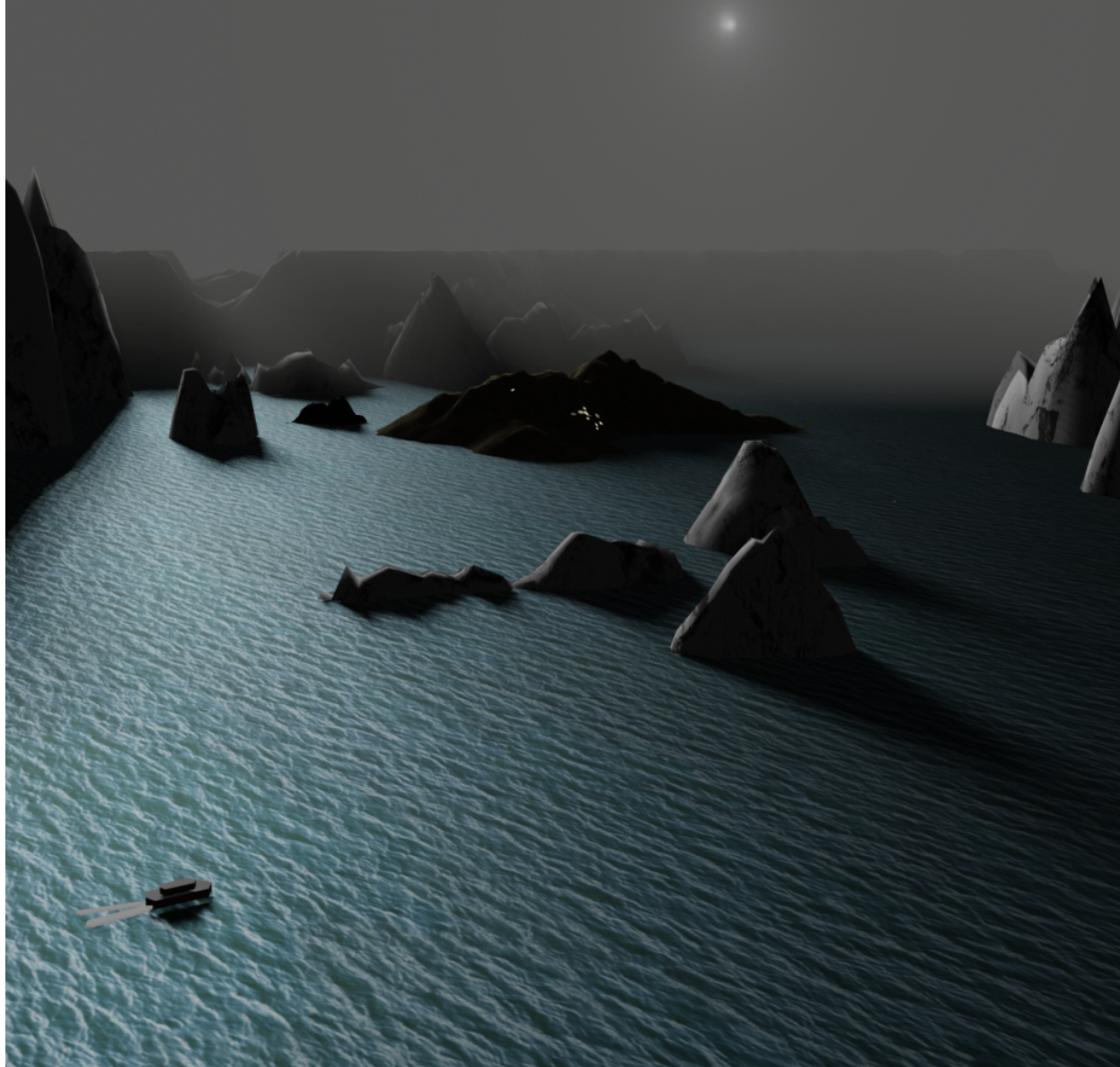


Fleshwelder



By Skylar Guillaume

The small boat traveled swiftly, occasional chunks of ice brushed away by the prow. It was spring, and the ice sheet known as the Everlast had withdrawn enough to allow passage. Teal watched a large brown and black rock grow bigger on the horizon. He adjusted the old floppy hat on his head, and looked back at his book. Painfully boring. Hopefully his research trip to Everlast Keep would not last long. Then he could get his diploma, and retire early with his inheritance and a “respectable” reputation. His book was titled Myths and Legends from the Far South. He again reread the paragraph about his topic.

Among fairy tales from the far south, the legend of the Fleshwelders is the most grotesque. This story tells of a country of demonic creatures that killed outstanding individuals. Great thinkers. Star athletes. These creatures looked like regular humans, but could take disembodied pieces from others and stick them to themselves.

The legend goes that there used to be a country of these creatures, but there was a great war, and all of the Fleshwelders vanished. Many versions of this legend can be traced to the Southern Glacial Islands region, specifically Everlast Keep.

There are many forms of this legend, but all are quite vague. The authors of this book sincerely apologize for any inconveniences resulting from the shortness of this entry, but limited funds are a real thing, and we wanted to research more on the Holy Giftpelter, from West Arboria.

The hum of the engine slowed. Teal glanced up.

“What is it?” he snapped. He was looking forward to a nap and a hot bath. Little did he know there was no hot water on Everlast Keep.

“Nothing, good sir,” said one of the crew.

Teal glanced over the side of the boat, and would have sworn he saw a huge shadow moving down in the depths.

Teal heard a splash, and saw one of the crewmembers dumping a bucket of kitchen scraps over the side.

The engine sped back up, and the boat was back on it’s way, faster than before.

“Might want to gather your belongings, Mr. Teal,” advised the captain. “We’ll be docking in a quarter of an hour.”

Teal went below decks, to his small cabin. He bumped his elbow on the wall with a grunt as he pulled his suitcase out from under his hammock. He tied his sheathed sword to his belt.

“Useless thing,” he thought. Still, his sword was of a rare metal, and people would think twice when countering him because of his perceived wealth.

Teal emerged on deck to see the boat being tied off at a modest wooden pier. He paid the captain, and disembarked.

Everlast Keep was a barren place, characterized by dead grass and basalt, hinting at the island’s volcanic origins.

“Welcome to Everlast Keep.” said the officer waiting at the end of the pier. “My name is Nerve. Are you the researcher, Teal?”

“That is me,” said Teal.

“I trust your journey was comfortable?”

“Comfortable enough for a dirty cargo ship.”

Nerve frowned slightly, shaking her head.

“That ship is the pride of our island. You might be used to gilded pleasure yachts up in the Steel Valley, but here all our tools are made for function. And an awfully great job they do.”

“Sorry...” grumbled Teal, feeling somewhat provoked at the officer’s mini rant.

“Can you just show me where I will be staying?”

Nerve led Teal up the hill along a dirt road. A few scraggly goats grazed the sparse field. Soon they reached a little shack. The harsh smell of exhaust fumes came from a pipe leading to the building’s heating system.

“Well, you’re here,” said the officer, checking her watch. “I have to go, I have a meeting.”

“Oh! Before you go, a quick question.” said Teal, “Do you know anything about the legends of the Fleshwelders?”

“The name sounds familiar, but this is not my area of expertise. If you want, ask Bogus, at the library.”

“What sort of name is Bogus?”

“He is fond of verbal misdirection. A great quality for a librarian.”

“What did you do to deserve your name, Nerve?”

“I am willing to do things others are too embarrassed or afraid to do. Sometimes this is helpful, but other times my audacity gets me into tricky situations. How did you get your name, Teal? You don’t look terribly blue-green to me.”

“It doesn’t mean anything, I guess.”

“I think it does. Teal is the color of algae, and your sense of humor is as primitive as algae.”

“If I was algae, at least I wouldn’t have to listen to your corny jokes,” said Teal.

“Better,” said Nerve. “I hope you enjoy the house more than you enjoyed the boat!”

With that, she headed off down the road.

Teal reached for the handle of the door, but paused when he realized he had never acquired the key.

He tried the door anyway, and found it unlocked.

“Maybe they don’t lock their doors here,” he thought. He twisted the knob, and opened the door.

Teal stepped inside. The interior was sparsely furnished, with a table and a...

Teal tripped on something. He looked down, and saw he had tripped on a skull. A human skull.

Teal let out a pathetic scream, and fumbled for his sword. It took him the better part of 10 seconds, because his hands were shaking so much.

“OFFICER!!!” Yelled Teal.

Nerve had not gotten very far. She ran back, cudgel in hand.

“What is it?”

“Look...” said Teal, gesturing toward the skull.

“How awful. That skull looks fragile, you shouldn’t have kicked it. Look, it’s starting to crack!”

“But...” complained Teal,

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you. I’m sorry. I’ll keep my eyes out for whoever did this.”

“Do you have any idea of who it was?”

“I have my suspicions.” replied Nerve.

“Ok, well let me know if you find anything.”

“Sure.”

Teal walked into the house, and Nerve left.

He was chilled after being on deck of the boat, then climbing up the windswept hill to his lodging, and felt like a cup of hot tea would do him good.

However, when he opened the cupboard, he found it bare. No dishes. No food. No nothing, except a note.

Dear Esteemed Research Visitor Teal,

I apologize for the lack of amenities in this house. Your arrival was on short notice, and I could not prepare the usual items for a respectable guest such as yourself.

Sincerely,

Blasphemy

Head of the Fireside Inn

Short notice indeed! Everlast Keep had been told of Teal's arrival several months in advance. Well, then, if not tea, a nap would do Teal good.

He walked into the small bedroom off of the kitchen, and stopped in his tracks.

There was a bed, sure, but where was the mattress?

Teal poked his head into the closet, but found it lacking sheets, blankets, or pillows. He would have to sleep very close to the fire tonight, or he would freeze.

Suddenly, he felt an unpleasant feeling. It was time for him to empty his bowels.

Teal headed out to the back of the house, where an outhouse stood.

When Teal had finished his business, he reached to his side, but to his dismay his fingers only touched an empty roll. The toilet paper was out!

Teal cracked open the door, and peered out, looking for a large leaf. But, after all, this was Everlast Keep, and all that grew was dry grass.

Teal emptied his pockets, but alas had no papers.

Then, a genius idea occurred to him. He took the empty roll of cardboard, and, ripping it apart into a rectangular shape, used that to wipe his bottom instead.

Teal was starting to become very irritated with this Blasphemy person. If setting up a nice house was a religion, then they had no hope for the afterlife.

Teal headed inside, and took down the curtains, and laid them out as a sort of bed. Then, using his spare clothes as a pillow, Teal lay down for a nap.

Nerve climbed the steep path down the cliff on the western side of the island. The waves crashed on the sharp rocks down below, sending bits of spray far into the air.

The path led sideways along the cliff, passing many small cave entrances.

Soon, she reached a larger cave entrance. It was blocked by a boulder almost 10 feet tall.

Nerve braced herself, and gave the boulder a shove. It rolled to the side with a booming grinding sound. Those arm muscles had been passed down and added to through many generations of her family, and her grandpa liked to tell her that pieces of them were from Hypocrite of the Greatsword, the legendary warrior who had died defending the Igneous Gate in the war of the Exile. There were many advantages to being a Fleshwelder.

Nerve peered into the cave, her cougar's eyes seeing excellently.

"You're late, as always," complained a slightly garbled high-pitched voice from the darkness.

"Earning your name, as always, Snap."

"I don't snap at people as much as I used to, Nerve."

"A few months ago you yelled at your brother when he said you couldn't have a turn owning Great Uncle's hands. Said you would rip off his nose and replace it with a bat's butt."

"Shut up!" snapped Snap.

The owner of the voice stepped into the light. Snap would appear to be at first glance a medium sized dog, but soon you would notice the ears of a horse, and the back legs of a deer. Instead of paws, the creature had the hands of a small child.

And on it's back, were, neatly folded, not one but three pairs of albatross wings.

"Any news from Below?" asked Nerve.

"The councilors just approved the construction of a slime mold farm in one of the abandoned lava tubes. Nothing interesting. Has the researcher arrived yet?"

“His name is Teal. Seems a nice enough fellow. Would be a shame if I had to kill him.”

“Well hopefully it won’t come to that. Did he find the skull?”

“Yes. His scream sounded like a dying rabbit. And Blasphemy took all the stuff out of the house. I think with these and the few more tricks planned, he will be out of here within a week. And if that doesn’t work, we can always send in the Trisworn.”

“That would certainly scare him away,” replied Snap, “But if the researcher gets concrete proof of the Fleshwelders, soon will arrive High Inspectors. We won’t be able to hide from a search by any such as them. And the world has not forgotten the... mistakes of our ancestors, and so next will arrive warships full of troops.”

“Well, we could run elsewhere!” said Nerve.

“We haven’t fled to a new home in centuries. Our technology has not progressed much, and for all your skill with the sword, and mine with the crossbow, we would still be slain, shot full of bullets. Have you heard of those new flying metal boxes they are making? I think they call them Plains. If Steel Valley knew we existed, they would find us easily.”

“Well yeah,” muttered Nerve, “But our tricks to make Teal leave will work.”

“I wish I could meet him,” said Snap, changing the subject.

“Never leaving the caves is the price you have to pay to keep such an inhuman body,” replied Nerve. “But personally I think you are missing out. Fresh air! The smell of the sea! And actually good food. Like spinach.”

“My inhuman body is super cool! I have breath that knocks people out! I can survive under water for half an hour! I can even fly! And spinach? Spinach is atrocious. I don’t miss spinach. I haven’t ever eaten it, but I am still entitled to an opinion.”

“How about roast mutton? Roast mutton is good.”

“I’m a pescetarian!”

“Like you have a choice,” countered Nerve, “All there is to eat down Below is algae and mold. Occasionally yucky dried and salted fish. And anyway, what are you, like 30% wolf? Who heard of a pescetarian wolf?”

“I have the stomach of a goat. Goats don’t eat meat.” proclaimed Snap.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Nerve, shaking her head. “A goat ate my great grandma’s foot out of the compost.”

“You sound like Bogus,” replied Snap, “You need to get better at lying.”

“It’s not a lie. I heard it from someone trustworthy.”

“Who?”

“Bogus,” said Nerve, grudgingly.

“See? My point still stands.”

“We’ve gotten off topic,” said Nerve. “No new orders from the council?”

“No,” said Snap. “Just let me know how the researcher deals with the library.”

Nerve laughed. “I am looking forward to seeing how he does.”

“Alright, then,” said Snap. “See you next week.”

“Goodbye, Snap,” said Nerve. She rolled the boulder back into place, and headed back up the path on the cliff.

Teal awoke. His muscles ached from sleeping on the floor.

He glanced out the window, and was surprised to see it was morning. His nap had gone longer than expected.

Since the house did not have any food, Teal rummaged in his trunk and found some crackers. They had been broken by the bumping of the trunk, but they were still tasty. Stale, but tasty.

What was he supposed to be doing today? Ah, yes, research. Teal remembered that the officer had suggested he head to the library.

Teal put on his shoes, and walked out the door.

“Ahhh!” he yelled as he tripped and fell to the ground. He lay there, groaning. Getting up a few minutes later, he looked backwards and saw that he had tripped on the skull he had found the day before. “Stupid skull,” he thought. “I never cleaned it up.”

A piece of his brain told him to stop being lazy and clean it up now, but he ignored it, and went to look for the library instead.

The town center of Everlast Keep was not terribly large, and was made up of five or so one story brick buildings with slate roofs.

One of the buildings had a big sign that said “Public Library: Open from 1 PM to 11 AM daily” in faded white paint. “What odd opening hours,” pondered Teal. However, it was 10 AM, and Teal headed in the door.

The library was one small room, filled with wooden shelves stacked with books.

“Unwelcome, unwelcome, bad sir! What doesn’t bring you to my not-library?”

The speaker was an older man, with a grey top hat, seated behind a desk, which his feet in black boots rested upon.

“I don’t understand,”

“Well I don’t either!”

“Are you the real librarian? Who are you?”

“Most certainly not the Esteemed Dr. Bogus, the most outrageous and annoying man on Everlast Keep! Or have you come to take the title from me?”

Teal scowled in anger. “I am most certainly not outrageous! Or annoying!”

“I don’t know about the outrageous part, but you are definitely annoying me right now. Comes right into my library, questioning my station, arguing with me like he has no sense of decency! Tell me what you want or leave!”

“Well, hey, I’m sorry,” said Teal, backing down. “I am just doing some research, and I thought...”

“Research, you say?” exclaimed Bogus, leaning forward in interest. “What sort of research?”

“I am researching the legend of the Fleshwelders, do you have any info or books on it?”

“The Fleshwelders, you say?” replied Bogus in a low voice, “You want to know about them? Why?”

“So you admit that they are real, then?” said Teal.

“No one messes with the Fleshwelders. Have defeated any that opposed them.

Emerged victorious in many tournaments. The best Slap-Ball team below the equator.”

Teal smacked his forehead in annoyance. “Not the sports team the Fleshwelders! I want to know about the ancient legend of the Fleshwelders. That the sports team was named after!”

“Oh, ok. I have the perfect book for you!”

Bogus led Teal through the aisles, muttering the letters of each section they passed.

Soon, Bogus retrieved a heavy book from the shelf.

“Here you go!”

Teal grabbed the book in excitement. However, looking at it, he realized he recognized it.

“Thank you, Bogus, but this book is *Myths and Legends from the Far South*, which I already have a copy of. Besides, it has only one paragraph about the Fleshwelders.”

“Oh, well, that’s the only book we have on them here. Sorry!”

“Since this is where the legend is from, I thought you would have more on it! Haven’t researchers come here before?”

“Well... ummm... not really,” relied Bogus. “If you would like to research the Fleshwelders, head to the university library in Steel Valley. The biggest book collection in the world!”

“Steel Valley is where I am from,” said Teal, “And that is the university that sent me here. And the only book about the Fleshwelders that they have is THE SAME STUPID BOOK THAT YOU JUST GAVE ME!”

Teal shook the book in anger.

“Please do not harshly handle books in the library. If you do it again you will receive a fine.”

“I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF YOU, BOGUS! GOODBYE! I HOPE THAT EVERY BATH YOU TAKE FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE IS IN GOAT DUNG WITH POWDERED SKUNK LIVER AS YOUR SOAP!”

“I appreciated your visit, Mr. Teal, do come again! Goodbye!” Bogus said with a sly smile.

Teal forced the book into Bogus’s hands, and rushed out of the library, slamming the door. He needed to calm down. Maybe a walk by the sea would help?

Teal headed down from the hill, and soon reached the coast. On this side of the island, the land sloped down to a pleasant beach covered in pebbles and driftwood.

Teal walked slowly down the beach, mulling over his predicament. No helpful information on the Fleshwelders, everybody was annoying, and things kept going wrong, almost like...

Teal looked up, noticing a strange sight. Several hundred feet away, there was a small island, small enough to be more of a large rock. Ice coated one side.

But the strange thing was, there seemed to be a pattern to the ice.

Teal got out binoculars from his bag, and looked closer.

That wasn’t ice! Those were fish! White fish, drying in the sun, set in orderly rows!

“Who would dry fish out on a random rock?” wondered Teal, “You would have to take a boat out. It would be much faster simply to dry it on the main island! Does the rock have a better sun angle? Not really... Is it a special kind of rock, that, I don’t know, gives the fish a special flavor?”

Try as he might, Teal could think up no plausible reason why they would dry the fish on a large rock in the sea.

Was there something special to that island? Teal decided to go and see. Was this connected to why people were being so annoying? No, probably not. Were both of those connected to... the Fleshwelders?

Teal dismissed his crazy idea, but wanted to check out that island anyway.

He walked toward the docks, wondering if he could find a boat.

The boat he had come on was still there, but it was much too big to get to the rock.

There were also a few fishing boats, but they were too big as well.

Teal then spotted a small boat, with an outboard motor. Perfect!

He walked over to the boat, and looked for some sort of identification to see who owned it.

While he was looking, a woman walked over with a bag full of tools.

“Greetings! Do you like my boat?” she said.

“I do,” answered Teal, “I was wondering how much I would need to pay you to bring me to the little island with all the fish.”

“Why would you want to go there? That’s just where the fishing boats dry all their fish so that people don’t steal it.”

Teal thought that seemed pretty reasonable, but he was still curious.

“I still want to go there. My name is Teal, and...”

“Teal! The researcher! I’ve heard of you, from my dear friend Nerve. My name is Blasphemy, and I own the Inn.”

Teal remembered the paper from his house. “Didn’t you furnish the house where I am staying?”

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry about that.”

“I was wondering... could you bring the stuff, later today, maybe? I don’t have any food for dinner, or even a mattress, and worst of all, no toilet paper!”

“Oh, I’m very sorry, we’re having shortages right now. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Uhhh... alright. Anyway, the boat?”

“Oh! I would be happy to take you to the island. One small problem, though.”

Blasphemy took a wrench out of her bag of tools, and opened the side of the outboard motor.

“See for yourself!” she said.

Teal looked into the engine. “Dear gods above!” he exclaimed. “What happened?”

The engine appeared to have burned up. All there was left were a few charred pieces of metal and some ash.

“Don’t swear by the gods,” said Blasphemy, “They are all idiots. Anyway, I think I put the wrong kind of fuel in a week or so ago.”

“Doesn’t the wrong kind of fuel just make it not work? It wouldn’t make it catch on fire.”

“That’s what I thought,” replied Blasphemy, “But I was wrong.”

“Anyway...” said Teal, pointing to the oars sitting in the boat, “Can’t we just use these?”

“Maybe,” said Blasphemy hesitantly, “It’s kinda far, and there is a bad current for it.

Maybe just wait till I fix the engine?”

“It’s completely gone! You can’t fix it. You’ll have to get a new one,” said Teal, “So there is no use waiting. I think rowing is a good idea.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” asked Blasphemy,

Teal thought for a moment. “Yes,” he replied.

“Ok, then,” said Blasphemy. Then, she yelled “HEY NERVE AND BOGUS, WE’RE GOING FOR A ROW!”

Nerve and Bogus emerged from behind a building, carrying large bags.

“Alright, hop in!” said Blasphemy. Everyone boarded the boat, and Blasphemy untied it.

Teal wasn’t so sure why so many people were coming, but he decided not to think about it.

“There are only two oars,” said Blasphemy, “I nominate Teal to row the whole way. It was his idea to go in the first place.”

“I second your opinion,” declared Nerve,

“I third it,” added Bogus.

“Hey, no fair!” said Teal, “Can’t we all just take turns?”

“We voted that you would row. Three against one.”

“Oh, alright,” grumbled Teal, realizing he would probably not win the argument.

He had rowed only once or twice before, at an indoor pond in a botanical garden in Steel Valley.

However, he got the hang of it pretty quickly.

He noticed Nerve and Bogus lowering the bags they had brought over the front of the boat, and tying them off.

“What are those bags for?” Teal asked.

“Ballast,” replied Nerve.

“The boat wasn’t really tippy at all,” said Teal.

“Best to be sure just in case,” declared Bogus.

When Teal resumed rowing, he found it was somewhat harder than before.

His arms grew tired. Back, forth, back, forth. Why was he rowing in icy polar waters to some random rock covered in dried fish, again? He was tempted to turn back, but then thought of the diploma waiting for him. The diploma, the key to an easy life. Most scholars worked for years to earn theirs, completing arduous projects with painstaking dedication and detail. It was only through the connections of his family that he had gotten something easier: going on some quick little trip to research a random old children’s story. Teal wasn’t so sure about the easier part anymore, but he still couldn’t give up.

His hands began to hurt.

“Can someone else take over rowing for me?” He said, “I think I am rubbing some of the skin off my hands.”

“It will make them tougher, then.” replied Nerve.

Ignoring her comment, Teal glanced over the side of the boat, and saw a large dark shape down below. He remembered when he had seen something similar when coming to the island.

“What’s that big shape thing? An underwater rock?” he asked.

“Oh, that? That’s the Sentry. It’s a giant sea monster whale thingy that guards the island.” said Bogus.

“You got to be kidding me,” replied Teal.

“It sometimes tips over boats. Spooky, spooky. Maybe we should head back,” said Blasphemy.

“Well, we’re almost there!” answered Teal. And, indeed, they were.

They tied up the boat on a metal stake pounded into the rock. The small island smelled strongly of fish.

Teal climbed to the top of the island, and surveyed the mat of dried fish. He reached down to feel one.

“Don’t touch them,” said Nerve, “The merchants don’t really want us here. They would kill us if we touched their wares.”

“Oh, alright,” replied Teal.

“Well, there isn’t anything to see here, wanna go back now?” proposed Bogus.

“I just want to check out the island a little more, then sure,” said Teal.

He searched the island left and right. Rocks. Fish. More rocks. More fish.

Suddenly, something reddish brown caught his eye.

He went over, and saw it was a bit of rusty steel. A handle, in fact. But why would there be a handle in the ground?

Looking closer, Teal could see a bit of a circular outline around the handle. A circle big enough to fit through...

“Hey, do you know what this is?” asked Teal.

“What is what?” replied Nerve.

“This handle with what looks to be some sort of trap door around it.”

Nerve looked to where he was pointing.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Do either of you see anything?” Teal asked Blasphemy and Bogus.

“Nope!”

“Nothing.”

“But it’s so obvious! How can you not see it? It’s right here!” exclaimed Teal.

Bogus yawned.

“I’m getting really tired,” he said. “Let’s go back now, shall we?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m tired as well,” said Nerve.

“I am positively exhausted!” added Blasphemy.

“We’re heading back to the boat. You should join us,” said Bogus.

All three sprinted back to the boat.

“Why would they sprint if they were tired?” wondered Teal. But, he had gotten this far, and he wasn’t going to stop now.

He pulled at the handle to the door. At first, it didn’t budge. Then, it moved a tiny bit. Grunting, Teal lifted the trap door up, and heaved it to the side. He stood, hands on knees, catching his breath.

He glanced up, and almost fell over in surprise.

All three of his companions stood in a circle around him, each about 20 feet away.

Nerve had a longsword. Bogus held a shortbow with an arrow on the string, ready to draw in a moment. And Blasphemy had two daggers, twirling them expertly.

“Uhhhhh... What's going on?” asked Teal, voice shaking.

“We’re going to explore down that hole you found,” said Nerve.

“Hurray! An adventure!” added Blasphemy.

“I think... I think I am ready to head back to the main island,” replied Teal, “I have had enough.”

“You will go down that hole,” Nerve repeated, more forcefully.

Teal looked into the hole. Metal rungs lined the sides.

“It’s too dark,” he said. “I am going to fall. Can I have a light?”

Bogus reached into his bag, and pulled out a flashlight. Instead of handing it to Teal, he tossed it to him, keeping 20 feet away.

Teal flicked on the flashlight, and shone it’s light down the hole. It seemed to be maybe 60 or 70 feet to the bottom.

He grabbed the first rung, and, holding the flashlight in his mouth, climbed down. Once he had gone a short distance, the others began to descend as well. Apparently, they did not need lights.

Once Teal reached the bottom, he started down a short passage, emerging into a medium sized cavern.

It was lit by many jars full of glowing algae. Boxes and crates sat to one side.

On the other side was a partitioned off section, with a nice wooden floor. There were desks and tables stacked high with papers and other various office supplies.

At the desks worked people. But they did not look like regular people.

One had five arms, and wrote simultaneously with each.

Another was reading a book. But an eye in the back of their head watched the rest of the room.

“Where am I?” cried Teal.

“You found what you were looking for,” answered Blasphemy, emerging from the tunnel behind him, and putting away her daggers.

A bearlike creature with a human head walked into the room, pulling an empty cart. It used its tentacles to scoop up some boxes and place them on the cart. Then, it left the same way it had come, bringing its cart with it. Teal could only stare in shock.

“These are... Fleshwelders?”

“Yes, those are Fleshwelders. I am one as well,” replied Blasphemy.

“But, but...” spluttered Teal, “You are a regular human!”

Blasphemy laughed. “The rule is any Fleshwelder who lives above ground must have a body that looks normal on the outside. I am just as altered as them. Perhaps more so.”

Suddenly, Teal’s perspective shifted. These people had been tricking him the whole time! He was a fool, an ignorant fool! He did not belong here, in this world of secrets and ancient legends. He should be back home, eating a nice meal or reading a book! They had given him so many clues, so many chances to turn back! Why hadn’t he taken them?

Nerve and Bogus arrived, putting away their weapons.

“Why did you all have weapons out?” asked Teal,

“To make sure you wouldn’t escape before we went down the hole,” said Bogus.

“So I can’t leave?”

“I thought you got that. It was pretty obvious we were threatening you,” said Nerve.

Teal in reality had not really thought this through. Now, the truth began to sink in. He panicked, sprinting down the passage.

“STOP!” yelled Bogus, taking out his bow. But Teal had rounded a corner before he could shoot.

Teal ran as hard as he could, which was not very hard.

He ran into a Fleshwelder, carrying jars of the glowing algae. They smashed on the ground, sending goey algae everywhere.

Teal heard Blasphemy slip behind him.

A few seconds later, Teal could not run anymore. He was exhausted.

He stopped to catch his breath in a side passage.

“Who are you?” demanded a garbled and high pitch voice from behind him.

“Ahhhh!!!” screamed Teal. Spinning, he saw the speaker was a strange dog-like creature, with horse ears and human hands.

Teal heard footsteps behind him. It was Bogus, Blasphemy, and Nerve. Blasphemy was covered in algae.

“Knock him out, Snap,” said Nerve.

“Hey, I’m not touching him! Looks like he would bite. You hold him down first!”

Nerve kicked Teal’s feet out from under him, and he screamed as he fell to the ground.

All three of the new arrivals stood on Teal’s limbs. He thrashed, but it did nothing.

“YOU HEARTLESS DEMONS!” he screamed.

“Name calling has no effect on Fleshwelders,” said Snap, “Because we are already named for negative aspects of our personality. Well, according to our parents, at least.”

Snap walked up right to Teal’s face. Snap opened his mouth. And breathed out...

Teal tried to hold his breath, but he was still panting from his run, and could not for long.

When he breathed in, an awful smell filled his lungs. He gagged, and then... Nothing.

Teal woke up. He was on a cot, in a small cell. His side ached from being knocked to the ground, his arms ached from rowing, and his hands were covered in blisters. He began picking at them, curious because he never really had blisters before, since he hadn’t really done much physical work, and one popped. Teal winced in pain. Picking blisters had been a bad idea.

How long had he been knocked out? That dog breath had been disgusting!

So, he was stuck here. In this underground world of the... Fleshwelders? Before coming to Everlast Keep, Teal had never actually thought the old legend was real.

Looking back on his actions right after entering the underground, Teal realized they had been extremely stupid. He was not going to escape by randomly running, and plus all of

the Fleshwelders he had met so far seemed to be expert fighters. He guessed he had just acted in panic. For now, he should play along, and hopefully get a better escape opportunity later.

How he wished he could see the tall towers of Steel Valley again, their metal struts gleaming in the sunlight like stars! The lush gardens, full of plants! That city was full of life. Not like this frozen wasteland. And, he might not be allowed to see even that, being stuck underground!

What turn of misfortune had led him here? There had been dozens of other researchers in the university, and any of them could have gone instead. Why him?

“You’re awake!” said a voice.

Teal looked up, and saw the dog creature standing in front of the bars of the cell.

“I most certainly am.”

“Good. I am here to let you out, under the condition that you promise to never again do something stupid like you did yesterday.” said Snap.

“What I did was extremely stupid. I am glad you are giving me this most wonderful opportunity. I promise to never try to escape again.”

“Sufficient,” said Snap, unlocking the cell door. “Follow me!”

Teal followed Snap down a passage. There were a few other cells, but all were empty.

They reached a heavier door, which Snap unlocked.

“Where are we going?” asked Teal.

“To your initiation. And to meet your new leaders.”

“Initiation?”

“For you to become a Fleshwelder.”

“BECOME a Fleshwelder?!??!! How is that even possible?”

“Fleshwelders are not a different species from humans,” Snap explained. “They are just people who use bondflower jell to attach new body parts to themselves.”

“Bondflower jell?” asked Teal,

“This is our most important secret, but since you can’t leave, there is no harm in telling you.

Bondflowers are a special kind of flower we grow here. Requires very specific growing conditions. Then, we make the petals into jell. When you rub the jell on a body part and

stick it to yourself, it becomes part of you, and you can control it, just like your normal limbs.”

“Ummmmm... cool.” said Teal, hesitantly.

“Soon, you will meet the counselors. They will help you in your initiation, and they will tell you the history of the Fleshwelders.”

“Who are the counselors?”

“You have an elected Commander in Steel Valley?”

“That’s right,” said Teal.

“Well, we have three. They have to vote on every decision they make.”

“Huh,” said Teal, mostly uninterested.

“Anyway, we’re here!” said Snap. They had reached a small wooden door in the wall.

“Are you ready?”

“Ummm... I guess,” said Teal.

Snap opened the door, and Teal went in, and Snap shut it, not entering.

The door led to a large, stone stage. When Teal entered, a crowd cheered. There were maybe several hundred Fleshwelders on stone seats in front of the stage.

Teal turned, and saw three Fleshwelders standing in the middle of the stage.

“Welcome, Teal!” said one, “My name is Jealousy.”

“My name is Denial,”

“And I am Indecisiveness. You are the first to join our ranks in many years.”

“Has Snap informed you of what is happening?” asked Jealousy.

“Sort of. I know it’s an initiation of some sort.”

“Alright!” said Denial, taking a tray off of a small table. “What do you choose?”

On the tray was a random assortment of body parts. There were fingers, eyes, random muscles Teal could not identify, and ears. Teal’s stomach was not happy at the sight.

“Do I really... have to?”

“Take your time. This is, after all, an important decision.”

“Could I maybe... wait until another day?”

“I am not sure the crowd would be too happy, but waiting could be arranged. Though, you would have to stay in your cell until then.”

“Ummm... then I think I will take the ear, I guess,” said Teal.

“Fantastic!” replied Jealousy, taking a small jar of jell and rubbing some on the ear.

“Here you go!”

“So I just stick it somewhere?” asked Teal.

“Yep! Try not to stick it somewhere that will hinder you too much. But we can always cut it off later if need be.”

Teal had never in his life thought about where he would want to put a third ear. But he had to now, and eventually decided the back of his ankle would be a good choice.

Teal took off his shoe, and, pulling off his sock, stuck the ear on his ankle.

It stayed, but Teal did not feel much of anything. Suddenly, his hearing changed. None of the sounds were different, but, well, the perspective was fuller.

Teal tried to put his sock back on, but it pulled painfully at his ear, and so he put his shoe on without it. When it clopped back to the stage, Teal jumped in fright. It was so loud! The crowd chuckled at his reaction.

Teal tried a few practice steps, and the sound of his own footsteps was quite noisy. That would get annoying very quickly.

“You are now a Fleshwelder,” said Denial.

The crowd cheered.

“And now we will recite our history,” said Indecisiveness.

He began to speak in a loud voice. Teal realized it was half for him, but half for the audience watching and listening as well.

“Millennia ago, there was a small kingdom. It’s people were often at war with the neighboring countries.

One day, some miners discovered a strange flower in a cave. They rubbed it on their pet squirrel, and the squirrel nudged a deer leg the miners were planning to eat. And thus the power of Fleshwelding was discovered.”

Indecisiveness stopped, and Jealousy took over.

“The miners told no one but the king. He was excited by their new discovery, and experimented with it much. Then, he ordered his soldiers to become Fleshwelders. And then the townspeople.

The people of the kingdom embraced Fleshwelding, and soon most everyone had become a Fleshwelder. This whole time, though, the flowers that the jell came from remained a secret.”

Denial took over, her voice filling the cave.

“Soon, the king sent assassins to other lands, killing people for their parts. The muscles of athletes, the brains of thinkers, and such. They also hunted rare animals which were treasured by the people of those lands.

Soon, all the other countries began to hate the Fleshwelders. They banded together, and then followed a great war. Eventually, the Fleshwelders were defeated, and their king killed.

The survivors went into hiding underground, and swore never to repeat their mistake. They decided never to take body parts from someone without their permission.

We are the descendants of those people. We have survived for centuries, providing good lives to our citizens. We will never, ever be discovered!”

“Long live the Fleshwelders!” chanted the crowd. “Long live the Fleshwelders. LONG LIVE THE FLESHWELDERS!!!!”

The councilors bowed to the crowd, and to Teal, and left through the door Snap had led Teal in.

Teal stood on the stage by himself for an awkward moment, and then realized he was supposed to exit as well.

Outside, Blasphemy, Bogus, and Nerve were waiting for him.

“Uhh... hello,” said Teal. “What are you doing here?”

“We’re going to help you get settled here. Find you a house and stuff like that.”

“Oh, alright.”

“Really! You accept our help? I thought you would want nothing to do with “Heartless Demons” such as us!”

Blasphemy and Bogus laughed. Teal blushed.

“Ummmm... I’m sorry. I wasn’t in my right mind yesterday.”

“I mean, it probably was quite stressful,” said Bogus. “It certainly was for me. But let’s go.”

They entered a large cavern. A pool of clear water sparkled in the middle. Around the wall were doors and windows. Teal peeked in one of the windows, and saw a family playing a board game.

“Here’s your house!” said Blasphemy, pointing to a door.

“Do I get a key?” asked Teal,

“There aren’t any locks,” said Blasphemy. “There is no crime among Fleshwelders. You were probably the first person to ever use the jail.”

Teal opened the door, and stepped inside.

It was a pleasant house, for being deep underground.

There was a small bedroom, a kitchen/living room, and a bathroom.

“You have running water?” asked Teal.

“There is an elaborate plumbing and sewage system,” replied Bogus.

“Impressive,” said Teal.

He opened the cabinet. To his surprise, there were no plates or forks!

“You’ll have to get used to your new diet of algae and mold soup,” said Blasphemy.

Teal grimaced, but didn’t say anything. He wouldn’t have to ever eat it, hopefully. If his plan worked.

“I have a question,” said Teal.

“Go ahead,” said Nerve.

“Why do some of you live on Everlast Keep? And why all the fish on the little island, anyway?”

“We keep Fleshwelders on Everlast Keep that pretend to be normal humans, in order to trade fish for supplies we can’t produce ourselves,” explained Nerve. “The fishing boats drop off their fish on the little island, and since the door is there, we can easily go up and bring it down once it is dry.”

“That makes sense,” said Teal. “Thanks for helping me find my house. I think I need to relax a bit. Do you have any books I could read?”

“We have books,” answered Bogus, “But they are in the Fleshwelder writing. You wouldn’t be able to read it, but maybe you could learn.”

“Ok, thanks,” said Teal. “Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

Nerve, Blasphemy, and Bogus left.

Teal sat down at his table.

He needed to escape. The secrets of the Fleshwelders were too valuable not to share.

How important would he be, the famous discoverer of the Fleshwelders? How much money would he get? He imagined the Commander of Steel Valley putting a medal around his neck. The crowd would cheer. They would chant "Teal! Teal! Teal!"

Teal shook out of his daydream. He would have to escape first, before that became a reality.

He waited a little while, to make sure his "friends" were far enough away not to discover him.

Then, Teal went to his bedroom. He looked in the closet, and found it full of clothes.

There was a dark brown cloak hanging on a peg. Perfect!

Teal put it on, making sure to cover his face, and headed out the door.

He had no idea which way it was to the ladder up.

"Do you know the way to the place with all the crates?" Teal asked a passing Fleshwelder.

"Oh! Are you Teal? Welcome to town!"

"How did you know it was me?" asked Teal. He had thought the cloak would make him unrecognizable.

"We all know our way around town. So if someone asks for directions, it must be you. My name is Gullible, nice to meet you! There are a few places with lots of crates. The Merchant center, the storage caverns..."

Teal had an idea. The names of the Fleshwelders had seemed to be pretty accurate, so why not this one's?

"The one with the ladder to the surface," said Teal.

"Then you would want the Merchant center," answered the Fleshwelder, without a hint of suspicion in their voice. "Head down this road until you get to the smith's shop. Then, turn left.

"Thanks!"

Teal left the cavern with houses, and got to a cave with lots of shops. Soon, he saw the smith's shop, and turned left.

Teal arrived in the room with the crates and the people writing at desks. He saw the tunnel that led to the ladder. He was so close!

However, Teal noticed a dog-like creature dozing in the passage. It was Snap!

Teal snuck over, trying to not draw too much attention. The creature snored quietly.

How could Teal get past? It looked kind of hard to jump. He could make a distraction and hope Snap left to investigate it, but that would probably fail.

Teal had a crazy idea. It was quite risky, but he had to try, he had to!

Teal walked over to the office area and casually picked up an empty chair.

He began to walk over to the passage.

“Hey! What are you doing with that chair?” called one of the workers.

Teal placed the chair in front of Snap. And climbed on.

“Please bring that chair back!” yelled the worker.

Teal leaped! He flew over Snap, and landed in the passage. Snap awoke at the sound.

Teal sprinted, but Snap was faster.

“COME BACK!” Yelled Snap. Teal kept going.

Snap had gotten very close when Teal reached the ladder. He climbed as fast as he could.

Snap’s body was not suited to climb ladders, since his back feet were those of a deer.

“HE’S GETTING AWAY!” Screamed Snap, “SAVE HIM!!!”

“Save him?” thought Teal, “Why would he say that?”

Teal continued to climb, however. He reached the top, and shoved the stone circle. It budged enough for Teal to get through.

He heard people climbing below him, and he ran across the island. The boat was still there!

Teal went to the boat, and untied it. He noticed that the bags that had been tied to the front had been removed.

He began to row furiously, passing a floating chunk of ice. His hands burned from his blisters.

When he was a bit of a ways out, Teal saw three figures reach the shore.

“COME BACK!” yelled Blasphemy.

“YOU’RE GOING TO DIE!” called Nerve.

“Die?” thought Teal. She must be bluffing!

“YOU DON’T HAVE THE BAGS OF SPICES!” Screamed Bogus.

Teal continued on.

“YOU’RE GETTING CLOSE!” Screamed Blasphemy.

“YOU HAVE ABOUT FIVE MORE PADDLE STROKES BEFORE YOU GET TOO FAR!”

Yelled Bogus.

Teal continued to row. One, two, three. Would he continue? Did he believe them?

Four, five, six. He had gotten past five! They were bluffing!

Something crashed into the boat from below, hurling it and Teal far into the air.

He plummeted into the sea, the boat landing nearby. The water was frigid! Teal could barely breathe!

He struggled toward the overturned boat, but the water began to ripple between him and it.

A gargantuan head burst from the sea. It had the blue-black skin of a whale, but it was much bigger than any whale Teal had ever heard of.

“Leave me alone!” Teal sobbed, “Don’t eat me!”

An eye, three times as big as his head, watched him.

Teal tried to paddle around the creature, but he was weak from the cold. His head went under.

He reached the surface, gasping, to see the eye still on him.

Teal tried again to swim around it, but he seemed to make no progress. It was as if the creature kept itself in between him and the boat.

Teal pushed with the last of his energy. It was no use!

“Spare me!” he whispered. “I can’t die. I can’t die now. I know too much... too much...” he thought as his head went under water. He managed to get back to the surface again, but had no strength left at all.

The huge eye kept staring at Teal as his head went under for the last time.

The End