

INSIDE OUT

Chapters 1-5

A Brief Introduction

INSIDE OUT is the first book of the 'Far End' trilogy. It begins in an imaginary place, the Inside, where animals live. The story follows an inquisitive youngster, Not-Bear, in a quest for his real name. He doesn't feel part of the comfortable world he inhabits, and wants answers to his many questions, but no one seems able to give them. His friend and tutor, Bear, tries, but his adherence to the rules and rituals of the Inside hinders him.

On the cusp of his coming-of-age, Not-Bear decides to leave the safe haven of the Inside and strike out alone. His quest takes him through the dense Forest onto a vast Outside, where a City of Men lies in the shadows of distant mountains. To reach it he must fight hyenas, cross barren plains, and navigate underground caverns in the unlikely company of a rabbit, Map, and a man, Jod.

Unknown to him, Not-Bear has a central part to play in a shift of power taking place in his world. A cryptic prophecy has predicted his appearance on the Outside, anticipated by the power-hungry King Barnabas, despotic ruler of the City, and his mysterious shape-shifting cohort Melos. Will these two succeed in using him for their own ends in their battle for supremacy? Or will the forces of good, on the side of the animals, defeat an ancient evil that threatens to engulf their world?

A Walk in the Forest

Bear went over like a felled oak. One moment he was upright, the next he was on his knees. He got up and picked off some leaves that were sticking to his fur. Then he looked to see what had tripped him.

It was the entrance to a small burrow, now partly destroyed.

'Oh dear,' he said and peered into what was left of it. He called down the hole, 'Is anyone there?'

No reply.

He rubbed his knee and brushed himself down.

'You should be more careful,' said a voice behind him.

Startled, Bear turned round to see a crow staring down from a tree at the side of the path. 'Something lives in there,' it said.

Bear looked from the crow to the burrow and back again. 'Sorry, it's my fault, I wasn't looking where I was going. Do you know who they are?'

'No idea,' the crow said.

'Oh. Well, if you see them please apologise. It's just that I was looking for my friend, he's been running off all morning, chasing scents and trails that shouldn't concern him.'

The crow pulled a feather out of its wing and watched it drift to the floor. 'What does he look like?'

Bear held a paw about two feet from the ground. 'He's young, about this high, goes on all fours, with a straight tail, and...'

'Yes?'

'Good teeth.' He didn't like to describe them as sharp.

'Haven't seen anything like that, but something did move a while ago, down there.' The crow pointed a wing down the path.

'Thank you,' said Bear. In his experience crows talked too much, and he didn't want to encourage this one. He set off down the path. The crow flew off its branch and started strutting along beside him.

'Can I ask what you are doing out in the Forest?'

'We're on our way to the Occasion.'

The crow nodded. 'Thought so. Don't see many of your sort out here. You should tell your friend not to wander off from the path, this isn't the Inside you know.'

'I have told him; he takes no notice. It's his first time.'

'Well it could be his last, if he isn't more careful. There are lots of things around here that don't like being disturbed.'

Bear didn't need reminding of the dangers that lurked among the shadows. He called down the path, and a faint echo came back from the depths of the trees.

'I wouldn't do that either,' said the crow.

Bear stopped and listened for movement, but could only hear the wind whispering in the leaves. Some pigeons were cooing in a distant treetop. He sniffed for a scent, but the smell of

wet leaves and damp vegetation smothered everything.

Suddenly the crow flew up and wheeled back along the path, squawking as it went. Bear turned again to see Not-Bear, nose to the ground, sniffing next to a bush behind him.

'There you are,' Bear huffed. 'I wish you would do as I tell you. If you go running off every five minutes we'll never get to the Occasion.'

Not-Bear watched the crow disappear into the sky. 'What did he want?' Then he noticed Bear was scowling and wagging a paw at him.

'Sorry, Bear,' he said.

It was autumn, and the trees were starting to lose their leaves. The rich reds, russets and tans of their decline all made the landscape glow. Bear didn't notice. All he could see were the dark spaces between trees that stretched away on either side of them. He peered into those shady depths and shivered. He didn't like the autumn, and he didn't like being out in the Forest. He preferred warm summer days lazing on the Inside, doing nothing in particular.

This was the day of an Occasion, however, and one did what was needed to get through it.

Not-Bear, in contrast, didn't mind the damp or the darkness. He was enjoying himself. The strange scents and zig-zag trails intrigued him, while the breeze had delivered piles of slippery wet leaves for him to run through.

He dodged in and out of the bushes at the side of the path, turning over leaves and twigs with his snout. As he did so, Bear was aware of a strange noise.

'What's that?' he asked.

'What?'

'That noise. Is it you?'

'Might be,' Not-Bear replied. 'Why?'

'No reason,' Bear said, although he felt he had plenty. 'Sounds strange, that's all.'

Not-Bear carried on rooting about, and the sound got a bit louder. To Bear it was a bit like wheezing, but with squeaks added in. Finally, after they turned into another, wider path, he said, 'Can't you do something else?'

Not-Bear looked up at him. 'Like what?'

'Like something that doesn't involve making noise.' He remembered what the crow had said. 'And stop moving around so much, you might disturb things that don't want to be disturbed.'

'Like what?'

'Anything.'

They walked side by side for a while. Not-Bear drifted to the side of the path again and started making the same sounds. Bear called him. Not-Bear loped back.

'What are you doing?' Bear said.

'I'm whistling.'

'Humph,' said Bear. 'Doesn't sound like it. I thought you had something stuck in your throat.'

'Well, I haven't. I was whistling. A tune.'

'A tune? But you don't know any tunes.'

'I do, I'm whistling one, aren't I?'

'Humph,' Bear said.

The path began to widen. Where the sun was able to reach its edge, low bushes of hazel and hawthorn spread. Thick, wiry grass grew between them and around the trunks of the taller trees.

'Where did you learn it then?' Bear asked.

'What?'

'That tune.'

'I heard it somewhere I suppose.'

'Really, and where was that? Because I don't recognise it, and I've been with you all the time.'

'It seems like forever,' Not-Bear muttered.

'What's that?'

'Nothing,' said Not-Bear, 'but you're right, I didn't hear it anywhere, I made it up.'

'Rubbish,' said Bear, 'no-one makes up tunes.' But his friend's words started a tingling in his stomach, reminiscent of the times when he peered into the dark spaces between the trees. A cool wind always seemed to be blowing out, mixing the scent of pine with the hint of something mysterious.

He shivered, knowing the nearer they came to the Occasion the nearer they came to the Outside. He had been told stories when he was young, warning him of the dangers beyond the Forest. Where it was said creatures lived who ate each other, or anything else they could find. The music associated with those stories had been handed down on the Inside, passed from generation to generation. The tunes were sometimes hummed or sung as the animals went about their business. What troubled Bear most was, he didn't recognise the one Not-Bear was whistling.

'Have you been sneaking off at night, into the Forest, against all the Rules?' he asked. 'Well, have you?' He stopped and started to wag his paw again.

Not-Bear looked up. 'No, I haven't,' he said. 'I told you, I made it up.'

'Humph,' said Bear again. 'Don't forget, Rules are there for you to follow, not ignore.'

'Don't believe me then if you don't want to,' Not-Bear said.

They carried on walking again. 'Sometimes, Bear, you can be very...!' Not-Bear ran up the path. Then, as Bear walked up he said, '...pompous.'

'Really!'

Yet Bear was too busy thinking about things to get angry. Had Not-Bear been visiting the fringes of the Forest? Chipmunks, badgers and moles lived there, underground animals that had their own way of looking at life.

As Bear went past Not-Bear turned his head to look at him. Then he ran down the path to catch up.

'You were right, Bear,' he said.

'I knew it,' Bear sniffed. 'Made up indeed.'

'An otter taught it to me, I didn't sneak off at night, honest.'

'An otter? And where did she hear it?'

'She said the river sang it to her.'

'The river,' Bear said slowly. 'What nonsense.'

'Well, maybe the wind made it, blowing over the water. I don't know the details, I only wanted to learn it.'

'And what did she call it?' Bear asked.

'Call it? I don't understand. A song.'

'No, no,' Bear said, but then he remembered Not-Bear still knew little about Naming. It was one of the oldest Secrets, which he hadn't got round to teaching him yet. So he just said, 'I'm glad you told me the truth, in the end. That's always the best option. Lies always lead to more lies, until you get tangled up in a web of them.'

They set off again, this time without talking. But something troubled Bear, and after a while he asked, 'Are you sure the otter didn't call her song something?'

Not-Bear sighed. Since he really had made the tune up, there was no question of the otter calling it anything. But Bear was acting on false information, which was what he wanted to hear, as opposed to the truth, which he was deaf to.

He carried on the pretence. 'Positive,' he said.

Distracted, Not-Bear almost trod on a creature that burst out of the trees to his left and scrambled across the path. Watching it disappear into the bushes, he said, 'Why would she need to call her tune anything? What difference would it make?'

'All the difference in the world,' Bear said. 'Everything must have a name.'

'Why?'

'So we can identify them. Names are the way we know what a thing is. Whether it's a tree or a fungus, it needs a name.'

'Or a song.'

'Exactly.'

Not-Bear stopped in the shaded corridor of trees, the tall trunks towering above him. Bear carried on before he realised he was on his own. He turned round and with slow deliberate steps walked back.

'We can't stop here,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Because it's dark and damp.'

'So? Not-Bear countered.

'And dangerous,' Bear added.

That got Not-Bear walking again, quickly this time. 'If I had made up that tune, the one the otter taught me, could I have named it?'

Bear hurried to keep up. 'Well, there's no reason why you can't name your own tune. But animals and things need proper names.'

'Why?'

'I told you, so we can identify them.'

'But they're still there, aren't they, before they have their names?'

'Of course.'

'And afterwards, they haven't changed because of them?'

'Well, not exactly.'

'What do you mean, not exactly?'

Bear was nervous and kept looking into the trees, as they turned right onto another path and continued. Their pace slowed.

'The way we think of them has changed,' he said.

'What does that mean?'

'Well, to understand things, we have to know what they are. We give things names so that when others look at the same thing, they know what it is.'

'All right, so what was that creature that ran across the path earlier. That I almost trod on?'

'You know what it was. A squirrel.'

'So I do know about names!'

'I never said you didn't know about names. I'm trying to explain why we need them.'

'Who named the squirrel then?'

'I don't know. The Elders probably.'

'When?'

'A long time ago.'

'Mm.' Not-Bear paused. 'So, who named the Elders?'

'What? That's not important.'

'It is,' Not-Bear continued, 'because there must have been something that named everything else in the first place.'

'I'm not sure about that.' Bear was getting flustered. 'That's one of the Secrets,' he muttered. 'Part of The Great Story. Really, you shouldn't question these things, sometimes it's important just to listen.'

They came to a clearing off the main avenue, and Bear said it was time to stop for a break. In truth, he was glad of the distraction.

'Oh good,' Not-Bear said. 'I'm starving. What's there to eat?'

'Berries and bugs,' Bear replied.

'Ugh,' said Not Bear. He hated them

Berries and Bugs

They sat on the grass in the clearing and Bear untied two green packets from the pouch round his waist. Not-Bear took one in his mouth, laid it on the grass and opened it with his teeth. A large leaf unfolded to reveal an array of dead insects and shiny berries.

'That's disgusting,' he said.

Bear was already munching away, scanning the ground and nearby trees. 'There's a fungus over there if you don't like that,' he said, pointing at a large slab of bracket fungus on a nearby tree.

That was another thing that confused Not-Bear – the food they ate. On the Inside they had fruit, roots, lichens and leaves most of the time. But when they went anywhere they took bugs, dried berries and hard seeds, which hurt his teeth. Bear said it was because you couldn't trust any of the stuff that grew outside King's Oak. Except for fungus it seemed.

'I don't like fungus either,' Not-Bear announced. He was hungry though, so he started to eat.

'There'll be more food later, at the Occasion,' Bear told him. 'Much better stuff. This is to keep us going.'

Not-Bear nodded, trying to work a wing case out from between his teeth with his tongue. That was one problem with bugs, among many others. Like burrowing in your fur and biting you. Or hanging on your eyelids when you were asleep. He did long for other types of food, but never mentioned it to anyone on the Inside, not even Bear. Although every now and then, when he saw a mouse, rat or even a squirrel, he felt a strange urge. Was there something wrong with him?

The home they had left earlier that morning was light, cosy and safe. A real contrast to the dense, dark and – hadn't Bear said it? – dangerous forest all around them. On the Inside, the Elders organised most things for the animals. They told them where to be and even what to do. This coming Occasion was an example of that. It happened at the same time every year, and every Insider was expected to be there. Everyone of age, that is, and for the past two years Not-Bear had been one of those left on the Inside, too young to face the arduous journey through the Forest. Yet unlike the other animals he wasn't happy being told what to do. In truth, though the Inside was his home, he had never felt settled there.

As he sat on his haunches in the clearing, the trees rose high above him. Their shadows stretched out across ground strewn with dead branches and fir cones. He saw Bear had been to retrieve the tree fungus and was wandering back.

'Wanna beet?' he called as he walked, waving it in the air. Not-Bear shook his head.

'Please yourself.' Bear came and sat next to Not-Bear. He carried on nibbling at the fungus.

'Bear?' Not-Bear asked after a while.

'Yaaas?' Bear mumbled, mouth still full of his dessert.

'You know the squirrel that ran across our path this morning?'

'Mmmm.'

'You said it existed before you named it, didn't you?'

'But I didn't name it, I only told you its name when you asked me.'

'But did it exist as a squirrel before that?'

'Of course,' Bear said.

'Then why bother to name anything? It doesn't seem to make any make any difference to them.'

Bear put the fungus on the ground next to him and scratched his chin. 'Not-Bear, I've told you, we name things so we can identify them.'

'But why? They're still there, whether they have a name or not.'

'Think what I'm saying. I said "squirrel" to you, so you didn't have to think, "funny looking red creature with bushy tail that climbs up trees". That's why we give things names. It's easier then describing them.' He picked up his fungus.

Not-Bear paused to take the words in. 'But I haven't got a name. Does that mean I don't exist?'

'Of course not. And I've told you before, you're not old enough.'

'So I still exist, even if I don't know what I am.'

'You're an Insider, and you are Not-Bear. That's enough, for now.'

'Then why bother to give me another one?'

'It's obvious, isn't it?' Bear spluttered.

'Not to me.'

'It's all part of growing up. You're given your name, other things have names, you learn their names, so you learn about things.'

'That doesn't explain why I haven't got a proper name, when even a stupid squirrel has one.'

'You will get a proper name,' Bear said. 'I promise.'

'When?'

'Soon,' Bear said.

'When?'

'Soon, perhaps very soon.'

To his surprise, Not-Bear sprang up and began running round the clearing. He criss-crossed the ground, stirring up leaves and scattering pine cones as he went.

'Do you mean at the Occasion?' he panted as he rushed past.

'No, I mean, I don't know,' Bear yelled after him. 'I shouldn't say, the Elders told me to —,' he began, but Not-Bear didn't hear him. He was too busy running and rolling in the dirt, thinking of the great moment when he would get a real name.

'Thank you,' he barked as he went around Bear a second time.

'Oh dear,' said Bear, as he swallowed down the last of his fungus. 'Oh dear,' and he shook his head.

He got up and pushed the remains of their lunch under a pile of leaves. Not-Bear was waiting for him on the edge of the glade, panting after his exertions. They plunged back into the trees. But soon the path they were on widened, the trees grew further apart, and the sky opened above them.

The sun came out and the temperature rose. One by one or in small groups, other animals stepped out of the trees and adjoining paths. They started to walk with them.

Not-Bear looked up at Bear, but he just lifted his chin as if to say, "Carry on and be quiet". Not-Bear couldn't run around as much, so he stayed with Bear, and watched the newcomers as they hopped, walked, or ran alongside.

A clatter in the trees to the left of them drew attention. A group of monkeys had bumped into each other and fallen through the branches. They scattered some rooks, who rose protesting into the sky. The noise echoed on for a while.

'What's going to happen at the Occasion?' Not Bear asked as more creatures joined them on the path.

'You'll see,' said Bear, moving out of the way of a goat who barged out from some bushes.

'Sorry,' it bleated.

'Yes, but what will I see?' Not-Bear persisted.

'It's an Occasion,' said Bear. 'You know well enough. A celebration of the passing year.'

'But what's going to happen there?'

'You'll see,' Bear said again.

'How long is it going to last?'

'As long as it takes. Stop asking questions, you'll find out soon enough.'

'How long have we been celebrating the Occasions then?'

'Oh, for years and years. Since before the time of Reed.'

'That's a long time.'

'Hah,' said Bear. 'You have been paying attention to my lessons after all.'

'I know what the Occasions are,' Not-Bear said. 'I don't know what they're for.'

'I've told you all you need to know.'

'So, who invented them?'

'No one invented the Occasions. They existed long before anything else.'

'But how do you know they existed?'

'The Elders of course, know they existed.'

'But how do the Elders--?'

'Shush!' Bear hissed, a little too firmly. Some nearby animals looked across at them.

'All these questions will get you into trouble,' Bear whispered.

Before Not Bear could reply they emerged from the path into a wide avenue. Not only was it wide, but there were hundreds of animals packing it. A bobbing swell of chattering, intent creatures moving across in front of them.

'At last, Holkelm Avenue,' Bear said, as the tide of animals swept by. 'What a stirring sight.'

Broken clouds scattered sunlight across the avenue as the animals jostled along. Horses, oxen and goats moved along in the middle, while families of deer trotted by on either side. Beavers, otters, stoats, prairie dogs and jackrabbits found what space they could. Boars, rats, and dogs darted about.

The air was full of raucous noise, a crescendo of talking and squawking. There were swarms of birds in the trees, flitting from canopy to canopy. Buzzards and ravens cruised high above the vegetation. Flocks of finches fluttered from bush to bush. All the animals of the Inside were converging onto the path now. All on one road and with one aim.

To get to the Occasion.

Bear and Not-Bear were soon in among the crowd. Bear was hurrying along on the side of the avenue. Not-Bear loped alongside him. Animals jostled for position: 'Look where you're going.' 'Mind out!' 'Hold on there!'

Then a goat stepped on Not Bear's foot.

'Ow!'

'Sorry, didn't see you there,' the goat said as it moved off into the crowd. Not-Bear stopped to lick his paw, and a black boar bumped into him.

'Hey!'

The boar backed off when he saw what he had bumped into. He stared at Not-Bear.

'What's going on here?' A horse had stopped too. Then it saw Not-Bear. 'Are you with us?' it asked.

Not-Bear looked at him.

'He bumped into me,' the boar squealed.

'I didn't. You bumped into me. A goat trod on my paw, I was licking it and –'

'What part are you from?' The horse demanded.

'What part of what?'

'The Inside,' the horse said.

'None of your business.'

'Don't be cheeky, it is my business, I am charged with ensuring a smooth passage to the Occasion. Again, what part of the Inside are you from?'

'Well, if you want the truth, I don't think I'm from the Inside at all.'

The boar gasped. 'Not from the Inside, then you must be –'

'An Outsider,' said the horse.

'An Outsider!' croaked the boar.

'No, I'm not an Outsider, I simply said –'

'I'm here, I'm here,' said a familiar voice and Bear bustled into view.

'Do you know him?' The horse turned his attention to Bear.

'I'm his tutor. He's with me. He got lost, that's all.'

'He said he wasn't from the Inside.'

'Really! Just having a joke with you. A bad joke it's true. We're from King's Oak. Going to the Occasion like everyone else,' Bear chattered. He reached down and pulled Not-Bear by the ear. The horse and the boar stood aside and watched them leave.

'Stop pulling my ear,' Not-Bear said when they were some way ahead.

'Try not to draw attention to yourself,' Bear said.

'A goat trod on me. The boar knocked me over. I was explaining that to the horse.'

'Well don't explain anything. Answer yes or no if anyone says anything to you. We don't want to attract unnecessary attention. Is that clear?'

'Yes.'

'And don't ever say you're not from the Inside. You will get us into trouble. Clear?'

'Silence.'

'Clear?'

'Yes, Bear,' Not-Bear conceded.

In the Depths of the Trees

'Ow, let me go,' the little vole squealed. It lay on the ground, twisting and writhing, but was trapped on a bed of pine needles, pinned down by the weight of the hyena paw that held it.

'Tang, don't play with your food.' Fleg sat a few yards off, watching.

The vole struggled a little more. Tang looked up, then eased the pressure on its body. The vole made to get up, but Tang pressed down once more.

'Tang,' Fleg growled. The next moment Tang lowered his head and, with a quick snap of his jaws, left the vole lifeless on the floor.

'Spoilsport,' he said.

Fleg got up and left him to his meal. He walked over to Grap, who lay on the forest floor a little way off.

'One otter, two voles, a lizard and six baby frogs,' Grap said as he sat by him. 'Hardly a feast, and the frogs were half-dead anyway.'

'It's getting more difficult,' Fleg said. 'And not the fun it used to be.'

Tang trotted over after a while, licking his lips.

'There's a bit left, if you like,' he said. 'I'm still full of lizard.'

'No thanks,' said Fleg, while Grap shook his head.

'Please yourselves. So, what's next? We really should be moving on.'

'There's no rush,' Fleg said. 'We've got a while till the Occasion starts. The others will be here soon, then we'll see what the Colonel wants us to do.'

The Occasion

As the afternoon lengthened Bear and Not-Bear walked on with the others. Not-Bear's legs had been aching for a while and his head pounded with the chatter of animals. When he tried to talk to Bear some creature would come between them and he would fight to get back alongside. Everyone looked intent, and he could see some smaller animals were struggling. There were young ones among them and Not-Bear wondered if they were going to get their names at the Occasion too.

Then someone shouted, 'Look!' A stag had stopped and was gesturing with a tilt of his antlers ahead of them. A buzz of excitement rippled back through the crowd as they tried to see what it was. Some ran or climbed up nearby trees to get a better look. A cat jumped on the back of an old boar to get a better view. Big bears lifted smaller bears on their shoulders to see what was happening.

Not-Bear, who was too low down to see anything, had to rely on the others for information.

'Look!' 'Look at that.' 'What is it?' came the cries.

'Well?' asked Not-Bear, as Bear craned his neck to find out what was going on.

'I can see some smoke,' Bear said, not to be hurried. Not-Bear could see it too, a distant wisp of grey spiralling up into the sky.

'Is that all?' he asked.

'It's a sign the Occasion is starting,' said Bear.

Soon they came to a huge clearing among the trees. As they arrived the crowd was already filling an area so big Not-Bear thought it must be the Outside itself. Bear, although it was four years since his own coming-of-age, was still impressed. There was Forest on all sides, a forest of dense, straight, emerald-green pines. Ahead of them the huge bowl of land stretched to a distant horizon of trees. They watched as the flood of creatures emptied into it. A bonfire was burning at the very centre of the expanse, the source of the smoke they had seen earlier. But the fire was dwarfed by the immense structure around it, a ring of great slabs of grey stone.

'That's it,' said Bear, 'The ancient site of the Occasions, the Circle.'

Not-Bear whistled through his teeth. 'Who could have built that?' he said.

Bear turned and looked at him.

'I only meant...'

'Not now,' Bear urged, and they carried on down the slope toward the Circle.

The crowd kept filling the clearing as the sky darkened and the Circle loomed ahead. As they edged towards it questions kept firing inside Not-Bear's head. Would the Elders be in the Circle? Who built the fire? Who discovered fire? Who named it? Questions he knew Bear would not want to answer. He thought about asking one of the other creatures, yet many looked at him warily and backed away.

'Bear?'

'Yes,' Bear said.

'Where will we spend the Chilling?'

'On the Inside, as usual,' Bear told him as they found a space on the grass and settled down.

'So we are going back?'

'Of course, tomorrow, the same way as we came. Why?'

'Bear?'

'Yes?'

'Nothing.' He was going to ask why they didn't celebrate the Occasions on the Inside, instead of in the Forest. Yet, looking at the Circle, he could answer that himself. He had never seen anything like it. The walls were archways formed of standing stones. There was a smaller circle inside the large one. Some of the stones of the outer group had further slabs on top of them, alternating with the gaps. In some cases these had fallen off, to lie twisted and broken at the side of the uprights. It was clearly too difficult for the Elders to put them back, to make the pattern whole again. There were no words to describe the thing. Yet one thing bothered him. If the Elders couldn't repair the Circle, how could they have built it? Someone else must have. Was it the same people who had named the Elders? They must have been much bigger, taller than the tallest tree, stronger than the winds of the Chilling. And again, why build it here in the heart of the Forest, so far from the Inside?

He knew the Insiders rarely ventured into the Forest, except for the Occasions. He sensed they didn't enjoy it either, for all they talked about was going home. Whether it was because they were close to the Outside, he didn't know. The Forest was as dark as the Inside was light, as full as the Outside was empty. Bear had taught him as much. But there had only been trees, as far as he could see, in the Forest. Until now.

These were questions for which he had to find answers. Bear wasn't going to give them to him, and he suspected Bear didn't know himself. Then who did? The Elders must know, although no one ever mentioned such things. Or did they answer to someone else, he thought? Someone who had named them, built the Circle and who no longer existed?

He was going to ask about it when the ceremony began. Animals jostled around the Circle or on the long slopes facing it. A hubbub of voices, whispers and the occasional shout filled the air. The experienced among them waited for it to begin. The inexperienced stood in amazement and wonder.

The sun was sinking fast in a blaze of orange, spreading across the horizon to light up the sky. Fingers of flame stretched over their heads and behind them, catching the clouds in a glory of fire. He could see Elders in the centre of the Circle, moving about with purpose. They were tending the burning central pyre. As the crowd looked on, the stones cast shadows from it across the ground, touching the nearest onlookers. Not-Bear looked around-- everywhere faces glowed red and eyes flashed with reflections. Then the sun sank beneath the land and the sky turned to purple and then to black. The only light left was the moon hanging in the sky behind them, and the furious fire that lit the motions of the Elders.

A gentle music filled the clearing. It began as a few chords that snaked and twisted round. They rose into the night air before dropping down and caressing the senses of the onlookers. A melody overlaid it, notes clinging together, chasing each other around, swelling in volume. All the time the fire flashed and sparkled in the centre of the Circle. Not-Bear noticed a few animals moving down the slope to the stones. Youngsters, nudged on by their parents. A few foals, deer, goats, and then he saw smaller creatures almost hidden by the grasses moving in the same

direction. Fire lit their faces as they walked. He looked up at Bear, who had his eyes closed, listening to the music. Why wasn't he guiding Not-Bear down to the stones?

As he watched, one by one animals walked into the Circle. The Elders addressed them in turn as they filed around the inner stones. One or two flinched as the fire spat towards them.

Not-Bear sensed it – this must be the moment he would get his name.

'Bear, Bear!' he nudged his friend to alert him. Bear mumbled something about it not being time.

Time for what, Not-Bear thought? This was his time, he sensed it. So, he strode off toward the Circle on his own. Picking his way among the animals he kept an eye on the Elders. The youngsters he saw earlier were coming out now, bounding up the slopes to their parents. Not-Bear hurried nearer, he couldn't see anyone else going into the Circle. As he got there a throng of bodies was leaning forward to see what was happening. The heat from the fire was intense. He struggled to make a way through, and lost sight of the Elders.

'Wait for me,' he cried. At last, stumbling to the front of the crowd, he faced the Circle.

Something was wrong.

What had been visible before was now shrouded in smoke. He couldn't see anything. Beside him others had started to draw back. In front of them the smoke, like a dense, dark mist, was rolling out of the Circle toward them. It swept and billowed up, a wild grey cloud. The strange melody was still playing, but now a different sound began to fill the arena. A wailing, ethereal music. As the mist billowed the music changed, wavering and pulsing. Sometimes it was a squeal, sometimes a hum, while behind it a pulse began. It became a rhythm that the nearest animals began to sway to, lifting a paw here, a hoof there, tapping in time to the beat.

Not-Bear edged back up the slope, confused. He ran among the swaying hordes, searching for Bear. The animals were matching the strident rhythms with nodding heads. The beat of each heart seemed to mesh with the music. When Not-Bear reached his friend, he saw his eyes were closed. He was swaying from side to side in synchrony with the others. Not-Bear tried to resist the music, because he didn't understand what was going on. Yet against his will he found himself beginning to dance too.

As the music continued a distant drumbeat began. Colours flashed above the smoke pouring from the Circle. The mist covered the lower slopes now, and some animals were almost hidden in it. The music boomed through the clearing, stirring the blood which pounded in their ears. Animals leapt and danced as one, hearts pulsing to the beat. They danced on, even though exhausted, hungry and afraid. They danced on, forgetting their fear of the dark, the open spaces and approaching night. They danced, while the moon hung over their heads in a clear night sky, the stars a reflection of the red, orange and white lights that flashed above the stones.

More smoke billowed, then the sky was lit by a flash of red fire. From the centre of the Circle a plume of intense red smoke rose above the clearing. It ascended, caught by the breeze, and spread over the crowd. There were groans and whelps of delight. Everything was in motion as the lights above the Circle flashed and fired. Now a green plume rose above them, followed by blue, then purple.

As legs grew tired, the music relaxed, changing its rhythm to accommodate fatigue. But once it had slowed to allow recovery, it sped up again to a frenzy. Like this the larger animals

danced through the evening. In the surrounding grass and trees insects, frogs, spiders, and birds of all kinds no doubt twitched as well. All swaying to the seductive rhythms, each in their own inimitable way.

As they danced, each forgot their hunger, discomfort, sorrow or pain. The music held them, and as the hours passed the fire reached its zenith and started to die down. The light over the whole gathering began to change. Animals that couldn't keep up the pace began to slow down. They lay on the grass, at first respecting the space of others. But as more and more slumped down exhausted they rested on each other and began to sleep.

Now unobserved, the fire in the Circle began to die down and the music stopped. Soon, in the early hours of the morning every creature was sleeping.

The fire was now a mere glow in the centre of the darkened Circle.

The Elders nowhere to be seen.

A Decision Made

Not-Bear woke and looked around. It was dark, but a faint light above the trees showed dawn was on its way. Through thin clouds the moon shone bright. A few other animals were sitting up too. Others were wandering among the hundreds of still-sleeping bodies. Then he became angry, because he remembered what had happened.

'Bear, wake up.' He nuzzled his friend's face until he awoke, spluttering and wiping his nose with a paw.

'Ugh,' he said.

'Well?' Not-Bear said.

'Well what?'

'What happened to the Occasion?'

Then it was Bear's turn to remember the events of the evening and turn them in his mind. 'Didn't we eat?' he asked.

'No.'

'I remember being very tired, I must have fallen asleep, I'm sorry I missed the ceremony.'

'What ceremony?'

'The Ceremony of Names of course. I do apologise, it must have been all that activity in the Forest, or the early start.' He yawned and stretched his arms. 'How did it go?' He became excited then and pulled himself up to sit cross-legged.

'It didn't happen. There was no food, there was no ceremony, I still have no name.'

Bear looked at him. 'No name? I had hoped...'

'Well I haven't,' Not-Bear repeated. He described the music and the smoke and the flashing lights, the manic dancing and the lack of both food and names. He repeated the last in case Bear still didn't get it.

'How strange,' said Bear. 'There's always food, and there's always a Giving of Names.'

'I saw other animals go into the Circle, and come out again. You were no help so I went down myself, but by the time I got there it was over.'

'Over?'

'The naming. If there was any.' He looked around. A goat was a few yards off, scratching in the grass.

'Hey you, did we get any food last night?' Not-Bear asked him.

The goat looked up, mouth full of grass, and shook his head.

'And what about the Giving of Names?'

The goat shook his head again, then moved off to avoid any more questions.

'See!'

'That's not right, not right at all,' Bear said, but didn't seem to know what to do about it. Not-Bear knew what he was going to do about it, and he went off down the slope towards the Circle. The stones soon loomed large in the morning mist. There was no one around so he walked straight up to one of the huge grey monoliths. Centuries of weathering had left it scarred and pitted. He noticed what appeared to be cracks in the stone were actually patterns carved

into its surface. He walked to the next stone, which bore similar patterns, and shook his head in disbelief. Who had created them, and for what purpose?

Now he was inside, the Circle wasn't quite as imposing. He explored a bit more. A massive mound of ashes and half-burnt timber in the centre of the stones was all that remained of the fire. A strengthening breeze fanned the embers. The pyre had been built on a huge flat stone, like those that formed the outer Circle but embedded in the ground. Cream and green lichens dotted the surface. Smaller stones were arranged around it in a circular path. Not-Bear wandered around, trying to sense the energy that had created such a frenzy the day before. He left through an archway and returned up the slope to where Bear sat rubbing his tired eyes.

'It's called Writing,' Bear told him when he had described the stones with their strange patterns. 'And you shouldn't have gone down to the Circle, it isn't allowed.'

'What is Writing?'

'Ahhh...!' Bear was still trying to shake the sleep from his head. 'It's like talking without making a sound,' he said.

'But we don't write anything on the Inside,' Not-Bear said. 'I've never seen it before.'

'You haven't, but the Elders do that sort of thing all the time. That's another reason why we name things, so we can describe them,' he said, as Not-Bear settled next to him. 'Whether in writing or not, we add them to our experience.'

'You've already told me that.'

'Have I? Right. So instead of saying, "furry little creature moving quickly over the grass from left to right", we say, "squirrel running across the path".'

'You could have said that anyway.'

'Not if I hadn't named "squirrel" first.'

'Or "running", or "path".'

'True, very true,' said Bear, trying to find some route to take his thoughts on. 'It really is too early for this sort of thing.' He sat back. 'I suppose we name things so we can tell others about them,' he continued.

'But,' Not-Bear interrupted, 'If I see a squirrel running across the path, do I name the squirrel as I see it? Or do I already have some idea of a squirrel in my head? Do I name "running", or do I just think "running" or "trees", or anything else for that matter? Do we need names to think? From what you say,' he concluded, 'names aren't needed to think, they are only needed to describe.'

Bear tried to recall how thinking felt. Was Not-Bear right?

'Didn't I say that yesterday?' he suggested. He was finding it all quite tiring. At that moment he couldn't think of anything using a name at all. The harder he tried, the more difficult it became. If Not-Bear was right, and he wasn't admitting he was, then naming might not be as important as he had thought.

Then he saw a way out. 'Ah, but to learn anything, we have to talk about it. That is why we need names.'

'Or, we can experience it ourselves,' Not-Bear said softly. 'Isn't that better than talking about it?' If it was a choice between experience and being told something, he knew which he preferred.

'You can't learn everything for yourself,' Bear told him. 'When you are young, someone has to teach you.'

'Like you teach me.'

'Exactly,' said Bear, but he wasn't sure what Not-Bear meant. He felt a tightness gather in his chest. Where were all these stupid questions leading?

A voice interrupted them. 'What are you talking about?' it demanded.

A small crowd of sleepy-eyed animals had gathered around them.

'We are discussing Naming,' Not-Bear snapped, as a grey-whiskered badger strode up to them.

'Nonsense,' said the badger. 'That's for the Elders to know and you to be ignorant of.' He prodded Not-Bear with a sharp-tipped claw. 'What are you?' he asked him. 'What are you doing here?'

'I haven't got a name,' replied Not-Bear. The jab had startled him.

'Nonsense,' said the badger again, 'everything has a name.' He glared at him, before turning to Bear. 'Are you his guardian?'

'Well, yes,' Bear admitted. He got to his feet and motioned to Not-Bear to do the same.

'Then you should be ashamed of yourself, talking about Naming so openly. It's not the right time or place for such things, is it? Now, what is his name?'

'He hasn't got one,' Bear confirmed.

'Not got a name!' A murmur rose from the crowd gathered around them, more eager faces come to see what the fuss was about. At the front there was a younger badger, a boar and a fierce looking wildcat. They began to chatter, loud words echoing around their heads.

'I'm special,' Not-Bear announced and the murmuring increased. Bear glared at him to keep him quiet. He knew how officious these old badgers could be. There was no telling what might happen if the Elders got to hear of things spoken out of order.

'What's so special about him?' a dog at the front of the crowd asked, pointing a paw.

'Nothing special about that,' hissed the skinny wildcat, glaring at him. Not-Bear felt a sudden urge to attack it, even though he knew it was against the Rules.

'No-one asked you,' he growled. The wildcat backed into the onlookers. A couple of nearby animals took a step back, and the badger seemed more amenable.

'No need to get angry, young fellow,' he said.

Not-Bear faced the motley crowd, swinging his head from side to side.

'He's going to get us,' screeched the wildcat, trying to edge further backwards into the others.

Not-Bear felt fine. Although he was being calm and reasonable, these creatures seemed to think he was a threat.

'I might start with *you*,' he growled again, taking a step towards the cat. The crowd shrank back.

'Help,' squealed the cat, now isolated in front of the others.

'He can't do that,' said one of them. 'Can he?'

A boar approached and hissed at Bear. 'Control him,' it said.

Bear didn't think he could. He bent down to whisper to his friend. 'We need to get away,

follow me.'

Not-Bear nodded and they started to walk off together through the ring of spectators. For a moment of resistance it held, before parting and allowing them through. As Not-Bear went past the old badger their eyes met. The badger lowered his head and allowed him to pass.

They moved off down the slope and Not-Bear let out a yelp of excitement. 'Did you see that? I made them shut up and I scared them as well.'

'Don't get too big-headed,' Bear told him, looking back over his shoulder. 'That badger is an important person on the Inside. He could ask awkward questions,' he said. 'You must be respectful to older animals and certainly not aggressive. What were you thinking?'

'I don't care,' said Not-Bear without remorse, 'I enjoyed it.'

Bear looked at him and sighed.

'Don't worry, Bear, I'll help you,' Not-Bear said.

'Help me? You're the one who's in trouble.'

They scrambled down the slope away from the eyes and ears of the others. Before they knew it they were back at the Circle. At first Bear was reluctant to enter, as he was certain it was against the Rules. He said they should be heading back to the Inside. But Not-Bear reasoned another indiscretion wouldn't add much to their sins. They went in. As soon as he approached the first massive stone Bear had a sinking feeling in his stomach, as if things were never going to be the same again. Not-Bear showed him the patterns he had found, the remains of the fire, and the circular path. 'But I suppose you've seen it all before,' he said.

'Never,' his friend replied, then forgot his concerns as he studied the carvings. He knew about Writing, the preservation of Rules and stories on stones, but had never thought he would see it himself.'

I still wonder who built it,' Not-Bear said.

'Humph,' said Bear.

It was a grey morning now, and a thin mist hung over everything. The day was becoming the colour of the stones, as grey as the ash from the fire now burnt to its end. Rain began to fall from dark skies. Although Not-Bear sensed the wonder of the Circle as well as Bear, to his mind it also seemed sinister. A monument to knowledge denied to him. If these rituals controlled by the Elders meant anything, then it was to the others, the ones with names. Whatever the secret was, it wasn't going to be revealed to him.

The rain got heavier, and as the drops hit the remains of the fire it started to sizzle. Dark blotches appeared on the stones, the streaks soon joining into a uniform grey. The two of them stood there with the rain coming down and looked, first up and across at each other, then at the stones.

'I can't go back,' Not-Bear whispered through the drumming of the rain.

'What's that?' Bear couldn't hear him.

'I can't go back,' Not-Bear shouted.

'Back where?' The zing of the raindrops and the rushing sound of the wind swept across and beyond the Circle.

'To the Inside.'

Bear didn't understand. 'But you have to, I mean, there's nowhere else to go,' he said. 'We're

all going back.'

'I'm hungry,' Not-Bear told him, and then he said. 'Where was the food? Where was all the food you promised?'

'I don't know,' said Bear, the rain dripping down his forehead and into his eyes, so he had to keep blinking to clear them. 'I didn't promise it to you, I thought it would be here, it usually is. Let's go and find shelter, we'll talk about it then.'

'I don't want to talk about it; there's nothing else to say. I'm leaving.'

'But you can't.'

'Why not? I still haven't got a name and I don't belong with you or your friends. Everyone either laughs at me or runs away. Besides, the badger will make life difficult when we get back. You said so.'

'I can handle the badger,' said Bear, not sure if he could.

'It will be easier with me gone,' Not-Bear told him.

'Where will you go?' Bear felt so helpless. Not-Bear was prowling this way and that, in the relentless rain.

'The Outside,' he said.

The full horror of that statement shook Bear. Now he knew his friend was either mad, ill or both. He sat down on a fallen stone to try to make sense of it all. The Outside! It was forbidden to go there. Not-Bear would be cast out, shunned and Bear, his tutor, would be blamed for it all. He could see the Elders now, sitting in committee, while he stood in front of them trying to explain everything. Yet it would come out as gibberish, or idiocy, for that is what it seemed. How could he explain it in any other terms, how could he deny it? The truth would seem the madness it plainly was.

'Bear.' Not-Bear came up to his friend, face to face. 'I want to thank you.'

Bear was speechless, 'I, um, er...' he mumbled.

'You've helped me through a lot, and you've tried to answer my questions.'

Those silly questions, thought Bear. 'Er, um,' he stuttered.

'But I've got to go and find out things for myself.'

Bear looked at him.

'Find out who I am.'

Bear's eyes watered, not entirely because of the rain.

'My real name.'

Bear was crying.

'Why I am so different from the rest of you.'

'You're not different, not really,' Bear said through his tears.

'Humph,' said Not-Bear gently, in a well-practised imitation. He walked forward, his nose touched Bear's paw and then he was gone. Bear looked for him, trying to rub the tears and the rain from his eyes. 'Not-Bear,' he shouted, 'Not-Bear, wait!' and he stumbled off after what he thought was his friend. A dark shadow loomed, one of the huge stones, and he was through the perimeter of the Circle. He stumbled up the incline and found himself once more among animals.

There were only a few left now, weary, bedraggled, and cold, moving away from the Circle

across the clearing. Looking for one of the avenues leading back to the Inside. Bear wandered around, looking at faces, hoping to see a familiar one, but in vain.

Not-Bear had vanished.

Author's Note:

If you want to read more follow [this link](#) to Wattpad for the serialized book. Two new parts added each week until completion!