

Skeelington



Max Saris – The World Stones



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Rabbit Stew

The air outside had begun getting colder by the day, the forest having transformed into a picturesque painting of vivid yellows and oranges. Mushrooms dotted the ground in every corner, under trees and beside rocks, adding to the landscape with their own vibrant colours. Leaves drifted gently through the air, the trees filtering the golden evening light. Today was a calm day, a contrast to the difficulties of last winter. *We will be ready this time*, Skellington thought as he reached down to pick up a big bolete. He grabbed the thick and sturdy stem, twisting it until the dirt gave way. He examined the mushroom for a bit, picking off a moist leaf before putting the bolete in his straw basket. He had already found around a dozen boletes, all various shades of brown and orange.

He walked the path he always did, a natural path formed by him and the **magna deer** through the decades. His bones creaked and groaned as he walked, having worn down over the last few centuries. What hadn't worn down one bit was the eerie blue glow in his eyes, still flickering like topaz torches. His old blade was still strapped to his side, hidden well under his dark, tattered robes. Along the path, Skellington found another half dozen mushrooms, the pile of browns and oranges audibly straining his makeshift basket.

Finally, he got to the clearing. At its center was a small lake, with a single, lonely lily pad floating on the surface. Skellington walked past, to a spot he placed a snare at just the other day. As he neared, something jumped up, rustling the leaves. Sure enough, a small rabbit had ensnared itself by the ankle. Its beady eyes locked onto Skellington, wide in fear. It was an expression he remembered all too well from when he was a warrior; the face of someone staring down their own death.

Skellington walked up to the rabbit, set aside his basket and gently grabbed its neck. It squirmed in his bony fingers, thrashing around in a desperate attempt to escape.

“I am sorry, little one,” Skellington said in a raspy, monotone voice.

He hesitated only a moment before twisting its neck. With a sickening crunch, the rabbit went limp. Skellington stared at the rabbit with a blank expression. Despite his nature, somewhere in the depths of his soul, he felt something heavy. *Ever since that day, four centuries ago...* Skellington thought as he freed the rabbit's ankle. He held the rabbit by the ears in one hand, picking up the basket in the other. He followed the path back westward, to the cabin he built over a century ago. He walked back in silence, bones clacking each time he stepped over a rock. As he neared the cabin, more a makeshift den than a house, a young voice pierced the peaceful evening.

“You're back, Mister Skellington!” a young girl shouted, bursting out of the cabin. “A bunny!” she squealed.

Greta was the eldest of the three orphans, still only six summers old. She was the liveliest of the bunch, always teasing the two brothers, **Noah** and **Nilo**. A warm rabbit pelt coat hung over her small shoulders, her worn-down red dress underneath. She smiled at Skellington, the gap in her front teeth visible—the first tooth she'd lost. It didn't take long before the two brothers burst out of the cabin as well, having heard Greta's squeal. Both had curly brown hair and faces dotted with freckles and dirt. Nilo, the younger of the two, had a mole under his lip.

“A bunny!” they said in unison, jumping up and down in glee.



It was true, they hadn't eaten much more than berries and mushrooms for the past few weeks, so a plump rabbit was a perfect surprise. Greta was especially delighted, as tomorrow was her seventh birthday. Skellington stared at the children, still not understanding why food was such a cause for celebration. *Why do animals... consume? Why... do I not?...* Skellington thought as he tilted his head in silence.

“I am back. Let us make supper,” Skellington said in his usual, raspy monotone voice.

Greta tried to take the rabbit from his hands, her face straining as she tried to pry open his fingers. Noah and Nilo were both already picking boletes from Skellington's basket.

“Let me have it! I want it!” Greta said adamantly, her green eyes pleading.

But Skellington didn't loosen his grip, and instead began walking towards the cabin, rabbit in hand.

“It must be... processed first,” he said as he opened the door.

The children followed him inside and watched as he placed the rabbit on the table, unfastened his sword, and set it to rest by the door before grabbing his rusty knife, a valuable tool he had found on the ground years ago. He began working on the rabbit, skinning it and gutting it with as much skill as one might expect from someone taught only through observation from a hundred feet away. While Greta watched with intense fascination, Noah and Nilo puckered their faces in disgust as he pulled the guts out with a squelch.

“EW!” they recoiled before running to hide behind the wooden stumps they used as chairs.

Noah and Nilo grabbed some wooden figurines that Skellington had carved for them: a deer, a bear, a man, and a woman. The figurines reminded them of their parents, but also of the fire and carnage of that night. A year had passed since their village was attacked, since their parents were killed. All this time, they had lived with Skellington, isolated from the rest of humanity. The winter was rough, food was scarce, and the temperatures were freezing. They didn't thrive, far from it. But somehow, they adapted and they survived. Little by little the children taught Skellington about their customs, about what it means to be human. The figurines? Skellington had to make them after Nilo cried for two days straight, disappointed he didn't get a birthday present.

Once the rabbit was cleaned, Skellington put the carcass in a rusty metal pot, filled it with water from an old milk pot, and added some herbs he had picked earlier. The pot was orange with rust, likely older than the kids combined. It was left behind by some hunters years ago, along a handful of other camping supplies. Who knew what had happened to them; perhaps they were killed by goblins, eaten by a drake, or maybe they simply got lost. Regardless, it was a miracle they did, as without a pot, without the axe and without the bedrolls, winter likely would've been the end for the orphans.

Skellington put more sticks into the stone fireplace he had made last winter, a makeshift construction of various rocks he cluelessly stacked on top of each other. Was it structurally sound? Probably not. Had it collapsed a few times? Absolutely. But it kept the orphans alive through the winter, and that's what really mattered. He grabbed the greyish-black stone he had found a decade ago, something he saw goblins use to make fire, striking it with his rusty knife to create sparks.

Greta looked at him in fascination, her gaze drifting across his skeletal frame as he struck the rock again and again. Skellington turned his head to look at Greta, pausing for a moment. This was a dance they had done dozens of times, and Greta knew exactly what she needed to do. She leaned down to blow onto the embers. She took a deep breath and blew like forge bellows. The embers glowed before sparking aflame. The flame spread quickly onto the nearby sticks, and soon enough they had themselves a fire. Greta



helped by stacking firewood on top of the flames, just as Skellington had taught her, just as he had seen hunters do it from afar. As always, Noah and Nilo were too preoccupied with their toys to tend to the fire. Greta cast them a prideful glare before sticking her tongue out. Noah was the only one who noticed, and rolled his eyes in response.

Once the fire was stable enough, Skellington took the rusty pot and balanced it on top of two large stones on each side of the fire. He and Greta worked together to add some blueberries and mushrooms to the stew, as well as some more herbs and even some salt. It didn't take long before it began boiling. The rugged, mouth-watering aroma of rabbit stew drifted through the air, slipping into every corner of the cabin. Of course, to Skellington, the only thing different was the slight steam and smoke wafting through the air.

Once the stew was ready, Skellington simply grabbed the burning hot pot from the fire, immune to any sensation of pain. He placed the pot on the ground at the very center of the cabin. He grabbed the three carved wooden bowls and spoons, placing them on the mossy ground around the pot. At first, the children had found it strange that his house had no floor, but now they had grown used to it. Skellington then grabbed two heavy wooden stumps, dragging them next to the warmth of the fireplace. He grabbed the pot again and poured equal portions for each of the children.

“Supper... is ready,” he stated with a rasp.

Near-famished, the children quickly ran to the stumps, sitting themselves down near the fire. The children started stuffing the stew into their mouths before Skellington even managed to sit himself down. They ate like hungry dogs, coughing in between bites, slurping up all the broth. It didn't take long before the first portions were eaten.

Skellington observed the children with keen interest, noticing how their hair had grown quite a bit since last year. Greta's blond hair was now long and tangled, and the brothers both had shoulder-length hair by now. *Fascinating*, Skellington thought, putting a hand to his own bony skull. Greta turned to Skellington, putting on her usual puppy eyes.

“Mister Skellington, it's my birthday tomorrow. Could I please have some more?” she asked while holding the empty bowl toward him.

He looked at her for a moment, studying her. *Why do humans... celebrate the passage of time?... He thought. He looked at the pot; there was plenty left for seconds. He poured some more stew for each of the children before sitting back down. Over the next hour or so, they ended up finishing the stew, each spoonful growing slower and slower as the heat returned to their stomachs. Nilo was already dozing off, swaying his head from side to side like a seesaw, going lower and lower each time. Noah looked at Greta before they both stared at Skellington.*

“Mister Skellington, can you tell us the story again?” Noah asked slowly.

“It's my birthday tomorrow! Tell the story again! I want it! I wanna hear the story again!” Greta piped up, grabbing **Sniffy**, her stuffed teddy bear, another of Skellington's finds from the forest.

She held Sniffy to her chest, its one missing eye meeting the hollow glow of Skellington's blue eyes. Skellington looked at the two of them, then at Nilo, who was already dozing off.

“Have I not... told you... already?” Skellington rasped before looking at Greta and Noah again.

“Wanna hear again!” Greta bounced, clutching Sniffy closer.



“Please?” Noah pleaded. “We want to hear it again!” he added while crawling into his bedroll.

Greta nudged Nilo as she tried to grab her bedroll from beside him, jolting him awake. His eyes were half-lidded, a bit of soup still on his chin.

“Huh?” Nilo let out, already half-asleep.

Skellington gave the children a silent nod before setting the empty pot, bowls and utensils back onto the pile of random objects, a stack of various things he had found over the centuries, things he had brought back to his cabin out of curiosity. The pile was mostly random knick-knacks dropped by explorers, woodsmen, or left behind by the odd hunter. Some things, like the piece of flint, a leather pouch, a bone needle, and even a pair of leather boots, were from goblins, pesky little creatures that had luckily learned to avoid him over the years. The children, now all in their bedrolls, turned to look up at Skellington. The fireplace cast dancing shadows along the wooden walls.

“Very well... I will tell you again... the story... all that I remember...” Skellington began.



Warrior of Etheria

It all began with a flash of purple. Bones grew from the purple light of pure **creation**, a skeleton taking shape in mere seconds. Inside the skull, a small **magilite** crystal formed, his core, his very heart. That core flared awake, the empty sockets flickering with a purple, sickly glow. There he was, **Skellington**, then but a nameless husk devoid of life, a mindless tool created for a single purpose: destruction. He wasn't alone, beside him were hundreds—no, it must've been nearly a thousand identical, skeletal forms. Each form was already standing at the ready, weapons at their sides, crude armor draping hollow bones. A thousand pairs of amethyst eyes flickered awake in dark caverns of **Etheria**, a dimension of chaos created by *him*.

The air was stifling, toxic to all but the hardiest of life, and suffocatingly hot. The purple, misty caverns seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions, an infinite cage of burning hot mist.

In front of his new army sat the creator himself, the **Allfather Demon**. He was regal, radiating the power of a true, immortal overlord. He had a skeletal frame too, but his bones... they were **black** **than darkness itself**. He sat on his throne with the presence of a dark god, an utterly monstrous aura swirling all around him. His amethyst eyes had the glow of pure hatred, like existence itself were his enemy. His chest pulsed purple with a brightness comparable to the very sun, an unimaginable weight within, like his chest held the world itself. Where his heart should've been, at the center of the glow, was a crystal the size of a fist. It pulsed with primordial energy, an object of sheer impossibility, of such magnitude that the world shook when he wielded it. Skellington knew deep down that his only purpose in life was to serve this being, his new king.

He and a thousand newly created **boneborn** just like him were created to form a new legion—a legion to take over the world of **Andaril**, tasked simply with eliminating everything that was alive. He trained and trained, combat drill after combat drill, learning to fight and follow basic commands, non-stop for a hundred years. His bones, had they not been strengthened by the magic of the creator, would have cracked and worn to dust long ago.

A century later, it was finally time to fulfill his purpose. His legion was ordered to invade Andaril, to search for and kill every living thing they could find. Hundreds of thousands of demons marched and coalesced within the caverns of Etheria, ready to slaughter life itself. The Allfather Demon stood tall, lifting his arms with a pulse of purple light. The air crackled and the mist steamed as large, purple portals formed ahead. It was as if the fabric of the world was forcibly torn, purple magic crackling like lightning. The **minotaurids**, beastly folk hellbent on bloodshed, screamed as they flailed their axes. The **arachnoids** clicked their multiple appendages, and the boneborn readied their weapons. Then, **he spoke...** It was the first and only time Skellington heard his creator speak. His voice was commanding, exuding the confident, silent authority of the supreme being.

“Demons of Etheria!... The time of reckoning is upon us!... The time has come to reclaim Andaril! Find the two missing World Stones! Destroy any who stand in your way! March!... Kill!... and Die!” His voice reverberated through the endless caverns, followed by the earth-shattering roar of a million demons cheering for the destruction of man.

Led by the nigh unkillable **Upper** and **Lower demons**, the legions marched forth. A million demons poured into the swirling, sizzling gates with thundering steps. Dozens of portals crackled with energy, leading from the caverns of Etheria to every corner of the world, every great city of man. There were legions upon legions of rattling boneborn, thousands of hulking minotaurids thirsty for blood. Thousands of crawling arachnoids clicked their mandibles together, the sound like heavy rain. There were thousands of skittering **ratlings** with poison-tipped knives and arrows, hundreds of thumping **chaos golems** made



out of pure obsidian, constructs made for the purpose of demolishing walls. Amongst the hordes were hundreds of one-eyed, horned **culans**, their arcing reverse-creation magic lighting up the cavern a sickly purple. There were even around a dozen **spectrals**: shadowlike demons of unimaginable speed and lethality, capable of phasing through the blades, shields, and armor of their enemies, and even through solid walls. Thousands upon thousands of cat-sized **fledgelings** flapped overhead in the poisonous, misty air, grinding their starved teeth together, sharp claws extending, eager to rip flesh apart. Slaughter was coming...

Never before had the world faced a threat quite like this, not in centuries, not even in millennia. The **midnight moths**, an omen largely forgotten by humanity at the time, had been swarming every land, coast, and city for weeks prior, their delicate black wings doing little to prepare the world for what was coming.

Skellington, though he had no name at the time, was a simple boneborn foot soldier, a skeletal warrior out of a million just like himself—the cannon fodder of Etheria’s army, equipped only with rudimentary armor and weapons, expendable trash. While stronger than the average human, not requiring food, sleep, or even breath, the boneborn were nothing compared to the other demon races. They possessed neither the strength of the minotaurids, the versatility of the arachnoids, the agility of the ratlings or spectrals, nor the magical prowess of the culans. Compared to the Lower and Upper demons? Even calling them ants was far too generous. Nevertheless, his legion was tasked with taking over the island continent of **Ocula**, then a peaceful land of agriculture and trade.

In the year **5 B.L.T. (Before Lumare Time)**, Skellington marched through the crackling portal, the gateway connecting the dimension of Etheria... to the world of man. His foot stepped through, planting itself into the brown, gravelly dirt. It wasn’t like the scorching, jagged rock of Etheria. Here, the very soil was alive.

He found himself in the middle of a small settlement, a town which would later turn into the fortress city of **Ironrock**. Screams of terror pierced the air like knives as the legion began its slaughter. Some of the farmers tried to defend themselves with pitchforks and torches, but soon realized it was all futile. Against beasts, pitchforks and fire may have been enough, but against warriors of bone? They may as well have been unarmed. Pitchforks got stuck between ribs, arrows clattered as they hit bone, and kitchen knives did little against reinforced bone and mail. Futile attempts to burn the boneborn with oil and torches only turned them into infernal executioners as the flames roared awake. It was hell, unimaginable terror.





Fledgelings clawed at the ones who tried to run, tearing the intestines out of those that couldn't. The yellow light of the burning houses and the sickening purple glow of the portal lit up the night sky, the horror reflecting off the puddles of warm blood.

The ground turned into blood-caked mud as Skellington walked further into the burning town, sword drawn at the ready. His eyes glowed a sickly amethyst, a colour that has since burned itself into the hearts of man as evil incarnate. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a young child and her mother huddled behind a crate in an alleyway, shaking in fear. He turned his head mechanically, marching straight towards them, a single command echoing through his bones: Kill.

The woman's eyes widened in fear as she realized they were spotted. She grabbed the hand of the terrified little girl and ran deeper into the alleyway. Skellington followed right behind, his bones and armor clattering as he marched towards them. He raised his sword when he got closer, but with a loud *krack*, a burning wooden beam came crashing down between them. The woman flinched as a puff of smoke and embers burst out of the rubble. She grabbed the little girl's hand tighter and ran with her towards the eastern palisade.



Skellington didn't waste time and climbed over the burning rubble, bones rattling as he continued pursuing her. The woman reached the palisade wall. To her left was the gate, around a dozen villagers surrounded by demons on all sides. People she had grown up with were being slaughtered one after another. A raging minotaurid came charging towards the group, goring a man and flinging him another thirty feet before smashing right through the wooden gate, splinters flying everywhere. It roared in victory as it readied its axe. The woman glanced to her right in panic, eyes flared wide open.

Skellington approached, swinging his sword at the woman's head. She ducked at the last minute, her hair being slashed as his sword embedded itself into the wooden beam with a *thwack*. She ran as fast as she could with her child, along the edge of the palisade wall until she reached a dead end, blocked by a wall of crates and barrels. She looked at the base of the palisade; there was a small crevice dug into the dirt, large enough for a child to fit through. She glanced back at Skellington, who swung his blade free from the pillar, turning his head towards them. She crouched down and told the little girl something, tears streaking her terrified expression. "No!" the little girl cried out. Seeing Skellington march towards them like the reaper himself seemed to make her change her mind, as she started pushing her way through the crevice. Skellington wasted no time raising his blade. Her expression was one of true, bone-shaking terror, the feeling of knowing you are facing death itself, a lamb for the slaughter. In a sick, fleshy rip, the woman crumpled to the ground, blood splattering all over Skellington.

The little girl kept pushing herself through the hole, making it just in time before Skellington's bony hand came down, trying to grab at her ankle. Skellington, realizing he could not fit through that crevice, glanced around, noticing the crates. The first obstacle was eliminated; now all that remained was the girl. He started climbing the crates, making it all the way up with terrifying speed. From his vantage point, he saw the girl just now making it out of the hole on the other side, and the forest beyond the walls. He then made a running jump over the palisade, a height most would've broken their bones from. His strengthened bones rattled, armor crunching as he landed on the other side. His crouched form raised itself with terrifying slowness, his purple eyes locking onto the little girl.

She saw him too, the wolf coming for the lamb. She ran as fast as she could, heading straight for the forest. Skellington, locked onto his objective, ran right after her. They quickly left the burning, hellish chaos of the town behind, entering deeper and deeper into the forest. She looked back, seeing Skellington following her with terrifying endurance. She was but a human, and he?... He had no flesh to tire, no tendons to strain; running from a being such as himself was all but futile.

Slowly, the girl's muscles started waning, her movements turning sluggish, her speed slowing down. Skellington was getting closer and closer, until he was not even 10 feet away. Then, the little girl tripped on a root, crumpling onto the ground. The end. This was it. She looked back at Skellington, who was marching closer and closer, her shocked expression turning into empty acceptance of her fate. Then, the leaves rustled violently and the ground shook. Skellington stopped, glancing around to get a read on what caused the tremors. But there were trees everywhere, massive, tall grey trees, taller still than the largest caverns of Etheria. *Thump... Thump...* The ground shook more and more with each breath. **Ironwood** needles dropped down from the thick canopy, landing right beside Skellington and the little girl. Then, he saw it: a massive, towering form emerging from between two ironwood trees. Its eyes had a faint, red glow as it looked at them. It was... a giant...

The little girl took the opportunity and ran, dashing away from Skellington and the giant. The giant didn't seem to care about her, and kept staring at Skellington. Even the basic thought he was capable of was enough to tell him that this giant was a much bigger obstacle than the girl. It was something he needed to deal with immediately. He raised his sword, ready to fight the hulking giant, its arms as thick as trees, its skin gnarled and thick like bark.

The giant narrowed its eyes as it stared at Skellington; it did not like visitors on its territory. It walked right towards Skellington, every step thunderous. The ground shook as it planted its massive feet onto the soil. It pulled its massive arm back, heavier than three horses combined. Skellington charged at it,



swinging his sword. But the sword was no match against the strength of the giant. The giant's fist smashed into Skellington's body, shattering two dozen bones as he was flung into the air like a ragdoll. Even his armor exploded into multiple pieces, shrapnel flying in all directions. In a single blow, he was utterly destroyed. His body flew into the lake behind him, splashing as his crumpled body hit the surface. Missing an arm, his jaw, and his entire lower half, he sank to the bottom like a rock. He gently hit the bottom of the sandy lake, the surface of the water slowly settling. His purple eyes slowly faded, turning into hollow, empty sockets.



Rebirth

Years had passed since Skellington was destroyed, his crumpled body sinking deeper and deeper into the sandy sediment with each passing season. Small fish were now using his cracked ribcage as refuge, laying eggs against his spine. Bigger fish swam overhead, the **yellow-streaked bass**, curiously circling his ancient, unmoving form.

On the surface, the twin brothers **Kaligo** and **Lumare** had fought valiantly to push back the demonic invasion, with only the very last push remaining, the push to close the gates of Etheria **once and for all**. The brothers taught the world of the warmth of a fire, the peaceful, nourishing rain, but also the destructive force of an erupting volcano and the terrifying pressure of the sea. The warmth of Kaligo's fire and the lifegiving water of Lumare were the beacons of hope humanity needed to survive and push back the slaughter. The last few years had been a pyrrhic fight for survival, millions of people losing their lives in the Chaos.

One fateful evening, when the last of the battles for Andaril took place, the very world shook. A primordial power echoed throughout the realms, pulsing like the heart of the planet itself. The skies were painted red across the globe: vibrant, beautiful, like the colour of fresh strawberries, a sign that the season had finally changed. As the land trembled, something in the lake flickered awake for just the briefest moment, its own essence responding to the beat. Brilliant green light lit up the forest as the lake began to glow.

Bones reformed—no, that's not quite right—it was like the cracks themselves were unmade. Bones knit themselves back together, the skeletal frame rebuilding itself to how it was many years ago. His legs were back, his bones healed, the cracks gone like they were never even there. In those hollow eye sockets, a faint flicker of light arose. It wasn't the sickly, amethyst glow of a demon, but a vibrant, life-like teal.

The green light faded, falling back asleep, while the teal glow flickered awake, brighter... **alive**. Clarity—that was the very first thing he noticed. Skellington was alive in the truest sense, for the very first time aware of his own existence. The events many years past were like a hazy dream, the nightmare of a construct, a husk, of something never truly alive. Now?... He peered up at the sky through the stilling, crystal-clear water, the ripples calming. Soon enough, the stars became visible beyond the surface of the water, small pinpricks of life, much like the light in his own eyes. Skellington was frozen in awe, experiencing the light of awareness for the very first time. Curiosity and confusion hit him like a tidal wave. What had happened? Where was he? How was he alive? What... and who was he?... He was the very first of his kind, a demon that was alive, a demon that was truly sentient, and not just a crude imitation of life. His body had been made for a single purpose, to serve as a tool, a pawn for the Allfather, but no longer did his corrupt light shine within him. His eyes shone with a newfound curiosity, the light in a newborn's eyes.

He lay there at the bottom of the lake for hours, completely paralysed. *The lights... they... moved?* he thought. His eyes followed the fish that swam over him, gazing at them with keen focus. He could sense the smaller fish nudge against his ribs as they used his ribcage as a hideout, darting towards him to hide from the larger fish.





When dawn came, the light spilled across the forest, washing over the lake. He looked at the golden rays, noticing the clarity that the sun brought. It reminded him of the amethyst light from years ago, the very first light when he himself was made. It also reminded him of the emerald glow that just gave him his newfound clarity, that just remade his body. *Big... yellow light... creator?* he thought, pondering whether the sun would turn green again. The morning light awoke the forest: its beasts, the birds, and even the very trees themselves. The trees creaked, while the birds began tweeting their beautiful songs. The crack of a branch hitting the ground echoed dully across the lake. Slowly, Skellington began to move, the fish around him quickly darting away, no doubt wondering why the strange boulder came to life.

He arose like an old, creaky post, the sand and sediment sliding off his bones like the sands of an hourglass. His old, tattered robes, now thoroughly caked in algae, danced in the water like ghosts of the past. Slowly, he raised himself, his head and shoulders breaching the water as he stood. Both his shoulder pauldrons and the iron chainmail he had worn were entirely gone, shattered by the giant, the pieces no doubt strewn about the lake. Only his iron-plated boots and scaled gauntlets remained of his armor, and the ghostly black cloth. Water dribbled off him as he stood taller, causing gentle ripples across the surface. The sounds of the forest were the first thing that hit him. The birdsongs under the water were one thing, but now their clarity pierced the forest like a cool morning breeze. He looked around for a long while, noticing the massive grey trees reaching into the sky, the red birds hopping from branch to branch, and



the ground, covered in an ancient layer of moss. He ran his gauntleted hand through the water before peering back up at the forest, the bushes and the trees.

Water sloshed as he slowly stepped forward, taking his very first real steps. Step after step, he kept staring up at the forest, completely lost in awe. Another bird flew right past him, landing gracefully on a nearby branch not far from him, its vibrant red feathers shining in the morning sun. He thought about the fish, about the birds, and now, himself. He looked back to the lake, seeing his own reflection in the water.

Creature?... Me?

He then stepped onto the mossy soil, analyzing how it squished softly under his boots. He reached down, poking at the moss with an armoured finger. He plucked a small piece off, inspecting the white and green tuft as if it were the most interesting thing in the world, squeezing it between his fingers. Everything was utterly new to him, everything utterly awe-inspiring. With an infantile curiosity, he felt the ground beneath his feet, noting how his boots crunched when he took a step. He grabbed a small pebble, curiously testing its weight in his hand. He reached for a small stick on his right, holding it out towards the sun. There was a small black ant crawling on it, walking from the stick right onto Skellington's gauntlet. With the same keen curiosity as before, he inspected the tiny soldier marching on his digits. It crawled further up his hand towards his forearm, but Skellington put a finger in front, carefully letting the ant crawl onto his other hand. He took the ant as gently as he could, placing his hand onto the ground, letting the ant go its own merry way. There was something about that little ant that reminded him of himself. Small, fragile, and part of something bigger.

“Goodbye, little creature,” he rasped, testing his voice for the very first time. It sounded like stones grinding against each other, certainly nothing like the birds singing above him.

Just as he turned his head upwards, he spotted something glinting in the morning sun. Amongst the moss and roots, there it sat, having lain in the very same spot for many, many seasons—his old blade. It was rusty, chipped, resting peacefully in the damp, soft moss. Skellington reached for the sword, slowly wrapping his bony fingers around the hilt, his gauntlet clacking. He had dropped it the moment he was hit by the giant, years ago. Holding the sword brought back the memories of the giant, and the girl he was chasing. *A warrior?* He thought, staring at the rusty blade, a relic of the past.





Skellington pondered whether to keep the sword or not for a good minute, his eyes roaming over the edge, his other hand brushing away the dirt and moss. He looked down to his hip, where the old, tattered leather loop still hung. He paused for a moment, as if remembering where it was meant to sit, before slowly sliding the sword back into place beside his hip.

He stared back to the lake one last time. He had no concept of time, no idea how long he had been at the bottom of the lake; was it a day, a week, or perhaps many years that had passed? He did not know. All he had was his last memory of the girl running away, disappearing further into the forest. His metal boots crunched as he walked across sticks and stones.

He stopped frequently whenever he ran into something new, staring long and hard at every new plant and insect. He tilted his head and stared at the bees flying by from flower to flower. They danced around the white flowers, buzzing around him. He stopped moving when a curious bee flew around his head. He tried to reach for the bee, but it flew away.

“What... are you... little fly?...” he rasped. All he had ever known were the insects of Etheria, each deadly as a troll: the bear-sized **Titan Mantises**, or the panther-sized **Devilflies**, massive dragonflies his



kin had to regularly exterminate. These ‘flies’ were nothing like that: so small... so fragile... so... gentle... Curious, Skellington crouched down and leaned towards a flower, pressing his bony face onto its white petals. He crouched for a good minute, keeping his face in the delicate petals, but nothing happened. He got up, confused, not understanding the world of those little bees.

In the distance he spotted the red birds again, pecking away at some kind of bush, ripe with crimson berries. He stared at the two birds, wondering what they were saying as they chirped and flapped their wings at each other. They periodically pecked at the berries and seemingly at each other, trying to scare each other away from the ripe berry bush. Skellington walked closer, getting only a dozen feet away before they fluttered away onto a nearby branch. Skellington continued walking towards the bush, crouching down to grab a red berry from it. It was bright red in the sunlight, with a faint waxy coating on its surface. By his feet, he spotted more of the black ants around a few crushed-up red berries, using their little pincers to tear off tiny pieces. The gears in his head were turning, and he wanted to know why the birds and ants seemed so interested in the berries. He lifted a single red berry up to his face, placing it right between his teeth. Slowly, he bit down, crushing the red berry. He ground his teeth, turning the berry to paste. The chunks simply fell out from the crevices of his jaw. He looked down at the fallen chunks, tilting his head, before lifting his gaze back to the birds.

“Why?” He tilted his head in confusion. Unlike the animals and insects, he felt no hunger, and he had no tongue to taste with. His senses were entirely different from any other creature in the forest, relying almost exclusively on **magilite sensing**, his glowing eyes providing him with magilite vision, while the faint magilite of his bones provided all the tactile sensation he’d need.

Skellington continued walking through the forest for hours on end, with no sign of the girl whatsoever. With no muscles to tire, there was nothing stopping his strides. His bones creaked, his armor crunched, and slowly but surely, he learned more of the forest. He realized that the animals, the deer and the birds, much like the people that ran from him years ago, did not like to be near him, quickly bolting away as he came closer. With neither the concept nor the feeling of fear himself, he did not understand why creatures kept their distance, but nevertheless he learned to stay farther away, because that way, he would have a better chance of studying them for longer.

As night fell and the sun dipped below the horizon, Skellington was captivated by a large white doe and its fawn. He had been tailing them at a distance for an hour already, but all of a sudden, the doe stopped by a clearing. Curious, Skellington crouched below a fallen young ironwood tree, glancing at the doe just a hundred yards away. The doe paced a few circles, checking its back trail multiple times before grooming itself and the little fawn beside it. Cautiously, it lay down amidst the moss, head still up. The smaller one, a brown speckled fawn, let out a tiny squawk before nestling down beside its mother. Fuelled by confusion and curiosity, Skellington stared at them lying there for over an hour. Then, the majestic doe got up, stretched its legs, shortly followed by the little fawn, and they cautiously walked away from the clearing. Skellington didn’t want to scare them, so he stayed there, completely still, silently studying them. After they were gone, he leaned back against a thick tree. *Sit... still?...* He thought to himself, wondering what the deer were doing. He sat there for almost an hour himself, but without the need to sleep nor any hint of tiredness, nothing happened. *Why?... Still?...* He pondered.

He pushed himself up and continued wandering the forest. Hours went by and dawn broke again. The birds started their songs, and the forest woke back up. *Cycle?...* He noted, soon realizing that the forest, life itself, seemed to follow a pattern. But he himself? He was a machine, not meant to take a break to eat, sleep, or live... He was merely that, a tireless, timeless weapon.



Three days had passed since he first woke up, and with each passing hour, Skellington had learned more about the forest. He learned that animals, from the large magna deer to the rabbits and the mice, all defecated. He learned that other creatures, various insects, flies and larvae, use the waste as food. He came across predation for the very first time, watching from a distance as a large **night prowler**, a carnivorous bird the size of a bear, snatched up a deer. It sank its dagger-sized claws into its hide and bit its throat with its massive beak. It was over in seconds; death. The night prowler's purple feathers turned red with blood as it ripped flesh off the deer. Skellington could simply watch from behind a boulder with keen fascination. A day later he saw a snake eating a small mouse, and a worm getting killed by a mob of angry ants. He understood killing, but consuming the corpse was still somewhat foreign to him. Sure, various demons in Etheria consumed other creatures, but he himself had no need for it. He even found a rotting rabbit in the morning and tried eating it, but just as before, the flesh simply slid right past his hollow jaw. He pondered long and hard why he did not consume and defecate, why he did not rest or tire, why even water just ran down his bones when he tried to drink.

As he learned more about the forest, he realized more and more that he was different. He was not like the insects, not like the ants after all, not like the bees, the flies, and not even like the deer or snakes. What was he? Why was he different? Those questions remained unanswered for each day that passed. The fact remained: he was simply different.

And now, with the third day coming to a close, he was suddenly face to face with a creature, green-skinned, humanoid, yet small as a child, waving a crude stone spear at him. The creature had long ears, a scar on its cheek, and wore the look of terror on its face. There was another like it in the distance, aiming a bow at Skellington. He had not yet drawn his blade, studying the creatures threatening him, simply calculating fearlessly.

“Little... green... creature... what... are you?” he rasped, grabbing the tip of its spear with his gauntleted hand. The look of terror that the creature had was something Skellington recognized from years ago, the same expression the villagers had when they came. An arrow whizzed towards him, clattering as it hit his ribs. Skellington's head jerked up to the archer, before snapping the spear like a twig. The creature in front of him ran for its life into the bushes, followed by its friend. Skellington peered at them as they scuttled off. He looked at his rib, a tiny chip missing from where the arrowhead hit him. He placed a finger on his rib, confused more than shocked. He had seen animals squeal in pain from being hurt, but he? He felt nothing. “Why?” he rasped, the evening forest offering only the sound of cicadas. Once again, he was met with more proof that he was different, an alien wandering the forest, something not quite alive, yet terrifyingly aware.



Two months had passed now, and Skellington, exceptionally curious, watchful, and eternally tireless, had memorized the cycles of the forest better than most people ever would. He had observed the behaviors of the forest's inhabitants, from the smallest insects to the largest of predators. He knew the bees loved buzzing around flowers, the deer were the most cautious inhabitants of the forest, bolting at the first rustle of the leaves or break of a stick, always watching the canopy for the night prowlers. The red birds loved curiously checking on Skellington as he walked the forest almost as much as they loved their berries. He even spotted a giant drinking from the lake a few weeks ago, surprisingly gentle as it leaned down to scoop water with its massive arms. Skellington kept his distance to it, just like the smaller creatures did to him, this time avoiding being turned into bonemeal. Despite all he had learned, he had yet to receive an answer to what, or who he himself was.



Skellington had grown a new habit of collecting various oddities he found in the forest, anything new, anything he didn't yet understand. He collected all manner of rocks, acorns, small bones, and various things he found on the forest floor. In his possession were now a rusted metal pin, a piece of flint, and even a silver ring he had found in a mound of night prowler poop. He had started by collecting flowers of various colours, shapes, and sizes, but learned quickly that even the prettiest of flowers wilted in his hands. He wondered if he was the one that killed them, or if they starved without anything to eat. He figured they must have gotten their sustenance from the ground, which naturally prompted him to test whether he too could eat dirt. Unfortunately, Skellington was no flower, and his attempt went just like any other.



Three months in, Skellington found a fallen ironwood tree, and under it, a figure that looked an awful lot like himself. There it was, pinned under the massive tree, a corpse, the flesh having rotted away decades ago. It was covered in moss, and the eye sockets were entirely empty and hollow. Skellington poked at it, trying to wake it up.



“Hello... Warrior... Wake...” He tried poking its skull with his gauntleted finger. The skeletal remains stayed still as stone, the jaw hanging slack. An ant crawled into the empty eye socket, staring up at Skellington’s unblinking, glowing eyes. “Warrior, dead?” Skellington asked, tilting his head. It was then he saw the rusted axe just a few feet away, resting flat against a root. It was no battle axe, but the axe of a lumberjack.

“Strange axe, warrior?” he asked, but the form remained just as still as the tree on top of its back. He grabbed the axe, pulling it free from the moss gripping its handle. While inspecting the axe, Skellington saw how the head shimmered a faint blue in the afternoon light. He inspected it closer, curious why this metal was much bluer than the others he had seen. While leaning closer, it was then he heard the rhythmic clack, echoing from the edge of the forest. *CLACK, CLACK*, it echoed between the trees. Skellington grabbed the axe and took one last look at the skeleton under the tree, before starting his trek towards the source of the sound. He held the axe in his hands as he walked closer, the sound growing louder with each tree that he passed. He walked around a particularly thick tree before the source of the sound became visible. There it was, a person, a human, holding an axe, sweat flying as he hit the bark of a young ironwood tree. *CLACK*, he hit it again, chips of greyish brown bark flying from the vee-shaped edge he had cut into the tree. Skellington watched from the shadows, careful not to spook this creature. He crouched down and hugged the thick tree, observing as the young man kept hacking at the tree. A human, the same creature he remembered seeing all those years ago. His blue eyes locked onto the man with laser focus, studying every move he made in minute detail. There was another man present, this one wore a thick red beard and a belly nearly as thick, a crooked posture, and a wooden pipe between his lips. He scrunched his forehead, taking his pipe out for a moment.

“Nay!” he coughed. “Yer hitting it all wrong! From yer legs, yer legs, Jimmy!” the larger man barked, coughing a puff of grey smoke. The young man quickly shifted his posture and hit the tree with a louder clack than before.

“Yes, Da!” he piped up, his voice much higher than the larger man’s. Skellington knew from studying the deer that the fawns had squeakier voices. *Mother human?* Skellington pondered. The young man kept striking the tree for hours on end, the two men taking a pause to eat supper before he continued hacking. Right around dusk, the tree finally started groaning. It started buckling and bending, the sound of wood splintering echoing through the forest. “*Timber!!!*” the young man shouted. The massive grey pillar came crashing down, shaking the whole forest with a thunderous impact. Moss and dirt flew everywhere, the ground quaked like flesh shuddering from the bite of winter. Birds fluttered away in panic as the sound of the thunderous impact echoed across the trees.

As the dust and moss settled, Skellington looked at the axe in his hands for a good long moment. He glanced behind him towards where he saw the body crushed under the massive tree. *Human?* He realized. It was no boneborn, no warrior like himself, it was a human being—just a woodsman trying to cut down a particularly large tree. He looked back to the father and son, both staring at the newly felled ironwood tree. *Human?...* Was he human after all? Perhaps he was whatever became of one when they passed? The other heap of bones was surely no more alive than any old rock. *Why?...* Skellington stared at his gauntleted hand as the questions swirled in his mind, if you can even call it that. In place of a fleshy brain, Skellington had a complex network of **magilite pathways** running throughout his bones, with the core of his self resting right inside his skull, the complex, pea-sized magilite crystal. It was this crystal, just like the crystals of the **Ancient Dragons**, that gave him life.

Completely oblivious to being observed, the two humans started packing their bags, looking nervously to the treetops as the sun dipped below the horizon. The younger man packed his bag and slung it onto a broken branch of the felled tree. He smirked proudly as he rested the shiny bluish axe over his shoulder. His hands were red hot with blisters, yet he did not utter a single word of complaint. The older man had thick, scarred skin on his hands, a mark of pride for a retired woodsman, even more so to one of this forest. Hurried by the dangers of the looming nightfall, the two humans quickly left the area.



Once the two men had made it out of the area, Skellington came out from behind the thick tree. His teal eyes were glowing faintly in the darkness of dusk, like two flickering candleflames. He stared at the tree, lying down like a fallen warrior. He knew not why the people fought the tree, nor why it did not fight back. All he saw was a broken warrior of the forest. When his eyes wandered across its corpse, they landed on the broken branch and the rustic leather bag dangling from it. Curiosity piqued, Skellington walked towards it with a ghostly grace. He placed the axe against the tree before reaching for the strap of the bag. He lifted the bag off the broken branch, noticing the hefty weight of it. *Human warrior supplies?* He thought. He had seen the older man close the button on his pack, and repeating the same motions on this one seemed to open the seal. He pulled the flap open, peering into the bag. Inside was a load of the same bread he had seen them eat during their break, and a clay pot filled with butter. There was also a small shimmering whetstone, and a small leather purse, clinking with coins. Skellington emptied the purse onto the moss, tilting his head as he stared at the small metallic circles. He picked up a coin and rotated it slowly, examining each of its sides in thorough detail. There was an image of a face, and some text he had no capacity to read. It shimmered a silvery hue, lit up by the glow from his own eyes. It was an item so foreign to him, he had no concept for it whatsoever. Nonetheless, he decided the coins—a silvery one and three copper ones—were special enough to pick back up. With no concept of ownership, Skellington decided to take the bag for himself, seeing it as a useful replacement for holding the various things he had found, a clear upgrade to his overfilled pouch. With the bag in hand and the axe picked back up, Skellington headed back into the forest.

Over the following months, Skellington observed the full process of more trees being felled, how the branches were cut off and bundled separately, how the logs were sawed into smaller pieces before being loaded onto reinforced ironwood carts, drawn by heavily muscular horses. The younger man got scolded more days than not, and did not receive supper for multiple days after losing his bag. Skellington even had a close call after the young man spotted his glowing eyes through the bushes. His hand trembled as he pointed towards the bushes. He screamed in terror, “**GHOST!!!!**” while running away like a little girl. Skellington barely had time to lie flat against the moss as the older man looked towards him. He saw only bushes and trees, and thoroughly scolded the younger man for his “**Brainless cowardice!**”



A year went by like the blink of an eye, and Skellington kept wandering the forest, tirelessly collecting things and learning about the world. Winter came and went, a period of cold despair for life, a mere curiosity for Skellington. His bones creaked more, his movements were slower than before, and the forest was quieter than normal. Despite studying the forest for almost two years now, the humans, the animals, the bugs, the plants, and the seasons themselves, he knew very little more of what he himself was. All skeletal remains he found were still as stone: human, deer, even a decaying forest troll as large as a boulder, all utterly devoid of life.

As spring came around the corner, Skellington found himself drawn towards the open sea, a cool, endless sea, much larger than the lake from which he was born. Perhaps the sea might offer him answers to what he was. He went to his hideout, a small cave behind two fallen trees, spring flowers sprouting right by the entrance. It wasn't much to speak of; there was barely enough space for a person to crouch, but it was his home. He placed his bag beside his newly sharpened axe, right by the pile of bits and bobs he had collected from the forest. His sword? For some reason, he felt attached to it, like he could not leave it for even a moment. It was a part of him, a stark reminder of his past. There it was, day and night, summer and winter, rain and fog, resting by his hip. He had only drawn it once, and that was solely to sharpen it.

Leaving his cave at the break of dawn, he walked to the very edge of the forest, where the gravel and sand met the white foam of the oceanic waves. There it was, spanning across the horizon as far as the eye could see, waves like moving mountain ridges. The birds were singing the same songs as when he first



opened his eyes. The waves were lapping against the gravel, singing the songs of the sea. The golden yellow light of the morning reminded him of that day. He took a step towards the sea, the gravel crunching under his boots. One step turned into two, and soon he was waist-deep in the water. The waves were rocking his body back and forth, much unlike the tranquility of the lake. He descended deeper and deeper, fully submerging himself in the water. The rocks underneath were jagged and slippery, each step forward measured and slow. The sun illuminated the water a bluish green; golden rays piercing through like arrows of light. The water swallowed him whole, like the embrace of a mother, but much, much colder. As he looked around, alas, he felt no different at all.

He walked for over an hour, admiring the sea and its curiosities. He stopped to look at the fluttering seaweed, picked up the iridescent shell of a clam, and examined a small sea snail crawling on a rock. He then stopped abruptly, having walked right up to a shelf break, the seabed dropping like a cliff. It was bottomless, a hazy blue going who knew how deep. He dared not take another step. Frozen in place, he looked around, from the shelf to the true depths of the ocean. He could not swim like the fish; he would merely sink to the depths and never be able to get back up. A silvery sheen reflected the golden rays to his right, red fins flashing as a fish larger than he himself dove towards the depths. His black robes fluttered like ghostly weeds as he realized that not even the ocean was his home.





Months passed once more, spring turning into summer as flowers and plants retook the forest. Skellington, seeing flocks of birds migrate and return, decided it was time for him to move too. He packed his bag, the axe, and his various oddities before heading east. He walked for hours on end, past the beautiful lake, past countless massive trees, to the edge of **Belua**, what the humans called this part of **Ocula**. At the very edge of the forest, he saw the bridge the humans had built, a great structure of stone hundreds of feet long, at least three dozen feet thick. There were people all around, people with swords around their hips patrolling around the bridge, and many more coming and going with carts and horses. Some were loaded with straw, others with jars and boxes of who knew what. Skellington studied the movement for days, trying to learn the patterns, trying to figure out how he too might get across. He knew both people and animals were afraid of him, so walking right across was out of the question. There was a tall stone watchtower too, where a pair of guards kept a lookout day and night. He waited until the dead of night on the third day, when the traffic was lowest and the guards were just about to change shift. That's when he made his move, slowly crouching past the bushes thirty paces behind the tower. He knew from before that he could walk across the seabed; if he could only make it under the bridge, from there he could easily traverse the distance to the other side.

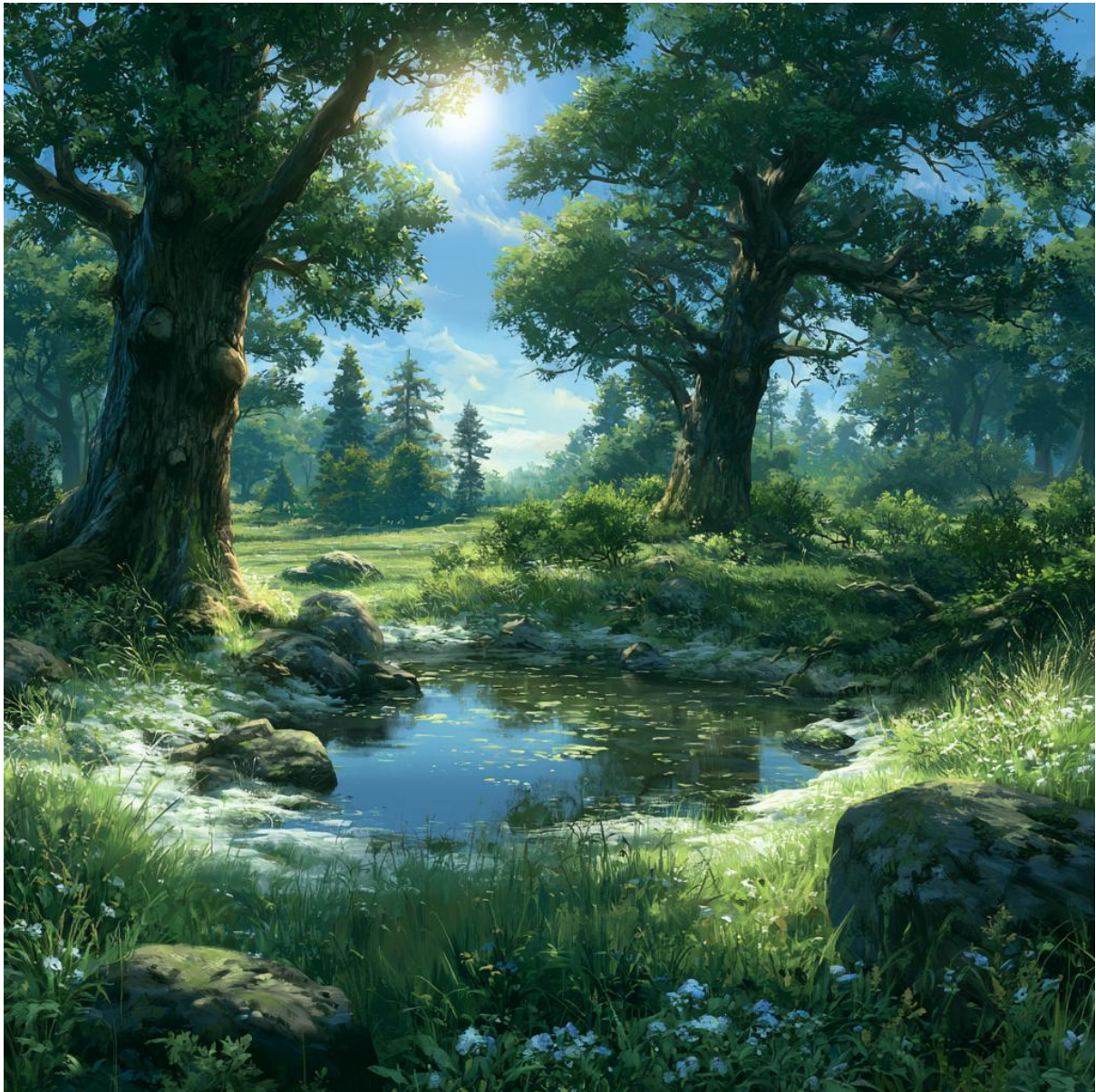
“Hey, you!” a voice suddenly cut through the night. Skellington turned his head to see a man with a torch walking towards him, fully dressed in a fitted gambeson, a shield in his other hand. Skellington's boots clattered as he began running toward the water. “**Stop right there!**” the man said as he started running after him. *SPLASH!* Skellington hit the water, sinking like a rock. As the man turned around the corner, using his torch to light the area, he could only see the bubbles hitting the surface, the ripples steadying. Skellington could see the torchlight from under the water. *Trouble?* he thought to himself. A minute passed, and the guard kept staring at the water, but nobody was surfacing. Skellington began walking on the bottom of the seabed, slow, steady steps forward, invisible on the surface. Not even bubbles escaped him as he walked, and the guard kept staring at the water. He rubbed his eyes, waving his torch back toward the bridge and the shoreline. Three minutes had passed, and nobody had surfaced. The guard must've thought he was seeing things, or perhaps it was just a deer, maybe even a fish, or perhaps he was just tired. Skellington saw the torchlight move away from the shoreline. It took a while, but he eventually made it to the other side, officially setting foot on the coast of **East Ocula**.

As dawn came, Skellington took shelter in the nearest forest, being careful not to go too near the adjacent village. The trees here were much smaller, the sky pillars replaced by gentle leafers only the height of a dozen men. Oak and maple trees danced in the wind, the ground much more alive with ferns, bushes, and flowers than the great forest he came from. It was much louder: birds singing in every corner, trees groaning and leaves rustling gently in the wind. Branches and rusted leaves crunched as Skellington walked across them. The canopy no longer shadowed the ground, allowing all manner of life the privilege of basking in the sun. A mouse ran across a natural path formed by deer, ants crawled in a line to the top of a tree, and insects flew all around. The sky was as blue as could be, not a single cloud drifting through. The sun illuminated the forest, and despite having no way to feel its warmth, Skellington knew, somehow, that this forest was a lot brighter, a lot happier. He pondered as he walked through the forest, about the age of the forest itself, how this one seemed much younger than the last, less choked by predation, gentler. It was odd adjusting to the size of the trees; it felt more like he was one of those giants now, able to snap a young tree with just his hand if he so wished.

He walked for hours on end, through day and night, through the gentle forests and tall hills. Past the hills was another gentle forest. He walked across its natural paths, the soft, warm ground squishing and crunching with every step.



It was then he found a clearing, far enough from the nearest village to not be discovered, yet close enough to allow study—a clearing at the heart of the forest. The clearing had a small pond nearby, formed from a natural artesian spring bubbling through a crack in the earth. The edges were covered in wildflowers and white moss. Here, Skellington decided, was home. It was not dissimilar to the places the deer had chosen as their own, but unlike them, he would come to spend his next few centuries here, in a clearing at the heart of the forest.



Years went by faster than you could possibly imagine. To a timeless skeletal frame, especially one already having lived a century before even being born, aging was simply not something he thought about all that much. He had seen the forests, both young and old, seen animals die from various causes, few succumbing to age itself. Nevertheless, after a century had passed, he had started to notice his bones wearing down ever so slightly, joints not as mobile, bones creaking more than before, and almost imperceptible cracks forming here and there. He had learned so much about the forests already, and now, after a whole century of stalking and observing, he had learned much of humanity too – well, as much as



could be learned by staring at them from inside bushes or behind trees. He now understood that the felled wood was used to build houses, carts, and all manner of tools and objects. He saw the process a dozen times from start to finish. He had even seen the great war and its devastation. He had watched the nearby village, **Ossaan**, burn down and rebuild close to a dozen times. He had seen the midnight moths swarm the forests and skies before the great war started; the war that was still raging on to this day, all because of a feud between the two twin brothers, escalating, like two bucks fighting for a mate only for one to die. It was tragic, but a fact of life, thought Skellington. He had learned more of the language of the humans, how a large party was thrown every midsummer, every winter solstice, and whenever someone had a child or married. He did not understand the latter; what did it mean to be married? He spent many nights pondering his observations about humanity. Yet... in a whole century of living, still, he did not know what, or who he was. A wanderer, an observer, the remnants of a person, stone birthed from water, that was what Skellington thought of himself. However, he admired the humans, how hard they worked, how complex their lives seemed to be. Wanting to be more like the people he was studying, Skellington decided he wanted to build a house for himself, a real home.

It took an entire century for him, with dozens if not hundreds of failed attempts culminating in something you might even be able to call a house. It wasn't stable by any means; it fell apart every other year, every month and day at first, but it was the first real thing he had built all by himself. He learned how to cut trees, how to saw them into logs, painstakingly with the dull, bent saw he salvaged from the edge of the village. He built a foundation of loose stones, which at first were simply arranged around the logs, but eventually grew to something more stable. The walls took almost a decade to get right, but the roof... the roof was a whole different beast. He tried every method he could think of, from leaves and branches to moss, but nothing worked. Either the weight of the snow collapsed it in winter, or the rain pierced through in summer, rotting the leaves and branches until they crumbled away. He eventually made a solid wooden roof, though the weight of it made the walls unstable, causing the whole shack to crumble to rubble. The trial and error of human imitation took years, but he kept working, he kept tirelessly copying the ingenuity he saw in the people he was observing. He went back to observe, learned, iterated, failed and learned again. Eventually, his roof no longer collapsed, rain no longer came through, and his walls... they remained stable for almost a decade. The shack even had windows by the second century, though he never learned how to make glass, so they remained simple holes in the walls. Since he had never seen the inside of a house, he did not realize they usually had floors. Thus, in place of a floor, he had the grass, beaten down to packed dirt throughout the years. He had no nails or hammers. All he had was his sword, the axe he had picked up all those years ago, and the various small objects he carried with him. He had found a knife left by a hunter, a rusted metal pot, and various pieces of trash left by people wandering the forests. His pile of oddities grew with each passing year, the clam shell still as iridescent as when he first picked it up, resting beside a small amethyst he found on a dead goblin. It was curious, the colour he so remembered from his past, yet so distant now.

It was always nerve-racking when he went to observe the village, especially since he got spotted by a little girl. She told her parents that she saw a spirit, that the spirit was watching over the forest. Rumours spread like wildfire; some thought it was a ghost, an ill omen, whereas others shared the sentiment of the girl, that it was simply a curious spirit, observing the village. All the villagers knew the trauma of those glowing amethyst eyes through legends passed down by their parents and grandparents, but none were familiar with anything teal blue, like those two dots that still shone in Skellington's face.

He ran into various creatures within the forest too; the big horned boars that so loved mushrooms, the familiar, cautious deer, the fuzzy mice that skittered about from bush to fern, even some wolves with their grey and brown manes, howling under moonlit nights. He even ran into goblins a handful of times, though they quickly learned that he had nothing tasty on him, no valuables to steal. Even the simple threat to draw his blade was enough to make the green cowards run in fear. After all, he was something they had no concept of, a walking corpse.



One day, four centuries since his eyes flashed blue, he saw smoke rise on the horizon. It was the dead of night—a raid by the Kaligo Empire no doubt. It wasn't the first time the village was on fire, but this time was different. As Skellington neared the village, the roaring flames came into view. Much like the previous times, there were people screaming, some from being burned alive, some from fear, and others from the brutality of what raiding soldiers do to those they catch. He watched as the flames consumed the houses, as soldiers cut down stragglers and dragged others by their hair. But this time, he was closer than before, so close that the heat of the flames reached him. Then, from the edge of the village, three figures came running right towards him. They were small, frantically escaping from the destruction, three human children.

A girl ran in front, wearing a bright red dress, tears running down her cheeks. Two boys ran right after her, both with curly brown hair, skin dotted with freckles. Snot ran down their noses, tears flowing like waterfalls. The girl stopped first, and the two boys ran right into her, knocking them all down to the ground. They looked up at Skellington, eyes wide like dinner plates. They were the eyes of terror, yet behind them was a flicker of hope, for they saw the teal glow they had only heard about in their bedtime stories. It was him, the spirit of the forest.

Behind them ran three soldiers, red tabards draped over their gambesons, each one swinging a sword. Their faces were wicked, twisted into vicious smirks as they ploughed through the bushes toward the kids. In that moment, something happened within Skellington. As he looked down at the kids, then up at the three approaching men, a flicker roared bright within his soul. He knew, in that instant, that he had to protect them. He did not understand why, but his hand moved on its own, his gauntlet wrapping itself around the hilt of his blade. The blade whispered as he drew it slowly, the children running behind him. His eyes burned bright, as if possessed by all the good of the world.

The men stopped dead in their tracks as they saw him, their eyes immediately landing on his skeletal face, and his glowing teal eyes. Their faces dropped their sneers, eyes widening with fear. It was the same face he saw all those years ago, terror, the terror of facing death. One of the men screamed as he lunged for Skellington, blade glinting with the light of the fires behind. *SHLUCK*. A spray of blood erupted from the man's forearm as his hand hit the ground, sword clattering against a root.

“*AAHHH!*” he screamed, before another slash cut it short. His body hit the ground with a thud, followed by the two others lunging for him. Two blades pierced right through Skellington's chest and stomach, getting stuck between his bones and armor. The men looked triumphant, only for it to be very short-lived. The glow in his eyes kept staring back at them with the same cold, analytical gaze, an emotionless being completely indifferent to their lives. Skellington lifted his blade. *SCHWIK*. Another of the men crumpled, blood spraying. The other man kept trying to pry his sword loose, to no avail. His face twisted in pain as Skellington's sword pierced through him. In a few short breaths, the man slumped down and hit the ground beside his friend.

Skellington gripped the blades and pulled them out from his chest and stomach, one after another. He let the blades fall onto the bodies, before turning to look at the children. They had witnessed everything. Their faces had drained of colour, a stunned relief mixed with the heaviness of sorrow and terror. They had just lost everything—their parents, their home—yet somehow, the spirit of the forest had protected their lives. They looked up at him in awe, their savior, in the body of something they had never seen before. Unlike an adult, they weren't deterred by his appearance, more curious and shocked than scared. As Skellington sheathed his sword and began walking back towards the forest, to his surprise, the three children followed after him. Like a brood of ducklings, they followed him into the forest.





Mister Skellington

As Skellington entered his cabin, the three curious, newly bonded ducklings followed right after him. They were still traumatized and in shock after what had happened, so they stayed silent the entire walk there. They settled inside, splaying their calloused toes at the lack of a floor. It was then that the girl piped up.

“Mister, why don’t ya got a floor?” she said, tilting her head at him. Skellington sat down against one of the walls, glancing at the ground, then at the girl. A floor? Skellington had no concept of such a thing, nor any need for it for that matter.

“Floor?” he said in his raspy voice, like grinding stones. The younger of the boys twitched as he heard Skellington speak for the first time, startled by hearing such an alien voice. The older boy kicked the dirt floor, stones flying across the cabin.

“You’re askin’ da skeleton why him don’t have a floor?” the boy said, staring right at Skellington.

“W-what’s your name, mister skeleton? Mister? Wh-what’s your name?” Greta said, tilting her head at him twice. A name? He had heard the people call each other by various names, but never did he think he himself had a name. Skellington looked at the girl in confusion.

“Name? Mister... Skele-ton?...” he rasped.

“Skelling-ton?” the young boy said, the mole on his lip still trembling.

“Oho! Nice to meet you, Mister Skellington!” the girl piped up again. “I’m Greta, and that’s Nilo and Noah! They’re a bit mean, and hopeless, and I’m better at all sorts of things! Oh, and also, my favourite colour is red, and I’m five summers old! Nilo and Noah are only four!”

“Hopless!? Dummy Greta! Yous the hopless one! Look, dummy Greta got her dress torn-ed!” Noah quipped, while Nilo nervously hid behind him. Greta looked at her favourite red dress and instantly burst into a bawling wail.

“Waaahhh! My dress!!! Waaaaaaahhh!!!” Her tears flew with the intensity of a roaring stream. The tear in her dress was only a tiny broken seam by her sleeve; nevertheless, it felt like the end of the world. Skellington stared at the chaos with deep confusion, taking a glance at his own, utterly tattered robes. If it weren’t for Nilo finding the stuffed teddy bear in Skellington’s pile of oddities, who knows how long she might’ve cried. Nilo handed the teddy bear to Greta, extending it towards her with a shy expression.

“H-hele Gleta,” he said, still struggling with his r’s. Greta grabbed the stuffed toy and hugged it tight, not even noticing the eye hanging by a thread. Her cries slowly turned to sobs as she took the stuffed animal to bed, though it was still just an empty spot in the dirt at the time. Before long, the exhaustion got all three of them. It wasn’t the best night, that’s for sure; the dirt was cold and uncomfortable, many things running through their little minds. However, despite everything, they had a new home, and someone, or something, was just about to learn all it meant to be a parent.



The weeks and months flew by quickly, but not as quickly as before. The children always kept Skellington on his toes, be it with their constant bickering, or their incessant questions. Why is the sky blue? Are there pink mice? Skellington did not know how to answer questions like those. He was forced to adapt on the



fly and learn how to do various things he had no clue about before, starting with food and proper shelter. From studying the animals for many centuries, he had learned roughly which berries and mushrooms were edible; however, applying that knowledge to humans was a whole other problem. A certain mushroom that the deer ate just fine ended up making the children terribly sick. Another problem was the taste. The children were used to eating food with salt and seasoning, herbs in every soup and roast, so when they refused to eat certain foods because of the taste, much unlike the wild animals in the forest, Skellington didn't know what to think. Taste? That was a concept entirely foreign for him. However, to learn about the children, and to find some peace for contemplation, he figured out how to find wild herbs. Salt was out of the question, but with the addition of wild garlic, the boiled mushrooms became palatable enough on an empty stomach.

As winter came, they were faced with multiple problems on all fronts, from the lack of food to the biting cold. Skellington began to realize why winter was so tough for animals when the children nearly froze to death. Miraculously, through sheer grit and trial and error, they survived. Skellington barricaded the windows to keep the cold air out. He constructed a makeshift hearth out of various loose stones around the cabin, borrowing some from the foundation of the house. Unsurprisingly, without a proper chimney, the smoke was a problem, but not as much as the fact the whole thing was as stable as a horse on ice. After a couple more times getting close to freezing to death, Greta and Skellington managed to get it stable enough to take them through the winter. As for the food, Skellington learned to lay traps, which was actually quite easy for him after seeing traps laid by hunters hundreds of times in the past. For the biting cold, they were blessed by Skellington coming across an abandoned camp east of their cabin by late autumn, where the hunters had left their bedrolls and other equipment. Perhaps they were still coming back, or perhaps they were attacked by goblins? Whatever it was, it was their problem now, and their sacrifice allowed the children to survive the winter. It wasn't fun by any means, but they made it. They survived by eating rabbits and birds, some berries and seeds too. Skellington had to carve toys for the boys, and began entertaining them with stories. He wasn't the best at coming up with anything new, but that didn't matter, for the children's favourite story was always his own.



As Skellington lifted his gaze, he saw that the children were all cozied up in their bedrolls. Greta was drooling with her mouth open while snuggling Sniffy. Noah was snoring the loudest, his little brother in the fetal position, clutching the fur of the bedroll. It seemed they had all fallen asleep. Skellington's eyes dimmed before returning to their usual brightness. He looked at the children with deep fondness. It was only because of them that he had learned so much about humanity, and now, even about himself. Despite the difficulties of taking care of those three, he had enjoyed every second of it.

He peered out of the window on the opposite side of the cabin, trying to see the stars. Instead, a single, coal-black moth fluttered by, landing on the windowsill. Its wings opened and closed, displaying their pitch-black shade. It crawled around a moment before flying right back where it came from. So gently it came and went; a sign, or warning perhaps? Skellington had seen them only once before, centuries ago. As much as he tried to remember, the meaning of those black wings was like a ghost in the night. Whatever it may have been, it did not matter right now. As for the question of who he was, well... Nothing was set in stone yet, and there was surely a lot more to come. What he did know about himself was that now, he was a parent, and his name?... His name was Skellington.

