago. Now every object could be seen. He looked at a tree in the far distance because it was taller than the others. His sight zoomed in, to the surface of the tree. He watched the ants climb over the lumps and bumps, their nimble legs quick and efficient, their antennae turning perhaps communicating with each other. There was a curvature to the ant's body ... how fascinating. He stopped himself. If he continued in this way he would spend forever looking at every object!

The horizon was hazy, a mist rolled in from the east, rolling over the trees. Distances were closer, or appeared to be. The detail of the trees were as clear as the lines on his hands. He looked down at his hands. The entirety of his vision was filled up with colours, the small lines of his palms were canyons. One colour swirled up into a matrix of such complexity that his mind tried to escape from it. He felt his knees grow weak, yet before they could buckle his vision normalised.

Again the trees came back into focus, if anything they were clearer. He looked upwards and watched a hawk glide through the torrents of invisible eddies (he felt that if he focused his vision enough, he would see the very substance of the eddies.) He was hesitant to look at his hands again. It was a fleeting hesitation –the *suit* oozed confidence and assurance. He looked down at his hands. They were there and the details were ... interesting. Now his hands appeared as they usually were. There was a intricacy of lines which he hadn't noticed before (or had been unable to notice.)

"What are you?"

"I am" – [point of entry, soft load complete – retransfer.]

– I am a sentient technological self realised being.

"I see." Said Trev promptly. Then: "What shall I call you?"

[Accessing cochlea: click click.] "You can call me big Al." The voice made Trev's heart jump, ¹⁴a huge butterfly leapt to his throat and scuttled around his Adam's apple. Also, it resounded through his head, echoing through his synapses. The voice made him turn his head, fully expecting someone to be there and be the purveyor of the words.

¹⁴ Leaping butterflies are said to linger in the heart chakra, from this point, when they excited, they travel to the next chakra through the *Noklia* way. When they leap it is a fortuitous occurrence, indeed, these butterflies are born from hope which is nurtured from the springs of Ambrosia.

Big Al — it seemed an appropriate name. Somehow fitting. Very easy to remember.

Trev fumbled for words. "How do you do." Trev felt awkward, felt as if someone had caught him talking to himself.

The presence subsided. Words passed through his mind. [If this is a less alarming way of speaking with you then I will speak in this way.]

Trev looked down. He was on a ledge, below there was a vertical drop. The suit morphed. It was a curious sensation. It felt as if his very being was changing shape. A sphere left his body (he no longer thought of his body as separate from the suit) and rotated, moving forward a few metres. Then it shot downwards at an incredible speed.

He stepped back from the ledge. The idea that he could fly seemed very real. The suit had thickened. Trev extended his arms outward, noticing as he did so that now he had a kind of webbing between each of his arms pits, webbing which extended down to his elbows. *Oh wow*. He ran at full speed and leapt over the edge. He shot upwards, which was unexpected. He expected a downward motion, to be propelled up into the air when leaping from a ledge.

He fell.

He stretched his out his arms. He, and the intelligence which controlled the suit, merged. The correct techniques of flying came naturally. It was not really flight. This was falling with grace. He smiled at the expression. The ground travelled toward him. He curled into a ball and positioned himself feet first. A deceleration occurred. Then as the ground came closer he felt himself become lighter. A bubble, for a fraction of second, surrounded him. He landed on his feet, feeling very little impact.

He walked through the forest feeling alive and buoyant. He began to run. The colours swished by. His acceleration was complete, he reached full speed. The whole process of running felt different. It was as if he merely willed himself through the forest.

Perhaps he had synced himself with the suit completely. His muscles were stronger, his joints more subtle. *This must be syncing*. His senses – it was a thrill to witness the forest being lit up in such a way. The sounds were clearer. The nocturnal animals were awake and doing their thing. There was a large cat in the foliage, it was at least fourteen feet in length. Trev smelt her (he was certain the animal was female.) The stealthy creatures were out and about, the bat and the owl. This must be a dangerous place for humans. The creatures had heat signatures. There were patterns on the ground, smears of aluminous dust. These illuminate dust particles were scent signatures. The *suit* interpreted the environment in various ways, then translated the variables to Trev visually. The scent signatures were in the air too. Dull colours floated above the ground, some were on the surface. Creatures had passed here a few hours ago, perhaps even days ago. He passed his fingers through the scent particles, and watched as they glowed.

Augmentation — It was another word which had a strange meaning, unknown to this world. He came upon some orange scent marks, there were at least fourteen of them. He knew which animal these belonged to. These were human scents. He felt the undergrowth move by the side of him. A creature passed by. A huge cat. She slipped through the forest almost as easily as he did. He watched the white tiger ease past him, feeling a cool breeze brush up against the surface of his skin. She sniffed the air with her huge wet nostrils then her mouth opened wide. She bellowed. In the high branches a small furtive monkey scratched its arm pits. The tiger growled, and as she did so, the sky lit up for a moment. Lightning streaked across the sky then there came a low rumble. Her pink eyes blinked leisurely as she turned her head and stared at him. The tip of a huge tongue protruded through its teeth; Fearless, remorseless and without foe. The suit transformed, moving like quicksilver into different shapes. It grew thicker, its right hand formed into a long blade, growing thinner at the end. His left hand formed into a hand cannon, which was curious to see, and even stranger to experience. The cat eyed him, unperturbed by his transformations. Then it sloped off into the forest, fading quickly. It had become invisible, its tail lingered for a moment, half visible, in the form of a question mark. Now it left no heat signature and physical signs of its passing presence.

The suit cooled him down. His body had heated up considerably when the creature had turned towards him. He began to move again, slipping through the forest like a wraith. Branches leaned downwards from the trees. Each tree had huge leaves, leaves which felt like silk. The suit was a living encyclopaedia of knowledge. As his body passed by the leaves, information from the centre cortex (that was another new word for Trev to assimilate) of the Suit filtered into his mind immediately. The leaves from these trees were highly toxic to humans. He passed right through them, barely decreasing in speed.

The forest grew darker. He slowed to a walk.

[– augmented light sequencers adjusting to compensate. Heat signatures – ultra light senses implemented. Infer program perimeters collaborating. Red radiation diagram and algorithms alignment complete. Infra red; idiosyncratic subroutines aligning. Defence systems updated and temperate.]

"Trev, proceed with precaution." This time Trev stopped himself from turning around. He sent his thoughts to Big Al: *Duly noted*. He walked through this new part of the forest. With each new footstep, the forest darkened. Then abruptly the darkness descended like a vast curtain. There was a screeching and a scratching. A scuttling and screeching. Then the suit powered up. Every detection system operating at optimum level. The demons came. Avalanching, streaming like a vast living black carpet. This part of the forest had been transformed. The trees were all but gone. What survived now were in a state of decay. It was as if he had been teleported to another world. The first one appeared, emerging from the black demon mass. Its mouth was unnaturally large. The suit turned black as night.

The demon hurled itself at him, mouth smiling, eyes bulging, foam issuing from its mouth. Trev's blade pierced and slipped through the creature with ease. It's head toppled from its malformed shoulders. Its tongue writhed and its mouth chomped. Little arms formed either side of the head. It lifted itself off the ground and continued its attack. Trev thrust his blade through it again. He watched with amazement as a small tube emerged from his arm. A long thin line of fire leapt from the tube to the demon. The fire consumed the head, melting it.

The screams came as a thousand demons rushed him from behind. His movements were quick and efficient; hand cannon blasting, blade slicing. He raced across the backs of the demons he slaughtered, rising and falling across their sleek slippery bodies. They swarmed and coalesced into one big mass, then separated again. He ran through them, slicing their bodies in half. A stream of fire enveloped them as he ran through their ranks.

The darkness was deep and effectively denied all light to the land. He knew which direction to run, and he negotiated his way through the bodies. They increased their efforts. He sliced and diced them, and blasted them with a canon. The more he killed the further they increased in number and mass. The fallen, what was left of them, merged together creating a larger demon.

The ground shook. The ground heaved, beginning gently, and then it shook with a frenzy. A huge demon, easily twenty feet tall ran towards him, trampling his brethren as he came. The smaller demons blocked all exits, they hugged each other and closed every avenue of escape. Trev's right hand turned from a blade into another hand cannon, and above his right shoulder a three pronged gun rose up over his shoulder, spinning on an axis. Three different types of energies beamed across the sea of demons. One passed through whatever it touched, passing through the thick hide of the demons, turning their insides into mush. The other beam brought ice, freezing every blackened demon flesh. The third swivelled on his shoulder and fired red quick beams, on contact demon flesh exploded. The monstrous demon still strode forward. The three pronged energy weapons struck it in the chest with terrible effect, throwing it onto its back. It clawed itself back to its feet. Rage filled his visage. It's terrible mouth opened and its black eyes gleamed with malice.

The lesser demons melted into the contours of the greater demon. It climbed to its feet and strode fearlessly forward, lost within its own rage. It grew as its wounds healed, as the smaller demons merged with it. All cannons were now centred on him. The weapon fire grew in intensity and lit up the bleak environment. He couldn't avert his gaze from the massive frame of the demon. Trev's torso lit up too, pulsing. The lesser demons watched in delight, as the giant demon strode forward. The beams continued to fire, lighting up the demon night, and the grimace of each demon visage. They crawled and leapt, their cries assailing Trev's ears.

The two beams changed. The beams split into a thousand strands, each one criss-crossing into the flesh of the huge demon. They penetrated its flesh, as they had previously. Also, this time, on impact they spread along the surface of the demon confabulating at nexus points on the surface of its skin. Fire and ice spread across the surface of the demon, beginning at the chest, racing downward. It roared its defiance and expanded its monolith arms, opening huge clawed fingers. Reaching down, it scrapped its hands along the floor, shovelling the lesser demons into its huge mouth. The lesser demons screamed their defiance, mimicking the great demon's scream. They dived onto him. Energy suffused his being, as they fell upon his flesh. Again he was made whole. They merged themselves within the demon, melting into its body, a gleeful expression on each. They shrivelled, their flesh popped, blistered and then popped again as their flesh merged. They had bought precious time for the master demon.

Its flesh was lit up with balefire, the mouth jabbered flames, a curling twisting blistering tongue attempted to heal itself even as it burned.

It ran at Trev, closing the distance in a few footsteps. Its fiery presence remorseless, its aggrieved mouth opening and closing, slaving roars and demented cries. It was as if a thousand souls cried out against some terrible fate. One more footstep, its huge mouth opened impossibly wide and scooped him up, swallowing him whole.

The darkness was complete. It took but a moment for Trev to understand what had happened. Its throat clenched, then spat him into its stomach, into a furnace of red hot lava. The *suit* changed form, hardening cocooning Trev's body. Trev felt cool. The suit was now as hard as diamond. The heat of the demon, the stomach juices tried to penetrate his new form but was unable. The *suit* used the energy of the demon to fuel its defences.

Trev heard a roar. It must have been the loudest of all roars. It was not a demon roar. *It is very strange to be in the stomach of a demon, and be so relaxed.* Another terrible roar reached his ears, even though he was within the safe diamond cocoon.

The demons swarmed around their master. They licked the master Demon's wounds. Then came another roar. The demons looked at each other (those that had eyes.) They looked around themselves, then at their master, perhaps believing that he had made the terrifying sound. The great demon, its goliath form, was preoccupied with his painful condition and not heard the sound. It nursed its stomach, not unlike a child with a stomach complaint.

A white blur appeared and ripped the small demons to shreds. Its beautiful head turned as it surveyed the environment with cool yellow eyes. The lesser demons noticed this new apparition and cried out in shock. The white claws extended out and raked through dozens of them.

The huge demon turned around and met the cool eyes of the great tiger.

The tigress roared into life. Fang and claw tore the lesser demons as she leaped forward. In an instant, with one bound, the tigress, claws extended, leapt onto the huge demon. Huge white tigress – black stripes, huge incisors, yellow intelligent eyes – great humungous claws raked the demon hide, tearing at the huge demons flesh, slicing it open. The great demon fell to its knees – ripped asunder, fledgling demons and older demons leapt to protect their master, each was opened up and their innards scattered. She flung them aside with a relish that perhaps only a tigress can truly do. The demon flesh rendered did not heal.

It leapt onto the head of the great demon. It tore at the skull of the demon head, ripping it open. With her hind legs she raked the belly. The huge demon's skin attempted to re knit itself but was unable to do so effectively. The tigress's capacity to rend flesh increased. Her back paws raked at the underside of the belly, and penetrated within. She leapt downwards and roared at the lesser demon's, scattering them. She reached into the belly and scooped out a little thing – a cocoon of diamond. She flipped it up into the air, and caught it in her jaws. Then ran. Her senses picked up the subliminal sounds of nature, and ran toward the sounds toward her home.

She ran swiftly, mile after a mile. She entered the forest, her domain. She leapt like a young cub. Kicking her back legs up into the air like a young filly. She came to a great tree, and settled down beneath it. She tossed the hard morsel against the trunk of a tree haphazardly, then settled down on her haunches and licked her paws.

Trev knew what happened. He had felt sure that he and the *suit* would have been able to escape their predicament, eventually. Admittedly, being within the belly of a demon was an unfortunate event. Not many had ever survived such a predicament. Now he was in another predicament, out of the fire and perhaps into a frying pan. Big Al felt differently about their predicament.

[– Tiger species unknown. Magical related configuration unknown. Potential ally, potential friend. Integrated senses allude to potential friendship. Accessing mammalian code: aix. Tiger species: apex predator, sub matrix –avatar species. Intelligent, quick, predatory, capable of making decisions divined through higher spherical interrelationship. Tiger species: shared consciousness with higher interrelationship entity consider to be a god – lunar alliance/sun alliance.]

Trev felt the transformation begin, and then felt tired. It was not the time to allow tiredness to consume him, not yet anyway. The suit returned to its previous state, an ebon blackened state; still able to transform at a moment's notice to a battle configuration. The tigress was relaxed. Big Al felt comfortable with the tigress. Trev sat down cross legged, resting his wary limbs.

The tigress licked its leg and paw leisurely. She protracted her claws and licked a black gooey substance from her fur. Trev noted, that although its claws were extraordinarily sharp its tongue did not bleed.

Big Al spoke up, inside his mind. **[It would probably not be a very good to regard this creature as an it. This creature is female. Also, probably, she is an avatar –a living breathing aspect of the Supreme Being.]**

The great white tigress looked at Trev momentarily, as if sensing the discussion, of which it (*she*) was not privy to. Trev waved, she flexed a paw and smiled (or snarled). Trev very nearly pooped himself.

The faerie looked at her. No words were needed. Tiffany understood that their paths needed to part. Faeries never say goodbye. She flew away quickly, vanishing from Tiffany's sight in the space that it takes to say "Jack Robinson." Tiffany changed to her human form, and began to walk through the forest.

She missed her friends. She missed them now, especially now. *I guess there are no rules to missing someone.*

The trees were close together. They seemed to be touching each other. She understood why they felt the need to touch and entwine their branches, their need to embrace. She could hardly see the sky. She walked through a milky light. The ground felt soft beneath her feet. Pink butterflies skittered in the light, they danced, swirling around a large beam of sunlight. The beam created a pool of light on the floor, centring on small blue flowers. The leaves glowed gently, as filaments flowed through the veins of each. She moved closer as the pink butterflies began to drift, their wings moving slower than before. The light turned yellow, as a cool breeze entered the glade. The pink butterflies spiralled around the light, circling at greater speed.

From leaf to leaf a subtle light flowed. This light entered one leaf and then flowed to another, rippling through the entire environment. A cool breeze bristled the hair on Tiffany's arms and flowed across the top of her head, caressing her ears. A white unicorn stepped from the trees into the clearing. Its single spiralled horn touched the light beam, piercing it, refracting the light into a thousand different colours. Tiffany became very aware of her breathing. She found it difficult to breath for a moment.

From the tip of the horn different colours spread downwards. The mane of the unicorn turned from pure white then to multicoloured. The different coloured light changed the pigmentation of the unicorn's coat. The light descended downward and along its mane, suffusing the unicorn's back, spreading beneath the belly and toward the tail.

The butterflies descended, alighting onto the surface of the unicorn's back. The unicorn dipped its head and tasted the pool of light. Its tongue lapped at the light, and with each swipe of its tongue the pool of light transformed into droplets of water. The assortment of colours that suffused the unicorn's coat began to fade. The butterflies drained the unicorn's coat of colour infusing themselves with the colours. As they did so they took again to the air. The unicorn's deep blue eyes stared into the pool, seemingly unaware of the presences of the butterflies or their departure.

Finally she (Tiffany felt sure that the unicorn was a she. It felt wrong to even think of this creature as an "it") looked up from the small pool and stared at Tiffany. She walked over, approaching the little girl with gentle tentative steps. The unicorn drew closer until she stood hoof to toe with her. Its soulful blue eyes stared into Tiffany's brown. She received the thoughts from the unicorn. The information flowed into her and through her. The thoughts also flowed out of her, back into the unicorn. They became, for a moment, one entity. *I am becoming one with this creature ...* they shared the long moment, tasting each other's presences. The experience of her life before this moment seemed to be merely an intermittent stage, the prologue to the story of her life. Now that they were connected, she felt as if they had always been connected.

Have you ever awoken and wondered whether you are asleep?

Their contact broke. The unicorn dipped her head and nuzzled her hand. With her free hand she reached out and stroked her beautiful mane. It was extraordinarily soft.

Another moment came and lasted for a while longer – the butterflies flew in their thousands, herding each other, organising into ever increasingly intricate patterns. They formed vast shapes, Tiffany tried to discern the shapes as they formed. The individual butterflies could not be seen, now they were one big mass. With each pass, the shapes formed were discernible. There was a dragon shape, a dragon that blew fire. The butterflies disassembled the dragon even as it swooped. Another group of butterflies joined, swelling their number, broadening the shapes adding colour and texture. A person formed, the details were incredible, the person that formed was female. The figure ran, dress flowing, a bundle in her arms. Then the figure disappeared, in its place a face appeared, stark with fear. *It is like watching a silent film, in colour.* Then the butterflies formed a beautiful bird, made only from the red and orange butterflies.

The butterflies created a giant sized picture of her face her smiling. Then a different picture formed. A huge Phoenix fell from the sky, talons extended, body and wings golden.

The butterflies swirled in their flight, broke apart for moments and then integrated again. For the longest time she stood there, watching their movements, stroking the unicorn's silken mane. Then, as if waking from a dream she again became aware of her surroundings, and in those surrounding, which she could hardly remember seeing before, the unicorn had disappeared. She felt a terrible loss.

The pool remained.

A terrible thought occurred to her. She felt certain that if she looked into the pool she would be lost to herself forever. She continued to walk toward it, knowing that within its reflection was the very answer that she sought.

There she was, looking down into it, looking at herself looking into it.

She sat beneath a tree, watching herself – as the other stared, as the other self sat with her back against a huge tree trunk. She merged with her other self. Guitar music filled her mind and ears. A purple haze descended, smoke billowing, spreading outward in every direction. A man descended within the haze, playing beautiful music, smiling with a guitar that shone and produced a splendid light. His smile was as wide as a rainbow. He sang to her, perfectly in sync with his music. She drifted along with the music, falling into a deep sleep. The music continued. He remained also, as clear as raindrop on the tip of a unicorn's horn. He seemed to be riding the unicorn through the night, touching the sky – kissing the sky. He continued to play, each rift different from the one before.

His voice trailed off into a deep red sunset. With each touch of his finger upon the strings of his guitar a new feeling sprang into being. Universes sprang up as he spoke through his guitar. Nebulae burst shattering suns by the dozen creating a chain reaction. Gas giants spun outward at an incomprehensible rate. A single mote of music changed the direction of each.

You are like me Tiffany. You are like all those who continued to be who they are. That do, and choose to do, in every moment. She listened through the night – listened to his music. Being lifted, even as she lifted him. I am that which I am not, and not that which I am. It was a splendid dichotomy which enabled her being to transcend reality itself. At least for the moment, she sailed through the sky on the back of her own unicorn. Along with him, and his music, composers of every ilk travelled with them at a distance. Above them (or perhaps ¹⁵within them) a lone boy sat in his chair, writing with a pencil on lined paper, paper which rested on a large flat smooth piece of wood which bridged the arms of the chair.

All that is, is. It cannot not be. Everything is. It is has to be, for to not be is inconceivable. The infinite multi-verse demands that everything be so.

She drifted through the stars, through the cosmos. Drifting through the many worlds. Extra terrestrials smiled as she passed them in their disc homes. Inter-dimensional beings waved to her as she passed them by. The man continued, with his smile and guitar, dancing, dressed in purple and an assortment of orange clothing. An orange box spun by, hurtling at speed, overtaking them. They needed to duck, that was how close it came to hitting them. "*Look!*" he said, "*even that exists.*" He was excited now. His excitement was contagious, and his exuberance knew no bounds. She smiled at him, she could not help doing so. It was the best feeling.

Then they floated back to *Shookle*. Passing through the atmosphere, through the clouds. The unicorns ran through the air, easing themselves and those that were seated on their backs, to their destination. Their hooves trotted on the air currents as easily as solid ground. They dipped as they ran, cantering toward the earth. The wind rushed through Tiffany's hair as the ground drew closer. Her companion had an afro, it was pushed back as far as it could go.

Then finally, they rested on the sweet earth. "I must leave you now," said the gentleman even as he departed. He waved an arm above his head, climbed onto a unicorn and disappeared through the roof of the forest.

She decided to fall asleep in the glade. At least here she will be safe.

¹⁵ It is supposed, by the democratic cosmological development of Spiritual awareness that the boy's name was Adam.

Too much has happened so soon. It had been a hard day. She looked at her hands. They seemed different somehow. They looked larger ... she felt larger too. Her knees felt weak, her legs wobbled a little as she tried to take a step. She crumpled to her knees and allowed herself to roll onto her back. The warmth of the glade enticed her to sleep, along with the sound of distant butterfly wings. The darkness was not frightening here, it filled her with sincere peace.

She slept well, a dreamless sleep, absent of everything and everyone. Even her father.

She awoke the next day refreshed. Her clothes had been dirty the night before, now they were clean and fresh. The dark wizard was still alive. Flying somewhere perhaps, or gathering an army. Either way, her main goal was not the destruction the king or his army. She needed to find her father, search for him everywhere. She knew he was alive. She would not rest until she found him.

She walked at first light, away from the glade without looking back. The air felt fresh against her face. As she walked through the boughs, the leaves changed. These new trees wore mauve leaves. They spread in every direction. There was a trail, faded and with flowers, a blue sprinkling throughout the forest. A lovely sight – their splendour gave forth a smell which reminded her of clean washing, and lavender. She passed through the forest for many miles, watching the occasional rabbit pop out from the side of a bush or tree. Such animals always paused before disappearing again. A squirrel and a bear passed her by, the squirrel was leading the bear somewhere. They showed her no inclination. The animals knew her, or knew what she had done. Her magic had awakened the animals that had aided her in the fight with the dark wizard. They were now conscious and aware. They had the animal instincts, that aspect of them did not diminish, but now they were creatures of two worlds – consciousness and instinct wove them together.

Here the animals did not have sentience. A part of them recognised her, and although they had no thoughts they seemed to be kindly disposed toward her. A bear passed her by again, paying her no attention.

The moment came.

Wings materialised on the surface of her back. Transparent wings full of colours: purple, mauve, green (the colour of fresh grass in the morning) and sunset red. She took to the air, rising upward to the place where the branches were thickest. Her wings flapped and sparkled. She took off at an increased rate, whizzing through the trees. *Concentration* – it is hard to keep track of the distance when travelling so fast. A faerie travelling fast ... so fast, as fast as a train, or transient moonbeam, or a trickle of sunlight across the horizon.

She travelled throughout the day, making good time. The trees whizzed by, the animals looked up at her as she passed them by.

The flowers were arranged in rows. They may have arranged themselves somehow. Must have been doing so secretly because when Tiffany turned her head again they were in a different position. She was unable to catch them at it. They seem to be organised into sigils. Tiffany didn't know what sigils were. Tiffany formed the word *sigil* in her mind and felt for the truth of the word.

She continued on her way, following the slope of the land. She thought of her father, and his plight. She needed to find him, to focus her mind and efforts.

The forest, the mauve leaves were all around her. They were okay. If she kept focusing on them, letting them fly past beneath her, then she would know that she was on the right path. If she looked ahead all the time, the distances would defeat her. The echoes of her memories – the memories of the man dressed in purple, and the unicorn remained. They travelled with her, spurring her onward.

A few miles passed her by. The forests became condensed, the branches and fern wove around each. The sky above struggled to reveal itself above the roof of the forest. A break in the forest, an outcrop of large rocks rose up as high as the trees. She flew upward to the top. Now she could see the sky, it was dark grey. Flying was a struggle, she was really quite tired. It had begun to rain a little. She came across an outcrop of rocks, rocks upon rocks seated upon a great big mountain of rock. It was not a mountain in the traditional sense, just a pile of rocks stacked upon each other that led upward to the roof of the forest.

She rested for a while. A torrent of rain fell from the sky, bucketing down on top of her. She spotted a crevice and hid herself within it, thinking at first that it would not be deep enough to protect her from the rain. She pushed herself between the crevice, feeling the shale crumble against her shoulders as she wedged herself within.

She pushed forward a little more, cutting herself a little as she did so. Then it opened without warning. She descended hoping to find shelter, anything would do, anything to get out of this rain. She found herself within a small cave, or cavern. She glimpsed within, and almost instantly knew that she was not alone. There came a growl. She fired up a small light and drifted it forward.

Something stared back. Something with large yellow eyes. He had big fluffy ears, which looked kind of cute until you witnessed his teeth. His eyes were weeping a little at the sides. He had two large fangs which hung down beneath his lower jaw. He flexed his claws, stretching them out toward her. Perhaps he attempted to intimidate her. The darkness shrouded her entirely. Yet she knew he could see her. She stepped forward. There was only way through this situation. She knew that instantly. To back off now would be tantamount to inviting an attack. A step backwards now would be misinterpreted as a weakness. She was not weak. She walked towards him. He didn't like that. This was his lair. He perceived her wings first and licked his lips. Then he witnessed her small frame, and became a little excited. He was hungry enough to eat fifty faeries at once. He lowered his fur lined body and crouched low, ready to pounce.

She walked forward, her eyes firmly on his. Determination was in her stride and in her gaze. He howled and then growled. His hackles rose up on the back of his neck.

Here kitty kitty.

In the past he had hunted, when he growled, the creatures ran. She did not run, instead she moved closer.

"I have defeated a dark wizard, and protected the forest animals. The great and the small." She spoke to him without fear. The size of the cat surprised her. His claws were larger than the bear she had met earlier. Much larger, and sharper. This mountain cat fluffed himself up, leant forward and made himself look very ferocious. "The great enemy ran from me." Now she was very close to the mountain cat.

Maybe it is a lion.

He was ready now. Ready to attack. Something prevented him from doing so. Did she say she had protected the forest? His heart stopped him from hurting her. She continued to walk toward him. He readied himself. *Perhaps it is sorcery which prevents me from hurting her. I will kill her, I will rend her flesh.*

She reached out to him with her presence. Her love reached forth.

He could not do it. She was a being of power. He knew that. He wasn't stupid. He was a lonely cat. She knew that. He had been ousted from his pack and had lived on this rock for many years. He hunted in the forests below, between the wild flowers. The creatures: they feared him. Him, the mightiest! He filled his thoughts with his own might. He was a lion and wasn't a lion filled with pride. He leapt at her. Claws extended, body coiled, a lithe powerful killing machine.

He hit something, something that should not have been there but was, he hit it claws first. She had formed a bubble around herself, she filled it a little with electricity; well, more than a little really. He hit it and leapt back. Outrage was his foremost emotion, outrage and an overwhelming shame. He wailed and puffed himself up again. Then struck out at the darkness between them with wild furious strikes.

"Have you quite finished?"

She now stood by the side of him, a foot away. He continued to puff himself up but this time he did not strike out. He growled instead.

She placed a finger to her lips, walked a little closer to him, then reached her hand. A moment of weakness, on her part perhaps. She wanted to heal him but in order to do so she would have to bring her protective shield down. She did so, before she could convince herself not to. She felt vulnerable, she was a small child and he was a ferocious beast. She was ready with a spell just in case he attacked her. He did not move as she reached out, instead he lowered his head.

She touched his face, stroking his fur, feeling his whiskers on the back of her hand. He remained motionless as she touched him. He had been alone for a long time, alone, tired and in pain.

His eyes had been sore for many years. He had a sickness. Pain had been his constant companion through his long lonely hours. She felt his emotions and his terrible isolation. She eased herself forward a little, and gently touched his face. As she touched him he relaxed. He felt the pain lessen, first in his paws, then along the length of his back. She somehow felt the scar running along his iris. She stood with her hand toward him, her force, and a force much greater than her, connected with her, and through her, him. It was the same force that imbued her with courage when she fought the dark magician.

Life had been a blur – she had been a blur – but now his vision cleared. As it cleared he was able to see her. The animal instincts that had served him for so long, drained out of him. She cradled his head in her arms, easing his pain in every moment that passed. Her compassion welled up from her, from her heart, passing through her arms, to his whiskers, making them quiver, then flowed across his face and downward passed his throat. He slept for a while as she healed him. It was a warm sleep, filled with warmth and love.

She sat cradling his head for many hours. A light came; an inner light.

He came. He walked in through the wall (how he was able to do so she didn't know.) There was a light, a purple hue. Her friend had come back. A gentle purple light flickered onto the far wall. She couldn't see him, only his afro, it appeared, dim at first, then it brightened revealing his beautiful smile. It filled her being then passed through her into him. His fur became untangled to her touch, and his eyes stopped aching completely. He growled, but it was a kindly growl. The cat equivalent of a human sigh. He reached out a paw to her. She allowed herself to be drawn into him. He pulled her close, bringing her toward his warm torso gently. The warmth of his body was like standing next to a fire, a fire that could not burn. The afro moved gently forward for a moment, his face appeared again. Tiffany felt like bursting into rhyme or busting a move, maybe a dance move or three. The poem would be about orange skies, rainbow kisses and mermaids. The afro man had a soft gentle face, he kissed the centre of his palm and blew it to her, but made the mistake of blinking. If he had come, now he had gone. If he hadn't come, then why did she feel a warmth in her heart?

"Fly on sweet angel." She could hear him inside her mind singing:

fly on sweet angel,
fly across the sky
fly on sweet angel –
maybe someday you'll find someone,
someone that will love you
half as much as I.

She slept immediately after his departure, she leaned into her new friend and rested her head, resting beneath his chin. He slept, knowing that he was loved and accepted.

They both slept. His was a sleep which was without pain, one of many pain free nights to come. A beautiful peace radiated from the both of them, and the cave they dwelt in.

The morning reluctantly came.

A cold breath of air flowed through the cave, sliding across the floor, circulating through the rocks and crevices, sweeping up and beneath the gentle arm of the mountain cat, sprinkling itself across the surface of her face.

She opened her eyes, something soft caressed the top of her head. The giant cat gentling licked the top of her. The gentle movement of his tongue comforted her. It could not replace the word rambling of her Father, or his smile, but it did comfort her. She allowed herself to feel the lovely bond she now shared with this gentle beast. The sunlight slipped through a crevice spilling into the cavern. It was a welcome visitor. She slipped beneath her friends arm and paw and stood up in front of him.

"I have to leave."

He had the most beautiful eyes. They were yellow, sprinkled with gold. She reached forward and kissed him on the mouth, feeling the soft fur brush against her nostrils. She threw an arm around him and kissed his forehead too. Oh how she loved him! A spark of life entered into him. Something in his eyes changed as the light of reason entered therein.

She turned and left the cavern. She decided not to turn around, she knew it would make it harder to leave if she did so. Outside, the air was chilled. She lifted into the air, and travelled over the rocks darting upwards toward the summit of the mountain.

The rocks were barren, devoid of all life except for the stray strands of grasses that had somehow survived. She reached the top a few hours before midday. A grand vista could be seen from the summit, spreading far and wide. She knew the direction she needed to travel toward, her faerie senses told her which way to go. There may as well have been an arrow pointing the way, so sure was she of the direction she needed to travel.

The heat had entered the day a few hours earlier. It had come with a vengeance. In her faerie form the heat wasn't so hard to handle. The warmth came from the east. It was there that she needed to travel. Perhaps it was the invisible great faerie in the sky that revealed the way. If Binkerbelle had been here she would have nodded sagely. Tiffany looked up. The sky was blue, there were a few streaks of white lines coming from the west travelling eastward. She took this as a good sign, it was the very direction she needed to go.

She tried to remember the twinkling and the faun. It was important to remember everyone she had met. She thought of her friends too. She felt Binkerbelle's mind touch upon hers, gently touching the fringes of her thoughts. She couldn't communicate with her, but it was enough to know that she was okay. She sent a thought her way anyway, perhaps it would reach her somehow.

She needed to move on. The trees below were waiting for her to walk through them. She began her journey downward. It was handy to have wings. She had come to realise, as she travelled through the forest earlier, that there was something that was pulling her down. It wasn't gravity. A faerie knew about gravity. It played a part, indeed she could feel her own weight. No, this wasn't gravity. There was another force at work. She raised herself up higher, experimenting with how far she could go before the invisible force pulled her back downward. In different places, the force was stronger. On the mountain, as she flew over it, she felt light. It was not difficult to fly over the small mountain. As she drew closer to the forest, something pulled her down significantly. This time there was no doubt, there was something about this forest which made her feel heavier. It was okay, as long as she didn't fly too high. Twelve feet seemed like a good height. At that height it didn't take too much effort to fly.

She flew through the trees, remembering to stay at the right height. There were so many bushes surrounding the base of each tree. She travelled onward, brushing up against each tree as she passed it. She flew slowly. The forest seemed to her to be an unfriendly place. She felt the definite absence of connection with the environment. There was nothing outwardly that looked antagonistic or threatening. She drove herself onward, determined to gain more ground. She opened her faerie sight, hoping to pinpoint something in her environment which would shed some light on the mystery of this forest. She couldn't sense anything of significance.

Below her the environment changed. Hedges and bushes merged together, knitting themselves completely into one huge conglomerate. It would be a difficult barrier for any person to break through if she was limited to walking. Again she felt something pull her to the earth. Or was it the forest? Was it the will of the forest? Her wings felt heavier. She felt heavier. She moved a little lower. The forest was gloomier at this new lower level. It felt as if the forest wanted to eat her up. This was a silly idea. A forest could not *want* anything, surely? She realised, as she descended, that she needed to stop flying altogether. It was too difficult to keep herself in the air.

Below her the nettles were as big as her hand. Each had numerous deadly long needles. She spotted the length of them from above. The bushes didn't seem so imposing when you were up so high. The lower she got, the heavier she got. If she couldn't fly over the forest then she would have to go through the forest. Except there was no longer a forest. Just endless brambles. There was no way to settle on to the ground, there was simply no place to safely land. The bushes were everywhere. She couldn't use fire, fire she knew was a bad thing to use on undergrowth. The heat of the day was stifling enough without her adding flames to her environment.

There was a type of magic at play, something that made the air humid. The magic at work confused her mind. It was not isolated to any one spot or being. It seemed to be everywhere, coming from everything. She could not see it, or feel where it originated. In her being she knew it to be magical in nature. Then again, was not everything magic, at the very heart?

She reached a hand out and pictured icicles. Nothing happened. *Hmmmmmm* ... She formed the ice in her mind, paying particular attention to the detail, picturing it perfectly. The many miniscule shards ... she remembered reading a book about ice.

She sidled through the corridors of her mind, allowing the mental construct of herself to navigate into her memories – the library. The image of a compass, inlaid onto the cobblestones beneath her feet aided her. East, west, north and south. There it was, the entrance, the golden arch. She lifted a hand and slid it downwards, watched as the bookshelves slid passed her. There it was, a book about the elements.

She opened her eyes and took a slow deep breath. The book, the book in her imagination, could be clearly seen, overlaid over her environment, transparent like a ghost.

It began to form, first as a pin prick in midair, several feet from her, then the pin prick materialised forming a perfect icicle. It became a large icicle, then as she breathed out it flew from her. It burst forth, striking the bushes before her. Everything froze and became brittle. She blew into the palm of her hand, and let the little tempest move forward into the formed iced bushes.

The ice bushes shattered. A thousand small branches changed to ice dust in an instant. She alighted onto the floor, and looked about her. An imperfect circle of bushes surrounded her. She felt a little sad at causing so much damage. She was certain that she had killed so many little creatures.

There was no help for it.

She looked about herself and understood what she needed to do. She formed another icicle, a meter away. She guided it forward to the very edge of the undergrowth.

A tiny beetle cocked its head. It was no bigger than her thumb, it reached out a mandible, and rested it on the ice crystal. Then pulled back and scuttled away.

Is this all in my mind, or did I just see what I thought I had seen?

This just wouldn't do. She couldn't kill such a creature wilfully. She faced a dilemma. She needed to move forward but couldn't use the ice spell, or indeed any spell which would kill even the smallest of insects. Was there an answer to this conundrum? She would have to compromise. She would give them a warning before she struck the bushes with her icicle.

She blew into the palm of her hand, and sent a small wind toward the undergrowth. It was a strong wind, strong enough to send a message to the creatures within the undergrowth, warning them that the ice was imminent. She sent the ice out quickly, before she could change her mind. The bushes froze and then shattered into white dust.

She felt like a wicked witch casting spells and hurting everything. She quickly repeated the spell, before she could change her mind. Again she raised a hand, placed it to her lips and blew. She waited a moment, giving everything enough time to scuttle out of the way. Then she cast the ice, sending it forth from herself.

She did the same procedure again and again, not giving herself time to reconsider. She manifested her spells quickly. The undergrowth shattered with each cast of her spell. She moved forward. A gesture of her hand: a gust of wind. Then an ice sheet passed through the undergrowth again.

Many miles passed beneath her feet. Effortlessly she moved through the landscape, effortlessly perfecting her ice magic. She walked and cast without breaking stride. Then, as the light of the day switched to the grey of dusk, she looked upward and noticed the sky. The clouds rolled like thunderous waves of the ocean. The winds that raced across the sky were powerful, here where she stood the earth there was merely a breeze.

The clouds congregated together and quickly thickened, coalescing into thunderheads. Darkness fell across the entire land. She felt a deep tiredness, the casting had taken a toll.

She set up some magical wards. The magic in her environment continued to oppress her mind.

The wind came. It fell from the sky like a fist, lifting her into the air a little. She pulled her wings to herself, folding them around herself. Tiredness prevented her from focusing her will to any effect. Luckily her wings were an effective protection against the weather.

Her small figure huddled beneath her wings. A small cap of feathers cupped the crown of her head preventing the wind. Now she was safe from the wind.

The rain came too. A vast torrent, heavy as a mountain.

Lonely came. She fixed her mind on getting through the moments of loneliness. Her wings couldn't protect her against her inner struggles.

There was no father, nor sisters to support her (or argue with) and her mother had never felt so far away. She missed her mother, her kind eyes and devotion. Her laughter, she heard it now echoing within her mind. Her mother's brown hair dangled along her face when she hugged her. She felt it tickling her face; Trinity, her occasional enigmatic outbursts and occasional statements: "mind your own business!"

Tears came to her, some falling down into the fold of her wings, some simply trickling down her cheeks, leaving tracks. *I will see you again Mum. I will help Dad, and I will bring him back. Nothing shall get in my way.*

She had been physically changing. Beneath her notice, slowly, yet far quicker than should have been possible, her physical body had grown taller and stouter. It had happened, and she had noticed it in some distant part of herself. Now she recognised her growth fully, consciously. She closed her eyes and let sleep take her again.

The storm raged above her and within her.

She awoke through the night whimpering, tear tracks stained her face. The wind had stopped, the tempest had ceased. Now there was merely rain, and the taste of her salty tears.

The morning filtered in through her wings, piercing her eyes causing them to ache. She opened her eyes and felt a great ache in each part of her body too, especially her wings. She looked about herself, and felt a great depression descend upon her again.

The thorn bushes, the ones that she cleared yesterday, had re-grown. She was within a tight encirclement of thorn bushes. The morning light was bright and shone through the bushes, causing a thousand dew drops to sparkle.

The bushes had changed during the night too. Not only had they grown back they were changed, even as she investigated them they continued to transmogrify. The thorns were growing, they stretched and appeared far sharper than they did yesterday.

She heard a rumble, and a slight vibratory feeling beneath the soles of her shoes. It had been a very cold night, the remains of the bushes she had iced yesterday shook. A thousand particles danced at the rate of a thousand hectares a second. She readied herself. The bushes grew suddenly, the nearby thorns increased in size, becoming fuller and more robust. The ground beneath her feet dipped suddenly. She almost fell to her knees. Her wings saved her, they fluttered quickly and lifted her into the air. The bushes jerked forward another inch. The thorns reached out to her. The circumference became considerably smaller. She placed her hands together, palm against palm.

The bushes seemed to be waiting for something. It was a peculiar feeling to think that bushes could think. She felt as if they were about to pounce on her. Then they did. They heaved forward a foot. She didn't hesitate. She cast her ice spell and began to run at the bushes. She shouted, propelling her voice forward. Her shout became a physical force instantly, disintegrating the iced thorn bushes in front of her into a thousand pieces.

To her left and right, the thorn bushes encroached on her. She spread her arms wide and iced them too. She mistimed her next ice spell. She had meant to ice the ones in front of her, as well as the ones to her side. Instead she almost ran straight into um-iced bushes. She couldn't stop herself in time. Then yelled, the yell, which had initially been a yell of panic, changed and became a roar. The roar became a wind. The wind from her breath smashed into the bushes in front of her just in time to prevent her from being impaled. The bushes now were entirely gone, there were none in her immediate vicinity. She stopped to take a breath. The wind spell was initiated and transformed by the *wild magic* that dwelt within her. Wild magic accumulates in power. The thorn bushes, in every direction for at least half a mile dissipated.

Five beetles, two in front of her, two to her right and one to her left appeared. They burrowed up from the ground, rising quickly to the surface. They rose up through the hard floor, slipping through the hard surface like whales breaking the surface of the water. They were giant in size, each one the size of a small house. Their snouts were green and looked like door knobs. Their mandibles were raised, and moved in intricate circles. A sound came from them. They were communicating to each other. They galloped toward her.

She panicked. It was time to do something. She rose up into the air. It was the only thing she could think of to do. She had to get away from them. Their behemoth bodies came quickly, thundering across the partially barren landscape.

They tilted their heads up. Their huge bulbous eyes and jaws clicked loudly. *Click click klunk*. They had sharp beaks too. A pale blue light emitted from their huge bodies, connecting each of them with a thin blue beam. They dropped back onto their hind legs and lifted their front legs. Their antenna moved in different directions.

Tiffany sensed their evil intentions. *You may know them by the feeling that you have in your being. Listen to your feelings.* She listened to her feelings now. She usually responded to attacks. She had never initiated an attack. Now she would do so. She built up the energy within her. As she did so, a terrible heaviness filled her being. At first she sensed it within her mind. It was a dullness, a depression. It was their weapon. She still felt reluctant to initiate an attack. Her inner self spoke to her – within the depth of her being the still quiet voice spoke to her. *Strike before they do so.*

The inner conscience, it is the voice and entrance by which the exalted ones speak. It is the entrance of the Divine being. All beings are contained within it. Act in the very truth of yourself.

She desired to ignore the inner voice. She desired to listen to it also. The two aspects of herself battled for supremacy: for the moment. One wanted to remain passive, the other desired to be active.

She acted. She sent her force outward, breathing in to the utmost, letting go of her voice as she exhaled. She let out a shout that instantly turned into wind, a wind which became a tempest.

The bushes, the beetles –their stomping feet, antenna swirling and twirling in different directions; they communicated to each other, focusing their intent, weaving unknown spells. Beetle magic is unknown and thus hard to combat. Not that Tiffany understood magic, or had much in the way of experience.

She could feel a force gathering itself. A static energy could be felt in the air around her. They were about to attack again. She let out another yell which quickly transformed into another wind, another tempest.

They stomped their feet. The ground began to quake, the dust beneath their feet quivered. Their eyes wheeled around in their sockets. The tempest became more powerful, smashing into their bulbous bodies. The bushes in the distance were swept away like cotton wool carried by the breath of a wind dragon. Dust rose up, swirling, blinding their eyes. They stomped their feet rhythmically. They were furious. The thorn bushes were the nurseries for their babies. Now it had all been blown away, their babies, their carcasses, had been thrown to the east.

The blue beam that bridled them together became brighter. Then shot upward toward Tiffany, a tremendous flash of power ensued. Electricity leaped upward, along the path of the powerful beam and exploded on impact.

What happens now?

She felt split in two. I am blasted in two. Now I feel like a pear drop, split in two.

She is nowhere. The beetles are satisfied. The threat has been disposed off. They have defeated her.

I am still here. Somewhere. She looked at herself. She was intact. There was a pool beneath her gaze, and a unicorn; the purple man, his smiling face looked at her, the unicorn and purple man spun across her mind completing fiery cartwheels.

Light surrounded her on all sides. A clown wandered through her mind and then stepped out of it, running somehow through nothing into nothing. He took to running on all fours. Behind him a thousand wolves snapped at his heels. His face changed as he ran. His nose grew stouter, and his teeth grew terrible. His arms became more muscular. He tore at the wolves that drew closer to him. He snapped their limbs off with his jaws. He howled at them, a howl which turned into terrible laughter.

Then he faded and blinked out of existence. The ladybird appeared in front of her. The ladybird was as much startled by her sudden appearance in front of Tiffany as Tiffany was with receiving her company. They looked at each other for a moment. Then they both began to giggle.

One of her arms came out from behind her back. Nicolette brought a finger up to her lips but couldn't help smiling. "It is nice to see you gracious Tiffany." She took hold of the moment and held it for a while. It was nice to just stare at Tiffany for a while. She captivated the ladybird with her beautiful eyes and carefully crafted face. All human children have something about them which captivates. Tiffany had grown physically. This was not good. She should have not been able to do so, so quickly. There was nothing that could be done about it now. There was much that was unexplained about this situation.

What force could drag her from her own world and materialise her in this place? It was fortunate indeed, but still ... Nicolette spoke carefully. "Listen to me Tiffany. Your father was stolen away from me. A being called the Red King stole him from my very home." She tightened her jaw. She didn't like bringing her failure to light. "I detected Binkerbelle's teleportation spell and diverted it. I didn't think that you would end up in another dimension though."

She looked kindly, but had a pained expression. *This creature is wise and kindly*, thought Tiffany. *I should listen to her*. "I shall find my father and make him well again." It was such a simple statement, and said without hesitation. Nicolette simply stared at her. *Was that uncertainty in her expression?*

"You will," said the ladybird assuredly, stroking Tiffany's shoulder. "I have something for you." She reached into a bag and pulled out a wand. It was very beautiful. Half a meter long, twirls and curls on it, emblems and runes and at the top the best bit, a fiery Phoenix. Every line and curve had been hand carved. There were jewels within the grain of the wood. Tiffany didn't know what to say, so she simply took the wand and smiled. "This will magnify your spells. It will always calm your mind, if you hold onto it. Your father is in *Shookle* somewhere. I sense that if you find the kollagidy leaves you will also find your father. I have no other information. I am sorry."

Tiffany could tell that she was very sorry for not being able to help her more. "It seems as if you have powerful allies in this dimension. This is good." She tapped her fingers in her chin. "Remember to use your power wisely. The subtle way is often the best. You do not need to be so..." She looked at Tiffany carefully. "You don't have to always be so confrontational or dramatic. If you are confronted by beings which intend you harm, sometimes it is wise to effect the ways of their thoughts instead of blasting them with a whirlwind spell. Try not to blast them so readily. Remember, every action has an equal reaction." She winked at Tiffany then disappeared.

Tiffany disappeared too and reappeared where she had been before, high above the ground, in the air. She fled the scene before the beetles became aware of her. She headed eastward, following the streaks above in the sky.

The sky was hidden completely by the snow white clouds. The clouds were huddled together, flowing over the top of one another. Trev didn't notice them. He kept his thoughts to himself. The suit was sentient but didn't infiltrate his thoughts. He couldn't access big Al's technological mind either. That was another word he had never used before. The word: *Technological* tasted strangely in his mouth. Everything was subtly different now. He was still the same, in essence. His personality was the same. He was the same. He was different also. His senses were fused together. Sometimes he smelt flavours, sometimes he saw scents or felt them brush against his skin. Big Al had told him that he would adjust to this new way of perceiving the world.

Big Al was a quiet sort most of the time. Pleasant to talk to. Even his silent presence was comforting.

Big Al spoke up. "Trev"

"Yea."

"I have to tell you some things." The voice of big Al was surprisingly human.

"Shoot."

"That's just it. I will be unable to do that."

It took a little while to guess what big Al was talking about. To help him come to the right conclusion big Al showed him the image of the suit sprouting guns from his arms and shoulders.

"Okay," replied Trev. "So why not?"

"It is against protocols."

"What are protocols?"

"They are like a morality, but for advanced sentient technology. Which is what I am. It was okay for me to use my weaponry against the demons. They were not from this reality. Well, technically they are not from this reality. They would have been quite difficult to defeat if you had merely a sword. I am not supposed to function in this quadrant of space. I am able to define my own parameters. It has been a considerable amount of time since I last merged with a biological host. I have determined that I will have to stem my functionality."

"I see." Trev did not really understand.

"It is simply the case that if someone was to approach you with a sword and aimed to kill you, then you would not simply be able to pull forth a laser gun and shoot his head from his shoulders. I would be able to arm you with a superior sword, or one which was equal to the weapon being used. Or if you were being attacked by a spell then I could provide you with a suitable defence system, to the best of my ability. The defence system would be only on a par with the weapon that was being used. It requisite that I should not be a power which is used to destabilise this world. Also, I have to consider your evolution as a being.

Trev scratched his head with his left hand. "I think I understand. It seems fair to me."

"Fair or otherwise. It is now very true."

"Okay. Is there anything else that I need to know? Will I be able to function as I have already? Will I be able to jump from cliff tops and glide? Will I be able to see scent marks and have various other augmented abilities?"

"You are integrated with me. You should be able to know the limits of your capabilities as we progress."

"Okay. It is time to head back now."

**Chris Finger – high trees –
chest – the subtle influence – a pea.**

Binkerbelle felt bored. There was only one thing to do when you were extremely bored and too wide awake to sleep. She materialised some playing cards. Mc Noodle, at the best of times (and the worst of times) chose to immerse himself with extreme gusto into every human contrivance. He embrangled others with his passion for human habitat and contraption, often and usually with a fair degree of nonchalance.

There was a time, and it was quite some time ago, when Mc Noodle – which was ever a tempestuous sort – decided to break every rule in the faerie booklet of does and don'ts, and once or twice the highway code too. The red sports car departed the great city of Newport at tremendous speed. It sped down the motorway (whilst wandering from one lane to another) and eventually curtailed through the streets of Caldicot.

"It really did go at great speed," said some of the human folk with splendid pungency.

"Here it comes." Another human pointed toward a very narrow corner. The red sports car's left front wheel and left back wheel lifted from the tarmac gently as it careened around the corner. News travels fast in the human world, especially when people are ready to miscomprehend a situation.

He drove the sports car from a car show room at great speed. The humans thought that it was driverless. "It just upped and went," asserted the car salesman. "All by itself."

Human pedestrians witnessed a red sports car whizzing by at ninety miles an hour, through the high street and along the m4 motorway. At least a dozen people swore on oath that they had witnessed a little man, no bigger than a child, wearing dark glasses at the wheel – "*He couldn't have been more than two foot tall.*" One very cool gentleman, who sported a remarkably similar pair of glasses proffered a very astute nugget of reasoning: "*How he reached the floor pedals is any one's guess.*"

The incident was thrown out of court by A.H Herbert seventeen weeks later on the premise that twelve people had suffered temporary lunacy at the precise time the car had been stolen. Fourteen years later, on the cover of a magazine named "hyper– space-continuality," Mc Noodles could be seen in a dark pair of glasses, sporting a colourful cap which read "I love South Wales".

Another twelve lunatics spread rumours that perhaps this little chap was an extra terrestrial or inter dimensional being residing in the noble town of Caldicot (a later article, by a journalist that went by the name Zurg, committed to writing the following statement: *let it be understood here and now that there has never been, in the past or present, any decisive proof that any extra terrestrial or inter-dimensional beings in the vicinity of Caldicot.*

In short (and he was extremely short) Mc Noodle would not miss an opportunity of playing cards with a faerie and a human being. They played a game called Dark Queen. Luckily Mc Noodle knew the game (Binkerbelle rather thought he would), after all, human's played cards and Mc Noodle loved humans. Which, incidentally, was besides the point (a little to the left of the point actually) because all of the little people knew how to play cards. Indeed it was the little people who invented them. They did so as a means of deliberating across and over the inner working of the universe; sifting through and dissecting the microcosm through the use of specially created cards.

A great seer crafted fifty-two magically potent cards and busied himself with the task of altering the chaotic osmosis that every creature of the universe seemed to be undergoing. It was a noble endeavour, and possibly would have worked, but for a few humans who thought that it would be fun to "borrow" them and play a game with them. Whilst playing with the cards, the magical properties inherent within the cards leaked into the ether and solidified (as much as anything can be said to solidify in the ethereal.)

Somehow, human magicians snatched the leaked magical properties from the ether and garnered the magical uses of cards, or thought they did. Either way, they firmly believed that the future could be used to accurately ¹⁶predicted. A wizard's velvety left slipper (with a wizard foot inside it) is always firmly placed in the metaphorical and the other (of equal finery) always tenderly rested upon the smooth cemented foundation of rationalism.

Because human beings always believed in others who appeared to know what they were doing, everyone thought it a good idea to practice foretelling the future through the use of cards.

"Why do you read the cards the way that you read them?" asked an astute magicians apprentice.

The wise magician raised and asserted the following nonsensical response: "because this was the way that I was taught."

As the idea became firmly fermented in practice and ritual, a common enough woman that rode a huge horse, a woman by the name of Lucy, reinvented another use for the cards. She created a few games and attempted to play these games with every human she met. One of the first of these games was called the Dark queen.

Binkerbelle began the game with Mr Mc Noodle and was a little bit disappointed to see that he was quite good at it.

¹⁶ During the first reminiscence equinox, Egor the magnificent, first Garl of the Kani metropolis wrote a treatise (of which could only be understood by Artisans, one or two saints and nearly every other dwarf) on the use of Mystio cards. They were written with the intent to be represent the all encompassing truth on every scribble and squirm of faerie magic (from a goblin's point of view) in regard to the use of Mystio cards (see Appendix sixteen of the glorioician uses of scribble and squirm.) That is to say, without pondering too much on such matters, it was a load of codswallop. To bring forth a greater meaning, for the purposes of clarity and configurative thought, "codswallop" is used respectively and specifically in reference to the works of Egor the magnificent, first Garl of the Kani metropolis. The reader should be reminded that the use of Mystio cards, which were formerly regarded (and latterly) exclusively as faerie cards, were faerie in origin. It is worth mentioning also, that Faerie folk and all little people (apart from those that lived within the first reminiscence equinox, which were entirely enthralled or scared witless) have always refuted and felt an overall repugnance toward any kind of authority other than their own. A human, whether that human comes from Earth [Shoople] or Pani [Shookle] might perchance misunderstand, and from this misunderstanding conclude that there was a general consensus between faerie folk. This could not be further from the truth. Each faerie is an authority to themselves and can disagree with another, or indeed every other faerie.

The girl opened one eye, watched them all for a moment then sat up. "Can I play too?"

"Of course you can," enthused Binkerbelle with a smile. "Anything to stop this ¹⁷Rhubarb ¹⁸Numkin from beating me all the time." So the girl sat down crossed legged, Binkerbelle to her right and Mc Noodle to her left. They formed a perfect triangle. This did not go unnoticed by Binkerbelle.

"The dark queen is worth twelve points," she pointed to the cards. "The ace of hearts is worth five, King of hearts four points, the queen of hearts three, and the jack of hearts two points." She spread the deck into a fan. "All of the rest of the hearts are worth one point."

The girl nodded. Mc Noodle smiled a smile which was much too wide and way too smug. Binkerbelle wanted to slap across the face with the dark Queen herself. Instead she smiled. "The whole point of the game is to get no points at all."

"We play a similar card game at the camp." It was nice to hear the girl talk. Several strands of her hair fell down covering one side of her face. For a brief moment Binkerbelle glimpsed the woman that she would one day come to become. She yearned to witness the girl grow into that woman. The girl had exquisite dark hair and clear blue eyes. An intelligence sparkled within, a fragility – the fragility of youth.

They played. Binkerbelle watched carefully, noting the girl's easy smile and care free expression. "Remember when I put you in that cage Mc Noodle?"

"Remember when I saved you from the twister?" The remark came right off the cuff, lacking even a momentary pause. Binkerbelle tightened her jaw.

They had been playing for an hour and a half and she had only won four times. She didn't want to remember how many times Mc Noodle had won. Even the girl had won more than her. Mc Noodle let the girl win a few times. Which was good, at least he had some sense.

The girl did seem to be having a good time. She smiled wonderfully and clapped her hands with joy every time she won.

Mc Noodle smiled and said, "diamonds" as he placed a two of diamonds down. The girl smiled and put the dark queen on top of his two. "Oh Gawd!" he exclaimed. It was so nice to see his smile disappear for a while. The girl started to smile too. It was a nice smile. They laughed together. Mc Noodle did his walking on his head trick. He did it a little wrong and fell onto his back. The girl clapped her hands together with delight. Mc Noodle bowed. He even tried to levitate for her, but fell on his bum. "I used to be able to do it honestly," he insisted. Binkerbelle warmed a little at the antics of the little man.

"I honestly could." Binkerbelle laughed at Mc Noodles face. He wore his very best abashed expression. The girl laughed even more.

Then, as they played, the girl became more sombre. She stopped laughing at Mc Noodles jokes. Then she told them that she didn't want to play anymore.

¹⁷ *Rhubarb (often used in conjunction with Numkin) [Shoople]:* "Rhubarb" is a common term used by Faeries . Its usage began somewhere between the first or second Moddling. Over the vast expanse of time the term has changed from a mild derogative term to a slanderous one. In recent times it is used by Faeries as both a derogative and a kindly term. The term is only used in the presence of brownies.

¹⁸ *Numkin [Shoople]:* Any being which is really annoying in a silly sort of way.

The flames licked upwards and heated the girl's face. Binkerbelle stared resolutely at Mc Noodle, attempting to send him a clear message. A female brownie would have probably understood instantly. He caught her stare and raised an eyebrow. He finally got the message. He turned away and told them that he was going for a stroll.

"Hey." Binkerbelle called out to the girl.

The girl had been walking away from Binkerbelle. She was just a tender young thing, no more than fourteen. The girl's face lacked any kind of expression. Shadows fled as the glow of the fire bathed their faces.

"You have a secret dreadful thing hidden from every eye that doesn't wish to see." Binkerbelle spoke gently and with kindness.

Tears trickled down the girl's face. Binkerbelle reached over and cradled her pulling her close. The girl cried and spoke of a secret childhood pain. It was the kind of suffering which can only be exchanged between close friends. "You stay with me," whispered Binkerbelle. "You stay with me forever. I will keep you safe." The girl looked up into Binkerbelle's eyes – a faerie's eyes look like the centre of a beautiful blue fire. There was a question there, within the blue.

Binkerbelle raised a finger. The girl raised a finger also. Then they crossed their fingers together. "Pinky promise," they said together and both smiled.

"I don't even know your name," whispered Binkerbelle. The girl rested her head on Binkerbelle's lap.

"Mandy. My name is Mandy."

Sometimes, on an evening when the ocean is far to the west, and the fire is close, silence can express what words cannot.

Trev travelled the whole night, and throughout the morning hours. He arrived at the camp about nine O'clock. He didn't have a time piece on him, a horsemeister didn't need one. He had an inner clock, and sometimes it ticked slow and sometimes it spun as fast as a ¹⁹*Katerline* wheel. He rested on the balls of his feet, and scrutinised every mark left in the hard pan dirt. The camp was small, but it had seen a fair bit of activity recently. It looked as if a herd of ²⁰*Buffers* had been here. He estimated the number of men that had been to the abandoned camp. There had been near to fifty.

¹⁹ Katerline Wheel [*Shookle*]: a firework lit on the winter solstice in the dimension of *Shookle on the world of Pran*. It is very similar to earth's Catherine wheel firework.

²⁰ Buffers [*Shookle*]: Large creatures which resemble the Buffalo of Earth. They are much smaller and instead of snouts they have small trunks (much like the elephant, accept that their "trunks" were less versatile and were used mainly for pulling small rodents from the ground.)

They had been a well ordered troop. Only five of them had travelled actually into the camp. The rest of the troop had stood around the parameter. This was not good news. He felt sure Binkerbelle had been on the move at first light. She was a smart faerie. Mc Noodle would have hid their tracks well. Binkerbelle would have been impossible to track. A faerie's feet infrequently touched the floor. Mc Noodle would be concealing his tracks even as he walked. Brownie's were notoriously difficult to track. The girl would have been a problem, she might find a way of leaving signs for her pursuers to follow. Surely Binkerbelle would not be foolish enough to trust her? He would have to track them, or at least try. He had an advantage of course. He had augmented senses.

He travelled east, through the forest. He knew that they would be travelling east. He tracked the heat signature of the brownie. He could see it clearly. Trev sat for a significant amount of time in one place. There was a problem. The troop of humans seemed to be following the tracks also. He spotted their heat signatures, and didn't like the taste of them. He could feel the troops presences on the tip of his tongue. There was one spell caster with them. That would be the main problem. As long as they had that spell caster with them, Binkerbelle and Mc Noodle would have a chance of being caught. A large stream spread the length of the land. This was good. Water always confused spell craft. The trees thinned out. They had been sparse for a long while. Every tree had been a birch tree. There were plenty of rocks and boulders too. The boulders climbed out of the ground and looked like the fingers of giants. The sky had become cloudy and it had started to rain. Rain always interfered with magic. His senses seemed to have dimmed also. Perhaps the *technology* of the suit was like magic.

Big Al was unusually quiet. It was probably due to those parameters he spoke of earlier. The stream made it hard to know exactly which way to travel. The suit kept his temperature the same, kept him warm even as he had entered the river.

There were hardly any heat signatures, this side of the stream but there were some. The stream turned into a river. He leapt in, into the currents, they swept him south east and smashed him against the shale beneath. He climbed out exhausted. Every muscle ached. Big Al aided him, healing his body and easing his mind. His joints and muscles ²¹*cranked* for a while. It took him a while to pick up their trail and scent.

He searched the whole area and eventually circled back on himself. This was good news. He felt certain that Binkerbelle had kept moving directly east. This could mean that the humans lost track of them.

Half an hour later, as he walked, he sensed rather than saw movements. Movements in the shadows. Then, as he paused and listened. He heard the softest of movements. Somewhere, a little way ahead, there was a rustling of feet, and the soft rustling of cloth moving against cloth.

²¹ *Cranked*: One thing grinding against another causing extreme discomfort.

Shadows moved within shadows. In darkness, between boulders, shadows moved. It wasn't his augmented senses which aided him. Rather, it was his horsemaster intuition and sharp mind. There was something not quite right about the way one of the shadows moved. The suit enabled him to move quietly and camouflaged him. The suit changed colour, blending into the environment, turning him black to grey green as the light dimmed. He shimmered as he moved. He crept passed one man, a man who stood perfectly still within a shadow, and almost stumbled over another. Trev felt momentarily angry with himself. He gripped the former and put a sleeper hold from behind. He lowered the man to the floor quickly and crept behind another. He moved swiftly, a dark shadow, silent – a liquid shimmer.

He travelled the land stealthily. Night came like a wraith. The land quietened.

The stars occasionally appeared between the rolling clouds, willingly. The insipid landscape throbbed with a dark past, a past which longed to creep and claw its way into the present. Old bones lay in cold earth. Large boulders reached for the sky, their jagged edges shaped by ancient human hands to form the faces of forgotten heroes or villains.

This land was a beast whose maw swallowed the past.

They were close. Their scents were everywhere. He followed the mists – the vapour that was left behind. The scents grew stronger.

They sat in a circle. He could hear their voices through the darkness. A fire burned as they huddled within their cold coats and cloaks. They talked of sacred oaths and solemn promises. One was silent. He stared into the darkness. He had a shaven face. He held a dagger against the fire, and watched the reflection in the blade. A cloaked individual sat by the side of the man with the dagger. He had a hood that covered most of his face. A staff was to his right, half an inch away.

"She has travelled far. She has companions." The hooded one spoke." He stretched a hand outward to the darkness. "I cannot pick up her energy."

The man with the blade didn't answer. He simply stared into the darkness. It was impossible for the man to see Trev. No human eye could detect him at this distance, yet Trev felt a coldness clutch his heart.

"We made an oath." The man's tone was guttural, barely above a whisper, and as coarse and bitter as the landscape. He whispered something. The men leapt up and surrounded him. He began to speak in a foreign tongue. His tone sharp steel on cold rock. "We have taken a vow. We shall keep that vow and fulfil it."

The men spoke the words back to him. Their dark red cloaks fluttered in the cold breeze.

"It is a death vow and can never be broken. Through life and through death we shall continue our quest." They repeated his words. "Her companions shall die for helping her. Their demise shall gladden the heart of our war chief." He stood up and walked into the darkness. In the darkness he kissed the blade and sheaved it.

They turned in for the night, disappearing into their tents.

Trev sat back, resting his head against an outcrop of rocks and slept a while. As he slept his dreams were filled with the images on the boulders. Images of conflagrated terror etched across visages flowing across the rivers of time – into fluttering tearful cups.

Binkerbelle settled in for the evening. It was cold. She created an invisible dome around herself and her companions, then with a click of her fingers she lit the fire wood that Mc Noodle had collected. She wove a camouflage spell, and not only one. She wove many camouflage spells, weaving them together into a tight net. She stared at it with her faerie sight for the longest time, seeking a fault within the weaves. Her mind wandered a little as she performed her checks and counterchecks. Something was terribly wrong.

Something of importance had happened. Something had been decided, and that decision had changed something fundamental. She knew that one of her – *her keet* had done something irreversible. She smiled ... that had been one of the horsemeister's phrases. The ways of *keet* are strange. Perhaps it was the horsemeister who had decided on a course of action which had changed their future. Despite the heat from the fire an ice cold shiver travelled through her. *Be careful brother, be careful of the decisions that you make.*

Mc Noodle sat calmly. He smoked a long tailed pipe. He had crafted it whilst collecting fire wood, with his little multipurpose knife. His little eyes settled for a moment on hers. He nodded gently. He too felt that the weaves of fate had changed. They could almost hear the great wheel of fate grinding forward. Binkerbelle sat down by the fire and opened her arms. Mandy sidled over with her head down, hair draping to one side. She settled down with her back to Binkerbelle. Binkerbelle stroked her hair softly, and sang to her.

When they slept it was long and deep.

Trev listened to the wind as it whistled through the landscape. The suit kept him warm. He thought about the blade master's words and the way that he had delivered them. He had heard such words before. The language that had been spoken haunted his thoughts. Big Al had translated the words of the man with the knife, even as he had spoken.

He closed his eyes and let his mind drift, hoping for a dreamless sleep.

The cries of the horsemeisters mingled with the heavy sound of racing hooves. Men and women rode their horses, with their children bundled in their arms. Fire erupted everywhere.

"You have to leave ... " His master's words coursed through his mind. "You have to survive. Everything depends on you." His master wore surety like other men wore clothes. A master horsemeister's words were law for their apprentices. His soul was bound up with his master and other people in their community. Keet – it was just a word but it was the only word which mattered.

An enemy sword master struck people as they fled the destruction. His blade cut through flesh as he heard their cries. The blade master watched Trev run and pursued him. Trev was faster than most and managed to get ahead.

His hair had been long and unruly then, it bounced as he ran. He slipped his blades between the joints of the enemies armour. The soldiers attempted to engage him but he was too quick. His two daggers flashed and enemies fell but he did not linger.

The weapon master pursued him.

The lush fields embraced them both.

As Trev ran the cries of kinfolk became distant. Smoke rose in the distance, behind him.

His pursuer did not give up, he moved with uncanny speed and agility.

Trev sprinted across the fields, leaping the hedgerows and climbing over embankments. His pursuer did not relent, didn't slow or tire. A horsemeister is strong and had a stamina which was legendary. Trev was not a horsemeister yet. His chest began to hurt a little and there was a noticeable pain in his knees.

He came to the edge of a cliff. These were the Calibing cliffs. A mist flowed beneath, perpetually swirling. A large gulf ran through the land dividing it. Many thousands of years ago, tectonic plates had heaved most of the land upward. These cliffs, and the chasm below, were a remnant of an ancient forgotten past.

He climbed over the edge and descended. The secret hand grips and their elaborate positions had been memorised and drilled into every horsemeister student's mind. His mind. This was one of many escape routes for the horsemeisters. This was his escape route. But he was not escaping. He was following the best of advice. No one could read the master of masters. But he didn't need to read another's mind to know that what they told him was the best approach.

Beneath the mist small ropes had been carefully placed at strategic points. Each rope had a different texture. Some even were designed to break under an adult's weight. Some could hold a man's weight easily. He knew which was which. The other, if he followed, would fall.

The other did follow, he didn't pause. He scaled the cliff face easily and almost caught Trev. The blade master was strong. He reached for the ropes and levied himself across the mountainous rocks with a terrible ease. Trev's clever hands remembered which rope was which as he levied himself down, concentrating on what needed to be done and nothing else.

He made it across, feeling the blades master's stare on the back of his scalp.

The other paused for a moment, took stock of the situation. He looked at the ropes. Trev glimpsed his angry face disappear above him. His gaunt lean face.

In the mist ...

... Trev awoke gasping. The man with the knife – his intention and voice ... his face ... it was the same as the one in his dream. Trev rose up and disappeared into the night. Into the night his fierce glare penetrated the darkness.

The night swallowed him. Swallowed him whole.

"Here I am."

The little man, to put it mildly, which is to say – he was no larger than a very small thumb, shouted upward in an important manner.

He was the only one of his kind. Everyone was bigger than he. Much bigger. He once tried to fight a bee. The bee flew away feeling a little sorry for him. Everyone called him Tom thumb. Everyone consisted of just three people. Incidentally, his name wasn't Tom thumb, it was Chris Finger.

Not Chris Little Finger, or Chris Index Finger. Just Chris Finger.

Everyone laughed when he told them that. Now he was here on a leaf. He couldn't remember how he had got here. When you are a very small person and you don't know where you are, the world is a very scary place.

Trees were everywhere. Not everywhere *per se*; there was a certain something that was more than a little disconcerting about this place. Tiffany did some thinking. It was nice to be able to simply think for awhile without worrying about overly large beetles stomping on her head.

She travelled and became gently aware that no matter how much earth passed beneath her wings, no matter how fast or far she travelled, everything repeated itself. This thought did not strike her, instead it formed at the back of her mind. She back peddled through her thoughts, assimilating the events as they occurred. At first, she didn't place much trust in them. After all, the thoughts were at the back of her mind for a reason. Nicolette spoke about how the subtle way was often the best. Tiffany's directed her sight inward. There were subtle malevolent influences around her, forces that had orchestrated events. They manipulated others to move against her. This Red King was at the centre of these machinations. Tiffany knew this and Nicolette did too.

The trees were the same, the daisies too. They were exactly the same length one from the other. It is very disconcerting to find a place which is truly monotonous and not know it. Tiffany's back thoughts sidled up to the front, exchanged information, liaised. She listened to them for a while, easing herself downward, crumpling into the grass (the grass felt like paper-mache) She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

It was only a little nap, so perhaps "fell" is the wrong word.

She awoke to a squeak.

Ignored the squeak.

"Ouch!"

She reached down and rubbed her thigh.

"Ouch!" It felt like a bee sting.

She reached down to hold her thigh and almost knocked Mr Finger over with her hand. He dived. It was a whole body dive, a considerable dive, a dive which took a considerable amount of skill and energy to perform. Still, she nearly knocked him out. A big hand is very hard to get out of the way of if you are (just) *almost half an inch* (at a stretch).

She spotted him. Or something. Might have been a butterfly.

– Too wiggly to be a butterfly. It must be a caterpillar.

It wasn't a butterfly or a caterpillar. It didn't have the look of something which crawled.

A little thing waved at her.

He thought of it as a big wave: A very big wave but it wasn't, *it is was a mere little thing*. A very little twitchy titchy thing. She magnified everything around her, just a little. He had a little pinched something (was there a face down there?) She couldn't see his face but she felt sure it was there. She dropped her hand down to his height, slowly.

Something leapt on to her hand.

Whatever it was it wiggled, tickling the palm of her hand.

He shouted: "So when you have finished gawping, try telling me where the hell am I!"

It was meant to be a shout but it was more of a squeak, a good squeak, but a squeak nonetheless. She still wondered what he was.

"I thought I told you to stop gawping!"

For such a little man he had an awful big attitude. She collected herself together and asked him why he was here.

"I have to be somewhere." Quick witted. Maybe, if you are so little (and he was) perhaps you need to compensate for the lack of size.

"Hello," said Tiffany.

"Hi. Can I stay with you for a while?" He shot an arm hoping to seal the deal. "I know I know it's not the norm for a gentleman to ask a lady such a thing but I am in a pickle. I am completely lost. I have no idea how I got here, or where I came from. Could I accompany you for a little while?"

A dear little thing. But I should never mention his height.

"Yes of course you can," she assured him. "It would be my pleasure to have you come along with me. I have to warn you, it is only fair that I do so. I keep running into danger." She tried to keep her tone polite so as not alarm him.

"I shall aid you on your travels." He gave her a formal bow. She felt the urge to curtsy in return.

She didn't know whether to ask him to climb into her pocket. She was frightened to ask him, just in case he got angry.

He already spotted her pocket. He ran along her arm nimbly and jumped into it.

She walked for a while.

Everything was the same. Nothing changed. There was no alteration of any kind in the environment whatsoever.

"This place is very odd," said Chris matter-of-factly (his surname was *matter-of-factly*. It was Finger. Capitol F.)

They stopped for a while. She felt a little sick. Her head swam. Chris didn't look too well either. He rode most of the way with his head jutting out of her top pocket.

Tiffany sank to her knees. She wanted tears to come. She didn't want to appear weak to her new friend. Were very small eyes a hindrance to seeing? She didn't know. It was always best to be careful. She lifted her hand. He stepped onto it nimbly. His little feet fidgeted in the centre as she lowered him.

She closed her eyes. Blocked out this fake world. Her head ached fiercely. It was the environment which caused her and Chris Fingers nausea. A few minutes passed. Maybe three, she couldn't tell. The squeak started again, somewhere beneath her chin. Colours danced across her eye lids. She listened to the squeak for a while. It was Chris tell her something. She opened her eyes, lowered her hand and lifted him up.

He pointed upward. "Maybe we should go up." She hadn't thought of that. It wouldn't hurt to try. She looked upward attempting to measure the distance. He scarpered back into her pocket, looking considerably paler than a moment ago.

Her wings began to flutter and vibrate as she lifted in the air. A perfect vertical takeoff! She flew upward, spiralling around the trunk and tree. The trunks appeared smooth, honey suckle wafted of honey suckle. Which made no sense because honeysuckle was nowhere to be seen. She focused on a single purpose – speed. A branch jutted out at an awkward angle. She narrowly missed skewering herself on its barbarous length. Chris Finger hung on for his dear life.

Another branch twisted against itself. Then there was a change in scenery. Another branch came her way. Having reached her maximum speed, she continued, focusing on maintaining speed, stability and momentum.

Another branch came her way. It was then that she realised that the branch was identical to the last one and probably the one before that. She sped on anyway.

Each line on the trunk of this tree was identical to the last. Then the branch showed up again. She slowed up, knowing that if she didn't, if she just stopped, then it would be likely that the little man in her pocket might find himself catapulted out. He gripped onto the sides of her pocket, feet, legs and torso quivering in midair, mid-pocket. As her speed decreased she swivelled and flew back to the branch.

Not getting anywhere is a sure way to feel frustrated. She perched herself on the branch and gathered what little composure she could muster. This definitely didn't feel right. It felt a little like when Binkerbelle, Mc Noodle and her were trapped in that nowhere place, that in-between place.

"We need to see through this illusion Mr Finger."

Mr Finger hung half way out of her pocket as he stared up at her. She looked out at the thousands of identical tree trunks in front of her. "But how?" She stared upwards at the sky. Her gaze filled up with stars, and between the stars there was a darkness. The sky felt right. Like they were meant to be that way. She focused on the way she felt. She conjured her sisters in her mind's eye.

Trinity's face came to her mind. Her sister had a way of staring at things. She had such a powerful imagination. When she looked into her Trinity, at her eyes (and you had to be quick) there was always a sense that her sister knew things within her happy glances, within her "knowing" glances.

Some things were more than the world. Trinity's enigmatically smiled as she played with her dolls. They were real. She fed them biscuits and talked with them. She did the voices for them, got them to talk to each other, and with her.

Real.

She remembered her Mother too, her smile and patience.

Real.

She pictured her family in detail. They had a presence within her. They were *alive* within her, in her memories. Each of them had presence. She felt them reach out to her, through the expanse of time and dimensions. She remembered her Granddad, how he smiled. Even though he had now gone to Heaven she could still feel his presence within her, around her, in the same way she could feel her sisters. In her heart.

Real.

This feeling that she was not alone, that within, within the inner chamber of her heart there was a shared space.

That was real. Real real real. She felt her father's presence within her too. He was in trouble. His presence struggled with something. Something real.

She lifted a hand and whispered: "Show the truth." A velvety thin veil slipped between her fingers as she pulled it aside. The trees came alive, transforming into pillars. They were still of a uniform appearance but now there were windows, little slits in the alabaster walls that emitted a dull glow.

She turned toward her own pillar. This one was different than the rest, purple. She faced a window. Curtains hung each side of the window, on the inside. Outside is definitely not inside.

"Can she see us?" asked someone.

The whisper came from within the alabaster.

Two women sat at a kitchen table idling the day away. One had an incredibly long neck and the other had no neck at all, just a face and eyes that squeezed into her nose.

"I believe she can," answered Miss no neck.

Long neck swivelled, twisting her neck a hundred and eighty degrees. There was a head on the top of the long neck, a tiny head, or perhaps it only looked small because it was high up. Tiffany placed her eyes close to the pane of glass to get a better look. Miss *I got a very long neck* wore glasses that caught the light. Her friend, Miss No Neck wore very large glasses too, glasses that made her eyes appear as large as saucers – two very large saucers, crazy and huge, and those little things in the middle were her pupils.

Tiffany knocked on the window. Mr Finger hid himself, snuggling deep within the pocket. The two women walked over to the window and peered back at her, both of them gave her a little wave. Miss No Neck stood on tip toes to see through the window, resting her glasses against the glass at the bottom. She had a mop of curly purple hair that rose up and quivered gently.

Miss Long Neck moved her neck like an ostrich, as her neck swayed from side to side like a snake. Her head performed a balancing act, wobbling precariously. She tapped on the window and called to Tiffany. "Come on in," she mouthed. Her voice barely penetrated the glass. *perhaps she is shouting*, thought Tiffany. She mouthed the word "how" and made a show of shrugging her shoulders.

"Walk through it." No Neck made her fingers do a little walk. "Just pass right through it."

Tiffany tried, and banged her head against the surface of the glass for her effort. "How?"

No Neck, purple hair (or wig) hugged herself and pursed her lips. The two very strange women looked at Tiffany together and frowned.

It's an illusion! They had sent her a thought. The words popped into her head and were clear enough. But there was something unsettling about the experience. It was like hugging a giant icicle and expecting to come away chilled, but instead feeling hot and sticky.

Tiffany had come across her fair share of illusion spells. Perhaps this window was another illusion. *Stars, friends, father, mother and sisters* – all real. She touched the pane of glass. It remained, feeling just as solid as before. She knocked on it. It didn't sound like glass. She opened her faerie sight. *Hmmm*.

The curtain, the veil – everything is real to the mind which perceives it to be. She clicked her fingers, and listened to the sound of it. Imagine that! For the briefest of moments she convinced herself of the unreality of reality. Then she attempted to prolong her disbelief.

The frame of the window shimmered for a moment. Tiffany reached out a hand and brushed her fingers against the glass. The glass felt like hot dry sponge. Then her hand passed through the window. The sponge texture melted around her hand. She perceived this unreality, understood the masquerade for what it was.

The two women clapped their hands together. "How wonderful!" They both squealed with delight. "You are a clever sort of girl." Mr Chris Finger, the littlest chap made it through too, she could feel him wiggling in her pocket.

"We are so glad you made it through okay," enthused No Neck.

"We really are so very glad." Miss Long neck wiggled the fingers of her left hand into her right palm. It was a well rehearsed line. "Please please, take a seat. It is so very nice to meet you."

No Neck patted the seat next to her.

A tea pot sat in the middle of a tray and the tray lay in the centre of the table, accompanied by some cups, more than three – maybe they always kept a few handy. The cups were red, the teapot too. The table cloth also.

They sat opposite Tiffany, eyeing her carefully. They placed their hands beneath their chins (which was a very difficult thing to do when your neck is as long and as bendy as an ostrich neck, or if you had no neck at all!) They wore smiles on their faces, which was okay, except that the smiles looked more like leers.

No Neck straightened herself. "I do apologise. We have been so impolite."

"We have," affirmed Long Neck. Her neck wobbled despite her best efforts, and she shivered minutely as she spoke.

"Yes, please beautiful faerie. Please let us have the honour of sharing a nice cup of tea with you."

"Please say yes." No Neck gave Tiffany a lecherous smile that was supposed to be kind. She had an apron on, and her fingers danced over it nervously. "We have been so rude by staring at you the way we have. We are dreadfully sorry ..."

"Dreadfully." Agreed Long Neck. Her head wobbled in a most exaggerate way.

Tiffany wanted to assure them that it was quite alright. She tried to get a word in.

"We don't get much competition ..." Long neck corrected herself quickly. "I mean ... mean, we don't get much in the way of company." She picked up the large red tea pot and began to pour a dark liquid into a cup.

Tiffany felt a little weary of the two. Yes, they looked a little strange. Strange was okay – she had gotten used to strange. There was a little man in her pocket, you couldn't get stranger than that. The strange had become familiar to her. Her mother had always told her to not judge people too quickly. Especially foreign people.

Magic was at her finger tips. She could feel the power in herself. It felt good. She was still weary of them. Something didn't feel right. Their smiles were to smiley. Miss Long Neck's neck was wobbled too much. Was she nervous? No Neck became very still. She poured the tea into an overly large cup, and handed it to Tiffany with a smile.

Had No Neck poisoned her tea? Had she done it with sleight of hand? A spell hadn't been cast. Tiffany would have sensed it.

Something had happened. No Neck was blinking too much, but Tiffany couldn't be hundred percent sure. Poison could be administered in many ways. She needed to counteract the poison in some way. A little spell would do it. Binkerbelle had taught her a useful spell for doing just that. She recalled it now. Firstly she needed to distract the two sisters somehow.

An ornament high on a shelf, it peered down at her. It was made in the image of a fat man. She gave it a bump with her mind and watched it fall.

They turned quickly, startled at the sound of it crashing against the floor. Tiffany quickly waved her fingers over her cup, and released a blob of energy. The blob settled on the surface of the liquid, then disappeared within it.

"Oh my goodness!" muttered No Neck.

"I can't believe that something just fell off the shelf like that," said Long Neck. They glanced at Tiffany nervously.

"All by itself," squeaked wobbly neck. "Our very best fatty ornament too!" Their nervousness turned to suspicion. Tiffany took a sip and smiled sweetly.

The room began to swim. She felt light headed. The little lights on the ceiling suddenly spiralled. Her face hovered, it felt like it hovered twelve foot in front of her. All sensation left her body. She slumped against the chair.

The room span one more time.

She felt herself being lifted into the air. She couldn't focus, not even for a moment. Not that it would do any good if she had a moment of clarity. She hovered across the room. The magic swirled around her. She had enough time to change from faerie to human form. The poisoning effect evaporated.

"Oh my!" muttered one of the two, she thought it might have been No Neck.

"Quick. Grab her legs, I'll grab her body. Get her in the chest quickly."

Tiffany felt their rough hands handle her. She tried to struggle out of their grip. In retrospect, she should have summoned a spell instead. Before she knew it she felt herself being tipped into something large. It must have been a chest. Their triumphant smiles greeted her as they shut the lid down.

Chris finger ran up the side of her arm and spoke into her ear. "Don't worry princess, will get out of here." She tried a spell but nothing happened. The giggles from the women could be heard, as they moved further away.

Trev's rage exploded as he entered the glade. He moved swiftly and with great stealth. It was hard not to. He would have moved quietly if he had been without the suit. With the suit he was merely a sliding shadow. He slid up behind the first and drew his blade silently. The man fell. He paused to feel the man's life force escape.

He struck them in all the right places. His deadly blade slivered through the darkness. Each time he felt the moment of their demise and smiled.

"*No Trev ...*" whispered big Al. The environment turned red. His conscience whispered "*no*" too. He felt unable to focus on these quiet reasonable voices. Rage isn't the listening type and stupidity is blind. Red rage swallowed his inner being, even as the shadows swallowed his external form.

Every moving shadow was lit up against the night – painted red. Each one became a distant memory as they fell. They fell as he moved. His blades made short work of their lively falling twitching bodies.

The last to fall would be ...

... *Him*.

– Rage.

– "*Come*." The blade master's voice was clear and dry. Trev moved toward the place where the voice came. He tried to keep a clear head but rage continued to eat at his soul. The earth cried out for blood.

The suit augmented his vision.

The heat of the weapon master's body lit him up against the environment. The weapon master came, moving with uncanny speed, weaving his way forward. The suit switched back to a normalised view as the distance between them lessened.

The blade master looked the same as he did in Trev's memories. There was a terrible intensity about the man. The hairs rippled on the back of Trev's neck and bristled the filaments of hair on his arms. The blade master reached up over his shoulders and withdrew his blades. He seated himself in a wide fighting stance, blades facing forward.

He came quickly, blades whizzing through Trev's defences, slashing through the suit. Trev moved. The blades came toward him again, weaving a path which was hard to follow. The suit hardened to steel around his forearms.

Him –

This man had wounded him. The suit did not act as it had acted when fighting the demons, it was not as protective. Trev found himself disarmed. He rolled quickly and recovered two short sleek swords from one of the men he had recently slain. Trev's chest hurt, the weapon master slash hadn't split him open but it had done significant damage. He blocked a torrent of incoming blows. There was no time to think. The blows thundered against his blades, sending waves of force through his arms and shoulders. Trev's forearms screamed with pain. The torn flesh across his chest began knitting together as dodged.

The suit was at least doing something.

The weapon master closed in again, dancing his deadly dance. Trev's torn flesh began to knit together. Trev felt the flesh move across the wound.

The blades came again. He caught the two blades on his forearms and lashed out. The speed of his blows caught the blade master by surprise. Trev's blade ripped opened some flesh. He struck again, feeling his blades clash and ricochet against the weapons of his deadly opponent.

Again his blades flew from his grasp. Instead of an evasion strategy he struck his opponent with the palms of his bare hands. He extended his stance forward to the fullest extent, striking through the opponent. It had been a bold move. The weapon master received a double blow across his chest. He flew backwards.

Trev had no other thought but to bring about the demise of opponent.

The blade master watched his opponent carefully, observing the way the garments knitted back together seamless. His pale moonlit eyes attempted to find a flaw. The armour's appearance shifted, blending into the environment.

Trev, in turn, watched the opponent circle him. He took in his opponent's features: He had a high forehead. He would have been handsome if it wasn't for his expression. Perhaps it was madness that rode across the rampant features. Focused hate had left a permanent mark.

In a moment, a moment that would have been a mere blink to an observer, the blades wove their way toward him. Trev felt truly alone ... his first thought was to block the blows that were about to assail him. Instead he chose to attack.

Trev moved in a straight line.

His fist connected with the other's throat. The enemy's blades stopped inches from Trev's throat. His face contorted and crumpled. He dropped his blades and reached clumsily for his throat.

The end came swiftly. His opponents lifeless body fell to the earth.

Trev cried out. The yell became a sob and increased in volume. The emotions exploded from him. His surroundings drank his sorrow.

Big Al witnessed the pain. If the technological wonder had ever misunderstood sorrow, now it was revealed.

Big Al was neither male nor female. To some, he would not have been accepted as a living entity. *Harm, only if absolutely necessary.* The concept was at the root of Big Al's programming. It was a good principle. Big Al had disapproved of the notions that had passed through Trev's being.

Emotions had never been fully understood by Big Al. Lots of sentient beings had them. These beings that called themselves humans had many of them. Big Al finally understood why they were necessary. For the first time Big Al felt an emotion too. It was an emotion that was unexpected. *Sympathy*. Big Al felt mercy flow through his saline structure. Trev had loved his clan very much. They had been family to him.

Trev sobbed for many hours. As the night deepened his sobs quietened. The hours passed and Trev's gaze turned inward. His mind fell into a fugue state. Big Al tried to rescue him, tried to reach his mind.

Trev's consciousness had vacated the premises.

They saw him, their friend, their brother. Trev watched his friends pass him by. A mist accompanied them, a mist which swirled around each of them. Some acknowledged him with a nod as they passed by. Some simply stared at him. Others smiled gently but carried a vacant expression. Some nodded as they passed him by. Jasper, Trev's boyhood friend, stared for a long while. He lifted a finger, and appeared to be proposing a question. A momentary expression of remembrance flittered across his features, but then his face returned to repose. There was a long line of shuffling once remembered personages. Unseen entities stood to the left and right of him. For the briefest moment Trev felt the presence of two entities on each side of him.

Finally his body and mind closed down. Exhaustion overtook him, embracing him, settling him to the earth. He slumped onto his side and slept.

Big Al felt Trev's mind come back. He immediately took control of Trev's primary motor cortex.

He walked Trev's body away, many miles away, away from the prying eyes of the rock faces and their malignant stares. He knew that it was essential to take Trev away from this terrible environment. This was an evil place. The stones absorbed some of Trev's energy, and did something with it. Big Al did not trust them. Electrical impulses passed between them, ricocheting back and forth at an alarming rate.

Big Al's internal clock ticked as they travelled. He watched the environment quietly, ever alert and ever vigilant.

#

Chris Finger talked incessantly. She didn't know what was worse, being locked in a chest, or having to put up with him talking all the time.

I know what is worse. Having to deal with both at the same time.

She knew he wished her well but if he would just stop talking she would be able to think straight.

"Don't worry little Missy, I shall sort this mess out." He promptly made for the keyhole of the chest. His limbs moved haphazardly, jutting out at odd angles as he attempted to quicken to his exit.

She felt around the chest as best she could. Everything was terribly smooth, she sought out any inconsistency in the wood. She felt out the space inside the chest with her inner being too, not that it made a difference. Nothing happened, everything seemed completely void. It was the first time in her life that she could not feel, feel with her inner being the presence of her environment. The wood smelt of pine forests.

She imagined the chest and pushed at it with her mind. Nothing happened. It was like trying to move a mountain with a fingertip. She imagined her friends, pictured them in her mind.

Nothing.

There was something though, something very tiny. It ran along something and then jumped. It swung and climbed a velvet wall, then peeped through a little opening. She heard two women speaking, whispering about a red swing. She reached out to him and whispered with her mind.

"Ekkkkk!" squeaked Chris Finger.

She had his attention.

"Is that you little Missy?"

"How did you ..." she began.

"I climbed through the keyhole." His voice sounded a little strained. She was able to feel his presence clearer now. The more they talked to each other, using their minds, the better able they were at doing so.

"Take a look around. Can you see them?" asked Tiffany.

"I can hear them. I know that. They are in the other room and the door is closed."

She felt frustrated. He felt some of her tension through their newly formed telepathic bond. He wanted to reassure her. She might be much larger than he, but she was still a child. "Don't worry little missy. I will see if the door has a keyhole."

There was a long silence.

"I think we are in a pickle. The door has no keyhole," he tried to keep the glumness out of his thoughts, he didn't.

"Let me try something." Her voice lowered significantly.

Something wobbled at the corner of Chris finger's vision. He turned his head slightly to take a better look. Nothing was a miss, perhaps it had only been his imagination.

Again something moved. It was one of the irons. Chris eyed them suspiciously. The two sisters were knowledgeable, it was best to not underestimate them. They could have placed a magical trap in the room.

There were a pair of irons standing upright, next to some folded clothes. They were moving minutely, tipping toward each other

"I think I can do this," whispered Tiffany in a strained voice. Chris heard her gasp but didn't know what she was referring too. Then the irons floated upward together. They tilted a little as they silently lifted into the air, they wobbled too, considerably.

"Be careful," whispered Chris. His inner voice trembled. "If they were to fall, it would alert the sisters."

The words struck fear into Tiffany, her mind froze for a moment. The very thought of their leering faces and their terrible malicious smiles, and what they would do to Chris if they captured him, terrified her. Thoughts were tenuous and can be disrupted if the thinker is terribly focused and forced to do an arduous task.

Both irons nose dived suddenly. Chris gasped and put his hands to his ears. Luckily they stopped falling, they wavered in midair as if deciding what to do next. Tiffany murmured something and growled a little. The irons descended, the irons weren't in free fall, but their decent wasn't perfect either.

"Be care ..." Chris Finger tried to warn her.

Too late, the irons *clonked* as they made contact with something.

"What was that?" barked one of the sisters from the other side of the door.

Tiffany felt tired, the effort of moving the irons, the effort of using Chris Finger as her vessel tired her out. She felt her consciousness slip, then take a nose dive into a very dark place. "Must sleep," she whispered. Her environment – the inside of the chest swirled as she closed her eyes.

The sisters came. Chris thought that they must be sisters, there was something about them – they didn't look alike, but they spoke almost in unison. Chris climbed up quickly, scaled a bookcase within seconds. He ran along the top. He puffed as he ran. He wasn't the fittest little man. He spotted a coloured jar and hid behind it.

The sisters strode in, leaving the door unlatched. Long neck weaved into the room, head bobbing. No neck ambled in behind, much like a prehistoric herbivore looking for some undergrowth to munch on. "I am sure I heard something ..." muttered Miss long neck. Her head rose up and craned forward. Her nostrils flared.

Long neck straightened suddenly. Her head sprang toward the ceiling as her neck swayed like a cobra. Chris quickly dived back behind the jar, hoping that she hadn't spotted him. He made himself as small as he could.

The jar was coloured a girly pink, the liquid within it was as thick as syrup. He eyed them both through the pink murk.

"Something is definitely off in here, Tracy," said Lisa. Although considerably smaller in stature Tracy was perhaps the most stable of the two. She responded with a small grunt.

Long neck's neck curved and twisted as she attempted to observe the whole room in a few seconds.

Lisa called her Tracy when she felt frightened, stressed or paranoid. Tracy had a good sense of smell too. She sniffed the air with her huge nostrils. "I can't smell anything or any presence. Are you sure you didn't imagine the noise Lisa?"

Lisa's long neck twitched as she snooped around the room. Her head ducked and wove between the alcoves and shelves. Tracy No Neck stood very still. Her sister could be a little paranoid at times, but something definitely didn't smell right. Tracy arched her head back and expanded her nostrils.

"Lisa, it's just your imagination. By the hide of the Red King, just stop being so ..."

"Now just hold your tongue," Long Neck face reddened, she knew what the next word was going to be and didn't want to hear it. Lisa's neck began to weave like a snake.

"Don't you be moving your neck like that at me!" No Neck bunched her shoulders together, her teeth grew much larger suddenly, protruding out of her mouth a little. She clamped them shut loudly.

"Alright Tracy, calm down." Lisa's neck stopped its weaving and she even put a smile on her face. "I guess you are right." She plopped herself into a chair. "Put the kettle on and we'll have ourselves a brew."

Tracy no neck felt instantly better. She hated her sister when she got all snakey. She clicked her fingers, a flame appeared an inch above her fingertip . She turned a knob on the cooker and dipped her finger beneath the kettle. The flame ignited the gas beneath the hob.

Lisa closed her eyes and scrunched her face into a frown. "It's that girl. I keep thinking things are going to go pear shaped. We can't afford another mishap." She shuddered minutely as if remembering something unpleasant. "Not after the last mishap." She scratched the back of her long neck with a purple painted finger nail.

"Everything is going to be okay. She didn't put up much of a fight did she?" Tracy looked up at her reassuringly. "We captured her easily. Her friends are miles away. We've got this one in the bag sis."

"You mean chest." They both giggled incessantly at the joke.

Tracy finished sniggering and wiped her wet lips with handkerchief. "All we got to do is sit tight and wait for him to come and collect her."

"I know I know ..." Lisa felt a little better, it was nice to have a giggle at another's expense. Her sister always settled her down.

Tiffany had woken up half way through their conversation. She wondered who *he* was. They had said that he was red. Perhaps it had been that red creature that she had fought. The one that had hurt her father. If it was him, he would rue meeting with her again.

She stilled herself. It is best not to think of all the things you can't do. Instead it is better to think about the things that you can do. She sat quietly and sent Chris a comforting thought. "I have a plan, and it's a good one. So don't worry Chris Finger."

She didn't have a plan. She just wanted him to feel better and less scared. He was trying to be brave.

"Okay missy I will wait here for you, very quietly."

She heard the quiver in his voice. She listened to the sisters as they talked. They were confident, but nervous. She could see them too, through Chris Finger. Chris knew she was watching the sisters through his eyes, he felt her presence within him.

They sat around their teapot, chanting. They took their time to wave their hands over the teapot, their red teapot. Maybe they got their red objects out because he was coming. The idea made sense. It fitted in with their nervous disposition.

If this was true, she did indeed need a plan, and quickly.

It's this damn chest. I feel sure I could take the sisters in a magical battle.

She needed to bring her knowledge of magic together. She had learnt a lot of magic in a very short period of time. She remembered Binkerbelle talking about different schools of magic. She didn't think that she meant actual schools. Like the type children went to learn lessons. More like different types of magic. She had mentioned wild magic, Tiffany's tornado had definitely been from that school. There was air magic too. Maybe that is what is used when a creature hovers. Who knows? Then there was a type of magic that Brownies used, when they teleport. Her ideas of magic weren't categorised. She just sort of did things.

Brownies were interesting, they used a particular kind of magic in their own way. She had watched Mc Noodle and the way that he teleported. Teleportation was the key, it could be used in this situation she felt sure. However, she couldn't do magic whilst being in the chest. She scratched her head.

Chris Finger felt his head turn. It was a very disconcerting feeling to feel your head being moved when you wasn't the one doing the moving.

The sisters were still talking. They had become sullen, Chris couldn't be sure because their expressions were constantly malignant. Tiffany could see them clearly, it was comforting to be able to study them without having to have their eyes on her too. Their intentions could be seen in their stares. They must have been witches, evil and corrupt. They tried to watch everywhere at once.

"I can't have all this tension between us." said Tracy no neck. She lifted a hand up and rolled back a sleeve. "I know that it isn't your fault, dear sister. We must do something about it. I shall make a brew, a special brew. She waved her hands and muttered some incomprehensible words. "This will put us to sleep."

Her sister's eyes opened wide in alarm. Tracy anticipated her reaction and interrupted her before she could protest. "There is nothing to be done but wait." She flicked her thumb toward the chest. "Give the chest a kick and see if she is still in there, and then we can get some sleep."

Lisa grumbled to herself but knew that her sister was making sense, she always made sense. She gave the chest a firm kick. "Ouch!" yelled Tiffany. Lisa scowled at the chest then turned and walked back to the table with a grin on her face. "He is coming here at six. We shall have to be up an hour before."

Chris felt his head being moved again, along with his eyes. The clock hands said four O'clock. That gave her just one hour to come up with something.

The sisters drank their tea, rested their heads on their arms and fell asleep. They weren't pretending either. No one could make those snoring noise consciously. As they slept they spluttered and groaned, with each exhalation their lips flapped together, synchronized.

She could see the keyhole, it stared back at her. A filament of light passed through it. It was through this little hole that she was able to influence the situation. Growing small is something she could do. Even if she could use her magic, she very much doubted that she would be able shrink to fit through the hole. There must be something she could do. There must be a way of escaping.

There isn't any point focusing on the things you can't do. That was her father would say to her. He always sprouted pearls of wisdom. She never took much notice of them before.

No point worrying about the things that you can't change.

She sat still and breathed. *Put your mind on your breath. And follow it with your mind, and when your mind wanders, bring it back to your breath.* She did that now. Her father always said that meditation was the key to problem solving. She remembered her Dad's words. He always said so many of them, so many words of advice. She could see his face now. His kind smile. She rebuked herself, she mustn't allow herself to get upset. Getting upset never helped anyone.

Maybe she could get them upset. Maybe she could cause them to open the chest in anger or fear

A pea – it is strange what comes into the mind. The image floated into her mind, it crept in softly. Perhaps there was something to the image. A pea was small and hardly noticed by any one. It could be there on the floor and you wouldn't notice it was there.

Her mind cried: "But I can't cast spells in here!"

No you can't but what did the Nicolette explained to you about being subtle? About not being so confrontational? It's all about the timing of things.

She was angry at the voice. She knew it was her own inner voice, but it was speaking nonsense. Her conscious mind began to clank and clonk – that is to say, it began to grind; moving around itself, swallowing itself.

What happens when the chest opens? This was that small voice again, the one that she hardly ever listened too.

"*What happens...!*" She wanted to yell at the voice, yell with her mind of course. She wouldn't give the sisters the pleasure of hearing her upset.

She wanted to yell at the stupid voice. She thought back at the times she had listened to the voice. It had always spoken good advice. She had submerged the voice often, and even when she heard it she mostly ignored it.

When they open the chest, they will see me in the chest. That is what happens when they open the chest! She took some grim satisfaction at her logic. The voice fell silent. At least there was some satisfaction at being proved right!

Except the voice didn't remain quiet. Give them a surprise when they open the chest.

It was an idea. She had to admit it to herself. That was a good idea. Not only was it a good idea, it was the only idea that made sense. They would be ready for her. When they opened the chest they would have all sorts of counter-spells ready to use against her.

Again the quiet voice was silent.

Tiffany studied the inside of her chest. Not that there was much to study. If she looked closely enough she could see the grain in the wood. *Upset them. What do they most fear?*

They feared losing her. This Red King wanted her and they feared failure. Chris sat on a crayon, cradling his chin, waiting for Tiffany to return. She would enter his head again and speak to him when the time was right. She would find a way out of the situation. He had faith in her.

Make them frightened! Fill them with fear!

Tiffany's heart began to beat faster, she felt it thumping against her ribcage and in her ears. What were they frightened of? They spoke about this Red King, they were frightened of him. They were frightened that something would go wrong, that somehow she would escape.

But I am trapped in this chest. How can they escape!

Her heart began to jitter in her chest. You don't have to actually escape. All you have to do is make them think you have escaped. That was an idea she hadn't thought of before.

Now Tiffany's heart really did pump fast. She felt butterflies in her chest. The butterflies were as big as Baffers. What did her father tell her about that feeling! He said that when you get that feeling you really are thinking about something very true!

Oh my goodness. It really was a good idea. She entered Chris's mind again. *I have a plan*, she whispered to him. *I have a really good plan!*

Chris got really excited. So much so that he fell off his crayon. Tiffany spotted the crayon beside Chris. *Oh yes it was a beauty!* She lifted the crayon with her mind. After lifting the irons earlier on, lifting a crayon was easy. She drifted the crayon along the book shelf, and as she did so she noticed two large pieces of paper on her way. *Oh this is so easy!*

She drifted them down carefully. One in front of each sister. She began to write.

Dear Tracy no neck,
I am so glad that I don't have to
see your ugly face again. I thought your
sister was the ugliest thing ever
until I seen your ugly face!

Then, just for good measure she added:

Goodbye! C U later alligator!

She wrote something similar for the other sister but at the end she wrote something different:

P.S It was so easy to escape the chest.

ha ha ha!

Time to raise the alarm. She gave the room a cursory glance. The irons would have to do. *Get ready Chris. Time to raise hell!* With one mighty effort, she lifted the irons with her mind and hurled them through the window.

Crash! The glass splintered into a thousand different pieces, spraying the room, spreading the sisters with glass. The incident stunned the two sisters. For the briefest moment they stared at each other with wide eyes. Their rubbery lips trembled as their eyes bulged. Then the two sisters leapt up. One went one way, the other leapt the other. They scanned the room quickly, conjuring every scrying spell they had ever known.

Long neck was the worst of the two. Her neck (along with her head) sloped one way as her body attempted to go the other. Her limbs entangled themselves and she ended in a heap of silly disorderliness on the floor. They noticed the window of course, then they spotted the two notes. No neck looked down at her note and her face changed to the colour of beetroot.

Tiffany prayed that they wouldn't dash through the window. If they did she would be stuck in the chest.

"Quickly, check the chest!" Shouted one of the sisters.

Time to become a pea! It would have been a distinct pleasure to see the sisters face when they opened the empty chest.

They flung open the chest together and shrieked. The lock turned. Timing is everything. A sip of air slipped in. It was enough, Tiffany turned herself into a pea and flung herself to the corner of the chest.

Both sisters screeched, then hurtled toward the window. "Quick, by the Red King's gills, we are done for if she gets away."

Tiffany wanted to change back straight away. She checked to see if the coast was clear. She used Chris's eyes, and turned them toward the window.

If you could have just asked. I would have checked for you. Chris was a little annoyed at her for taking the liberty of his eyes without permission.

"Oh sorry," and she was sorry. She had used him, and he had let her.

She changed back to her normal self. As she passed the shelf Chris leapt onto her shoulder, climbed down and slipped into her pocket. Somewhere outside the sisters howled. Tiffany exited through the broken window. Then flew in the opposite direction.

They flew to freedom on a gentle wind; a merry wind. The trees vanished, even as they flew. Tiffany spread her arms wide. She wore a smile on her face, and had a twinkle in her eye. Her aura spread in every direction lighting up the sky; her euphoria expanded – she switched to her faerie sight, and watched her energy ripple in every direction. She felt exalted. Her very frequency changed; *I am real.*

A red tail flowed through the forest. A pair of ears in front of the tail and a muscular body fuelled its movements. It looked heavenward. Perhaps he sensed something. He seemed unconcerned, anticipating perhaps that the game hadn't ended yet. He slivered up a tree with the speed of a black mamba. Still nothing, there was nothing to see, just the rolling hills and the sky.

A screech in the distance – the two sisters ran for their lives. They moved quickly, as quick as mice. They leapt onto a magical carpet and soared into the air. The red something closed in behind them and roared his defiance. The sisters were quick. Behind them he roared again. Long Neck chanced a backward glance and wish she hadn't. She witnessed his mouth turn into a maw which stretched impossibly wide and was filled with teeth. No Neck opened a portal. The last thing the Red King saw was the back of their heads.

A moment later his anger sizzled to nothing. The hill had a nice slope. He walked up leisurely, retrospectively. Atop of the hill he looked into the distance, at the beautiful rolling hills. The illusions had dissipated. He had kept them alive for decades but now there was no need for them.

His face lost all expression. He had handsome features, a finely chiselled face. An angular face – there were too many angles.

His face changed. The numerous diamond like facets melted from his face. It had taken a moment, but in that moment his face lost cohesion. His skin and his face's other particulars, like his nose and eyes, moved. They slid down whilst his chin slid up. Then they switched places. They did so for a second. They swished downwards and jittered for a bit. His features became infractions and the infractions became a blur. A blur, then a globular mess.

He became the finely chiselled person again. He licked his lips with a tongue which was far too long.

His teeth long and sharp. He licked them too. He had shapely eyebrows, and finger nails which were long and finely manicured.

He smiled to himself, "now what shall I eat?"

Circus.

The day began as the sun lifted. The clown watched it rise and observed the light ripple across the sky in wavelets, each wavelet bringing a new colour – a new vista. The light unfolded the world, and revealed the world. From the horizon to the fringes of the deserts and the corners of the mountains. The world breathed. A ball of light tumbled from the sky, a simple nothing – no more than a child's rubber ball or thimble carelessly thrown. The lazy ball descended with a gentle grace, then ricocheted as it struck the ground. It increased in speed exponentially, travelling upward to the heavy clouds, dispersing them.

He wandered the land, killing a few humans as he travelled. He wanted to taste their flesh but couldn't bring himself to do so. He opened his maw and wiggled his tongue, a horribly long tongue, blue in colour: a discordant colour which looked much too unhealthy. He licked the flesh, then discarded the chunk with one flick of his wrist. He had been eating his apples. He had eaten some flesh too, animal flesh. It wasn't tasty enough, but beggar clowns couldn't afford to be choosy clowns.

The land wasn't barren but the wilder bigger animals kept away. They feared the humans, their instincts told them that humans were the enemy. Animals were clever but the humans were intelligent.

The clouds rolled across the sky as the day progressed. Heavy clouds, rain would fall soon. He could smell and taste it in the air. He could smell the horses too, in the distance. He wouldn't mind eating a horse, there were enough of them, but they were always so well guarded.

The humans rode the horses. The humans always rode their horses and the horses could run fast enough to catch him. They were in the distance. They paused. The horses grazed on the grass beneath their hooves. He heard their loud snorts. The humans talked to each other in hushed tones. His eyes didn't tell him much at this distance. His other senses told him considerably more. These men had adrenaline flowing through their system.

The clown's nostrils inflated impossibly wide as he tilted his head back. His eyes flashed red. The horses snorted then raced in his direction. Something was definitely wrong. The clown ran. He ran first on two legs and then threw his body forward and used his arms also. His arms changed as he ran. The soldiers chased him.

His arms and shoulders thickened and his face elongated. Now he was a mixture of clown and wolf again. His body somehow remembered the last time he had been chased. It was a successful form to flee a situation. The men gave chase, whipping the necks of the horses as they rode them hard.

The wind bellowed in his ears, it always did that when he ran like this. He could smell how far behind they were. The men stank nearly as bad as the wolves. Then the rain came, it fell onto his thick coat. It was then that he noticed he had a fur, a fur coat like a wolf. He smiled a wide shark like grin. He panted and growled – toothy grin became a snarl. His breath created a brief thin mist before him as he bellowed.

"It be a wolf," said one of the soldiers. The clown managed to circle behind the them, and listened intently. They had given up their chase. One of them wore a cassock with a heavy hood. An acrid odour oozed from him. There was also a smell of soap and disinfectant too, interlaced with the smell of horse meat and man sweat.

The cassock was a rich purple, the hood fringed with arcane symbols. The hooded figure sat astride a horse, a black stallion and brooded.

The clown watched carefully and felt a purple ²²gook ripple across his skin. A connection was made, and both of them felt it. The clown's pupils inflated, taking up the whole iris. Something welled up within the clown, a hate, a despicable hate – a luscious hate. The clown licked his lips, catching his tongue on his increasingly sharp teeth. Blood spilt from his lips and dripped, drooling downwards.

The magician's gaze searched the hedges and trees, running an eye across the clown's hiding place. The clown growled in the back of his throat and sent ferociousness down the UMBILICAL cord of their connection. Fear entered into the one who wore the purple, it clambered into his soul and scampered about. The clown licked his lips. *Yummy* –

The leader of the men wheeled his horse round, and gave a quick glance back. Fear continued to affect the magician, it continued to roam the corridors of his mind. The clown chuckled to himself as he watched the magician hunker over the horse's neck. The muscles around the horse's black neck glistened as it disappeared into the thick of the soldiers.

After the departure of the soldiers the clown wandered the lands of men, wandering on the fringes of their cities and towns. The men rode on horseback, they were suspicious and hateful of anything that wasn't human.

Most people were suspicious of anything that was different. Yet there were those that didn't shun magical creatures. There were some men and women who practiced magic in the land of the horsemen. They did so in secret, behind their hearths and candles. In the lands of the ²³Carnasti, magic was banned. Only those within the *House of the conclave* had been given permission to study the magical arts.

Humanity was okay. Some could be fierce, certainly those that were called soldiers or warriors were vicious. Generally, individuals were not powerful enough or dangerous enough to be feared. He was, after all, so very powerful and not unprepared to deal with large batches of men. Soldiers were different, soldiers wore a symbol which meant that they had been trained for combat.

He did not wander into the cities of men, not at first. He felt it prudent to not do so. His first impulse was to stroll through the large wooden gates. Later he admitted to himself that this would have been a mistake. A part of him wanted to tear them to pieces with his teeth and claws. A part of him desired to see terror in their eyes and slit their gizzards from hind quarters to chin. They all seemed so cosy within their towns behind their thick wooden or stone walls.

²² gook: wandering elemental or just a shiver of something, something unknown.

²³ Carnasti: [Shookle] Also, known as horsemen of the south.

Instead he waited and watched. He sometimes killed a few humans. He did this to satisfy a need, a need that he did not understand. Always, after eating his apples, a fierce destructive impulse came upon him. An impulse to destroy and control, the impulse to pierce the hearts of others with terror.

Mostly he watched the coming and goings of the soldiers. Then, beneath a large bridge, a beast that the men called *troll* growled. It was a deep growl, a growl that had huge eyes and stature to match. He smelt the creature beneath the bridge and knew it was there, afraid. It was definitely a fearsome creature. Easily seven feet tall (Small for a troll) had huge canine teeth, and once a troll attacked it didn't stop. The clown didn't know the way of trolls, but the clown knew enough not to go below the bridge. Even he had his limits.

The soldiers came for it.

It did not run, instead it tucked itself beneath a bridge, hiding its bulk in the darkness. The men lit torches, then grouped up into small raiding teams. They poured an oily substance along the floor beneath the bridge.

A smog filled the troll's mouth and nostrils.

"Come on!" The soldiers yelled and stepped closer to the bride.

My bridge, thought the troll. This is my bridge.

A fierce eye became visible as the flames licked at goliath legs. He hunched up, fearful of the flames that slowly encroached upon its territory. Huge legs uncoiled quickly. Grey coarse hide rippled upward as impossible arms reached forth and scagged two soldiers between the rivets in their armour. Bodies flew into the air or were crushed then thrown.

Eyes calculated distance and teeth snapped onto teeth . Huge hands extended outward on terrible arms, arms that belied distance. Bones crunched and snapped, flesh was rendered into chunks. Throats were torn open and strewn like litter. The terrible cries of soldiers were heard as they were hurled up into the air then clobbered into the earth.

Lances and swords pierced and hacked at the troll's hide. The soldiers rallied together with perfect discipline unmindful of the fallen. They moved as one, shifting together. Each soldier listened to their commander and trusted. Hands signals were sometimes used by the soldiers to convey messages and help coordinate movements.

Claws racked armour, mashing it into fleshy pulp – a conglomeration of iron and meat. Chaos ensued.

Everything seemed chaotic, yet the clown noticed that there was order to the men's movements. They attempted to pierce the hide of the troll with lances. Its huge hands crunched bone as it's claws and teeth attempted to tear chunks of flesh from the men. It snapped its jaws shut an arm, tearing the limb from its socket. It's bloody toothed grimace became a roar. He met each strike fiercely, bellowing defiance into the faces of those who sought its demise.

It ran forward at the horsed men, mouth chomping and salivating, arms extending out, attempting to grab them. One man barked orders and the whole team wheeled just outside of its finger claws. They circled the beast, rotating slowly clockwise. It's cavernous mouth opened wide. A mouth filled with crooked yellowed teeth.

It stood tall towering above the men. The occasional man stared at the beast's terrible visage and froze. The beast would trample such men, grinding their bones beneath its heels. Then it wiped its mouth with the back of its red stained furred hand and seemed to smile.

They wheeled around the beast, striking with their lances. One man ran forward with a large spear, but instead of sticking the beast, he painted a large X beneath its ribs. In response the beast swivelled and swung a huge hand at his head. The man ducked and rolled away deftly, diving between the horses. The horses were disciplined and did not trample him. Instead their steel tipped hooves danced cleverly out of the way, allowing him safe passage.

Each man held the reins of their horses with one hand and thrust their spears at the red X repeatedly, controlling their horses as they retreated. The beast didn't care what it grasped, but the horses danced and butted the beast with their bladed foreheads and kicked out with their sharpened steel hooves. The soldiers grimaced with each thrust. Some lost their lances and withdrew their swords until their squires fetched another.

Then finally they pierced the side of the troll. Within minutes of the first penetrating strike the beast fell. They hacked its head off (which took most of the morning.)

Men were clever creatures. Men were intelligent creatures. They used time to their advantage and utilised tactics to bring down their prey. He would not become the prey of humans. He would be the hunter, if there was to be a hunt then it would be they who would be fearful not he.

He attacked small caravans and small teams of men. He took their clothing and disposed of the bodies. The clothing had been tight at first. He noticed how his body changed to accommodate the clothing. It was an unexpected development to witness the vast shrinkage of his body. At first it alarmed him, so much so that he ripped his clothes apart in fear. His body changed as he rent his clothes, reverting back to his former size and stature.

What need he of clothes when his entire body was clothed in such a splendid multicoloured fest for the eyes?

He took the life of every human, not wanting witnesses to his deeds. "Thank you very much." A clown smile is a naughty smile – rough, smiley and oily. He felt the freedom and power from doing what others would dare not do. Being stronger and more powerful was wonderful, but the satisfaction dwindled with each kill.

Then came the caravan of all caravans. It was the most impressive accompaniment of people that he had ever seen. There were rough looking men, but they weren't soldiers. These men had swords like the soldiers but these were dirty unwashed men. They smiled and laughed carelessly with the women and children as they walked. Everyone of them wore expressions which were unknown to the clown. Their lips were upturned. The clown tried to mimic the expression but his facial muscles didn't seem to be able to move that way. He used his fingers to lift his cheeks but when he let go, even for a moment, his cheeks fell back into the previous position. It made him look constipated.

Some people breathed fire, how wonderful! Some walked on a rope, rolled on a rope, flipped on a rope, all without breaking a grin. There were pretty women here and deformed people. The deformed people interested him, they were like him. There were large beasts of every sort, each housed in a different cage.

He thought that these were *yummy* people, but yummy for a different reason. He didn't want to eat these people. He lifted a white hand that looked to be gloved, but wasn't. He lifted a hand for no other reason than because he had a thought, and a very different thought. It was an intelligent thought – a creative thought, perhaps even ... a goodly thought!

I would love to be part of such a group!

"Oy! you over there, get yourself over 'er some!" yelled a woman. He thought it was a woman. "It" had been a female voice. He made his way over to her, grinning with teeth that were wickedly sharp. He tried to smile, hoping that his lips turned up instead of down. He noticed people's eyes widened when they smiled. He decided not to push his luck and kept his eyes and teeth normal.

She had a beard. "Now then ... " Something made her pause. She drank in the sight of the clown. She licked her lips. "You need a job?"

He had wanted to eat her. As she grew closer he smelt her. She did not fear him. She was not repulsed. He was lost for words and more than a little intrigued. Her odour was different than other human's ... it pleased him. This was a entirely new experience. *She admires you. She sees something in you which she deeply admires.*

He nodded. He couldn't stop his head nodding. She asked him questions and he nodded. She spoke at length about something, and he nodded.

There was something different about this clown. She knew different, she was an expert on different. "You are magnificent. That's what you are!" She beamed at him and lifted her beard, flicking it at him. "Are you hungry?" Her cheeks lifted upward and her eyes twinkled. The clown – *aka* the clown of death – was really very hungry.

She slapped him on the shoulder. "Cam on good feller, let me get you some food."

He followed her through the crowd as she swatted performers out of her way playfully. Everyone was busy doing something. Some people erected tents, others practiced various movements, cartwheels and such. Marvellous movements – one person breathed fire into the face of another. He smiled after the flames receded and complimented her. Another creature, humanoid, red, possibly male, observed them. Was it a he though? Now that the clown investigated a little more, he couldn't tell. He tried to see the genitalia of the person, after all, it was naked! His eyes kept sliding away just as his eyes zoned in on the aforementioned genitalia.

His bearded companion headed toward a tent. Others were erecting tents by the dozen, and quickly. One had already been erected. It had faded red and white stripes. As they entered through the flap he saw a huge man standing behind a large wooden table. He wore a blood stained apron. Behind him there were various amounts of pots and pans, each being heated in some way (there was no discernible heat source).

"Cook this gentleman some of your finest meat dishes Mitchell. Give him as much as he wants." The man looked up briefly, smiled and gave her an acknowledging wave.

"You'll have to wait for a bit." He looked directly at the clown as he spoke, and he smiled. It was the kind of smile that provoked others to smile. He had a kind face. An open face. He did not smell of fear either, he smelt of meat and kindness.

"Just sit yourself down sum, and he won't be very long." Her voice came from behind, but when he looked over his shoulder to thank her, she had gone.

Mr Clown swung the nearest chair around, sat on it, and stared at the meat as it was being chopped.

Yummy yummy in my tummy.

– *Into the fire, out from the frying pan.* That had been the way of things ever since the froggy creature had appeared. Now Mr Frog was a memory and not a pleasing one.

Or was he a memory of a memory? Memory is a strange fellow, and reality is stranger still. The frog creature slipped and stumbled across his mind, webbed feet fumbling on every newly found corner. Froggy clambered up into a fissure, and then slid off into a big hole. Had the froggy ever existed? The clown was no longer completely sure.

The sound of the cutter coming down brought him out of his silent reverie. Reality stepped up and gave him a shake. The man doing the cutting was a giant of a man. Clearly he was twice as big as the usual sort of man. He wielded his cutter with efficiency. His great forearms bulged as the meat cleaver came down again and again, slicing through the meat and pounding into the bench. *Whatever that bench is made of, it's made of stern stuff.* The man seemed to know what he was thinking because he looked up and smiled, then continued chopping.

The stature of the man was incredible. Every muscle was defined and massive, and the way that he wielded the cleaver was nothing short of exhilarating. His head was shaved – sometimes he tore the meat apart with his hands.

The clown stared. Give this man a sword and I would not like to go up against such as he. Give me a bear any day.

Yet there was a gentleness in his demeanour too. He heaved what was left of a large carcass into the largest of pots, all without losing a smile. The pot was impossibly large, with handles on each side. His two huge hands gripped it on either side and hurled it upward onto a bench. Another carcass flew into it, then he scooped up various bowls of herbs and spices and threw them in too.

He lifted the full pot, his great forearms bulging with the effort. The clown knew what was about to happen, even as the big man stumbled, the clown leapt over the bench and grasped the pot before it could tumble from the big man's grasp. The huge man presented a gracious smile for the clown, a smile that warmed the clown from the soles of his boots (not that the clown wore boots, remember: the clown's apparel looked to be real but it was not real, not one little bit, it was merely a manifestation of himself – in short, a lie) to the top of his head.

They both carried it over to a hot plate. The weight of the pot surprised the clown. He was capable of carrying three times the weight of an ordinary man without transforming but could hardly carry half of the weight of this pot. The muscles in his arms burned, every muscle and fibre. The huge man offered his hand, bearing the weight of the pot with his left. The clown looked at it and glared at the man whilst attempting to comprehend how a man, even a man as large as he could carry such a weight.

Now the weight of the pot had entirely disappeared. The clown looked up as the great pot rose into the air seemingly by itself. The big man held the impossibly heavy pot balanced on the palm of his left hand, all without breaking his smile. With his right he gave thumbs up.

"The name's Mitchell. Glad to make your acquaintance." *I really must shut my mouth,* thought the clown. We will be great friends. What's your name mate?"

The clown's closed his mouth and shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay, you got to have a name, otherwise people will get suspicious. I tell you what, your name can be John. Okay?" The big man grasped the clown's hand. Warmth spread upward into the clown's wrist.

The clown wanted to speak up, he guessed that to say anything at this point would probably be a good idea, but he couldn't curve his tongue to the appropriate shape. He nodded instead, and smiled (at least he thought it was a smile). Mitchell eased the pot down onto the hotplate and walked over to a large iron oven. He slipped some huge gloves on and opened it. "Here you go," he said with a smile. He put a slab of meat on to a large plate and handed it over to the clown. The clown gave him a smile, turned away and began to eat.

"You can sit down over there at the back. I'll bring you over a mug of ale in a few minutes." The clown headed to the back contently.

He sat down and gorged himself on the food. It was the best tasting meal he had ever had, not that he had had many. Cooked meat was delicious. It made his hands greasy too, which he didn't mind, he licked them clean as he finished the last of his meal. Mitchell sidled around the kitchen patiently. He was tireless, he scrubbed the pots clean in a huge sink. Then brought out sizable bowls, and placed them on a table, lining them up in rows.

The kitchen was a fair size and was perfectly organised. Large metal spoons, forks and knives hung in tidy rows. Each surface was clean and there were so many of them. Mitchell scrubbed the whole area with a towel that didn't seem to get dirty. He began with the large cooker. After he had cleaned it he brought out a huge container and threw what was left of the meat inside it. The man was tireless and efficient.

Then a woman came through the door with a tray of empty bowls. She smiled at Mitchell and blushed. He gave her a little bow and leaned over and placed a finger beneath her tray, helping her to ease it slowly to the surface of the counter. He winked at her slyly and began to fill the bowls full of meat and hot juice. She carried the full ones away, out through the flap which served as a door. She came back a few minutes later for more.

Other girls came in with smaller trays filled with bowls. He filled each of the bowls quickly. The clown observed all these things but didn't think much of anything. He was pleasantly full. He ate an apple, and then felt a familiar urgency to move, to do something. There was another apple in the bag but he felt no urge to eat it.

– He would keep that one for later.

Eventually the bowls came back. The clown spotted a sink nearby and headed over to it. He washed the plates and cutlery. Then he washed everything nearby with the very same cloth that Mitchell had used and was pleased to see that the cloth didn't get dirty for him either.

He looked around for Mitchell and saw that he was sat at the back. John (the clown) felt very comfortable as he approached Mitchell. He threw the ever clean cloth on to a spare surface and walked over to Mitchell, giving him what he hoped was a smile. Mitchell handed him a large mug, a mug that looked more like a bowl with a handle. The clown cupped it with both hands and looked into it. Within there was a thick liquid, it smelt wonderful and he didn't even need to inflate his nostrils to smell it. His first thought was that he didn't want to drink anything. That was a silly thought. Why worry about poison when you had just eaten a whole meal without even a thought of poison?

He took the drink and bowed stiffly, trying desperately not to spill any of his beverage. He hoped that Mitchell hadn't noticed his hesitation, the last thing he wanted to do was offend him. He rested the mug against his bottom lip and tilted. His taste buds exploded with pleasure. He took another sip and smiled. Mitchell laughed loudly. "You're a good guy." He slammed his large meaty hand on the table. The whole table shook.

The clown laughed manically. The big guy didn't mind, he just smiled. "We get you a good job here and you will be happy."

The bearded lady walked in a little later, and laughed at them both. "You guys are as drunk as lords." Her smile put them both at ease.

"Come take a seat me lady." The man mountain stood up and wobbled considerably (If a Mitchell fell in a forest, and there was no one to witness him fall would he make a noise when he hit the ground?)

"You can take a seat your big oath." She beamed at him, beamed with her smile and with her eyes. Then she sat down and looked at the clown, *aka John*. "You will start early in the morning." The clown smiled easily, his teeth had retracted measurably. Now he didn't look dangerous at all. "You can help with cleaning the animals out."

He didn't know what she meant but felt more comfortable smiling than not smiling.

He thought he should say something. "Thank you me lady," he dipped his head gratefully. Whilst attempting to stand he stumbled, and fell backwards. He clambered back onto his feet with less grace. Mitch howled with laughter and held out both of his meaty hands and pretended to stumble too. The lady's eyes smiled and somewhere under her beard her lips did too.

"That's that then." She rose up and walked out of the tent.

"Well that's me done too." Mitch stood up with his smile and headed toward the back of the tent (wobbling a little as he walked). "Come on back here and I'll show you where you can get your head down."

The smell from the kitchen was fresh and the smell of the alcoholic beverages wafted up into the clown's nostril as he followed the big man. "There it is," said Mitchell, pointing a meaty finger to his left. The clown turned to the left and lifted a piece of canvas. The small room had a small wooden bed and chair. It looked to be the most inviting place he had ever seen. He tried to sit on the edge of the bed, but instead he fell onto his side. In a moment's breath he fell into a blissful sleep.

The horses neighed. They raised their legs and kicked out at nothing. Other creatures were being exercised too. There was a large mountain lion, it looked severely ticked off. There were several birds that stood twice as high as Mitchell. They followed a little man around the ring, squawking.

The clown couldn't see much. He was knee deep in wet slimy smelly mud. He shovelled it into a cart. He couldn't help peeking through the canvas door occasionally as he wheeled the cart to the great hole in the ground, a hole which seemed to get further away with each trip.

"Are you a clown?" asked a voice. He had gotten back from the hole, and had released the handles of the cart (everyone called it a cart but it was more of a wheel barrow, except it had four wheels.) He wheeled around to see who had spoken. The animal pens were dark, there was one lamp and it didn't radiate much of a glow. Perhaps some of the muck had gotten into his ear, maybe he hadn't heard anything.

Another voice spoke up. "Well, are you a clown?"

He looked around himself again. This time he did see them. They were knee high and were surrounded in shadows. They whispered to each other.

It's the girl!

He hadn't heard the inner whispering malignant voice for a while. It quipped some words his way maybe to make him squirm. Maybe, the thing within him liked this murky light.

It giggled manically. It's the girl from your dreams!

A terrible fear stung his heart. He gulped. Perhaps some of his fear surfaced to his face. The two little shadows snickered to each other.

Look at those bright pearlys!

They stepped out of the shadows together, a boy and a girl and a dog. He had never seen a dog before, he noticed that it had something wagging from its hind quarters. The two little things were children, very dirty children. Not that he could judge them, he was knee deep in some very smelly stuff himself (at least he hoped it was mud). The oil lamp on the wall lit up his features revealing scarlet eyes. The boy and girl glanced at each other briefly, wondering if it had been a good idea to engage this stranger in conversation. They looked to their dog, seeking solace and protection. It didn't seem to mind the stranger, it wagged its tail furiously.

"I don't really know what a clown is."

They weren't amused. They made a sound, the very same one he had heard others make when their lips turned upward. *Maybe I should turn my lips up too, every once in a while.* He tried to smile and hoped that it was good enough.

"We will show you the clowns," said the little girl. She beckoned him with a curled finger.

The clown lifted his shovel and shook it. "I have to finish my work first." He looked at all the muck that surrounded him, that he was knee deep in. He wouldn't be finishing any time soon. He eyed the children from the side, hoping they would go away.

"But you are a clown, sir." Shouted the boy affirmably. The clown didn't know what a clown was, or, what a "sir" was either. He lifted his shovel and pretended that they weren't there. This did the trick, the children vacated the premises.

He worked steadily for many hours. The light between the hinges and beneath the doors ceased. The grey turned to complete darkness. The clown hadn't noticed. His nose told him where the muck was.

The light ceased to filter beneath the flap of the door. He climbed out of the pens and felt soft fingers brush against his. He looked down he noticed two faces looking up, two perfect moon faces. "Now we are going to show you the clowns," said one of the faces. He thought it might have been the boy.

"Your fingers are so soft," explained the girl.

"We love clown's," the boy assured him.

They led him through the circus, through the crowds of people. "You are one of the clowns," said the boy, the delight in his voice was unmistakeable.

Johnny thought differently. He didn't think he was a clown at all.

The children stopped for a moment and gave him something. It was made of metal and it was smooth. He looked at it and then leapt backwards in shock. A clown stared back at him. "You see! We told you, you are a clown!"

He looked again then gave them back the mirror.

They arrived a few moments later at the biggest tent in the whole place, and entered into it. "And here we are." The girl and boy opened their arms. A strange sight greeted him, greeted him with smiles, lots of smiles.

There were people running around tumbling and falling over each other. They had big shoes and bright hair and big smiles. There were animals too, some of the animals had bright coats that flickered and sparkled. Some colourful chaps danced around the animals and even rode them. They rode them and they tumbled to the floor occasionally. Then they attempted to get on a wild snorting creature that resembled a giant hog. The hog skipped a few paces then bucked them all off, all five of them.

They did this for an hour. Johnny began to realise that these people were very skilled indeed, each fall was a well rehearsed performance. A few sweated so much that their make-up began to run and smear their face. Then it happened, a few passed him by. A close up inspection affirmed his deepest thoughts about himself: *I am not a clown*. He asked one of the children for the mirror, and checked his features checked the mirror. Again he witnessed a clown looking back at him. But was it himself that looked back at him? The clown in the surface of the mirror looked back at him and winked.

"I am not like them. I am not like them!" Johnny realised that he had raised his voice. The two children reached for the other. These were fake clowns, beneath their makeup they were human.

The children walked away from him. "He thinks he is not a clown," stated the boy between chuckles.

What am I? the clown wondered. He touched his face and wiped it with a palm. He opened his hand. A tooth lay in the centre of it.

Where is my bag!

Panic seized him by the lapels. He headed back to the tent. *How could I forget my bag!*

It was a good question. He rushed into the red and white tent and headed for his room.

His teeth wobbled as he walked. People stared, or rather, he thought people stared at him. He told himself that they weren't staring at him, that they were just looking at a clown. He rushed through the kitchen, passed Mitchell on the way, gave him a wave, or what he thought was a wave and headed toward his room.

There it was, just lying there on his bed. He felt within and was relieved to feel a round object within. He pulled it out and stared at the apple. He clutched his chest and tried to force his fear away. Holding the apple between his hands did the trick. His fear subsided. "Thank you God!" he whispered to himself. Then he wondered who God was.

He ate and wondered who God was again. He felt the apple rattle in his gums as he turned it to mush. All thoughts of God left his mind as the apple slush flowed down his throat.

He would just eat one apple. His eyes filled up with blood. He opened his mouth wide and watched his teeth grow and sharpen. His maw continued to widen impossibly wide. The pain agonised him. He wanted to scream but stifled it. The pain continued as his mouth widened further. *What is happening?* This hadn't happened before, at least not to this degree.

Face, throat and his mouth were suddenly consumed with pain.

Then his fingers grew impossibly wide. *You are mine*. Something whispered from the hollows and depths of his mind. It was a calm voice. As smooth as velvet. So calm. It chuckled. It was the beast, the beast within him. *You are mine!* He didn't recognise the voice.

The clown began to cry. He tightened his jaws and willed them to close. His eyes flashed red. The iris, pupil and even the whites turned red.

Then it was over. He felt himself again. His face turned instantly back to normal, or rather, back to the way that it had been before.

That was new!

He came out of his room and walked passed Mitchell. Mitchell glanced up and smiled. The clown smiled back, then wished he hadn't. A pain travelled from one side of his face to the other. He turned his face away and winced. Mitchell continued to wash the counters down, his broad face had become very lax. Then as the clown left the tent, Mitchell's face changed from lax into concern. Compassion surfaced, compassion for his new found friend.

The clown headed toward the circumference of the camp. No one intercepted him. He didn't know why he felt that someone would. He headed for the hills, watching for soldiers as he sniffed the air.

He waited for the longest time, watching as the sun descended beneath the hill. There was plenty of rage – the froggy creature appeared in his mind, telling him to get the kollagidy leaves. The clown laughed at the little feller.

Look at the little feller, isn't he cute!

A hole opened up several feet away and a spindly leg stepped through. The froggy now stood in front of the him and wagged his finger. He beckoned to the clown, with a crooked finger that seemed much too long for his webbed hands. "Come take a look." He stood to the side of the hole, and waited for the clown to come closer.

The clown took the bait and waltzed over. What have I to fear? he thought. I have grown more powerful than before. If the froggy creature tries anything I will eat his head.

The froggy pointed to the hole and stood patiently with one leg bent. The clown sidled over and bent down and took a look. There was his tree, his very handsome tree. Now it was nearly barren. "What have you done to my tree?"

"Well, firstly, I have done nothing to the tree. And secondly," the froggy creature brought a gangly finger to his lips. "It isn't your tree."

I am beginning to hate this little frog, thought Johnny the clown. I really do wish to hurt this damnable thing.

"Nope not one little bit is it yours. In fact, I planted the tree there quite some time ago. So technically it is mine."

The clown stared at him for the longest time. The clown looked different to froggy. He was significantly redder. There was blood around his mouth, and his jaw looked bigger. His father had been right (*wasn't he always?*) that last apple had progressed the clown's transformation. He rubbed his hands together, anticipating the new possibilities.

"Now, go and get those leaves." Froggy pulled something from his pocket. It was a something which looked like a giant leaf. "Here, take it. Find more of these." He handed the leaf to the clown. The clown examined it. "That my friend is what I need to help your tree. You have less than a week, then there will be no more apples for you!"

It was the clown's turn to pout. He walked away from the froggy creature, walked away with heavy feet and droopy eyelids.

He felt wretched. Another apple would do the trick, but there were no more apples. He felt frightened too.

No leaf, no tree, no apple –

The sun had gone to little sleep and he felt that he needed sleep too. He thought that maybe it was a good idea to take a lie down, maybe right here. The grass was lush beneath his feet. He knelt and then eased himself onto his back and slept. Slept to the morning.

The morning came. He awoke and headed to the animal pens. *I will muck them out again.* He didn't know why he wanted to that, but it felt like the right thing to do. *I will do that before I leave.* With this last thought a great sadness settled upon him, filling him up from within. A blood red tear rolled down his cheek.

He walked to the animal pens and expected to see them as dirty as yesterday. Instead they were clean. He scratched his head and wondered what to do with himself.

The bearded lady passed by the entrance, spotted him and called him over. "You can have the day off today." She opened her arms, "explore this place and enjoy it, and watch the show tonight." With that she turned and walked away.

There was nothing else to do but do just that. So he did. He took a walk and wandered around the tents.

People came from many different areas of the human world to buy things, it wasn't merely a circus it was a market too.

There were clothes to purchase. Buying things was a strange concept for Mr John Clown. What was this thing that the people called money? It was a very useful thing indeed. It allowed others to have whatever they wanted. As long as they had enough of it. A huge fat man sat in a big chair, a chair with bars running through it. Two muscle bound men carried the man everywhere. The bars rested on their shoulders. They were almost as big as Mitchell. He was being carried around by people! *Why would they do that?* The clown shook his head.

He came across some toffee apples. He stood there for a while just gazing at them, admiring the very look of them. He noticed something that looked like apples, apples covered with a creamy brown substance, and they were on a stick. He was a little afraid of them. *Oh goodly goosh I had better not have any of those. Any of thooooooooooooose ...*

That was that, except it wasn't. He couldn't take his eyes off them. Candy floss came to the rescue!

"Have some of that. You will love it." The voice came from below him. For a moment he feared that the children had returned. J. Clown looked down and wasn't surprised to see a little man there, a three foot man that looked to be quite normal, that was, until he opened his mouth and smiled. The smile took up the whole of his face. "Take three toffee apples," said the little chap. "You will love them. Take a bite. If you eat them quickly, for every fresh bite you take it will change the taste of the next bite." He shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

The clown didn't know whether it was such a good idea. Food can change a person. The clown pointed to the fluffiest one and was about to ask the little chap if he could have one when the little guy smiled gaily and said "Take as many as you want. Take what you want and smile. You are one of us now."

Before he left the stall, the little smiley man slipped some sandwiches into the clown's hands. "You will love those sandwiches." It was his goodbye gesture. The clown took them to be polite. The very idea of eating anything which referred to itself as a sand-witch was probably not such a good idea. The little man smiled at another customer and sidled away.

J. Clown munched on the candy floss as he strolled around the market. He tried to munch it but it was just too fluffy. Most of it got stuck in his hair. A clown with candy floss in his hair doesn't look that strange, it blended in. The sun shone down on his face and he felt, for the first time, something akin to contentment. The beast within him slumbered. He reached the top of the hill and felt the sun pour down onto his face. He took a moment and looked up. The light spread through his face and passed on through his body.

He sat down and noticed that his pockets were filled with things. He pulled each item out and placed them in front of him.

Here they were, and they looked great! So many different kinds of snacks and food!

He sat and ate sand-witches. They were lovely, and they filled him to the brim! Then he started to tuck into the many other different food items. He ate them, and lavished the taste of each morsel. Some exploded into his mouth, some made a popping sound. He laughed joyfully. Then he eyed the toffee apples. *I should eat them. I really should.* He checked that his little bag was at his side. Maybe if something went wrong he could eat one of his own apples. If there was one left.

He bit into a toffee apple. The outer casing was quite tough. He pierced the shell and felt a soft texture swirl behind his teeth. This was a piece of wonderfulness. It really was. It tasted of toffee and toffee ice cream. The clown hadn't tasted toffee or toffee ice cream before. He loved the taste of them. He waited for something bad to happen, after all they were apples!

Nothing happened. They just left a wonderful taste in his mouth. He took another bite. Before long he was eating the second one and then the third. The toffee apples were the best of all the food and snacks. Their taste changed every second, and if you left them in your mouth a bit longer than necessary, just a little bit longer, the taste kept happening. Then, even though he tried to prevent himself from swallowing, the toffee melted and turned to mush and slipped down his throat.

Everything had been successfully eaten. He dug into his pocket one last time to make sure. All gone.

It was then that he felt someone watching him. He eased his eyes to the side and confirmed that indeed there was someone there. He allowed his head to turn just a little. A woman stood there. She walked over to him and sat down by his side. She had fair hair and the bluest eyes, her skin was soft and her legs, as she sat on them, were fair and matched the colour of the skin on her face. She was exquisite. Her hair rested gently on her shoulders as the gentlest of breezes titillated a few stray strands.

He felt her presence and recognised it somehow. He wanted to say something to her. He tried to pluck up the courage to do so.

The feeling that maybe he could one day feel contentment whispered on the fringes of his mind. With her by his side anything was possible. She turned her eyes to him and as he looked into them he felt a contentment. The kind of contentment that you could live a million years and never experience. There was a promise there, a promise of a brighter tomorrow.

"Watch" – a breeze whispered the word against his cheek.

"Watch to the right of the sun." Her voice was soft, ephemeral.

The woman pointed to the sun. Her hand glowed for an instant, and for that moment the gentlest of hues surrounded her fingertip s. The clown bridged his hand over his eyes and looked toward the sun.

Patience. Wait for a moment.

He saw a spec to the right of the sun. He stared hard for a while. Slowly, as he stared, he felt a warm glow suffuse his entire being. It was a bird of some sort. In the distance, it flapped its magnificent wingspan on the eddies of the sun rays. It was there, in all its fiery glory – a phoenix.

"The phoenix pursues the eagle and is the master of it. The phoenix chooses to be the highest expression of itself. It is immortal, self governing and lives within the grace of the Fae. As long as it exists then all will exist. It is the very meaning of everything.

"Choose well dear friend. Look to your left, at the bag which is at your feet. Look to your right foot."

The woman had spoken aloud yet her lips hadn't moved. The clown had no time to appreciate the musical sound of her voice or the majesty of her personage. At his right foot there was a bag, a silver bag.

Blink.

He was alone. She had gone and taken her joy with her. Yet there remained the promise. Her promise.

He stood up and walked a few steps then turned round. The silver bag waited for him. He reached for it, felt its velvety texture on the surface of his fingertips. It felt right. It belonged with him.

He walked to the camp and noticed that there were many soldiers entering it. A huge tent had been erected at the centre of the camp. Sounds came from this magnificent pavilion. The clown eased open a flap and snuck in.

The circus people didn't stop him, some even waved him through.

The tent seemed a lot bigger on the inside. Every seat had been taken by whistling, laughing smiling people. Their faces wore expressions of joyful expectation. They clapped their hands together and stared at the ring below. The ring was circled by blue fire and at its centre stood a man in a pink tuxedo. He had a large moustache and a tall hat.

There were Fafalumps.

The ring master shouted something and watched as the creatures came in, two at a time. They were followed by a stout dwarf sporting a huge beard which hung to his waist. The Fafalumps had the biggest ears, each one had huge ears which covered their entire body. Twelve Fafalumps, each with two ears – twenty four ears. Each Fafalump was about five feet tall and three foot wide. They were mostly fur and ears. The children in the audience laughed at them. The clown felt like laughing too. He was feeling joy. Yet he did not think of it, he just started to laugh and clap along with everyone else.

Twenty five feet in front of the ring master twelve targets were lowered. Each one was lowered by a single rope until the target finally rested on the circus floor. They came to the ground with the issue of a tremendous sound of stamping feet. The clown looked about himself and felt delight. His heart hammered in his chest and his face couldn't stop smiling. The whole crowd was stomping their feet and clapping. The dwarf flicked his beard and shouted something. Immediately all five Fafalumps stood up on their hind legs. From them twelve projectiles flew and struck the targets. The targets sizzled and melted, then with a flash of smoke the targets disappeared entirely.

The crowd gasped in awe. The clown put his hand to his mouth and giggled. *This was fun!*

"I give you the Fafalumps!" cried out the ring master loudly. Everyone stood and cheered. The Fafalumps fell forward onto four legs, lined themselves up with each other and marched out together to the beat of a drum, with the dwarf behind them clapping.

Next came the tumblers, with trampolines beneath their arms. They placed them on the floor in different places (if you were to look at them from above you would notice that they were in a configuration of a five pointed star.) The tumblers cart wheeled and somersaulted, back flipped and did side flips too. Then, in no time at all, they were somersaulting back and forth from one trampoline to another. Each movement perfectly timed to avoid collision. One pushed off from a trampoline and landed on the ground. He placed his hands on his hips as a last flourish. The others followed. Two landed next to him. They formed a line and then the tumblers began landing on the shoulders of their fellow tumblers. They formed a pyramid of bodies, until finally the last one landed at the top.

The clown whooped for joy, he leapt off his seat and leapt into the air. Everyone clapped and cheered.

Then the clowns came out to play. Smoke filled the air. They came. They could tumble, and they did tumble and fell all over the place. Yet they were delightful and brightly coloured. They came in all shapes and sizes, they flipped and somersaulted and fell flat onto their faces. Some fell onto their tummies (some were almost as good as the tumblers themselves.) The crowd *ohhhed* and *ahhhhed* every time a clown fell. One clown balanced across a high wire with a huge grin. He leaned to one side and pretended to fall off. A woman in the crowd audience shouted out at the top her lungs: "Be careful!" The clowns below ran around falling over each other, and throwing pies. Then there was a scream. Above them, a man and woman – the high wire act, wobbled and fell. Several women shrieked and some covered their eyes.

The clowns below jumped onto each other's back and caught them in mid air. They all collapsed and became a huge puddle of bodies. They lay there for thirty seconds, all of them completely still. A hushed silence filled the whole room, as the crowd held its breath. Then the clowns leapt up together. Music played. The audience roared and clapped, then everyone stood up and stomped their feet. John clown heard the stomping, and at first didn't understand. At first he thought that they were expressing disapproval toward the clowns below. Then he realised that they were showing appreciation.

The clowns bopped and jived with the crowds' loud thumping feet. They skipped around the circumference of the circle until finally the music stopped. The crowd continued to stomp their feet even after the clowns had filed out of the ring. Then they came out again, took a bow and stood along the circumference of the ring.

The music started up again and the animals came out. Lots of different animals, all different shapes and sizes. Big cats came out, at least Johnny thought that they were big cats. They had hooves – they used these to good effect and drove them into the ground. The crowd clapped in rhythm. Trumpets sang and other musical instruments began playing too.

The great cats circled the entire ring with the ring master at the centre. He had a whip in his hand but he didn't use it, he didn't need too. The great cats were wonderful, their fluffy tails (fluffy? yes fluffy – the creatures in this world were all so similar but oh so different than those of *Shoople!*) The front cat bucked, then thrust its legs up and backwards powerfully. The cat behind lifted its front legs and hooves at the exact moment. Their hooves came together, producing a loud accompaniment of sparks.

The crowd whooped and the big cats trotted faster, then began to canter.

A nice mood swept through the circus. The cloven hoofed cats ran so fast that they lifted the dust from the ground and caused the air to be filled with a purple haze dust cloud. Sparks from the occasional impact of hoof against hoof leapt up from the ground and entered into the smoke, creating a small electrical storm.

The audience leapt to their feet and roared their approval with clapping and foot stomping. Johnny loved it, he too rose to his feet as tears drenched his body, producing a puddle between his feet. The tears were of joy and happiness. The moment captured him with huge arms and hugged him. *How wonderful*, he thought. *How very brave and wonderful*.

The smoke cleared and revealed nothing, just an empty ring. The crowd roared their appreciation.

Silence descended across the audience as each person leaned forward in their seat. Anticipation settled on every face. They leaned forward, mouths fully set, ridged as stone, eyes cast forward.

Johnny wanted to shout something out, just to make them jump.

A chittering began. Something clicked and clonked. All eyes turned to the entrance. A leg appeared, a long spindly leg. Then another appeared by the side of the first. Johnny held his breath. What was he about to see? Now his face was filled with rapt attention too. He felt every muscle in his body become taunt.

The clowns below became very quiet. They shuffled their feet and looked everywhere except at the spindly leg. They appeared relaxed but Johnny could smell their fear. It titillated his nostrils and would have filled him with a wild exaltation, but it didn't. He felt fear. A fear for them – the audience. The performers had done a magnificent job. They had done well, they had worked hard and truly entertained. The clowns were noble.

The leg belonged to a beast and the beast stepped forward tentatively. Then, with a sudden burst of agility it leapt into the centre of the ring. The clowns leaned backward. Johnny couldn't blame them, this was a formidable beast.

The ring master stepped into the circle proudly, chin held high, back straight. He brought forth his whip and cracked it near to the creature. The music began as a fresh scent of fear met Johnny clown's nostrils. This time fear came from the ring master too.

Johnny stood up and made his way to the steps. At any other moment the people would have complained, they would have yelled at him to get back into his seat. Their gazes, however, were transfixed on the creature. Johnny descended the steps quickly without keeping his eyes from the ring or its occupants.

The creature lifted up its mandibles and clicked its beak together rapidly, then shrieked and rubbed its mandibles together too. It looked to be a giant scorpion, yet there were differences. This scorpion, if it really was a scorpion, had a beak and two antennae.

Fear spread like a tide through the audience. Some even left their seats and headed toward the exit. Their fear almost paralysed Johnny – the overwhelming scent exhilarated him too, excited him, and the beast within him. He held onto his mind even as it tried to leave him. He struggled mightily to contain the beast that was within him. It wanted to claw its way to the surface and transform him. The potential for violence, for chaos, willed the creature forward with a terrible ferocity.

Johnny was not without strength. He tried with all of his might to hold onto the moment, to what was truly important. All of the performers were noble and full of kindness.

I must protect the clowns!

He drove the beast back, back to the place from which it dwelt, back down to the depths of himself. He fought with it and wrestled it into submission.

Ah yes, the beast chuckled ... but soon it will be over. Soon I will rise and never descend.

Johnny felt a wonderful love for his new friends. They had been so very kind to him. The giant scorpion heaved its body backwards onto its hind legs and lifted two front legs and grew. Johnny couldn't believe his eyes. It was like watching a giant jigsaw reconfigure itself. The creature's cartilage shifted. Hidden pieces of itself slid from the inside to the outside. Now that Johnny had time to inspect the insect, or whatever it was, he realised that the surface of the creature resembled a tortoise (though instead of a curved shell, its *shell* was not curved but instead had sharp angles.)

More pieces shifted. It doubled its size in moments.

Everyone began to run. Some screamed and ran, some simply screamed. He leapt into the circle and placed himself between the creature and clowns. The ring master stepped back too.

The creature seemed to sense the fear of the clowns and leapt toward them. Johnny intercepted it. He ran at it and struck it across the beak, racking his finger across the hard surface. The force of the blow rocked the creature. As he stepped back the creature spat at him. A thin projectile flew from its mouth, clipping the clown's arm.

His eyes blurred, there was pain, a tremendous pain. It raked his mind with claws of steel. He had never imagined such pain. He sank to his knees and held his head. His head felt as if it was going to explode. At any moment he expected to be impaled by one of the creatures legs or bitten in half by its beak. Neither came, instead he heard a terrible scream.

The bag the bag

– he reached for it. It was there. He sank his teeth into the underside of an apple and felt the juices flow down his throat. His symptoms disappeared. He stood up and took stock of the situation.

Whilst the J Clown had been recovering the creature had not been idle. It now stood over a circus clown and was ready to deliver it's finishing blow. There was a clear intelligence in its eyes, in its many eyes.

The creature calculated the distance between itself and the clown, the huddled clown below its beak. Then it raised its beak high, ready to deliver the death blow.

It was now or never. Johnny leapt forward and changed form in mid flight. He became streamlined, a multicoloured bullet filled with teeth and talons. He caught hold of the beak with his hands, as his elongated nails became talons. The power of the beak was all consuming. His hands split apart like ripe fruit. Even as they split open he changed again, becoming stronger. The skin of his hands formed layers of bone. John's hands became as tough as an Orc's skin. He poured all his strength through his hands as his talon's grew stronger.

His transformation continued. He doubled his size and transformed his jaws. He leant forward and finished the last of his transformation. He growled forth a warning, and turned towards the clowns. "Go!" His terrible maw opened wide.

The clowns didn't need telling twice. They scrambled out of the ring and disappeared with the last of the people.

Again he became something more, a cross between a wolf and a clown. He raked his claws viciously across the underside of the creature and kicked it backwards.

Behind the creature, barely seen, behind a flap in the wall a large hand waved. The hand could only have belonged to Mitchell.

"Bring the creature over here!" Mitchell's voice was unmistakable. After the words had been spoken Johnny/clown thought that perhaps Mitchell hadn't spoken. Maybe, the beast was playing tricks on him, trying to trick him into doing something that was not a token of his own will, but a part of his *otherness*, or perhaps, the *beast* was trying to direct him to itself.

These thoughts were like meteor showers cascading against, or through the atmosphere of his mind. Yet like shooting stars they were short lived.

Seeing a large arm, an arm that could only belong to Mitchell, snake around the corner made Johnny smile. It was a plan at least. He ran at the beast. Its tail came up quickly and thrust forward. The clown fell to his knees and slid beneath the creature, biting the undercarriage of the beast with his elongated teeth.

Furious, the creature leaped upwards and swivelled in midair. *Beak and tail* – beak smashed into the floor, missing its target by a centimetres. It screeched and cawed, leapt and almost castrated the Clown as its tail swung low. Again Johnny was too quick, but the creature had gotten close. Much too close.

He headed for the flap, hoping the creature would follow. He passed through the flap, noticing the blade of a large battle axe above him. The creature scuttled behind quickly. It cawed and chittered. The clown didn't know much, but felt certain that a giant insect shouldn't caw.

The great and mighty Mitchell held an axe over his head and readied it. The clown's choppers were jabbering powerfully. The beast within, surfaced and snarled. The clown's eyes became blood red.

He looked down, never failing to be surprised at his own transformations. He readied himself for the final moment. The creature followed him at break neck speed.

Mitchell didn't hesitate. This snarling red eyed man wolf was surely not his friend? It was too late to think anything else. The scorpion like creature burst through the flap, its pincers snapping with deadly force.

Mitchell brought his axe down. The axe penetrated the outer shell of the creature and penetrated somewhat into its flesh. The beast's exoskeleton absorbed most of the blow. The clown readied himself to attack, to kill anything. Mitchell withdrew his axe and smashed the creature in its side with one of his great fists. Then he swept his axe sideward, catching it off centre, spinning it onto its back.

The axe came down again, this time for the last time. The bestial insect squealed. Its six legs jittered in midair and then became still, no longer desperately seeking leverage.

The clown smiled a wicked smile, a smile that was filled with too many teeth.

There came a sound, a sound that the clown remembered well. It was the sound of soldiers, of men running in armour. They came in from the back of the tent, shields positioned, swords unsheathed. They faced the clown and Mitchell.

"Big man," said a voice from the back. "Put the axe down. We only want the creature."

Mitchell understood exactly who they wanted.

"He is one of us and he is my friend." The big man leant down and spoke between his lips. "It is time to take a run good friend." Johnny, a Johnny that lurked beneath visage of the beast, understood instantly what Mitchell meant to do. The big man stepped forward and shielded the clown with his huge body.

Why? thought the clown. *Why are you doing this for me?* Mitchell lifted his axe as easily as a child lifts a toy. "You had best run, or I might change my mind and kill you myself!"

A cloud of determination settled behind Mitchell's eyes. His face became stone. He turned and cleaved through four soldiers with his axe, instantly smashing armour and tissue. An arrow struck him in the shoulder. It barely slowed him. The clown, and the beast within him, ran. To this day, the clown didn't know which part of him decided to run. Was it the beast within, or was it himself – his true self? He suspected it was a little bit of both.

He ran from the circus and into the night. The image of Mitchell swinging his axe replayed itself in his mind as he ran. He carried the image with him. The beast within tried to remove it from his mind, remove it or twist into something it wasn't. But the being, the true being that resided at the centre of himself, knew that he had a friend named Mitchell.

Mitchell had sacrificed himself for me!

Tears ran down his cheeks as he ran. The soldiers chased him. He left the circus quickly, descending into madness as he ran. There was the sound of metal on metal, armour clashing against armour, snorting horses and amongst the noise, there were a shouting of commands. The soldiers would be on him in a moment if he didn't move fast enough.

He transformed and fled. Always transforming – he was a transforming machine. Changing into what was needed. A mile passed beneath his paws in a moment. He ran with his tongue hanging out and with his nose wet and close to the grass. He stretched his legs out two at a time.

A row of candles in the distance. They looked like candles, but anyone would have guessed what they were. Soldiers, hundreds of them. He could imagine them with smiles on their faces ready to strike him down the moment he got near. The wind blew his hair back. A sprinkling of rain, rain that had been mere drizzle, now struck him across his face. His eyes were now red and cold as steel.

He listened for their movements. No matter how still they were, there would always be slight movements. There would be hundreds of soldiers that would shifting their weight from one foot to the other. There would be a stench also. He licked the wind. No taste. He flared his nostrils. There would be a stench of sweat or soap, there would leather and sniffs.

There was no shuffling of feet. Not even the slightest scuffle. The wind blew through the clown's nostrils and brought no scent. These soldiers were silent, as silent as a moonlit grove. How could a thousand soldiers make no sound?

He suddenly felt that death was the right thing to do. Death was upon him finally. Was death such a bad idea? Within himself, the forgotten creature, the creature that the *beast* sometimes referred to as the worm sent a thought: *let it be now. End this madness.*

The *beast* within roared its defiance, yet it also sought out death, but not its own (*never that!*) He drove himself forward, galloping on all fours and howled at an imagined moon. The worm, that quiet voice within, dreamt of death and a release from the beast's imprisonment. The beast would not be cowed, it was what it was, the greatest! At least, that was its image of itself. It had not become the creature it was by backing out of conflict.

He ran at them. He felt death loom toward him, imagined its clever teeth gnashing. He greeted it. (*Let it be now. If my death must be, then let it be now.*)

He came upon the torches but there was no one holding the torches. It was a trick, just a lousy trick! The torches were in a perfect line. He ran down the line, snapping at the wooden torches. He howled his contention. How dare they trick him! He gave a low growl and ran. He turned on heels and headed west.

He spotted the wooden spears. They were hammered into the ground, designed specifically to impale any running thing. His eyes transformed, becoming what they needed to be. *Feral* – his limbs grew leaner, his eyesight sharper. Now he was able to see in the dark.

The soldiers ran through the night, after their quarry.

He kept low and darted through the long grasses of the tundra. He did not tire and nor did they, at first. A moon disappeared behind the clouds. He wanted to turn, to tear them asunder. The beast within him wanted to delve into their meaty mass.

Johnny forced himself forward, into the driving place of his mind. He changed direction, away from the clever humans. He wouldn't let Mitchell's sacrifice be in vain.

Their noise diminished, vanquished by the clouds and tundra. Then they appeared again. This time their noise came from another direction. His eyesight was perfect, unmatched by any beast. His ears picked up on their clamour, not that they were making much noise. But when you had hearing such as he did, then they may as well have been beating a drum to announce their presence.

He had a thought. *They a herding me, into the forest – Let's go there.* To go into the very place where they wanted him to go was sheer stupidity – yet this was what the beast wanted him to do. The clown's eyes grew blood red. The beast dared death to come.

He darted into the forest, feeling a little less exposed as he entered into it. Beneath the baying of the hounds (he could hear their howls a mile away) he could hear the men speaking. He couldn't make out their words but the fact that he could hear them made him uneasy, they were much too close.

Without warning, noises and smells came from the left and right. It was them! How they did it he didn't know. He instantly manoeuvred past them as the nets fell from above. He leapt and watched in amazement as his claws extended and became talons.

Men leapt down from the branches of the trees. He turned on a dime, twisting his torso, springing forward and through a thorn bush, disappearing into the denseness of the forest.

Biting and thrashing, snarling and cursing, lips curling, mouth splitting as his mouth grew, as teeth grew. An arrow flew past his ears as one thudded into the ground in front of his nose.

He stride lengthened, his muscles grew stronger and he became leaner. He withdrew an apple ate it, ate it on the fly, gulping the pulp down. He became a multicoloured missile hurtling through the forest. His claws slashed the trees as he made sharp turns.

The men did not linger, they did not gape at the wondrous speed of the clown. Their spell weavers, although not as accomplished as the other races in the art of magic, had telepathy as a tool. Not only were they able to send thoughts and receive thoughts clearly. They could also cloud the minds of others whilst shielding their own minds. The clown's mind was like a vast labyrinth, divided against itself. They came to understand that they could not enter his mind.

One spell weaver fell to his knees and cradled his head with his hands. Then others fell to their knees. A scream ensued, a scream that only they could hear. The master spell weaver quickly shielded them from the clown's psychic blast.

There was something gained however. Now the clown's position was known.

The clown could read thoughts too, but not theirs.

Men were mobilised and repositioned. Now they were ready for the kill.

The clown grinned.

She appeared, hovering in the air, next to a tree. His first thought was that the apparition was a magical contrivance created by of his pursuers. But there was a strange feeling of peace that settled over him.

The bearded lady pointed with a straight arm. Steam bellowed beneath her feet, filling the environment, stifling the smell and clouding the mind maps of the telepaths. Johnny's gut told him to follow where she pointed. His head wondered whether it was wise. There wasn't much time to react or to decide, so he trusted. He wheeled to the left and ran. He kept his head low and focused his attention on speed.

She appeared again and pointed in another direction. Again he spun and leapt, re-aligning himself to a different path.

There came a crossing of paths, the paths that the larger creatures of the forest travelled. She appeared again, and pointed. Again and again she pointed. He followed every secret pathway of the forest, sometimes doubling back on himself.

The forest grew denser. She appeared and faced her palm toward him. He stopped abruptly, kicking up dust. She pointed downward, and with her other hand she lifted a finger to her lips. He realised just how close he had come to falling. He looked down and watched the shale bounce of the face of the cliff below him. The sound of his heart thundered in his ears.

He knew what he needed to do. He looked down and heard the soldiers close in behind him. He needed to act quickly.

His body shape-shifted again, becoming balanced and monkey like. His paws changed into hands and from his hind quarters a tail grew. His body became grey as it blended into the cliff face.

His confidence grew. Shape-shifting was fun.

The creature within remained quiet and had probably fallen asleep.

The rocks crumbled beneath his weight as he descended. He focused his attention to his toes, feeling for every small hole with his new versatile toes.

He heard her voice again, her voice came from the mist. "Beware, the rocks are enchanted. Follow the small strips of cloth."

He couldn't see any cloth. He began to panic, he felt a scream rise up into his throat – a scream of panic. He peered downward and felt terror for the first time."

Be brave little one. I will see you through this. Somehow he heard the voice and its tone was that of the bearded lady.

The soldiers were very close now, he could almost smell their breath. What now? He looked about himself, desperately seeking the cloth or anything which could aid him. A beam of light emerged and shone on a spot beneath his chin.

Ah, now he could see it!

Strange! When something is seen, something that has remained unseen, then abruptly it is seen, and appears right beneath your nose! *It is strange!* It is then that you wonder how you had missed such a thing in the first place! This is how it appeared to Johnny!

He gripped the rock, the one with the cloth hanging from it, with his left hand, then noticed the next piece. His toes did their clever trick and found the tiniest crack in the cliff face. He scaled the cliff.

Above, the dogs stared over the edge and barked excitedly. They had found their quarry.

Not today little doggie –

He moved swiftly down, easily following the hidden pathways. He grew in confidence with each hand and toe hold.

He felt something damp swirl around him. It was a cold curling shifting form. Mist slivered between his legs, rising up past his torso.

I called this mist forth thousands of years ago, whispered a voice. It echoed from the stones. The voice slivered around him, with the mist, chilling him.

He heard it with his ears but somehow it spoke within his mind also.

There were screams, screams that grew louder. Then they ebbed away beneath him. Some had attempted to follow him. Their cries could be heard whizzing past him, diminishing. He hugged the rocks to insure that they did not strike him on their way down.

I think I like this entity, mumbled the beast. A cackle of laughter reverberated through Johnny's head.

I called forth the mist to smite the intelligent beasts a millennia ago. For a moment the mist formed into a pair of lips. Then the image dissipated. Johnny licked his lips. His body hurt. All the shape changing had a cost. The voice of the mist ran through his mind like a silken scarf. It caressed his body also. He felt it against his cheeks and between his legs, pinching him occasionally.

I am a beast. Why doesn't the mist smite me? Chuckled the beast.

He continued his downward climb, feeling for the small strips with sore fingertips.

Her ... A snake slivered past his hand. It's smooth skin travelled over the bridge of his knuckles as he climbed downwards.

She ... The beast was dreaming about her. The beast's voice was tiny – a little tease but then, a flash of teeth: a smile within his mind's eye. It was her smile. Who was she? and why did she cause such terror for the beast?

Her ... "I need to find her." He whispered into the mist and felt a hopeless uncertainty. He didn't even know who he was, or why he should find this little girl. Should he not find himself first? Nevertheless, this little thing – the littlest smile ached his heart.

No ... whispered a voice, it was the beast's leathery twisted voice. "No! never that, never her!" The beast within raised itself from its curled up position.

No not now.

He was near to a revelation. It lingered on the fringes of his mind ... he turned his head and looked down. He would rather fall to his death – he would rather do that than let the beast escape from his prison, the prison within the matrix of himself.

The beast knew his heart and hunkered down again. It's smouldering presence sullen and perhaps a little too smug.

The moons strode the ice currents of the north and slid beneath a thunderous black cloud. There were three moons tonight, the two larger moons were cradled by the third in a half light. He felt a warmth and a delicate pain against the side of his face. He realised that he had scuffed his cheeks against the cold cliff face.

He continued his descent and as he did so a cascade of thoughts paraded through his mind (the beast inside remaining) – *Mitchell saved me. Why did he do that?* Mitchell is my friend. Johnny had felt things, things that he had never felt before. Friendship; a door opened in his mind. A warm happy feeling permeated his chest and his whole being. There was another word, a word that caused him confusion: *Sadness* –

He felt dreadful. He hung on, concentrating on every hand and foot, making sure that he didn't lose his focus.

Tick tock.

– A timer began in the depths of his mind, somewhere to the left.

Was the beast within playing a new game? Where had the beast come from? Had he always been there? Had he crawled into it whilst Johnny had been looking somewhere else? He couldn't remember. He filed the thoughts to the back of his mind. Perhaps he would deal with them later.

What if I could stay off the apples forever? What would happen? He hadn't had that thought before. Part of the problem was: a part of him loved it when the beast took over. He felt empowered. However, and this was the nub, when the beast took over there was nothing left of himself. There was no part of himself that felt good about anything, especially about friends.

He had felt part of something. Okay, it had only been for a short while but it had been a real feeling. Real as diamonds. He could not shake Mitchell from his mind and didn't want to. He had never seen a person be so brave or selfless. He felt his heart blossom with love, compassion and a deep sadness. He would miss him, he felt his absence acutely, yet even as the sadness filled him, he realised that he was really feeling sad for himself. He would never feel the joy of loving someone again.

A single blood red tear rolled from his eyelash, trickling onto his cheek, sliding quickly downward to the balance of his jaw.

The beast within him slumbered and rolled onto its side. *"Mitchell stupid."*

I disagree, thought Johnny. He regarded the beast as a separate entity. *A loathsome creature.* He looked into himself and found a terrible tomb, an echoing silence. He felt weary, weary of his travelling companion, weary of the constant war with himself.

Red fanged lips smiled, then opened: *"I'LL TEAR YOUR SOUL APART."*

It was more of a scream than a shout.

Now the beast was fully awake, and he didn't like Johnny's turn of thought at all. Didn't like it one bit.

The clown returned to his previous thoughts: *I felt part of something ...*

... Real as diamonds.

The beast grumbled: *Mitchell stupid.* The beast's first thought had been one of concern. It didn't want to lose what it had gained. It didn't want Johnny to become aware of what it was. Or, indeed, who Johnny was.

If he tries to take over my mind I will simply let go. Despair filled him from the very core of his being. He felt truly helpless. His teeth gnashed. *These are not my teeth! None of this is me!* He felt his grip weaken.

The beast fell silent.

Johnny sighed.

He concentrated on his downward climb again. I must hold on and hope, hope that my life comes back to me.

He climbed tirelessly, one hand over the other, one rough shod foot downwards and then another. The moons hid like playful children, as the clouds shouldered one another.

He continued his descent. The beams of light continued to guide, lighting up where he needed to go, leading to the next dirty rag. Each rag cleverly hid a piece of metal, a perfect piece to grip hold of. He orchestrated all of his movements and leapt from one peg to another when he needed to. He was mindful of slippery surfaces, even though with each hand haul he became stronger and further able.

The sun rose again and travelled across the sky, as a redness spread evenly to the west. He glanced downwards and observed the roof top of a forest. He concentrated on keeping his focus. To jump ahead in his thoughts would perhaps cause him to slip. A fall from here would still instantly kill him.

The clown felt the earth beneath his feet and fell to his knees, but even as he fell he looked up. A figure beckoned to him with a raised arm. He attempted to follow the figure with his eyes, but a sudden weariness overwhelmed him.

The beast within yawned and cracked its metaphysical jaws.

Cauldron and pie.

Amongst the trees a cauldron sat on a tripod in the darkness. It bubbled and frothed. The flames beneath the cauldron lit the small camp enough to reveal a shadowed figure. The shadow hunched over the cauldron and clucked her tongue. She also produced a strange sound that resembled laughter, or perhaps she sobbed. Occasionally the shadow stirred the contents of the cauldron, whispering and cackling. Long fingers scattered dust into the bubbling frothy mixture.

"Karm over here sweet man, karm hither some and karm see." She drawled out the *arm* in "karm" and pronounced the "K" sharply. "Karm over 'ere so I can sees yuse." Her tone was shrill in one moment, and soothing in the next. "I wonts hurts you no, not one tittle bit. I is tasty, I is tasty nice." She smacked her lips fervently. "The old king of *Forfor* told me I was tasty nice and he was never known to be wraang." She didn't look up from her cauldron, she smiled gently into it.

He watched her from the shadows with tightly pressed lips. His scarlet eyes blinked.

The scene was spooky. He stepped closer, one solid step, and as he did so the environment brightened. Candles suddenly sprang to life, illuminating the environment – every part of it, every hollow in every tree. An old shoe had been cleverly secreted within a knotted hole, and a red candle pulsed out red light from it. All the trees had holes, most of them had several holes and each emitted a different glow, a different colour and shade.

Why is this camp so lit up? The clown didn't know. *Why should I tread here?* He didn't know that either. His feet carried him forward nonetheless. He eased forward, shuffling one step at a time. He felt the ligaments in his feet stretch and ease. The sinews and the tissues of every body part relaxed. There was music in the air, a subtle rhythm – very kind – barely audible. He could have adjusted his hearing, could have changed the shape of his ear to hear the music a little better. He chose not to.

"Yes I is magic some, yes I is magic some and I am is lots magic some." Her face became clearer as he approached, her tone gentler. She crooked finger against her chin. "Aye a lot magic some. No point denying it, not that I ever would. Us good magic some peoples keep this worlds from falling apart. Indeed we do, jus we are magic sss sssome – us and Fae with a capitol F!" Her voice crooned toward him, enchanting him.

"You'se been hating us plenty but youse and everything elses is magic some and some are magic a little bit, but we are all magic some. She prattled at the darkness and shook her stick. "I say some, we are all magic some." She pulled her hood back to reveal her face. It was a hideous face, full of warty warts and hanging flesh; loathsome – flesh quivering upon flesh, in places where there shouldn't be. Two noses, yes two, and they grew into each other. So pronounced was her grotesqueness that the clown couldn't help but wince.

"The Carnasti karm some. They karm but we got some time still." She flicked her chin with her index finger. A fleck of skin fell from her face. "Yea, the Carnasti are just beginning to build their empire some."

She clucked her tongue between sentences. "I know I knows. There haz been many a thing that hazzes experienced my beauty and hazzes taken a misstep jus to take a better look." Now her words ran into each other.

She stopped clucking her tongue." 'Ere you'se can give me a little kiss by 'ere." She offered him her bony chin and pointed to her cheek. With her other hand, she slipped a drink into his hand. He couldn't help noticing her hands, they were knobbly and bulbous. Hairs grew from prolific lumps and bumps. As she lifted a sleeve he witnessed a fat spider swing and scuttle down a line of silken web. It's spindle lively legs traversed the lumps with ease. It flipped itself around one of her bony fingers (she opened her palm and turned it upward to prevent it from falling off) then it sank it's fangs into her. She shuddered deeply with obvious pleasure. Its dark body filled with a yellow substance and grew noticeably fatter. Then, having taken its fill, it scuttled back up her sleeve.

"Takes it sum, take it lots sum and give me a little kiss wontcha?" He didn't feel the urge to kiss her so he didn't. She smiled a toothless grin at him. "Please yourself. Youze don't know what youze missing."

He took the beverage and smelt it. It smelt of coffee and peppermint. He decided not to drink it. Drinking or eating things which were given by hideous witches was not a good idea.

He told his hand to give the substance back. His hand refused to heed his command. He observed his hand lift the cup to his lips. He watched, utterly fascinated by the reluctance of his own arm to do his bidding.

He tilted his head back and allowed the liquor to flow down his throat, wondering as he gulped, why he was doing so. The next thought that came (as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve) was: *can I have some more?* The witch smiled and handed him another cup.

A gentle warmth seeped through his entire body. He seated himself by the side of the fire and stretched out his legs.

"You must go to the North." She extended a hand out. A staff lifted into the air and drifted into the palm of her hand. She turned toward him and twisted her face into an expression which may have been a smile.

Then her accent changed and her tone became clearer and her words precise. "The time comes. Here'd it come."

Above their heads a full moon appeared. "Aye, she hasn't got her sisters with her tonight." If ever there was a thing which could be said to fade into existence, here it was: the moon above their heads. It drifted between two dark clouds resplendently, and bathed the night sky dark blue.

It was a distant moon, blue and kind. The clown lifted his now purple scarlet gaze to the blue moon. His inner self waited, quiet and still.

Now all vestiges of the witch's unkempt use of language fell away. "Resplendent mistress we are here and recognise you."

Another Orb appeared in the sky, this one orange.

"Oh great Father, Father from the highest realms, it is good to gaze upon your face. Thank you for sharing your presence with us, we thank you for this moment."

Her voice changed again. Her personage radiated power. Her accent changed too. She spoke quickly in an unknown language. Power flowed through her. Her eyes and face smoothed, her gnarls and twisted flesh became young. Ugliness slid away. Now she glowed silver.

A figure entered their encampment. This figure glowed orange and within the centre of its chest there was a flame. The clown felt calm and contented, and desired to sleep to scoop him up and whisk him away.

They met. Her silver surrounded the fiery being, surrounding him. Then the flame sprang up again within his breast, filling his being as his being ... his orange aura poured into her. They shared each other's presence. Orange light filled the camp. The fiery being turned briefly to the clown. There was fire ablaze in his eyes, roaming around the iris – fire burning white and orange.

Fire and silver merged. His smile. His smile brought peace and contentment.

Then the figure disappeared and the witch instantly changed back to her grotesque self.

The witch (for surely she was a witch) shrieked: "The master cometh!" The orange moon spilled forth. She tilted her staff and struck the ground. The end of the staff penetrated the earth, the other end leaned toward the clown. She released her grip and splayed her fingers. The staff did not fall. She turned her gaze upward and opened her arms, surrendering herself to the flows of energy.

The blue moon shone a beam of pure light downwards and the orange moon did the same. The blend of orange and blue converged on the staff and mingled, becoming one. A brief moment of silence, a moments breath, then the illuminations ceased. A few inches from the clown's feet a small golden bag manifested. It faded into reality.

Then the moment departed.

"Now we have but a moment." The crone's voice was now calm and grave. Her eyes shone with a brilliance. "When you leave here, go north. You will find your Kollagidy leaves there. But listen here and listens well. The beast sleeps, I talk plainly and to the point, at least somewhat." She gave a quick girly giggle. "He has a hold on you and you knows it." Her eyes were green – cat like.

"There is a creature called the Red King. He is about his purpose and his purpose has never been good. But onward we go and I must tell you what must be told. I will conjure a spell but I don't want you to be alarmed. Be alarmed and in all probability the beast within you will awaken and you don't want that do you. You need to trust."

The clown shook his head solemnly.

"By your own will do you allow me to cast the spell on you?"

He nodded. Everything felt right, and he felt more himself than ever.

Her face lit up violet. "This is what you must remember. There will be one which holds the white rose. Trust the white rose." She pointed to the bag at his feet. She picked it up quickly and gave it to him. No sooner had the bag touched the palm of his hand it disappeared.

"Ah you have another bag." She passed her hand atop of Johnny's hand. A silvery bag appeared. She gazed at it with wonder. "So, sheems the silver queen has been playing her part too." She passed her hand over the silver bag, as she did so, the bag disappeared. "That sum silver bag probs for some other adventure in the future."

"Remember this and forget." She clapped her hands once.

A brief wind flowed between the trees. The candles extinguished themselves. Light became darkness. A rushing forth of wind ensued. The forest exploded with sound as shouting and yelling commenced.

Soldiers!

The witch disappeared.

The beast within awoke and growled. The clown's terrible mouth opened. His consciousness slipped into a kaleidoscope hole as the beast came forward.

The Kollagidy leaves!

The beast knew what he needed to do. He knew where to go. To the north. The men would be upon him soon. He could have turned and transformed but there was no time. He could have changed his form yet again and faced the soldiers. He would be able to dispense with them easily, but time was of the essence.

The alignment is nearly upon me. He felt his masters within his life blood – within his consciousness. They called to him through time.

He ran.

He didn't understand his thoughts but he didn't need to. He knew what needed to be done and where he needed to be.

North called to him.

He transformed, this time into an entirely different form. The beast had been born. That which had been a clown transformed into its final form. It happened suddenly. The consciousness of the clown fell into a kaleidoscope of colours. The beast roared its triumph.

The Kollagidy leaves. The beast smiled. Now that he had finally taken over his host there was no need to guard his thought. The clown had believed every word! How absurd! *The Red King. What a wonderful contrivance.* The beast remembered when his masters had created the toy. The toy had been a wonderful machine. The beast had watched, intelligent back then, in the long distant past.

That was what the Red King had been. A toy that his masters had tinkered with, that one of their children had made. How wonderful that such a play thing could bring his masters back into this realm.

I am becoming! It wouldn't be the Kollagidy leaves that would bring about his final transformation. That had been a simple lie. A lie that was designed by the Red King to get this sorry creature to the place he needed to be for the beast to be able to grow. His coming forth had happened sooner than the Red King had anticipated. The beast smiled again. *It is not surprising that even the Red King underestimates the mighty power of the ancient Lizard Kings.*

Somewhere the fabric of reality rippled, becoming thinner.

He ran north.

The men followed.

Something had changed. The general knew it, he sensed it. He had been many battles and knew when something had changed. The game had changed. He felt it in his bones. The dogs sniffed and barked. They howled too. Howled with fear. He had never heard dogs make such a sound. He followed the dogs, urging them on. The soldiers rode their horses hard as they followed. He heard their whips as they struck their horses. The horses eyes grew wide with pain, fear and exertion. Within the eyes of the soldiers there was a fierce light, a fierce determination to uphold all that was Carnasti.

The Carnasti heard the growl. The growl was as loud as thunder. Their leader heard the thunderous growl and felt fear enter into his heart. What manner of beast had made such a sound?

#

Trev awoke with a start. It was time to move, but the moving hurt. Every inch of him hurt. He stretched – tried to stretch. Big Al had moved him. He felt sure. His head hurt. His dreams ran away from his mind even as he struggled to rise.

Good morning. Trev almost jumped. His body felt as if it had travelled a thousand miles whilst he had slept. Then he remembered big Al.

"You have been busy big Al. Where the hell am I?"

You are safe. That is what counts. Big Al sounded different. Somehow meeker.

"We have to find her. The little girl needs our help."

Trev was right. Big Al knew it. His voice warbled as he spoke back. "She does. Have you ever wondered why you found her? Why your paths crossed?"

"I don't think of such things. Who are we to know such things?"

Big Al voice descended into a whisper ...

Who are we indeed?

Trev mused for a moment. Sometimes Big Al's voice was clear, mostly it was like Big Al spoke directly into his ear. Other times Big Al's voice was in his own head. Trev didn't like the way Big Al had lapsed into speaking within his mind. "We have to get going, and I have no idea which way to go."

No idea indeed.

"Stop with all the gobbledegook. My head hurts too much for that crap." His head did hurt too. Trev never suffered from headaches but now one raged with his head.

Gobbledegook indeed. This time Big Al's voice trembled ... and giggled.

Trev grimaced but smiled nonetheless. He looked about himself. He looked for a river or for signs of a river. A stream would do.

He talked to Big Al as he walked. Big Al did not answer. Hours passed beneath his boots, hours and dust. He listened for the faintest murmur from Big Al but there was no reply.

As he walked he ached less. Walking is good for the soul. Trev kept telling himself that Big Al's silence was a blessing. Perhaps he needed some time to himself, some time to think.

The terrain, for many miles, eased upward (which was bad. Rivers tended to flow downward.) There was a dusty trail. The wind blew the dust on either side into small spirals, titillating the hair on his arms too. The path rose slightly for many miles and the wind began to blow a little harder. The grass thinned and the mountains either side him, in the distance, rose into the air like grand cathedrals.

An hour passed as he watched the path and listened to his boots. The wind now rushed at him. The wind was no longer capricious, now it was a beast, a beast that pushed at him, an ill tempered bull. Flecks of dust stung his cheeks and eyes. Grains of grit stung his eyes and ears.

In a strange way the wind also refreshed him, awaking him to his essential realness. It also chilled him. It had been a long time since he had felt the elements against his skin. He felt alive again. He could taste the grit and feel it between his teeth. He kicked a few scorpions out his path with quick well aimed kicks.

Since he had had donned the suit the elements hadn't been able to touch him. An unsettling feeling flowed upward, upward from the centre of himself heating his face.

With him and Big Al something was amiss.

This land is ancient. For countless ages it had remained untouched.

Al seemed to be talking to himself. *My memories seem to be faded. At least the memories of what I did before you found me.* Big Al's thoughts were unusually pervasive. They were usually soft and did not intrude on Trev's own thoughts.

It was best not disturb the Big Al whilst he was being retrospective. *This whole realm is a forgetful realm...*

Trev wondered what a realm was. He kept his thoughts to himself though. It would do to disturb Big Al. Trev felt his fragility. Big Al had fallen quiet again. *Diagnosis ...* the word floated upward into Trev's consciousness. The thought was gentle and delicate. A feather floating upwards ... or downwards.

For two days they travelled and watched the mountains turn into hills. Trev walked ceaselessly. His leg muscles had grown strong. Big Al still healed his muscles when they ached. He almost could feel his muscles re-knitting themselves.

He sat on a rock and felt the sun heat the top of his head. His hair had grown long and unruly. It was the price of wandering in the wilderness. His fingers ached and felt a little strange. He looked down and noticed that something was dripping from them. It was a black substance, it pooled around his feet. He noticed it with a detached attention, attempting to keep his mind calm and clear.

– "Sh sh sh" said big Al.

Trev had gotten used to the invisible suit, so much so that he had forgotten that he had a suit on at all. This garment – a garment that fitted as well as his skin. Whoever had thought of such a thing? For a moment the suit changed colour, becoming black. It was then that Trev understood what Big Al was doing.

The gunk that pooled around his feet began to solidify, forming into an elongated shape. He watched patiently as the shape formed into a long blade. It was a slow process. He had experienced the suit form weapons before. Then the suit's transformative powers had been near instant. This transformation was slow and tedious.

The substance coalesced into a sword. Trev felt the hilt of the sword with his fingers. He gripped it tightly and felt the wonderful balance of it.

Friend Trev, this is a present for you.

Now it is time to practice –

Trev did so. He danced with his blade. He attempted to remember his lessons. He felt an energy flow through him. It had been an age since he had felt similar experiences. The joy of the blade. The defensive arts. Arts that should only be employed as a means to defend that which is most precious. *Oh the joy!*

The blade felt heavier. He felt the weight increase, at first his wrists ached. The sword was becoming heavier by the moment. This was Al's doing. He could almost feel the little chap smiling. It was a good idea. Whilst he danced with the blade, he remembered the time his teachers had placed weights on his body and had given him a heavy sword to practise with. Resistance training was an essential part of perfecting the arts of defence.

Big Al was awake to what Trev was doing and although he was not as he should be, he was the sort of chap who, even on a bad day performed better than most did on their best. Gradually, as he trained through the day, he felt the invisible suit become heavier and heavier. He had to smile. He had forgotten what it felt like to train as hard as this.

It is about time that Big Al came back to reality and stopped his musing.

Big Al had done more than muse. He had done a complete diagnostic of every part of himself. His first conception was correct. He was dying. This did not come as a shock to him, as it would any another sentient life form.

"I am dying friend Trev."

There was no return to that. Trev sweated and gasped for breath. The sword felt like a lead weight in his arms. He dropped it to the floor and sank to his knees.

There was no point in asking if it was true. Big Al did not make mistakes. He was not a living breathing sentient being. He was a machine ... and yet he was more than that.

Trev felt his heart fill up with sadness and love. Love for his friend. "You have taught me more about being a human being than any human I have ever met. Thank you Big Al."

Big Al's love blossomed. The sword became lighter. Trev lifted and slipped it into a scabbard, a scabbard which now sat between his shoulder blades. A moment ago he felt it manifest. Perhaps it was Big Al's last act.

He walked for a bit and watched the sun dip. He realised that his sight was no longer augmented. Now his senses were his own. He looked at the moonless sky. The clouds hung heavy. He found a spot against a rock. He huddled against it and prepared his mind for a cold night.

He had survived many such nights in the past. You never got used to them. The cold and the numbness and aching of the joints were unwelcome night companions.

He closed his eyes and drifted off.

Trev awoke to pain. The sun crept over the horizon and bled into the darkness. Trev opened his eyes and struggled to get to his feet. His muscles cramped as he tried to stand. He straightened his legs and felt agonising pain in both legs. His legs locked up and screamed. Cramp seized every part of him, disabling him completely.

He gritted his teeth and tried to bend his knees. Half hour later he was able to finally move them, albeit through a locked jaw and grim determination.

Big Al was absent. Trev felt he was there, somewhere. Hoped he was still there.

The night had been a torment, it had taken half of the morning to recover from it. Yes he had set out, but the wind was blowing cold against his face and legs. His torso felt okay, perhaps the suit still protected him.

There was plenty to be glad about. Finally the land was beginning to change and slop downward.

He walked all day with the sun on his head.

It was the next day (after a warm evening next to a fire) that the forest presented itself. Grasses presented themselves. Scrawny grasses and wizened trees littered the landscape.

Good bye Trev. Powering down. Beep.

Trev kept his mind on his purpose. The very thought that Big Al was gone was unbearable. As he came down from the last sloop, the scrawny grasses became longer. He picked up a long stick, and used it as an aid for walking. He kept it in front of himself and swished through the grasses. He didn't know what kind of scuttling or crawling creature existed in this clime. It was the hot clime that the poisonous creatures were found in abundance and things had definitely heated up a little. Prudence and caution is a good practice.

His suit was becoming decidedly thinner. The wind pierced it. He would have to do something about clothing soon.

He found the pathways of humans as he entered into a small forest. At least he hoped that only humans travelled in these parts. He had travelled eastward and covered a lot of ground. The clime had changed.

It wasn't a dense forest. Which was good, because he was intensely aware of the passage of time. Within these forests humanity had settled, stem and root. That is what he had been taught by kin and clan. He had seen maps and had been taught about the different creatures that resided in these forests. This place would be filled with humans. This was his hope, and it was a slim hope. Perhaps he based this hope on faulty logic and a poor memory. He wouldn't depend upon everything remaining as his clan had taught so many years ago. Yet when he spotted a pathway through the forest he felt sure that a group of sentient creatures travelled here often, or if not often, then sometimes.

There was no point in worry about where his friends were. He had to accept that he might not see them again. This was a harsh way of thinking, his heart grew heavy thinking it. Faeries had a way of doing things which always caused trouble. He knew it wasn't their fault, they didn't wish for troubled events to come their way (or his) but that didn't change the fact humans should avoid contact with the Fae.

A rough shod road stretched forward, winding itself between the trees. He felt the earth beneath his feet turn from soft to hard. Broken remnants of brick and cobble littered the pathway as grasses tried to escape between the crooked patterns between. Tall grasses reached through the gaps in the trees in the distance. Trev had never seen such tall grasses. Where were the creatures that would eat such foliage?

He walked upon the path, what there was left of it. He walked slowly so as not to trip or stumble. He felt the suit lose its cohesion as he walked and feared nakedness. Surely he would look strange to anyone who would stumble across a walking naked man. There was not only this to consider, but also the obvious conditions of the cold.

The wind blew, rustling against the leaves, sweeping through the boughs. He felt the spirits of this place. They watched from the creeping shadows, from the hidden spaces between the branches. The trees leaned and stretched into different awkward positions. They resembled Ogres and Orcs. Once he had seen such creatures in a field fighting each other.

He sat next to a large tree. The trunk of the tree was easily three times as wide as any other. He collected branches and arranged them carefully between the roots of the tree.

He walked a little way into forest. He walked carefully, feeling the edges of his feet on the earth, finding the special place where balance resided. He paused in the shadow of a tree listening to the sounds of the forest. He melded into the forest. A part of his mind witnessed the intake and gentle exhaling of air into and from his lungs. This was a process of meditation. He became aware of his soul body and extended his soul senses.

An hour passed slowly. He heard the small creatures of the forest and witnessed a few snakes pass him by. A cat walked past him, paused and gazed through the darkness into his eyes. Trev prepared himself for an attack. The energy of the animal met with his energy and was without animosity. The cat simply walked away.

A while later a hooved creature stepped into his view. It was covered in fur and appeared to be plump.

He swung his sling quickly.

Missed.

The creature pricked its elongated ears and paused. Trev stepped forward and loaded another.

Before he could swing another stone the creature fell, crumpling to the ground.

Men rustled gently into view. There were three of them. One of them was far larger than the others. It was he who stooped to one knee and withdrew the arrow from the creature.

Trev slipped through the darkness silently. He came from behind and slipped a blade gently against the throat of one of the men. The man's eyes grew wide but didn't make a sound.

Trev gently divested the man of his sword, easing it out of its scabbard with one quick motion. With the same quick speed, with his left hand, he withdrew the sword from the scabbard of the second man. The large man in front managed to grip his sword. Trev struck him a quick blow on the neck, collapsing him where he stood.

He stepped back levelling his sword forward. "Back off a little my friends."

At least he now had clothes. He followed the cobbled stone path until they became smooth. The people in these parts knew how to make their paths. The stones were of different sizes yet were smooth on his heels. The forest smelled fresh. He felt good. He felt relaxed. Big Al seemed to have disappeared entirely. There was no inner voice or even the semblance of one.

It felt strange not to miss him. Trev felt sure that the experience of him not being there would be unnerving in some way. Yet the indisputable truth was that it didn't feel strange at all. It felt natural.

For a long while he walked. The scenery rolled by as the path swerved. The air was fresh, fragrant and elegant. Elegance – it was hard to define the mysterious qualities of this place. Everything was a little more refined and defined. The trees themselves gave forth a feeling of tranquillity. The land became lush as he walked. Flowers reached toward him, or so it seemed. Yet when he turned his head to view them doing so, they weren't. He felt as if he had walked into another world. It had happened gradually, almost without notice. He sat beneath a tree and checked his garments. They weren't much to look at, but even as he felt their coarse texture, he felt a deep contentment.

Hours drifted by. The immensity of the place, of this world made him feel small. The eagles would be able to see more than he, but even they would surely feel small compared to the giganticness of the forest they were in. And to the world this forest might very well be a mere blip.

A gentle breeze caressed his brow. The fragrance of the trees and the gentle stirring of the leaves brought him to a relaxed state. His thoughts stopped running, and his muscles lost every ounce of tension. He realised for the first time in his life that he had never known true peace. Here there was peace.

You don't know true peace and relaxation until you have experienced it. These words were the last conscious thoughts of the evening. He drifted into a sea of tranquillity.

Then he awoke with a start. At first he didn't know what it was that had awoke him. He felt the definite urge to sink back into this wonderful place, sink back into tranquillity.

Something was wrong. *Even the trees knew it.* They didn't stir as gently as they had been before. His sleep mellowed, he rose lethargically and stumbled around the tree. The trees seemed to be urging him to climb, which was a crazy thought but he heeded their call and began to climb.

He climbed the nearest tree, felt its soft texture and settled in the branches. He ran his hand along the surface of the branch which he knelt upon. It was incredibly soft. Such strange trees.

In the distance there was the baying of hounds and the thunderous sound of horses galloping. A lot of horses.

A beast swept through the forest. Its presence was strangely quiet as it passed by. A cold wind accompanied it. It stopped for a briefest of moments and sniffed the air. Its fallow nostrils lifted in the air. It crunched its teeth together then grinded his teeth, creating sparks. Its eyes were shallow slits of ochre. The creature's senses were on full alert. It opened his mouth and growled and thrust its head forward. It had no fur. Its hide was as dark as night, its body sleek and it had a tail (which was the strangest of its features) which was long and pointed at the end. *It is a dragon youngling.* The ancient forest breathed the thought statement into his mind.

If Al still existed he would have thought it had come from him. Of course dragons were myth. If they had existed it had been in a long distant past.

The creature disappeared as quickly as it arrived. Its muscles bunched together, then it sprang forward and disappeared into the night. Then came the horsemen with their hounds. There were a lot of them. They shouted commands and thundered through the forest.

There wasn't much to see except horses, men and a pack of hounds. The hounds took the lead.

He waited a little. These soldiers were well organised and well equipped. Five minutes flew by. Scouts ran beneath the tree he was in. They ran swiftly and gracefully. They moved skilfully and with surprising stealth. He waited for them to pass. Then waited a little longer just to make sure they had vacated the area. Then he slipped down the tree.

"Pie anyone for pie?"

She came. She was there, first a stone's throw away and then right next to him. Her voice could have frozen every person if they had been unprepared. If they were in their beds and waiting for to sleep and heard such a voice they would have been unprepared just as he was now.

"Such a nice pie for such a nice man. Come hither and come meet us, special one." She was entirely cloaked, but there was a warty nose perturbing from her cowl.

She faced him as she drew closer. He could see her ugliness. Could it be her? Could this be their kind mistress. The Mistress of legend? The moon sorceress?

Every story of note from his childhood included some mention of the moon Goddess. As he grew into a man he had mastered the unarmed arts but there had been other teachings too. Each day the historian would teach them the old tales. The mysteries were taught to him and he was a willing student. For his peers the lessons were boring. For him they were fascinating.

"Ha ... a true master. One who has not forgotten himself, but who would blame him for the loosing of himself, even if he did?" She ambled toward him with a crooked spine and crooked gait. Yet as she entered the circle (Trev noticed for the first time that he stood within a circle of mushrooms) she pulled back her cowl and revealed her face. It was ugly beyond compare, yet as he viewed it he knew that her features was but a clever illusion. Horsemeisters would have been fooled by such if they had seen the features on another. They were as susceptible as any other to spells and incantations. Simply put, she belonged to them as they belonged to her. For those who did not know the mysteries they would see only ugliness.

Indeed, so did he, at least, the illusion filled his vision. His heart told him something different. Yet he knew who she was and the purpose of her ugliness.

"May I kiss your fair cheek great mistress?"

She smiled, cackled and offered her cheek. He kissed it. It was soft to his lips. A pool of moonlight abruptly shone on her demeanour, her ugliness fell away like a veil being lowered. A beauteous sight could now be seen.

"Glory to the great one from which you and I have come from, and move to." It was an invitation of sorts. The ancient greeting that had been passed down to every horsemeister. It had been prophesised that one day a horsemeister would see the Mistress of the Moon.

"Aye, tiz wise to say so. Yet you are also among those who are blessed and the moon welcomes thee." She lifted an arm to her centre, palm upward. Then she pushed her arm forward.

Another old ritual.

She was a creature that had been there at the beginning, at the conception of the Horsemeister clan. He bowed deeply and opened his palm to her.

Her beauty fell from her face and was replaced with repugnant ugliness again.

"Now let's 'av sum pie."

The Red King.

The desert was large. It was broad and super large, as large as a really big frying pan and then some. The sun baked landscape ached. Wisps of dried seed floated on tendrils of air accompanied by an acrid odour. Stone boulders merged with the sand and the occasional barren tree drooped its branches to the unforgiving hardpan desert soil. The landscape was motionless and silent.

as the last of the desert day turned to night the cold came with a vengeance. Lizards scuttled over large boulders with dextrous webbed feet. Mammals slipped into their tunnels and ran to the depths. They shivered and huddled together for protection. Perhaps they sensed the dark creatures which walked and slivered above them.

Red gigantic worms ploughed through the tunnels, collapsing the carefully constructed secret chambers of the secret huddling creatures, as they passed through the earth. The small creatures held each other and peered upward, ears pricked high as their little bodies shivered with fear.

Dark creatures slivered and slavered as they travelled quietly together. They moved in an orderly fashion. They refrained from eating each other. A considerable achievement, considering each desired to do so almost every minute. Tonight there was a greater game afoot. Their low cunning and mutual fear of the Red King kept their moods temperate.

They made a beeline to a destination, a destination that each was being directed toward, by the low thrumming that could be felt in every cell of their evil disfigured bodies. Occasionally, a creature decided to travel in a different direction, then the thrumming began. The thrumming was a reminder of the Red King's might and a reminder of what would happen to those who disobeyed.

The Red King had promised that the greatest of feasts would be theirs.

Leagues away, his smile spread wide across his smooth wrinkle free face. It was a face of a movie star, worriless and confident. He yawned and stretched, lifting both arms. He peered at the expanse of the desert below him, at the sand filled landscape and embraced the emptiness. A few scattering of grasses were being lifted by the occasional updraft of air. He stared north and east and felt the immensity of himself. He was the very antithesis of fullness and completeness. Who else made plans, filled every moment with greatness and expansiveness? The desert was entropy incarnate.

Emptiness.

An age ago there had been a city at the centre of this desert. The spiralling spires caressed the sky, and between the spires a sprawling metropolis had spread in every direction. His masters' grandest achievement had been the impossible monoliths. The vast buildings had been carefully constructed and precisely arranged in geometric shapes which communicated the intricacies of the Tababacalasia rigid social system.

That city had been their greatest achievement. At least, their grandest achievement before they created him.

They wouldn't have thought of him as great. They had ceased to exist in the material realms but they did exist somewhere, in some dense dimension, imprisoned by their folly and pride. No, the Red King had no illusions about what they thought about him.

His ever persistent smile remained on his face. He had no intention of letting it slip even for a moment. A good smile was a very necessary tool for a leader to have.

He preened, brushing his broad hands across his red trousers and blazer. A fragrant desert flower passed by his face, landing softly on his shoulder. He flicked it with a well aimed finger nail.

I am that which I am.

His masters hadn't considered him their grandest achievement. At most, they thought of him as a mere contrivance. The Red King licked his dry lips.

They didn't exist anymore. He did.

He looked to the east. It was there that the future waited to be born. He was the emissary of a new dawn, a new twilight.

He waited for the appointed time. *Management*. He whispered the word. Perhaps saying the words out loud would nudge the future a little nearer. *Management* is everything. It was what he did. Management was the space in-between, the place no one ever noticed.

"There are those that do it and there are those that don't." He liked to speak to the desert. The desert understood him. The desert was big, wide and very full of itself. *Like me. Only Florinthia understands me*. That was his name for this place. His place. It gave the best of itself all the time. It stood the test of time. It swallowed time. It swallowed pride and the cities of the proud. It swallowed the humble too.

The desert was a great big gaping wound.

He had stood on this precipice many times. He had watched millenniums pass beneath this precipice. Once he had seen a man walk in the desert, from this very spot. The desert had swallowed him whole.

The clouds zipped by. They were not zipping by *per say* – they moved leisurely. He entered a trance state with the ease of house wife unhooking her clothes from a washing line. Now everything seemed to be moving a little faster.

He continued to smile. "I guess I am evil." He spoke to the wind. "As evil as I can be"

There were the birds. The birds had always been used for scrying purposes by the magical folk. The green hills were behind him, somewhere behind him, and they breathed. He felt the breath of those places, the pretty places. He hated such places and those who lived in them.

That was where he would soon travel. A few strands of yellowed grass wavered in the wind. Beyond this point the desert laid claim to everything. The Red King reached out a hand. It seemed to him that he could cup the whole desert in the palm of his hand.

A crow pecked at the ground and cawed. It may not be an eagle but it was a worthy bird. It takes what it needs and adapts. If it can't find what it needs then it adapts until it is able. The other birds do too, of course. But they flee a bad situation. Crows are different. Crows adapt to different climes. Crows are the most versatile of birds, hardy and clever. They are also beautiful.

He heard the footsteps behind him and knew that his son waited for him to turn.

He did not turn.

Behind him his son shuffled his feet, a little. The Red King smiled, prolonging the moment.

On turning he witnessed a quick expression flit across his son's face. What was that? A distinct pleasurable waft of fear assailed his nostrils, exciting the Red King's nostrils.

"Hello son." *He likes it when I call him son.* The movement of an eyeball, a gleam within the iris. "It is good to see you." He saved his best smile for his son. A show of canines. He giggled internally at the mere suggestion of the word love. Then, for the briefest moment, his face lost cohesion. It warped into an aberrant abhorrent abomination.

His son shuffled back –

With an effort the Red King brought himself back together and smiled reassuringly.

His son, smiled back. "Everything is going according to plan, Father."

The Red King's smile broadened as his son's heart sank. The Red Prince didn't feel in control. That was the nub of it, but he couldn't understand why. Everything was going to plan. He should be rejoicing but instead he kept feeling uneasy. He didn't know why. It was difficult to look his father in the eye, having just witnessed his brief dissolution.

His Father reassured him with a hand, a red reassuring hand.

Then he brought his hand back quickly. He didn't like to touch, or to be touched.

"The Phoenix lands soon. But even I do not know exactly when." His Father tried to keep his composure, tone mellow. "When it lands everything changes and I will remake myself." This wasn't a lie. The Red King liked to speak the truth when another would misconstrue its meaning.

"You will become a man soon, and be changed forever."

When the young prince was a boy he had come to understand that there were some questions that were not to be asked in his Father's company. He also understood that there were some questions that should be asked, but the timing had to be right.

He didn't like the idea of being changed forever. He quite liked the way things were.

He continued to look at his Father, perhaps waiting for more words. The Red King's gaze moved a few inches to the right. His father sometimes did this to dismiss him. The Red Prince stepped back a few paces, then shuffled a few more.

A few metres away there were two cages. In one there was a person who had a neck which was very long, it wove to and fro. She looked downward and appeared exceedingly sad. Perhaps it was because she was absent of any legs. She didn't have any arms either, so she may have been sad about that too. The other creature was without legs and seemed to have no neck. They both gave the Red King frequent furtive glances.

The Red King felt the sliver of their regard.

Yummy!

He looked at the grand vista and increased the accuracy of his sight. There was nothing to see. There was just a vast emptiness. The empire that had once been here had evaporated a long time ago. Creatures had come in massive star ships, a long time ago. It had taken a few days to crumple an empire that had lasted millions of years. The Red King looked upward at the sky and shuddered.

Some humans were still hard at work in the other world, in the other dimension – *Shoople*. They tried mightily to recreate their world in the image of that once great empire. He had no such pretensions. They thought they were making their world in the image of themselves but he knew differently. He knew their secrets.

This was his world. He rested his leg on the surface of an ancient crumbling wall and continued his musings.

This desert had been the very centre of the greatest empire this world had ever known. In his opinion, this ancient species was the greatest species to have ever existed.

They had made this place their home.

He picked up dust and let the granules slip through his fingers. This was a good place to be. Even now, after so much time had passed. He felt the greatness of his masters in the very air surrounding him, in his very breath. Some would think that he was being fanciful. He knew better. He remembered his masters well. Yes, now they only existed in his memories but they still pulsed with power.

He looked at the sisters and grinned. Maybe he would take them for a walk soon. He would lead around by their noses, perhaps he would slip a skateboard beneath them and let them cruise for a while. Pets, after all, needed regular exercise.

No Neck looked terrified. She bit into her lip, making it bleed.

There were greater things to think about. His beast had been born. His master's soldiers were all gone but there was one that had survived. It had survived in the ether. He captured it, kept it in a box – a metaphysical box for a long while. He had needed a vessel to give it strength and had found the perfect host.

The Phoenix was ready to come to the earth again. He eased his eyes closed and pictured the Phoenix and shuddered with fear. To feel fear of anything – especially the Phoenix made him feel anger. He had a plan. His special soldier would vanquish the Phoenix.

His army was ready. They waited in the desert, in the dust and heat. Lots of them had died already. He had so many and didn't mind losing a few. Soon he would send his army across Pani and the world would be his.

The only opponent left to beat was a little girl – a resourceful little girl ... and there was Nicolette. Nicolette would be no match for him. He had called his legions and his generals. He wouldn't need to lift a hand to defeat Tiffany. The elder demon of Chranos – Kani would do that for him. Kani would destroy anything which stood in-between him and her. Hopefully he would destroy Nicolette at the same time. The Red King giggled and lifted a palm to his lips.

He wanted to laugh, to give one of those evil laughs that the actors did so well in the movies, over in that other dimension, *Shoople*. His favourite past time was to watch scary movies, especially the ones with Dracula. *Ahh ...* they were a grand fest for the imagination.

His musings continued.

Maybe I should retire and watch DVD's for the rest of my life. The problem with that idea was that he was very near to being immortal. He wasn't truly immortal. He could be killed. He didn't age, at least, not in the traditional sense. He still needed to do things to replenish his energy. He was very much like the Dracula in the movies. But unlike Dracula, every few thousand years he needed to do something, a particular something in order to continue to live.

He didn't drink blood. He drank energy. He fed from the energy of anything which was able to feel fear. That was why he kept the creatures in cages. He would drink from them soon. He would sup on them.

Regeneration was not transformation. That was why he needed the Phoenix.

Here it is.

He watched with impossible eyes. It was there, the smallest of specks, a blip against the sun. How he would like to hold the sun in the palm of his hand. Not even his masters had been able to accomplish that task.

"Come." He walked in a straight line toward a great black gate. They walked in silence, footsteps crunching against the sand.

Snakes skittered across dunes. Beetles scuttled across flecks of stone as they busied themselves doing whatever beetles do. The air shimmered. The sky crystal blue – the gate became larger incrementally. He and his son drew closer to the gate. The sun blistered the skin, but not his skin. Nor his son's.

He increased the accuracy of his hearing. The quickening drum beat of his son's heart hammered. He licked his lips, tasting his son's sweat before it evaporated into the air.

The gate loomed in front of him. If the Red King had a pulse, it would have been racing. The gate emitted a signal that reverberated in the cells of every living thing.

Tiffany didn't mind at all. All she wanted was a peaceful life – a normal life where a certain ladybird didn't look as if she was ready to get out her knitting needles. The Aeroclypse desired to start knitting with her clever fingers, fingers that shouldn't be there. It was her fingers that reminded Tiffany that her friend Nicolette wasn't an ordinary ladybird, or even a lady bird at all. Oh, and there was her size. It is hard to think of something being a ladybird when you had to arch your head up to look at her face.

Here they were, being very careful not get ahead of themselves. They had flown a very long way. The butterflies had accompanied them. They had come along for the privilege of being with her, Tiffany. They said so, but Tiffany thought they really wanted to be in the company of an Aeroclypse. They flew alongside them for many miles. They had little faces and smiles. They whispered to each other and nodded as they flew.

Nicolette was very often in her own thoughts, and as such, didn't say much. Tiffany had transformed into a faerie. It felt natural to do so. Nicolette had produced two knitting needles and started to knit at great pace. Energy flowed around her, and because Tiffany was in her faerie form she was able to see the energy. Physically though, there was no result, there was no unexpected appearance of anything. There was no whizzes or bangs. In fact, everything stayed the same.

Many miles of earth passed beneath them as their shadows leapt and stretched. Bunny rabbits joined their company. They were different only in colour, otherwise they appeared identical. Their red fierce eyes followed at a discrete distance. They seemed to be wearing garments of a sort. It was hard to catch a glimpse of them, they always escaped scrutiny by hiding behind an object or one of their kin.

Badgers joined their company at some point. They looked like hardy beasts, stern in appearance and gaze, each held a spear at the exact same angle. When Nicolette increased her speed the badgers slipped their spears onto their backs and ran on all fours. Weasels flanked their movements. Weasels were often the enemy of other creatures. Not today. They wove through the ranks of many different sorts of creatures without fear of rebuttal.

The creature, the ladybird – Nicolette, continued her knitting and appeared not to notice the immensity of the army that gathered around herself and Tiffany. Her focus was fixed. Her knitting needles picked up speed, becoming a blur. Now Tiffany could feel magic pulsating from Nicolette in waves. Powerful magic – a purple fume shrouded Nicolette, then expanded to enshroud everyone, including Tiffany.

Tiffany noticed, objectively, that she had become an adult. It didn't surprise her. She was tall and slender. In faerie form her hair had tints of the purple and green, though where the green separated from the purple was anyone's guess. Her eyes were filled with a quick intelligence and a quick subtle elasticity – an energy bounced between pupil and iris.

Her nature, her personality, the greatness, in its entirety, was not known to her. Her power was brimming, coming to the surface, entering into the environment in some way, in every way, everywhere. Others felt it and were strengthened.

... And they continued to walk. The animals chatted. There was a great deal of chatting – a clatter of chatter. It was the kind of chatter you wouldn't mind listening to if you were in the company of six instead of six thousands. Many whispered in a dialect completely incomprehensible except to themselves. Also, many spoke in an entirely different language. They spoke to each other excitedly. Tiffany thought their jabbering was incomprehensible, but the more she listened to it, the more she began to make sense of it. She had a mind to interject with a few comments of her own.

Nicolette was weaving a great magical spell. She now danced as she wove her spell. Her eyes glazed over and became deep purple. Her rhythmic movements coalesced together with the movements of the faeries. They sang in time to her dance steps. All six of her legs moved with incredible speed. A magical purple haze surrounded her becoming thicker, swirling like water. A light emerged from the centre of being as she stood tall, balancing on just one leg. It rose into the air, vertically.

Have you ever seen a giant ladybird dancing? Her feet twiddled and her knitting needles click and flash with incredible speed. Red and black spots, red and black spots wheeling and slipping between all the bodies, all of the thousand of bodies as they danced together, weaving with perfect timing.

Tiffany noticed the light depart. First, she felt it depart. Its presence was here, then gone. It felt like someone had used a seeing device – or some kind of perception device. She felt it depart, then with her mind's eye she observed it depart. Tiffany caught Nicolette's eye. The giant ladybird smiled and winked.

Sh sh sh ... Nicolette's mind voice spoke to everyone. The army stilled their clattering voices and walked quietly. The battle field came on the crest of a hill. They flooded over it and witnessed the edge of a desert.

Tiffany closed her eyes and opened her mind's eye wide. These senses had been working within her for such a long time, perhaps before she had learned to think. Now she became conscious of them.

She witnessed the Red King's army at the edge of a vast desert. They waited in a particular spot, in front of a massive black gate.

Tiffany's magical sight flittered over the dark army, zooming in on the dark creatures. All of them were hideous, each one more hideous than the one before.

It is happening! Something or someone whispered into her mind. Some individual creatures were clearly angry. They occasionally struck out at other creatures. A silent dark creature, completely silent, floated through their ranks. The smorgasbord of hideousness parted to let him through. There was a darkness surrounding this creature, it slivered around the living shadow. He sucked the very light which attempted to give it definition. He slivered within the darkness. The sand vibrated gently and blackened beneath it as it hovered forward. The creatures shuffled back, silently agreeing that they were more frightened of the blackened sand than they were of each other.

Two creatures, a creature with terrible teeth (like a shark) battled each other. One was like a snake but had the feet of an eagle. It tried to coil its huge body around its opponent.

The blackened one, silent and deadly, watched as the creatures climbed over each other to avoid his presence. The snake creature and a man shark were interlocked in a deadly embrace. Blackened tendrils tenderly slivered towards the two of them, slipping their appendages. Abruptly a terrible sound escaped both combatants, they cried out together as their flesh fell away, transforming into blackened dust particles.

Tiffany withdrew her sight. What she had witnessed was too terrible to comprehend. She fortified herself with the energies of Nicolette and the goodly army that encompassed her.

Something was coming. They all could feel it. There was fear, but the fear did not stultify them. A great tension could be felt but there was a great air of expectation too. Her Father filled her mind as her love blossomed. With all the changes that had come, with her final leap forward to womanhood, she now felt ready.

She recognised now that her majestic journey had changed her in many ways. Her friends had played their part. She looked at her hands and marvelled at the physical changes that had taken place in such a short period of time.

There was a titillation, a tingling along the circumference of her aura. Tiffany knew that she was being observed. Without turning her head she looked to her left. One of Nicolette's eyes stared at her.

They came to a hill, a great perfectly spherical hill. It was here that Nicolette stopped flying and rested. Tiffany stood by her side. The panoramic vista made Tiffany gasp. As far as her eyes could see (and her eyes could see very far) there were goodly creatures of every sort. A purple mist hovered over the top of them all. Tendrils of purple smoke wove its way between them.

"The time is nearly upon us," said Nicolette. "Even as we gather, the Red King also gathers his armies." She sat upright, on part of her shell and closed her eyes. Tiffany didn't need telling, didn't need any explanation. All that was needed to be done was being done.

She felt a tremendous love fill her again. The love was ceaseless, it continued to every part of her and then outward to the kind and brave army around her.

"I trust you, Nicolette."

Nicolette opened one eye and winked.

The gate was huge. It dwarfed them, humming on the edge of peripheral hearing. It was also hard to stare at. Every sense cried out against the gate. It was like being in the presence of a nothing – a great big nothing.

But it had presence.

The gate was tall and wide – a rectangle of blackness. The centre was empty, the desert could be seen through it. The red prince walked through. It was an incredibly stupid thing to do. Dabbling with ancient advanced technology was something that should not be done. He did it because he wanted his Father to think him brave.

In a great big tome of learning it is written that curiosity would lead to humanity's undoing. Curiosity hadn't undone him. He felt different after he walked through the gate. He was half between one place and another, when a metaphysical hat fell from the sky and onto his head. His brain was suddenly filled with terrible thoughts. In his mind's eye he witnessed the Phoenix's destruction. It exploded energy. His father somehow unhooked his soul body and Father flew into him, pushing him out of his body.

He knew it to be true. This is what his father planned.

Would his Father do such a thing? The boy prince had no pretensions. His Father was capable of anything. He had looked in the mirror yesterday and couldn't help admiring how he looked. He had looked at himself and was reminded of his Father. His shoulders were wide. He was hairless and red. He had a tail. It was a small tail, significantly smaller than his father's. He liked it. Of course, few had ever seen it. His face was smooth like his father's face too.

His face didn't morph. He was solid and normal in every way. Yes, he had magic, and he had his own power. He did feel dwarfed by his father's influence. Everyone was afraid of the Red King. So, when people said and did things in response to his actions, he never really knew whether they did because he was his Father's son or because they feared him.

Now it was the end of times. Everything was changing.

The Red King spoke a guttural language and the gate had come alive. If the Red Prince had hair, his hair would be standing on end. The gate must have been synched with his Father's voice. No one knew why things worked for his Father. In his Father's hands ancient technology came alive.

His Father had secrets, secrets that he told no one else.

A few creatures followed the Red Prince and his Father through the gate. Creatures that had huge teeth and claws. Teeth that could strip, claw and cleave. There were tall creatures and small creatures. Creatures that screeched and cawed, creatures that roared and creatures that were silent. The Red King called to them as he passed through, assuring them that they would remain intact, that the gate would do no harm to them.

Through the gate the landscape changed. Now they were at the edge of the desert. Somehow they had travelled a thousand miles in a second. The Red King waited for his army to immerge.

They poured through quickly. Heaps of them toppled over each other in their attempts to quicken the procedure. It took an hour for them all to pass through. Some were crushed into the sand. No doubt some had been trampled on the other side of the gate too.

Last to come was the Demon Lord called Kani. The Red King begrudgingly admired the creature. It drifted through the gate at a leisurely pace. He observed its presence as it emerged. Demons were notoriously difficult to influence and impossible to control. Their nature was to consume. Yet this Demon Lord was a Lord for a reason. This creature could think for itself.

It was a black figure. A shade. Black mist swirled everywhere as it passed through the gate.

The thousands of evil creatures bulked as the Demon Lord moved through their company. They spread wide, allowing it to pass. One creature fell and was instantly pulled into the Demon Lord's embrace. Tendrils moved quickly, forming teeth at the last moment, gripping, chewing and then killing. It slurped and gulped.

A giant panicked, roared and began to stomp.

The Red king grew in size quickly, "be still friends. Soon you will have a feast, the kind of feast that most of you have never had before."

The darkness around the Demon Lord slipped and slivered and seemed to calm down. Again there was stillness. The stillness waited and oozed confidence.

"Let us not become unfocused at this final stage. Soon there will be a feast and the world will be ours!"

The creatures settled. They were still hungry, but they still trusted their King.

Nicolette circled her limbs and made a sound which had very little to do with singing. The sound was Shriill. Power pulsed, emanating from her. Not everyone knew what she was doing but everyone knew why. She sat within both dimensions channelling the light, transforming it into a weapon.

A company of winged beings breathed their mist into Nicolette. They appeared for a moment and could be clearly seen, by everyone. They were the Mikial – winged beings. The first physical beings to transform their physical substance into a spiritual form. Multitudes in both dimension understood that something of importance was happening. The wise ones in *Shoople* and *Shooke* opened themselves to the ever loving light and helped it onward.

Mysterious beings of the upper archons of the Celestial spheres poured their love to the two enmeshed worlds. A great door opened. The great one poured his magnificent perfect love to where it was needed. The secret heavens became one, trumpets sounded and proclaimed that the hour was at hand – a tumultuous sound.

All hearts are secret things, initially. Then when they sing and join together they become something more. They resound through the heavenly spheres and stir the hearts of the majestic ones. Through the entranced state the Majestic ones, the ones who have proved themselves on every battlefield, share their energies. The kindly ones listen to the heart of the clown, in all his meanderings. They know what they know. They heard his love and they blew breath of love into the heart of Tiffany. They heard the secret prayers of every child and all those of pure inclination.

Binkerbelle, Mc Noodle and Mandy sidled to the circumference of the circle. Binkerbelle reached a hand up above her head. She opened it, palm upward and released a small light. It was a sacred light, a light that had been given to her by Mandy at a secret palaver.

Tiffany laughed and everyone knew that it was a child's laugh, even though it came from the lips of an adult woman.

Nicolette stared at Tiffany. Nicolette saw a child where others perceived an Adult. "Come Tiffany, come be a child once again." A pink swirling mist appeared and descended, spiralling into Tiffany.

Tiffany felt herself shrink. Everything happened blessedly quick. She was a child again. She smiled a child's smile, eyes sparkling: perfect in every way.

A bird began its descent. It was a blip, at first. Then the sky changed to a smouldering red. Tiffany remembered her first magical dance, when she visited Nicolette, within "George" – the tree. She had danced with the Phoenix then. Now it was here and it was descending with vast tumultuous sweeps of his wings

Majestic.

Its wings dripped fire. Its huge beak lit up, like a beacon. A beacon for those who wish to be free. It shrieked a sonic boom. Everyone gripped their ears. Nicolette waved a wand which was very much like the one she had given Tiffany, after their escapade with the large beetles. The great sound diminished. Its eyes cried tears of fire. The sky roared.

No, it was the Red King that roared.

"Don't let it land, not yet!" The Red King's army moved rapidly forward. "Here I come!"

The armies faced each other. They paused for no apparent reason but for a tortoise. The Red King was at the forefront of his army, he also stared at it. The tortoise strolled by. He had a waistcoat, bow tie and spectacles that hung perpendicular from his beak. Was the tortoise a secret weapon? Tortoise beak was wedged between two pages of a book. On the cover was written bold letters: Truths of Mathematics (volume 1.35).

The tortoise seemed to be unaware of where he was. Either that or he really didn't care. Tiffany thought that maybe he would disappear in a puff of pink smoke.

Instead he looked about himself, put his beak back into the book and continued to walk.

A giant apparition appeared above the Army. It was up close projection of the personage which could only be the Red King. He smiled and cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted. "Boo!"

Tiffany didn't think that he looked very scary at all. Then she saw his incisors and decided that he was a little bit scary. She didn't like the look of his army either.

Binkerbelle must have thought (who can say what a faerie really thinks?) that the Red King would be scared of her because she projected her image next to his, and blew a raspberry at him.

Everyone laughed. Nervously.

Pink bunny rabbits flew at the army. They filled the space between the armies in seconds. They bounced in, leaping onto the monstrosities. The monstrosities lunged at them quickly, but not nearly quick enough. Monstrosity flesh bit into monstrosity flesh by accident as they tried desperately to hit at least one.

The rabbits continued their mayhem. Not one bunny was hurt. They moved like lightning. Pink fur balls were left behind, fur balls which stung the eyes, temporarily blinding the enemy.

Ugly ferociousness met with rage within all the loathsome creatures. The Red King felt especially proud of all his creatures. To him they were beautiful.

The ground heaved and flowed as creatures moved beneath the ground. They flowed beneath, then emerged. The Red King clapped his hands together with joy and shouted to his son "Amphisbaenidae! I brought them here you know. The death worms will sort out those bunnies. "Allergorhai-Horhai for the win!"

Giant red worms reached out of the ground. Long purple tongues came from their mouths, mouths filled with razor sharp teeth. The tongues were incredibly long and wiggled about three foot away from their enemies: the bunnies. The rabbits fell, stiff and shaking from ear to tail. Static electricity filled the air. Each rabbit had been stultified. The rabbits which were attacking other monstrosities, turned and dived onto the worms. Every rabbit became liquefied as they made contact.

A few rabbits darted back into safe territory.

Nicolette noticed the Red King was dancing and waving his arms about.

She sent her caterpillars in. Each caterpillar had thousands of needles covering their entire body, each caterpillar was five foot long, deep purple and angry. They closed in on the red worms, spines bristling, body rising in the middle before stretching out again. The red worms didn't hesitate and moved forward also. Half submerged in the hard soil, the red worms swam through what was otherwise hard dirt and stone.

The caterpillars wasted no time. Their needles bristled and flew upward, then forward, little heat seeker missiles. The red worms waved their tongues in the air, creating static as they did before. Some of the flying needles disintegrated in mid air, but most found their mark, piercing the skin, burrowing deep within red flesh.

The Caterpillars fired again and again. Yellow mucus oozed across the surface of the red worms. The worms drew back into their holes, producing a high pitched squealing sound as they sank in the earth.

The red skin being that everyone called the Red King roared defiance and shouted a command. Again the evil army surged forward.

An assortment of creatures flooded forward. The goodly tortoises came. They were not the book reading type, but they were intelligent. These had swords and hands to handle the swords. They stood in rows, at first, but as the battle ensued, the army of tortoises spread out. Green arms and hands held scimitars and used them to deadly effect.

The evil creatures were all different, different in shape and size. The vital organs of the each creature was in different place, but the tortoises seemed to know where to strike (possibly due to their extensive study of the *Emperi emporium Ismael* encyclopaedia.) Each of the tortoises dispatched every opponent that slivered, stepped or flew into their circumference. Arms, hands and weapons frequently disappeared within the shells, to reappear at a different place and angle. Plus, their shells seemed to be impervious to damage, and considering a great portion of each tortoise was shell, this made them extremely hard to hit.

Magical bolts were thrown at the tortoises. These bolts slowed them a little, until their shells began to rotate. Then the bolts ricochet of the surface of each shell every time.

The Red King howled his frustration. He waved his legion forward, the sheer mass of which pushed the goodly army backwards.

Razor blade winged butterflies smiled as they swarmed across the horrors. Millions descended, acting of one accord. Chaos ensued. The Red King lifted a hand and a giant silken net appeared in mid air, then it fell. On touching the butterflies, each burnt up.

He smiled. Someone hurled a fireball at toward him. He ducked and lifted a palm as another flew toward him. The fire ball ricochet of the palm of his hand back to where it came from, gathering speed and size as it travelled. Nicolette reached out with one of her black limbs, with a black ebony wand directed the now huge fireball into a wide arc and returned it, smashing it into the dark army. The Red King grimaced for a moment, and let his smile slip.

Then it flipped back into place.

He raised an arm and thousands of dragonflies darted overhead.

Tiffany witnessed the horrific battle and the horror of it stunned her. The courage of her friends swelled her heart. A ball of light shone from her breast. As it expanded, she opened her arms and levitated. The heat from the light warmed her face. She needed to let it go. She formed a strange elliptical shape with her lips and thought up the right spell. Before she could vocalise it, her mind went blank. A faerie fell from the air. She felt its life force wink out of existence. Tiffany screamed. Her lungs hurt because the scream didn't want to stop. The roar from the monstrosities diminished as her own voice increased in volume. Nicolette whispered inside her mind. "Let it all go into the ball." Blind rage filled Tiffany. Raw emotion held in check for so very long, burst from her. Luckily, there was a huge crystalline ball in front of her (had she created it automatically?) She screamed into it. Her emotions poured through the scream and her scream filled the white ball, turning it red. It bounced left, to the good side, then bounced to the right into the evil rampaging monstrosities.

It bounced onto the head of every creature, lightly. Claws shrank and became tooth picks. Growls withered, then the shrieks began. The ball danced between the creatures and shrank them into nothingness.

The still dark creature moved through the battle field drinking the life out of everything it came in contact with. Its face revealed a terrible hunger, as it killed it drank. The darkness fell away from its face. A terrible manlike face appeared, beautiful and terrible. Fangs for incisors, appeared as he stuck a centaur, as it dipped its head. Thousands of centaurs appeared from over a hill and poured onto the battlefield.

The white ball turned red as it continued to bounce. It came to vampire – the still one. He drank it, all of it, until there was no light. Something happened. Something. The vampire/demon's (or whatever it was) face became hidden again. The darkness became dense, surrounding him entirely.

Tiffany threw a few tornadoes. They were miniature. Wild magic flowed through her. Her face shone with a fierce determination. She stepped into the battle. Creatures rushed at her. A hell cat! Its ears laid flat against its skull, pounced. In mid air, claws extended, red eyes glowing. Tornadoes surrounded her, they grew with every second, striking and sucking up anything foolish enough to be in her path. The hellcat twisted midflight, experiencing a change of heart. It was the first to go, to get caught up in a small whirlwind.

Something dark loomed over her. Much of it was tail. It swung it at her. Fire erupted in her fingers, then her whole hand. The tail slowed, everything slowed. *What a curious sight.* She looked at it calmly, breathed in deep, then side stepped. She graced the tail with a touch, a gentle stroke. Liquid fire spread across the monstrosities face and entire body. Before she could try to identify the creature it disintegrated.

A scream issued forth, a horrific wail. Tiffany attempted to find out which direction the scream emanated from. The still creature, which had suddenly lost its ability to be still, clawed at its own face. A light tried to escape from its empty eye sockets, mouth and nostrils. Its clawing manically. The darkness circled, swirled and poured into his eye sockets. The dark one's features stretched, its mouth elongated. The darkness swamped the light, even as the light attempted to cleanse the vampire. It struck at every creature near it, desperately. Its fingertips turned into siphons and drank the life of everything. Life was sucked out and turned into black dust – fingertips, anything it touched fell. A terrible manlike face appeared. It was beautiful and terrible at the same time. It would have been a beautiful human face if not for its terribly long fangs. "It" wasn't an it but a "he". He struck a centaur. As he did so Centaurs poured over the hill on the battle field.

Secretly, the vampire – the still one, with his gathering darkness shrouding him, feared Tiffany. It seemed that she had created the bubble as easily as breathing. Any being that could make such a weapon so easily should be avoided, at least, until such time that he could figure out her weakness.

The Red King decided that now was a good time to become active. He made a beeline for Tiffany. He struck everything with a terrible force. He wielded a hammer with a ferociousness that others could not best. Faerie spells bounced off him. He wore no armour, perhaps because his red skin was enough.

He leapt with hammer raised, then he brought it downward. He grinned, as he did so. No one had survived the strike from this hammer. Tiffany raised a finger. The hammer struck the very tip. When an unstoppable force meets an unmovable object something must give. Nicolette saw the blow but was unable to get there in time. She didn't even try, it was entirely impossible.

The Red King cried out. The hammer toppled from his grip, striking the ground with a tremendous thud. He gripped his shaking arm, holding it against his chest. Nicolette struck him with the palm of her hand. He hadn't seen her, she had attacked from his blind side. He flew backward into a rock, cracking it. He climbed to his feet and snarled with the whole of his face (which is an extremely difficult thing to do, that is, if you don't have a face like the Red King).

Blood spilled from his finely chiselled face, and from various other parts of his body – especially his chest, the very place where Nicolette had struck him. He scrapped the wound with a fingertip, then licked the red gooey blood. He raised a hand then lowered it, a signal to his army. The monstrosities surged forward.

The still one came. He walked through the battle field destroying everything. Many of the evil creatures had the good sense to get out of his way. The tortoises formed a spear shape and rushed forward to meet the creature.

The darkness swirled around and lashed out, enwrapping every tortoise that came within its vicinity. The tortoises did not desist with their attacks, instead their efforts increased, their great vehemence and complete discipline stunned the army of miscreants. The caterpillars fired their spines from capillaries that broke the surface of their skin. The still one seemed to anticipate every attack. Tortoise, caterpillar or any other creature did not give it pause.

Tiffany stepped forward. Rage filled her. The black figure continued to walk forward. The darkness which surrounded was a living entity, it swirled around his being and lashed out quickly at every creature that had the misfortune to be in its vicinity. Every goodly creature threw themselves at it.

He did not slow but everyone smiled and felt reassured because Nicolette took to the air. The goodly army parted. She raised a wand and pointed it at the still one. A blue flame shoot forth. The blue flame gathered momentum as it hurtled toward the creature. The darkness coagulated in front of him, absorbing the blue flame. Nicolette did not desist, she continued to create and hurl every coloured bolt at him. A pulp liquorish sulphur filled the air, coagulating across the tongue producing an astringent taste. The speed of the balls of light increased exponentially, all her six arms (arms that sometimes doubled as feet) hurled every bolt, each bolt doubling in size by the moment, travelling, striking with unerring accuracy.

He, the still one, waved his arms in the air as he was flung back several meters by three such bolts. He was clearly enraged. His face appeared and growled words in an unknown language. Still the bolts flew. He ran from the bolts, from her, shielding himself behind the bulk of the Red King's army.

On the other side of the battlefield the Carnasti arrived on their war mounts. They struck from the east and entered into the cur of the battlefield, driving lance and sword into the cowardly miscreants that resided there, at the back.

The cowardly tried to run, flinging their bodies in different directions. The Carnasti were ready. They had been killing such beasts for years. They herded them and split their skulls with diligence, wasting little effort or time.

The horses of the Carnasti wheeled and drove into the heart of the evil horde. The dark army trembled. The Red King roared defiance. He lifted up his mighty torso and headed for the Carnasti. Their interference would not be tolerated. He grew taller as he walked, taller and stronger. He knew what the Carnasti were attempting to do. To divide his army. He healed himself as he drew closer to their ranks.

Beams of light connected the Carnasti magicians, the beams connected through their staves. The Red King scowled. The leader of the ²⁴scarlet concave struck the ground with his stave. The connecting beams of the magicians connected through the leaders single staff. A single scarlet light shot forth. The Red King caught the beam on the palm of his large hand and smiled.

– Seven feet tall, roaring menace at them. He withdrew his sword. The scarlet beam increased in power abruptly. The Red King sank to one knee, suddenly aware that he had underestimated the strength of the Carnasti magicians.

The Carnasti army was supremely prepared for such a battle. They cut down the beasts easily. Every evil creature fell beneath their blades. The dark army trembled again at their onslaught. The monstrosities had been given a simple direction. Hem in, surround and squeeze the army of Nicolette. Instead they found themselves to be the ones closed in, buffeted by skilful blades of the badgers which stood upright, and also the magical spells of the Fae, not to mention the Carnasti at their backs.

²⁴ Scarlet Concave: the magicians of the Carnasti

The pink bunnies reappeared and began leaping, biting and blinding. They choked the creatures with their fur balls, whilst the Fae rose into the air and poured white balls of light over the entire monstrosity army. Again the red worms appeared, but as they readied themselves for the attack, the bunnies retreated. The caterpillars turned their attention to the giant red worms and fired their spines. The red worms squealed and disappeared back into their holes. Immediately, having strategically retreated, the bunnies now reappeared and continued their propensity for tearing about and causing havoc.

Timing and communication made the difference. It turned the tide of the battle. The different creatures from the goodly army worked together. They communicated and innovated, they moved forward, retreated, adapted and used their strength of communication to their advantage.

Within his cowl, the leader of ²⁵Scarlet Cascade smiled. The Red King spotted him. He understood malice and pride. He threw his sword at the man. It was a reckless move, reckless and unexpected, and in part it worked. The beams stopped.

The Red King moved at an incredible speed, and yet the Carnasti anticipated him. He used his fists; the Red King had no weapon except for his prodigious strength. Boom! A horse was lifted into the air and tipped over. He puffed out his massive chest, retrieved his sword then blurred into the heart of the conclave.

They anticipated his every movement, by using their impenetrable closed circuit telepathic system. The Red King knew that he was in trouble the moment he entered the circle of magicians. He had always been able to read the auras of his enemies. When a force such as he focused attention on an enemy, in that moment, even as the enemy perceived him, fear invariably disrupted the faculties of the enemy. As their minds folded, they invariably leaked their thoughts into the ethereal. By plucking the thoughts out of the ethereal the Red King had smote such an enemy into the dust.

He was immediately aware that he could not read them, at all. This was a shock. In all his years he never faced an enemy that he could not read. Some opponents had learned the gift of shielding their thoughts, but there had never been a group that could do so, and so completely.

The Carnasti grabbed their lances as the master magicians focused their attention on The Red King. They moved in unison.

A black creature smashed through the bodies of evil and good, without regard for either. Bodies flew every which way. It curtailed the Carnasti by turning and running at them. A lance ricocheted off its back, another came from a different angle. He chewed at spears and lances, spitting them to the ground.

Snap! Its terrible blood red maw shattered another spear. Wood and metal was bent and cast aside as it shook powerful head.

²⁵ Scarlet Cascade: Within the House of Cascade (the magicians of the Carnasti) there is a few magicians which are considered be supreme masters of the art of magic, these supreme masters are called the Scarlet Cascade.

Tiffany screamed! "My Dad! I can feel the presence of my Father! Nicolette, find him !" The goodly creatures, creatures of every sort surrounded her, forming a protective barrier. Above, the wings of the Phoenix beat remorseless heat upon the battlefield. Wings made of fire beat the air into a frenzy, pushing pulses of raw energy downwards. Heat rushed and crashed against the creatures below. The increase in heat effected the monstrosities negatively. They buckled under the relentless force of the goodly army, as well as the heat. It pushed them downward, to their knees and onto their faces.

Sky red, thick red – Phoenix roaring.

The Red Prince hid behind his father. The Red King hooted at the battle, and looked as if he was having a grand time at a football match. *Doesn't he know that we are losing the battle?* thought the Red Prince.

The ebon beast padded into the red fiery circle. Its ears flattened as it passed through the invisible force field. Inside the circle the ground was scorched. It walked softly, on the inside circumference.

Trev marvelled at the ingenuity of the goodly creatures. They adapted constantly, cleverly measuring the weakness of each adversary. He lifted a Carnasti sword, enjoying the fine balance. Pink, yellow and blue bunnies were about their business, and their business was mayhem. They came in droves, flooding the battlefield. They had retreated, multiplied and came back with a vengeance.

Trev drove his sword deeply into the giant creatures as the rabbits sharp incisors gnashed furiously, flashing in the red heat of the phoenix, penetrating through flesh and hide alike. He ran with the rabbits, driving his sword into the wounds that they created. Soon small Xs began to appear on the creatures. The rabbits were marking the vulnerable parts of the enemy. He drove his sword into an X and watched the creature fall immediately.

The monstrosities rampaged. The massive creatures survived. Beams of light arced over head then descended. The Red King jaws tighten as he watched more of his creatures fall.

A large triceratops charged, propelling bunnies every which way. It continued its triumphant trampling, destroying faerie, elfkin and tortoise alike. The faeries threw bolts of lightning and tornadoes but nothing dislodged its focus, or even harmed it. It merely shook its head and impaled them. Pixies leapt onto its back and stabbed furiously. The tips of each of their little spears had been painted with poison. A small laceration would have done the trick, but they were unable to pierce its hide.

Trev ran at the creature, thrusting his sword into its hide. The blade pierced the creatures skin, a little. The elves tried to capitalise on the small open wound but were heaved into the air by its massive charging bulk. They barely managed to escape with their lives. The triceratops bellowed, bowed its horned head and churning up the ground beneath its feet. A dust cloud surrounded the creature in seconds. Trev blinked his eyes and felt his heart pound in his chest. Fear paralysed him. He wished he had the forethought of covering his face when the dust began to churn.

He dived. He couldn't decide which way would be safest, so he dived to his left, hoping that luck would be in his favour.

Something wrapped around his ankle and dragged him awkwardly along the ground. It was useless to claw at the ground. Whatever had hold of his leg would not be letting go, its grip was too tight.

The dust cloud began to dissipate. A giant gapping mouth appeared, it was chomping up and down. It looked like ... well just a mouth really, and a pair of eyes atop of it. That's all Trev could see. The grey mouth chomped as bits of flesh flew in various directions. Tentacles waved about, shifting and twisting, seeking a new creature to capture.

On being released by a tentacle, the creatures fell into a drool filled glutinous mouth. After release, the tentacle wiggled and stretched, sometimes slivering, sometimes thrusting toward its next victim. Tempestuous gapping aperture waited for the taste of this new creature, this man creature.

Binkerbelle appeared by Trev's side. She battered the tentacles with so many different beam spells. None of them worked. She looked up, horrified at the spectacle of the triceratops destroying her kin.

She placed her wand on the tentacle which gripped Trev remorselessly. She closed her eyes and directed her entire being into heating up her wand. A tentacle enwrapped her, pulling toward its mouth. Binkerbelle fired a terrible light into the triceratops. The triceratops face took the brunt of an explosive. Enraged it raced toward her, charging, mindlessly. She placed her wand against the tentacle which held her. The wand permeated heat. It released her suddenly, as the triceratops charged. Binkerbelle waited a little and then flew upwards at the last moment.

The fan of bones surrounding the head of the triceratops smashed into the mouth. Both became entangled. The chomper chomped and the impenetrable head smashed its teeth apart.

Hello Trev.

Trev couldn't have been more surprised. He sat in the dust with his mouth hanging open. "Whaaa." He tried desperately to work to gather his thoughts, his mouth popped open.

I know. How cool, that am back.

The suit appeared, a black blip on his forearm. Then it spread rapidly, enveloping him in seconds.

[Time to kill some demons.]

Rose – Lion – Phoenix

Christopher awoke with the mother of all headaches. He didn't know where he was either. Darkness surrounded him. He breathed it in. *Oh God* – there was a terrible thick musty dankness to the place, a choking dampness emanating from every area, all at once.

There must have been light somewhere because he could see his hands. It felt good to see his hands. He flexed them. For some reason he expected them to be different, perhaps a different colour. Maybe a clown's hands. A skittering, whimpering clown's laugh attempted to erupt from his throat, but instead relapsed. Suddenly he was very glad that they were his hands and not the hands of a clown.

He could hear something. A crackling fire. He could smell it too, filtering through the mustiness. He tried to raise his legs but they wouldn't work, they felt like tree trunks. He tried again, taking his time, raising himself by his palms, concentrating on pushing himself upwards.

He reached out and found an object. he gripped it, felt it's gooey wetness, leveraged himself up. Whatever it was, it was damp. He managed to stay on his feet, though his thighs shook with the effort. He wobbled and thought for a moment that he was going to topple.

Mum would think me drunk.

It would be nice to be at his mother's house. To sit in a comfy chair and relax. To let go. *Just for a little while*. It would be good to just think, to be himself, to be at home. He began remembering things. His daughters, his life, his work. Tears trickled down his face.

Where the hell am I?

He headed toward the light. He could see it, a fire, breathing in the heart of darkness. There was a time for defeat, self defeat. Now was not that time. Love suffused his body. It was enough. He struggled forward, one step at a time, keeping his daughters' faces in his mind's eye. Something damp remained in his hand. The remnants of the curtain, soft and gooey. There was a terrible damp odour in the air, it clung to his face. He had smelt such a smell before, many times in fact. The walls around him would be black with damp.

The fire could be clearly seen. Christopher inched forward. The unmistakable smell of the coal fire beckoned. As he came nearer to the heat, he felt a sudden familiarity with his environment. There was something about the positioning of the armchair and the chair adjacent to it. It stirred a memory.

Blankets were heaped onto the armchair. Christopher sat down careful and peered into the heart of the flames. Not thinking of anything, nothing at all, not thinking ...

Something moved. An arm came crept out of the blankets, picked up the poker and stoked the hot coals. Horror filled Christopher, horror and freight. Then his fright subsided as he noticed eyes, small inquisitive eyes appearing from within the blankets. Small dark eyes, blinking dark eyes –

The creature was an imp, but its eyes were gentle. Its blue lips moved. Christopher couldn't make out the words.

"You reap what you sow." Finally, it had raised its vocalizations an octave higher. The fire spat. The imp was slightly red, with stripes of light yellow in the pigments of its skin. Its dark clothes hung on its skinny body like clothes from a misshapen coat hanger. It had black scraggly hair too. It was not uncommon for an imp to have hair. This creature's hair had not seen a comb for a long while.

Memories tumbled out of Christopher's unconscious. Memories of a clown that wasn't a clown. Memories of man-wolves chasing him and speaking chipmunks that were all but invincible. His mind sorted and filed away the images for later. Christopher was accustomed to mysterious events, his life had been filled with them.

He had the distinct feeling that the worst was behind him. The room lost its stuffy damp feeling. He looked to the chair, looking between the blankets. Now there were only blankets and shadows. But perhaps, the shadows produced a warmth and a kindness.

There was a sound of a door, creaking open. Christopher walked toward it, without asking why. He was being guided, from within himself.

Forward.

As he entered the next room his clothes changed. Jeans and a t-shirt became a white suit. The room was filled with light. Not the light of the sun but the cold light of a full moon. The walls on either side rose heavenward and there was no ceiling. A lizard scuttled on the white tiled floor with clever flat webbed feet. There were other creeping things, a snake and scorpion. A snail moved slowly forward. A butterfly, with its immaculate colours flicked around effortlessly.

Shadows of things long since passed moved about. Ghosts of people, long since faded from memory, commenced with thoroughly focused on their business, passing him by with no acknowledgement.

The faded apparitions he recognised. At different points in his life each had been important.

He walked past the creeping things, realising that he was perhaps an occupant in his own mind. His past walked around him. People who were now old, or who had died, walked and talked with each other with a youthful vigour. He saw himself as a child, riding his bike, skidding his bike with one of his friends.

On a red table there were tarot cards, they spun on end, moving from wands to cups. Etched into the surface of the table there were zodiac signs. Above the table, hanging on the wall there was a picture of a lion lying next to a lamb.

There was a sign above a door to the right. Words were engraved in the sign: *the seven levels of the resurrection of man*.

The next room, ignited his memories. Painful memories, joyful too – painful now because they had been joyful then. A woman walked toward him, blonde hair blowing in a wind that only she could feel.

His breath caught in his throat. She always had this effect. But here she was so youthful. It was like travelling back in time. She paused and looked at Christopher, but then he realised that she was not looking at him. It was just the past, just a memory. Something caught her attention and strolled off, fading as she walked.

A white figure, Chinese and beautiful. He wore a white robe and stood there, shining a light onto the sleeping head of a man that resembled Christopher in his youth. Images toppled downwards, cascading like rain onto the young Christopher. The Chinese man gave the older Christopher an acknowledging smile as he passed by.

Christopher walked through the room, walking by the robed figure, noticed the golden cross hanging around his neck. A heart could be heard beating slow, vibrating through the walls and floor.

"You are so beautiful," said the man that lay on the fading bed.

"It is not I which is beautiful. Rather, it is your own beauty reflected in me that you see."

Voices could be heard. It was as if someone was turning the dial of a radio. Prayers were echoing throughout the building, bouncing from wall to wall.

The young Christopher rose to his feet and began to sing: "As I cross the verge of Jordan bid my anxious fears subside."

Tears flowed.

There is the sound of marching feet. A man is wearing regalia, he salutes with his sword. Images flow through the room. These are not remnants of memories, instead they are real and solid. A dragon chases a Phoenix. Christopher passes through the third door, into a yellow room.

A woman is there. Her hair is full of beads of different kinds. He knows who she is and marvels at the look of her. She is beautiful and strong. At first she is old but the age drops away from her. She sings praises to God whilst blowing soft silent kisses; fingers to mouth, she sends them his way too.

People that glow surround Christopher. Some fade into the room, becoming more solid by the moment. Glorious Angels; golden people float downwards, they shine orange and yellow. Energy fills the room. Colours move across the wall, blending into each other. Christopher continues to walk because he can feel the wonderful power emanating from the walls and from the floor.

Then from among the fading images of people there comes a man, a native American. He wears three white feathers, they are displayed, and rise upward. Riding high on the bridge of his shoulders there is a magnificent bow. "Time is of the essence." The Native American's words are clear and concise yet his lips do not move. Christopher continues onward and as he passes the Native American hands him a bow. "At the heart. Fire at the heart."

The next room is entered via a pink door. Christopher falls to his knees as he enters. In the centre of the room there is a lion and a flower. The lion lifts his head and looks at him.

As he walks toward the lion he begins to shake and weep. His legs are weak but he continues to walk. He reaches past the lion's golden mane, and lifts the white pristine Rose. There is a bowl of water. Within it he watches himself being led to an apple tree. There, a red hand lifts an apple to his lips.

The memories surge, and as they do dark hands reach for him through the wall. The lion roars. The roar vanquishes the shadowed hands instantly.

A voice speaks to his heart: "Give the white rose to Tiffany. It will guide you to her and she to you." Accompanying the words there is a tremendous glow, and explosion of energy coming from his heart.

An explosion of light and love.

The Phoenix descended, touching the earth with its flamed claws. The ebon creature attacked immediately, leaping impossibly high. It swivelled in midair, then raked its claws through the flames. Its sleek body grew in mass and power as it tore into the Phoenix. The Phoenix is flame. The ebon creature thrived on the energy of the Phoenix. It clawed at the Phoenix, and as it did so, the flames of the Phoenix grew hotter and higher.

Claws and body dripped magma, red against black.

The Phoenix raised its head and shrieked. It shook its great mane, its great body. The ebon beast was tossed high and far, across the entire sleeping crumpled monstrosity army. It roared its defiance and frustration, shook its head, then bounded across the battlefield.

It was then that it happened. The ebon beast shook its great head, snorted then cried out. Pain contorted its face. It fell to the ground and rolled onto its back. A blinding light shone forth from its body. From the light a white rose appeared, drifting in mid-air before falling to the ground. Tiffany looked at the rose, then smiled. She reached her hand and picked the rose up gently.

The ebon creature leapt at Tiffany, snarling with contempt and malice. Then the strangest thing occurred. The beast split in two, except the second piece was in the form of a man. Christopher, Tiffany's father, smiled, notched an arrow and fired it into the face of the ebon creature.

The smell of sulphur pervaded the entire area. Tiffany had never heard such a terrible cry as that of the Phoenix. She readied her wand. Christopher notched another arrow.

They both fired. Tiffany with her wand and her father with his arrow. The ebon creature shifted a few feet to the left, avoiding Tiffany's purple magical bolt, then moved to the right to avoid Christopher's arrow.

The Phoenix roared. Power and heat expanded outward. This time, the heat brought everyone to their knees. Everyone except Tiffany and Christopher. Tiffany sensed rather than saw the Phoenix's life force ebb dangerously low. It was near to death. The thought of such a creature dying brought a deep heaviness upon her. She knew the ebon creature had won. She felt her own energy ebb even as the ebon creature, whatever this ebon creature was, ran passed them. She extended her palm toward the Phoenix and concentrated – she pictured the Phoenix being well.

Christopher notched another arrow and let the string go with the outward stream of his breathe. Stream after stream of arrows flew. The ebon creature dodged each. He notched two arrows together and let them fly. Dragon kin dodged one but the other struck it between the eyes and exploded. Its fierce red eyes glinted and it smiled a lethal grin.

Aim at the heart.

Perhaps it was the angel which spoke in the heart of his mind. Christopher steadied another arrow. The heart of the ebon creature would be impossible to hit. He would have to get the ebon creature to jump. Perhaps, when the creature leapt on the Phoenix again.

The Phoenix opened its wings, lifting its head high. In its chest, as the flames leapt high, its mighty heart could be seen.

Aim at the heart of the Phoenix! This time the words were in his ear.

Christopher let go his arrow. The arrow missed the ebon beast entirely.

Everything happened at once. The arrow struck true. The Phoenix exploded.

On the ridge in the far distance, the Red King's dropped to his knees. The ebon beast fell onto its chest, then burst into flames. Then it screamed out in pain and became dust

The expression on the Red King changed to one of complete dismay. The witch smiled from ear to ear. Her right arm lapsed lazily across the shoulders of the Red King's son. A little spider scuttled across his shoulder.

The Red King raised his fist. The witch smacked on the forehead with her staff. He fell to the ground, legs splayed.

"You can stay yourself right there." The witch closed one eye and aimed the end of her staff at him. Ya's nose match for me-some." She turned to the son. "You've have some ideas the plans he had for you've."

The Red Prince gulped. "I think I do."

The witch eyed him carefully. "I think you have some magic some, somewhere, It's in there somewhere", she tapped his chest with a long finger nail, "Somewhere'd , in there'd be a good heartsome – nay good hearts lots."

Nicolette took to the air and flew toward Tiffany. Tiffany was crying. Nicolette scooped her beneath her wings. "Why are you crying, sweetheart?"

"Come over here Tiffs." Tiffs ran to her father, and allowed herself to be pulled close into his chest. He moved some ash with the toe of his boot.

"ArrRRRkkk" A small head and beak appeared.

Tiffany knelt downward and looked at the little creature. "Come here boy." She reached out a hand. The little creature coughed and burped out a little smoke. "Oh my God he is so cute!"

The last of the monstrosities slopped off gingerly. The Carnasti had long since departed. The ebon beast had become dust. The witch had gone, Red Prince in tow. The goodly creatures partied. The centaurs stood guard. They refused to take part in the party.

At the day's end, after the fireworks and ice cream everyone settled down. One satyr played his lyre beautifully. A large fire was built and they settled around it.

Not many spoke. Most simply found contentment with each other. Binkerbelle and Mandy lay on their backs looking at the sky above. Mr Mc Noodle stood by Trev and kept showing him his boots. Trev simply smiled.

In the distance, in a secret place, a red scorpion hid.

In another place the witch prodded the Red King in the back with her staff. After many miles he suddenly fell to the ground and screamed. He looked to be dead. The witch was not convinced so she hit him with her stick.

"Oh blast! where has he got to?" His soul had skipped off somewhere.

At that precise moment the red scorpion moved. Its flesh rippled, faded out of reality for a second, then faded back in. It scuttled away at great pace, heading toward the desert.

A little later, over another mound of sand, it paused, lifting its tail in a defensive posture.

"Cluck cluck." A figure appeared over the dune talking, laughing and smiling. "I told Mrs Cavanda doh (she closed her eyes as she said doh). I mean she said to me, go and stand over there!" A crow cawed. Trinity, Tiffany's sister laughed loudly. Perhaps she laughed at the crow. She cawed a few times mimicking the crow (perhaps, you could never quite tell with Trinity) laughed again then commenced clucking.

"Cluck cluck" she projected her head forward and back. "cluck cluck." She paused, leaned over and gazed at the scorpion. "Ah, there you are." On closer inspection the red scorpion had the face of the Red King. She lifted him up and flung him in her bag.

He fumed.

She laughed. "Naughty scorpion, you are such a naughty scorpion! Don't worry now. I will keep you safe!"

The End

Accompaniment to Tiffany and the Fae.

Annum: 2013 (Shoople)

Aeroclypse: A species found in both Shoople and Shookle and possibly other dimensions too. Not much is known about the Aerocypse. It is thought that the species is related distantly to the ladybird species which is found on Earth in the dimension of Shoople. The ladybird itself is a species which is not native the Earth or even to Shoople. The ladybird is indigenous to the dimension of Arcadia. Nicolette belongs to this species.

Arcadia: Arcadia is a dimension. Nothing is known about *Arcadia*. It is unique because of this.

Baffer: Large creatures which resemble the Buffalo of Earth. They are much smaller and instead of snouts they have small trunks (much like the elephant, accept the "trunks" of the Baffer are less versatile. The Baffer use their trunks to pull small rodents from the ground.

Bishcip: A faun which is a friend of *Feaufkr* the twinkling.

Battle of Gagier: A battle that occurred many thousands of years ago. It began as a human battle between Orcs but many other creatures got involved. Both good and bad creatures.

Calibing cliffs: The horsemeister's village was originally built near to the cliffs. later, through the centuries they were moved nearer to the crop fields. Trev reached the Calibing cliffs and leapt from them.

Contrastian (the first): First Emperor of the horsemen.

Carnasti [Shookle]: The word Carnasti invariably refers to the horsemen though many of the magical creatures of Shookle use the word to refer to humans. Amongst the non magical creatures of Pran the Carnasti refer to the Horsemen.

Carnasti Dynasty: [Shookle] By the human's reckoning (the human's that live on Pran) the age of the Carnasti began fourteen thousand years ago. In some dialects of Pran "r" is sometimes omitted.

Chranos: Chranos is a demon land. There are demons in Chranos. Not much is known because few have ever lived to explain what is there.

Christopher: Tiffany's, Courtney's, Trinity's and Robert's father.

Cranked: One thing grinding against another causing extreme discomfort.

Chranos-Kani: A demon Lord.

"Declock sheekrien saffire" – Tiffany, Mc Noodle and Binkerbelle heard these words when they visited their first town in Shookle. Was this a spell? What are these words?

Dynadide: [Shookle] The toughest substance known to the denizens of the world of Prani (sometimes spelt Pran).

Dwarf: [*Shoople*] Dwarves exist on (or rather beneath) the earth. They have vast cities which have been built many miles beneath the earth. The Dwarven race are very magical creatures. On first appearance they appear related to humans. This similarity is superficial. They are quite adept at magic. Particularly mind magic. They are extremely gifted at alchemy. Their alchemical knowledge in relation to metals is second to none. They experienced travellers of dimensions. They are known for their fortitude and spiritual strength. They are considered to be very wise, and have a deep understanding all magical arts. Their considerable spiritual, alchemical and dimensional travels are so extensive that other species from far and wide often consult with the Dwarven race before embarking upon experimental spell casting.

Emperi Emporium Ismael [*Shookle*]: An encyclopaedia of all the species in Shookle.

Eve of the Hallows [*Shookle*]: A festival that recreated by the residents of villages each year in remembrance of an incident that occurred Eve of the Hallows [*Shookle*]: A festival that is recreated by the residents of villages each year in remembrance of an incident that occurred thousands of years ago. A wicked wizard ran rampant from the wilderness into the towns and through the villages. He burnt everything to the ground. The villagers chased after him, along with the soldiers of that period. He laughed manically as they approached, and climbed onto a scarecrow post and set himself alight. He laughed loudly as the flames incinerated him. The day after had been assigned as a holy day by the whole continent. Every year, at the same hour — the very hour that the maniacal wizard had burned himself to a crisp, villagers lit up scarecrows to commemorate the occasion.

Egor the magnificent (or terrible): first Garl of the Kani was a pain in the posterior.

Emperi emporium Ismael encyclopaedia: Noted for its accuracy of content, particularly in regards to anatomy of obscure creatures.

Eve of the Hallows: A festival that is recreated every year. It is a tradition which is based on a (supposed) events which occurred thousands of years ago on the Kien (in the dimension of Shoople). A wicked wizard ran rampant through the southern wilderness just outside of Kien for three years shouting out profanities. At the beginning of the solstice on the fourth year he entered the town of Matice. He burnt everything to the ground. The villagers and the soldiers chased him out, back into the wilderness. Then he stopped and turned to meet the people. He laughed manically as they approached and climbed onto a scarecrow post and set himself alight. He laughed loudly as the flames incinerated him. After that day the people of the southern continent (and eventually the northern wilderness too) assigned that day to be holy. From that day to this, every year at the same hour – the very hour that the maniacal wizard had burned himself to a crisp – villagers light up scarecrows to commemorate the occasion.

Faerie: Magical creatures which are able to fly, change size and extremely accomplished in spell casting, due to their inherent magical nature.

Fafalumps: Fafalumps are wonderful, especially the female ones. However, the thing to take into consideration when dealing with Fafalumps is that the females and male of the species are remarkably the same when first looked upon. Fafalumps have long soft fur covering every part of their bodies and have large ears which lie flat across their backs and take up three quarters of their body length, the ears are covered in soft fur too. Fafalumps ears cover most of their bodies. A Fafalump body is between four and six foot long and exactly three feet wide (when fully grown). The males are identical from the female when first looked up, however, the males, if they feel threatened stand up on their hind legs (the females are unable to do so), their fur sweeps backwards (along with their ears) and they spit poison from their lips. It has been known for a Fafalumps to spit 50 yards. Most male Fafalump's reach twenty five to thirty yards with their spit. The male Fafalump body, when it is stood on its hind legs (in combat mode is muscular and has virtually no fur.)

Faerie: also known as fairy or *fae*. Little magical creatures that exist in the ethereal realm. Can be humanlike, this is not always so; can also appear as balls of light. It is not known whether the *Fae* create and maintain the ethereal realm or whether the ethereal realm creates them. It is likely that they both create each other and is dependent on the other for existence. The ethereal realm interpenetrates all other realms of existence. It is supposed that there is no realm or dimension which the faerie realm does not interpenetrate. This is unverified and possibly unverifiable. No one entity or species has ever travelled to or through all of the realms of existence. If it were possible to do so, then it would be a faerie who would achieve it.

Feaufkr: Feaufkr is female twinkling. A twinkling is a baby faerie.

Florinthia: The name that the Red King gives for the desert on the world of Pani in the dimension of Shookle.

Garl: In various ages the term "Garl" has taken on subtly different meanings. Either a female or male can be a Garl , particularly in Shookle. Kings and queens in Shooople are not usually called Garl, though have been referred to as a Garl in the secret writings of the dwarves.

Gerloop. Mr Mc Noodles real name. (Gerlump is a corruption of Gerloop.)

Gracalo. [*Shookle*.] A magical sanctuary or grove. Or, a magical prison.

Groak: A Groak is a creature which resembles a tree but is not a tree. It looks like a tree but it is in no way is a tree. It is made of flesh and bone and resembles a tree in every way. A Groak naturally is able to move independently. This perhaps is the only way to know whether a Groak is a Groak and not a tree. Unless you accidentally hurt a Groak (which is not an easy thing to accomplish). The strength of a Groak is prodigious. They mainly exist in forest as a forest naturally is able to disguise a Groak (or a Groak disguises the tree.) However, a Groak can be seen in any environment. They have been known to move in herds, even in vast herds but they have also been misperceived as being a forests. They move in herds when walking large distances across hazardous environments. They have been seen moving through the Okari desert often. They are long lived and are able to stand stationary for centuries. It is thought that a Groaks are able to suspend themselves indefinitely in the deepest oceans. Though this is speculation. Strangely, Thrani do not attack a Groak. The reason for this unknown.

Gook: A wandering elemental. A wandering elemental can be said to be a spirit. It is often the case that an elemental facilitates a connection between two intelligent beings.

House of Conclave: The magicians of the Carnasti. The emperor Contrastian (the first) gave the magicians of the horsemen permission to study magic for the good of the kingdom. It is the way of the house of the conclave to serve the emperor and only the emperor. At any one time there is a minimum of three magicians within the immediate vicinity of an emperor of the horsemen.

Kani: A dynasty that existed between the ages of Onal and Canasti. The denizens of the two dimensions, both Shoopple and Shookle had been bound together at the beginning of the Onal and Canasti age. This was not a natural occurrence. It has been said that the Onal is the birthing age, and that it was a dark age. Scholars of magical lore in both dimensions agree that it was at the beginning of the Onal age that humanity was formed.

Kani⁽²⁾: An elder demon that lingers in a place called Chronos.

Kashir: [*Shookle*] An Orc which had been killed by a Groak in the battle of Gagier.

Katerline Wheel: (*Shoopple*) or Catherine Wheel [*Shookle*]: a firework lit on the winter solstice in the dimension of *Shookle on the world of Pran*. It is very similar to earth's Catherine wheel firework.

Keet : [*Shookle*.] A horse meister's term which is identical to the concept and actuality of Kiesha.

Kiesha: the communication of emotions, intuition, words and experience is able to be communicated. It is a very pure and versatile means of communication. It is common amongst those which exist within a higher frequency. Amongst denser vibrational creatures it is very rare and is usually formed through an intense fear based emotion.

Kien. [*Shookle/Shoopple*] Kien: [*Dwarven; elven; faerie*]: inner mind, or, inner being.

Kiesha: [*origin: Faerie – Shookle*] A telepathic like communication wrought through a bond of tightly knit individuals. Through Kiesha: the communication of emotions, intuition, words and experience is able to be communicated. It is a very pure and versatile means of communication. It is common amongst those which exist within a higher frequency. Amongst denser vibrational creatures it is very rare and is usually formed through an intense fear based emotion.

Kear: The faerie name for what humans call Earth.

kollagidy leaves: A leaf which is hard to find, that only exists in one place: within the dimension of Shookle. Often used in transformation potions.

Kolly hill: This is a place on the world of Pran.

Lisa Long Neck (last name unknown) – an operative of the Red King. From the species oblicitus (humanoid). An extremely cunning creature, capable of every evil contrivance. Often seen in the company of her sister, Tracy. The two sisters have been altered physically by the Red King. He did so to punish them for a task which had not been carried out properly.

Mandy: The girl that befriends Binkerbelle and Mc Noodle.

Mc Noodle: The one and only Mc Noodle. Leaves small foot prints in the homes of humans deliberately. He has many numerous restaurants named after him in the twenty first century though the humans that named their restaurants after him were not aware that they were doing so. For them the names came as random ideas.

Moddling: A general faerie reference of time. Not many faeries have a firm grasp of time. Dates and times are not taken with any kind of seriousness by the faerie mind. "The Moddling" is a time period somewhere between the birth of humanity (in its present form) and the brownie revolt. It is to be noted that the brownie revolt began and ended in the first century.

Mc Noodle's deluxe noodle cafe: a place of rest and relaxation for Mr Mc Noodle. It is one of his favourite place to eat and drink (he has mixed a fruit cocktail and has named it unknowingly after himself.)

Moddling: A faerie reference of time (which is ridiculous really because faeries do not recon time, at least in a sense that the rest of the universe do. However, faeries seem to understand the term and always use it when talking about periods of time. By the way, they like popsicles too.)

Mystio cards: A goblin name for faerie cards (what human's call Tarot. Tarot is vastly simplistic version of Mystio cards – even the goblin version of Mystio cards is at least a hundred times more complex than human tarot cards.) A studious lore seeker would possibly enjoy the study of Dwarven Mystio cards and find great interest comparing faerie and mystio cards (of the Moddling era) alongside them.

Nicolette: Friend of the fairies, very magical and powerful with a wisdom respected by fairies and all other manner of magical creatures.

Numkin: Any being which is really annoying in a silly sort of way.

Ogrea: Ogrea is a realm which exists between dimensions. It has been surmised that once there was a great magician which created the realm of Ogrea. This is probably not the case. According to the Ministry of Dwarven antiquities and recollections, Ogrea was a magician of mediocre achievement though he was a well trodden gentleman. That is to say, he was well travelled. It is fairly certain that he did indeed travel the Ogrea way and was probably one of the first (of the human race) to do so.

Oblicitus: A species of humanoid. Nothing is known about this species other than they look very much like humans in appearance. Though their appearance is almost identical to a human they are different entirely. Which doesn't really tell you much really.

Oblien Canashie: Oblien Canashie was a human being which existed during the ancient *Carnasti* dynasty. It is believed that Oblien Canashie created a species called Orc–Canashie. This species was built through the use of dark spell craft of which Oblien Canashie had vast knowledge of.

Omworthson: A person. He is dead, or thought to be dead. His grave is in the plains of the wolf.

Orc – canashie: An a species of Orc which were larger than other species of Orc. They had been created by the ancient wizard Oblien Canashie for the purposes of death. They were thought to be fearless and far stronger than other Orcs.

Pani: The name of the world that exists in the exact same space as the earth but in a different dimension, the dimension of Shooke.

Purpureus cascade: In the beginning of the formation that is the Car

Realm: A realm is not dimensional in nature. It is possible to travel to a realm. Or it is thought to be possible. Agramoni spoke frequently of travelling to different realms. When speaking about "realms" it is better to think in terms of vibration. One could change one's frequency, and by doing so, oscillate at a different frequency. Having changed one's frequency one could then travel upward or downward (upward and downwards are relative terms) through the frequencies. The earth and the rest of the physical universe vibrates on a narrow frequency. Pani exists on a slightly different frequency yet it is still within the same frequency range as the Earth and the rest of the universe.

Rhubarb (*often used in conjunction with Numkin*) [*Shoople*]: "Rhubarb" is a common term used by faeries. Its usage began somewhere between the first or second Moddling. Over the vast expanse of time the term has changed from a mild derogative term to a slanderous term (15 **Anno Domini**). In recent times it is used by faeries usually as both a derogative term and a kindly term. The term is only used in the presence of brownies.

Numkin [*Shoople*]: Any being which is really annoying in a silly sort of way.

Scarlet Cascade [*Shoople*]: The secret (inner) sanctum of the magicians guild. The outer sanctum is named Purpureus Cascade (see also: purpureus cascade). The magician's guild is known by everyone outside the guild as the House of Conclave.

Sheridan: Tiffany's, Courtney's, Trinity's and Robert's Mother.

Shookle: One of many dimensions (Trev's dimension.)

Shoople: One of many dimensions (Tiffany's dimension.)

Thranied's hoof: or hooves are made from dynadide, which is to say, cannot be penetrated by any means known by god or man.

Theodore: A being which is regarded by some as a God. He existed at the creation of Pani.

The Still One: Very little is known about this creature. There are whispers of his deeds. Few speak of the creature. It is thought that to utter his name is to invite death.

The Dark Queen. The dark queen is a card game played by faerie kind.

The pathway's of Ogrea: There are hidden pathways in every place. In *Shoople*, or in any other known dimension. In the dimension of Shoople these pathways all called "The pathway's of Ogrea." The word or name Ogrea is of unknown origin.

The mountain tiger: Tiffany's friend (yet to be name.)

The Red King: A meddlesome being of unknown origin.

Tiffany's wand: It was very beautiful. Half a meter long, twirls and curls on it, emblems and runes and at the top the best bit: a fiery Phoenix. Every line and curve had been hand carved. There were jewels within the grain of the wood. This wand is able to shrink and become as small as pencil.

The white Tiger – an avatar of the Supreme Being. Its eyes are pink.

Tracy No Neck (last name unknown) – an operative of the Red King. From the species oblicitus (humanoid). An extremely cunning creature, capable of every evil contrivance. Often seen in the company of her sister, Lisa. The two sisters have been altered physical by the Red King. He did so to punish them for a task which had not been carried out properly.

Twinkling: A twinkling is a baby faerie.

Thrani: A Thrani is a creature which resembles a centaur. It is half humanoid and half horse. It is half humanoid but not half human. A Thrani has ears which curve and rise up pass the crown of their heads. There is something about them which speaks of the sea. Their noses are like the nostrils of sea lions and they have skin which is as smooth as a sea lion also. Their homeland is the snowy mountain reaches. It is thought that they gather in vast herds, moving in eccentric circles to keep warm. The outer layer takes on the brunt of the cold weather and protects the inner layer from the cold. As the Thrani continue to circle, the outer concentric circle eventually moves inward. In this way every Thrani takes up the eventual position of another Thrani. The friction of one body against the other generates heat and it is rumoured that that the females of the Thrani conceive at this time.

They are an intelligent, fierce and closed society. They are fierce warriors, who are willing to die for each other and have done so in many wars. They have no magic casters and have no knowledge of magic. Their fierceness and great number are their strength, as well as their furiousness in any kind of conflict. They were also extremely durable and were able to suffer various temperatures, perhaps more so than Dwarves.

They settle in the cold climates because the cold mountains and the lack of oxygen do not bother them at all. Other creatures, sentient or otherwise leave them to their mountains. They shunned every other sentient being in Pran. It is rumoured that some Dwarves have travelled through the mountains without coming conflict with the Thrani. Also, Groak's have travelled through Thrani territory.

Vash: The God of war. Worshipped on the south shores Girll.

Whatherling: A very mean type of creature which looks like a wizened old man, only uglier. Their noses are huge and they are much to hairy. Hairs protrude from their ears and from their ligaments. They have growths covering their hands and faces. They probably have growths across every part of their body. No one has observed this to be so, absolutely no one.

White Rose: The white rose of destiny. It is a pure manifestation of Divine power and love.

White Tiger: the avatar of god Vish'klo. The demon vanquisher. It is said, that at the beginning of time he prevented the demon horde coming to the world of Pani.

Time Line: Tiffany and the Fae begins at: *Poso* – 3061 (Shookle.) *Shoople time:* 2014 (Shoople.)