

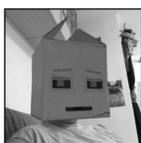
## Under the Fig Tree

By Drew T. Noll



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Deep in the burrow the brothers and sisters were snuggling together for warmth against the damp musty air. A storm had just passed and every crevice and crack in the burrow dripped and dribbled down into dark pools that would eventually congeal into glassy mud-puddles upon the floor. The smell of wet fur and newborns floated about within the well hidden home, buried deep and tangled amongst the roots of an ancient fig tree. Ancestors of the brothers and sisters had left marks upon the exposed roots, carving



patterns across each gnarled intersection using their teeth. They had left a written record of their lives and of the lives of the ancients for all generations to see. The oldest memory, a carving gnarled and filled with muck from history, told of the birth of the clan, which sat in the exact center of the burrow upon the old fig tree's oldest tap-root that sank down into the earth. The story told was of the first brother, who was actually a father, that ... in his haste to become tall enough to reach into the farthest corners of chaos, fell into his animal form and was, sadly, trapped with all who came after. His was a story of mythology, emanating birth and desire back into our histories, our subconscious collective, and thus birthing a knowing empathy from us all to this day. His name was Burnsting, and his story, carved deep into the roots of our home, our tree, soil-filled like ancient graffiti, told of how our particular clan of field mice had sown, and come to be.

Burnsting was a very normal looking field mouse. He had brownish matted fur and an extra small and twitchy nose. His brothers and sisters often laughed at him when he would have one of his moments of vision, telling everyone that he was communing with others that lived above, and ... with the others that lived beyond. This social pressure only caused Burnsting to delve deeper into the source of his visional-myopia, the soul of living that he felt within himself. So, Burnsting would often take solace from all the small creatures living around and about; such as the time he day-dreamed for days about why the little line marching bugs would break their formation when interrupted. They would always overcome the obstacle in



their path and continue on to their unknown destination, as if the obstacle had never actually been there in the first place. Burnsting was a wonderfully simple creature, according to most of his siblings, who really enjoyed being in his company. He, obviously, had an overly simplified view of their world, and he was very trusting and quite a happy little mouse ... which is why it is so much harder to understand what, in the end, happened.

The burrow was also home to many varied and interesting other creatures. There were long legged occupants with many eyes. There were many legged squiggling creatures, and there were also the hard-shell rollers that would curl up inside themselves when disturbed. These were mostly harmless when confronted; however, there were some creatures living in the burrow that were not so harmless. These were creatures that, when confronted, wouldn't just curl up and hide, or quickly squirm away into a corner of darkness. These creatures would raise an evil death-striker from the protruded positions behind their body-sheaths, and if an innocent was close enough they would strike ... to cause a slow, twitching, and painful experience for all those that beheld it. This had actually happened, or so it had been said by some. It had never, however, been witnessed by any of the relatives that were still in the presence of the old fig tree. And to Burnsting, it was just make-believe, which is why, on that day, when the roots of the old fig were washed free of the warm and familiar walls of soil that created such a loving and womb-like home for the fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters, Burnsting wandered into the burrow's depths ... and



into the forbidden tunnels of the dark side underneath the ancient fig tree. Burnsting had embarked upon an adventure of epic proportions, and had no idea how far the story would eventually travel, maybe even to the far reaches of the unbelievable.

The ancient fig tree was a magnificent bloom that stood proudly inside a lush and beautiful garden. The garden was filled with undergrowth, glowing bushes, and with trees that used their arms to stretch out towards the heavens. Filled with many other creatures, bouncing hippos, cartwheeling giraffes, and torpedoing porcupines seen zooming hither and thither, the garden was home. There was even told tales of upright walkers that could pick with hands the fruit from any tree that grew in the garden. It was storied that the walker would walk up to a tree and then fly straight up into the air, sometimes somersaulting as a fruit was plucked, only to land squarely onto the ground and sloppily bite into each intimate explosion, as if the garden actually belonged to the upright walkers in the first place. All of the creatures in the garden knew the real creator of the garden; and, they knew that the so-called upright walkers were only posers, really just fakes, talking and walking heads on the take. But, unbelievably, the garden seemed to prize these walkers above all others. It had been brought up in council on numerous occasions, but always the garden's creator would smile and intervene, saying that the medicine only tastes poorly in the moment, but that healing would be revealed in the world unseen.

All the residents of the fig tree, however, understood that the upright walkers, just—really seemed to be broken. They couldn't see the details of



how, but they also trusted the garden's creator. These were the myriad stories that Burnsting pondered as he traversed the passages deeper and deeper underneath the ancient fig tree, on his way into the burrow's depths, into the darkness of the forbidden tunnels. He scampered along the walls of the passages he found, in order to avoid the river running down the center of each, pondering the depths of history on his way to the future beneath.

The rainy season in the garden was always cold and wet, and the current flood was the worst flood that had yet been seen. The dark side of the tree was a place that never saw light from the warm globe above. Some of the dark creatures that made their home there came to the light side for warmth, but were never molested by others when they did so. Venturing into the dark side was always forbidden for the brothers, but on that particular day the burrow was a mess. Many of the tunnels were gone and the remaining passages were slopping-full of water. There wasn't a dry place to be found on the light side. Burnsting had taken it upon himself to help his family, looking for food, looking for warmth, looking for light ... when he chose to wander into the darkness, where he found a peculiar and short lived sort of friendship.

His new found friend's name was Sinkcare, and he was a small, yellow scorpion. When Burnsting leapt through the mangled remains of the old fig's root system and entered into the dark-side cavern under the home-tree, he had intended to return immediately. But, he realized at once that the entire tree had been deprived of its precious soil on both the light and



the dark sides of its roots. As he began to turn around, recognizing a thread of wonder that connected him to the light above, he, regrettably, noticed a glimmer across the pool of rising water deep in the bottom of the dark cavern under exposed roots. There was a creature trapped against the far wall, he could see, and understood immediately that it would surely perish in the floodwaters if something wasn't done to save it. Without thinking, Burnsting jumped to its rescue, not considering for a moment his own peril. The water was still rising and the current was powerful and erratic as water spilled into the black pool from beneath the exposed tree roots.

Burnsting was barely halfway across the pool, his fur glinting from the occasional bouncing moonbeam, when he realized that the creature was one of those that he had been warned of. Burnsting almost turned in panic back to the tunnel that lead to his family, to the light above, but decided to at least speak with the trapped creature before he abandoned it to its watery fate. Without thinking, Burnsting felt that it was a sure thing that, once he was close enough, it would be entirely possible to speak to the scorpion before he committed to help, so ... he tried.

He swam as hard as he could and stopped at a safe distance from the frightened scorpion. Its death striker was raised in a wet salute to the soggy air, menacing in its soft swing ... to-and-fro, kissing the taste of anything to use, to stab. The scorpion twirled once sensing its new adversary, its death striker slashing out and violently parting the air between it and the semi-submerged mouse.



Burnsting, again, had a momentary urge to turn and flee across the dark pool and back to the light above, but instead began to speak to the frightened scorpion. Burnsting had always had the desire to make peace and to question things that were, in his experience, only baseless fears. The stories that had been told were most likely exaggerated fabrications of fears that had been passed down from the ancestors, confusing everyone. These fears had created a deep rift between the creatures of the tree, and confusion amongst all the creatures of the garden. They were irrational and contrived. *Fear was a menace on its own and should always be questioned;* at least that's what Burnsting thought as he finished speaking and made his decision. He began swimming closer, with gurgling sounds bubbling out as he tried to breathe, swimming ever closer to the dark shore that Sinkcare the scorpion sat upon.

Their minds were both racing, Burnsting and Sinkcare, as each became closer to the other on the opposite shore. Sinkcare, timid and brave, advanced with hope towards the edge of the water and the wet mouse approaching, and Burnsting, burying his better judgment with each separate stroke through the dark pool, bravely swam on towards the waiting scorpion on the bank of the flooded cavern, under the fig tree...

Just then ... a BOOM so loud that it shook the tree's foundation erupted, crumbling the remaining dirt hovering above their heads into a wet muddy mass at the bottom of each separate pool filling the home tree's exposed root system. The ancient fig tree tilted to one side, springing forth pheromone soaked earth into spiraling patterns of mist decaying rapidly



into the wet air. Burnsting and Sinkcare were so close together that they could see each other's eyes, which had become brand new. The entire world had changed in a flash of sound and light reverberating across the darkness of the exposed cavern under the fig tree, and across every being in the garden.

They knew, then, what had happened; as all creatures in the garden did. The hippos began to fall from the sky. The giraffes tumbled to a crumpled stop. The porcupines closed their quills and scooted into the underbrush, hiding behind bushes that had once upon a time glowed. Something unthinkable had occurred, and each creature knew 'exactly' what it was. With frightened eyes ... looking up and out to where the warm globe once sat in the sky before the storm tuned the world upside down, the mouse and the scorpion watched an upright walker and his mate reach down in frantic abandon to pluck leaves from the mother fig tree that had sprawled onto the garden's floor. They hastily fastened the leaves into aprons around their loins in semi-panic, all the while hiding from everyone (even themselves) behind a thorn-bush. Obviously, they had eaten from the tree in the center of the garden, the tree that seeped darkness and light singing forth from within its origins. The rain and lightning increased, scaring the upright walkers from behind the bush, and they began to scamper about aimlessly in the garden ... and, it was now known that they would be ejected from the garden's shrubbery soon thereafter. The upright walkers had changed everything, forever, and the entire world, the universe, had been born once again over — the beginning.

