

The Between—Stories

The Between

“What’s the strangest thing I ever saw in the Between? Well, that’s a tough one. I’ve been exploring the Between for a long time now, and I’m not talking about the safe places like the Goblin Market or the Mirror Roads and Shadow Paths,” the man said, leaning back in his chair, feet resting on the fieldstone hearth.

He nodded at the back of the room when someone muttered.

“I know, people disappear on the roads and paths, but only the dumb ones who don’t stay on the trail,” he shook his head, salt and pepper strands flicking across his shoulders. “Anyway. The strangest thing in the Between . . . mind, I haven’t seen much of that place, even after more years than I want to count.”

His fingers danced absently along a staff, once white but now greyed and smooth with age and use. It had been polished by decades of oil and sweat such that it gleamed in the lights of the fire and the globes set in the ceiling. The man, the mage, stared up at the plastered ceiling, seeming to forget the dozen young students who sat around him.

He glanced out the window, over the sun setting behind the high-rises that formed the skyline. A plane drifted lazily by, leaving a trail of vapor behind.

Finally, he nodded, just as the youngest in his audience, a teenager, shifted to leave.

“Years ago, maybe ten, twelve. That’s when I saw it. I was on loan to the Shan Tzu Institute, in Hong Kong, at the time. They’d been . . . well, it doesn’t matter why. The important thing is that they’d called for aid from other institutes around the world to confirm and explore part of the Between they’d discovered. So, I went and met up with half a dozen others, all

masters of magic and veterans of the Between, probably four centuries of experience on that plane between all of us.”

.....

We were gathered in the Institute’s largest training room. A couple of the locals explained the process they’d used and described the realm that believed they had discovered.

Of course, getting to the same place in the Between, even if you start in the exact same spot on Earth, is a problem and not guaranteed. But, the local experts had some success by tweaking the usual spells. Really not my area, too theoretical.

Anyway, they described the place to us . . .

. . . I should probably explain that, huh?

There was me, obviously. Oifa McLean from Glasgow, she had a few decades exploring back then. Fuaad Osman from Cairo, he had the theory background to check the locals. Emiko, she never gave a family name I think, from Sapporo, she’s got a couple decades on me, easily the most experienced of the group. And Carl Trinh out of Adelaide, young kid, but hell of a reputation.

So, where was I?

Right.

They described the place as a sort of idyllic wilderness. Moderate climate, meadows, streams, and woods, that sort of thing.

I figured it could’ve been some remote part of the Werwood or maybe Shangri-La. There’s parts of the valley that haven’t been fully explored yet, they say.

But, Paul, our liaison Paul Zhou, swore they'd checked for signs of settlement and magic, ruling out Shangri-La. And no one's reported an open space of meadow as large as he claimed in the Werwood.

Long story short, kids, the locals eventually convinced Osman that they'd covered everything and their plans worked. Or Osman was sure they wouldn't get us blown up, lost, or strewn across the realms with their changes to the normal spells.

They got us all into a protective circle and, well, you all know how crossing works without a natural gate. You've all done it at least once. It's enough to say their tweaks were minor, you'll probably learn 'em in another year, when the teaching masters think you're ready.

So, everything worked like the Hong Kong guys said.

The wood paneled training room with its polished tile floor vanished. Instead, we stood in a meadow, quiet except for the birdsong, breeze, and the trickling sound of running water.

We'd never worked together before, but the team was veteran of scores of confirmation trips.

Osman and McLean swung down to set up for our return without a word. I spread out with the other two to be sure there weren't any hostile residents, critters, or plants around. All normal procedure and practices.

We had a mostly flat meadow with knee high grasses, with some woods off in the distance all around. I guess it was maybe two, three hundred yards across. Trinh found the water on his sweep, too big to be a stream, too small to really be a river. We decided to call it a river anyway. It wound through the meadow, about a third of the way from the trees.

I know, kids, everything was normal. Patience, we'll get to the strangeness soon, just gotta set the scene.

We didn't do much exploring that day, just secured the meadow. We set up a camp near the exit Osman and McLean made, since we didn't know where the natural gates were. Around the fire, after a camp dinner, as the sun set and the shadows lengthened, the stories flowed, along with a little drink. We caught up on old friends and companions, found shared acquaintances, compared notes on different Between regions and guides, that sort of thing that you kids don't want to hear right now. Stick around explorers long enough and you'll know the kinda thing.

No matter how old we get, explorers're terrible gossips, and love spinning more outrageous tales of their adventures.

By unspoken agreement, we let Emiko tell the most. She had to be pushing 200 then, we all sorta knew that trip would be her last. Heard she stayed in the Between, on some island in the Aspi Sea, for a few years before old age caught up with her.

But, I'm getting off track.

Anyway, stories told, everyone turned in, took turns with night watch, uneventful night. Didn't meet any local fauna or civilizations during the night. I could bore you with a few hours in my head, looking into the dark beyond our fire, but I won't. You don't need to know what I was thinking, we're not that close.

Quick breakfast was made, eaten, and cleared up. Osman volunteered to watch camp, gave him time to refine the return spell. He was always better at the transportation side of things anyway, from what I hear.

So, Emiko led off with me, McLean, and Trinh.

We crossed a low rise in the meadow to find the river. Emiko stopped at the crest, to look at the sky. Probably looking at birds and the weather. I went to the water, to search for spoor. Figured it would be a good watering place for local critters, so long as the others stayed

far enough back. Didn't have to worry, though. McLean and Trinh went off the direction we were calling west, following the river toward the trees.

They got into the woods while I was still looking for tracks near Emiko, I guess; they were gone when I looked up. Emiko didn't look worried, so I guessed she'd seen them.

While I visually scanned for tracks, I trailed my staff in the river and muttered a few glyph names. I sent a few of the usual seeker spells, looking for life, water composition, that sort of thing. Every region of the Between is slightly different, so we could compare the results to the regions we knew, see if it was new.

When I had my results, I went to follow McLean and Trinh.

They'd gone a few miles along the riverbank, well into the woods. I figured they were constructing a basic map, something for a future deep explore team to use. We'd talked that over during breakfast.

When I caught up with them, they were on a sand island at a fork in the river. It was narrow, maybe a couple yards wide and twice that long, but it looked like they were setting up for a trail lunch. Not a bad site, really. The river was barely knee deep and lazy at that point.

I was almost in reach of the sand bar when it happened.

Down the south fork, a tree moved.

It had a silvery bark streaked with brown and gold-green leaves, almost like alder.

Hadn't seen anything like it before.

But, it began to walk down the south fork.

Then another joined it.

And another, and another, until there were twelve, sixteen of them.

Now, I've been doing this a long time, seen a lot of the known Between. I know nymphs. I've met dryads and leimenides, meliae and oreads. I've seen tree nymphs galore.

These weren't nymphs at all.

The gathering took maybe a minute or two, really.

Then one turned suddenly. Its maw opened impossibly wide, showing massive square teeth, as it let out a roar the likes of which I've never heard. Think of a lion combined with an elephant with a troupe of howler monkeys, funneled through a hollow log. If you can do that, you might get a faint idea of the sound.

Wasn't really frightening, as such. More a deep bass felt in the chest, and awe inspiring in its raw power as it thrummed through the trees.

As the reverberations died down, half the tree creatures turned and loaded the others on their backs. I didn't see any rhyme or reason, but they looked like they'd practiced it for years. In seconds, half the group, herd, was mounted and I realized they were running right toward us.

I called out to McLean and Trinh, probably meant to yell, "Duck!" or something. I think it came out more like, "Ahhh!", as I threw myself to the side.

The tree creatures thundered past us, like a stampede of elephants, but twice as loud and completely synchronized. They turned up the north fork, the ground shaking with their passage. I swear the river rose out of its banks as they went by.

It was all over in seconds.

Trinh, McLean, and me got up, quick as we could.

Soaked and mud covered as we were, we recovered our staves in a heartbeat. One look passed between us before we were off, following the north fork.

I don't know about the others, but I wanted to see where they were going. They could've been intelligent, hard to tell. Possibly they were civilized.

Anyway, we never found out.

After about a mile, they were out of sight.

In three, we lost any spoor they might've left.

They just vanished, probably blended into the scenery

.....

“And that, kids, is the strangest thing I've ever seen in the Between. No, I never saw them again. Yes, we confirmed it was a new region. No, the Hong Kong explorers never told me about seeing any tree creatures afterwards. So far as I know, that's the only sighting of them ever.”

II

What is the Between?

It is migraine inducing, if you think about it too much.

But, I'm sure you'd like a more serious, less flippant, answer.

It appears to be a realm, a place of pure magic that exists as a buffer between Earth and the Shadow and Spirit Realms. It consists of scores, hundreds of regions that both occupy the same space simultaneously and are next to each other. The metaphysics and geography are maddening. It's best not to think about that part.

The Between is home to many societies and creatures. It is host to the places of Earth's legends: Irem of the Pillars, Shangri-La, the Goblin Market, the Mirror Roads, Sunken Atlantis. It is home to humanity's greatest fears and archetypes, like the Shadow Paths and Werwood. It is, in some ways, both platonic and Jungian, the place of forms and archetypes made manifest.

—Hunter Bradley, explorer, Shan Tzu Institute, Hong Kong, The Institute

III