

The Horrifying Tale of the Tremendous Journey of Dingle Doppleganger

Dingle bit down and jerked his head back a little against the resistance of the stringy bite of food. Juices ran down his chin. His mind immediately wandered off, as it usually did when he ate. Of all the things he used to do with his family, he figured eating with them to be what he missed the most- especially when juxtaposed against more recent experiences.

He remembered how dinner *used* to be. Dora, who in Dingle's opinion was too old for such behavior, dragged her dumb doll around with her every place she went, and insisted that their mother set a place for the damn thing. *Stupid fucking bunny*, he'd think to himself in those days. He dared not utter it aloud now. His mother, Greta, would oblige, and that poor, decrepit bunny would sit, stained and matted and most decidedly ready to join the chorus eternal, in front of an empty plate which Dora insisted was indeed *not* empty, but instead piled high with all sorts of portions of rabbit food. *Invisible rabbit food?*, Dingle would think sarcastically to himself and roll his eyes. Greta understood Dingle was bothered by Dora's constant make-believe. She would wink at Dingle from across the table, and Dingle would become a little less angry. Greta had a great gift for intuition and always seemed to know how to comfort, disarm, and keep the peace, amongst her family. Greta was as pretty as any Doppleganger could ever hope to be. Fine lines and wrinkles darted across her dignified face. Her coppery blonde hair was nearly always up in a bun, and though most of the household income was spent as frugally as possible on clothing and food, to the benefit of the rebels whom the family secretly helped financially, she always managed to look elegant. In the kitchen, scrubbing potatoes or peeling cabbage or boiling carrots, she always seemed distinguished and stately. *We're the ones eating rabbit food*, he'd think to himself, when Dora would scold her bunny for not finishing its invisible meals.

His thoughts migrated to his father. He heard Dweezel's boisterous laugh rattle through his head, and wondered why, as he'd seldom actually heard his father laugh. Dweezel delighted in little, and spent most dinners with furrowed brows, pretending to eat for the sake of Greta. His mind, Dingle knew, was entirely removed from that kitchen, focused on the rebellion in which the countryside was now embroiled.

Dingle clicked back to reality for a moment. He took another bite, this one more daintily. He chewed slowly and savored it. The paws were his favorite.

Dingle's thoughts shot back to his parents. He remembered that fateful night when his world collapsed around him the way mines did from time to time around the fathers of his friends. *It's a sacrifice the mines demands*, his father once told him. It didn't make much sense to Dingle, but who was he to question his father's wisdom? His fledgling sense of logical deduction assumed his family's demise, then, was *also* a sacrifice, for the appeasement of some greater entity, but he struggled to find a face or a name. He remembered that night and felt his stomach churn violently, threatening to throw out what he had just put into it. Bang bang bang against the door. Boots that sounded like wild horses, clapping against the wooden floors downstairs. Voices he didn't recognize. His father's voice yelling, and then a thud. Bare feet running up the steps to the second floor, his mother's shrill scream, the strange gargling noise it gave way to, then another thud. Then nothing. Strange voices yelling again. His sister's scream. Thud. Heavy boots clomped up the stairs. Crash. One door kicked in. Crash again. Crash again. This time the crash was right in front of him. Between the floor and the bottom of the blanket on his made bed, he saw sets of black boots. Candle light illuminated all corners with fluid light. It crept up in front of him, under the edge of the bed. "Clear" said one voice. "Clear" said a different voice. "Clear" again, and "Clear" from the owner of one of these sets of black boots here in Dingle's room. Galumph back down the stairs, impossible to count how many sets of boots all together. Dingle knew he was alone in the house. He knew he was the only living, breathing person in the house, if he wasn't alone. Dingle slept in a pool of his own piss that night.

He snapped back to reality again, and took another bite of his meal. Tiny bones crunched between his molars. The memories from that night had boiled down to flashes in the time since it happened. He no longer felt the terror he had experienced while laying under the bed, though he could remember the feeling if he concentrated hard enough. He had forgotten the despair and panic and total loss for any thought that he'd experienced when he came out from under the bed and saw the chaos, but he could relive those feelings, too, if he tried to. He thought about the moment he finally came out from under his bed, nearly two days later. His sister's body lay crumpled the top of the steps, her skull cracked open. He saw his mother at the bottom of this same staircase, balanced precariously against the steps and the wall, her head hanging unnaturally, her neck slit wide open. He remembered the gargling sound. His father, still clutching his pick axe, fallen face down in a pool of his own dried blood. The memory of that night no longer angered him, as he'd relived it so many times, that there was no anger left to draw from. It only made him nauseous. He sucked the tendons off the top of a bone, and thought back to his father, and how angry he would get when he would find Dingle sleeping under the bed instead of on top of it. "On the floor again, under the bed. Are you burrowing? Are you a rabbit, Dingle? You need to be below the surface?" He never understood why his father cared...maybe just a pet peeve. As he licked his fingers, his brain tingled as it tried to wrap all of the relevancies, the ironies, the whatever-the-word-was, of it. In Dingle's mind, it was quite a good thing he *did* sleep under the bed that night. And yes, maybe Dingle *was* a rabbit, even if only in his head.

Dingle never thought much about why any of those events had transpired. He knew it was something to do with the rebellion, which his parents spoke about in hush voices and which they referred to with Dingle and Dora as something that "wasn't their business" and "shouldn't be repeated by them." Dingle would sometimes lay at the top of the steps and hear them talking, picking out words that floated up from the whispers. He figured roughly that there were the people in the city-states (which Dingle had never seen) and that the people in the country, like the Dopplegangers, worked to support the city-state kingdoms. He never understood what "slave" meant, and couldn't really ask, as he was home schooled, and he obviously couldn't ask his mother, or she'd know he eavesdropped. The way he figured it, which was pretty close to correct, his father had been sent to oversee the coal mines throughout this part of the countryside. His father, seeing the mistreatment of the people who lived out here side by side with the waste dumped nearly daily from the city, who toiled for next to nothing in the mines, and rummaged through the garbage from the city for subsidies to their lives, wanted to help. He found a few like-minded overseers, and they began a plan to rise up and fight back. Dingle never figured out whether he was right or not, but he knew his family was in violation of something or other, hence the whispering.

His thoughts came back to the present. He thought about the fact that he thought to himself in human language, though he no

longer spoke it, and thought about how he had picked up the very basics of this new language. It wasn't quite second nature to him yet, and his first language was no longer his first reaction. He nevertheless declined aloud another fetus, speaking in this new tongue. He was quite full as it was. He spent a few minutes arranging the most recently birthed fetal rabbits in the appropriate piles. He always ate the oldest first, so as to avoid wasting any. He did prefer the inner liquids less congealed, so on occasion (such as today), he would treat himself with a fresh one, still warm out of his new caregiver's womb. She was no Greta, but she was his provider none-the-less. He made a three syllable noise, which sounded like a scream and two grunts, but was clearly understood by Mother Rabbit to be a "thank you". Mother Rabbit was most always lying belly-up, her back propped up against the wall of the cave. Dingle tucked himself between Mother's left hind leg and torso, safely out of the way of the flying fetuses expelled every twenty or thirty minutes, and pulled a rabbit-fur blanket up over him. He felt the fullness of his gut pushing against the outside of his belly, making the skin tight. He slept.

The symbiosis between Dingle and Mother Rabbit was essential, in the most grave of senses, for both of them. If not for Mother Rabbit, Dingle would surely starve, freeze to death, or die of loneliness, if not a combination of the three. Without Dingle, Mother Rabbit would drown in a sea of her own stillborn children.

Mother Rabbit had- at some point just before Dingle found his way down what he at that point had thought was an abandoned mine shaft days after that horrible night- been the subject of a cruel dose of fate. Wandering too close to any one of the many waste dumping grounds- overflowing with rotten food, metal smiths wastes, and the decaying carcasses of those kingdom peasants who could not afford to buy a plot in which to bury their dead- had been the demise of many a creature in the country. Kingdoms had long been sending their waste, mostly unchecked, to the country, and doing little if anything to protect the inhabitants, human or otherwise, of the land. Those who chose not to move to pledge allegiance to one of the kings of the loose coalition that had formed recently, comprised of the three largest dominions, had little in the way of options and even less in the way of respect or compassion. Dumping was rampant, and as it were, Mother Rabbit became another victim. After an afternoon of grazing, she returned to the cavernous, endless mine shaft which they both now inhabited. She took a brief nap, and awoke to a reality which would never again be the one she once knew. She had somehow managed to withstand a lethal dose of some metallurgical alloy, and while her body was able to continue to function, it underwent some rapid, and drastic, changes. Her size swelled. In a matter of two days, she had grown to nearly 18 times her original size. The toxicity of the elements caused her cells to split at such a rampant pace that she now hulked in the cavern, her hairs more than half as thick as one of Dingle's fingers, her black eyes the size of one of his mother's desert plates, her teeth like the broad end of a canoe paddle, at least as wide as Dingle's head. Though unfertilized, she somehow had begun producing babies another day after the growth spurt. Her eggs split, fertilized themselves, and gestated. The errors in genetic code must have been detected by her body, and as such, the damned offspring were expelled before any of them could ever come to deformed, invalid maturity. Indicative of the speed with which her eggs reproduced, she expelled one of these fetuses approximately every 23 minutes, give or take. The sound of the slimy fetuses popping, *shhhllup*, out of Mother Rabbit, had become as commonplace- and even strangely comforting- to Dingle as the clock that rang on every half-hour and hour in his old house.

Mother Rabbit couldn't eat much, as her stomach was obscured by her enormous uterus, lumbering under the weight of probably a dozen of these fetuses at any one time, and Dingle realized that she would not be able to keep up at this pace forever. Even in his little scientific knowledge, he understood that the matter to make up the fetuses had to come from *somewhere*, and with Mother Rabbit unable to take more than a few bites a day, she surely would succumb to this horrible fate eventually. Who could have known it would be this day?

Dingle awoke a few hours later, to the crushing pressure of one of Mother's massively powerful hind legs, pressing him against her body. She was clenching involuntarily. She moaned and shrieked. Dingle understood every word.

"Dingleboy, you have to move. I'm going to crush you if you don't." Dingle threw the blanket off him, and felt her contract again against him. He couldn't scream in pain. The air was gone, forced violently from his lungs by her leg. The contraction stopped, and he scurried out.

"What's happening?" He didn't begin to know what to think.

"Dingleboy, I don't want to think I know, but I'm afraid that I do." A fetus slid out as she talked, but with barely any of the velocity with which they usually were propelled out. "Mother Rabbit? What can I do? Do you need something? Can I help you?"

"Dingleboy, you have to listen to me," she panted. Her body was contracting involuntarily. Her face was contorted in pain. She had to concentrate just to take a breath. "You have to go out into the world. There is a purpose for you. Something, someone seeks you. I see it in my dreams, but cannot understand it. I'm sorry I have kept you here so selfishly for so long."

"NO, Mother Rabbit!" Terror was in his voice. "You're not selfish! Keep me! Please! Don't go! What's happening?!"

"Dingleboy. You must go. Take with you what you can carry. Go now. I don't want you to be here for the end."

"THE END? The end of WHAT?" Though he knew now exactly what was happening. Mother Rabbit was dying.

"Dingleboy, you must go now."

"Mother Ra-" A strange smell interrupted him. In an instant, her body went limp. In another, there was an audible splattering. Thick black goo oozed from her orifices, mostly where the fetuses had previously come out. It engulfed his feet. He cried aloud, screamed. He gagged and vomited.

Through sobs, looks back, blurry eyes and clenched jaw, Dingle collected everything he could wrap into one of the huge fur blankets he'd fashioned out of a few dozen of the baby rabbits a while back. He wrapped up a few of the freshest fetuses, a pillow made from fur, and the one thing he'd brought with him- a painting of his family. He cried more. He hugged Mother Rabbit's paw, but couldn't bring himself to leave. As if some backhanded gift from fate, the smell of the vile fluids which she'd expelled at her demise continued to smell more and more sour, reminiscent to rotten meat, until he could no longer bear it. He left the cave, and for the first time in a very *long* time, he saw the light of day. It was a welcome change from the light of rabbit's fur soaked in rabbit's fat, burning on a stick.

Dingle wandered for days. At one point, about a day into it, he actually turned back for the mines. He couldn't even get all the way to the door before he could smell Mother Rabbit rotting away. He cried. It was as if life was torturing him, never letting him die off with whoever was his current family.

Food dwindled. Legs grew tired. Dingle remembered the idea of fearing for his wellbeing, wondering how he would survive. He hated being back to it. He had no idea how far any of the city-states who had dumped, depleted, taken and left the countryside to rot, were. They could have been weeks away, or hours away. He encountered one castle on his first day out, but was too scared to approach it. He lay at the top of a hill in the distance, watching, and after a solid few hours of observation, decided it must be abandoned. He walked towards it, and as he drew close enough to make out the details of it, he realized that this had long since been abandoned. It sat, broken and alone. More of the stones were on the surrounding hill and valley than were still standing as viable structure. Dingle felt disappointment and relief at the same time, as he was unsure what status he would be given, if he'd encountered any sort of civilization. He turned back, hoping to return to the original hill he'd been on before he turned towards the castle, seeing nothing more than the occasional animal, scurrying in the brush, eating the grass. Up one hill, down another. Up another. Down another. His legs burned under the weight of his body on the way up, and his heels ached from bracing against the steep decline on the way down. The castle disappeared entirely, and the landscape was barren except for these hills, and the odd one out of a dozen that had a tree planted, singly, at the apex of it. He scanned the horizon. Tens of hills, evaporating into the distance, as far as he could see. All the same height, all the same distance from each other, 8 or 9 trees to be seen, all looking decrepit but still alive, all black, silhouetted against the bright, but hardly blue, sky. He passed a rabbit on one especially depressing afternoon. He spoke to it, *squeek click*. The rabbit cocked his head at Dingle, and then turned his back to him and continued grazing. Dingle spoke again. The rabbit turned his head, watched Dingle through its black eye, and then ran. He hung his head. He walked more. He hated the hills, every one looking more the same to the next than to the one before it. Dingle turned left and walked, turned right and walked, turned around and walked. He had no idea where he was walking, and figured if he zigzagged, he might come across something, *anything*. He wondered if he'd walked over this hill already. He wondered if he'd walked over that hill already. He kicked everything he saw in his path. He wished he would just hurry up and die. He feared dying and wondered what he would do for food. He ate grass, pine needles, tree bark. At least, he tried to.

These days became weeks, and at the slow, meandering pace he was limited to for the hills, walking no particular direction, he never covered more than a few straight miles in any day. He didn't know what he was looking for, where he was going, what he was doing. All he ever did was remember the words that Mother Rabbit had left him with- that someone, something, needed him. That he had a purpose. But it did nothing to quell his frustration. He picked up a handful of gravel from a patch of dirt. He threw it angrily. Plunk, plunk, knock, plunk, plunk. He knew one of them had hit a tree. He hoped the sounds he heard that accounted for the rest of them were what he thought- water. One of the few things his father had ever thought to teach him was to follow water. Downstream. Always follow water downstream. He ran forward twenty yards, down the hill, and sure as he was a Doppelganger, there it was- a large stream, three feet wide and a foot deep. It snaked perfectly between the identical hills. He wondered instantly whether he would have found it if he hadn't had his temper tantrum. Maybe he would have wandered across it. Probably he would have wandered left, or right, and never have seen it. He bent down and took huge gulps. Water ran down his face, made mud around his hands, soaked him. He swallowed until his stomach hurt from the swell, and he could feel it in the back of his throat, so full with water that the last gulps couldn't even make it all the way down. He lay against the hill and let his feet hang in the water. His hunger didn't subside for long, even with his full belly of water. He gathered himself, his empty blanket, and began to walk.

Time fast-forwarded itself, and after countless identical hills, pebbles, and dry, brown grass, the occasional grub for a meal, and cold, solitary nights, he found himself coming upon the edge of a huge body of water, a delta of sorts where the river was letting into some sort of lake, perhaps, the other side of which he couldn't even see. The flatness was beautiful if only because it was absolutely *not* more of the same hills. He hadn't noticed any specific place where the stream had become wider, as it was a gradual process, but he did remember how narrow it had been when he found it, and how wide it was now. He walked a few steps down the shore, looking up and down coast to see where the curve of this lake must surely be, but he saw none. It seemed this lake was so large that it bled off of the horizon from due north, all of the line of sight to the right of him, and down to due south. He deduced then that he must have reached the ocean, and wondered how it had been possible that he still hadn't passed any kingdom or population. But these sorts of questions were more or less irrelevant, and not the type of thing to weigh on Dingle's mind for too long. He realized that maybe it was better that he hadn't been found as a wandering orphan from the countryside, but better, undiscovered, and that was the end of his contemplation on the matter. In any matter, Dingle couldn't be bothered. This, at least temporarily, was a resolution of sorts. The end of something, though he realized subconsciously that he was still no better off than he was before he'd found the water. He was awestruck nonetheless.

He smelled the air, felt the sand, and had the urge to jump in, though he couldn't swim. It was his first time at the ocean, and after the rough countryside he'd grown up in, the mine he'd lived in afterwards, and the hills he'd just traversed, it was all things to him. As he took it all in, his eye was snagged as though a shirt by a thorn, on an unfamiliar shape coming over the horizon. Dingle, who'd never known much about the ocean, but had been told stories by his mother- who in her younger years, as the daughter of an affluent family, had spent time on boats, and was even a novice sailor- knew what he was looking at, if not the relevancy of it. A ship. A powerful, sleek ship. Unbeknownst to Dingle, this was no ordinary ship, and as such, the significance of the vessel itself went unrecognized. It was a caravel, the likes of which hadn't been seen in ages. A marvelous, beautiful boat, built shorter and lighter than the carracks with which it shared the ocean in its time, making it the far superior ship in terms of speed and agility. A two-masted boat, it was in meticulous condition- also unbeknownst to Dingle, a ship of this nature hadn't been produced since the late 15th century in

Spain. Impossibly white, almost glowing sails bulged under the force of the winds pushing it, though- at least where Dingle stood on shore- there was not a breeze blowing. Gulls called, waves lapped. Dingle was captivated. Didn't notice, couldn't move. His world stopped as this phantasmal vessel slid across the water, seemingly straight towards him. He watched.

In a matter of moments, the boat was upon him. Dingle continued to stare, entranced. The wind, which had just moments before been filling the sails, and blowing only on them, had apparently died. A face appeared over the rail of the port side.

"DINGLE!" the voice called out. Dingle blinked, twitched. He hadn't heard his name said aloud in his native language since the day his family died.

"Uh. Yes? Who are you?"

"Come aboard, Dingle! I've been looking for you," the voice boomed loudly. Or at least it seemed to reverberate in Dingle's ears. Dingle looked at the man. He looked large, towering, even in contrast to this huge ship. He had gaunt, sunken eyes, sharp features, and tanned, tight skin. He looked strangely familiar, and even just his appearance was wholly disarming.

"How?" he shouted back. Dingle had no apprehension to follow the command, as he was still entranced by this implausible vessel before him.

"Walk, of course!" With that, the water in front of him began to move oddly, the way tea looked when his mother blew on her cup after dinner in the evenings. Another second later and the water was split completely, leaving a 3 foot wide path from Dingle's feet to the portside of the boat, where a ladder he hadn't noticed before was hanging down the side. Dingle thought nothing of this, barely noticed any lapse in the laws of physics, as fixated as he still was, on the ship itself. He walked. He felt the still wet sand suck at his feet with each step. The thick stew of ocean bottom crept up between his toes, cold and textural like nothing he'd known. This all continued to go only barely perceived by Dingle. He reached the ladder, climbed mechanically, thoughtless, absorbed completely by the ship he was scaling. He reached the rail, swung a leg over, and fell with a thump on his back on the deck.

"Dingle. Welcome."

"Who *are* you?" He was in the face of a stranger, and a human at that, or so one would be led to believe. This, another living human, was another first for Dingle since the last day of his family.

"It isn't important, but if you'd like a name to use, you can call me AI. Call me AI."

"How do you know *my* name, AI?"

"Also unimportant. Dingle, I know your entire life. I have seen everything that has happened to you. I know about your family, I know about Mother Rabbit. I watched you wander your way here. I saw you throw the rocks, and find the river. I was waiting just beyond the horizon for you. When you arrived, I came."

Dingle, in a moment of clarity, made a high-pitched squeak, and then another, shorter one.

"Yes, I do understand *that* too, Dingle," he noised back. *He even understands Mother Rabbit's language*, he thought to himself in disbelief. *Yes, he does*, came an alien voice in Dingle's head. Dingle jumped back.

"Are you God?" Dingle asked, feeling his own knees begin to quake.

"Mmm...not particularly. Maybe just a little bit. But not totally."

"Who are you?"

"Dingle, it is far too complex a concept for me to explain to you. I am only here to help point you in the right direction. Turn around."

Dingle hesitated, but turned, and faced the shore he'd just left. Now, though, it was a different scene entirely. Massive trees crowded each other, strangled each other with their branches. Flecks of blue peeked out occasionally, but for the most part, the view was green and black, a sea of trees piled on top of each other. The shoreline was different, peppered with huge, coal-black rocks, partially rounded but not entirely smooth.

"What?" Dingle struggled to form the words to the question.

"Never mind, Dingle. That is inconsequential to your journey." Dingle didn't understand *inconsequential*, but understood by the tone, and some other intangible factor, the gist of the sentence. "Do not be scared. Walk back to shore, and into the forest. What you are looking for will find you."

"Ok. What should I-" before he could finish the question, he found himself standing in waist-deep water. He turned around. The boat was gone. His brain tingled like he'd never felt. He was stupefied.

Slush through the water, to the shore. DAMN IT, he shouted loudly, to no one but himself. He stubbed a toe on a rock. He smashed a shin on another. The gash on his leg was the worse of the offenses, and he could see the red clouding the water as he took the last few steps onto the sand. HELLLLLLOO, he shouted. *Of course* there would be no answer. He figured without thinking that any direction would be as good as any other, and as there were no breaks in the tree line to be seen, he walked straight forward.

The trees were thick and packed tightly together, in most places so much so that he had to squeeze and contort just to navigate between the trunks themselves, never mind the branches. The air was damp and warm, but not hot. The ground was black and gave under his feet, leaving tiny but detectable pools of water where the balls and heels of his feet had been. It was markedly noisier than the hills had been, and though he could see nothing, he heard scampering and scurrying all around him. Yelps, flapping, squeaks, cracks. Noises he'd never heard, from animals that he wagered he'd never heard of. He was nervous, but felt strangely comforted by AI, and figured if he'd been sent in by AI's guidance, then what could possibly happen to him? He climbed and stumbled, and had a notion to try to scale one of these trees to gain a better view, but he decided against it. *Probably just as hard moving up as moving forward*, he thought. He scraped himself more than once on the rough bark that he wrapped himself around and pushed himself through. He wondered if Mother Rabbit had been thinking of AI when she said there was something looking for him, and what her dreams had been like. He wondered if she'd seen the jungle or the beach or the hills or the castle. He thought more about AI. He wondered how he'd disappeared like that, who he really was, why he was so comfortable with him, and why he was the only human he'd seen all this time.

"BOO!"

Dingle froze, flinched, felt a little piss squirt down his thigh. A tree branch brushed across his wrist from behind. It seemed to bend around his wrist, almost grabbing. Instantly, a hand was in its place. It felt cold and firm, and at the same time, felt like nothing at all.

“Are you Dingle?”

He turned. A girl stood before him. She seemed older than him, and instantly he thought of how much more tolerable she was to look at than his sister. Yet, there was something strangely ethereal about her. He couldn't think of such a complexity, however. He only noticed that she didn't look quite normal. *Large eyes*, he thought to himself.

“Who are you? Do you know Al? Don't hurt me.” Dingle didn't like the way that sounded coming out of his mouth.

“Al? You're Dingle, right? Who's Al? Are you Dingle? You're Dingle.” She spoke strangely, and he noticed that the trees around her throbbed, just slightly, when she talked.

“Yes,” he said submissively. He wanted to ask who she was, but he dared not.

“I don't have a name,” she said. *What the hell*, Dingle thought. He wondered whether everyone, all along, had been able to listen to him think to himself.

“Dingle. I'm supposed to help you,” she said, “but I don't know what you're doing, so don't ask. I just know I'm supposed to help you find your way somewhere. You haven't much time. None of your kind do.”

“My kind?” He couldn't imagine how many others had been taken in by a giant rabbit, lived off of raw rabbit fetuses, wore furs and skins and even rabbit ears.

“Yes. Your kind. Humans.” As she spoke, a few leaves drifted lazily down off of branches that swayed on her syllables, and landed in a perfect ring around her feet. He looked at her feet, examined her pale skin, her long hair. She seemed faint.

“What? *Our* kind?”

“No, Dingle. *Your kind*.” She sounded mildly frustrated. “You and I aren't- never mind, Dingle. This is for you to understand on your own. Give me your hand.”

Dingle held out his hand.

“Good luck, Dingle. Hopefully I'll see you again after it's all over. I'll be here. With any luck, you will, too.” Dingle thought better than bothering to ask what it meant. “Ready?” She bit his hand.

“OUCH! Why did you do that?” He pulled his hand back and clenched it into a fist. Through the pain, he could feel something moving. Strange warmth pulsed through his hand, burning more intensely with every breath. He looked back to the Tree Girl, but she was gone. The ring of leaves remained. COME BACK, he shouted into the distance. Nothing. He screamed out again, but no words. The pain was horrendous, throbbing through his arm. He looked down at his hand again. A huge, messy hole replaced the bite mark the girl from the trees had left. He couldn't believe the intensity of the pain. WHAT DID YOU DO, he yelled out. He stumbled backwards, and fell against the trunk of a tree, the bark making impact on his spine even through the rabbit skins. The pain of the impact of the tree on his back was nothing compared to what was terrorizing every nerve in his arm. His hand had deteriorated to a stump. He watched in horror as the decay crawled quickly through his wrist, burning its way up his forearm. He felt himself fall further, seemingly through the ground.

Dingle woke up. He opened his eyes, and couldn't see anything. All in the same instant, he remembered what had just happened, and hoped it was a dream. He wiggled the fingers on his right arm, and in the pitch black, thought he wiggled those on his left arm as well. He couldn't be sure. He felt for his arm with his other, and screamed. A crusty, hard stump ended just below his shoulder. He reached around futilely for his limb, knowing full well that it was gone for good. Back to the darkness. He heard nothing, saw nothing, and wondered if he'd gone blind. Shouts for help were in vain. Or so it seemed. He found his feet, both of which he still had. The ground was hard and cold, and felt like the stone floors in his old house. The air was perfectly still. His ears rung in the silence. He walked a few pensive steps forward, and put his hands out in front of him. Nothing. He walked another step, cautiously, sliding on the ball of his foot in case he found a hole or another rock to smash his shin against. Nothing. He took two more steps, slightly more confidently. Nothing. He thought about his arm again. Nausea swept through him, then anger. He thought about his journey, about the Tree Girl. She had seemed so nice, and then she took his arm. He didn't understand. It seemed so arbitrary. Maybe it was. He thought about Al, about the gash on his leg, about the ocean where he had cut it, about the sand and the hills and how they were almost the same thing. He thought about the defunct castle he'd seen. He thought about walking along the river. A million thoughts poured over his brain from some pitcher above and splashed everywhere. Too many things crossed his mind, all at once. He couldn't really actually *think* about any of it. He just watched the scenes floating past. Another step. Nothing. He didn't know why he was bothering to move forward, but he did. Soon, steps came with no hesitation, and Dingle broke into a run. Not from anything, and probably not towards anything, but just for the strange sensation of running in total darkness. After all that had happened to him, after all he had lost, he didn't think he'd particularly care if he DID run into a bottomless pit, or the mouth of some beast, or whatever other bizarre, unlikely event might happen. He thought about reality, and wondered if he was no longer in it. Maybe he was dead. Maybe the world had been destroyed. SMACK.

Dingle fell backwards.

A green light appeared above him. It was terribly faint, and only barely illuminated anything, but it was light. It seemed miles above him, and yet it seemed like it was the ceiling of something, totally different than the sun looked in the sky. He stared up at it. It stared back at him. Dingle realized he'd run *into* something, and as yet, didn't even know what it was. He went to push himself up and fell onto his side, knocking his head against the hard ground. He felt his eyes well up with the pain of hitting his head and the simultaneous reminder that he no longer had an arm to push himself up with. He rolled over and righted himself. The very, very faint silhouette of someone, maybe a woman judging by the shoulders, stood before him. *Thump*. He looked to his left and saw another silhouette, this one much further away, and much less distinct, but he immediately thought that it must be a rabbit. *Thump*, from the other side. Same thing. Six more *thumps*. They formed a gigantic circle around him. Fear threatened to manifest into vomit. The figure in front of him spoke.

"I'm glad you found us, Dingle," said a flat-toned voice. It was most definitely a woman, though Dingle could discern little more.

"Who are you?" Dingle didn't bother asking any of the other questions that had thus far in his journeys proved to be fruitless. "I am the faerie queen," she said. He could see her hand twirl in some manner above her head, and the green light above increased in intensity. He still couldn't see her face particularly well, but he could see she was older than any of the others had been thus far. He wondered if she knew Al or the Tree Girl. He again judged against asking. "These are my faerie helpers." 8 *thumps* in unison. 8 more. They were close enough now that he could begin to make them out. He felt a shiver. These faerie helpers were not what Dingle had imagined when his mother had read him faerie tales. They were large, freakishly large. Mother Rabbit's large stature suddenly seemed quite unimpressive. They were gigantic, hulking, lumbering. They had huge eyes, that weren't black like Mother Rabbits, but in the green light, it was hard to discern exactly what color the actually *were*. Their fur looked different, too. Rougher, or choppy. They had a strange smell, and while their teeth looked proportionally the same size as Mothers, something about them was intimidating. The rabbits themselves were intimidating. Scary. Borderline terrifying. Tiny beads of sweat began creeping to the surface of Dingle's face.

"What do they help you with?" he asked in a shaky voice.

"My work," she responded flatly.

"What's your work?"

"Do you remember Walter?" the Faerie Queen asked, ignoring his question. She pointed to the rabbit directly behind Dingle. "You tried to speak to him on your journey." Dingle had absolutely no recollection of having ever seen this rabbit before.

"I have absolutely no recollection of having seen him before," Dingle said.

"Hmmm. Think back," the Faerie said, still quite deadpan. "Do you remember a smaller, browner rabbit, who seemed to ignore you?"

Dingle remembered. He thought about the rabbit, and how he'd known the rabbit had heard him, but ignored him just the same.

"Yes, I do."

"Dingle, meet Walter." Dingle emitted an uneasy squeak. Walter "squeaked" back in a low, rattling, guttural squeak, the likes of which Dingle had never heard. It was as loud, if not louder, than Al's voice. The breath from Walter blew across the void and forced itself violently up Dingle's nose. It smelled worse than anything he'd ever smelled, ever. *Thump, thump, thump*. The circle choked up further as the rabbits hopped forward in unison. They grew even larger, and Dingle began to wonder whether they were actually *growing* as they hopped forward, not just getting closer. Dingle turned back to the Faerie Queen.

"What is it you do?" Dingle asked again.

"Well, Dingle, I do many things. But I have been waiting for you for this, my largest and grandest task." There was silence. Dingle waited for her to continue. She did not.

"Well, what's the task?" he asked. He was becoming a little more comfortable with the Faerie Queen and her goonish faerie underlings. She did, after all, *need him*, so why would she possibly harm him?

"Oh, I won't be harming you, Dingle. Not per se."

"Why do you say it like that?" The faerie rabbits seemed to grow larger, though it seemed implausible, as they hadn't actually moved any closer.

"All in due time, Dingle. You ask too many questions." She approached him. He tried not to flinch. She knelt beside him and put her hand on his face.

"Are you ready?"

"For what?"

"Close your eyes, Dingle." Dingle hesitated, but complied. A booming *crack* filled the air.

Dingle's face throbbed.

"What was that?" he asked, eyes still closed. "Did you just hit me?"

"No, I didn't...not per se," a voice said softly, blowing across his ear. Goose bumps rose up all over his body. He opened his eyes. The Faerie Queen was gone. Light filtered through the canopy of leaves around him. Trees surrounded him in a perfect circle, almost too precisely placed to have happened by chance of nature. They reminded him of the big goon rabbits. He thought of the time his father- who in one of the rare moments his soul wasn't weighed down with the weight of the world- had, to the protest of Dingle's mother, gathered Dora and Dingle around the wooden table and in one swift movement, yanked the tablecloth off of the set table in a huge, billowy movement, leaving every glass, plate, fork and knife, barely moved from where it had sat atop the cloth a moment earlier. Dingle wondered if the Faerie Queen hadn't just done the same thing to him. He turned his head and faced the voice talking into his ear. A familiar face- pale, with eyes that matched perfectly the umber dirt beneath him- stared back at him. It was the Tree Girl. Dingle was caught by her eyes momentarily. He tried to jump to his feet, the thought of losing another limb shooting instantly through his mind, but fell backwards from sitting to lying when he tried to pivot on his absent arm. He managed to scramble to his feet.

"Get away from me!" he shouted. She looked up at him, still on her hands and knees. He took two steps slowly backwards, backing into a tree. The girl stood up.

"Dingle, I did what I did to *help* you" she said, cocking her head slightly sideways as she looked at the black stump that ended just below his shoulder. Dingle's lip quivered, tried to curl upward into a smile. He stopped it.

"You *ate* my *arm*. Or something. I mean...what *did* you do?" Dingle heard how unsure and awkward he sounded. Again. He didn't like how weak the girl made him feel. She stepped towards him.

"Get the fuck away from me," he tried to yell, though it came out closer to a plea. "What did you do to me? Why am I here again? What do you want? What do all you people want from me?" He clenched his teeth and his fist, and could feel tears welling in his eyes. He felt anger and fear and frustration all at once. His face was flush and hot. She took another step towards him.

"Dingle, I *think* you're almost done. You see, I don't know everything there is ahead for you. I only get glimpses. But there's

something more I need from you.” She stepped towards him once more, reaching out her hand towards his chest.

Dingle's trembling fist swung nearly involuntarily at the girl. He felt it glance against her face, but then continue to swing through the space her head had just occupied, which was now only cold, *thick* air, if there was such a thing. The girl was gone from his sight. He turned on his foot and ran from the circle of trees, and as he did so, the ground beneath him seemed to drop away from his feet. His steps felt strange, but he continued running straight on, through the dense woods. Twigs slapped against him, branches tugged at him. The trunks seemed closer together with each passing step. A million times he saw that girl, behind every tree. He could feel the trees closing in around him, even as he was moving. It was as if they had all been planted here all these years ago, just for this moment, knowing that he would be running through them, and meaning to hold him in. There was less fear than anger inside of him at this point, and Dingle seemed to gain strength from it. With every stride he completed, the forest fought harder against him. But with every amplification of the trees efforts, Dingle's strides became surer and longer still. He felt stronger than all of the woods combined. A few minutes more, and the trees thinned out drastically. Tall, thin blades of green filled up the ground where the trees weren't crowded enough to inhibit their growth. The air felt warmer, and patches of sunlight shown everywhere. Through the farthest trees, he could see golden yellow hills. He saw himself slowing his run to a walk, but thought better of it, and continue running at full speed, even while questioning in his head which was the worse fate. Soon though he was through the last of the trees, and saw in a very narrow gradient the last of the green grass from the in-between fade into yellow and brown, rolling up and down the mounds filling his line of vision. He was here again.

He wondered how he'd managed to pick the exact direction, entirely accidentally, to come back to the same hills he'd wandered through however long ago that had been. He saw no coast from where he stood, and figured he must have come out on the other side, or bottom, of whatever shape that patch of woods was. He realized how little he knew- the land he lived on, the inhabitants of it, and what the hell he was doing. Dingle figured then to be as good a time as any for a nap. He put a few more hills between himself and the farthest reaches of the woods, just for safety's sake- he seemed to know intrinsically, or at least hoped and thought- that beyond the woods, he was safe from the reach of that evil, strangely bewitching girl. He laid on his back, a pair of rabbit ears over his eyes to block the sun.

Dingle woke up with a dry mouth. He moved his tongue around. It was like sand. *Great*, he thought to himself. He remembered this. In the distance, he heard a muffled *boom*, but thought little of it. The most immediate concerns were about the only thing he bothered to account for, and some meaningless sound somewhere beyond his reality was of minimal interest. He stretched his arms and legs, pointed his toes down as he arched his back, thought about big gulps of water. He pulled the ears from over his eyes.

The sky above Dingle was strange, glowing orange and pink, and thick, bulbous clouds covered the sky to the north and east of him. He figured, entirely guessing, that it was the direction from which he'd come in the first place. Directly above him, there were none of these strange clouds, though the sky still glowed. Dingle was unable to locate the sun or moon, and wondered whether it was actually day or night, or somewhere in between. He heard another *boom*. Even still, Dingle's major focus was finding something for his parched throat, and he set off to find water, uneasy in the back of his mind with what he figured to be the scarce chance of finding said commodity, based on his previous experience with these hills.

Dingle walked. He walked again, cursing the hills, but still grateful to be out of the woods. He heard more *booms*, and wondered whether they were getting closer to him, though they seemed to be coming from more than once source. He watched the clouds continue to fill the air in the distance, creeping closer to directly above him. The clouds, at the farthest glimpses of the horizons, seemed to be so backed up that they were filling in the sky all the way down to the ground. Still no water. Up more hills, down more, *boom, boom, boom* in the distance. He wished he could throw more rocks and accidentally stumble upon another stream, though he knew this would never happen. He kept walking, kept listening to the *booms*, saw the clouds come to cover the sky above him. The sounds were definitely getting louder now, and Dingle more than once thought that he saw the slight silhouettes of some massive structures in the distance, but decided they must be more plumes of clouds rising from whatever had been going on all that way away. He opted to sit for a little while and suck on a blade of brown grass, causing himself to salivate enough to swallow fully and relieve his throat. He still didn't know what time it was, but had no particular interest, realizing the futility of time itself at this point. Somehow, Dingle managed to yet again doze off.

BOOM BOOM BOOM woke dingle. Another *BOOM*, and then another. He hadn't intended to sleep, but couldn't imagine he'd been asleep that long. His mouth was dry again but he barely thought of it as he scrambled to his feet. The sky was brighter than day, and the incessant, thunderous crashing noises stung his eardrums. Thick clouds filled the sky above him, and terrible heat permeated the air. He turned to the direction the noise had come from before he fell asleep, just in time for an explosion barely 300 yards from him.

Dingle came to, confined and cramped and pouring sweat. His arm was folded at the elbow, his fist shoved under his chin and his elbow digging painfully into his gut, straining his shoulder to bend so unnaturally. The sounds of the *booms* seemed to vibrate him, and must have been right beneath him, though the sounds seemed muffled. His legs were outstretched, though twisted around each other, and both shot bolts of pain from where each of his ankles was digging into the other. It was stifling hot. He could feel himself seeming to move, bobbing rhythmically as he imagined it would be on the back of a horse, though stationary in whatever it was that restrained him, and he seriously doubted that he was on the back of any animal. But logical, or any, thoughts were fleeting right at this moment, and terror paralyzed the limited logical capacity that had been allocated to Dingle when God made him. He tried to open his eyes but something, coarse and thick, was packed against his face. He struggled to breath through his nose. His mouth was forced shut by his own fist. He felt terror overwhelm him. The air was filled with a rotten stench worse than anything he'd ever smelled- even worse than when Mother Rabbit had died. He wanted to scream. His brain was frantic. He figured he must be within the confines of some captor, and tried to bite whatever it was that restrained him. All he managed was a bite of thick, cord-like strands of what must be hair, too long to feel the beginning or end of. He struggled more. He felt his bladder empty itself involuntarily and felt it run down his

legs. This too was becoming too familiar an experience for Dingle's preference. With that, there seemed to be some expansion of his confines. He slid his fist out from under his chin, though he still lacked little space to do anything but slide his arm downwards a bit. He twisted his leg and felt relief almost as intense as the pain he'd just alleviated. Rough hairs tore over his face, the way he felt rug burn as a younger child playing in the living room on the old worn carpet in the Doppleganger's living room. He could see light through his eyelids. He opened them. He screamed.

A huge face hung over him, blocking almost completely the light he had just detected through closed eyes. It was freakish and deformed. He instantly thought of the goonish faerie helper rabbits, though those would by scale have to be far smaller compared to this rabbit than he had been to those oafish faerie rabbits. Dingle realized he was clutched within the malformed paw of this thing- enormous and looking so horribly grotesque as to be only marginally functional as an organism. Black eyes that looked bigger than Dingle himself, obscured by huge, dingy hairs, half as thick as Dingle's lone forearm. Three loud *booms* rattled off, deafening and blindingly bright in the reflection of the huge black eyes before him. The beast, the huge rabbit beast, had a nose like ground beef that had been beaten by huge fists, with two unevenly placed and horribly misshapen holes wheezing air in and out. Dingle felt a strong wind across him as the animal moved him closer to its face to examine him. As he moved, he saw at least half a dozen more massive creatures beyond this one, swinging deformed paws, crashing into the countryside. Within a second, he was in the face of this beast, one huge, ink-black eye filling Dingle's vision. The thing made a noise that reverberated through the air so loudly that he felt his own bowels vibrate. Dingle didn't realize at first, but a moment later, understood. It was speaking to him. *Alive*, it had said, in distorted rabbit speak. Dingle figured it must have been checking to see whether he was still alive, or if the near-retarded thing had accidentally crushed him to death. Dingle felt relief, though he wasn't sure why. But why else would the rabbit care to ask whether he was alive, if it intended to hurt him.

"What-" was all Dingle managed to get out. It was difficult to make the noises loud enough to even hear himself, never mind hope that the big beast could hear him, over all the repeated *booms* of explosions, and *thuds* of the upright-walking monsters' back paws landing. Besides, he didn't even begin to know what to ask or say.

Alive, the thing roared again.

"Yes," Dingle responded as loudly as he could. He figured maybe with ears as freakishly massive as this thing's, that perhaps it could hear him after all.

We finish job, your job...you finish, we finish...more to do...it droned, again vibrating Dingle's bones.

"What?" He had no idea what this thing meant to say.

YOU HAVE MORE JOB, it boomed. *Take King back* stumbled slowly and deeply from its giant, rotten mouth.

The paw closed around him again.

Dingle once again found himself regaining consciousness. He heard the thuds of one of the beast's legs, sounding as it were to be carrying it in some direction away from where Dingle himself was. He opened his eyes to find himself staring up at a thick canopy of leafs. Again. *DAMN IT*, Dingle shouted, more frustrated now with the idea of being back in the woods again than with the larger theme of what ever the hell was going on in the world, around him, in the woods, or wherever else some unexplained actions were happening. He instantly regretted opening his mouth, again fearing that strange girl, the horrible limb-eater which he'd escaped just hours- or days, if the case may have been- before. Dingle, who at this point had absolutely no interest in trying to keep track of such measures of his reality as day and night, time, up and down, real and what could only be imaginary- saw that there was more pink and orange clouds and smoke above him. He laughed a short breath to himself, amused by the entire impossibility of every single thing around him. He got to his feet, and wondered whether he should bother to run. He wondered what the huge rabbit had meant by anything it had said, and wondered why he was here, why he hadn't been killed, whether he would again if he were seen by the rabbits again, or seen by the girl again, where he should go...too many thoughts to process. Dingle got an answer in the form of a firm crack against his left cheek. The ghostly, timidly brutal girl stood before him.

"You hit me. That's for hitting me," she said in her strange voice. Dingle felt his feet and knees tingle, that fear-and-adrenaline mix that one gets when contemplating fight-or-flight. "This is for you." With one broad swing of her open palm, the impact of a baseball bat crossed his face, knocking him to the ground. He tasted blood instantly. Before he could move, she dropped to her knees beside him, put a palm over her face. Her fingertips spread like the exposed roots of a tree, covering his head in all directions, trapping his face between her palm and the ground- though Dingle could see none of this, as his eyes were once again forced closed. The girl bent over him, slowly and ceremoniously, and pulled the rabbit-skin cloak aside to expose his stomach, sunken slightly below the level of his bony, outlined ribs. She bent her neck, and Dingle felt her mouth on his stomach, covering his navel. Stars filled his vision even through closed eyes, and as though some heavy cloth had been lifted from Dingle's brain, a flood of knowledge broke the damn and played in front of him. Unlike every other time Dingle's feeble brain had overwhelmed his consciousness, he understood all of it. Tracked every thought, saw every small picture as they fell beside each other to form a cohesive, finished puzzle. Dingle understood.

It was all for me. It is all mine.

Dingle watched everything as though looking at a picture book. He saw himself, tiny, newborn, lying on a patch of leafs just the same as the ones in the woods he had found himself in. He watched Greta pick him up. He understood he was never really their child. Mother Rabbit, his real mother, had left him there. He was a deformity, his human appearance the result of gross genetic mutations, the same as had brought Mother to grow so large. He was the lone fertilized egg created by mother after her exposure- some sort of bizarre, fatherless conception. He understood the fate of everything. He knew his "parents" had been killed by the greater cosmos, which waxed and waned with the deep breaths he drew in and exhaled. He knew the futility of his father's struggle, and of that of all those in the countryside, as well as in the kingdoms with whom they battled. He saw that his parents had to perish to reunite

him with his real mother, to prepare him for his journey. A lesser mind would have laughed to see the blatant foreshadowing his entire life had been. He watched himself wander, and find water. He knew that at whatever point he'd chosen to throw those rocks, was when he'd find water, no matter where he had been. He saw Al on his massive boat, his diminutive boat, on the miniscule ocean. It was all so small. He saw the woods, which were his woods. The Tree Girl bit his arm, and he watched his larger power loosen from the confines of his physical body, allowing the passage of his consciousness to what he now knew to be his final home, the Shadow Realm, and then back up again to the surface. He watched himself run from the Tree Girl, saw her talking, saw how she was the counter-weight of herself, the Faerie Queen. They were two ends of the same umbilical cord, sharing thoughts without direct knowledge of it, but having some idea of the notion, of each other. 'I won't harm you, Dingle,' he watched the Faerie Queen say. He saw the Faerie's bunny helpers turn to trees when the Shadow Realm turned to woods. The giant, deformed nuclear rabbits destroyed on Dingles whim, his anger and frustration turned giant explosions from paws pounding hard enough to crush atoms themselves against each other, pock-marking every last inch of the map, destroying the land in magnificent displays of scorned power. Watched the souls of how many men, sucked into purgatory to await their judgment. Saw them, his loyal subjects, 'take King back' to the woods, *his* woods, from *his* wastelands. The Tree Girl end of the two-headed entity sucked his soul out of his body, and Dingle saw *his own* two-headed being become freed from itself. He saw his earth-bound anchor swallowed up by the girl, and saw all of his being collect itself below, in the Shadow Realm.

Dingle opened his eyes. His vision, like an alligator, shown the scorched face of the rotted world above him, to the halves of his eyes that broke the surface of the water. He focused his sight down below the water, and saw his kingdom before him. The tiny, sparkling bits of light that represented every infinitesimal bit of flora and fauna that had once breathed life into a seed or an egg on the dead planet above, illuminated the Shadow Realm like a million pin-hole stars. Eight huge, mutant rabbits, dwarfed by four rows of 42 gigantic, terrible nuclear rabbits, all bowed in reverence ground his feet, the feet of their King. To his side kneeled the now-united Tree Girl Faerie Queen, no longer split by the planes of these two worlds, collected into one being, whose head bowed in worship. Dingle's arm, dreadful and powerful, grasped the armrest of his throne. He had taken back his world above, and it was *his* world. All that was left above were the rotting corpses of countless women and men- legions of whose souls would inevitably be transferred to the dominion of the great King of the Shadow Realm- and the smoldering, charred rubble of those incarnations of plant and animal, the lives of which had been Dingle's all along. That which *was*, that existed up above the physical, earthen realm, may not have been his to command. But the rest- the dirt and rocks and hills, burned sky and blackened earth, and more importantly, the Shadow Realm below- were, as they always had been and always would be, his.