

THE DREAM FOREST

Once upon a time a boy named Ezra lived in a little red hut deep in the forest with his father. His mother had died many years before and life was hard for him. He could not go to school and meet other children, and instead had to help his father with his work every day. He would get up at sunrise and walk into the forest armed with a blunt axe to collect kindling for the fire. By the time his father returned from work, he would have filled three baskets with chopped wood, and they would have enough to keep the fire burning and the hut warm all night. But, by the morning it would all be gone and it would be time to gather more all over again. Sometimes he felt so desperately sad that he would cry, but only deep in the forest where he was sure that his father could not hear. His father worked all the daylight hours to put food on the table for him, so Ezra figured that this meant he owed him a happy smile whenever he saw him.

Sometimes Ezra would wish for some company. He once had a dog called Snow, but one day Snow ran away and never came back, so his father said it was for the best that they didn't have another pet. Ezra liked to dream when he was out in the forest. He dreamed that the animals would talk to him, that they had personalities and problems that only he could solve. But when he returned home the dream was over, and he settled down to sleep, tired and sad once more. Dreams would always be just that, and there was no more to it.

One night, Ezra and his father sat in front of the fire together, both exhausted from the efforts of the day. The embers of the fire were smouldering away to nothing.

'Time to go to bed Ezra. While it's still warm.'

'Father, this hardship we suffer. Will it always be so?'

His father walked him to his bed, before tucking him in and sitting beside him. He stroked his head as good fathers tend to.

'Hardship is only what we imagine it to be. I work all of the daylight hours, but I come home to my boy and tell stories until bedtime. I don't call that hardship.'

He kissed Ezra's forehead and stood in the doorway of his tiny bedroom.

'Dreams and stories are what make life come alive. Never stop dreaming and you'll never be bored or lonely or tired. You have all the power in the world up here to do whatever you wish.'

With that, father wished him goodnight and departed. Ezra's head was full of his father's advice as he drifted off to sleep.

Ezra was woken by a bright light streaming through every crack and crevice in the hut. It was so bright he thought that the sun itself had descended upon them. He got up and tried to peer through the windows, but the light was too brilliant. His curiosity pricked at him like a hot pin, and finally, with a glance back at his dozing father, he threw the door open and stepped outside.

The forest he had stepped into was quite unlike anything he had seen before. This forest floor was a kaleidoscope of coloured silks; the trees were bodies with arms swaying and grasping; the sky was an ocean, shimmering and rippling. Ezra was curious as to how the fragments on the forest floor were rising into the sea-sky, like water dripping from the roof of a cave in reverse. Hundreds of shades and textures fought for Ezra's attention in this wonderful new world.

Each footstep sounded like the crunch of pebbles, despite the ground being as soft as his mother's lap. The technicolour forest was teeming with creatures, animals like the ones that Ezra knew of, and yet completely unfamiliar to him.

Before he could begin to take any of these strange sights in, he was distracted by a glowing ball of light, floating gently around him as if his head was a star it was orbiting; finally, settling in front of his face. It appeared to be some kind of firefly. The glowing ring around the little insect evolved from soft yellow to orange to red to purple to blue to green to white. After hanging in front of his face, the fly made to buzz away. Ezra gave chase, for he was sure he should follow.

He followed the little firefly through strange trees waving him through, and strange plants, burping and laughing. He followed through sloping valleys, where candyfloss clouds stuck to his legs as he passed. He followed through strange caves that rustled like newspaper and streams that boiled cold. He followed through a haze of reds, yellows, oranges, greens, blues, violets, and indigos with a wind of confetti blowing up from

under his feet. But finally, he lost the little firefly as it buzzed ahead too fast.

Ezra looked around. He had reached some kind of clearing. The strange trees gave way to a circle of open territory where the ground twinkled with a thousand stars and moons. The sea in the sky sparkled bright, but there was no sign of the little firefly anywhere. Ezra felt somewhat disheartened, until he was nearly blown away by a sound so loud he had to cover his ears. It sounded something like an army of thousands pounding their boots hard on the ground, and the floor beneath Ezra began to shake as he cowered at what was about to emerge from the trees. Suddenly, as the noise was at its most unbearably loud, a friendly little voice chirped:

'Hello young man. What brings you here?'

Ezra pulled his hands away from his ears and opened his eyes, but could not see who or what was talking to him.

'Hello? Who is that?'

'I'm down here my boy.'

Down at his feet sat the most wonderful little frog, whose flesh was blue felt and eyes were red buttons.

'Who might you be?' said the charming frog.

Ezra realised that this was quite out of the ordinary, but if a felt frog could communicate with him, he thought it most rude not to return the compliment.

'My name is Ezra. What was that horrid noise just now? I thought the world was coming to an end!'

'I'm not sure I follow you my lad. So you're Ezra, eh? Well my name is Estes. How did you find your way here?'

'I, umm, I was following this beautiful firefly that glowed all the colours of the rainbow. I followed him for oh so long, but now I regret to say I've lost sight of the little fellow.'

'Firefly you say? Well now that is odd.' said Estes, his little felt tongue darting in and out of his mouth.

'Yes, I feel like he was leading me to where I need to go. Can you help? Have you seen him around?'

'Well now, I'm sure I haven't seen anything quite like that. Unless...'

'Unless what?' said Ezra, concerned. 'Please tell me.'

'Well, unless the feared one has made a meal of him.'

Ezra stepped back in horror. The little frog made no motion.

'What do you mean: *the feared one*?'

'The dreaded Tyger who stalks this land. He makes meals of creatures great and small. He rules with a tyrannical cruelty. No animal is safe during nightlight hours.'

'Nightlight hours? I don't understand.'

'For us, night is when the light comes to reveal our world. This is when he stalks the land. No creature is safe from his wrath. My family and friends have all fallen prey to his unceasing hunger. He shows no mercy.'

'Oh my.' said a startled Ezra. 'There are others?'

'Oh yes my boy. I risk my life being here with you now while the others are in hiding. I'd say that your friend was most likely eaten by the Tyger.'

Ezra felt a great sadness he had not felt since Snow had ran away, but also anger that this Tyger could eat his friendly guide and force the animals of this wondrous new world to live in perpetual fear.

'That's not fair. Why is he allowed to behave like this?'

'Because he is a Tyger dear lad, the biggest, meanest predator around. He treats the whole world as his own.'

'Well it's wrong! He can't be allowed to eat my friend and just get away with it!' yelled Ezra, defiantly.

'You speak nobly from the heart child, but it will always be this way. I can not foresee how you could stop such a beast.'

'I can stop it! I will stop it! I promise the creatures of the forest will never again have to hide in fear.'

Ezra was adamant he would rid the forest of the great beast.

'Good luck, we are all behind you brave Ezra! I must away, for the hour of his usual coming draws near.' said Estes, hopping away into the trees in the distance. That terrible thunderous sound rang around the clearing again until the frog had disappeared from sight.

Ezra did not waste any time, and ran as fast as he could in the direction he had not been. He yelled at the top of his voice:

'Tyger! Cowardly Tyger! Show yourself!'

Ezra felt as if he had been running for the entire night when he finally collapsed from exhaustion in the Thicket of Splendour - a tangle of tall, helter-skelter trees that shone green and gold. The forest floor appeared to be rising up and dancing as he tried to catch his breath, swaying and taking shape in front of his eyes, looking like a giant candle flame. A crescent moon appeared in the face of the flame, followed by two gleaming red rubies. These shapes formed the face of a big cat, and

soon Ezra saw its whole form standing before him. He could not find the power to speak, and he now understood the phrase: "cat's got your tongue". The moon waxed as the mighty beast spoke.

'Who might you be and how have you found your way here? This is a *dangerous* place for a young boy to stray.'

Ezra's heart beat very fast. He stared into the rubies with all of his courage.

'I am Ezra. You ate my friend the firefly, and I've come to tell you to leave the forest.'

The Tyger seemed to flinch before coughing again and again. Ezra wondered if it was choking, until he realised the beast was actually laughing. Finally the Tyger's jewels glinted and it spoke again, with a strange hiss not unlike a snake.

'I am afraid you are mistaken child, I have no business with a firefly. Why would you wish me away?'

Ezra was angered by the denial of his crime.

'You are nothing but a terrible bully! You stalk and eat the forest creatures! Why should you get away with these atrocities?'

Far from angering the creature, Ezra's fury seemed to make the mysterious predator more docile than ever.

'Calm yourself. Look at me, I am a Tyger. I prey on forest creatures because I need food. The domination you speak of is meaningless to me.' it purred.

'Liar!' cried Ezra. 'You are a bully and a liar! You ate my friend and now I will chase you away from the forest for good!'

The Tyger moved closer to Ezra, until the crescent moon was almost touching his cheek. Ezra could feel the predator's hot breath, and it gave him the feeling of immense power turned down, like the lowest setting of a chainsaw. It sent a shiver down his spine, and for the first time Ezra was truly afraid of what the Tyger may do to him. He wished for all the world that he had his axe with him. As the moon swelled, Ezra feared for his life, as it spoke again.

'Think of me what you will. I make no apologies for who I am. I kill to eat, no more. Now be gone boy, lest I make a meal of you.'

And with that, the fearsome Tyger turned its flaming tail and shimmered away into the trees. Ezra did not know what to do, so he just turned around and headed in the direction of the hut, disconsolate at his failure. Although he could not tell where he was going, instinct guided Ezra back to his little red hut, and he felt so drained from the night's exertions that sleep consumed him as soon as he laid his head down.

'Wake up Ezra. Sunrise. Time to rise and shine.'

Ezra opened his eyes to his father gently rocking him back and forth. The morning and the world he knew had returned. The grass was green; the sky was blue and filled with white clouds. He gripped his axe like a sword and strode out alongside his father, ready to forget the bizarre events of last night.

Despite singing as he worked, Ezra found it hard not to visualise the wondrous plants and animals from his dream, if it even was a dream. There were so many unanswered questions fighting for attention inside his head, not least what would become of those poor creatures with that awful Tyger stalking the forest. But what could he do? He began to feel quite glum at the thought of returning to the forest and having to face Estes, to whom he had given his word that he would drive the terrible Tyger away.

The night came, and Ezra set off into the wonderful forest in search of the little felt frog.

'Estes!' he called out. 'Estes, where are you?'

Ezra had been walking for some time when the silence was finally broken by a faint guttural howl sounding something like spoons on a wooden washboard. As he passed the familiar clearing it became distinct, seeming to come from under Ezra's feet, while all the coloured textures of the forest floor meant he had nearly tripped over the wishing well before he saw it. He wasn't sure if it really did grant wishes, but it certainly looked magical, twinkling with gold dust. The sound grew louder, and Ezra was certain that whatever was making the sound was trapped down the well.

'Hello!' shouted Ezra.

'Hello...' came the distant response. Ezra could tell that the voice belonged to Estes.

'How did you get down there?'

'Oh it's terrible; I was thrown down here my boy. Do you think you could help?'

'How could I help?' replied Ezra.

'Do you see the basket hanging over the well, next to the big pulley?'

'Yes. Should I throw it down?'

'If you turn the pulley the rope will uncoil and the bucket will lower down to me.'

In no time, Estes had been raised to ground level in the bucket.

'Thank you child. Thank you greatly.'

'What happened Estes? Who threw you down the well?'

'Oh my. I'm afraid it was the accursed Tyger who cast me down there in a fit of rage.'

Ezra was most distressed at hearing this. Immediately he felt compelled to act.

'I can't believe it. That Tyger needs to be taught a lesson.'

'You are most certainly right Ezra. This is why I was so glad that you vowed to drive the beast away. You are such a brave young man.'

Ezra's father had always taught him to face his fears. He had also taught him to keep his promises.

Ezra woke up with Estes' words ringing in his head. He had slept late, and set off in search of his father, for he was sure he would know what to do.

Ezra's father was sitting on a barrel outside the plastics factory tucking into a lovely corned beef sandwich when Ezra bounded up to him. He jumped up and launched into his father's chest, prompting one of those hugs where his legs were lifted off the ground and he was spun around.

'What are you doing here Ezra?'

'Father, I needed to find you. I have a friend who is in great danger.'

'A friend? Which friend is this?'

Ezra knew that his father wouldn't believe his story, so he decided to make it sound more realistic.

'It is a very small friend father, and they are threatened by a bigger, nastier creature.'

'A creature you say? Oh I see. Well, my boy, a good method of stopping an out-of-control animal is to set a trap.'

'How would I make a trap father?'

Ezra's father spent the rest of his lunch break demonstrating to Ezra how he would go about constructing a net snare out of climbing plants, stringing it tense and tight along the ground, and securing it halfway up a tree, so that when a creature stepped into the net, their weight would trip the elastic part of the netting and scoop them up into the net, leaving them hanging helpless from the tree.

Ezra wandered back to the forest and set about making his own net, just the way his father had shown him. He made many mistakes, but Ezra would not give up, for he remembered why he was doing this and how important it was to the little frog and all of the oppressed forest creatures that he chased away the awful Tyger.

The air had started to turn cold, as the dusk approached. Ezra had worked harder than he had ever worked in order to construct his trap and fill a basket with firewood. He returned to the hut and showed his father what he had made. Ezra's father was very impressed with his work, and promised that the next day they could wake extra early and test his trap together. Ezra could hardly sleep with excitement that night. He thought he could sense that brilliant light surround the hut again, but this time he ignored the calling. He would be ready to face the night forest again tomorrow.

The morning came uncomfortably soon, but Ezra soon brushed off his tiredness as the memory of his father's promise crept into his mind like a shower's spray warming up. They headed out together and Ezra set the trap just how his father had shown him: tying it securely to the tree, making sure the wires were tense, laying the net along the ground and covering it in leaves and twigs to hide it from animals.

'Now what, father?' said Ezra, eagerly.

'Now we leave. A guarded trap will not entice animals. We need to go away and return tonight.'

Ezra looked crestfallen. His father put a strong arm around him.

'Hey, don't be glum. It will give you something to look forward to. We will check it as soon as I return tonight.'

'Okay father, I can't wait!' smiled Ezra.

'Good. Now we had better mark this tree so that we remember where the trap is.'

Ezra's father took a red handkerchief from his top pocket and tied it around a small branch of the tree they had set the trap on.

'There. Now we won't step into it ourselves later!' he laughed.

The two headed back to the hut to retrieve their tools for work. As they got inside, Ezra's father went to the kitchen cupboard. Ezra was quite curious when he retrieved a small carrot.

'Now, one more thing I forgot to mention Ezra, the most important element in any successful trap: bait.'

'Bait, father? What do you mean?'

They walked back to the red hankie tree together. Ezra's father placed the carrot carefully into the centre of the trap.

'Bait is something you use to attract the animal to the trap. A rabbit might stumble here by accident, but you could be waiting weeks. If the little fella can smell food, then you'll most likely catch one by tonight. Do you understand?'

'I think so father. They come to take the food and the food is inside the trap?'

'Exactly. Now there's work to be done. The trap will be fine without us.'

Ezra's father led them back to the hut, ready for another working day.

The day passed too slowly for Ezra's liking. He would watch the sun crossing the sky, and at times he could swear it had snuck back towards the dawn break. While he was chopping wood he thought about what he would do when he had caught the Tyger. He thought about leaving the Tyger in the net. He thought about bargaining, saying he would only let the beast go if he left the forest. He thought about if his trap had even worked. He thought so much that his head was hurting. Finally the working day was over, and Ezra ran home so fast his top half seemed to be in a race to beat his legs.

When he returned home his father was waiting, holding the net triumphantly. Inside sat a plump rabbit. Ezra was overjoyed. His trap had worked perfectly, and it had caught dinner for tonight too.

After the trap and preparation for cooking, the rabbit tasted even better when father and son finally sat down to their meal. Ezra was so full he could hardly move after he had finished.

'So will the trap work just as well again father?' said Ezra.

'Oh if you still have animals to trap, then yes of course, just untangle the knot at the top and you can set it just like I showed you.'

'Thank you father, I think it will work perfectly.'

'But remember what I told you about baiting, or you will not catch anything,' Ezra's father warned; 'and always have a back-up plan.'

'What do you mean?' asked Ezra.

'Well, if you catch something but the net breaks you need to have another plan. Otherwise the animal will escape.'

'But what could you do father?'

'Well you could fashion a spear out of a long branch or some similar weapon, or you could construct another trap. You can never have enough

plans, because you will learn that things don't always turn out the way you hope.'

Ezra set off into the night forest filled with hope and purpose. He had carved a tree branch into a point as a spear just like his father had suggested, and now he merely had to find the Thicket of Splendour to be sure the Tyger was nearby. As if his mind had created it, the Thicket of Splendour emerged in the distance, and Ezra held the spear high in case the Tyger should already be there.

Not a sound came from the Thicket, except the strange rubbery creaking of the helter-skelter trees as Ezra set the trap. He completed the trap much faster than the first time, and ran to hide as soon as he was sure it was ready.

Suddenly he remembered what he was missing: the bait. If he wanted to trap the Tyger, first he had to think like the Tyger. What is a Tyger tempted by? Meat. Ezra knew that the only 'meat' likely to be in the open at this time of night was himself, so it was up to him to tempt the Tyger into the trap. Figuring the best way to attract the beast's attention was noise, Ezra began to sing at the top of his voice as he returned to the trap.

'Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright, in the forest of the night, what immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful...'

'Symmetry?' finished the Tyger.

Ezra fell forward with surprise, rolling head over heels, narrowly missing his own trap. He jumped up as soon as he had figured out which end was which, and now the Tyger stood between him and the net. The rubies flashed and the crescent twitched.

'What brings you back to this world boy? This world is not fit for a child.'

Ezra reached for his spear, but he had dropped it when he fell. It now lay under the Tyger's body. The beast walked languidly around the perimeter of the netting trap, its black sickle claws seeming to pluck at the rope as if completely aware of its presence. Ezra began to panic.

'Something tells me you did not return to apologise.'
said the Tyger, menacingly.

Ezra summoned up all of his courage and stood tall.

'No. I returned to finish what I started.'

The most horrendous cackle rumbled from the Tyger.

'FINISH WHAT YOU STARTED!' he boomed. 'What exactly do you propose to finish, you foolish little man?'

The beast slunk around the net effortlessly towards Ezra. Ezra froze in terror as it stood mere feet from him. He could feel that hot breath again, threatening to melt him.

'Very well. You have tested my patience enough. I will give you to the count of three to make a getaway before I give chase, after which time I will tear you to pieces.'

Ezra heaved himself to his feet and ran even faster than he had run home earlier, for he was certain that the Tyger was serious in its intentions. He could hardly think from fear as he looked over his shoulder to see the Tyger appearing rapidly over the hill behind him. What had his father said? A back-up plan. Ezra scanned his surroundings in desperation, trying to notice anything that may be used as a weapon or a shield. A thousand colours, but nothing appeared to be sharp or heavy. The Tyger was catching up fast when suddenly a glint of gold drew Ezra's eyes like some great treasure erupting from the ground. Changing his course for the wondrous light, he recognised that it was the golden wishing well that he had rescued Estes from a day earlier. The dreaded Tyger was practically scalding his back with his acrid breath when Ezra leapt with all his might at the gleaming well, followed swiftly by the furious beast.

Holding his arms out in front of himself, Ezra's lower body plunged down the great hole before his hands caught a grip of the well's edge and saved him from falling. The Tyger slammed into his back, but Ezra clung by his fingertips as the beast's terrible claws sunk into his ankles in an attempt to save itself from the fall. The pain and weight of the Tyger was unbearable, and Ezra's fingers began to slip. He could imagine his father's words: 'Hold on through the hardest trials and the good times will taste all the sweeter.' Right now Ezra would just settle for a release, but he blocked out everything that was happening and just urged his fingers to support him. Suddenly the beast fell from one ankle, and Ezra looked down at his stricken foe. The rubies of his eyes were much dulled as the beast pleaded.

'Please child, save me. I will spare your life I swear.'

'What honour do you have? You would have killed me like you killed my friend the firefly. I am going to let you fall!'

'Listen to me. I have never so much as chased a firefly, who told you this? Please, if I fall I will never get out.'

'You are a coward and a liar! Estes told me everything, and now you will suffer the same fate you intended for him!'

The beast slipped further and now only clung to Ezra's shoe.

'ESTES! What has he told you?'

Before Ezra could answer, the beast finally lost his grip and plunged down into the depths of the well, letting out an incredible roar that almost shook Ezra's fingertips off of the well's edge, although he clung on to pull himself safely up and out of the golden wishing well.

After lying in the vibrant colours of the forest floor for a few moments, Ezra chanced to look down the well. The Tyger's flame burned so brightly at the bottom that it lit up the entire well and turned the golden glow a bright shade of copper. Rather than tempt fate, Ezra ran away, back towards the Thicket of Splendour, but before he had made any distance the deafening crashing and stamping noise rang around the forest, forcing Ezra to drop to the ground and cover his ears. When he was sure it was over, he turned around to see Estes sitting at his feet wearing a broad smile.

'Well done my friend! You have done a great thing this night. I and the forest creatures thank you from the bottom of our hearts.'

Ezra finally began to take in what he had achieved. The great beast; the tyrant that plagued the otherwise beautiful night forest had been vanquished. By him. He allowed himself a smile as he stood up, but now the pain from the cuts in his ankles forced him back down.

'Steady my boy. You are wounded.'

Suddenly a deafening roar set the ground shaking, and Estes hopped onto Ezra's back.

'Quick my lad, take us over to the well. We must see what has become of the beast.'

Ezra limped over to the well with Estes on his shoulder. The red-orange glow was so strong it was as if the whole well had caught fire. Estes peered into the depths and whispered into Ezra's ear:

'This is not over. We must brick the well up.'

'Are you sure? It seems...'

'Of course my boy, how else should we be rid of him forever? He will one day escape and we will all feel his wrath when that day comes. This is the only way to end it once and for all.'

'If you're sure this is the only way...'

'Yes. Let us gather the bricks.'

Estes had gathered the materials remarkably fast, and Ezra, remembering his father laying bricks on building their first house, found he had a natural gift for it. As he prepared the last stone he swore the growling far below had turned to a desperate whimper. Putting the last stone in place, the powerful glow through the cracks faded to nothing. It was as if the flame had been extinguished.

'Thank you Ezra, you have saved all of us from our lives of perpetual fear. Now you must return home to tend to your injuries.'

'Okay. I am glad things are how they should be, with all animals respecting each other and living in peace. Farewell little frog.' With this, Ezra limped away and back towards his hut, leaving Estes looking like the happiest creature in this or any other world.

Ezra could not stop smiling at breakfast, and his father was somewhat curious at his giddy disposition.

'Why, you look as if you caught a rainbow in that trap of yours my son!' he laughed.

'No father, but I had quite an adventure last night, I saved the night forest from a great beast, and now I believe they should live in great peace and happiness.' Ezra explained eagerly. Ezra's father almost spilt his porridge, but soon smiled and ran his hand through Ezra's hair, which made Ezra feel even better.

'You have some fantastic dreams my boy. Well done.' He thought better of explaining to his father that this was not a dream he spoke of.

It is a rare fact of life that labour is best undertaken when one has just accomplished a defining task. Ezra certainly found his day's work more enjoyable than ever before, and was not even tired come the sunset. The fire burned bright as he enjoyed supper, relaying his exploits to his father in great detail.

Ezra found that the one sour note of his glory was that it left him exploding with energy, even at bedtime. He laid his head on the pillow with excitement making it buzz, and knew he would not be able to sleep. Despite resolving not to return, Ezra wanted more than anything to see the results of his triumph, and when that familiar light filled the hut, his feet did not touch the ground before he had fled the hut.

The night forest appeared different to before. The sea-sky's waves were crashing and fizzing, while the forest floor's colours were dim and stars were unseen. The darkness made it difficult to see where Ezra was walking, and the air was filled with growls and frightened whispers he could not quite make out. He felt as if something was approaching him from all sides, and it made him shiver.

'Who's there?' he called out, betraying his nerves.

Suddenly he could hear something more distinct. As it got louder, Ezra thought it sounded like popcorn popping on the stove. Out of the darkness he could make out movement in the trees, and he walked tentatively towards it.

'Is there anyone there?'

A sound like a fizzy drink can opening.

'Hello?' called Ezra.

He heard the sound again and moved to its source, where he could now make out a moving object on a tree branch. It would have been camouflaged exceptionally well had it been on a tree in the real world, rather than the rubbery technicolour tree of the night forest. The fizzy drink sound again.

'Is that you?' Ezra asked.

The creature appeared to rear up to face Ezra.

'You must be a stick insect. Hello. My name is Ezra.'

'I am certainly NOT a stick insect.' rasped the little creature.

Ezra squinted hard. It appeared a little like a wooden model of a winged cockroach.

'Nor am I a mantis, locust or *COCKROACH*.' he buzzed defiantly, as if he were able to read Ezra's thoughts. His voice sounded as if he were croaking from inside a biscuit tin.

'Beg your pardon, what shall I call you?' ventured Ezra.

'You may call me Casper. I am a cricket, and very proud of it.'

Ezra remembered reading about crickets at school before he had to drop out.

'Aren't crickets supposed to chirp?'

'We do not *CHIRP*, we sing the sweetest melodies in all the land.'

And with that, the little fellow began to rub his hind legs together, emitting the most entrancing music, like an orchestra playing a divine lullaby.

'Wow! That is beautiful. I am sorry I doubted you Casper.'

'We all make mistakes. You I recognise as a human. Humans do not live here, where have you come from?'

'I come from the world outside of the forest. I have been here before, but I don't believe we've met.' said Ezra.

'No I don't believe we have. I would not normally find myself in these surroundings, but desperate times call for desperate measures.' Ezra was taken aback at this comment, and noticed that fragments from the forest floor were rising around him and falling into the sea-sky, which he had to dodge from now and again.

'I don't understand. What desperate times?'

'My kind all live underground, in little burrows to shelter from the elements. We only come above ground if we fancy some of the fluffy stuff that grows on the side of the trees. But ever since the frog began his reign of terror we have been forced up here permanently, which makes us easy prey for him.' explained Casper.

'You mean Estes?'

'I know not the names of my enemies. I just know the horrible noise that precedes his coming. He filled in all of the burrows he came across to force us to the surface. Many of my friends fell to his greedy tongue.'

'Estes eats crickets?'

'Are you joking? He eats whatever he wants! Crickets, butterflies, ants, fireflies...'

Ezra's face fell in realisation.

'No creature in the forest is safe from his gluttony. Different species used to respect each other, but now it is every being for itself. Life is misery.' Casper uttered, with a whine.

'But he was my friend. He told me you were all happy now.'

'Ha! All I know is that something has changed. Long ago something similar happened.'

'What do you mean?' asked Ezra, desperate for reasons.

'Well a long time ago this frog rode around the forest on the back of a great Tyger. Together they hunted, and became great friends. The frog found that riding with the Tyger prevented his prey from hearing him approach, while the Tyger appreciated the company. With the Tyger's help, the frog found he could inspire fear amongst all of the forest creatures. Sadly he began to abuse this power.'

Ezra began to understand, as the cricket continued.

'He would eat relentlessly, fill in burrows, destroy nests and threaten all the animals. One great day, the creatures sent a messenger to the Tyger as the frog was busy ruining their homes. They told it about the frog's crimes, and the Tyger disowned the frog, telling him that the

forest should work in harmony. Finally, he proclaimed that every creature should respect every other, and he would enforce this understanding himself. The frog fled, and never dared to behave this way again. Until now.'

Ezra had to sit down. All he had wanted was to do something good, and life was now worse than ever for the forest creatures. Suddenly, a shimmering silver shape bounced out of the darkness and stopped at his feet. It was coiled like a giant spring, but Ezra could see by its head that it was some kind of serpent. It called out in a panic-stricken tone:

'Run for your lives! The dreaded one comes! You must flee now!'

'Leave now boy, before it's too late!' cried Casper, before scuttling high into the tree. The strange coiled snake bounced away rapidly before that deafening sound began to reverberate around the forest. The entire forest floor felt as if it were being lifted into the sea-sky, and Ezra followed his instinct to run without looking back.

Ezra felt awful the next morning. Without realising it, he had upset the balance of the wonderful night forest, and now a paradise of lustrous colours and textures had become a dark wasteland where animals feared to tread.

He knew what he had to do to make things right. The only thing he could do was to return and convince Estes to be fair. So, when the day had passed him by, Ezra finished his supper extra early and rushed to his bedroom. He waited all night, but the light never came.

Nor did it come the next night. Or the next.

Ezra was at a loss what to do, and so sought his father for advice.

'Father, what if you try to do something good for someone who says it will make things better for everyone, but it seems to make things worse? How can you make sure the next time you will do things right?'

His father stroked his grizzled jaw ponderously, and took a deep breath; looking more serious than he ever had before.

'Son, doing good is wonderful, but you must be very careful involving yourself in the affairs of others. Relying on the word of one person can be misleading, as they often have ulterior motives. You should

base your actions on what you've experienced to tell you what would truly be better for people.' his father explained.

'Ulterior motives?' said Ezra, curiously.

'It means reasons you may not be aware of, usually selfish. If I told you it would be fun to make my bed, my ulterior motive is that I do not want to make it myself. Do you understand?'

'I think so.'

Ezra went to bed having learnt a valuable lesson.

And the light never returned to the hut.

THE END.