

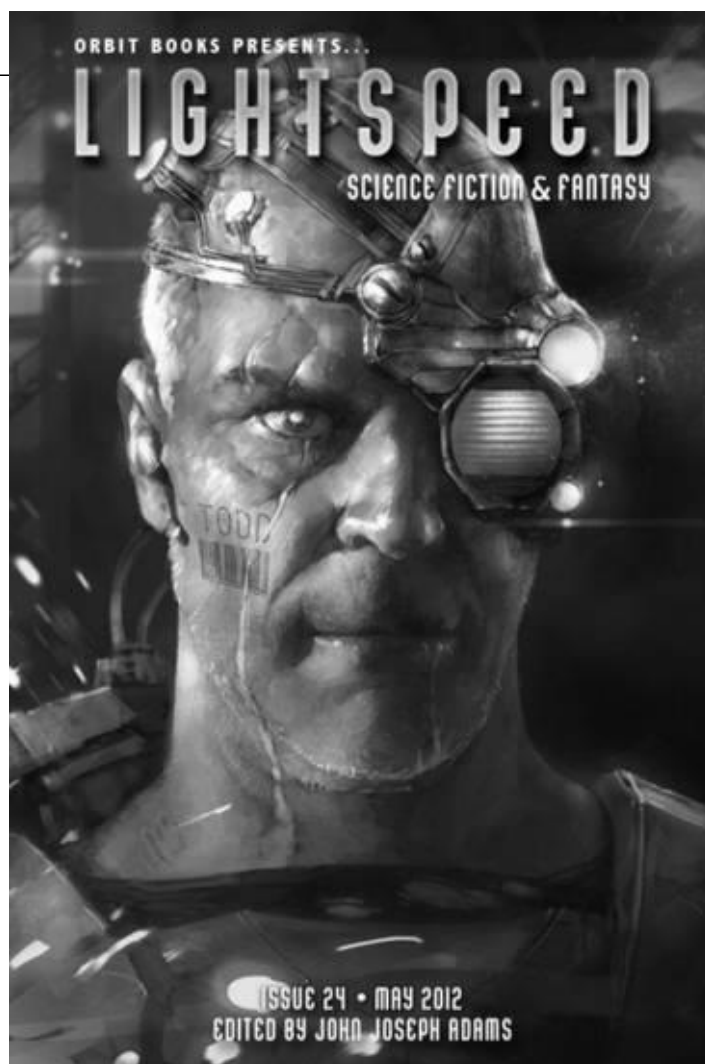
ORBIT BOOKS PRESENTS

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE-FICTION & FANTASY



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EDITED BY JOHN W. CAMPBELL



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Editorial, May 2012

John Joseph Adams | 672 words

Welcome to issue twenty-four of *Lightspeed* !

In case you missed the news last month, *Lightspeed* has again been nominated for the Hugo Award for Best Semiprozine, and your humble editor is again up for the Hugo Award for Best Editor (Short Form). We're all very excited to be nominated again, and we're hugely honored to be so recognized. Thanks so much to all of you who nominated us, and congratulations to all of the other nominees.

In other news, we're having a bit of a sale on our older ebooks; we currently have all of our 2010 issues on sale for just 99 cents. So if you haven't already got the whole set, now would be a great time to pick up those 2010 back issues.

This month, we have original science fiction by Linda Nagata ("Nightside on Callisto") and C. J. Finlay ("The Cross-Time Accountants Fail To Kill Hitler Because Chuck Berry Does The Twist") and SF reprints by Nicola Griffith ("Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese") and David Langford ("Different Kinds of Darkness").

We also have original fantasy by Dale Bailey ("The Children of Hamelin") and Melanie Rawley ("Mother of All Russiya"), along with fantasy reprints by Catherynne M. Valente ("A Hole to China") and the late Kage Baker ("The Ruby Incomparable").

And, in our ebook edition, we'll also have an excerpt of Paolo Bacigalupi's new young adult novel *The Drowned Cities*, plus . . .

Our issue this month is again sponsored by our friends at Orbit Books. Look for *2312*, the new novel by visionary SF writer Kim Stanley Robinson, available in bookstores everywhere on May 22 (You can also read the prologue to the novel in this very issue!) You can find more from Orbit—including digital short fiction and monthly ebook deals—at www.orbitbooks.net.

It's another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And remember, there are several ways you can sign up to be notified of new *Lightspeed* content:

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Well, that's all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading!

About the Author

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor of *Lightspeed Magazine*, is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Armored*, *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom*, *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He is a two-time finalist for the Hugo Award and three-time finalist for the World Fantasy Award. Forthcoming anthologies include: *Other Worlds Than These* (Night Shade, July 2012), *Epic* (Tachyon, Fall 2012), and *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (Tor, January 2013). John is also the co-host of Wired.com's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

The Cosmology of the Wider World (Part 1)

Jeffrey Ford | 26833 words

Beneath a yellow sky that fizzed like quinine, staring out to sea from the crenellated tower of his own construction, stood Belius, the Minotaur, shedding globes of water from his eyes. Life germinated inside these transparent spheres, civilizations rose and fell in clouds of war, colors of love grew vibrant and then washed away. A million seasons raced round within the see-through boundaries, until rolling off his snout, they smashed against the ledge and shattered.

He lowed in a tone more of creature than man, and that sound flew out toward the horizon. Upon losing speed, it dropped with a splash into the deep ocean and sank, frightening lamprey, scattering herds of sea horses, to eventually settle on the sandy bottom. As Belius wiped his eyes clear, the edge of a bubble his voice had made cracked open, giving birth to the exact sound that had formed it. The sad moan vibrated in every atom of green water for miles around.

Pezimote, the tortoise, was awakened by the racket from his slumber beneath the mud. He struggled up out of sleep, out of the warm ooze, and started slowly swimming toward shore. His shell was orange and black, and he snapped his beak peevishly, because his anatomy did not allow for grumbling. "I am coming, Belius," he thought, and Belius knew instantly that he was coming.

Shuffling and tapping from human foot to hoof, across the cobblestones of the turret, the Minotaur reached the side that gave a view of the woods. He rested wearily on the ledge for a moment, but when the frustration that gripped his heart became too much to stand, he struck his horns against the facade, drawing sparks from the cold stone. Another cry went out, this one splitting the sky above the distant trees. Only Vashti, the owl, knew what the strange call meant. She lighted from her branch with graceful wing thrusts that roiled the leaves. "I am coming, Belius," she screeched. Once above the trees, she used her lantern eyes to pinpoint the Minotaur's lonely figure on the tower.

After summoning his friends, he took the winding stairway down inside the tall structure. He dressed in formal attire; swallowtail jacket and striped pants. In the kitchen, he brewed cinnamon tea and prepared finger sandwiches with his hooves. He put his books away, rolled up his charts and maps, and shooed his pet cat from the study. The niceties he performed for his guests' arrival were all done rather out of habit than conscience. Since the first pang of his malady, nothing made sense; no task seemed worth the effort.

Pezimote sat on the divan because the chairs would not accommodate his giant shell. Having no articulated digits, for every finger sandwich he ate, it was necessary to utilize both of his stumpy appendages. Vashti, perched on the marble bust of Belius, swooped down every now and then and snatched a dainty off the silver platter. Cinnamon tea was not to her liking, so instead Belius had broken into his private liquor cabinet and poured her a glass of dandelion wine. He then stuffed his pipe with the dried petals of the digitalis and lit it. A sweet blue cloud grew around the company. He coughed with vigor and passed the smoldering drug to his companion from the sea. The owl could not take the blue smoke directly. The first and only time she'd tried it, she went stiff as a stone and dropped to the floor. It was enough for her just to breathe their exhalations.

When the group "tuned down," as they had grown to call the state of intoxication the flower gave them, Belius uncrossed his legs and sat forward.

"I'm poisoned," he told them, waiting for their reactions.

Their silence was a lure to draw him out.

"My heart is a snowball, my mind a cracked peach pit," said the Minotaur, leaning further forward, his heavy head sinking down as if in exhaustion.

“I see,” said Pezimote. “And to what do you attribute this malady?”

“I’m poisoned. I feel as if I am soon going to . . .”

“To what?” asked Vashti, who was now perched on the huge globe of the wider world.

“To perish, of course,” Belius cried, losing his patience. At the utterance of these words, three large volumes jumped off the bookshelf across the room and fell to the floor.

“Now, now,” said Vashti, her feathers ruffled by the physical implications of his anger.

“Who, may I ask, has poisoned you?” said the tortoise, reaching for a deviled ostrich egg the size of a cantaloupe.

Belius shook his head.

“Perhaps you suspect one of us?” said Vashti.

“No, no. You’re my closest friends.”

“Who then?” asked Pezimote.

“Maybe,” said Belius, “it’s someone who doesn’t want me to complete my Cosmology.”

“You’ve been working on that book, Belius, for years and years. Why now? Most creatures have little interest in reading books and less faith in their messages.” The tortoise feared this revelation might wound his friend’s pride, so he leaned across the coffee table and stumped him lightly on the knee.

“Look to yourself,” said Vashti. “You’ve poisoned yourself somehow.”

“What?” said Belius, straightening up in his chair with a look that as much as said, Absurd! “I’m no weeping willow, Vashti. If I don’t mind saying, this tower we sit in was built by these two hooves alone. Each block of coral, I cut myself from the barrier reef and placed with an exactitude that nearly made this chaotic universe reel.”

“Yourself,” said Vashti, “look to yourself.”

“I must agree, Belius,” said Pezimote, finishing off the last morsel of egg and eyeing up another. “Your condition reminds me of my wife’s, Chelonia’s, unfounded lamentations when the children don’t visit for a time.”

“Chelonia has other reasons for lamenting, Pezimote,” said Vashti, turning her head 180 degrees to face away from the tortoise.

“A cruel cut,” said Pezimote, feigning astonishment in the face of the subtle charge.

“So you agree,” said Belius. He hoisted himself out of his chair and crossed the room to where a full-length mirror was mounted on the wall. Staring into it, he searched for clues to his own undoing. All looked as it ever had, except for the heavy rings beneath his eyes. His color was good; a cream speckled blue that showed no blush of fever, nor pallor of weakness. His horns were sharp. His snout was firm; his teeth, white and strong. Sticking out his tongue, he inspected every foot of it with great care. He then turned profile to the glass and peered from the corner of his left eye. “Nothing but handsome,” he thought.

“I see nothing wrong,” said the Minotaur. But then his eye looked deeply into itself and something toppled his confidence. “And then again . . .” he said and drew closer to the reflection. All was silent but for the sound of Pezimote munching. “And then again . . .” In the dark iris at the center of his left eye there was a minute but conspicuous absence. The light of the lamps did not produce a gleam there as they should have. There was a tiny mote of darker darkness that seemed to consume the light instead of offering it back to the world.

“Wait,” said Belius, “I see a black spot within me.”

Vashti flew off the globe and came to rest on the Minotaur’s shoulder. Pezimote rose from the divan and sidled up next to his friend, draping an arm around his wide back. Together they looked into the mirror, into the eye, into the dot of definite nothing.

For the hundredth time that day, the tears came from Belius; big and round as soap bubbles.

moan escaped from somewhere in his third stomach and the sharp self-pity of the sound cracked the glass suddenly as if it had been hit by a rock. The three jumped back. A rough wind entered the room and swirled the smoke of the digitalis into a visible cyclone. Papers were caught up in the storm. Furniture was tilted over. The tray of food flipped onto the floor. The three companions huddled together as books and knick-knacks, fossils and teacups, flew through the air. The tighter the group held onto each other, the weaker became the power of the gale. When at last they had each other in a knot of strangle holds, the danger dissipated into a light breeze. They broke apart, and Belius stumbled backward against the wall, clutching his head with both hooves.

“Time to be going,” said Pezimote, bringing his head slowly out from within his shell. He spoke as he moved toward the door, his voice, as well as his leathery skin, quivering with fear. “I suggest that tomorrow, bright and early, we pay a visit to the ape. Your condition is serious . . . not to mention dangerous.”

“Agreed,” said Vashti.

Belius nodded, unable to speak for the throbbing behind his eyes.

“Get some sleep,” said his visitors in unison. Then Vashti flew through the open window and Pezimote ambled out the door and down the winding steps.

As soon as he was alone, Belius reached for the bottle of dandelion wine. With one mythic gulp, he drained it. His headache lay stunned, barely able to breathe. Packing his pipe with a bolus dose of petals, he lit it. The digitalis was a stake through the heart of his pain. Its frustrated life eased away as he sat back in his chair puffing, too tired to think of sleep. From where he sat, he could see his whooping figure in the cracked mirror. He smoked and stared, studying the queer mosaic.

Phantom thoughts skittered through the Minotaur’s mind, conjuring no real images or memories and leaving only the vaguest of impressions that he had been thinking at all. From the time his friend had left at dusk, he had remained in his half-stupor, staring straight on and breathing deeply to keep the anguish to a dull ache.

In the mean time, night had come to that hemisphere of the Wider World. As the first waves of darkness rolled across the forest, Siftus the mole put on his snakeskin vest and took up his walking stick. He nosed his way up out of the burrow, which had been his home from birth, and sniffed with delight the rising tide of shadows. He set forth that evening to dine on grubs and the dewdrop liqueur of honey suckle.

The raccoon brothers stole, as they always did, into Belius’ garden, but when he was not there to toss rocks at them, they lost their appetites and made off, each with only one ear of corn. After dipping their heist in the ocean for seasoning, and gnawing through a few rows of kernels, they agreed that the ears’ mealy taste meant something was wrong with the Minotaur.

The ants that lived among the stones of the tower bedded down with atoms of bread crust and pinprick dreams. The moths flapped out of the bushes and went to work on the cloth of Belius’ overcoat, which, for the past few months, had been the new personality of the garden scarecrow. Creepers sang a magnificent in a round of ten thousand voices, while bats flew toward fruit they could hear ripening. The fox, the lynx, the weasel, each came awake, as all of the creatures of daylight drifted toward sleep.

Belius’ cat, Bonita, slipped away from her master’s feet, taking the spiral staircase to the wine cellar, where it was a certainty that some rodent would have been dabbling in the stream of a leaking cask and would be too drunk to run. And way off, in the middle of the forest, perched on the uppermost branch of the tallest, most ancient tree, sat Vashti. “Who?” she asked, and as always there was no reply. She flapped her wings and a breeze rolled outward to rustle leaves, bend flowers and push a firefly through the open window of Belius’ study.

The insect perched on the tip of the Minotaur’s snout and worked its electro-chemical tri-

because it didn't know how not to. Belius was dragged out of his daze by the tiny flash, believing it be the lost gleam returning to fill the void in his iris. Soon enough, he saw his mistake and brushed the impostor into flight. He rose from his chair with great effort and looked around at the mess his manifest bad feeling had caused. He would have groaned had he not been so weary. Instead, he sighed heavily, causing a hairline fracture in the last unbroken tea cup of the service. Waving his hooves at the shambles, he decided to straighten up in the morning. With hoof-tap and foot-slap, he made his way up the spiral staircase to his bedroom.

He sloughed the swallowtail jacket and striped pants, letting them drop to the floor where he stood. He chose from his armoire the green silk pajamas. All of his sleeping apparel had a good size rock sewn into the collar, which kept him off his back while he slept. Without the rock there, he would roll over, flat out, and begin snoring so ferociously that even the solid structure of his tower was in danger of caving in.

He passed up the book that lay at the foot of his bed, a treatise written by the Sphinx, entitled "Riddling Men For Glory and Sport." The fact that he had paid out three casks of his oldest dandelion wine for it meant nothing to him now. He pulled back the quilt of his bed; a massive four-poster, its headboard scarred from the violence of his horns due to recent nightmares. He blew out the candle and then lay down on his side. Trying to corral his thoughts so they would not wander wastefully as they had all day, he concentrated on the bright sliver of moon that hung outside his window. Sleep, he knew, would not come, so he snagged his memory on that hook of a satellite and thought back and back to his earliest days in the lesser world, searching for some insignificant incident that might have planted the seed which had latently germinated and blossomed into the evil flower of his present discontent.

When Belius was born, his father didn't know whether to send him to the barn or swaddle him in blankets and put him in the crib that had been built for his arrival. His mother demanded that he stay in the house. After a lengthy spell of weeping and arguing, his father finally relented, but made one demand, and that, to fill the crib with straw instead of comforters.

The doctor present at the blessed event told his patient that he had seen stranger anomalies of birth in his years as physician to the surrounding farm community. "Once, I saw a little girl born with feathers and wings. She was a darling," he said and rubbed the new mother's back, hoping his anecdote had been a comfort. Later, after he had done all he could, and the mother and child were resting peacefully, he whispered to the father that these types of mixed up births never survived for more than a few days.

"How could it have happened?" asked Belius' father, his head filled with wild accusations toward his wife.

"Your wife told me that six months ago she was out in the field, over by the swimming pond, picking daisies for the supper table, when she was chased by your prize bull. Do you recall the incident?"

"Yeah, the bull broke from its pen and had wandered out there. She was real upset. It chased her down to the house, almost got her too."

"Not being a university scientist, and not having one within a hundred miles to consult, I would say that the fright of that incident stayed in her mind, imprinting the image of a bull, so that when the child was forming, part of its growth was arrested in the evolutionary state of bovinity and did not make it all the way to becoming human."

Belius' father looked skeptically at the old man. The doctor raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"You could say it was god's work if you like," he said, and then prescribed a good-sized dose of

alcohol for the younger man and a larger one for himself.

The child was to have been named as his father's junior, but when it came from the womb with the promise of horns and hooves, a different name was promptly chosen. "Belius" had been an ancestor on the mother's side; a personage of antiquity whom no member of the family had any recollection of nor any memorable stories to tell about. It was the oldest name recorded in the family Bible, a progenitor of that race of farmers that had taken to tilling the soil of the valley.

Once given a name, the little beast began to take on a definite personality. It did not die as the learned doctor had promised, but thrived under the care of a mother who had waited many years to have a child. She'd had to watch with mixed emotions of jealousy and regret as her sisters of the community grew heavy with joy time and again.

When Belius was born, she hardly noticed his strangeness. She saw past his robin's egg complexion, his blunt snout, to his essence, which was child, and hers at that. She lavished affection on him, treating him as if he were the rarest gem of humanity. His exceptions became the rules by which she judged other children. Her neighbors' little ones were sadly lacking a tail and could not keep the flies off themselves in summer.

Before long, Belius' father almost came around to feeling true affection for the creature that was his son, not exactly loving it, but instead loving his wife's love for it. The three of them made a family and that was what satisfied him most. It gave him a greater reason to work hard and that pleasure took him a long way.

In order to clear things with the community, so that when the time came to take Belius out into public, he would not cause an uproar, his mother, a short time after giving birth, asked permission to speak in front of the congregation after the Sunday service one week. She told about the birth and explained her love for the child and asked that her neighbors accept him as they would any new baby. The members of the parish took the news stoically, with only a modicum of murmuring. There was one extremely old woman who fainted, unable to believe that something could happen that she had never heard of happening before. The reason for the reverent silence of the event was not due to the parishioners being charitable at heart but more to the confinement of the church, for many wore the charity to mass each week the way they wore a Sunday hat. Later, in their homes, a majority of them laughed, others felt threatened, and some confused scorn for pity.

At first, the new mother believed that her son could enjoy a normal life, but the barely audible whispering and the fear that glazed people's eyes on the few occasions she was to bring Belius to town brought her around to a realistic view of the situation. Finally, she was forced to admit his difference to herself. From that time on, she decided that he would spend his young life away from that spirit of ignorance. The young Minotaur grew up believing that there was no other existence than that of the fields and surrounding woods, and that there were no other inhabitants of the universe but himself and his parents.

From the time he could first walk, he was lord and master of the farm, allowed to run wild, more or less anywhere he pleased. The only place that was forbidden to him was the stable in which the bull and two cows were kept. He was strictly told by both mother and father, never to enter that building. On more than one occasion, he would ask what was in there. Then his father would grab him by the horns and spin him around until they were both dizzy and let the boy fly off to land in the dirt.

"That's what's in there," the rough old farmer would say.

Because Belius did not continue to ask did not mean that discovering the secret was not always on his mind. He made many a daring attempt to get inside, but was always caught just as he was pulling back the big red doors, revealing the huge darkness and foul aroma. Each time he was apprehended the punishment was a stiff whipping with a leather belt, the smell of which disturbed him more than the sting.

The cows and bull were sent out to graze at night so that Belius had no chance of coming across them in the fields during his daily adventures. His mother and father lived in fear that he would somehow discover the brutish aspect of his affliction and be shocked out of his learned human traits. The first time he recognized himself in a mirror, it took them hours of lying to make him think that his features were a developmental stage that every child went through. To further this whole charade, his mother gave up eating beef, and, although he could not bring himself to make that sacrifice, his father did vow to take these “cannibalistic” meals in the kitchen, away from his wife and son.

The only time his parents regretted not having told the truth from the beginning was the night on which little Belius first heard the sound of the cows lowing in the field.

“Father, what’s that noise?” he asked, running from his bedroom.

His mother and father looked at each other. Being caught unprepared, his father, not a man of quick wit, said, “It’s a ghost—spirits of the dead, complaining.”

“No it isn’t, dear,” said his mother. She thought for a short time before she came up with, “It’s simply the wind. Your father is trying to frighten you.”

“It’s no more the wind than a wind from my ass. It’s ghosts!” he repeated.

“The wind,” she said.

Belius left them to quarrel. Back in his room, he noticed that not a leaf of the tree outside his window so much as stirred. From then on, when he heard the strange noise, he would crawl under his bed and cry with fear, his sobs almost identical to the sounds that sent him into hiding.

When Belius grew old enough to do more than just charge through the corn rows or ram, with his horns, the old door his father had set up for him against the weeping willow, his mother started having him work for a few hours each morning in her garden. This early experience led to him always keeping a garden for himself. He turned out to have a special affinity for understanding the needs of vegetables and flowers. She had no idea that he would benefit her small crop so much. In fact, she thought his ungraceful movements and unbounded energy would leave the neat rows in chaos.

By initiating this work period, she hoped to bring Belius around to the point where he could help his father with the daily chores of the farm. She knew that her husband had always wanted a son who could share with him the summer’s hard work and the satisfaction at harvest time. He never thought that Belius might be capable of more than just frolicking in the fields. She had told him to try the boy at some small tasks, that it would make him feel good to be more useful now that he was older. To this, her husband replied by shaking his head in reproach as if she were making a cruel joke.

By way of the perfect order and prodigious output of the garden, the farmer realized that the genetic mishap had not stolen his son’s ability to work. In a solemn voice, he told his wife, “I think it’s time Belius learned to farm.”

Belius did as well in the fields as he had in the garden. After a relatively short time, he gradually grew less talkative and more thoughtful. He ignored the old door that leaned against the willow, and when he entered the cornfield, he went about with reserve, not charging blindly, but instead keeping his eyes trained on the stalks for signs of blight or pests. All of the thousands of questions he had been in the habit of asking were now no longer spoken. Instead of haranguing his father for answers, he watched for them in silence. The earth, sky, rain and wind gave the most satisfying replies. He grew stronger with the heavy work, his muscles taking on real definition. His parents knew it was not possible, but to both it seemed that he had grown a whole foot taller in just the first month of farming.

When he and his father would spot each other on the opposite boundaries of a two-acre expanse of alfalfa and wave “hello,” that is when both felt most content at being partners. As long as there was a fair distance between them they were the greatest of friends. It was only when they were forced into close quarters, forced to speak, that the father panicked as if he were trapped in a broom closet with an actual bull.

At noon, when they took their lunch break behind the barn, they would sit on bales of hay, facing each other. The old man would lean forward with his elbows resting on his knees, a sprig of hay jutting from the corner of his mouth, and draw forth a strange mixture of simple wisdom and complete ignorance. Belius hardly ever uttered a sound during these sessions, except when his father told one of his obtuse jokes concerning the stupidity of people who lived in towns. Only then would the son force a laugh because he did not want to disappoint his mentor. His father would stay silent for some time out of a sense of false modesty but eventually would join in and react to his own joke. For only a moment, he would feel a closeness to Belius that was even stronger than the one they shared from each side of a wide field. Then he would forget and look up so they were face to face. To see that snow raised toward the sun, to see the large gleaming eyes filled with intelligence and hear the deep animal laugh was more than he could bear. His laughter would stop abruptly, and, whether it was two minutes or twenty into the break, he would return to work.

Belius had begun to be treated more like an adult by his parents. At night, though, he was still forced to stay inside as the cows and bulls were let out and led to pasture. When he heard their eerie moans now, he discounted his previous belief in ghosts and decided it must be the wind. What forced this change in thinking was not so much that he had lost all his childish fear, but more that he had grown so large that he no longer fit under his bed.

One morning in autumn when the leaves in the woods were at the meridian of color between bright yellow and that final blaze of red, Belius' father screamed for him. At the moment the Minotaur first heard the voice, he was sitting on the ground beneath the weeping willow, his horns aching, his head spinning from having just taken a charge at the old door. The result was that nothing remained of the target. He had run at it this time with his new strength and weight, and his points went through the solid oak as if it were paper. When his thick skull made contact, the entire barrier seemed to disintegrate like a dream meeting daylight. At first, he thought that his father's wild yell was the audible groaning of the willow, since he had deeply scarred its trunk. When the call came again, though, his head was clearer and he understood. He got off the ground and ran through the stubble cornfield, picking splinters from his arms and chest.

Belius had no idea where his father was calling him from until, rounding the side of the barn, he heard echoing within, a sudden riot of thuds and screams. From the opposite side of the field, he had not recognized the thick vein of agony pulsing through the cry. As he made his way to the entrance, a part of the commotion inside grew still and his father's voice fell silent.

The usually secured doors were thrown open wide. From where he stood, bathed in the brightness of the morning sun, he could only make out the vaguest of shadows. Past rebukes from his parents leaped up in his memory and repelled him with a force equal to that of the attraction. He might have stood there for a very long time if his father hadn't again called in a weak gurgle, "Belius, help."

"Father, you want me to enter?"

There was no reply.

Like a traveler trying to make headway against a storm, he leaned forward and took his first step. He continued past the dividing line between day and night and plunged into the shadow. As he waited for his eyes to adjust to the new surroundings, he noticed an unusual aroma permeating the atmosphere. It was an earthy smell, a ripe vegetal smell, but closed in and made stale by the confinement of the wooden walls. It was as if a mound of earth had risen up and taken on the properties of life. He thought it similar to the odor of the plough horse, but it was not as gentle. When he took it into his lungs, it made his facial hair bristle and drew planting rows of bumps from the human flesh of his chest and stomach.

"Belius," his father whispered from somewhere at the back of the barn, "be careful."

"I'm here," Belius called out. He was about to travel down the dark aisle when he heard the

unmistakable sounds of the night ghosts. Again, he was unable to move. “They’re in the barn,” he thought. The distance that he had always felt separating him from his father suddenly disappeared. He put his head down and charged up the aisle between the stalls.

It happened so quickly, as if a mirror had magically appeared in front of him. The bone and horn of Belius’ head made contact with what seemed to be a double of themselves. There was a jarring impact. He was lifted off his feet and thrown onto his back. His vision was blurred, but he could, for the first time, make out the enormous figure of what he took to be one of the ghosts. It backed away from him, recoiling for another confrontation. Belius pulled himself up using the stall next to him for support. The monster bellowed, kicked holes in the planks at its feet, and lowered its head, preparing to charge.

This time Belius didn’t bring his head down for protection. He was so dizzy from the first encounter that he knew if he leaned forward, he would continue on to the floor. He stood upright, making himself an easy target. The monster smashed a hole in the back wall of the barn and daylight rushed in around it. As if the sunlight hitting its flank were fire, it lunged forward. Belius waited until the moment when the long, sharp horns of his opponent were only inches from his chest. With all the speed and strength of an animal, and not a single thought in his head, he raised his right arm and brought it down like a sledge hammer on the crown of the enemy’s brow, directly between the horns. There was the fleeting sound of a great egg cracking open, and the monster stopped dead in its tracks. It reared onto its hind legs and then fell to the floor with such force that the vibration knocked Belius to his knees.

Blood seeped out of its ears and snout and gushed from the crater in its head. Its eyes were wild. Belius could feel the fear in them. Its jaw moved and it filled the barn with deep raspy squeals—dead sounds that rose and fell in a strange rhythm. With each interval, they went through a transformation that brought them closer to speech. Belius listened as if to some piece of music his mother might play on the upright piano in the parlor. Slowly, the sounds evolved into words. “I wanted to see the sun,” the monster said to Belius. For the first time, the Minotaur realized that the head of his victim was much like his own and that the hooves that carried its massive weight were identical to his and that, whereas neither his mother nor his father had horns, this thing did.

“Speak to me again,” Belius pleaded, but the bull was dead.

In the farthest left hand stall, across from the one that held two more creatures similar to the one he had just killed, Belius found his father’s body. The horns had passed directly through the stomach and chest. He lifted the limp form in his arms. As he stepped back over the bull on the way out, its two hornless sisters cried, “Murderer, murderer.”

Belius took his father into the house and laid him in his bed. Then he sat down in the chair next to the headboard. Until his mother returned from town later that afternoon, he did not move or speak but for the entire time felt the dizziness he would experience when, as a child, the farmer would answer by grabbing his horns and spinning him round.

He sat next to the corpse in the parlor, watching a parade of strange faces pass by the open coffin. His father’s old friends and their families spent more time staring at him than they did at the dead man. After the first hour, their whispers had consumed every aspect of reverence the ceremony had originally held.

One man came forward to where Belius was sitting, patted him on the head and fed him a sugar cube. The rest kept their distance but eyed his horns suspiciously after seeing the condition of the neighbor’s body. He heard their words, but they did not think he was capable of understanding.

Two hours before the wake was to be over, he motioned to his mother who was in the back of the room, speaking to a distant cousin. His mother came up close to him and leaned over, putting her e

to his snout as if the sound of his voice might frighten the mourners.

“Get rid of them, mother. I’ve had enough,” he said.

“A few more hours, Belius.”

With this, he reached up and ripped off his tie, flinging it to the floor.

“Please be calm,” she said.

He settled down when he saw the look of embarrassment in his mother’s eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said, sitting back in his seat. It was too late, though. They’d heard him speak and seen that he was angry. Women and children were ushered out with great haste. The men looked over their shoulders with contempt but could barely restrain themselves from running.

The night of the wake, after hammering the lid on the coffin and carrying it into the living room, Belius left his mother sitting at the kitchen table and went outside to the barn. He opened the big door and stepped inside. Although the neighbors had dragged away the carcass and buried it, the smell of the dead bull still hung in the air. It sent a shiver through his human flank and raised the hackles behind his ears. He walked slowly down the center aisle, reliving in his mind the battle that seemed as if it had taken place only minutes before. The fit of dizziness finally passed, and he opened the stall that held the two cows. They pushed back against the wall in fear.

“Out with you both,” he bellowed, thinking that it was necessary to scream when dealing with animals. When they would not budge, he lifted his hoof in the air and reenacted the crushing blow he had dealt the bull. This signal was all that was needed to spur them to action. They left their cubicles and brushed quickly by him, mooing messages of fright to each other. Once out beneath the moon they calmed down, slowing from a trot to a lazy amble. They led Belius to their usual grazing area between the cornfield and the boundary of the woods. The night was unusually warm for autumn. A pleasant breeze blew dead leaves out of the nearby stands of trees and into the pasture. The stars were everywhere in the sky, leaving so little to darkness. After wandering around the field for a little while, the cows found a previously undiscovered thatch of clover and settled down to munching. Belius took off his jacket and sat, crossing human over beastly leg.

“First,” he told himself, “I must find out whatever else has been kept secret from me. Then, as soon as father is buried, I must begin preparing the farm for winter. When the chores are caught up on, I will then show myself in town, take the abuse that is coming to me for being different and make them so used to the sight of me that I can come and go as I need to get groceries and supplies. I must be a friend to my mother and not punish her for trying to shelter me from my own horrible self. Last, I will learn how to read and write and cipher so that because I resemble an animal, no man or woman can say that I’m stupid.”

“But face it, you’re a freak,” said a voice, drawing Belius’ attention from his plans. He looked up in astonishment to see that the cows had sidled up closer to him. Instantly, he remembered the words of the dying bull. Before speaking, he shot a glance over his shoulder, making sure there was no one else there.

“Did you speak to me?” he asked.

“Do you see any other freaks around?” said the cow, standing directly in front of him. “Plensio here, is all cow, as am I. You are the only halfling present.”

“How is it possible?” said Belius.

“Just listen to yourself,” said the cow. “Say your name and listen.”

“Belius,” said the Minotaur, but heard nothing strange in the pronunciation.

“Again,” said the cow.

“Belius, Belius, Belius . . .” He said his own name twenty times, listening with horror as the sound of it melted from human language into a prolonged animal bleating. Though he could hear the change in it, he still understood the word to be his name.

“You see, you’re a monster for sure. There is enough human in you to murder and still enough human in you to understand the language of your victim. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of such a thing. Have you, Plension?”

“Most certainly not,” answered the other cow. “I wouldn’t hear of it.”

“What do you mean by monster?” asked Belius.

“Calm yourself, I’m only trying to help you. You’re partially one of us, remember?”

“No I’m not,” he said weakly.

“I won’t even answer to that foolishness while I’m standing here conversing with you,” said the cow.

“How do you think you’re helping me?” he asked.

“I want you to understand a very important thing that your parents failed to mention to you. Perhaps you’re already beginning to see it for yourself?”

“You mean that I won’t be accepted by people?”

“Precisely.”

“I may be part something else, but I’m also part human, and I have devised a plan for myself.”

“Did you hear that, Plension? He has a plan.”

For the first time ever, Belius heard a cow laugh.

“Do you remember the bull you killed?”

Belius nodded.

“He also had a plan. He was going to escape, because he couldn’t stand living in the shadow anymore. It’s all right to live in the dark if you have never seen the sunlight, but, without sunlight after a while, the eyes dim, the coat loses its sheen, the muscles ache for warmth and the mind goes mushy. We don’t like the dark either, but we’ve learned to adjust a little better. Now if you were to make us go out into the sunlight, we’d probably go crazy. Is that true, Plension?”

“Stark raving mad,” said the other cow.

“The bull I killed was trying to get back to the light. That’s what it said before it died.”

“Yes, you smashed our husband’s head pretty handily and that was the end of all his plans. Take it as a lesson.”

“It was my fault the bull was kept in the barn all day,” said Belius. “It was my fault that he had to try to escape, that he killed my father.”

“One could say,” lowed Plension, taking the initiative for the first time.

“Do you hate me?” Belius asked.

“We hate the world that men have made. There’s no obvious good in the species. Wouldn’t you know they’d be the ones to run things.”

Belius shook his head, realizing that perhaps the cow was right. The society that would be from that day forward his “yes” and “no” was comprised of frightened, dangerous creatures. “What’s the use?” he asked.

“Just like a two legger,” said Plension, moving closer. Her spots, like her sister’s, seemed continents of black in a milky ocean. Her face was more gentle, but her disposition more severe. “Everything has to be either one way or the other. If things don’t go well, then one might as well give up. There’s a way, Belius. There’s a place you could go to and not be lost as you are here.”

“Shhh!” cautioned the other cow.

“Now, Austina, we might as well tell him.”

“Tell me. What place is this?”

Plension pounded the earth with her right front hoof, deciding how best to explain. She looked to Austina for help. Austina dipped her massive head and said, “Pay attention, Belius. I’m only going to tell you about this once. You’re a halfling, so it isn’t exactly treason, but if the pond toads find out w

told, or the field mice catch wind of this, we'll never hear the end of it. There's a place that can be gotten to, where, unlike here in the lesser world of men, every creature accepts every other creature. The fox converses with the quail, the condor with the spider, the whale with the wild dog. Language is used there to communicate. It's the Wider World. I can tell you how to get there. It's right next door to here, right over there, right under this field, just at the top of that tree. If I were you, I'd pack up and go. Don't look back." When she finished, both cows looked around to see if anything were crawling or creeping or flying close by.

"I've never heard of such a place," said Belius.

Both cows laughed.

"If it's so wonderful, then why haven't you two gone there?" he asked.

"We're old now and set in our ways," said Austina. "We haven't the strength."

"What about my mother?" asked Belius. "She's sitting right now in the kitchen, crying. I can't leave her. Who'll run the farm?"

"Do as you like, Belius, but when you've been beaten and ridiculed to the point where you'd gladly trade places with your father, don't say we didn't try to help you. That's all the talking that Plension and I will do for tonight. There's still some healthy thistle that the frost hasn't yet bitten." Austina turned her huge body and, with a swish of her tail, walked off to another part of the field.

"Where's this place?" Belius asked Plension. "How do I get to the Wider World?"

The cow slowly closed her eyes, shook her head and made the eerie noise that in years gone by would have made Belius duck for cover.

"Tell me," he demanded, but she moved off to join her sister. The confusion caused by what they had told him created an unbearable pressure inside Belius' skull. He knew that it demanded release or his head would pop like a bubble on the surface of the pond. Having cried on and off for the past forty-eight hours, his tear ducts were barren, so instead the building spirit of destruction escaped in a bellowing laugh.

"The Wider World," he managed to say amidst fits of hysteria. The jostling his ribs took made them ache. Claspng his arms tightly around his middle, he rolled from the sitting position onto his side, drawing his legs up toward his chest and his snout down toward his knees.

After his madness had diminished to giggles and then to silence, he lay there in the field, listening to pine cones dropping to the ground in the nearby woods. In the distance, he heard the storm door to the kitchen open. His mother's voice came drifting out over the pasture.

"Belius, Belius," she called.

"Yes, mother," he shouted from his place on the ground.

"What was that terrible noise? It sounded as if one of the cows was dying. Is everything all right?"

"Yes," he called back. The sound of the storm door closing came to him where he lay, and then the darkness moved in around him. In sleep, his plans came back to him disguised in the mask of perfection. That night he began the habit of snoring, and the sonic force that rolled from his snoring uprooted the willow tree and made the neighbors a mile off think a storm was on the way.

Belius woke suddenly, a few hours before daybreak. Seeing as he hadn't moved his position through the entire night, straightening his body out to its full length was a grim task. When finally he had loosened his knees with continued rubbing from his forearms, he crunched them a few times as a test and then stood up. He looked around to see if the cows were still nearby, but they'd returned to the warmth of their stalls.

On his way back to the house, he noticed that the willow tree had been knocked over during the night. At first the sight saddened and puzzled him, but when he remembered that his father was to be buried that day and that he was responsible for digging the grave, he saw the gaping hole as an omen of good fortune.

He found his mother still sitting in the kitchen, asleep, her head resting upon the table. With one burly arm, he lifted her bodily and carried her to the couch in the parlor, where he threw a blanket over her and tucked the edges in around her chin and shoulders. He sat next to her for a time, remembering his conversation with the two cows. Nothing he had ever learned while working the fields or wandering in the woods had prepared him for the events of the past few days.

Without thinking, he lifted his father's pipe from where it sat on the end table next to his chair. He stoked the bowl from the open tin that lay next to it. Lifting the matches, he struggled to light one. His first draw made him light headed. His second made him sick. Before he could worry about the nausea, though, his eyes fixed on the serpentine trail of smoke as it grew like a vine toward the ceiling. The shifting patterns that it drew in the half-light of dawn set his imagination in gear, and he began to think about what the Wider World must be like.

Doctor Grey, the physician who had delivered Belius, was the only person who attended the burial. He was a man who liked to see all projects through to their completion. Since he had delivered Belius's father many years before, in the time when his face was smooth and his hands trembled from nervousness rather than alcohol, he felt it his duty to be present at the ceremony. In his gruff voice, he read a passage from the Bible—the first three or so pages of Genesis. The reading had no closure, but just sort of trailed off and ended when he felt as if he had given God his due.

Belius' mother leaned against the Minotaur's sturdy side, weeping into the rumpled cloth of her only suit. The day was cold and clear in a show of arrogance toward their grief. Then the doctor cleared his throat, signaling that it was time to lower the coffin. Belius tilted his mother to a standing position and stepped forward. He wrapped his arms around the coffin, his hooves meeting beneath it with a distinct click. With no more than a sigh, he lifted the box, walked over to the pit and cautiously lowered it down. He leaned as far forward as he could without falling in, but it was still four feet from the bottom. "Good-bye," he said to the wooden lid that pressed against his snout and then opened his arms and let the weight drop with a thud. Doctor Grey led his mother back to the house.

Instead of simply filling the grave in with dirt, he propped the willow, which lay nearby, back to an upright posture and filled in around it with dirt.

By the time Belius had returned to the house, the doctor had given his mother a sedative and put her to bed. With flask in hand, the old man sat on the steps of the front porch, indulging in a quiet cup of his own.

"Thank you for coming," Belius said from a distance, not to let Grey think he was spying.

"It's my job," said the doctor.

"How's my mother?"

"She'll be all right in a couple of days. I haven't seen much of her in the past few years. Both her and your father shied away from us neighbors after she had you, but if she's anything like her old self, I believe she'll have the gumption to press on."

"Yes, sir."

"You know it won't be easy. You're old enough to understand that."

"I have plans."

"Good man. You have the farm to take care of now. Remember, be tolerant of others. I have never seen intolerance work as a successful cure for itself."

"I am going to start learning things. My father didn't think I was capable of learning from books, just like he never thought I would be capable of farming. That doesn't matter now, as I see it."

"You'll do well if you can keep that attitude," said the doctor, capping his flask and standing. "I've got to get on my way. There's a girl that lives over the hill there who broke her arm last week. I have to pay a visit and see how it's mending. Why don't you walk me to my carriage, I've got something there that might help you out."

The uneven pair strolled out to the road where the horse and rig stood tied to a fence post. Doctor Grey assessed Belius' development out of the corner of his eye. He could hardly believe how strong and healthy such an aberration of nature had grown. The way the boy thrived was as much a miracle as the shriveled healer as was the peculiar birth.

As they drew up next to the rig, the doctor turned to Belius and said, "I owe you something. I swore when you were born, you wouldn't live as long as a week. But here you are, bigger than life. Now I must pay up." He reached into the carriage and retrieved something from off the seat. "Here it is," he said, handing Belius a book. "I picked this out for you from my library this morning. I want you to have it. Have your mother help you with it. It'll keep you out of trouble for a good long time."

"Thank you," said Belius, accepting the gift.

"Tell me what you think of it when you learn to read," Grey said and hoisted himself up into the seat of the carriage.

"What's the name of this book?" Belius asked.

"*Inferno*," said the doctor. Then lifting his whip, he lashed viciously at the horse's rump and was on his way.

Pezimote thought he was hurrying, but any creature that measures its life in centuries knows only a lumbering imitation of haste. The gnat that is born, lives out all its years and dies in a matter of forty-eight hours would never perceive the old reptile as having life, but would have passed him in a blur, noting only a large, oddly colored boulder.

"Your gait is kin to a yawn, Pezimote," Belius would tease on their walks along the violet beach.

"I'll make it up to you," the tortoise would hiss in reply. "I'll hurry to your funeral the day they bury you."

Pezimote had been sluggishly creeping about for more than two hundred years. Because of his marvelous age, he was considered by many to be a reliable historian. In reality, his memory was a riddled with holes as a dried honeycomb. This deficiency never prevented him from fabricating past events to please his friends and rankle his foes.

He paddled slowly through the water, heading up the coast toward the spit of land that held Belius' tower. The blue sun was rising out of the sea to the west and, just as Nosthemus, the sperm whale, had prophesied for him on the way home the previous night, it was going to be a clear, yellow day with crisscrossing channels of warm air and plenty of fizz.

"Poor Belius," he muttered as he went, taking a beak full of saltwater for his sympathy. "Such an inquisitive fellow—always wanting to know the 'why' of things and always returning, sadly, to himself." He hoped that their trip to the ape would result in a cure for his friend's suffering. His pain was truly felt, but before he had paddled over the next two waves, he let the Minotaur slip from his thoughts. The warm water, the vanishing constellations, brought to mind instead the young female tortoise he had been sneaking around with lately in the early hours of the morning. Unlike Chelonia, her shell was free of barnacles, her skin almost smooth. She had wondrous orange eyes and flash markings of red and gold. Counting the diamond shaped quadrants on her underside while swimming with her in the lagoon, he discovered that she was a hundred and fifty years his junior. Contrary to what the prowling night creatures of sea and forest were gossiping, though, he had not yet made love to her. The union was coming soon, he was certain, because he often dreamed of it during the day while catching up on his sleep. They had met one night in the mango grove, not far from the stand of palm trees that he and Chelonia called home. He had been restless in his sleep for the past decade and had gotten into the practice of waking a few hours before sunrise and wandering out in search of a snack. His vast experience had lulled his innocence, leaving him an insomniac. He was not one to moan and fret like Belius. Usually an abalone or a dozen oysters would quell his empty feeling and

send him back home tired enough to sleep until dawn.

His wandering in the dark eventually took on the aspects of a ritual. He would wake suddenly from a nightmare involving sharks to the sound of Chelonia's heavy breathing. After making an attempt to get back to sleep, he would try to initiate a round of love-making, which would invariably be met by his hissing and beak snapping. When this sedative was not forthcoming, he would pat his wife lightly on the shell to send her back to sleep and then strike out in search of food.

No more than a month ago, he had awoken as usual and decided seafood would not do, but that something sweet was needed. Scuttling inland past the stand of lime trees, beneath the flitting of the fruit bats, he arrived at the mango grove. He gathered together a half dozen of the twisted trees' prized droppings and began eating away at his restlessness. Just as he was digging into the third piece of fruit, he heard the shrill cry of a young tortoise. "Wolves," he immediately thought, and on not hesitating long enough to impale one of the mangos on his beak, he turned around with every intention of stumping back home as fast as possible.

Whereas others might have rushed to the aid of their brethren, Pezimote was no hero. He had not lived so long in the crazy world to end as a delicacy for four legged heathens. Of course, he felt a pang of remorse for what had sounded to be the scream of a young female of the species and also a small measure of the same emotion for his own cowardice.

So he charged away at the dazzling rate of a yard a minute. The cries of pain lasted not much longer than the time it took for him to make up his mind to flee. "Soon they'll be done with the hapless child and come sniffing for more," he told himself, but his retreat ended as abruptly as it had begun when he heard a rummaging in the stand of bushes that bounded the sandy path to his right.

"No, they're upon me!" he thought. He stood still, his fear paralyzing any will to escape. Snapping jaws and sharp teeth, claws and stinking fur was the beast that swirled in his imagination. "This cannot be," he cried in the storm of his thoughts as the noise in the bushes drew dangerously close. The mango still impaled on his beak, he shivered in the moonlight, waiting for death.

He would later be grateful that the mosquitoes that swarmed on her body had not missed her eyelids. When she crashed through the underbrush and onto the path, she was completely blind. She could, however, tell by way of scent that a male tortoise was standing close enough to hear her. "Help me, they're draining my blood," she whimpered.

Pezimote dropped his mango and thanked fate for having materialized a tortoise instead of a predator. He was so relieved; he didn't now hesitate to come to her rescue.

"I heard you call out," he said to her writhing form. "My first thought was that you were being attacked by tortoise eaters. Of course, I was rushing to your aid." In this instance, his wide experience did prove an asset. Scuttling to a nearby aloe plant, he broke off a large stem with his beak. "Hold steady now," he said when he was again at her side. Placing the plant between his two front stumps, he squeezed its clear sap out onto her head. With gentle strokes, he rubbed the puddle in widening circles over her face and neck, then on each of her legs. The mosquitoes, drunk from the sweetness of her blood, flew slowly away.

Pezimote gazed down upon the young female. Her red and gold markings stood out in contrast to the overall darkness of the rest of her shell, whose lack of barnacles made its surface shine in the light of circling fireflies. He caught a shadowy reflection of his face in the sheen, and, in that moment, he knew that he would eventually have to ride the ocean swells upon her back . . .

Pezimote looked up from his paddling to see Belius' tower looming in the distance. To calm the boiling of his usually cold blood, he brought to mind the vicious sharks that were forever invading his dreams. A hungry hammerhead swam now from ear to ear, circling in his skull. He did such a good job of conjuring the image that not only did it shrink his desire, but he actually began looking back over his shoulder in fear. This specter forced him to increase his speed, and, in record time, he landed on

the beach not far from the tower, heaving and wheezing like a hippo trying to climb a palm tree.

~~As the tortoise crawled up the violet beach toward the path, Belius had just then, in his~~ recollections, reached the point where he was sitting at his father's wake.

Pezimote dallied for a quarter of an hour in the garden, nibbling strawberries off the vine and gorging himself on squash. He entered into a discussion about the weather with Siftus, who was passing by on his way home from the limestone cliffs, having spent much of the night searching for choice hunks of rock to chisel into art. Finally remembering the reason he had traveled to his friend's home, Pezimote rushed off in mid-sentence, leaving the mole bewildered.

As always, when entering the tower, he was compelled to rise up on his back legs and walk the way Belius did. He usually kept the strange posture until he was out of sight of his friend. He told himself that he did it out of respect for the Minotaur, but it had more to do with envy. Stumbling up the winding stairway to the study, he found only Bonita there, sitting amidst the mess of the day before. The cat was paging through an old volume brought by her master from the lesser world. Shaking her head, she perused the nonsense of humans and giggled quietly to herself. Pezimote took to the stairs again, climbing up to Belius' bedroom. As the tortoise stumped on the solid wooden door and called "Belius, are you awake?" Belius was reliving the instant in which Doctor Grey told him, "*Inferno*." The doctor then lashed his horse's rump and the cracking of the whip brought Belius to his senses.

"Belius, are we going to see the ape?" Pezimote called from the landing.

"Yes, yes, a moment," he answered. He tried to roll his massive body out of bed but found that searching through the past had caused him slowly, over the course of the night, to drive his horns right through the headboard and into the stone wall behind it.

"Come in, Pezimote. I need your help. I'm trapped."

Together they worked out an escape for the Minotaur which involved the tortoise pulling at his legs and Belius using his hooves to push out of the predicament. It ended, after a prolonged bout of grunting and cursing, with the horns sliding free and Pezimote stumbling backward against the opposite wall.

"Have you eaten yet?" asked Belius, helping his companion off the floor.

"Not a morsel, I'm famished," said Pezimote.

They ate a light breakfast of clover soufflé and barley broth, smoked a quick bowl of the petals and then left the tower, taking the path through the woods that led to Shebeb's cave.

Shebeb the wise, the merciful, the healer—all of these appellations had been bestowed upon the ape who lived in a cave amidst the thicket of blabbering trees. There wasn't a creature within miles that didn't, itself, or a member of its immediate family, owe its health, and in many cases its life, to the primate's potions, poultices, or scalpel. To all, he was an enemy of pain, a friend to life. Sometimes, merely a rough touch of his hairy fingers could mend a broken wing or draw the fever from a victim of disease. He knew how the ants breathed and why the bees had to dance or die of starvation. With his pink ear against a patient's arm, he could hear the rush of blood. Only because of his monthly treatments of herbal compresses could Siftus' failing eyes still distinguish between sunlight and shadow.

Mosier, the patriarch of the crane clan, after being attacked by an alligator, could be seen in the shallows, resting blithely on a prosthesis Shebeb had whittled from an elm branch. He set bones, removed thorns, counseled the mad, and, when death was inevitable, would administer his secret potion that hastened the end but eliminated the fear and pain. For all his services, he asked nothing in return. Some said that he did it because it offered a steady string of subjects to observe and study. Others believed that his empathy was so great, he could feel the distress of each victim and was unable to rest himself until things were set right. Whatever the reason, no one was ever sure because he spoke very little and never left his cave unless he had to.

In stature, he was almost as tall as Belius, but his shoulders were much wider. His stomach hung out in front of him like a destination the rest of his body was traveling to. Long grey hair covered almost every inch of him, save his palms and soles and ears. His gaze was placid, as was his demeanor. The only time he ever showed emotion was when, during a difficult operation, he would be momentarily uncertain of an incision and put his scalpel down to think. Then he would step outside the cave, leap up and grab a low hanging branch of one of the blabbering trees and swing and screech and pound his chest with his free hand until the answer came to him. Although he looked suspiciously like a man to many of the creatures who had seen them, he didn't wear any article of clothing, with the exception of a golden tasseled fez that Belius had given him for once having dislodged a mouse bone from Bonita's throat.

For one as quiet and contemplative as the ape was, it was a mystery to all why he chose to live amidst the clamor of the blabbering trees. Distant cousins to the cypress of the lesser world, the trees were notorious for their twaddle. They murmured and whispered and mumbled all day long never making any sense. What his neighbors did not realize was that he used strands of the long stringy moss that was indigenous to them for his sutures when sewing up patients after an operation.

All of his instruments and medicines were adapted from nature. His scalpels were razor thin slivers of onyx he hammered from off the wall in a far-flung passage of his cave. To check temperatures, he utilized an unopened bud of the telmis bush. If a warm-blooded animal's temperature exceeded the danger point, the heat from their body, as they clenched the stem between their teeth would cut the bud's gestation period to only a few minutes, resulting in a beautiful pink bloom of warning.

The medicinal herbs he administered were grown by Belius in the garden near the tower. Other useful items (toadstools, snake venom, etc.) were gathered from the wild during a journey that he took early each spring. The cadavers he studied with exquisite patience were donated by their former owners, who, having once been treated by the ape, appreciated his work and hoped that their mortal coils would benefit his future efforts.

When Belius and Pezimote entered the cave, they found the ape sitting at his huge granite desk on a tree stump chair, gazing at a mess of shrew brains laid out before him on a palm leaf. With one hand he held a half-eaten banana, and, with the other, he scratched his head beneath the brim of his fez.

Belius hated to interrupt the physician at his studies, knowing the aggravation he, himself, felt when friends would drop in just as he was penning a crucial passage of *The Cosmology*.

The Minotaur cleared his throat as a gentle attempt to draw the ape's attention.

Shebeb slowly tore his gaze from the labyrinth of convolutions sitting before him and looked over his shoulder. "Please come in," he muttered.

"How are you, Shebeb?" asked Belius.

"I'm well."

Pezimote nodded but gave no greeting. He was wary of the ape ever since Shebeb had asked him if he would consider donating his carcass to the medical cause when he died. "I refuse to die," were Pezimote's last words to him four years earlier.

"What is it, Belius?" asked the ape.

"I'm sick."

"Explain."

"Well, there's a darkness inside of me I can't get rid of. It's as if my worst enemy were sharing my body with me. I can't concentrate. I sit for hours and stare. I sleep too much."

"Headaches?" asked the healer, rising from his chair and shuffling up to grasp Belius' wrist.

Pezimote backed away from the two, taking a seat in the waiting area near the entrance.

"Headaches, eyeaches, heartaches," said Belius.

“Bowel movements?” asked the ape.

“Scanty and hard as diamonds.”

“Have you been eating?”

“Light meals.”

“Are you still smoking the digitalis every day?”

“I’ve cut down considerably,” said the Minotaur.

Pezimote drew his head inside his shell, but the laugh escaped and echoed throughout the cave.

“I see,” said Shebeb with a frown. He took his hand off Belius’ wrist and laid it across his forehead between the horns. “Nausea, vomiting, dizziness?”

“No . . . but my anger—I’m angry a lot lately—my anger and my sadness manifest themselves sometimes in physical ways.”

“So you feel frustrated. Am I right?” asked the ape, nodding as if he already knew the answer.

“Yes.”

“I see, I see. Not surprising. Do you have the day free?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m going to have to do exploratory surgery. Take off your jacket and roll up your sleeve. Wait over there, I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

“What’s the verdict?” Pezimote asked. He could see from Belius’ heavy breathing that the Minotaur was shaken.

“He’s going to cut me,” Belius answered, sitting down next to his friend.

“Does he have to remove something?”

“No, exploratory surgery.”

“Sounds serious,” said Pezimote.

“Where’s Vashti? I thought she’d be here,” said Belius, leaning his head back and nervously tapping his horns against the wall behind him.

“I haven’t seen her today. But for Vashti not to keep an appointment, it must be something terribly important.”

“Yes, yes,” Belius grumbled.

Shebeb was busy moving around the cave, cleaning his instruments and lighting extra torches to make the work area brighter. After a considerable time of preparation, he called Belius over next to the flat slab of marble that was his operating table. Although he hated the sight of any creature bleed blood, especially that of his friends, Pezimote followed in order to offer moral support. Now he also wished Vashti were there, she being much better at such things, knowing just what to say to instill courage.

The ape left them standing near the table and went to a more distant part of the cave. When he returned a few minutes later, he was carrying, in the palm of one hand, a small wooden replica of a castle. The tiny building was no more than four inches high and three wide. He set it down on the marble slab. Belius and Pezimote leaned over it, marveling at the minute detail of lattice and turret and cupola.

“I want you to meet my assistant,” said Shebeb to Belius. Reaching up, he pulled a hair out of his head. With the end of the stout grey strand, he tapped on the gates of the diminutive structure. “Thip, come out,” he called in a rough whisper. “We have work.”

Almost instantly, the gate came down on microscopic strands, like a drawbridge opening. A tiny insignificant speck of black hopped out of the palace and into view.

“Thip, the flea,” said Shebeb as an introduction and waved his hand in the direction of the diminutive atom.

“What’s he do?” asked Belius.

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