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Opening extract from

The Well between the Worlds

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I

The darkgardens were deepest green shading into black, fed with the finest blood. Darkness was the loveliest thing; coloured darkness, with little red flecks swimming in patterns, glowing, always the same in this world that always changed.

The woman's mind cruised the darkgardens, speaking with the giant Helpers. Her body lay in the tower high above the land; but deep in the darkgardens, she rested and made her plans. The time was drawing near when the worlds would become one, and beautiful darkness, would cover the earth.

Brightness was weakness. Darkness was power.

She rose from the darkgardens to look at her kingdom.

Up raced her mind, through the dark water, up the rock shaft until rock became builded stone, up, up the chimney of the Well, through the secret tunnels into her chamber in the highest tower of the Mount. The body drew a breath. The fluids of life gurgled in their tubes. The woman rose, and went to her window, and opened her night-black eyes, and turned them down upon the bright world of Lyonesse.

It was dawn.

Below the Mount the land sank into a valley still untouched by the day. The lake lay at its bottom, with the walled city rising at its head. Night fog hung in the walls and buildings like beast guts on a slaughter rail. The city was

crowded with buildings – hovels and cottages by the lakeside, and further back heavier blocks and ranges, blackened and lofty.

A chimney spat chemical smoke. Through the air came the thump of a machine.

The black eyes crawled beyond the valley, over long leagues of hills to the oak forest of the Shipwright's Garden, where the River Fal ran through green meadows to the ship-basins and wharves of the Southgate. They scorched over a barer land with standing stones and shadow-filled vales, far, far, to a thin black line that dammed the grey downs. The line was the Wall. Beyond the Wall the sea shifted, stretching away for ever, bright, weak, hostile.

The eyes closed. A bronze shutter wheezed to. Inside the tower, night fell again. The woman lay down on the black stone bed. The chest stilled. The mind plunged back through the twisted tunnels into the deep. The time of darkness would be very soon.

But far away under the Wall, in a town brilliant with morning light, something was beginning that would turn her wicked dreams to nightmares.

Listen.

One

The town is Westgate. And bursting out of the school into the warm afternoon sun, here comes Idris Limpet, eleven years old at this time, swinging a rope of books round his head, mad with joy at being released. They had been doing the Treaty in school. They were always doing the Treaty, and they were sick of it, Spignold and Erys and Mawga and Cayo and everyone. "Books on the roof!" cried Spignold.

Up on the thatch of the net shed the children slung their books, the ropes hanging down so they could pull them off later. That was the idea, anyway. But Spignold obviously threw his too hard, so the rope was out of reach, which he would eventually blame someone else for. And Mawga threw hers too softly, so they slid down again. Idris took the time to dust off Mawga's books the glittering powder of mica sand and fish scales that floored the narrow streets of Westgate, and tossed them neatly on to the roof. Mawga sniffed at him and ran on.

Idris paid no attention because he was leaping in the sun, saying good afternoon to his pet gull, Kek. He knew that Master Omnium, the teacher, would be watching in his dusty black robe. And with Master Omnium that day was a man with a thick red tunic bearing the silver device of an eel devouring its tail, and a dark face, and a nose ring of heavy gold. Master Omnium and the man with the nose ring were staring at Idris. The nose-ring man had a tablet in his hands, on which he was scribing in squid ink. Master Omnium said something. Nose Ring raised surprised eyebrows and wrote again. Idris's joy quailed before an uneasy sense that they were talking about him.

"Oi!" cried Spignold.

And off they went, running, hands out for balance, up the cracked and sea-pink-tufted steps to the top of the Wall. And there was Westgate spread out behind and below them. There was the crumbling Wall, the high harbour, the Seagate with its chain to keep out wicked murdering sea-roving corsairs and Ægypt slavers, its turrets, once proud and fierce, now glassless and blind, battlegrounds for gulls and owls at the hinges of the day. And ahead, the surprise of the sea, huge, blue and shifting, battering the Wall with the creamy edges of its waves.

The sea was higher than the land. Much, much higher, the height of nine tall men standing on one

another's heads. It had always been thus, though if you listened to old people it was rising steadily. Spignold laughed at this; life was good, the old people were idiots. Idris was not so sure. He was a respectful boy, and he did listen, even if he did not in the end agree.

"To the Fort!" cried Spignold.

To the fort they ran, along the wall, up the steps, into a spiral stone staircase that smelt of rotten seaweed and up a tower at whose top was a chamber like a huge stone lantern, a round room with an all-round view and a ceiling partly fallen in on a copper boss in the centre of its floor – a tower built by a merchant to watch for his ships, perhaps in the distant days of Westgate's prosperity.

On the inland side, the empty window-sockets gave a view over the Westgate and the hills beyond. Once, the town had been a great port city. But the sea currents had blocked the channels with sand, and now it lay half-ruined. The castle still stood on its hill, a grim drum of black stone over which flew the red-fist flag of the Town Captain. But the grand houses on the hill below it, once home to purple-cloaked merchants, now stood empty and rotten, their roofs sway-backed, their windows blinded by white crowds of gulls. The people, Idris's parents among them, now lived in the narrow, cosy streets that ran back from the harbour.

Behind the castle the road ran up a long valley,

shrinking with distance, and vanished among the rounded summits of the Downs. Apparently if you followed the road for a week you would come to the Wellvale, far to the east, where the Captains lived in splendour. Once the road had been full of traffic. Now there were weeds in the paving and few travelled it. ...

Idris frowned. For as long as he could remember, the road had been part of what he saw every day. But now he found himself thinking: what would it be like to travel along it? He felt uneasy. The thought was an odd one, mixed up in some way with the nose-ring man who had been talking to Master Omnium. And a stupid one. People did not leave Westgate.

"Idris," said Mawga's rather whiney voice, "*Idris*!"

Idris turned. It looked like they were playing Kingdom. It was a good game.

Spignold sat on a throne of stone lumps in the middle. Mawga sat at his side with a gull's feather in her hair. Spignold's pug nose was high, Mawga's eyes cross and narrow. They were the king and queen, as usual. Kek the gull sat on the parapet, watching.

"Repel corsairs!" cried Spignold.

Everyone ran around, half-mad with excitement, boiling imaginary oil and firing imaginary crossbows at invading slave ships. Spignold was shockingly wounded but cured by Mawga's keen nursing. Erys and everyone else were less badly wounded, except for little Cayo,

who took a poisoned arrow in the shoulder and expired horribly, twice, because nobody had been watching the first time.

"Corsairs repelled!' cried Spignold.

"Oh," said Mawga, put out, because she liked being queen almost as much as pudgy, mean Spignold liked being king. "What now, then?"

"The Plank."

"What's the Plank?"

"New game," said Spignold.

Idris felt a return of his uneasiness. There was an odd look in Spignold"s eye, half excited, half frightened. Idris noticed things like that. Nobody else seemed to. "Meaning?" said Idris.

Spignold walked over to a pile of rubble in the corner and hauled out a long board of reddish wood. "We stick one end out of the window," he said. "Someone sits on the inside end. Someone sits on the outside end. We rock. Like a seesaw. But better."

Idris looked out of the window. A long way below, a blue tongue of sea licked up the wall. Whoever was on the outside end of the seesaw would be in some danger. Plenty of danger, actually. You could bet it would not be Spignold.

"I'll go on the outside," said Cayo, always ready to make up for his lack of size with wild boldness.

BONG, said the great bell in the town. The air

shivered. The children stopped looking at Cayo. They stood with their feet together, heads bowed. It was the Hour of Thanks. "The Well," said Spignold, taking over as usual.

"The Well," said the other children. Idris watched an ant walking over his bare brown toe. He tried to feel solemn, but the ant was more interesting. The Hour of Thanks was just a muddle of words about towers and Wells and a lot of other things that did not make much sense. He had said them ever since he could remember. They had long ago stopped meaning anything.

"Thanks to the Well and the waters therein," said Spignold. His father was the Town Captain, hander-down of justice in the name of the Mount. "For they bring forth monsters that we may live free. And thanks to our Captains, who show the monsters the glory of day who else would know only night."

"Thanks to the Well," said the children. The noises of the day had stopped. The words rose in a murmur from all over the town.

Idris's mind moved from the ant to Spignold. He did not actually like Spignold very much. He did not like the way he automatically took control, or the way he deliberately set people against people, or the way he thought that just because his father was the Captain he was some sort of Captain too.

BONG, said the great bell again. Far below on the

street, voices started to gossip again, tin pots to bang on stoves and cart wheels to grind the sandy cobbles.

"Right!" cried Spignold. "Cayo! The plank!"

Idris looked across at Cayo. The small boy had not been concentrating either. He had been using the quiet time to feel sorry he had ever volunteered. Now his eyes were too wide and he was munching his lips from the inside, and his knees were shuddering faintly beneath his school kilt.

"Or maybe," said Spignold, with a mean, narrow look, "you are chicken."

All eyes were already on Cayo. All eyebrows were up, and all lips pursed. It made Idris uncomfortable. Cayo turned pink. He opened his mouth to say that he was certainly not chicken, no way. But even as he did it his lips wobbled. At this point, Idris was certain about two things. One, if Cayo went bouncing around on planks he would fall in the sea and drown, for nobody in Lyonesse was permitted to learn to swim, on pain of death. Any swimmer might be a Cross, child of human and monster, and it was the law that no Cross could be allowed to live. And two, it was unfair, and everyone knew it was, but nobody would say anything, for fear of Spignold. Except Idris, who disliked bullying and could hardly ever stop himself saying what was in his mind.

"Kek," said Kek the gull, standing on the parapet.

"Cayo," said Idris. "Would you mind if I had the first go?"

He saw Cayo's face turn bright red with relief, then assume a tough though tiny scowl. "Werl," said Cayo. "I dunno. If you really really want to—"

"Hey!" said Spignold, looking sulky.

"Plank out, then," said Idris, before anyone could object. "Grab the other end, Mawga."

Normally, Mawga would no more have got her hands dirty than walk across the sea to the Outer Banks. But Idris could feel a thing in him that he had felt before; a sort of energy that spread to other people and made them do what he wanted them to do. Spignold had it too, in a way. Spignold managed it by being big and mean. Idris was not big and not mean. But sometimes he seemed to be able to tell exactly what other people were thinking.

"Look," he said. "If you do this seesaw thing it's not going to work." He took possession of the plank, shoved its end out of the glassless window and jammed its inside end under a great lump of stone, once part of the roof. Kek flapped into the air and hung on the breeze, watching. The plank now stuck out over the sea like a long, narrow diving board. "Watch!" said Idris.

He stepped on to the board and walked out of the window. Now he was outside the tower, the sun shone hot on his head. Behind him was the kind of silence

that comes from your classmates when their mouths are hanging open. A hundred feet below, the sea boomed hollow on the Wall of Lyonesse. He felt happy, because he could tell that Cayo was thinking that if it had been him he would have got the knee wobbles and drowned. Idris was light, and free, and he had done good.

He flexed his knees. The plank flexed too. This was good, but frightening. He flexed again, with more power this time, and gave a little jump. The plank sprang under his feet. The fear faded. He did the next jump, a little bigger. Up he went into the warm breeze, arms straight out from his shoulders, weightless for a brilliant second, no fear at all now. Then down again, feeling the comfortable bend of the plank, the pressure in his knees as it shot him upwards, the lightness in his stomach at the top of his leap. *Woo*, said the children in the Fort. "You and me, Kek," he said to Kek. Then he was down again, bounce, up again. As he went down through the joyful air he thought he heard a clatter of wood, and someone shout. He cast his eyes downward, looking for the plank under his feet.

The plank was not there.

There was a confused shouting from the fort. He fell past it straight as an arrow, hands by his side. He glimpsed the white lines of surf on the Outer Banks, a drift of gulls, blue sky, sun high. He was astonished. His

mouth was open. He knew he should have been frightened, but he was not. Instead he thought: I will never see Mum again, nor Dad, nor the Boys, nor the Precious Stones. And he felt very, very sad.

For about a second. Then the water bashed the soles of his feet a huge, stinging blow, and he was in cold, salty water, drowning.

Drowning was not at all what he had expected. He had assumed that when you fell into water you would sink, and the air in your chest would keep you going for a bit, but only until you got that panicky feeling you get when you hold your breath for too long in a breath-holding contest, after which you would take a gasp, which would not be of air but of water so you would sort of strangle. Then the horrible bit would start, with your life passing before your eyes and a very nasty struggle, the kind a caught fish makes in the basket.

There was the smash of the water. There was the panicky feeling. And a question: *Why don't we learn to swim, like the seals or the fish?*

And an answer: *Because what swims is beast, monster or Cross.*

Then there was the struggle. Silent screams, blood thundering in ears, panic, real, horrible. But no past-life stuff. Just a stopping of panic. And a shrinking of the mind. And a feeling of floating in deep green darkness,

with little red flecks around him, glowing, perfectly beautiful. . .

Something was battering at his chest. He gave a huge cough, very painful, because what he was coughing out was not air but water. Strong light jabbed his eyes. He rolled away from the battering and curled into a ball.

"Stone me," said a voice. "It lives."

Idris opened his eyes. The light was still like knives, so he shut them. "Oi," said the voice. "Come back."

Idris recognized the voice. It belonged to Daft Alb, a fisherman when he felt like it, the rest of the time the laziest man in Westgate.

"Silly bleeder," said Alb. "Lucky for you I was passing by. In fact," said Alb, a note of puzzlement entering his voice, "lucky for you I was a-dreaming of a man with a nose ring, me telling him tide's wrong for fishing, him saying give it a whirl anyway, and me doing it. Then having come out of the Seagate I goes not straight ahead for the Banks but turns hard a-starboard along the Wall like I never do, just in time to see you come a-thundering out of the sky like a gannet. Down you did go," said Alb, "and I made sure you was mullet bait. But then up you did come, so I grabbed you. I wonder," said Alb, "if I am in for a reward."

Idris was not in a position to answer this question, as he was being sick over the side.

"Better out than in," said Alb. "Whyn't you give me a hand to row this thing home?"

Down the Wall they rowed, between the towers of the Seagate and into the great stone basin built for the trading ships that had made the Westgate's fortune before the sand banks had blocked the channels. The quays were empty, except for a handful of fishing boats, a couple of gigs and the *Pride of Westgate*, a big corsair-chaser tied up to the Guardian Dock. Idris began to feel better. His head cleared. He had the energy to wonder about Alb's dream. And as he wondered, something odd struck him.

He frowned. He said, "A man with a nose ring appeared to you?"

Alb puffed, rowing. "Yep."

"What did he look like?"

"Told you. Nose ring."

Nose rings were uncommon in the Westgate. A nose ring had been discussing him with Master Omnium. And now a nose ring had saved him.

Odd.

But plenty of things were odd, thought Idris, always practical. The main thing was that he had not drowned. The boat was sliding alongside the quay steps, green weed waving below.

A small figure was waiting on the cracked marble paving, looking miserable. Idris felt sorry for him.

"Cayo," said Idris, taking the mooring line up the steps. "You all right?"

Cayo did not lift his eyes from his feet.

"What happened?"

Cayo avoided Idris's eye. "It was Spignold."

"It was Spignold what?"

"He was angry that everyone was looking at you. He sort of bumped into the plank. He can't have meant to. Then he said he would save everyone a lot of trouble."

"Trouble?" Idris felt a chill. "What trouble?"

"You know what bighead rubbish he talks. I expect he's very sorry."

"Yes." A niggle of worry started in Idris. Sudden death was common in Lyonesse, and Westgate was a hard place. Games were dangerous and played for keeps. It was good practise (some people said, particularly the Captains) for later life. But what was this about saving trouble?

Idris started along the quay, sore in throat and chest. Beside him, Cayo had cheered up, and was singing:

"Out of the sky he plummeted
but much to Spignold's pain
though blue sea closed over his head
he plummeted up again."

Idris laughed, which hurt his chest. As he turned his head to tell Cayo the song was rubbish, he noticed two men were watching them: Master Omnium in his long black gown, and the man with the nose ring. As Idris caught Nose Ring's eye, Nose Ring inclined his head in a small, knowing bow. Idris remembered Alb's dream. The hair prickled on his neck.

Suddenly he wanted home and warmth. He trotted down the fifty steps from the top of the quay to Wet Street. Thank the Well, it was nearly time for zupper.

The Limpets' house was not very big, but what it lacked in size it made up for in tidiness. "I'm back," called Idris to his mum, who was battering tin pots at the clay stove.

"Dinner in a whale's dive," she said. "Wash."

He dumped his books in the bedroom he shared with the Boys, his large blond brothers, Ed and Cadmon. He washed in water from the rain tank, rinsed the salt out of his school kilt and put on clean breeches. He was trying not to worry about the man with the nose ring. The ring suggested he came from the Wellvale. He wondered what happened to him when he had a cold. Snot everywhere, probably—

Someone was calling him. His mother. Harpoon Limpet was tall and blonde, like her elder sons. The corners of her eyes and her arms bore the luck tattoos

of the guild of Fishers. Idris ran downstairs and started to bang the shell bowls round the driftwood table, his worries vanishing with the prospect of zupper. "Here's your dad," said Harpoon.

Ector Limpet was a small, upright man, with the sea-blue eyes of those whose duty it was to patrol the Wall of Lyonesse. He was wearing the dark-blue uniform of a Gateguard Wallwatcher, and a slight frown. The frown deepened when he saw Idris, but the eyes looked more worried than annoyed. Idris felt his stomach sink, and ran over in his mind the things he ought not to have done that day. "Where are they all?" said Ector.

"The Boys are out till the five bell," said Harpoon. "And the Stones are at their friend Wilda's." The Stones were the Precious Stones, Emerald and Ruby, Idris's little blonde sisters, who seemed to spend months on end in their friends' houses, except when their friends were at the Limpets".

"Good," said Ector. "Siddown, then."

Idris sat down. Harpoon sloshed a pinkish stew into three shell bowls. It smelt deliciously of crab, and of garlics from the garden path at the back of the house. Ector ate for a while, silent except for slurping noises. Then he looked at Idris with those sea-blue eyes. "And you," he said. "How's it been?"

"Same old stuff," said Idris, uneasy under his father's

gaze. He did not want to tell his parents about the fall into the sea, and the odd stares of Nose Ring and Omnium. What was done was done, and it would only worry them.

But Ector was not a Gateguard for nothing. "There was something, though," he said. "In that fort of yours."

"Let him eat," said Harpoon, to Idris's relief. "Took some catching, those crabs did, then some boiling, then some picking—"

"And very nice too," said Ector, forging on. "But I bumped into Cayo's mum on the way home, and she told me a tale about Cayo." The eyes drilled into Idris's. "She said you'd done him a good turn. Very happy about that, she was."

"Ah," said Idris, not wanting to explain. "Yes."

"And?"

"Very good, this, Ma," said Idris, eating.

"All right," said Ector. "That there dratted Spignold was throwing his weight around, and you thought you'd stop him. Is that it?"

Idris put down his spoon. This might get complicated; Captains like Spignold's dad were far above Gateguards like Ector. Perhaps his dad would get into trouble. But there was no getting out of it now. He held his father's eye. "What would you have done?" he said.

Ector ducked his head. "Very good," he said.

"Just the same." He was a kind man, simple and straightforward and strong-minded.

Idris felt a moment's relief. Then he saw his father catch Harpoon's eye and look away too quickly, as if there was something they were hiding from him, and he felt that chill again. "What is it?" he said.

"Eat," said Harpoon. "It'll get cold."

Idris laid down his spoon. He hated it when they hid things from him. "Please."

If the Boys or the Stones had done this, Ector would have ignored them. But Idris had a knack of making people feel the same way he felt.

"Tell him," said Harpoon.

Ector shrugged, and prodded a bit of crab in his bowl. "That Spignold said something," he said. "Nonsense, of course—"

"Tell me," said Idris.

"You fell in the sea," said Ector. "You went under for a good bit. Then Alb fished you out, and Alb still doesn't properly know why he was in the right place to do it at that moment, except for some dream he said he had, silly fool. They reckon . . . that is, Spignold is saying . . . you swam, and you made Alb rescue you by talking in his mind." He fell silent. The terrible words hung in the air between them. Monsters could swim. Monsters talked in people's minds.

Idris's heart had started hammering. "So according

to Spignold," he said, "I am a Cross or some such horror?"

"We know what's true," said Ector, his face grim but embarrassed too. "But you know Captain Ironhorse. He'll listen."

Idris watched his father, and saw the awful danger in his face. In his mind the words of the Treaty marched with a steady, doleful tread. *Men may catch Monsters for the benefit they give to Men. And Men will keep open the Wells from which the Monsters rise, that the Monsters may enjoy the bright plunge of day into their world. The one is a fair exchange for the other.*

But Man is Man, and Monster Monster. The Treaty permits no abomination. The chief abomination is a Cross. For there are Monsters that present themselves in mortal guise, yea, even in the guise of young men and women, that mortal women and men may be deceived by them and bring forth Crosses, a Cross being a creature gotten by men of monsters, yea, even if it be of the thirtieth generation. And the way ye shall know your Cross is if your Cross can swim in the waters on the face of the earth; so any man that swims shall be called Cross, and must surely perish.

The Treaty was something you learned at school. It was words, that was all. Monsters lived in Wells and were useful in some way that nobody told you. But if monsters got loose they were bad and frightening and wanted to breed with humans and conquer Lyonesse.

But somewhere far away. Not in sunny little half-ruined Westgate. It was ridiculous.

"I *sank*," he said, slowly, so they would understand and tell everyone what was true. "I went on that plank because Spignold was bullying Cayo and I wanted to help. And Spignold moved the plank and I missed it and fell and sank, and Alb pulled me out just before I went down for the third time—"

"I know," said Harpoon, smoothing his hair with a hand hardened by nets and lines. "Spignold's father is a fat fool, and the boy's as bad. You mustn't worry. We'll sort it out. Now. I can hear your throat is all scratchy. Time you were in bed."

"Things will be all right," said Ector. "I'll see to it."

Idris noticed that his father's eyes met his mother's as if things were not all right, were indeed a long way from being all right. But he was very, very tired, too tired to be unhappy about things he did not understand. He dragged himself upstairs and into his bed. Dimly he heard the clatter of Ed and Cadmon coming in, and the squeak and titter of the Stones. Then he went to sleep.