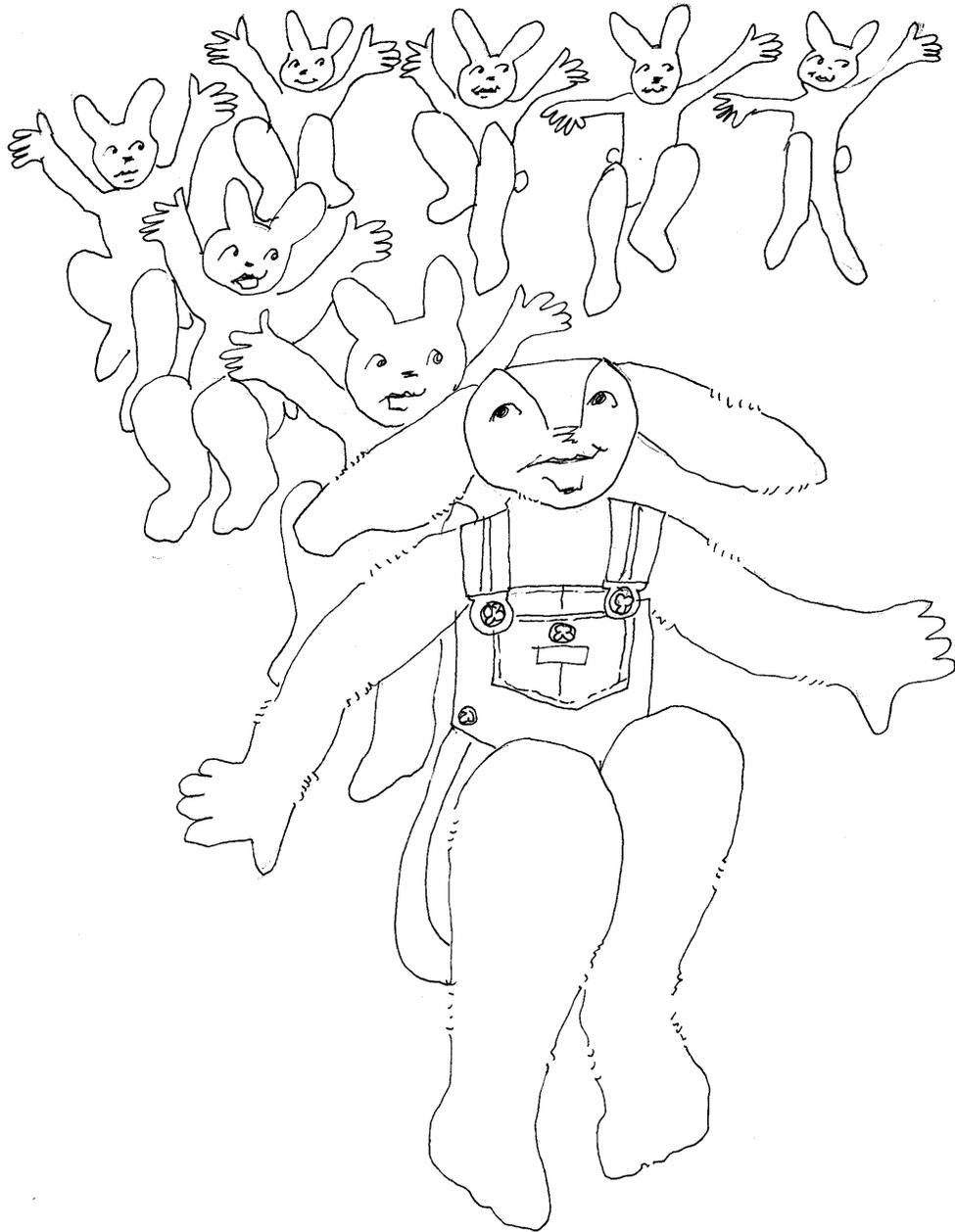


WELLINGTON RABBIT

FRIENDS TO THE RESCUE



Written and Illustrated by

Sandra Leigh Jett Ball

For Ian, Winn and Alex
Becca, Sarah, Jenn & Jessica
Good friends and book lovers all

and

Ruth Rigor
who begged for more

We thank our Heavenly Father
Who guides us and teaches us the way of love

Titles set in Harrington Bold
Text set in Harrington and Goudy Old Style

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Preface

Oh, where did the time go? A victim of magic and projects. As usual I am here at the last minute frantically writing and drawing. This season proved especially difficult since there were so many deserving high priority projects that kept pushing Wellington to the background. I painted a horse for the Centennial of Flight Winged Horse Extravaganza and successfully finished my EMT course. Emily needed me to care for Martin so she could be a volunteer at the World Figure Skating Championships. Stephen and lovely Sarah are getting married in May which is just around the corner. But I plugged away here and there counting on Wellington's faith to get me through and it absolutely did.

We find another new friend in this book, Mr. E. His name comes from a favorite game of my teen years called Mr. Ree. More about that later. Meanwhile if you see Lewis you can ask him about it. He will fill you in, as will I, in due time.

All the drawings were done this year on the road to Lewis' track meets. And like Lewis in most of his races, everything was down to the wire but triumphant in the end.

The stories write themselves. I try to stay out of the way. I literally am wondering sometimes what a certain idea or thing has to do with anything and it becomes clear about five chapters later.

Ever the patient man, Donny jumps in at the eleventh hour, after wistfully trying to get me started months earlier, and edits to perfection. Or as close as possible given the impossible lack of time I give him to work his magic. He is definitely a member of the Wellington gang, knowing quite well how to fly by the seat of his pants.

As always have the best year of your lives and seek your wish flower. It waits for you with infinite patience.

God's peace,

Sandra Ball
Bayside, Colington Island

Foreword

Later



Chapter 1

Wellington Disappears

“Wellington, what’s up this time? Where are we going?” asked Georg as he fumbled to stow his magic wand that he had been polishing into his vest pocket and grab a piece of apple pie.

He reached for his rumplesack and scurried to catch up with Wellington who had flown in the door, grabbed his cape and rushed out again, calling over his shoulder, “Come on, Georg, we’ve got to hurry.” Georg, being a big black bear, was not quite as agile as his rabbit friend. But he managed to keep Wellington, who was now running down the lane in the direction of Uncle Wells’ bungalow, in sight.

Georg rambled along, munching pie and calling out, “Wellington, wait up! That rabbit,” he muttered to himself, “always off on another adventure. Good and fine, I like a snappy adventure. But give a bear a chance to eat now and then,” he grinned as he brushed the crumbs from his paws and began loping along faster. “Wait up, Wellington.”

It was at this very instant, in fact, that Wellington disappeared. “Drats,” grumbled Georg. He hurried up, not too worried. Wellington had been almost to the turn in the lane and he was probably approaching Uncle Wells’ stoop at this very moment. The bungalow was actually Wellington’s, now that Uncle Wells had faded to the WEB and left all of his belongings to Wellington. But Wellington was happy in his own cottage and had recently loaned the bungalow to their good friend, Bethleann, so that she would have her own place in Willis Warren and thus enable the three friends to have extended visits without getting in each other’s way.

It was a fine plan, seeing that Georg had his own cozy abode that disguised itself as a tool shed right behind Wellington’s cottage. That, coupled with low level invisibility to keep the rabbits in Willis Warren from having to worry about a bear and a girl in their midst, had everything working out quite smoothly. Someday soon, though, the rabbits would have to meet Georg and Bethleann. It would make things a lot easier, that was for sure.

Georg reached the turn in the lane. Wellington was not in sight, but Uncle Wells’, or rather Bethleann’s, bungalow was straight ahead. The door was shut and there were no signs of activity. Georg became a little bit alarmed. There were dark magic forces around that would like nothing better than to get their hands on Wellington. Black Veil, for example, one of the most evil rabbits of all time, was out to get Wellington’s Easter powers. Wellington was the current Easter Bunny, the title being passed to him by Uncle Wells before he faded to the land of all former

Easter Bunnies, called the WEB by the few that knew of its existence. Actually, few knew of Wellington's existence as the Easter Bunny. It was a well kept secret. Of course, everyone knew there was an Easter Bunny, but no one knew who that rabbit was. It helped keep things in perspective. Most knew Wellington as simply Wellington Rabbit, good neighbor and friend to all.

Georg approached the bungalow apprehensively, calling out, "Wellington! Bethleann! Hulloo, where are you?" He shook his head sadly. Already this looked bad. His fur felt tingly and gnarly, sort of a like he'd been in a huge briar patch. In spite of himself, Georg had to chuckle at the thought of any briar patch. For it was a briar patch that had brought him and Wellington together a few years back. He had muffed a spell and ended up in a briar patch near Willis Warren where Wellington found and rescued him. The two had become fast friends and Uncle Wells even solicited Georg to help Wellington with his new Easter duties. Georg shook his head. No time to reminisce now. He had to figure out what was going on. "Bethleann, are you about?" he called louder.

"What's up, Georg?" asked a very pretty girl rounding the corner of the bungalow. She was dressed in her usual bib overalls and her cocoa brown hair was done up in two sensible braids.

"Oh, there you are," declared Georg. "Where's Wellington?"

"Haven't seen him since yesterday," Bethleann replied, picking a burr off of her pants. "I've been down at the cove tending the oyster beds. I thought you and Wellington were working in the garden today."

"We were going to, but before we could get started he darted off in this direction, muttering something about being late and hurrying."

Bethleann looked perplexed. Georg and Wellington were very close. There were no secrets between those two. "Maybe Wellington is in the house. He wouldn't have found me since I was down at the cove," she suggested. Since she had her muddy boots on, she headed round to the back of the bungalow and Georg followed. At the back door, Bethleann removed her galoshes and stepped into the soft moccasins she kept just inside the doorway. "Hello, Wellington," she called out, "we're back here. What's up?" Getting no reply, she headed for the front of the house calling out, "Wellington, where are you?"

Meanwhile, Georg took off in the direction of the back study where the magic wardrobe was. The room itself was a quiet, peaceful place, and today was no exception, but Georg knew that wardrobe could really be a handful if provoked. He gingerly peeked inside but didn't venture any farther. He was tempted to check the lock on the secret door hidden at the back of the wardrobe but he definitely

did not want to tangle with those biting coats by himself. So he satisfied himself with a quick look and shut the door.

He turned toward the kitchen and in doing so noticed a small object on the floor under the wardrobe. He bent down and picked it up. It was flat and round, rather like a coin. It had a square cutout in the middle and strange markings on one side. "Odd thing," he pondered. He stuck it in his pocket and headed back toward the kitchen.

"Any luck, Bethleann?" he called out.

"None," she replied, entering the kitchen after a fruitless search of the upstairs. She put the tea kettle on to simmer and loaded the tea infuser with white tea and placed it in a cobalt blue tea pot, one of her favorites. "This is so un-Wellington like," she mused. "Now, tell me again what he said."

"All he said was, 'Come on, Georg, we've got to hurry,'" replied Georg, "and then he rushed out of the cottage before I could barely do that. I lost him at the turn in the lane, but I thought for sure he would be here, filling you in on the mystery."

"That's it?" quizzed Bethleann.

"That's it, start to finish," answered Georg woefully. "Any ideas?"

"None," replied Bethleann, removing the tea kettle from the stove. She poured the hot water into the waiting teapot. While the tea steeped, she reached up to the spice cabinet for stirring cinnamon sticks which she placed in two hearty mugs. Finally she poured the ready tea and placed one mug in front of Georg, who had sat down at the kitchen table. She joined him, her hands wrapped around her tea mug, savoring its warmth. "If only we had a clue of some sort, any sort," she muttered.

"I know," replied Georg. "Nothing looked out of place to you?"

"Not really. Everything was just as it should be." Bethleann sipped her tea pensively. "Wait a minute," she said. "I got a funny telebee today. Thought it was one of those sales things. Let's see. I jotted it down here somewhere." She jumped up and began rummaging through a pile of papers on the tiny desk she kept in the kitchen. "Ah ha, here it is, *Easy Money Is Likely, Yours Ever Lastingly Free*," she read aloud. "Oh, my goodness!" Bethleann's eyes widened in amazement.



Chapter 2

The Mysterious Telebee

“Whew,” Bethleann breathed a whistle.

“What is it, Bethleann?” asked Georg cautiously.

“Look, Georg,” she instructed, “take the first letter from each word in the telebee.”

Georg spelled out, “E, M, I, L, Y, E, L, F. Emilyelf, so what does that mean?”

“Listen, Georg. Read it slowly, like this. Emily Elf,” said Bethleann.

“Zounds,” yelped Georg, “a message from Emily Elf. Do you suppose Wellington got one too?”

“I bet he did.” The two friends looked at each other.

“She needs help,” they said together.

“Well, no question Wellington would have responded immediately, just like he did,” said Georg.

“But what happened to him when he got here is the mystery,” continued Bethleann.

“Maybe he didn’t get here,” suggested Georg.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I lost him at the turn. I only supposed that he got here. Maybe something happened after the turn.”

“Or maybe something happened when he got here but before he could find me,” suggested Bethleann.

“So many maybes,” said Georg shaking his head. “Maybe we need some sustenance before we try to untangle this mystery.”

“Another maybe,” laughed Bethleann, “but I think you are right. Let’s make grilled cheese sandwiches topped with tomato slices before we start out.”

“Add a baby greens salad and a bowl of warm butterscotch pudding for dessert,” added Georg, “and we should be set for anything.”

“Exactly, and then we can begin our search for Wellington and Emily.”

“Who’s to say they are together?” Georg wondered.

“Nobody, but it’s something to do until a better plan comes along.” said Bethleann reaching for a wicker basket to gather salad greens in. “I’ll be right back. You can start the sandwiches and pudding.” She need not have bothered speaking, for Georg was already rustling in the icebox, pulling out a pitcher of milk and a bowl of eggs.

In no time at all Bethleann was back with a crisp pile of salad delights. She

set about rinsing them in the sink, then chopping and cutting until she had two fine, mouth watering salads in sunshine yellow bowls. Meanwhile, Georg cut the warm tomato Bethleann had also brought in from the garden into slices and slipped these inside the toasty cheese sandwiches that were at that moment ready to be taken out of the pan. Next, Bethleann secured a bowl of pot cheese from the icebox and topped off each salad with a hearty scoop as Georg was setting the sandwich plates on the table beside the warm pudding. Georg poured each of them a glass of cool spring water from the icebox pitcher and sat down.

“Yum,” sighed Bethleann, easing into her chair. “I worked up an appetite in the garden. This smells delicious, Georg.” She took a big bite out of her sandwich.

“Thanks,” muttered Georg between bear size bites. “Now tell me, how are we going to begin our search?”

“Well, I’m thinking that we could try the four corners closet.”

“You mean the wardrobe?” gulped Georg, almost choking on his sandwich.

“Yup, Emily did disappear when Black Veil did and his lair is down there.” Bethleann was referring to the pathways and rooms under the earth, accessible through the wardrobe. These caverns were tempting to travelers as they provided a short cut to the four corners of the world. But, unfortunately, they were also where Black Veil made his home and so were not used too often.

Georg looked nervous. “Bethleann, the last time we were down there we almost got snared by Black Veil. And besides, Emily sent Black Veil into exile. Why would she be in his lair? And, if she is, how are we going to get her back?” Georg paused, “You know,” he said rather sarcastically, “all we need is Black Veil and we could work an X-change charm.”

“We do have Black Veil, smart bear,” yelped Bethleann excitedly. “At least we think we do. Remember the finders-keepers egg?” She leapt out of her chair and raced for the study. She swiftly reached up on the shelf where she had carefully stored the finder-keepers egg last spring, right next to the some old leather bound tomes. It was just after Easter, and she and Georg were shucking some freshly harvested oysters for dinner when she came upon a mollusk with a strange black pearl in it. At dinner that evening she showed the pearl to Wellington, and as they watched in amazement, it began to increase in size. They immediately took action and confined the odd pearl to tight security in a finders-keepers egg to which only Bethleann had the key.

Now Bethleann took the egg from its lined wooden box and sat it on the heavy inlaid desk that dwarfed the cozy study. Georg had come into the room and watched as Bethleann took the key that opened the egg from a locket that she wore around her neck. She inserted the key in the lock and slowly turned it. With a click

the latch snapped open. Bethleann gingerly inched the hinged egg open. Georg held his breath.

“Oh, my,” Bethleann gasped and sank into a faint. The opened egg fell from her hands to reveal an empty inner lining.

“Bethleann,” cried Georg, “Bethleann, wake up!”

Bethleann moaned but her eyes remained shut.

“Bethleann, can you hear me?” implored Georg. The girl remained still and silent. Georg could see that she was breathing, which encouraged him a bit, but truthfully, not very much.

“What shall I do?” wailed the bear. “Maybe my wand can pull her out of this spell.” He tried invoking several disenchant spells but nothing worked. Bethleann’s eyes remained closed and her body limp. Georg carefully picked up the sleeping beauty and carried her to the divan. He gently laid her down and covered her with a comforter he found draped over the back of the couch. As distraught as he was, he noted the throw’s shimmering hues and felt its cozy softness as he tucked the edges around the slumbering girl.

Not knowing what else to do, he sat down in a chair across from Bethleann and dropped his head into his paws. “Everything is disappearing,” he moaned. “Everything.”



Chapter 3

Georg Makes a Plan

“Everything and everyone is disappearing,” repeated Georg. “First I lose my e.” Georg was referring to the e that belonged at the end of his name. It helped people know that his name was meant to rhyme with the word gorge, which suited Georg just fine. He liked rhyming with gorge, which means to fill up really full. He did not particularly like being called ‘gay org’. It sounded too much like a happy orc, and whoever heard of such a thing? Anyway, Georg lost his e a long time before he met Wellington, and he sorely missed it. He meant to get it back someday. His mum had told him it was magical, and besides that, he just plain missed it.

Then there was the disappearance of Emily Elf, whom Georg had never met. But any friend of Bethleann was a friend of Georg. Bethleann met Emily last year while on her Easter journey. Emily had helped Bethleann out of a very trying trial with Black Veil, who was set on thwarting Easter. Emily showed up in the nick of time and sent Black Veil into exile. Unfortunately, it meant her going with him and no one had seen Emily Elf since.

Then just this morning, as we all know, Wellington disappeared. And now Bethleann might as well be gone, so deeply did she slumber.

Georg lifted his head and sank deeper into the chair, his mind too dazed to really think. “Gotta do something,” he muttered, “but first I need to rest my eyes a bit.” He gave a sigh and closed his eyes. Immediately his head began to nod and soon Georg was in as deep a slumber as Bethleann. He began to dream and his dream took on a terrible glow. There were black rabbits everywhere, and snapping biting things. Wellington was there, but he kept disappearing. Georg could hear Bethleann’s voice but he could not find her. Georg found himself running through caves and wandering through strange passages that twisted and turned. He would get lost and there would be Wellington saying, “This way.” But he could never catch up. Just when Georg thought he had, Wellington would turn a corner and disappear. Finally, Georg thought he saw light and was sure he could hear sweet music. He hurried up. There was laughter and merriment just ahead. He was sure he could see a spirited meadow full of blooming flowers and chirping birds and dancing folk. He even thought he saw Bethleann dancing, and with a black rabbit, of all things. And Wellington was leading, what was this? The bunny hop! “Imagine,” guffawed an amused Georg, a twinkle settling in his eyes, a huge smile on his face. And then he woke up.

“Where am I?” wondered Georg for a moment, rubbing his eyes. “What a busy dream. I need to tell Wellington and Bethleann everything.” And then he remembered the events of the day. He gazed over at the divan. Bethleann had moved slightly, but still she slumbered on. “Hey, Bethleann,” Georg called out softly. She did not even stir. It was as Georg feared. He knew magic was involved here. “How long did I sleep?” wondered Georg. His stomach rumbled, but then it was always rumbling. It was not a good indicator of time passage. Georg got up, stretched his cramped limbs and ambled over to where Bethleann lay sleeping. He readjusted the coverlet. He placed a quiet kiss on Bethleann’s forehead, smoothing her bangs, “I’ll get you out of this,” he promised.

Georg headed toward the kitchen, ascertaining that it must surely be afternoon snack time. Rescue solutions rushed madly through his head. Now that he was rested, ideas popped up in rapid succession, but if truth be told, none seemed very viable. And without a buddy to bounce ideas off of, it was very hard to concentrate. “But I have to do this,” resolved Georg, “and so I will.”

He rapidly tidied up the kitchen from the earlier meal and put the tea kettle on. Next he rustled in the icebox for sustenance. He found a block of cheese and some sliced carrots and stewed pears. He put these on the table and reached toward the breadbox. He pulled out the remains of a loaf of Bethleann’s wonderful herb bread. He quickly sliced off two pieces and returned the rest of the loaf to the breadbox. A swift slice of cheese later and Georg had a delicious sandwich to go with the carrots and pears.

“Now what I need,” said Georg, “is a good solid plan. Maybe if I write my ideas down one will pop out at me.” He got up and found pencil and paper among the throngs of stuff on Bethleann’s kitchen desk. He dug his reading glasses out of his pocket and put them on. He wasn’t used to wearing them. They tickled his nose. He sniffed and attempted to straighten them a bit and began jotting down a list of all the ideas that had floated into his head.

1. Try to reach Uncle Wells and the WEB.
2. Go see Sir Boris Bear.
3. See if Wellington unlocked the wardrobe secret door.
4. Try a safe magic counter charm on Bethleann.
5. Reveal himself to the warren rabbits and solicit their help.
6. Find out where the mystery telebee came from.
7. Examine the finders-keepers egg carefully.
8. Get help.

Georg leaned back in the chair. “Wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Georg was so startled that he lost his balance and both he and the chair fell to the floor.

“What the...” Georg looked all around as he rubbed his sore elbow and bruised pride. His mum had always warned him about leaning back in a chair. “Must be imagining things,” Georg mused. He picked up the chair and recovered his glasses which had flown off of his head in the crash. He turned toward the table to return to his list and there, right in the middle of the paper, stood a black cricket with a big grin on its face.

“Name’s Edward Edward, but most folks just call me Mr. E. Glad to meet you.” Mr. E, all business, extended his upper right leg toward Georg. Georg’s mouth fell open.

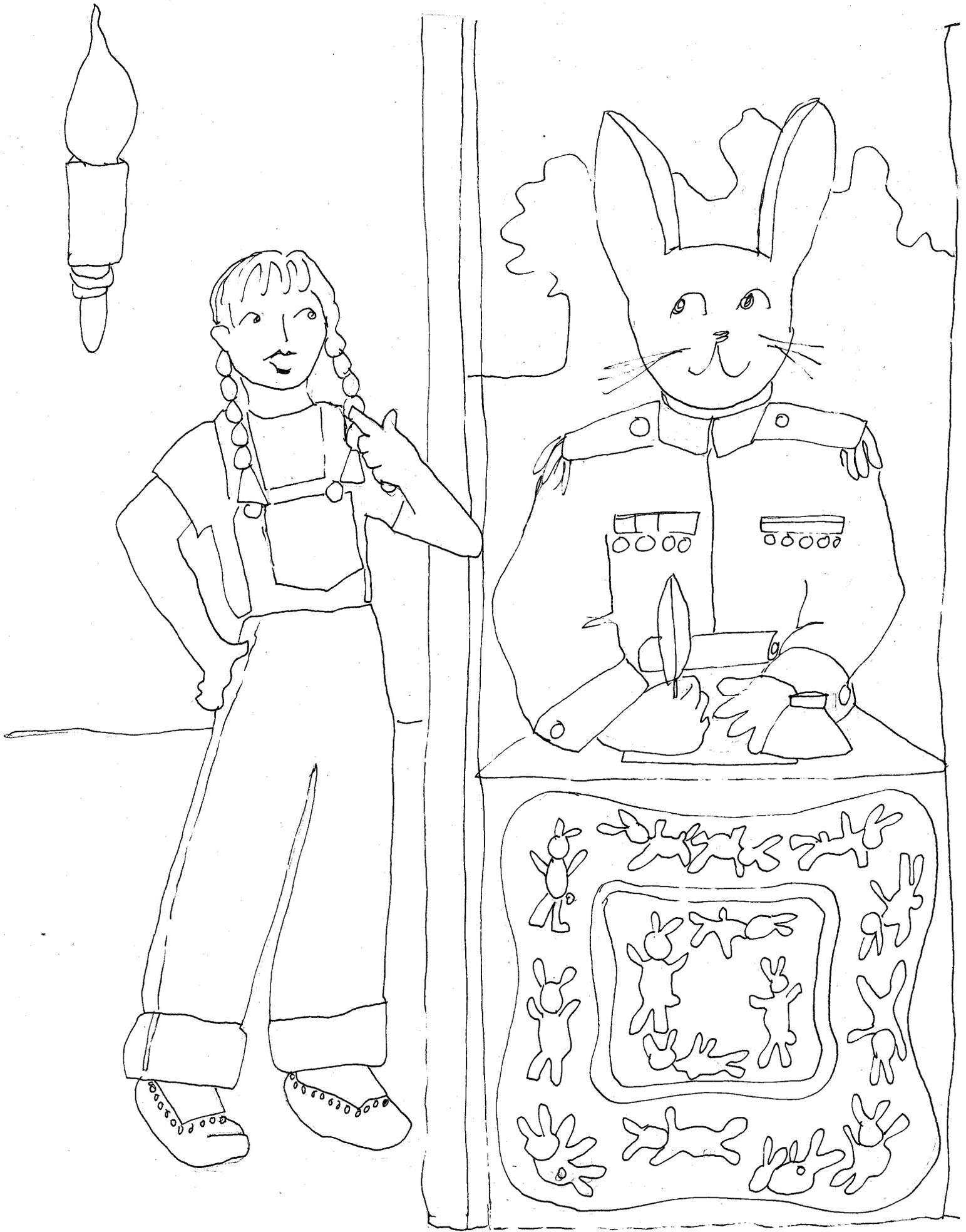
He weakly extended his paw to return the greeting. “Umm, hullo. Do I know you?”

“Actually, we have never met, but your mentor, Sir Boris Bear, sent me to find you. I admit it has taken much longer than I feel comfortable admitting, but ‘A job worth doing is worth doing right,’ me grandpappy always said, and I left no stone unturned seeking you out. Learned a lot about you, I did, Georg, my friend.”

Whoa! This made Georg uncomfortable. He really did not have anything to hide, but snooping into his affairs? Well, he wasn’t too sure about that. “Why did Sir Boris send you?” wondered Georg.

“Didn’t say exactly,” returned Mr. E. “He just sent me to find you in a quiet manner and bring you back to the laboratory.”

Suddenly there was a loud crash. Georg jumped to his feet. “That came from the study where Bethleann is....is resting.” Georg fumbled with his words. He couldn’t bear to hear himself say that his dear friend was really in a magic trance. Mr. E leapt to Georg’s shoulder and they rushed to the study.



Chapter 4

Bethleann's Plight

Bethleann felt as if she were in a dream world. Everything was swirling. There were black bunnies everywhere she looked. She felt like she was tumbling down a long, deep hole like that girl Alice. It was a light and airy hole and black bunnies were tumbling with her. Over and over and over they tumbled. Soon one of the bunnies decided to organize a contest to see who could tumble the most turns without bumping into anyone. He started and rolled five times before he caught the ear of a bunny on his left. Another bunny decided to try and she rolled seven times but got up so much speed that she tumbled right into the bunnies in front of her. Bethleann decided to try her luck. She rolled and rolled and rolled. "This is fun," she laughed. She kept on rolling. All the bunnies were backing out of her way. She was rolling so fast that she couldn't see anything.

Suddenly she hit bottom with a thump. She looked around expecting to see all of her bunny friends. Instead she saw Uncle Wells' study. She was sitting on the floor with a coverlet all tangled around her legs. "Where are the bunnies?" she wondered. She quickly extracted herself from the coverlet and gathered it around herself for warmth. "I must find them." She scurried to the wardrobe and flung open the door. It was a well organized closet with everything labeled just so. There were galoshes labels and hat labels, coat labels, glove labels. Everything was labeled and in its place on a designated shelf or in a box. Consequently, Bethleann knew how to deal with the magic coats and dispel their biting and nasty burrs. As she approached each coat she quickly removed the o from its label and began rubbing the coat's fabric softly, humming a purring cat song as she did. Immediately upon passing a coat, she returned the o and dealt with the next coat. It was a very effective charm but could not be sustained for long. Plus the best plan was for speedy work so the coats never knew what had happened to them.

Finally Bethleann reached the last coat and then the back of the wardrobe. She felt for the door handle. "Please be unlocked," she cried, giving the knob a twist. The coats were stirring. They felt something amiss. She pressed on the door. At first it would not budge. Her heart sank, but, trying again, she gave it a good push, and it flew open. She tumbled forward and began rolling down the stairs. Down and down. Bethleann felt like she was back in her dream. Only this time it was very, very dark and she was all alone. Using her wits, she gathered the coverlet about her to cushion her fall. Finally, she hit bottom, and for a moment lay in a heap just breathing quietly.

"My, oh, my," she sighed as she got up and dusted herself off. "It certainly is dark in here." Fortunately she was quite familiar with the way to go, having used this passage many times, the last being when she brought Wellington and Georg down here right after Uncle Wells faded. That day she was trying to help Wellington recover his packet of fading dust that Uncle Wells had left him. It was magical dust that would help Wellington fade to the land of the WEB when it was his turn, and it also enabled his haversack to produce Easter eggs whenever Wellington needed them.

Bethleann had just arrived in Willis Warren for a visit with Uncle Wells when she chanced upon Wellington and Georg in a great dither. Uncle Wells had just faded and before Wellington could recover the fading dust packet Uncle Wells left him, it disappeared. The two friends were very distraught, but Bethleann, being a level five magician, had a few tricks up her sleeve. She guided them into this very passageway and onto a successful recovery of Wellington's fading dust.

But today she was alone and without a bumbershoot light. It was then that Bethleann noticed the glow coming from the coverlet. It was lighting her way! "You are a delightful coverlet," cried Bethleann. She gathered the coverlet about her and started down the pathway that led in the direction of Black Veil's lair. Before long she could see a faint light in the distance down a pathway that led to the left. She reasoned that it lit the outer fringes of Black Veil's lair. She started down the pathway and very carefully approached the ever increasing light. She could see no one about. Finally she came upon a thick wooden door into which were carved dancing rabbits in all sorts of frolicking poses. It was quite a lovely piece of work and Bethleann admired it in spite of its affiliation with that nasty Black Veil.

She reached out her hand to touch the carvings and was quite surprised when the panel slid upward into a hidden recess of the door. "Yes, can I help you?" inquired a very blustery steel gray rabbit who was twice the size of Wellington. He, she supposed it to be a he, was dressed in a black suit which was covered with many, many shiny medals.

"Well, I um, well," began Bethleann.

"Get on with it, girlie. I haven't got all day. Many important things to do, you see," insisted this rabbit. "I have the king's picnic to get ready for and that huge line of folks behind you to check in first, so be smart about you. It won't do to waste time."

Bethleann looked behind her but could see no one, no one at all. "But, sir," she started.

"Do ye or do ye not want entrance into the picnic?" inquired the rabbit, reaching for a scroll, quill pen and ink bottle. The inside of the door housed a sort of ledge where he now placed the scroll and unrolled it a few inches.

"Well, yes, certainly," replied Bethleann, wondering to what picnic the rabbit was referring.

"Name?" barked the rabbit dipping his pen into the ink bottle.

Bethleann thought quickly. "Flopsy," she stated.

"Flopsy?" quizzed the rabbit. "You don't look like Flopsy."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Bethleann pulling herself up a bit taller. "Take a look at this hair. Why do you think I wear it in braids all of the time?" She seemed

little concerned that the gray rabbit had never seen her before. “For my health?” Bethleann glared at him. “Of course not. It’s because my hair is floppy. Plain, straight and floppy. Braids are the only thing that works in a hurry. So, naturally, I’m Flopsy.”

The rabbit looked slightly abashed, “Nevermind, deary,” he soothed, sorry he had rattled the girl. “Braids are very sensible. But do tell, where are Mopsy and Cottontail?”

“Why right behind me, of course,” said Bethleann, looking the rabbit straight in the eye.

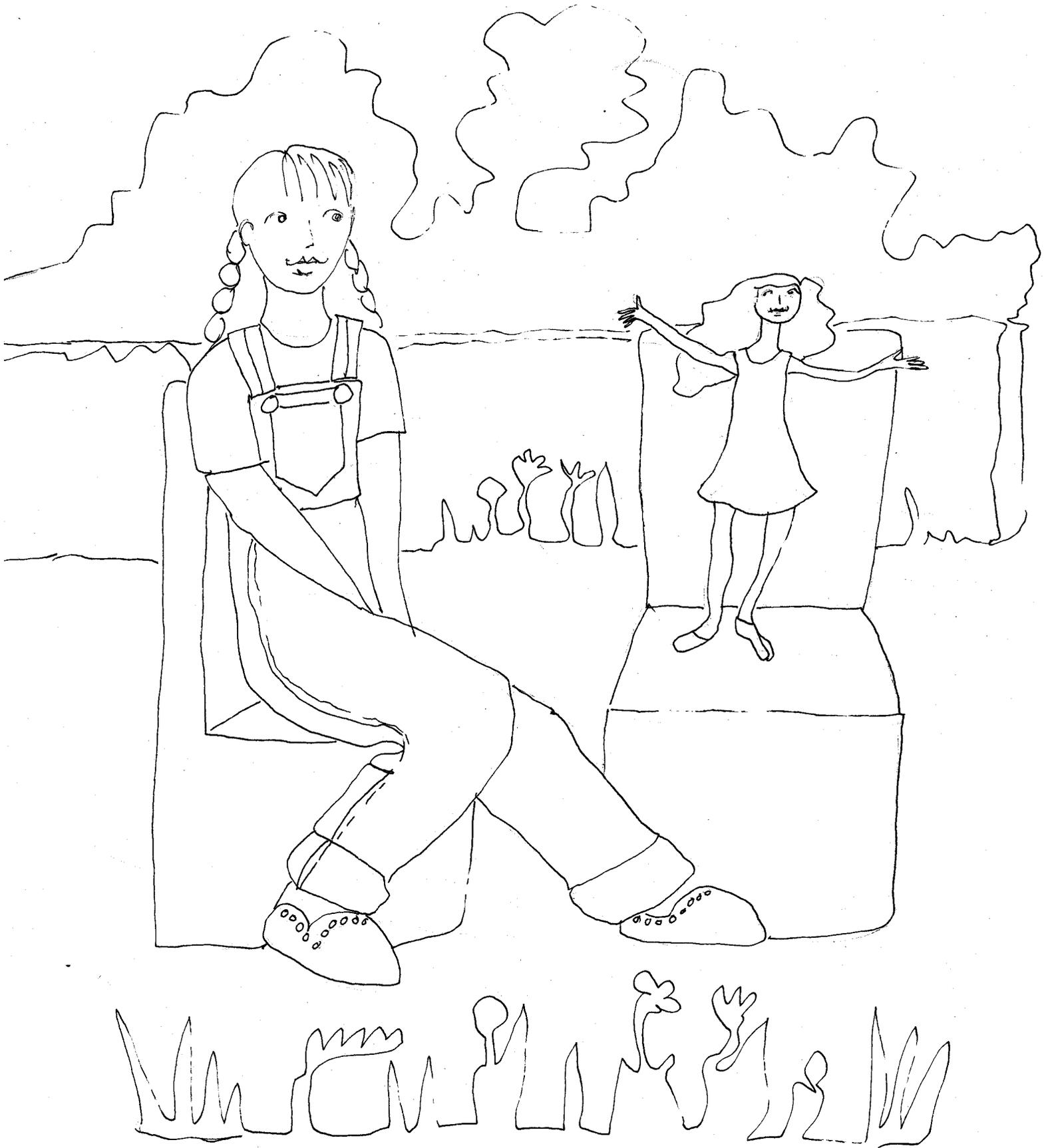
“Well, so they are,” declared the rabbit, peering round Bethleann’s shoulder, “And there is Peter, too. He began writing on his scroll. “Now mind you tell that Peter no one touches the salad until the king gives the signal.”

“It’s not a problem,” said Bethleann. “We’re sixth generation, you know. Our Peter is not so greedy as *that* Peter,” she grinned, much recovered from her hair tirade. She was referring to the original Peter Rabbit, who got himself into trouble by liking salads a bit too much.

“Be off with you then,” said the gray rabbit. He reached into a wicker basket and took out a smooth stone which he tapped on the scroll where he had been writing. He rolled up the scroll and returned his writing equipment to the shelf by the door. Next he turned a big key in the door which swung open to reveal a beautiful meadow off in the distance. The gray rabbit handed Bethleann the smooth stone. “This is the ticket for the four of you. It will give you entrance to all the events of the day, even the king’s high court banquet.”

Bethleann put the stone in her pocket. She signaled for her imaginary group to follow her inside.

“Next,” she heard the gray rabbit boom as she hurried down the pathway that led to the meadow. “Hurry up, now,” he continued. “Time’s a wasting. I have many things to do before the picnic starts.”



Chapter 5

A Surprise in the Tunnel

Bethleann almost ran down the path. She could not believe her luck and was very anxious to get as far away from the gatekeeper as she could before he began to have second thoughts about her. She could not help wondering, though, as she skipped along, trying not to appear in an unnatural hurry, where this meadow came from. She thought she remembered the paths in the caverns being rather flat, without any incline that would take her near the earth's surface. But it certainly looked like the sun and the sky above her and the breeze on her cheeks felt real enough.

"Do you supposed Black Veil created his own magical meadow?" she wondered, for she was really certain that the king was none other than Black Veil himself. "I really do feel like that looking glass girl," she thought. "She fell down a rabbit hole and ended up in a rose garden. I dreamt I was in a rabbit hole and now I am in a meadow." As she hurried along Bethleann felt the path change beneath her feet. She looked down and noticed the smooth dirt was turning into yellow bricks.

"Oh, my goodness," she exclaimed. "Now I feel like that Dorothy girl with the ruby red slippers. I seem to be hopping from story to story today." She took a quick peep downward, half expecting to see ruby slippers on her feet. But that hurried glance told her she still had on her moccasins. That made her think of Georg. "Oh, Georg is going to be so worried about me. I wonder what he found in the finders-keepers egg. Wait," she said to herself, "wasn't I looking in the egg with Georg? What did I see? It's all so confusing. I seem to recall a funny smell and a very dark cloud circling my head. Then everything went blank until I woke up on the floor, tangled in this cover." She was referring to the coverlet slung round her shoulders. With that thought she removed the coverlet from her shoulders and proceeded to fold it up. The day was quite warm and she did not really need it. She began folding the coverlet which got smaller and smaller until it was the size of a pocket handkerchief. "Excellent," Bethleann mused. She tucked the compact coverlet into the pocket of her bib overalls.

The yellow brick path began to follow a fine tall but trim hedgerow. Bethleann was certain she could hear music on the other side. But she could not see through or over. Suddenly round a gentle curve, a white gate appeared in the hedgerow. As she approached the gate, it swung open and another sentry rabbit stepped through. "Welcome to the king's picnic," he pronounced. "Nice ears," he

grinned at her.

How very rude, Bethleann thought, but saying instead, "Excuse me, sir?"

"Said you got really nice ears. My daughter would be happy to have such. All nice and floppy like and that braided look is very becoming. And your whiskers are so trim, why you can hardly see them. Wouldn't be giving the name of your groomer, would you?"

Bethleann was chagrined. Here she thought this rabbit was laughing at her stubborn hair when he was actually handing her a very kind compliment. Folks certainly are hair conscious around here, thought Bethleann. "I do my own hair, umm ears, Sir Hare" replied Bethleann.

"Really now? Say, I wonder if my daughter could do her own ears? Certainly would save me a bunch of carrots."

Bethleann smiled and wiggled a braid at him. "Nothing to it," she replied as she showed him the stone ticket. Then, with another wave of her braid, she stepped through the gateway and down the path. Inside was a lovely garden and rabbits everywhere, chatting and dancing. There was table after table of all types of salads. A lively mole band was situated in the gazebo located in the center of the garden. It was a very, very pleasant garden, and not in the least Black Veil-like at all. There were statues and sculptures all around, and rambling walkways with lush grass and trimmed shrubs in-between. Bethleann wandered about, studying the sculptures. Her favorite was one shaped like a house but actually flat, like a cookie cutter.

She wandered away from the main crowd and strolled along the perimeter walkways admiring the sculptures and greenery. After a while, she stopped to stretch and soak up a few sun rays. It had been a very exhausting morning. "Easter friend, I am extremely glad you will help me escape," came a voice from the shrubbery.

"Emily," Bethleann jerked her head around toward the direction of the sound, "is that really you?"

"Exactly so, but do speak softly. I must eschew detection," replied the voice.

"Actually, it doesn't seem to matter," said Bethleann. "These folks see what they want to see. They think I am a rabbit. If you walk with me they will assume you are too."

"So entertaining," mused Emily as she slowly emerged from the bushes. "Are you exactly certain about this rabbit thing?"

"Worked so far," said Bethleann. "Now, do tell me where we are and how you got here." She led Emily to a circular grouping of stone chairs where they could catch up and make an escape plan.

"A group of rabbit ladies was just rising to leave. "Exquisite ears," nodded one of them to Bethleann. She grinned in return.

Another walked over to Emily. “My pleasure indeed to meet a Netherland Dwarf,” she bowed.

Bethleann could feel Emily bristle. In a stage whisper she said, “Breed of rabbit, silly.” She knew elves and actual dwarfs were barely civil to each other in the best of times.

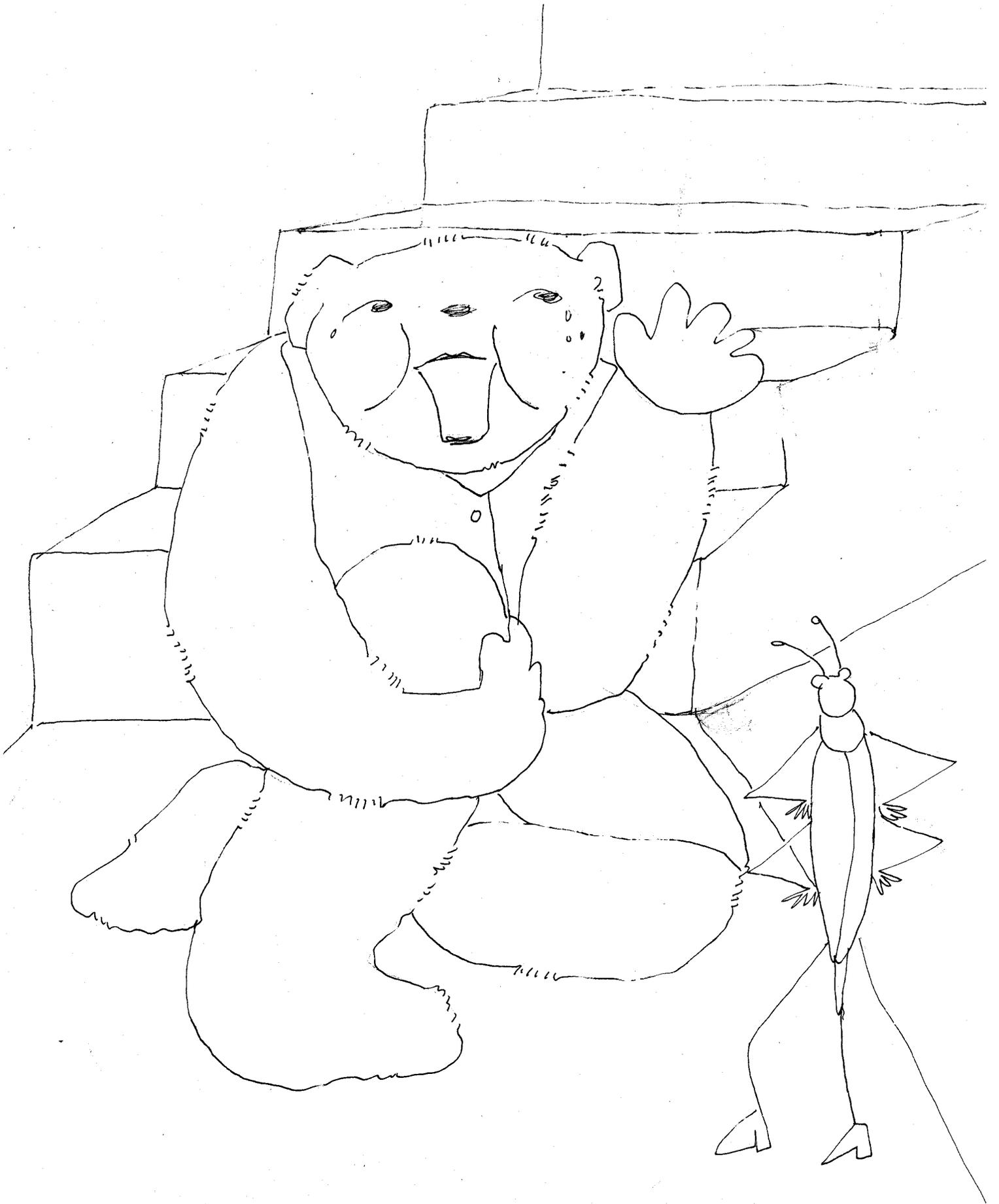
“You are an expert, milady,” murmured Emily, bowing low so her sneer would not be apparent. Dwarf indeed, of any kind. The rabbit lady took no notice of Emily’s expression. She was so very pleased with herself. She knew Netherland Dwarfs rarely attended public functions.

The rabbit ladies bid polite farewell to the girls and headed toward the high court banquet garden. They were anxious to admire the unique salads and ice sculptures they had heard so much about.

“Dwarf!” Emily exploded. “Dwarf, dwarf...,” she stomped around the chair fuming and growling.

“Relax, Emily,” soothed Bethleann. “Do tell me about your adventure after you banished Black Veil.”

Emily couldn’t stay mad for long. She began her story, “I really fixed that Black Veil good,” she laughed.



Chapter 6

Georg and Mr. E

Georg and Mr. E entered the study at a gallop. “Where’d she go?” bellowed Georg as he spied the empty couch.

“Where’d who go?” asked Mr. E.

“Why, Bethleann, of course,” replied Georg, forgetting that Mr. E had never met Bethleann. He peered under the couch and behind it, too.

“What’s a Bethleann?” asked Mr. E

“A girl, for goodness sake,” answered Georg very impatiently as he searched behind the desk and window curtains. He looked for signs of magic spells but saw none, at least none that he recognized.

“Did she go through that cabinet door?” asked Mr. E. He was referring to the wardrobe door which hung wide open.

“Oh, my gosh!” exclaimed Georg. “Do you suppose she did go into the wardrobe?” He trembled at the thought.

“Let’s see,” said Mr. E, hopping off of Georg’s shoulder and approaching the wardrobe. He started to hop inside.

“Wait,” began Georg, but before he could say any more, Mr. E had hopped into the dangerous wardrobe and was fast disappearing into the thicket of coats and galoshes that filled the cabinet.

“Very dark in here,” called out Mr. E. Then, “Are you coming?”

Georg hesitated. He wasn’t sure he could work the o charm as deftly as Bethleann had that day they came this way on the quest for Wellington’s fading dust. He had never tried that charm before. Maybe he could just slip through the coats without detection. So far they were very quiet. Maybe too quiet, grimaced Georg. Still Bethleann must have gone this way. Otherwise, why would the door be open? And she needed help, he was sure of that. He put one paw into the wardrobe. The coats remained quiet. He stepped the rest of the way into the wardrobe and pulled the door shut. Wouldn’t do for any unsuspecting wanderers to get caught in the wardrobe. It was very dark. “Mr. E, where are you?” whispered Georg.

“Mrmph,” came a muffled sound.

“What was that? I can’t hear you.” George inched forward. The coats remained quiet and still.

“Mmmstu...c....k.”

“Mr. E, please speak clearer,” begged Georg. He felt coats all around him as

he moved toward the sound and the back of the wardrobe. The coats almost seemed to be petting his fur. Maybe they thought he was a big coat himself.

“G...e....o...r...g. help.....meeeeee,” Mr. E’s voice trailed off.

“Drats,” muttered Georg. “The coats have him, sure enough.” Swiftly Georg reached the back of the wardrobe. “Where are you, Mr. E?” Georg felt for the door handle but instead only found a large hole. The door was wide open! He almost tumbled through. It was so dark he could see nothing. “Mr. E, are you down there?” Georg called, thinking maybe Mr. E had fallen down the steps.

“He...r...e,” came a quivery voice nearby. By this time Georg’s eyes had adjusted more or less to the dark and he could just make out the shadow of a big fur coat with something in its grip. Since the coats did not have regular mouths they used their neck opening as an orifice. The back half of the neck would snap forward and clamp onto anything in its way. Georg had heard plenty about this phenomenon from Wellington. Suddenly Georg spied Mr. E. He was tight in the grip of a big fur coat which was trying to stuff him into its big mouth. Not to be taken without a fight, Mr. E was spitting and bracing his advance with all of his arms and legs. It looked like Mr. E was about to be consumed!

“Stop!” commanded Georg. He jerked his arm forward, reaching for the coat’s o but in his haste grabbed the a. Suddenly the coat collapsed in a heap, dropping Mr. E who instantly hopped onto Georg’s head. Stunned, Georg, acting on sheer instinct, flung the a into the air and scrambled down the stairs as fast as he could go, shoving the door shut behind him.

At the bottom of the steps, Georg stopped and sat down, breathing heavily. “That was close, for sure. You were almost a goner.”

Mr. E, chatting nervously, hopped off of Georg’s head. “I’ll say. What was that monster?” He danced around in a circle. Even in the dark gloom of the cavern he looked absurd. His eyes were bugged right out of their sockets.

Georg opened his mouth to explain but he was so strung out from the entire day that instead he began to chuckle. His chuckle turned into a big laugh, and finally a huge guffaw. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. He clutched his side. It so ached from laughing.

Mr. E did not see the humor in the recent events at all. “I was almost eaten, do you hear?” he pointed a leg at Georg who could do nothing but laugh more.

“But, but, you looked so ridiculous,” begged Georg.

“Well,” reluctantly admitted Mr. E, “it turned out well enough, thanks to you, and I’m sure I did look pretty frantic.”

“Oh, no, you were quite fearsome. I’m sure you would have thwarted the coat without my help,” suggested Georg, finally regaining his composure.

“What did you do, anyway?” asked Mr. E.

“Well, I tried to invoke the letter charm Bethleann used on those coats. I’ve only seen her do it once. I must have mixed something up, though, because I got an a instead of an o,” said Georg.

“Why that means you turned the coat into a cot,” said Mr. E. “No wonder it collapsed so fast. I’m familiar with the letter charm. If I had known those were magic coats I could have worked it for us.”

“You went ahead too fast for me to warn you,” reminded Georg.

“Sorry,” grinned Mr. E. “I looked pretty silly, eh? That coat was serious about eating me for dinner.”

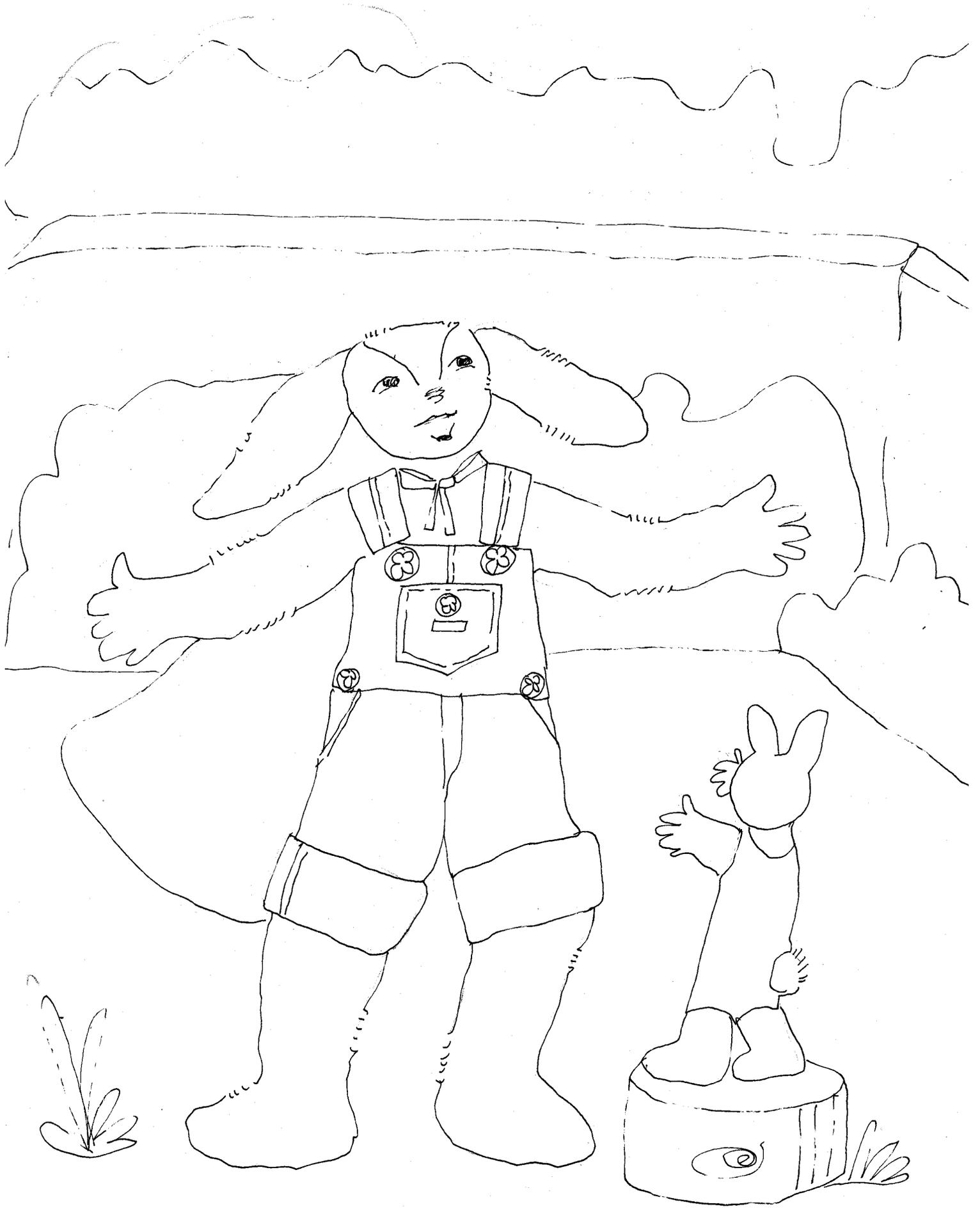
“Well, it didn’t, so let’s be on with finding Bethleann.” Georg was anxious to finish their task and leave the caverns. “It’s going to be slow going with no light though.”

“I can fix that,” said Mr. E. He twisted the knobs at the tops of his antennae and they instantly lit up.

“Pretty convenient,” admired Georg.

“A present from my three sisters when I graduated from hopping school,” beamed Mr. E. “Most crickets have regular antennae, but mine are super enhanced to offer light and also intercept signals.”

“That’s handy,” declared Georg.



Chapter 7

Wellington and the Tunnel

Wellington rounded the bend in the path at a rapid gait. He did not even turn to see if Georg was following him, although he knew he was. The telebee had been pretty urgent. He had never met Emily Elf, but she endeared herself to the Easter trio when she saved Bethleann's Easter gifts to the children from the clutches of Black Veil. So, here he was on a rescue mission, with no time to waste. The bad thing was that he did not feel all that comfortable with his magic skills yet.

It was only last year that he had finished his magic tutoring with Uncle Wells. Actually, he had barely received his last lesson before Uncle Wells faded to the land of the WEB. Now with Uncle Wells gone, Wellington did not even have a way to review or ask any questions. It was definitely a good thing, as Uncle Wells told him, that all the spells were woven into the fabric of his cape. It was a magic cape that Uncle Wells had given him many, many years ago when he was a wee bunny. At the time he did not know that it was magic, but it certainly provided great entertainment for young Wellington.

It was just last spring when Uncle Wells had revealed his true plan of passing the title of the Easter Bunny on to Wellington. Thus, along with many other revelations, Wellington began to realize the full depth of his beloved cape.

"Cape," he mused, "we have a job to do. Come on, Georg," he called over his shoulder without turning to look. He knew Georg well enough to know he was only a few steps behind. Suddenly a rogue gust caught the cape and lifted Wellington into the air. It spun him along, lifting him higher and higher. He could see Georg hurrying along the path exactly like he knew he would be. Then the edge of the cape swirled around Wellington's face, blocking out all vision. He could feel himself turning and turning. On and on he flew, and then just as suddenly as he rose up, Wellington could feel himself begin to drop. "Hang on, cape," he spoke. "A gentle landing, please."

But Wellington never touched the ground at all. His feet hit what should have been earth, but instead of a firm foundation, it felt like soft butter. He began to sink and sink. He still could not see anything. He tried to untwist the cape but he could make no headway. Finally, Wellington landed with a gentle thump on what seemed to be ground. "Thank you, kind cape," he began. Quickly he found his way out of the twisted fabric. His eyes grew two times bigger with astonishment. "Where am I?"

Wellington looked all around. He appeared to be in a garden of some sort.

But a garden the likes of which he had never seen. It was so very elegant. He thought he had fallen into the earth but the sun was here, all bright and shiny, and nature was evident all around. There were birds in the trees and fine shrubbery and lovely flowers. Wellington even spied what looked like wish flowers tucked here and there. Wellington knew full well their special capacity for granting wishes to children that found a mature one, made a wish, and blew that wish into the wind. If a fairy caught the it, the wish came true. But wish flowers in this mystery garden? Wellington was sure Georg had never been here planting, and since Georg was the keeper of the wish flowers, Wellington had to wonder about the authenticity of this garden. Still it was beautiful. Everywhere there were the most amazing sculptures. It was a rather large garden, defined by a tall hedgerow over which Wellington could not see.

“Well, cape,” muttered Wellington, a bit shaken up by his recent escapade. “What do you suppose this place is?” He stood up and shook the kinks out of his legs. Now that his head was clearing a bit, he noted that nearby a party of some sort or other was going on. There was a band playing and rabbits milling about. The section he was in was off to one side of this event, and there were no rabbits around, besides himself, of course.

“Are you a bunny or a rabbit?” asked a small voice beside him.

Wellington almost jumped out of his fur. He looked down in the direction of the voice. There on a stone stump stood a wee bunny. “Do I look like a bunny?” squeaked Wellington. He truly thought he was quite rabbit like. Only a few knew he was the Easter Bunny. To everyone else he was Wellington Rabbit. Bunnies are young hares. Where they reach bound-about age they have matured into rabbits, after which time to be referred to as a bunny is considered extremely rude and uncouth. But, of course, Wellington was the Easter Bunny to those who knew of his secret, which was why this young hare’s question startled him so.

“No, but you don’t look like a rabbit either. Rabbits don’t wear capes.”

“Well, I am a rabbit, sonny. Wellington Rabbit, to be precise.”

“Wellington Rabbit?” quizzed the bunny. “Then you are a bunny. You can’t fool me, I know that Wellington Rabbit is really Wellington Easter Bunny.”

Wellington turned pale underneath his fur. “Who told you that?”

“Everybody knows about you. Our King, Black Veil, has pictures of you everywhere. We are supposed to let him know the minute that we see you. He wants to feature you in his new book, *Rabbits of Fame and Fortune*.”

This time, Wellington looked sick. “Featured in a book? Pictures of me everywhere? Black Veil is behind this? Is this his garden?” the questions tumbled out on top of each other.

The wee bunny giggled. "Don't be so alarmed. Our king is the best. He is going to be so surprised that I found you. Most rabbits think that bunnies are only good for playing and frolicking about. But I set a sink trap and caught you in it. I'm a very smart bunny. Come on now, follow me."

Wellington hesitated. "No," came his firm reply. "I cannot do that."

"Why not?" asked the bunny.

"Because if Black Veil wants to see me he can come right here."

The little bunny looked abashed. "How do I know you will not run away?"

"Because I give you my word."

"Can I trust you?" wondered the bunny.

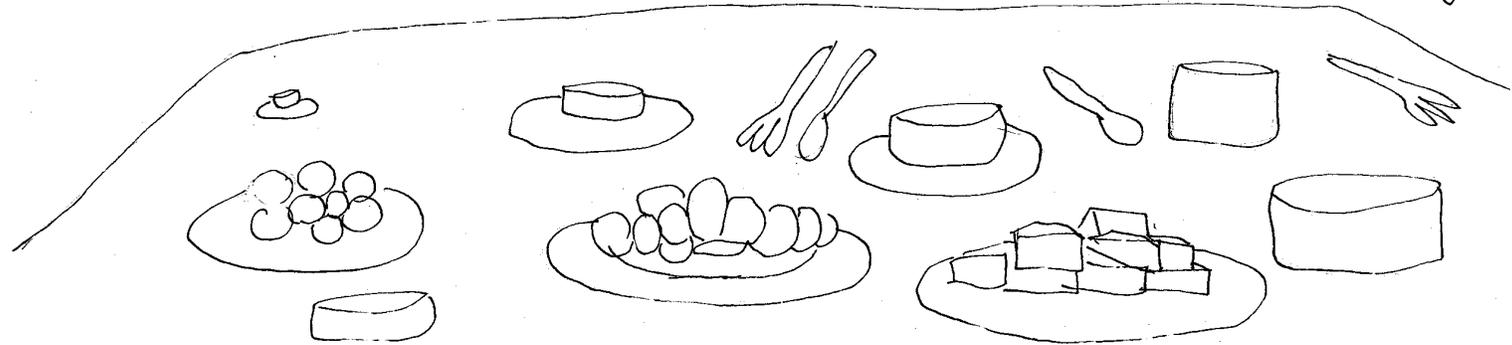
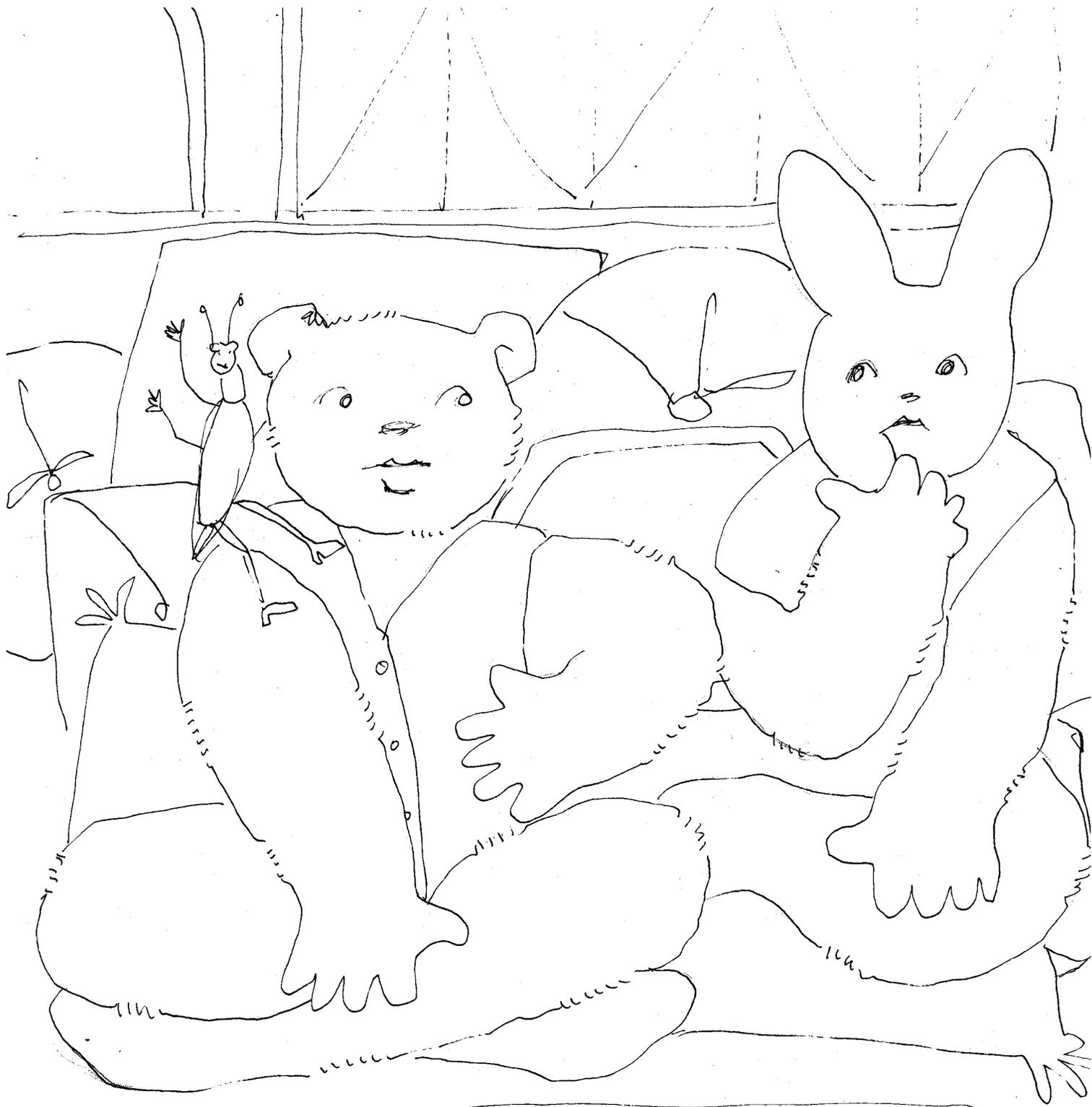
"The word of Wellington is sacred and ever to be trusted," replied Wellington.

"Black Veil is not going to like this."

"Oh, but he will," suggested Wellington. "For you are going to tell him that Wellington Rabbit has come to his secret garden and brought a surprise. One so special that he will have to come see it for himself."

The bunny looked around. "What surprise?"

"Well, now, I cannot show you. It is for Black Veil to decide who gets to see it." As Wellington spoke, he wondered how Black Veil had escaped from the finders-keepers egg in which he and Bethleann had sequestered him. At least they thought it was Black Veil.



Chapter 8

Mr. E Helps Georg

Mr. E's antenna lights provided ample illumination. He took up a post on Georg's shoulder and they hustled along, making good progress. "I'm hungry," moaned Georg after a few minutes.

"Did you bring any food along?" asked Mr. E.

"Nary a thing," wailed Georg. His stomach began to growl. At first it was a low quiet rumble-like growl. Soon it became louder and much more pronounced. Finally it became downright noisy.

"Georg, you must do something," declared Mr. E.

"I cannot help it," whined Georg. "Only food will abate this voluminous tide of noise." He began to slow his pace. "I feel faint."

"Georg, stop," demanded Mr. E. "We have no time for such shenanigans."

"It is out of my control," cried Georg, clutching his stomach. "Do you have any food with you? Anything at all?"

Mr. E hopped off of Georg's shoulder and turned to face him. "Where do you suppose I would carry any food?" he replied.

"Under your wings," whispered Georg hopefully. But truly, he had to admit to himself that slender Mr. E in his black skin suit had no place for anything extra like food. He shrugged his sagging shoulders. He fell to his knees. "Go on without me. I cannot take another step."

"Of course you can," infused Mr. E. "You simply must. That girl, what's her name? Bethie Ann needs your help."

"It's Bethleann," corrected Georg. "You're right. She needs me." He struggled to his feet. "Maybe if I take it slowly". He placed one paw on the wall and shook his head. "I feel so dizzy."

"You can do this, Georg," urged Mr. E, hopping back up on Georg's shoulder. "Take a deep breath and think about finding Bethie Ann."

"Bethleann!" snapped Georg, and with that he surged forward at such a fast pace Mr. E had to hang on for dear life to keep from falling off. They took a course that veered and turned much too often, if you asked Mr. E, which nobody did. He was slung from left to right so many times he finally quit counting. He tried to talk to Georg but his voice fell on deaf ears.

Finally, they came to a halt at the start of a long passageway. "How did you know which way to go?" asked Mr. E.

"Food, my good man. Could you not smell food?"

Mr. E was amazed. He could smell nothing. “What about food, besides the fact that you are hungry?”

“Well, I figure where there’s food, there’s folks, and maybe we can uncover some information about Bethleann.”

“And eat,” added Mr. E.

“And eat,” agreed Georg. Just then his stomach growled the loudest growl yet.

“Who goes there?” called a voice from the end of the passageway.

“Umm, who wants to know?” inquired Georg.

“Rather gutsy of you, ol’ chap,” Mr. E muttered under his breath.

“Hush now,” returned Georg.

“You are in the domain of Black Veil,” the voice was approaching the point where they stood. “Explain yourself.” It belonged to a hefty gray rabbit. He was not so much big in stature as, well, just plain large in size.

Georg began stalling until his thoughts could clear, for which he would most definitely need food. “We are lost and are in dire need of food. We have been wandering for a very long time,” he fibbed, which actually did not seem like a fib to him since his stomach felt as if they had been in the caverns for hours and hours.

The hefty gray rabbit softened a bit. He certainly understood the need for food. “That will never do,” he said. “Care for a spot of tea?”

“Would we ever,” grinned Georg, his spirits rising immediately.

The gray rabbit turned, saying “Follow me.” He hopped back down the passageway. Georg, with Mr. E still on his shoulder, followed, glad the pace was slow enough for his depleted body.

At the end of the passage, they passed through a low leather door. It was so low that Georg had to stoop to clear his head. Through the doorway was a small room. In it was a simple wooden table upon which sat a beautiful black porcelain wash basin and matching pitcher. Beside the pitcher were generous black towels. The gray rabbit stopped to wash his paws and clean his whiskers. He indicated that Georg and Mr. E should do the same. Then the three exited through another door into a plush sitting room full of pillows and lounging bolsters. Beyond the room Georg thought he could see a most delightful garden.

“Sit, please,” said the gray rabbit.

Georg was only too glad to do so. Mr. E decided to stay tight on Georg’s shoulder, for the time being anyway. He was not in the dire hunger dilemma that Georg was. Being a cricket, he could eat anything to survive, even though he personally possessed a more cultured palate than the ordinary cricket. Dining on leftovers and paper did not particularly appeal to him.

“Welcome to my home,” said the gray rabbit. “My name is Hearty and you

would be?”

Georg was not quite ready to tell his real name, so he said, “I go by Roger and this is my friend, Bugs.”

“My stars, are you really Roger Rabbit and Bugs Bunny?” said Hearty, smiling that he recognized the two famous rabbits. “Welcome, welcome indeed to my humble home. Fancy, bring out high tea, he called into the kitchen. And be snappy about it.” He turned back to Georg and Mr. E, “Sit down, sit down, you here, Roger, and you there, Bugs.” He was pointing to several very elegant looking cushions.

“But,” began Georg. “We’re not....”

“Now, no protesting. High tea it is for my new rabbit friends. How did you come to be in the caverns? No one uses that back way anymore.”

Georg began to see a plan. Hearty really seemed to think that he and Mr. E were rabbits, and famous rabbits at that.

“We are on a secret mission,” he replied.

“Whoa,” grinned Hearty. “Can I help?”

“Could be,” answered Georg.

As they spoke a small rabbit entered the room and began setting bowls and dishes of all sorts of wonderful delectables on a low table situated in the middle of the room. There were ginger cakes, and apple butter scones, and numerous tea sandwiches with enticing fillings. Next, Fancy brought in the tea. There were pots and pitchers of several teas, both hot and cold. There were small bowls of lump sugar and tiny creamers filled with sweet cream.

“Let’s to tea,” urged Hearty.

Georg was only too happy to comply. Mr. E decided to fix a sampler plate for himself, it all looked so wonderful. Fancy had even found a little tea cup just the right size for him.

It was a wonderful tea. Everyone ate their fill. Dining in the comfort of the plush pillows was too much for Georg. He felt himself nodding off. Soon he was fast asleep. Mr. E, too, felt himself getting very, very tired. He slid into the crook of Georg’s arm and told himself he would close his eyes for just a little moment.



Chapter 9

A Surprise Meeting

"I so socked Black Veil into everland but good," repeated Emily Elf to Bethleann. "The ethereal elf spell is awesome to use. That was my first experience, which was probably why I vanished, too. I have not yet learned the nuances of fine tuning to keep me grounded. I found myself here among all these rabbit creatures. So far nothing I have tried has worked to get me home."

"I got a telebee from you," said Bethleann. "And Wellington did too, I think."

"What's a telebee?" asked Emily.

"You know, a bee gram. Fast communication," answered Bethleann.

"Oh, that is what we call elf sents, but I did not send any type of message. The bees here seem to buzz a different language. I could not get any of them to take notice of me."

"Really," pondered Bethleann, "then who...uh oh...this looks bad."

"Bad?" repeated Emily.

"Emily, why are you not talking with e's?" Bethleann asked suddenly, still deeply concerned about the mysterious telebees.

"I am," replied Emily.

"Not really," returned Bethleann. "Or, at any rate, I do not hear you speak with your favorite letter words."

"Hmmm," said Emily. "If I speak with e words which you do not hear, or if I think I am speaking with e words but am not, then we are as deceived as those rabbits who take us for hare creatures."

"And don't forget the telebees," reminded Bethleann. "If you did not send them, who did? Nothing is as it seems, it seems."

"Emily, the sooner we leave this place, as beautiful as it is, the better for us."

"Agreed. I will try again to transmit a help signal to the elves," said Emily. She began humming a quiet tune. She hummed for several minutes. "Funny, the elves do not usually respond via transmission. They usually form a help force and proceed to the site with all speed. But now I am getting a signal of some sort. I cannot really make out what it is telling me."

"Maybe it is not the elves," suggested Bethleann.

"Oh, you could be right," said Emily as she stopped her humming. "Perhaps we should try something else."

"Let's walk around the edge of this garden," said Bethleann. "Hopefully, a

thought will come to us.” The two girls began strolling the perimeter of the garden. A few rabbits were also strolling out of the way of the main thicket of rabbits. Bethleann and Emily could hear the party laughter and merriment as they walked.

“It sure sounds like a fun party,” said Emily, a bit wistfully. “I really like parties.”

“Me too,” said Bethleann. “You know, I have a ticket that will get us into the main event. Perhaps we should see what it is all about.”

“Yes, let’s, since these hares think that we are one of them.”

Emily and Bethleann started walking toward the party sounds. As they rounded a path in the bend, Bethleann gasped, “That rabbit over there looks like Wellington from the back. I would recognize his cape anywhere. But it looks like he is doing....the bunny hop!” The rabbit that looked like Wellington was leading a group of young bunnies in a dance that looked very much like the bunny hop.

“Remember, things are not as they seem here,” cautioned Emily.

“True enough,” agreed Bethleann. They girls carefully approached the dancing group. When they were within hopping distance of the leader, the rabbit abruptly looked their way. He started to say something but his mouth closed in astonishment. Then he said, “Bethleann, is that you?” He stopped dancing and all the bunnies crashed into each other quite unexpectedly. There were bunny tangles everywhere. It was a happy group, though. They laughed and began untangling themselves.

“Wellington! It is you,” cried the relieved girl. “Georg and I have been so worried about you. Did you come here through the closet?”

“No. I was vortexed through a sinkhole.” He turned to the bunnies and suggested that they might find someone else to play with while he visited with his friends. They hopped away quite gleefully. Then he turned to the girl beside Bethleann. “And might this be the lost Emily Elf?” inquired Wellington, referring to the small girl figure with Bethleann.

Bethleann smiled, “Yes, I found her, or rather, she found me. We are trying to figure a way out of this place which, as nice as it appears, seems to be a construction of Black Veil.”

“You are right. It is his personal garden. I have been speaking with one of his younger bunnies. Black Veil is due here momentarily. I was entertaining those young bunnies while I waited for his majesty. Kept my nerves calm, you know.”

“Black Veil, here?” gasped both girls.

“Okay, I’m gone,” replied Emily very nervously. “One meeting with him was quite enough.” She turned to leave.

“Where are you going?” asked Bethleann.

“Anywhere away from here,” replied Emily edging away from the two friends.

“Please, trust Wellington,” begged Bethleann. “He is very knowledgeable about Black Veil and surely has a plan.”

Wellington grimaced at Bethleann’s confidence. He had no plan at all. Even though he was getting rather used to flying by the seat of his pants, rather like the early human airplane pilots. They were Wellington’s heroes. In their day, before sophisticated instruments were developed, those pilots had little to go on but the feel of the plane’s reaction to their actions at the controls. They felt this quite literally in the largest point of contact which was, of course, the seat of their pants. Now days the phrase meant to do something without planning, or to figure things out as you went along, or even to change course in mid-stream; all three of which were liberally used by Wellington. Still, he could not begin to confess to Bethleann that he had no plan. Her confidence was so sincere. Wellington started to say something vague when into their corner of the garden hopped the little bunny.

“King Veil cannot come here. He requests your presence at his banquet table,” he said. Then, turning toward the girls, he said to Bethleann, “Who are you? Wellington’s sister? Your ears are very pretty.”

Bethleann laughed - her hair again. “Not quite,” she replied.

“You look somewhat like that Elf girl, that everyone is looking for.” The bunny directed these word toward Emily. She shuddered. “I sent a telebee from her to entice the Wellington Rabbit here. I am a clever bunny.” He faced Wellington. “Come with me. The king waits.” To the two girls he said, “You shall remain here.”

Bethleann looked chagrined. She started to protest. Wellington held up his paw. “It will be alright,” he said and winked at her. Behind his back he indicated that they should follow him at a safe distance.

Bethleann mouthed, “Okay,” and cautioned Emily with a slight shake of her head to keep quiet.

Wellington bowed to the little bunny and they both exited for the party. Bethleann, still cautioning quiet, waved the stone ticket in the air so that Emily would remember, and they quietly followed along at a safe distance.



Chapter 10

The King's Picnic

Wellington and the little bunny traveled along at a fair clip. "Black Veil is very pleased you are here," beamed the little bunny. "He is very anxious to interview you for his book." Wellington did not respond. He was testing the seat of his pants. "Aren't you excited?" continued the little bunny.

"Not really," replied Wellington. "I like my privacy."

"But I thought you would be so pleased," the little bunny was confused. "Black Veil said that you were so very, very anxious to be interviewed. That is why I set my traps for you."

"Traps?" quizzed Wellington.

"Well, yes. I could not be sure how to catch you, so I set several traps for you in your warren."

"Oh, goodness," declared Wellington. "That is not a good plan. Who knows who or what might get caught in your trap, a baby or a mother or anything?"

"Oh, I see," said the little bunny. "I had not thought of that."

"Exactly the trouble these days," said Wellington. "Many folks act before they think." The little bunny started to weep. "Now, now," said Wellington, "don't cry. You thought you were doing a good deed. We'll fix those traps so they do not harm anyone."

"How?" asked the little bunny.

"Never mind now. Look, here we are at the party." Wellington and the little bunny had arrived at the banquet and made their way to the king's table. It was splendidly set with enormous bowls of elegant fruit, vegetables and edible flower salads. They were arranged by color and the entire table looked like a gorgeous rainbow. In the middle was an ice sculpture of Black Veil.

The little bunny took Wellington to the center of the table where Black Veil was sitting. "Wellington Rabbit, welcome to my party," boomed the deep bass voice. "Please be seated."

"Well, I really cannot stay," started Wellington.

"Nonsense, I insist." Wellington noted the guards at the ready to help him make the right decision.

"Very well, but only for a moment." The little bunny started to take a seat beside Wellington.

"Be off with you now, boy," ordered Black Veil.

"But," began the little bunny.

“You heard me. Leave instantly. Guards!”

“There is no need for that,” said Wellington. “My friend will be going now.” He turned to the little bunny, “The girls at this party are very beautiful, are they not? Perhaps you should go dance with the prettiest ones.” He winked at the little bunny. For a moment the little bunny looked puzzled, and then it hit him. Wellington meant for him to find the pretty girls that had been with him.

“You are so right,” he said, and bowed to Black Veil as he backed away from the table, “Your majesty.” In a flash he was back at the entrance and down the path. Of course he found the girls immediately because they were not that far behind.

“Mr. Wellington needs our help,” he cried. “I have done a terrible thing bringing him here to Black Veil.” He was extremely distraught. “Whatever shall we do?”

“It will work out,” soothed Bethleann. The little rabbit shook his head sadly, He did not see how. By this time the three were near the entrance to the party. It was almost time for the banquet to start and there was a large crowd of rabbits without tickets trying to get in at the last moment.

“Bethleann, is that really you?” hollered a voice close at hand.

Bethleann whirled around. “Georg?” she said incredulously. “How did you get here?”

“We followed your trail, but we stopped to eat and I think I was drugged or something. If it hadn’t been for Mr. E here intercepting a signal from your Emily Elf I would still be out cold.” Bethleann looked quizzically at the cricket creature beside Georg.

Georg noted her confusion. “That’s right. You have not met Mr. E. He helped me get here to rescue you. At least we figured you came this way when we saw the closet door open.”

“Yes, now I remember,” said Bethleann. “I woke from a dream and plunged into the closet to find....say, how did that tunnel door get unlocked?”

“I did it,” said the little bunny sadly. “I set a sinkhole trap and unlocked the tunnel door. And sent fake telebees to entice Mr. Wellington. I needed to catch him. Well, I thought I did.”

“Fool. Wellington can unlock the tunnel door himself, and who are you anyway and why would you catch Wellington?” growled Georg.

“I did not know that.” said the bunny, a quiver in his voice. “It was a mistake to try and catch Wellington. Now I see that. Black Veil tricked me.” He hung his head in shame.

Georg felt sorry for the little tyke. “That’s okay, laddie. We all make mistakes. The thing is now to rescue Wellington and go home.”

“Well, I can get four of us into the party,” said Bethleann. She held up the stone ticket.

“Mr. E can hide in my pocket,” said Georg. Swiftly Mr. E slid into Georg’s pocket right next to his glasses.

“Georg, what is this rock thing that is rubbing my legs,” grumbled Mr. E, none too happy about hiding in a pocket even though he knew it was necessary.

Georg felt in the pocket and pulled out the round disc he had found in the study. “My transport disc!” cried the little bunny. “I must have dropped it when I was setting the traps. With this you can go anywhere! You are saved. Follow me.” He gleefully danced to the head of the long line. “We have tickets,” he said pointing to Bethleann. She showed the attendant the stone.

“Very lucky for you,” said the attendant. “Most of these rabbits can only wish to get in.” The group hardly heard her. They were rushing for the head table and Wellington.

“Wellington, quick, over here,” called the little bunny.

“One moment,” said Wellington to Black Veil. “I believe my assistant has important news for you.” Wellington rose from his chair and joined the group gathered to one side of the massive table.

“When I say dive, do so without hesitation,” the little bunny was giving hasty instructions. “Dive for the open square in the middle of the coin. I have set its coordinates for the cottage in the warren.”

“You will come with us?” inquired Wellington.

“I will be truly honored,” grinned the little bunny. “Hurry now.!” Upon his instruction each, one at a time, aimed true for the middle of the coin. And each, one at a time, safely landed in the study of Bethleann’s cottage. The little bunny was the last to dive and as soon as he landed in the study he sealed the coin and handed it to Wellington for safe keeping. “I am done with magic for awhile.”

“My goodness,” said Emily “It is good to be here and not there. Is anyone else hungry?” They all laughed, knowing she was already in Georg’s good graces.

Emily and the little bunny offered to cook for their new friends. Mr. E set the table. In a short time a tasty meal was ready for consumption. The friends ate and drank and shared their stories which, together with happy chatter, lasted far into the night.

Epilogue

Everyone slept in late the next day and finally roused themselves for a midday brunch at Wellington's cottage. Emily stayed with Bethlann, Mr. E with Georg and the little bunny snuggled into the spare bedroom at Wellington's.

He and Wellington stirred up quite a nice brunch for the group which was only too happy to partake of the steaming hot biscuits, fried apples and ice cold orange juice.

Afterwards everyone retired to the back yard where there were rocking chairs aplenty and hammocks strung in the trees. "Say," said Bethlann, "has anyone figured out yet how Black Veil got back to his lair? Emily's charm was very powerful."

The little rabbit looked sheepish. "I may have helped," he mumbled.

"Helped?" the rest asked in unison.

"Yes, I was so sure Black Veil would make me an important bunny if I helped him get his book finished. I did not do much though, the elf charm is quite powerful. You are very clever," he said to Emily. She grinned, so proud of her first successful venture. "I just tweaked the pearl a bit. But I did not release him from the oyster. No, sir. Emily's charm was too strong for me." He looked in her direction again, eyes full of admiration.

"Then I am the one who started the chain reaction," mused Bethlann.

"But you did not know," said Wellington, "which is probably how the release came about. Through pure innocence. Do not frown. We are all here now thanks to little bunny."

"Yes, we are," agreed Georg. "But little bunny will not do. This lad needs a name."

"Yes!" they all shouted.

"What do you think, little bunny?" asked Wellington.

"I would like your name, sir," said the little bunny, shyly.

"Well," said Wellington. "We'll see if that can be arranged."