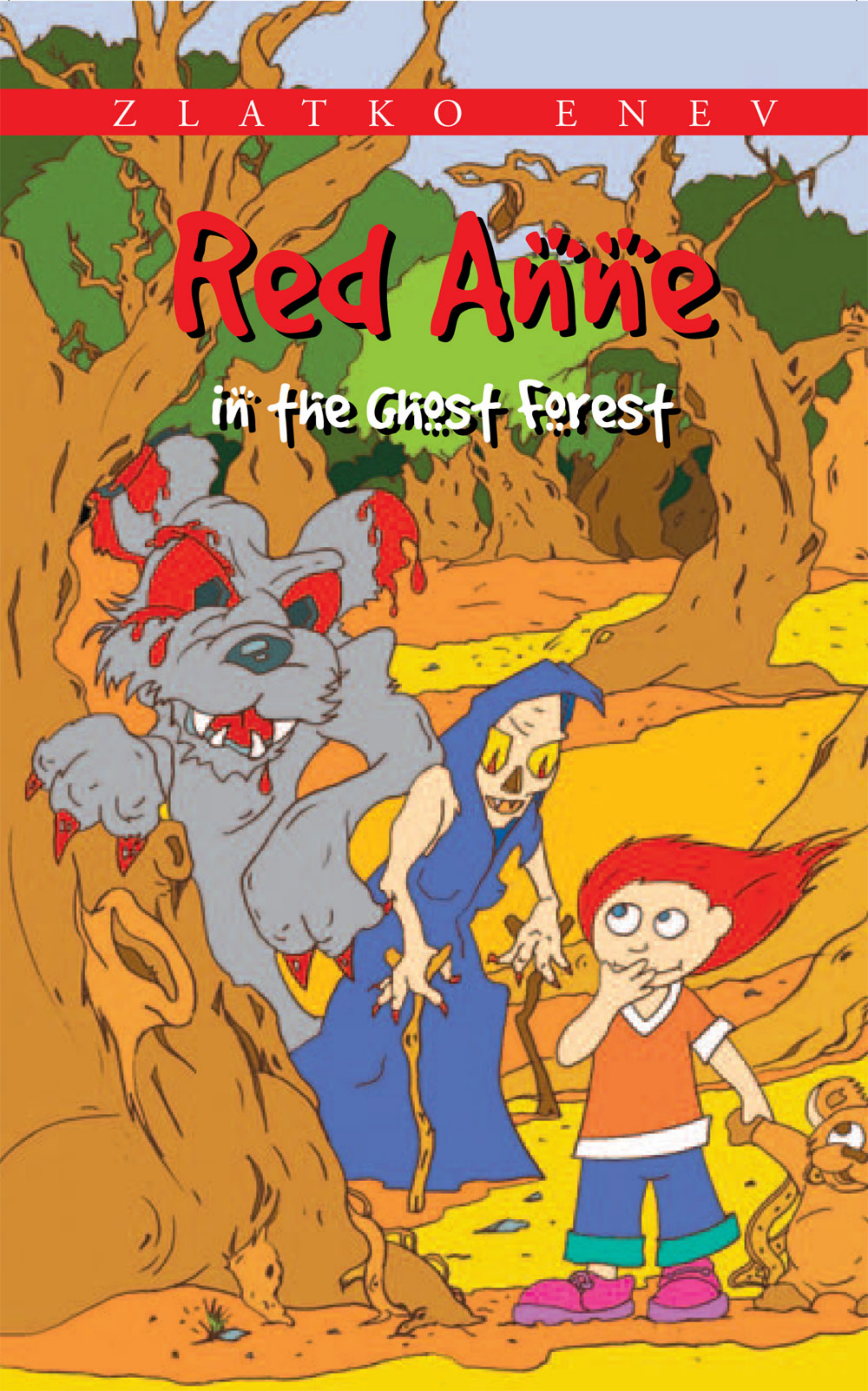


Z L A T K O E N E V

Red Аййе

in the Ghost Forest



To get more information about this book, please visit

www.ghostforest.com

Zlatko Enev
GHOST FOREST

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Zlatko Enev

Ghost Forest

Illustrations:

Andrey Kulev

For Nerod

Without whom I could not keep looking
for the path through the forest.

Thank you, my dearest friend!

I would also like to express my thankfulness to

My son Paul whose unbelievable fantasy brought about some of the most difficult puzzles in this story

Daniela and Vladislav Dunev who always supported me in the moments of weakness

Henry Kulev without whom the story would probably have existed only inside my head



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Foreword by an angry author

The electronic edition of “Ghost Forest” is distributed completely free of charge – something most people still consider a sure sign of low quality. And, really, who would be so stupid to give for free something valuable? I admit this is a rather difficult question.

Moreover, wise people told me more than once that giving one’s book for free is the most certain way to never get it published. Indeed, most publishers seem to consider this to be a new type of original sin, that final act of cowardice and betrayal committed only by the most desperate, most unsuccessful writers out there, the ones who have given up all hope of getting published “the right way” and hence polluting cyberspace with their chef d’œuvres. Unfortunately, the quality of most freeware seems to be confirming this opinion.

But why, you might ask, are you bashing your own book? In a foreword? What is this, sheer stupidity?

Well, I suppose it’s time to tell you a secret. Actually, what you are about to read is a published book. It appeared many years ago in Bulgaria, the home country of the author, where literacy is very high and the book market – rather sophisticated. And, what is more important, it became very popular among kids there. In the meantime several fan clubs were founded and the several editions are regularly sold out. The enthusiastic publisher keeps believing “this is the best children’s book ever written in Bulgarian” and the other books of the trilogy, not yet translated in English, are also very popular. Besides – and this should also tell you something about its quality – it got published in China, thanks to the efforts of people who loved it and fought bravely with the scepticism of several publishers, until it finally got out.

So, there are good reasons to think this is an interesting book, aren’t there? Why then is it offered for free? Why would its author choose to be seen as belonging to the “unlucky ones”?

The answer is very simple: because no publisher in the West would care to have a look at it.

Don’t think I didn’t try. I did, and I did hard. I have been sending submissions in droves, in the course of many years – some of them to literary agencies, some directly to publishers. A few British ones did answer – standard letters of denial which don’t give me even the slightest idea about their reasons. Americans didn’t bother answering, neither did Canadians.

So what, you might ask. You are not the only one, thousands of authors get those letters

and keep living. What is so special about you?

The answer, again, comes from the readers, this time the readers of the English translation. The book got downloaded many thousands times and, as it is easy to think, some of the people who read it wrote back to me. And, guess what? There have been dozens of enthusiastic comments, questions, requests for more – and so far one single (and rather devastating) critique which, after a short conversation with its author, showed he didn't actually read the book.

I hope you start to understand why I call myself an angry author. Excuse my prejudice but I slowly start thinking that being a Bulgarian in writing is like being handicapped – you must spend most of your energy not on doing what everybody else does but on proving you can do it.

If true, this is not fair. If untrue, it's enough of a burden. And, thinking about it, I came to a very simple thought: "Why not ask people to help?" After all, it's the readers, and not the publishers, who should be deciding upon the destiny of a book, so the theory goes. And sometimes it really seems to be the case, especially in our times of Internet-driven-empowerment.

So, dear people, here is my request for you: if you happened to like this book, why not send a short email message to, say, Bloomsbury or Harcourt, telling them so? Who knows, this might happen to change their opinion about the book? Isn't it worth a try?

If you find the idea Ok, please write a few lines to the following addresses:

childrens-editorial@fsgee.com (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

childrenspublicity@bloomsbury.com (Bloomsbury)

Thank you in advance! I keep my fingers crossed.

Zlatko Enev, Berlin

Introduction: **The River in the Box**

Somewhere towards the end of town, in a small cottage, surrounded by a spacious garden, lived the red haired Anne with her mother. Her father, who she used to visit from time to time in a far off town, had left a long time ago, and in fact it was so long ago that she couldn't remember. Actually, her real name was Anne Ravenhead, but to everyone she was simply 'Red'. That didn't bother her because somehow the name suited her down to the ground.

Anne was nine years old but tall, with a round, freckled face, a little snub nose and a fringe that kept flopping in her eyes. Even though she was a big girl by now, she still loved playing with toys, and there were heaps of them all over the house. I say 'heaps' because most of them were in bits and pieces piled all around. You see, Anne had a terrible temper. She wasn't an easy person to live with, especially for the toys, although they never complained. That's not to say that she didn't like them or didn't take care of them. On the contrary, Anne was a very considerate child, but sometimes... Well, there were times when she just flew into a rage, and then woe betide the toys! The sweet, kind-hearted girl seemed to vanish into thin air and was replaced by a nasty, menacing creature who prowled around looking for someone to pick on. Pity the poor toys she set eyes on then! For all that tended to be left of them was just broken parts and torn shreds. Mum would get extremely annoyed and threatened serious punishment if it ever happened again. But one way or another, either the threat wasn't enough or she simply forgot about it (she was a very busy woman indeed), so that after a day or two the storm had died down – much to the dismay of her poor toys, of course.

The story I'd like to tell you began precisely on one of those awful days. Actually, it was a lovely day – for everyone, that is, except Anne. It was the beginning of the summer holidays, the weather was warm enough to play outdoors all day long, but not so hot as to be unpleasant. Red had spent most of the day in the garden trying to put the finishing touches to the tepee she'd started building a few days earlier. It was hard going, though. There was always something wrong. If it wasn't leaning over, then it looked so stupid to her that she'd have to tear it all down again. Mum was busy as usual, working at her computer all day, and was so tense and stressed that she wouldn't have been of any help. On top

of all that, every child in the neighbourhood seemed to have vanished underground. After hours of strenuous effort, Anne decided that the tepee just wasn't worth it, and so she went back indoors.

Although the cottage was small, it was cosy and rather pretty. Downstairs there was a spacious kitchen-dining room. Next to that was mother's bedroom and the 'everything room': a big closet full of old, useless stuff. Anne sometimes spent whole days in there making up stories about winding paths and endless mazes. She wasn't in the mood today, though, so she went straight upstairs to where her mother's study and her own bedroom were.

It would, of course, be exaggerating to suggest that Anne's room usually looked clean and tidy. With Mum's help she managed to keep it some kind of order, but only on days better than this one. To be honest, today her room looked as if a herd of frisky baby elephants had just charged through it. There were pens, pencils and crayons strewn all over the desk. Several unfinished drawings were lying on the floor next to the overturned chair. The bed she had attempted to transform into an enchanted castle that morning now looked very much like the abandoned tepee in the garden. The contents of the shelves and boxes were scattered over the floor after she'd rummaged through them looking for tools for her building project. Her poor, forlorn toys, most of which were in a very sorry state, lay heaped all around in every imaginable or unimaginable place.

Anne entered the room shooting murderous glances all around her, looking for something to vent her anger on. It didn't come to that, though. One glance convinced her that someone had been meddling with her things, and there was no way she would let that go unpunished.

'How dare shel' she just managed to blurt out in fury and rage, before yelling at the top of her voice, 'Muuuum!'

'What on earth's the matter?' Mum wasn't in the best of moods herself as she was desperately late with her translation. 'For goodness sake, stop shouting!'

'Have you been tidying my room?'

'Not exactly tidying. I was just looking for the scissors. I still need them, actually.'

'They're in the bathroom,' Anne snapped back.

'How come in the bathroom?'

'My new doll's got lice and I had to do something about it.'

‘You... what?’

Anne watched while Mum dashed into the bathroom and immediately reappeared clutching a mutilated, bald-headed doll.

‘This is disgraceful!’ Mum was so angry that Anne was quite taken aback. ‘We only bought it a week ago and it’s already totally wrecked. Well, you’re not getting away with it this time. Listen to me: You’re not getting any more toys from me until Christmas. I’m sick and tired of your destructiveness!’

Red was wondering whether to carry on scowling or to admit her guilt when the doorbell rang. She was glad of the excuse and tore downstairs. Maybe she could use the confusion to come up with something better than a lame apology.

However, she was in for a surprise downstairs, which would make her forget all about her doll. There was a tall old gentleman at the door. He looked so strange that it gave Anne a start at first. He was dressed in a long coat that nearly reached the ground (Anne began to sweat at the very thought of wearing such a coat in summer). Perched on his head was a rather tall top hat decorated with shiny golden stars. His gaunt, bony face was covered with a long beard reaching down to his chest, and his appearance would have been rather frightening altogether if it weren’t for his eyes which looked so sparkling and cheerful, even under the bushiest eyebrows Anne had ever seen.

‘Good evening,’ the gentleman greeted her. His voice sounded unexpectedly youthful. ‘My name is Nerod Laptsev and I sell toys. May I come in for a moment?’

Anne was so surprised that before she could grasp what she was doing, she found herself hauling the man up the wooden staircase. The old, wheeled trunk that he pulled along squeaked as it rolled over every step.

‘Mum! Mum! Mr....er.. um.’ Anne looked back questioningly at the old gentleman.

‘Laptsev. Nerod Laptsev,’ he told her.

‘Mr Laptsev sells toys. His huge trunk is full of them!’ Having already forgotten about the doll, Anne was dreaming about the fantastic surprises hidden within the trunk.

‘Maybe I can explain a little better,’ said Mr Laptsev. ‘The word ‘salesman’, I’m afraid is a bit misleading. I am in fact a member of an ancient and, alas, declining craft guild. We define ourselves as ‘toy salvagers’. However, since that

term is unfamiliar to most people, we introduce ourselves as salesmen. I trust you will forgive this slight... inaccuracy.'

Mum had been listening attentively all along, and was scrutinizing the man in a very distrustful manner. Yet he didn't seem in the least perturbed by this. He just stood there on the landing, leaning on his large trunk, and looking completely at ease.

'Would you mind telling me more precisely what it is you do?' she asked. 'Is it some kind of restoration work?'

'Good gracious, no, Madam! I am chiefly concerned with locating and recovering those species of toys which are threatened with extinction.'

'Endangered species? Of toys?' Mum started to giggle. 'Then you needn't look any further as our house is full of them. Mr Laptsev, I reckon you're about to make the deal of a lifetime.'

The elderly gentleman gave a short bow.

'Precisely, dear lady.'

Now, Mum really looked confused, though she was trying hard not to show it.

'Well, now, let's be serious,' she said coldly. 'What is it you are trying to sell us?'

'I don't want to sound rude, Madam, but the one and only word I always give is: *nothing*.'

'I'm sorry, but I still don't quite understand what this is all about. Are you buying toys or selling them?'

'Let us rather say, my dear lady, that I *exchange* toys. But only when I find something that is of particular interest to me, naturally.'

Mum looked a lot more relaxed when she heard this.

'Okay, I think I'm finally beginning to understand. You are some sort of collector. In which case, you have probably not come to the right place. You won't find anything here older than a couple of months. The poor things just don't survive any longer than that.'

'That is of no concern,' replied Mr Laptsev. 'May I take a closer look at them?'

'Please, go ahead, if you can handle the sight of a battlefield.'

The next fifteen minutes were torture for Anne. She was so curious to know what was in the trunk that she could hardly restrain herself from begging Mr

Laptsev to hurry up. As if deliberately trying to be annoying, he was so preoccupied with his search that he seemed to have forgotten about everything else. Very slowly and carefully, he examined every toy he came across in the room. He even produced a magnifying glass from his coat pocket to take a closer look at some of them. Every now and then he would mutter something under his breath, and once or twice he scribbled something down in a little notebook. Anne's mother was meanwhile typing away at her computer, and was clearly not distracted by his presence. But for Anne, time dragged by slowly like thick, gooeey molasses. On more than one occasion she tried to show her impatience by coughing loudly. For a second, she even considered demanding he stopped what he was doing, but oddly enough for her, she didn't dare to. There was something about him that made her feel uneasy. Besides, the toys were all in such a pitiful condition that she also felt a little ashamed. What if he didn't find anything interesting? Would he then leave without opening the trunk? For a split second Red had a twinge of regret. If only there were just one toy that was still intact! She was a practical girl, though, and rarely wasted time on such thoughts. So she quickly reassured herself that if he took a fancy to something, that would be great. If not, then too bad, and good riddance to him!

'Hmmm...', sighed Mr Laptsev at long last. 'I see. You were quite right, Madam,' he turned to her mother who had immediately appeared in the doorway. 'I have found nothing ... substantial here. However, I would like to treat you to a little surprise so that you won't be left with the impression I have wasted your time. Otherwise my visit would have been pointless, wouldn't it?'

He bent over the case, opened it and carefully pulled out a large, flat box. It was weird, but Anne could have sworn that the box was bigger than the trunk, and yet she had watched Mr Laptsev take it out of the case in front of her very eyes. She didn't dwell too long on that thought, though, because the elderly man was already slowly opening the box and setting it down on the floor.

At first Anne thought it was some sort of television set. Someone had once told her that there were televisions in Japan that could be watched from all sides. Then it suddenly dawned on her that this was something stranger altogether. Mum was already squatting down next to the box and staring at it in awe and disbelief.

There was a river flowing inside the box.

Actually, the river was just one element of the game – it surely had to be a game, although Anne had never seen anything quite like it before. There was a mountain range in the far corner on the left-hand side, right under Mr Laptsev's elbow where he was leaning on the open lid. Anne couldn't imagine how mountains so steep and high could possibly fit into that flat box. The river had cut through the mountains, frothing and roaring its way through the narrow gorge in between before it widened out into a gentle flow dividing the hill planes which made up the rest of the game. Those hills were covered with dense forest, except here and there you could see clearings with forest animals the size of insects roaming around in the meadowland. Set into the landscape at various points were a number of tiny buildings: there was a watermill, a fishing jetty, and a minute hut nestling in the branches of a huge tree with an ingenious system of ladders leading up to it. Even the clouds suspended just under the lid of the box looked real and drifted slowly over the misty mountain tops. The scene was so incredible that Anne was speechless and just stood there staring at it wide-eyed. Evidently pleased at this reaction, the old man gave a little smile.

'That's amazing!' said her mother after a long silence. 'I can hardly believe my eyes. Whatever will technology come up with next!'

'Well, a somewhat *forgotten* technology, if you don't mind me saying, Madam. This game is much older than we might imagine.'

Anne's head was spinning with excitement. She had so many questions she didn't know where to begin. What kind of a game was it? Where did the old man get it? What did he mean by 'old' when it was obviously very new?

However, there wasn't time for questions. Before she had even collected her thoughts, she had already said, 'I want it!' And then all other ideas vanished from her mind except knowing she would rather die on the spot than part from this magical game. Although her mother was also transfixed by the box, she reluctantly tore her eyes away and put her arm round Anne's shoulder.

'Sorry, my love, but we can't afford anything like this. This game must cost a fortune.' She looked at the old man for support. 'Isn't that right, Mr Laptsev?'

'Quite frankly, one can hardly measure the value of such a game in financial terms.'

'I want it!' repeated Anne, biting her lip to keep from crying.

'But Anne....' replied her mother unconvincingly as she already had a fairly good idea of where this was going.

‘I want it!’ Red insisted for the third time, clenching her fists. As hard as she struggled, she could think of nothing else, which made her even angrier.

‘I understand,’ said Mr Laptsev. ‘In such cases our profession has devised a rule that permits...’

‘I want it!’

‘..that permits the temporary loan of a game for a few days in special circumstances. I would be delighted to apply this rule here.’

‘Did you hear that, Anne? The gentleman has offered to lend us the game.’ Mum clutched at this idea like the proverbial drowning man grasping at straws.

‘Only a few days?’ Anne asked disappointedly before immediately adding, ‘Ok, ok, I agree.’

She knelt down next to the game and tried to grab a tiny animal that sprang away at lightning speed.

‘Anne!’ Mum exclaimed nervously.

‘What? ... Oh yes, thank you. Thank you very much.’

‘Not at all,’ replied Mr Laptsev with a smile. ‘It’s merely part of my job.’

‘But we haven’t been able to offer you anything in exchange,’ said Mum with some embarrassment.

‘Yes, well, I have to admit things have got a little out of hand here. Let’s be optimistic, though, and hope that it only applies to toys. No doubt we’ll soon be persuaded of that in practice.’ The old gentleman reached inside his coat pocket and drew out a large watch, glanced at it and then flew into hurried activity. ‘How time flies! Madam, it was a great pleasure. Until next week, then.’

‘But you haven’t even given us a phone number!’ Mum looked terribly flustered, even ashamed.

Mr Laptsev was already on the doorstep. He turned round and looked at her in astonishment.

‘Number? What number?’ For a brief moment he seemed rather confused, then he tapped his finger on his forehead. ‘Ah, yes, I’m so absent-minded. Actually, there’s no need, and I shall contact you anyway. Goodbye, Madam. Goodbye, Anne.’

He hesitated before leaving and added, ‘I wish you...strength.’

Still feeling confused and awkward, Mum stood watching after him for a long time, all the while tapping at the doorframe, deep in thought.

Ghost Forest

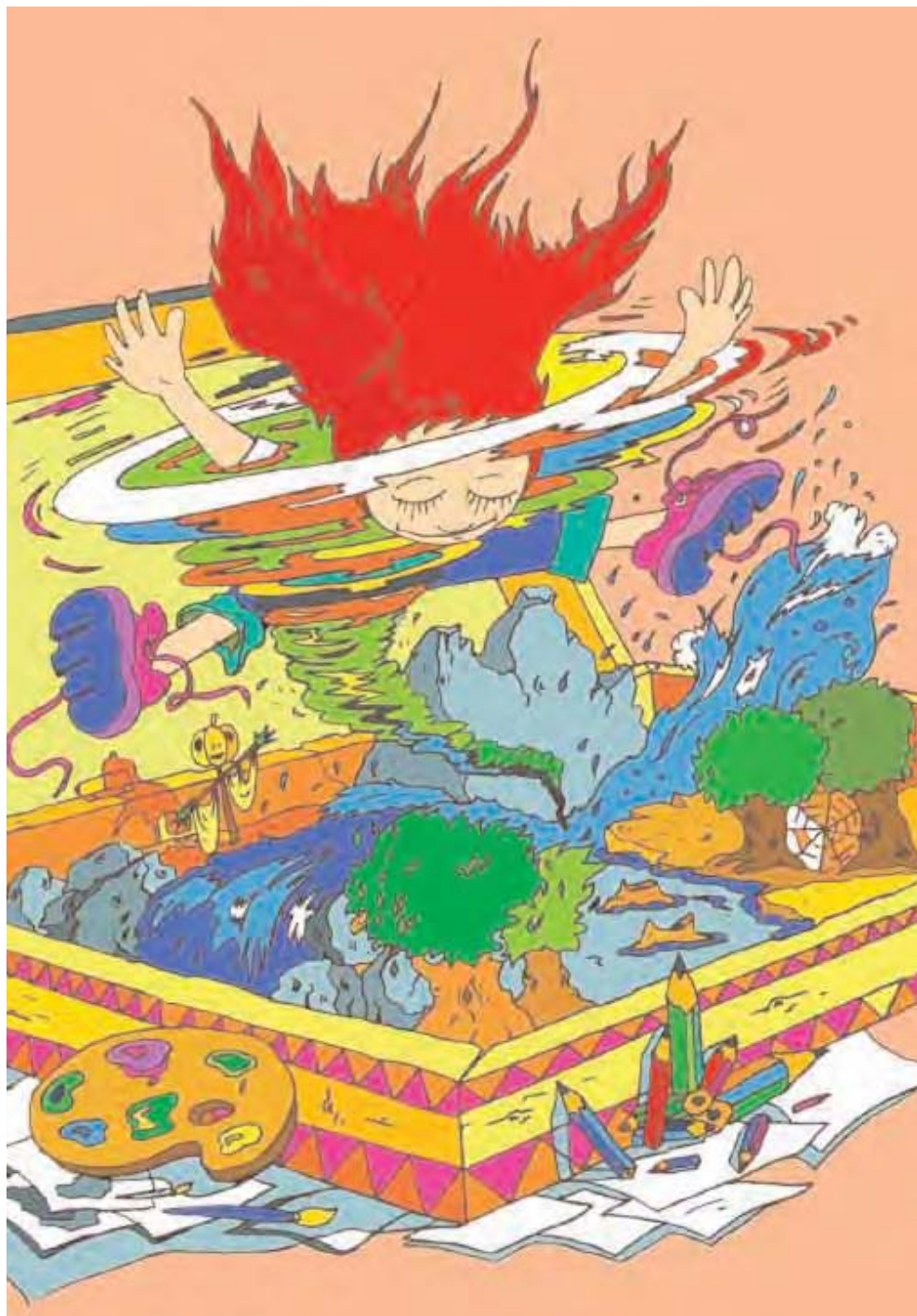
Anne was furious. It was the second day the game had refused to work.

Everything had been going fine and the first few days had simply flown by. She was so enchanted by the box that she would have forgotten to eat if it hadn't been for Mum. She would only flop into her bed at night when she no longer had an ounce of energy in her. The magic game continually offered new surprises. At the beginning, Red had tried to catch some of the little creatures that populated the box. But after she had pricked herself (or had been bitten) and bled, she quickly gave up on that. Then she busied herself with exploring the landscape. There wasn't a great deal to see among the dense woodland, but she nevertheless managed to establish that animals were only to be found on the near side of the river. In general, the game's two halves divided by the river, looked quite different from each other. Where there was meadowland on the one side, there was virtually impenetrable forest growing on the other. Each side differed in terms of colour as well. This side glowed with cheerful reds, yellows and browns, while the opposite was monotonous dark green broken up here and there by a few grey patches as if a disease were eating its way through the woods. Even the birds flying around were keeping well clear of that side of the river. Anne couldn't find any explanation for that, and to tell the truth, she couldn't really be bothered to as she was quite happy exploring the near side, which was also full of lots of much more interesting things. The watermill's wheel was turning and clattering cheerfully, the tree-house swayed gently in the breeze, and Anne even came across a waterfall in the gorge between the mountains. Its tiny proportions made it look rather comically bad-tempered, but still it was incredibly beautiful and fascinating. The game had been a lot of fun until yesterday when, quite out of the blue, it had stopped working.

At first, Anne refused to accept that the magic was over, and for a long time she was cross with Mum, who had tried to calm her down. Then she looked the box over to see if something was damaged, but eventually had to give up. And this made her so furious she was fit to burst.

'Are you going to work, or do you want me to smash your face in?'

'Stop it, Anne!' shouted Mum from the next room. 'I've told you a hundred times, it probably needs new batteries.'



‘New batteries, my foot! That old man has given us some cheap junk, but I’ll soon sort it out!’ She prodded at the river which had turned into something resembling a kind of hard jelly. ‘If only I could find how to get into the works!’

‘I’m not going to put up with that tone of voice! Leave the game alone and find something else to do. You’ve been getting on my nerves all day!’

‘Yeah, yeah...’

If she hadn’t been so tired, maybe Mum would have noticed a dangerous tone in Anne’s voice that would normally have warned her that some mischief was brewing. But either because she was too tired or simply because she was fed up, she preferred to end the conversation. And to show that she didn’t want to be bothered anymore, she shut the door to her room.

Anne had been waiting for just that. Without losing any time, she rummaged through all her shelves and cupboards until she found a big hammer. She then made her way to the box, tight-lipped and frowning. Slowly, she lifted the hammer above her head, hesitating a few seconds as if expecting the game to show some sense at the last moment before spitting through clenched teeth, ‘good riddance to bad rubbish!’

Bang! The hefty hammer smashed down right in the centre of the game somewhere between the mill and the fishing jetty. To Anne’s great amazement, nothing happened, except the hammer bounced off as if made of rubber. She stood there for several moments not believing her eyes. Then she realised that something really had happened. She bent down over the box in order to take a closer look.

First, she noticed that the game was radiating a light blue-green glow as if a thin, transparent veil had been thrown over it. Then somewhere in the centre, a little puff of smoke appeared that quickly started growing thicker. Anne was beginning to worry and thinking of running to Mum, but to her even greater horror, she discovered she was unable to move. Panicking, she attempted to shout, but her mouth just refused to open. She struggled with all her strength to free herself from the grip of the invisible force that held her, but it was useless. Something like thick mud enveloped her and she couldn’t blink an eyelid let alone move a leg or speak.

In the meantime, the smoke had expanded and was taking the form of a tall, upside down cone. It was spinning round at rapid speed and was slowly getting nearer to Anne. Just a few days earlier Red had been watching a programme

about tropical storms and, to her horror, she now realised that it wasn't smoke, but a small tornado. One of her arms was lifted up and drawn towards the neck of the cone. 'No, no, no!' she tried to shout, but to no avail. Unwillingly her arm stretched towards the tornado which drew near and started slowly swallowing her. Her body got thinner and distorted like a cartoon character. The invisible force gradually lifted her up, turned her upside down and stuffed her into the mouth of the tornado. 'Like a scoop of ice-cream in a waffle-cone,' thought Anne. Then she lost her bearings completely and decided simply to let herself be carried away. For some reason she no longer cared what happened to her.

Chapter One:

The Meadow with Three Exits

Thump! Anne tumbled down hard onto the ground. Luckily, she had landed on a soft patch otherwise she would have been badly hurt. Still dizzy from her wild flight, she lay there a while before sitting up and taking a fearful look around.

She found herself in the middle of a dense forest. Thick, twisted trees and thorny bushes surrounded the little meadow in which she had fallen. The vegetation was so dense that if the meadow weren't lit by cheerful sunbeams, it would surely have been a very dark, unfriendly place. The ground was covered by a thick carpet of fallen leaves. The tree branches were gnarled and crooked like bony old hands. They looked horribly menacing. But scariest of all were the forest noises: endless twitterings, muted screeches and low groaning sounds. Once or twice she even heard growling, which made her cringe in terror. For a moment she debated whether to cry or call for help. She decided it was safest to keep quiet, and began looking for a way out.

She didn't need to look very long to discover that she could go in three different directions: three openings in the wall of trees and bushes presented themselves to her. The tunnels on the left and right were connected through a well worn path, but the one in the middle looked less used, so she decided to keep away from it for now. She was just about to take the path on the right when from overhead she heard a strange sound, 'Pee-hew,' and then something crashed down at her feet. Anne let out an almighty scream, fell flat on the ground and covered her head with her hands. The thing didn't move, though, and little by little she gathered the courage to take a look.

At first she thought a dead animal was lying in front of her. Then suddenly she couldn't believe her eyes; it was her little backpack. It must be said here that she wasn't entirely mistaken in the first place. The backpack was made from a furry fabric and looked just like a fluffy bear cub. Her mother had bought it about a year ago, and even though it looked rather mangy, it was still her favourite backpack. Anne jumped for joy, grabbed the backpack and was just about to sling it over her shoulder when something very unexpected happened. 'Rrrr!' growled the backpack in a peculiar, faint but very angry voice. 'Stop pulling out my fur!'

‘What was that?’ whispered a trembling Anne, although she had clearly understood where the voice had come from. ‘Who is it?’

‘Me, who else?’ said the backpack. ‘You’ve ripped out all my hair!’

‘But... you can speak?’

‘Of course I can speak. I’m not a baby! I used to speak before, too, but you just didn’t want to listen! I’ll say it again, I’m almost bald because of you!’

‘Wait, wait a second! You’re my old backpack, aren’t you?’

‘Huh! Your battered old backpack.’

‘And now suddenly you’ve started talking? You never said a word at home.’ Anne still refused to take seriously what was happening.

‘Never said a word? I’ll have you know I complained an awful lot, but did anyone listen? I shouted, I screamed. You didn’t take any notice. You pulled out my fur, you scribbled on me, you threw me all over the place and kicked me around like a ball. Now I look like something the cat dragged in, thanks to you!’

Although still rather confused, Anne felt her anger beginning to choke her. Who did that little twerp think she was? Did she think she could behave that way just because she had suddenly started speaking? Whatever the reason for the miraculous change, Anne was determined to put the backpack firmly in its place before it started getting the idea it could tell her what to do.

‘Don’t you talk to me like that!’ said Anne, putting her hands on her hips in a threatening pose. ‘If you’ve got anything useful to say, go ahead. Otherwise, shut up or you’ll find it’ll get a lot worse.’

‘I knew it; I knew you’d be like that. You’re a shameless bully. I don’t know why I bothered to follow you!’

Anne was on the point of giving the backpack a good kick to teach her a lesson when a new noise made her look around anxiously. Concealed in the tree branches high above her head, someone was singing in a squeaky voice:

‘Little girls are tumbling down,
Tumbling down,
Tumbling down,
Little girls are tumbling down,
My fair lady.’

The invisible singer chuckled contentedly, then obviously decided the time had come to introduce himself, because the tree branches parted and from between them emerged two figures so strange that Anne froze with surprise.

The larger of the two was a battered-looking wall clock. Its elongated body, composed of the box containing the pendulum, was supported by two short, thin legs that were the clock's weights. His head was the round clock face that swayed freely on a thin spring hidden inside the box. Between the two piercing round eyes that were the winding holes was a key nose, which turned continuously in time with the pendulum's swing. The clock's hands were bent comically into the form of a handlebar moustache. The mouth beneath was full of the springs and cogs of the cuckoo's works, which gave the impression of crooked, broken teeth. He sported tin wings on his shoulders that were obviously not just for show, as he was floating quite effortlessly through the air. He landed on the meadow in front of Anne and started looking her over with great curiosity.

His companion, also winged though considerably smaller, preferred to stay in the air. At first, she thought it was a kind of bat or maybe an unusually large butterfly. She soon noticed, however, that the strange creature's wings were two huge, furry ears, and sticking out between them was a little pot-belly. Protruding directly from the belly was a round head with a trunk and two bulging eyes, and it wore a hat decorated with several tassels and bells. The two ear-wings were very flexible, and the strange creature used them like semaphore flags in order to speak to his bigger companion. At that moment, the creature made a quick series of movements while pointing at Anne and the backpack lying on the ground. The clock nodded in agreement.

'You are quite right, my dear friend Boo,' he said in an affected, theatrical tone. 'It seems we have guests. Oh, what an honour, what a great honour! Allow me to introduce myself, young lady: At your service, Quirk – free spirit, dreamer and poet.'

Boo sniggered, covering his mouth with his furry wings.

'Where am I? How did I get here?' asked Anne timidly.

'My dear lady, nothing would be easier to explain. But first, would you be so kind as to inform me of your name? Noblesse oblige.'

Mr Quirk clearly gave great importance to refined manners, but having so many teeth missing, he had acquired a terrible lisp. So, instead of 'noblesse oblige', Anne heard 'no leather please', which rather puzzled her.

‘My name is Anne, but everyone calls me Red.’

‘A delightful, charming name. I’m pleased to meet you, Anne. Extremely pleased, indeed. Well, now, back to your question,’ he added, seeing that Anne was getting anxious and impatient. ‘We are in the most splendid, the most secret and... the most terrifying enchanted forest in the world. Welcome to the Ghost Forest, Anne!’

In his effort to emphasise the effect of those last words, Quirk made his teeth clatter and his pendulum swing wildly, so that Anne became a little rattled herself. Of course, she didn’t like that, and struck back at him sharply with: ‘Fiddlesticks! I know it is just a game. And you know what? I don’t even think it’s very interesting. It looks like some sort of weird Disneyland to me. You can tell that to your boss Nerod Laptsev when you see him. And tell him he’ll be in big trouble when I get out of here!’

‘Disneyland? What poor taste!’ Quirk tick-tutted disappointedly. ‘And this language! It’s quite obvious you are already attending school! Boo, do you think we should tell her a little about our marvellous forest?’

Boo hesitated slightly before forming one of his ear-wings in the shape of a giant, down-turned thumb indicating no.

‘Well then, let’s leave her to manage on her own,’ said Quirk. ‘Besides, we’ve got enough work to be getting on with.’ He turned his back on Anne, and took several steps in the other direction without saying goodbye.

Anne was livid. Those boneheads!

‘Oi, you! Wait!’ she yelled in a nasty, commanding tone. ‘Hey, you two! I’m talking to you. Don’t think you’re so special. Tell me how to get out of here, right now!’

‘Oh, how brave we are! How self-assured we are!’ said Quirk without turning around. ‘It will be so interesting to see what happens to all that when they appear – when the terrifying ghosts appear!’ He spun round instantly revealing a horrible grimace on his face and started bellowing at the top of his voice, ‘Wooooo! Waaaaaah!’

Anne took a frightened step backwards, but tried not to look scared and replied casually, ‘Ghosts, pah! That’s rubbish – there’s no such thing as ghosts.’

Quirk started at the insult. ‘Did you hear that, Boo? No ghosts, eh?’ He stepped back, and to Anne’s horror, unhooked his face from its spring. Then he turned in her direction with the clock face angled towards himself, and started

to proclaim, ‘Alas, poor Yorick!... Where are your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning – quite chop fallen!’

‘Well,’ he added in a business-like manner, while re-attaching his face, ‘that chap Hamlet didn’t want to believe in ghosts either. And look what a dreadful mess he found himself in at the end. Boo, let us leave. Those fellows could be here before we know it.’ He turned towards his friend and, with some impatience, made ready to fly away. ‘The last time I lost two of my teeth with all the clattering.’

Boo, who had been shaking with fear during the entire performance, started to nod so vigorously his hat nearly fell off.

Anne forgot all her pride in her desperation. ‘Wait, wait, please,’ she cried with a tearful voice. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s all so confusing here, and I don’t know what I’m saying.’

Quirk circled round once and landed again. ‘What do you think, Boo? Would it perhaps be worth helping her?’

He didn’t hesitate for long, though. At that very moment, a long blood-curdling roar, or rather an almost indescribable mixture of growling, shrieking and wailing, pierced the air above the forest, striking terror in everyone’s hearts. Quirk and Boo vanished immediately as if swept away by a broom. Horror-stricken, Anne dropped to the ground and curled up into a ball. The roar spread over the forest like an omen, like an awful message from some forgotten world full of pain and despair. It then died down just as suddenly as it had started. For a long while Red lay on the ground, her eyes shut tight, without daring to look up or move. Just every now and then she found herself whispering, ‘Wait! Please wait, I beg you! I’m so scared! I’m so scared!’

Chapter Two: The Spider

A long time passed before Anne gathered the courage to look up. In the meanwhile, night had begun to fall, and the hope that it had all just been an old wizard's idea of a joke gradually disappeared. (She no longer had any doubts that Nerod Laptsev was some kind of wizard.) On the other hand, the thought that she would have to spend the night in this sunless place filled her with such horror that she felt close to dissolving into floods of tears. What manner of scary creatures lived in the forest? What was it that could have roared so terrifyingly? And where exactly was she? Maybe if she could find the edge of the box she could climb over and call her mother. Then Mum would convince the wizard to return her to her normal size. Yes, of course, after all she had only tried to break the game, and hadn't succeeded anyway. It was so obvious, even grown ups should be able to understand that.

'Ahem,' came a little cough from behind her.

For the hundredth time that day, Anne jumped for fright. She turned around slowly, and then jumped again, only this time for joy.

'My backpack!' she cried, completely forgetting about all the forest monsters. 'You're still here! If only you knew how happy I am to see you! I was beginning to think I'd have to spend the whole night on my own. My dear, sweet little backpack!'

'It must be a miracle,' muttered the backpack sourly. 'Red is acting friendly. Wait, let me make a note of this so we won't forget.'

'Are you still angry with me, then? Come on, please don't be petty. As for the fur-pulling, well, I... I just didn't realise that you're alive. That's why I did it.'

'Yeah, well now you know. So what?'

'What do you mean, "so what"? Why do you find it so hard to understand something so simple? It changes everything.'

'Like what?' The backpack looked at Anne as if she had just claimed she was the Queen of England.

'For example... er...' Anne tried in vain to think of something. 'Ok, you tell me.'

'A simple "I'm sorry" wouldn't be a bad start.'

'Ah...Hmm...Mmmm.'

‘It starts with “I”,’ offered the backpack obligingly.

‘Ok, ok, if you insist. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do it.’

‘Excellent,’ exclaimed the backpack triumphantly. ‘I’ve waited for this moment for such a long time. I’ve even prepared a reply. Would you like to hear it?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I reject your apology!’ said the backpack through clenched teeth, and then proceeded to pick its nose with great concentration.

Anne was so offended that her eyes filled with tears.

‘But why?’ she asked, bewildered. ‘Do you really hate me so much?’

The backpack carried on picking its nose.

‘Can’t we be friends?’ asked Anne tearfully.

‘That’s childish,’ retorted the backpack. ‘Bashing someone around and then saying sorry. I mean, look at me.’

‘But I meant it.’

‘Whether you meant it or not, I’m not interested! I’ve had enough and won’t put up with it any more!’

Anne suddenly couldn’t take it any longer. She slumped to the ground and burst into tears, each teardrop forming a tiny rivulet as it trickled down her face. Never before had she felt so miserable and forlorn, even that time she had got lost at the zoo.

‘I’m scared, so scared,’ she hiccupped while wiping at the tears with her fists. ‘Everything is so scary here... I want to go home to Mum. I’m really scared.’

‘Hey, listen,’ said the backpack eventually. ‘I don’t know how to get out of here either.’

Anne went on crying miserably.

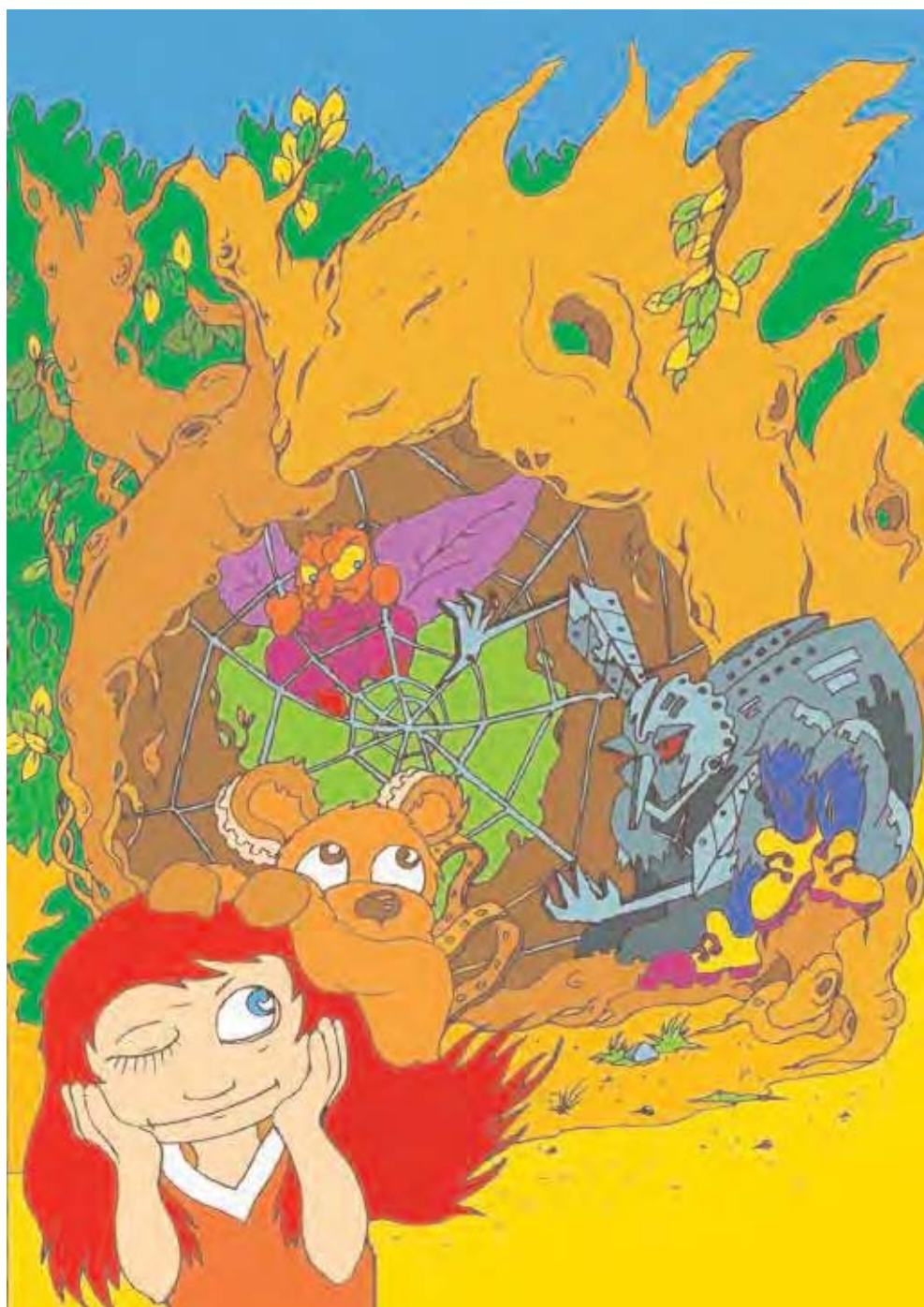
‘I mean, I don’t think I’ll be all that much help.’

‘But at least you’re here,’ moaned Anne. ‘I can’t begin to think how I’d manage on my own.’

She hiccupped a bit more, and once she had calmed down she thought for a minute, gave her eyes a final, decisive wipe and said, ‘Please don’t be angry any more. I mean it, I really want us to be friends. I’d be all alone without you. Please don’t leave me!’

A timid hope shone in the backpack’s eyes. ‘Real friends?’ she asked, still rather distrustful. ‘Not just the convenience kind?’

‘The realest kind you can get. I promise!’



‘And you won’t be so bad-tempered when I say something you don’t like?’

‘That too.’

‘Are you quite sure? You can’t break a promise!’

Anne pondered for a moment and then said, ‘Real friends. The very realest sort!’

The night passed quickly and without incident. Luckily, it was summer in the forest and fine for sleeping out in the open. Besides, the furry backpack was as warm as a thick, cosy blanket. In the morning the two travellers woke up a little damp with dew, but the sun quickly dried them, so Anne soon remembered she hadn’t eaten anything since the day before. Now the backpack proved itself priceless. She gathered two handfuls of lovely blackberries as big as strawberries and just as delicious, though a little more sour. It was a real treat for Red. Although it could speak, the backpack didn’t need food, and soon Anne was full enough to start thinking about getting home.

‘Which path do you think we should take?’ she asked while wiping her fingers on a patch of her T-shirt that was a bit cleaner than the rest.

‘Whichever. Let’s take the right.’

No sooner said than done. Anne put on the backpack and bravely set off on the path. She hadn’t gone ten metres when a strange sight suddenly met her eyes.

The path led to a second, smaller meadow, but the way was closed off by a mighty old tree so huge that it completely blocked the way. However, a tunnel had been built into it so that you would easily be able to walk upright through it. But the way wasn’t open: suspended on a complex system of levers and gears right in front of the entrance there hung a thick spider’s web. To the left of it there was a kind of slot machine in the shape of an animal’s head. On the right-hand side sat a large, hairy spider with two pairs of his eight legs crossed, intently cleaning his fingernails with a rather large knife. Trapped in the web and thrashing about desperately was a fat fly about the size of the backpack.

‘Let me go at once! You monster! I haven’t done anything to you!’ shrieked the fly in a trembling voice.

The spider grinned with self-satisfaction exposing several rows of sharp teeth. 'Wait just a little longer till I find time for you, my sweet. It's my lunch break soon.'

'Help! Oh my!' exclaimed the fly, scared to death. 'He's going to eat me!'

'All in good time,' muttered the spider philosophically without paying it any more attention.

'Hello, little one,' he turned towards Anne, who was just on the point of running for her life. 'If you want to get through, then be quick as I close soon. What are you waiting for?'

'Well, I...' Anne began to stammer. 'I only wanted to have a look.'

'What's there to look at? It's just a path like any other. This young lady here has been held up because she tried to pass without paying. No one gets past me, that's for sure.' He cast an evil glance in the fly's direction and continued, 'Put your money in the slot and I shall see that the web is raised immediately. If you're not sure what to do, the instructions are over there,' he pointed towards a notice board which Anne hadn't seen until then. 'If you can't read, then I can help you.'

'Oh, no need,' Anne's heart was pounding like a sewing machine. 'I can manage... and I'll just take a quick look.'

'As you wish,' said the spider disappointedly. 'Just don't say I gave you bad service. To me the customer is always right, please remember. You see that diploma? Mr Heino personally awarded it to me.'

'I've ... forgotten something, I've just remembered. Excuse me, I must hurry.'

Anne turned and ran away as fast as she could. She stopped once she was back in the meadow. Her heart was still beating loudly.

'Oh my, what a brute!' cried the backpack from behind. 'God help whoever falls into his clutches. Put me down a moment, will you? My legs are shaking.'

'Wh-What should we do now?'

'That path obviously wasn't the best choice. Let's try one of the others.'

'Let's rest a bit. I'm feeling quite faint.' The two friends huddled together.

'Nice service, eh? If you don't pay you get eaten,' the backpack blurted out.

'Oh, I was so scared, It made me feel quite sick. What do you think, what does all this mean?'

‘Well, it’s a kind of toll road as far as I can tell. You have to pay in order to get through. Have you got any money?’

‘Not a penny.’

‘Nor me. What a mess! Listen, we can probably find a solution, but I reckon we’d better stay off that path for the meantime.’

‘Poor fly, how she screamed! Maybe...’

‘What?’

‘Oh, nothing. I was just wondering if there was some way we could help her.’

‘Come on, don’t be ridiculous!’ said the backpack, outraged at the suggestion. ‘Didn’t you see his teeth?’

‘Yeah, well, if I was as strong as Pippi Longstocking...’

‘Yes, if you were, but you’re not. And this isn’t a kids’ story, this is for real, remember. Have you had enough rest? Let’s go. We’ve no time to lose.’

Anne put the backpack on again and set out in the other direction. Soon the path led them to a wide, open area. It looked like the forest ended there.

A vast swamp stretched out as far as the eye could see, and was dotted with little islands on which stood fat tree stumps. At first Anne thought she had reached the river, but then realised she was mistaken. The air was thick with the stench of slime and swamp, and the still, muddy water looked nothing like a river. Several metres ahead of her, not far from the edge of the swamp, there was a large stump covered from top to bottom with different machinery parts. Red moved closer cautiously and started to look it over from a safe distance.

What first caught her attention was that here was the same kind of slot machine as the one in the spider’s meadow. It was a grinning animal head with a number of thin whiskers on the snout, a black velvety nose, shiny glass eyes, and a wide-open mouth with two protruding front teeth. Next to it was a television monitor connected to a satellite dish mounted on the top of the stump. Two large loudspeakers completed the set-up. In between there was all manner of technical gadgetry such as a propeller, some pedals, a little display with buttons beneath it, as well as several metal signs with unreadable words written on them.

‘What do you think it is?’ asked the backpack.

‘I don’t know, but it looks a lot more complicated than Mum’s computer. Do you think it would be dangerous to get any closer?’

‘I haven’t a clue, but look over there. That’s the same notice board we saw at the spider’s. He said it explains everything. Let’s see if we can understand any of it,’ suggested the backpack.

Not far from the stump was a large signboard displaying a series of pictures and instructions. Anne approached it cautiously and took a closer look. At the very top in large, bold letters was written:

Heinomat®

Beneath that in normal type it said:

‘Welcome to “Heinomat®”. The last word in technology! Our system ensures easy and fast clearance through every obstacle. For a small fee you gain access to the latest technological breakthroughs of “Heinotech™”. Trust in “Heinotech™”: the greatest firm in the whole of Ghost Forest.’

Underneath that were several illustrations showing a hand placing coins in the mouth of the slot machine, then a bridge spanning the swamp, and finally, a person walking over the bridge.

At the very bottom was a photo of a fat, sleazy figure with the caption: ‘You can always depend on me: Heino the Beaver!’ Then there was an illegible signature. The head in the photo matched the shape of the coin machine exactly.

‘Hey, Anne, look at this! The slot machine is actually a beaver. I thought it was a giant rat,’ said the backpack.

‘Yes, but I still don’t see how we’re going to get through. They want money here, too.’

‘At least there isn’t a scary spider here. That’s something, isn’t it?’

‘Mmm,’ agreed Anne without much enthusiasm. ‘It’s something.’

‘Look, let’s try to get through,’ suggested the backpack. ‘It could work. After all, it’s just a machine, isn’t it?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Anne hesitated. ‘I don’t want to get into trouble.’

‘We could always go and beg the spider, if you’d rather,’ the backpack suggested casually.

‘Is that some sort of a joke, or what?’ said Anne, becoming angry, but then remembering her promise she added more calmly, ‘Ok, if you insist. Let’s see

what happens.’ The two of them slowly approached the stump and looked it over from every angle.

‘Where do we begin?’ asked the backpack.

‘Well, there must be some sort of button,’ Anne replied uncertainly. ‘That one, for example.’

‘Go on then.’

Anne raised her hand and pressed the button. The giant satellite dish began to buzz softly and started turning. The head of a fat female beaver appeared on the screen, and from the loudspeakers came the sound of a tinny voice. ‘Welcome, welcome! It’s good to see you! To use the system, insert a coin into the mouth of the machine, it’s as simple as that! Next, wait for the motorised bridge to assemble itself. The individual sections connect the stumps in the swamp, and the total length of the construction is over 500 metres. This is the most complex engineering feat to be found in the entire Ghost Forest. According to our records....’

Anne pressed the button again. The screen went dead and everything fell silent.

‘An advertisement’, she said, in a bored tone. ‘Let’s try another button.’

The next one turned a noisy propeller, while the rest of the buttons didn’t do anything. Anne was getting desperate.

‘Hey, Anne, look what I’ve found over here,’ cried the backpack from the other side of the stump. ‘Come and help me. I can’t move it by myself.’

Red walked around the stump and saw that the backpack was straining to shift an big lever.

‘Together now,’ said the backpack, ‘one, two, three.’

With their joint force the lever gradually gave and moved with a horrid creaking sound. Anne waited to see what would happen.

Two doors on opposite sides of the stump opened softly and out popped a pair of long metal hands wearing thick rubber gloves. Before Anne knew what was happening, the hands had grabbed her and bent her over, and a third hand that had appeared from somewhere overhead started spanking her backside methodically. ‘Oh my, help!’ she screamed. ‘Let me go!’

However, the machine continued spanking as long as it had been programmed to, and by the time it stopped Anne had already given up screaming and was accepting the situation with patient resignation. Finally, the hands

dropped her unceremoniously on the ground and without further ado retreated behind the doors from where they had come.

‘Oh Anne, I’m so sorry,’ cried the backpack, clearly full of remorse. ‘I had no idea it was a trap. I’m very, very sorry!’

‘That’s ok,’ said Anne through clenched teeth, while silently wiping away her tears. ‘He won’t get away with this. He’s got it coming, that Heino. I’ll teach him a lesson or two!’

‘Wait, wait a moment,’ said the backpack thoughtfully. ‘Do you remember that the spider mentioned that name, too? Yes, he said that he’d been awarded his diploma from Mr Heino personally. In other words, this lump of blubber there is his boss, isn’t he?’

‘Yeah, it looks like it.’

‘Then we’d better keep out of his way. We’ve already seen the kind of hoodlums he employs, so he’s not likely to be a bundle of laughs himself, is he?’

‘Oh no,’ exclaimed Anne. ‘Hoodlum or not, I’ll show him. I don’t put up with treatment like that.’

‘All right, don’t get angry. We’ll worry about him when the time comes. Right now our efforts are getting us nowhere. It looks like we won’t be able to get through here either.’

‘Yeah, you’re right,’ agreed Anne gloomily. ‘There’s only the third path left. If we draw a blank there, I don’t know what we’ll do.’

‘We’ll think of something. Let’s get going, I’m dying to find out.’

‘It’s easy for you,’ thought Anne. ‘No one is worrying or crying about you. No one is going to be asking where you’ve disappeared to. Mum has probably raised the alarm in the neighbourhood already. If she only knew I’m just two steps away!’ She gave a deep sigh, put on the backpack and set off.

Chapter Three:

Mr Buck

The third path arrived at the bank of a large stream. A narrow trail of flat stones led to a small fishing jetty hidden among rushes and reeds. There was a large fishing basket in the water. It was suspended from a long branch which was resting in the fork of another upright branch.

Standing next to it was a tall rabbit, shivering and wet from head to toe, who was clumsily trying to drag the basket to shore, but constantly failing. He could only get the basket out of the water by putting his weight on the long branch, but in order to reach the raised basket, he then had to let go again. The poor rabbit wasn't having any luck in doing both things at the same time, but on the other hand he was managing to have a wonderful shower with each new attempt.

The rabbit was dressed in jeans and T-shirt, just like Anne. He had a pair of large cowboy boots on his feet and was wearing a set of headphones from a personal stereo that could be heard from far away. He was so absorbed in his work that he didn't notice anyone coming, and just kept on muttering angrily to himself. Anne coughed several times, but to no avail. Once she realised he couldn't hear her, she went up to him and tapped him on the shoulder cautiously.

The rabbit was so startled he nearly fell in the water.

'What a cheek! How dare you!' he exclaimed in a weedy voice, while looking for a way to escape. 'You gave me the fright of my life. Couldn't you have given me a shout?'

'Well, I did try,' said Anne defensively. 'You couldn't hear me because of the headphones. Your music is very loud.'

'There's nothing wrong with my music,' said the rabbit sulkily, but took off his headphones all the same. 'Who are you anyway? I haven't seen you around before.'

'I'm Anne. Or Red if you prefer.'

'Aha,' having overcome his initial fright, he began examining her curiously. 'I'm known as The Rocking Rabbit. But Mr Buck to you, just so we're clear.'

Anne looked at him crossly, but kept silent.

'What are you trying to do?' she asked. 'Can I help you?'

‘Oh dear,’ fretted Mr Buck. ‘That thieving magpie stole my ring. Luckily it dropped it, otherwise I expect I wouldn’t have seen it again. What is the world coming to! Stealing in broad daylight!’

‘What ring? May I see it?’ asked Anne inquisitively.

‘There it is! It fell right in that basket! I’ve been struggling here for more than an hour to get it out, but I can’t manage it.’

‘Is that all? That’s easy, I’ll take care of it.’

‘You think it’s easy, do you?’ Buck gave her a resentful look. ‘If it were so easy, would I still be here?’

Anne puffed out her chest boastfully. ‘Hey, every job has its experts,’ she said confidently. ‘Step aside a moment, please.’

She lifted one of the flat stones, pressed down with it the end of the long branch and the basket rose out of the water. Now it was within easy reach. Yet getting it to the bank was still an effort as it was very heavy and slightly bigger than Anne herself. Buck looked at her amazed, as if as a miracle had taken place right in front of his eyes. ‘Well, what do you know!’ he said, scratching his neck. ‘That didn’t look difficult at all. But boy, did I try hard!’

Anne had a good look at the ring she had just removed from the basket. It bore the image of a large skull with two crossed carrots beneath it. ‘How horrible!’ she thought to herself, but didn’t say anything, and handed it back to Buck.

‘My ring! My beloved ring!’ he declared joyfully. Then he quickly put it back on and looked at Anne in an unfriendly way. ‘Ahem, if you’re expecting some kind of reward ...’

Red started to feel her anger rising.

‘No I’m not, but you could at least say “thank you”!’ she replied sharply, forgetting her manners. ‘There’s no need to be so jumpy.’

‘Hee-hee, if that’s all,’ said Buck hurriedly without acknowledging her rude tone, ‘Thank you. Thank you. And now is a good time to part, isn’t it? I’ve, er, got work to do.’ He started out on the path.

‘Hey, wait a second!’ shouted Anne. Mr Buck stopped and flattened his ears obediently. ‘Can I at least ask you a few questions?’

‘Ok, but be quick.’ He shifted from one foot to the other nervously.

‘First, tell me how I can get past the spider’s tunnel and the swamp.’

'Simple. You need money. It won't work otherwise... Not that I've got any myself, mind you,' he added hurriedly, just as the sound of jingling coins came from his pocket. 'I mean, not any to spare, that is. Next question.'

'How can I get out of here?'

'Get out?' the rabbit looked quite puzzled. 'What do you mean get out of here? Where do you want to go?'

'Back home, where else?'

'Ah, you are not from here, is that so?. Right, right.' He thought for a moment, gave her a calculating glance and added, 'I think we can arrange something, but it won't be easy. And you should know it won't be cheap either.'

'What does that mean?'

'Let me think a minute. Well, carrots. Lots of carrots. You find me two or three bags of carrots and I'll show you how to leave.'

'Two or three bags? Where am I going to find that many carrots?' Anne took a deep breath and tried to suppress her rage. That rude, stingy rabbit was really starting to get on her nerves.

'Fine, let's not quibble. Let's say half of that, then. So, three divided by two is, erm... er... that must be about six and a half, right?'

'Moron!' exploded Anne. 'You can't do maths for toffee! Three divided by two is one and a half. One point five, all right?'

'Hee, hee, hee. You find me one or five and you can keep the point as a souvenir.' He grinned from ear to ear, clearly pleased with his joke.

Anne went berserk. 'You jerk!' she screamed. 'Give me that ring back!'

The rabbit ducked as if she had thrown a stone at him.

'Wait, wait,' he stammered, hiding the hand with the ring behind his back. 'I was only joking.'

'Is that a fact? Well, now I've got a little joke for you: if I ever lay my hands on your ears, I'll tie them in a knot, got it?'

'Phew! What a hothead! Can't a fellow even make a little joke?' Buck was looking again for a chance to escape, but Anne was blocking his path and there was no other way out.

'That's enough hot air! Now tell me how to get out of here!'

'Well, it's.'

'What, another joke?' Anne took a step forward.

'No, but...'

‘Stop beating about the bush. Tell me!’

‘Well, I don’t really know, either,’ admitted a rather ashamed Mr Buck.

Anne stamped her foot in disappointment and frustration.

‘Oh, you don’t, do you? You, you... I can’t find the words, you liar!’

‘Hold on, wait,’ he stuttered in fear. ‘It’s true that I don’t know, but I could send you to someone who does.’

‘Who? Come on, quickly!’

‘Grandpa Hedgehog.’

‘Grandpa Hedgehog? Who’s that?’

‘Grandpa Hedgehog is our master herbalist. He’s very wise. He understands everything and has a cure for everything. If you’ve got toothache or stomach ache, for example, go to see him, he’ll give you a tea and you’ll soon be fine again. He’ll definitely know how to help you.’

‘And where can I find him, this wise Grandpa?’

‘That’s also very easy. Once you’ve got through the spider’s tunnel, keep to the path. It leads straight to Grandpa Hedgehog’s water mill.’

Anne pursed her lips. ‘But I haven’t got any money. Can’t I beg the spider to let me pass? Or is there some other place I can get through?’

‘Don’t even try! There’s no other way and that spider doesn’t joke around. He’s very strict and doesn’t make exceptions. If you ask me, he’s a little narrow-minded, but otherwise his work is pretty thorough and accurate.’

‘I’ve already seen evidence of his accuracy,’ said Anne sullenly, then added, ‘Look, couldn’t you lend me a little money? Just enough to get through the tunnel. I’ll pay you back, I promise!’

‘I can’t, I can’t,’ Buck replied immediately. ‘Times are hard, I’ve got a big family and taxes are high.’

‘But what can I do, then? On one side there’s a spider, on the other is a swamp, and in the middle there’s a stream. I can’t get past any of them! How will I get out of here?’

‘Well, I’m sure I don’t know. I’ve helped as much as I can. Let me go now. I’ve got to feed the kids.’

‘Ok. One last question.’

‘Well?’

‘Is it true,’ Anne was shuffling from one foot to the other. ‘Is it true that there are ... ghosts in this forest?’

‘Shhhhhh!’ hissed Buck. ‘Are you mad speaking so loudly! What if they hear us? We’d be finished for good!’

He grabbed the chance and ran past Anne like a shot. When he’d reached the end of the path he turned, looked cautiously all round him, then put his paw to his mouth and whispered loudly, ‘If only there weren’t! Be very careful, they’re no joking matter! Everyone in the forest is afraid of Mr Heino and his spiders, but let me tell you, even they are afraid of the ghosts. There’s nothing more frightening than the ghosts. Right, I’m off, ‘bye!’

Anne and the backpack sat down despondently on the little jetty and threw pebbles in the water. They were both feeling rather dejected.

‘Maybe we should try to cross the stream,’ suggested the backpack.

‘There’s no point. The path doesn’t continue on the other side. I can tell from here. And we don’t know how deep the water is anyway. We could drown, just like that.’

‘We could try to build a boat like Robinson Crusoe.’

‘Without tools? Cut down trees with our hands? No, no. It looks like we’ll be stuck here till the ghosts find us.’ Anne let out a snuffle, and had to bite her bottom lip to keep from bursting into tears.

‘Ha ghosts! Let them come. I don’t care! “Who’s afraid of the big, bad ghost...”’, the backpack started singing, trying to cheer her up.

‘Hey, Anne, what is it?’ she added, somewhat anxiously, seeing how Anne had suddenly jumped up and was walking around in a lively manner.

‘Say it again. The last thing you just said.’

‘Who’s afraid of the big, bad ghost?’ repeated the backpack. ‘What is it? I don’t get it.’

‘Yeah, that’s it!’ cried Anne eagerly. ‘The spider is afraid of the ghosts, right? Everyone is afraid of the ghosts.’

‘To be honest, I am, too.’

‘Yeah, me too, but that’s not the point. Listen. I’ve thought of something.’ Anne bent down and whispered in her friend’s ear. The backpack’s mouth started to change into a slow, satisfied smile.

Chapter Four: Rescuing the Fly

The spider had just dozed off in the warm sun and was already dreaming about how he would enjoy snacking on the fat fly, when suddenly he was woken by a tremendous din.

‘Help!’ someone yelled. ‘Ghosts! Every man for himself!’

‘What? Where?’ he stammered, not yet fully awake. ‘What’s going on?’

Running along the path towards him was the little girl from that morning – with a torn T-shirt, splattered with blood from head to toe.

‘Ghosts! Run! Save yourself!’

‘Where are they? Are there many of them?’

‘Whole gangs of them. Huge, terrifying! They almost got me, I just managed to escape.’

‘Are you sure? You weren’t just imagining it, were you?’

‘Oh no, they’re coming! Look, there they are! Run for your life!’

The spider looked down the path again and his blood froze. Along the path there came a hairy monster walking on thin, stork-like legs, and dripping from its paws was something thick and red: the little girl’s blood, obviously! Without thinking twice, he took to his heels and fled to the top of the tree in a flash, clambering along one of the web’s thick threads.

The meadow was now left unguarded. Already resigned to her fate, the fly watched with horror as the hairy monster slowly drew near. Then she couldn’t take it any longer, and started screaming with her last strength, ‘Help! They’re going to eat me!’

‘Hey, stop that! I’m not going to do anything to you,’ said the monster, and ‘Hup!’ it sprang like a flea into the air.

The thin stork legs dropped to the ground. The little girl approached the monster quite fearlessly, and started helping it free itself from the many twigs and leaves adorning its head. After a few seconds not a trace of monster remained. On the meadow stood a furry little backpack smeared with something thick and red.

The fly stared at her in utter bewilderment. ‘Who are you?’ she gulped. ‘Weren’t you a ghost?’

‘A ghost, my foot!’ replied the backpack. ‘Two branches for stilts, some leaves, a little mud and berry juice – that was the ghost.’

‘What? You’re kidding!’ the fly looked at her in disbelief, then she suddenly understood everything and burst into fits of laughter. The web shook and began to jangle.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ hooted the fly. ‘Quick, grab me before I fall! Oh my, what a trick! That old bandit is going to explode with anger. Ha, ha, ha! At last someone’s fooled the spider! The whole forest is going to laugh at him! Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Listen, there’s no time to lose,’ interrupted the backpack. ‘Quick, tell us how to raise the web so we can get away. The spider won’t be long.’

‘Oh, and you’re just going to leave me like this?’ said the fly, coming to her senses. ‘Can’t you see I’m stuck?’

‘Of course we’re not going to leave you!’ said Anne, while starting to free her from the sticky threads with a large branch. But you’ve got to help us, too. Without you we won’t be able to work out this machinery.’

‘There’s no point anyway,’ said the fly, patiently putting up with the scratches from the sharp branch. ‘You won’t be able to get far going through here. The spider will catch you straight away and there’ll be no mercy then. Your only chance is to hide somewhere nearby and wait while I work something out with him.’

‘Work something out with the spider?’ asked Anne doubtfully. ‘Can you do it? Since when have flies started working things out with spiders?’

‘Wait a little, we’ll talk later. I’ve got an idea. Once he sees I’m free, he’ll go raving mad. I know him well, the idiot. Forget that he outwitted me this morning. Now go and hide. If he finds you here you’re in for trouble. I’ll take care of the rest.’

In fact, heavy breathing could already be heard coming from the top of the tree, and was rapidly drawing nearer. The spider obviously suspected something and was coming back to see what had happened. Anne tore away the last sticky threads, threw away the branch and dashed off with the backpack following her.

And not a second too late! The two of them had just hidden themselves when the spider appeared from above, red in the face and puffing like a steam engine. He jumped to the ground, immediately realising what had happened and started roaring in an ugly voice. ‘A-a-a! Just wait till I get you, you devil! I’ll cut you to pieces you miserable maggot! Hiding, are you? Well, let’s see how long

you can hide. I'm going to get you, sooner or later I am! Ah! How could I have fallen into such a simple trap, idiot that I am! Well, just you wait! You and I are going to meet again, mark my words!

In a complete frenzy, he started slashing at the bushes with his knife. Twigs, branches and leaves flew in all directions, filling the air with the tang of fresh sap. The spider thundered and roared until he was so exhausted he had to take a rest.

'Yoo-hoo!' someone called above his head. 'Hey, what's your problem? You ran out of steam awfully quickly. And you were doing so well; pretty soon you'd have cut a whole new path through the woods.'

The fly was sitting on a branch only a few centimetres above his head, her legs casually crossed and sticking out her tongue in the rudest manner.

The spider leapt up as if he'd been jabbed in the ribs. His tiredness evaporated immediately, and he started hopping up and down trying to reach her, wild with rage. She buzzed around right in front of his nose, each time slipping out of his reach by a hair.

'Oh, look at him dancing! All we need is the music! Look at the hero hopping about! Come on, up! Up! Come on! Once again! Higher!'

The fly gradually started moving back along the path. Deaf and blind to everything but this loathsome mockery, the spider was following her like a wooden duck on wheels. The two of them moved slowly in the direction of the swamp.

A great deal of time passed. Anne and the backpack, still shaking with fright, remained hidden in the bushes. At long last the fly reappeared looking as happy as a bride. 'Yee-haaa!' she whooped as she approached. 'Hey, hey, hey, open the champagne! Come on, what are you waiting for, come out! The spider is done for; may he rot in peace! Sank in the swamp like a rock! Hooray! One less bandit in the forest!'

The two friends came out of their hiding place cautiously, still in disbelief. But once they had made sure that the fly was telling the truth, they started dancing around with her, drunk with joy. They jumped, sang and laughed until they were so exhausted they had to stretch out on the soft leaves to catch their breath.

'If this isn't the best day of my life, then my name's not Buzz!' said the fly after they had introduced themselves to each other. 'At long last, one of those

bandits has got what was coming to him! The whole forest suffers because of them, you can hardly breathe here anymore! They put this machinery everywhere, you can't take a step without their permission. It's unbearable, everybody's sick and tired of it. Things have gone from bad to worse, I tell you. Those brutes aren't afraid of anything.'

'But they are afraid of the ghosts, aren't they?' said Anne. 'Who are those ghosts, anyway? Everyone's talking about them all the time and seems to be really scared of them.'

'And rightly so,' replied the fly, frowning.

'But why? What do they do? And what do they look like?'

'Well, I've only seen them from a distance, but that was enough. When you've seen them for yourself, you'll understand what I mean. Boy, are they terrifying: huge, hairy, with enormous teeth. And how they roar! It feels like your heart will explode with fear.'

'Where do they come from?'

'No one knows. Where they come from, who they are, what they want... no one can tell you. Thankfully they live on the other side of the river and only rarely appear on this side. Otherwise, I don't know what we'd do.'

'I see,' sighed Anne with relief. 'We were scared ourselves. We met two winged creatures here – Quirk and Boo. Do you know them? They frightened us so much!'

'Ah, Quirk and Boo! Of course I know them. I mean, how couldn't I? They aren't bad in themselves, but they really love playing jokes on people, and not everyone can take a joke. Don't be angry with them; they don't do it to be mean.'

'Listen,' interrupted the backpack, 'as you can fly, you must know this forest from end to end.'

'Oh, no,' said the fly, smiling in a good-natured way. 'No one knows this forest from end to end. Basically because it doesn't have an end. And as I said, no one dares to go on the other side of the river as that's where the ghosts are.'

'That's a shame because we're trying to leave the forest.'

'Leave?' the fly scratched her head thoughtfully. 'To be honest, I don't know how you can do that. I'm not that clever. If you're looking for help you should speak to someone else.'

'Mr Buck told us to see Grandpa Hedgehog.'

‘Oh, really? Well, that Grandpa certainly is rather old and wise, but I doubt whether... Oh, never mind that. Hey, what do you say, shall we go ahead and open the path? If you want to get to Grandpa’s water mill before sunset it wouldn’t be a bad idea to get going right away. It’s not nearby, you see.’

Anne and the backpack nodded in agreement. The three of them jumped up and made for the spider’s meadow.

‘The scoundrels!’ said the fly, looking over the machinery for raising the web. ‘There was a time when everyone could pass through here freely. And there was no charge. Then they suddenly put up this system and, here you are, everyone has to pay. Don’t ask me how many of my relatives lost their lives here. And I almost died too! I was so lucky you were there!’

The meadow looked much friendlier without the dreadful spider guarding it. Anne began to have a good look round. The notice board the spider had pointed out wasn’t much different from the one by the swamp, but the web machinery looked very interesting. Red never missed an opportunity to see how things worked, and couldn’t hide her curiosity about this one.

‘Does it look interesting to you, then?’ smiled the fly. ‘Don’t be afraid, come closer. As long as you don’t touch the web itself, there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘I’m afraid something might happen,’ said Anne, worriedly. ‘Are you sure you understand it properly?’

‘I should say so!’ said the fly proudly. ‘We did a special study of these machines at school. I could explain it to you in my sleep. Come and have a look at how the whole mechanism works. Here, the web is suspended between two beams. The upper one is fixed, but can turn; you can see it’s on a roller. The lower one can go up and down. These weights pull the lower beam down to keep the web taut. The threads on each side go through pulleys which lead to this handle,’ she pointed to a handle fixed to a giant wheel. ‘The threads tighten when you turn the handle in this direction, the upper beam starts to revolve, and the web rolls around it. Simple and efficient. The spider’s job is just to ensure that the web remains strong and intact. That’s it.’

‘Very impressive,’ said Anne unable to hide her admiration. ‘But if we cut the threads...’

‘No!’ cried the fly. ‘No, don’t even think of it! That would be a big mistake. If we cut the threads there wouldn’t be any way we could roll up the web. It would

just be left hanging, and that would guarantee a completely blocked path. The machinery has to be broken properly. Look, I'll show you how that's done.'

With a few skilful movements she managed to roll up the spider's web. After that, she secured the wheel, inserted a strong branch between its spokes, and broke it off with a quick jerk.

'Voilà!' she bowed like a circus performer. 'That's how it's done. The web can't fall back down now and the path is open.'

'Wow, that was great!' Anne assessed the finished work with expert eyes. 'A clean job, no question!'

'Well, to tell the truth, that was my first time,' mumbled the fly, a little ashamed. 'In real life, I mean. I practised a lot at school, but how can you get anywhere near a real wheel? The spider would have swallowed me up before I could count to three.'

'You mean to say they teach you how to smash machines at school?' asked Anne a little enviously.

'Well, that and other things. Above all we learnt how to hide from the spiders and how to avoid the webs. That's not at all easy; it requires a great deal of skill and cunning.'

'Hey, listen,' cried Anne excitedly. 'Down by the swamp there's another machine just begging to be broken. Let's go and finish it off, too, eh?'

'O, forget it!' said the fly, shaking her head. 'That's the latest model, the "Heinomat 2000". Completely automatic, three different defence systems, and functions without a local operator. So far no one has found a way to bust those machines. And if you ask me, it's not going to happen soon. They are very cleverly constructed, damn them!'

'That's a shame. I'm just itching to get my hands on it. It gave me a good spanking this morning, and I want to return the favour.'

'What! Did you really try to tamper with it? Listen, don't do this again, do you hear me! You can't fool around with those machines. It's best to walk around or pay if you can.'

'That's the problem. I haven't got a single coin. So how can I cross the swamp?'

'To be honest, I've never had to worry about that. You see, I can just fly over. I'm afraid I can't help you there. I haven't got any money either. But at least I

was able to help you here. The path is open for everyone now. Long live freedom!

‘Hurray! Thank you for everything, Buzz.’

‘Hey, what are you saying! I should be thanking you. You saved my life, folks! Listen, if you ever need me, you’ll find me through the forest intercom. Buzz the fly, everyone knows me. I don’t have a fixed address, but when you call I’ll find you.’

‘How does this forest intercom work?’

‘Well, just by asking, how else? You meet someone, you ask where to find this or that person, and they’ll tell you if they know.’

‘And that’s called an intercom?’ Anne asked, rather astonished. ‘And what if the person we ask doesn’t know?’

‘Then they’ll tell someone else, that one will tell another, and so on until the message reaches the right one. Don’t worry, the intercom works perfectly. All right, off you go or you’ll be late. The path is waiting for you.’

‘Ok, then, let’s go. Take care, Buzz!’

‘You too. And don’t forget, keep to the path.’ Buzz made a parting circle over their heads and disappeared, waving an arm in farewell.

Anne walked for a long while without saying a word before muttering thoughtfully, ‘What a school, eh? Just amazing! If only we had one like that back home! That wouldn’t be bad. Not bad at all!’

Chapter Five:

Grandpa Hedgehog's Water Mill

'So the ghosts live somewhere over there,' said Anne pointing. 'To tell you the truth, seeing that the river is so rough makes me feel better. It can't be easy to cross it, can it?'

The two friends were sitting on the bank, shading their eyes with their hands, and trying to get a good look at the other side of the river. It was afternoon already. The sun was blazing hot, and in the haze the cliffs across the river trembled as if they were alive. The dark, unfriendly forest almost reached the edge of the steep riverbank. There didn't seem to be a single accessible spot along it. The river hadn't yet widened at this point, and it thundered past angrily, crashing on the rocks. Uprooted bushes, branches, even small trees were carried away by the current, bouncing over the rapids as if brought to life by magic.

'That goes without saying,' replied the backpack. 'Anyone who even tried crossing would have to be mad. The whirlpool would swallow them in seconds.'

'Thank heavens, nevertheless. See how gloomy the forest is over there. It makes me shiver just to look at it. This place isn't exactly a park itself, but over there it's just plain scary.'

'Oh, the more I see of it, the less I like this place altogether. I hope Grandpa Hedgehog can help us, otherwise I don't know what we'll do.'

'Well, it seems to me we're almost there. Yeah, that thing shining between the trees must be the water mill.'

Soon the path did indeed lead them to a small opening on the bank where the little white water mill sat daintily in the shade of several trees.

'Oh, isn't it lovely!' said Anne, enthralled. 'It's just like a little toy!'

The water mill really was very beautiful. The stone base of the building was roughly human height. Above that were carefully whitewashed walls with cute little windows set into them that looked good enough to eat. It made Anne think of the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel. On the right hand side, several wooden steps led up to a small, railed veranda. Through that you reached the front door, adorned with a large horseshoe for good luck and to guard against evil. The roof was made of greyish slates covered with moss, and perched at the very top was a tall, crooked chimney that was smoking even though it was summertime.

The wheel was almost as tall as the mill itself and stood just to its left. A complex system of wooden troughs channelled the water from the wheel, gradually spreading it in all directions and covering the whole garden in front of the mill. At the moment, however, everything had dried up because the wheel wasn't turning.

In front of the wheel stood a hedgehog leaning on a stick. He was tapping at the cogs with a hammer and shaking his head unhappily. Like his water mill, Grandpa Hedgehog looked like he had just stepped out of a Bulgarian folktale. He was dressed in a white linen shirt, an embroidered waistcoat, and thick, homespun breeches with a red belt, and on his head he wore a small fur cap. He was smoking a clay pipe, and his little eyes peered through thick, round glasses with wire frames.

'Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! This is a disaster!' mumbled the old man. 'All my work was in vain. It just won't turn!'

'Good afternoon,' Anne called out cautiously. 'Are you Grandpa Hedgehog?'

'That I am, that I am, child!' said Grandpa, startled at not having noticed her until then. 'But it doesn't look like a very good afternoon to me.'

'Why? What has happened?'

'I'm in trouble, big trouble. Do you see this wheel here? When it turns, it carries water from the river to my garden. Whether a cog has slipped or something else, I really don't know, but there it is. It hasn't turned at all today. My plants are going to dry out. They aren't used to dryness, poor little things.'

'Can't you call an expert?'

'Expert? What's an expert?'

'Isn't there some sort of call-out service? You know, someone who'll come and fix it.'

'Vixen?' Grandpa Hedgehog jumped as if he'd been stung.

'Fixer!' Anne stressed.

'Is that what they teach you in school today?' said the old man angrily. 'Go on, be off with you! Leave me in peace!' He turned his back on her and started hammering at the wheel again.

'I only wanted to help,' said Anne, trying to explain herself. 'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'You sound to me like one of those city kids,' said the old man, still angry but a little calmer than before. 'You have such an odd way of speaking, I can't un-

derstand a word. Anyway, everyone sees to things themselves here, and where would you find a repairman anyway? If I was younger I would have fixed it myself by now, but I can't do a thing with my wretched hands these days, and my eyes are bad, too.'

'What kind of flowers do you grow here?' asked Anne, trying to be polite.

'Oh the poor thing! Calling a cauliflower a flower!' groaned the old man. Then he must have thought better because he took her through the garden, touching the plants tenderly as if they were children. 'Well, there's a little of everything, my child. This one here's a geranium. There are some nettles for soup, some peppermint and camomile for tea, marigold and sumac for an old person's aches and pains, and other herbs to make the house smell nice. All the rest are vegetables.' He sighed heavily. 'Oh, I really exhausted myself today trying to fix this darn thing, and I'm starting to feel a bit feverish. I'm going to have a lie-down, so excuse me, please.'

He began limping slowly towards the mill and, while Anne was still wondering what to say, he disappeared inside.

'Now we've had it!' said the backpack. 'Nice help we found ourselves, eh?'

'How was I to know he was so touchy?' In a burst of anger, Anne kicked one of the flagstones on the path and stubbed her toe.

'Such a grumpy old man!' she added, hopping up and down on one leg. 'He gets upset for no reason. Is it my fault he hasn't got a clue about repair services?'

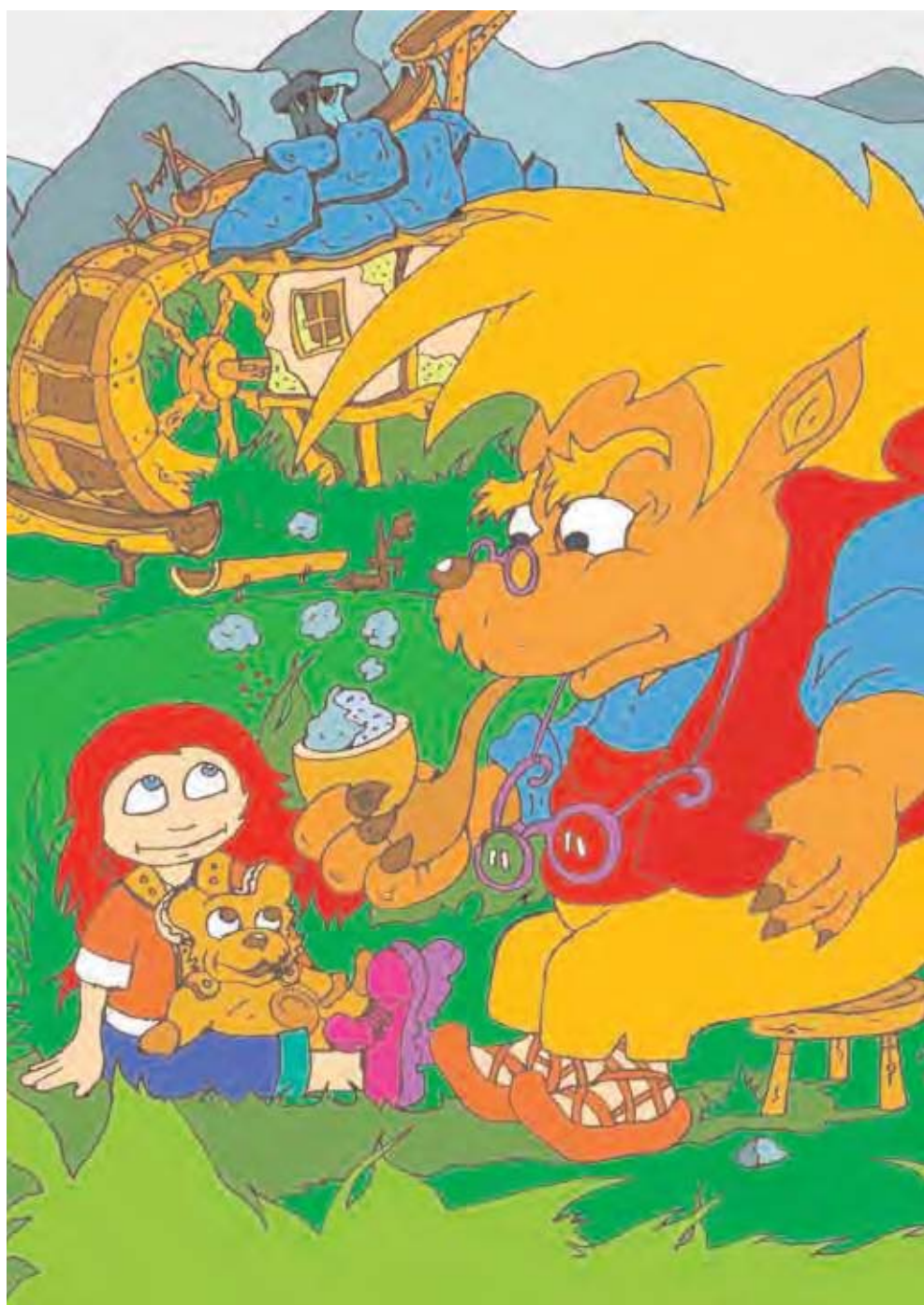
'Ok, but what are we going to do now? One way or another, we'll have to wait until he's had his rest. We can sit in the shade if you like.'

But Anne had become very annoyed and didn't want to stay a moment longer.

'Let's just keep on following the path,' she suggested. 'That Grandpa man is going to rest until dinner time anyway, why should we waste our time here? And who knows, maybe we'll find something interesting on the way.'

The backpack didn't need much persuading as she didn't want to sit in the old man's miserable garden any longer. Hand in hand, they walked down the path which gradually led away from the river and took them back into the forest.

They had walked a long way without seeing anything in particular, and were already asking themselves whether it wasn't time to go back when the backpack suddenly stopped and listened. 'I can hear something up ahead,' she said, cupping her hand behind her ear. 'Some voices, can you hear them?'



Anne listened and also heard something like a vague murmuring sound.

‘Hmm, it wouldn’t be a bad idea if we were a little more cautious. Don’t you think it would be best if we found out what’s happening over there before showing ourselves?’

The two of them started moving stealthily, step by step. The murmuring gradually became clearer until they could make out two distinct voices deep in argument.

After several more steps, a meadow appeared in front of them, and in the middle of it was a solitary, dead tree. In its branches sat two magpies, both bigger than Anne. They were dressed up to the nines and adorned from head to toe with numerous earrings, rings and necklaces. But right now they were looking quite bedraggled. Squabbling over something in their clutches that couldn’t be seen clearly, each was trying to grab it away from the other.

‘Excuse me, my dear neighbour, but I was the one who saw it first,’ hissed one magpie, rather ungallantly shoving at the other one.

‘Maybe you did see it first, but I was the one to take it, neighbour! The mask is mine!’ answered the other one, accidentally-on-purpose pecking at its rival.

‘Oh no, you don’t! I could have snatched at it myself, but one has to maintain a little decency. I’m not like someone I know who doesn’t have a clue about the meaning of manners!’

‘Ha! Don’t talk to me about decency and manners! What would you say if I was to call Madame Owl and told her a few things, eh? Or maybe you’d like to call her yourself?’

‘Ah, you’re impossible! You’d win prizes for your shamelessness!’

‘Oh so I’m shameless, am I? The scoundrel who robs half the forest is telling me all about manners!’

‘You miserable crow!’

‘Ignorant peasant!’

Forgetting all their talk of manners, the two magpies flew at each other and began to fight in earnest. The sound of blows rang out, and feathers flew all over the place. Anne and the backpack covered their mouths, scarcely able to stop themselves laughing out loud. For a while they watched the scene from their hiding place but then decided to move nearer to get a closer view. They had only gone the first few steps when the magpies made a fearful squawking noise and flew off. Silence reigned over the meadow.

‘Oh my, I didn’t know we were so scary,’ said the backpack. ‘Did you see how frightened they were? They flew off as if someone had fired a gun.’

‘Yeah, it’s strange. No one’s ever been afraid of us before now. I don’t understand why the magpies were so frightened. ... Aha! Look over there. There’s something lying on the ground. Shall we go and look?’

‘I think it’s the mask the magpies were fighting over. Yeah, they must have dropped it in their fright. Oh lord! It’s so ugly! And scary!’

Anne moved closer and bent down over the mask. It showed the face of a very angry man with a huge moustache. The face really was very unpleasant, even rather frightening.

‘Just think, they were ready to scratch each others’ eyes out for that ugly thing!’ said Anne. ‘How stupid! If you ask me, it’s best not to touch it at all, and just go back. What do you think?’

The backpack didn’t make a sound and was as motionless as a rock. Her face was twisted in terror.

‘Hey, what’s the matter?’ asked Anne, startled. ‘Are you afraid of the mask? Come on, it’s not so scary. I’ll throw it in the bushes right away if you like.’

‘Anne,’ whispered the backpack hoarsely. ‘It wasn’t us the magpies were afraid of. Look above you.’

Anne slowly looked up and froze. Just a few meters above them two huge, creepy figures were hovering in the air. The larger of the two, an enormous grey bear with a mangy coat and an emaciated body covered in wounds and scabs, had been leaning on the shoulder of the other – a small, bony woman dressed in a hooded cloak. Her ashen face was a mass of ugly red spots, and her eyes shone like embers sunk deep into her eye sockets. Her fingers were so bony that they looked like birds’ crooked talons. But scariest of all were the bear’s eyes: two black holes caked with blood which partly covered his cheeks, too.

‘The ghosts,’ croaked Anne. Her throat was sore, and her voice had become just a painful whistle.

The two figures descended to the ground and stood motionless several meters from Anne and the backpack. For a long time they watched each other in silence. Then the bony woman stood on tiptoe and whispered something into the bear’s ear. He shivered, took a step forward and growled, ‘Tell me something, child. I want to hear your voice!’

Anne was so terrified that at first she couldn't utter a word. The bear impatiently took another step forward.

'Speak!' he repeated.

'Wh-what should I say?' Anne couldn't recognise her own voice.

The bear turned to his companion. 'Are you sure you're not mistaken?' he asked. 'I don't know that voice.' The bony woman just patted him on the shoulder silently.

'Your name. Tell me your name!' said the bear. 'I don't want to make mistakes.'

'Anne. Anne Ravenhead.'

The bear lifted his head towards the sky, opened his mouth and roared. There could be no doubt: that was the roar she had heard when she'd met Quirk and Boo. It had the same blend of fury and desperation that had made the entire forest shudder.

In that next moment, everything in front of her eyes started moving very slowly and strangely, as if being filmed by a special camera.

The bear rushed at Anne. Despite his immense size, he moved nimbly and with terrifying speed. She screamed and closed her eyes, but her assailant didn't reach her. Instead there came the sound of something heavy hitting the ground. Red opened her eyes again, in spite of her fear, and saw that the woman had grabbed one of the bear's hind legs and was desperately trying to hold him back. Enraged by this unexpected restraint, he thrashed about furiously, tossing the woman around like a scrap of paper.

'Run! What are you waiting for!' she screamed at Anne. 'Can't you see I can't hold him?'

Anne turned and started running back towards the path, but it was already too late. The bear reached her in a few leaps, grabbed her from behind and lifted her in the air with one paw while preparing to strike with the other. His enormous, curved claws flashed in the sunlight like knives.

'No! Nooooo!' screamed the bony woman.

Anne clamped her eyes shut, expecting the worst, but it didn't come. Nothing happened. She looked again – not seeing was unbearable – and went rigid with surprise..

The bear was completely frozen in mid-action with eyes glazed over, his mouth wide open as if something were choking him. The hairy paw, still raised

to strike, trembled in the air as if some invisible force had seized it from behind and was preventing it from moving. Thin strands of saliva trickled from his mouth and dripped onto his chest. His huge, red tongue was drooping from the strain. He was panting in short bursts, wheezing with exhaustion.

‘Let me go! Let me go!’ cried the bear, breathing with great effort.

‘First let go of the little one!’ came a voice from behind him.

‘This... doesn’t... concern you. Why are you interfering?’

‘Let the little one go!’ repeated the voice.

The bear obeyed and set Anne back down on the ground. She crawled out of the way speedily. Her ears were ringing and her head was spinning. Everything was swirling around in wild, garish colours.

‘Why are you interfering?’ the bear roared again. ‘Haven’t I earned this reward? How much longer must I wait?’

‘As long as is necessary,’ replied the voice.

Anne tried to discover who was speaking, but she couldn’t see anyone. The voice didn’t have a visible owner, but neither the bear nor the bony woman seemed in the least surprised by that.

‘Leave her in peace and go home!’ continued the voice. ‘And tell all the others to leave her alone. Do we understand each other?’

The bear growled angrily, but nevertheless nodded in agreement, then turned and rose into the air without a further word. The bony woman followed him in silence. A few seconds later, the meadow looked as if nothing at all had taken place there.

‘Hello,’ Anne called out warily when she had calmed down a little. ‘Are you still there?’

‘Here I am,’ called the backpack.

‘No, not you. I’m talking to the one who saved me from the ghosts.’

But no one answered. The owner of the voice had vanished without trace.

Chapter Six: Mr Heino

It was already growing dark when the two friends returned to Grandpa Hedgehog's water mill. Anne was feeling so frightened and hopeless that she could hardly utter a word. The slightest noise made her start in fear. The forest seemed even darker and more menacing than before. The bear-ghost's rage had made her feel as helpless as a blind mouse. She hadn't done anything to him, so why had he attacked her? What reward were they talking about? And why had the woman with the deathly face tried to help her? Everything in this forest seemed so incomprehensible and confusing. Feeling very down-in-the-mouth, she trudged along slowly, sunk in gloomy thought.

Thankfully, everything at the water mill was still the same and there were no unpleasant surprises awaiting them. Grandpa Hedgehog wasn't out in the garden, so after a short discussion they decided to knock at the door.

'Come in, come in,' said the old man's voice from inside. 'A-choo, aaa-choo, choo!'

In his small bedroom it was already quite dark. The embers in the fireplace cast a dim light on the room's modest furnishings; there was a little round table with two three-legged stools, a bedstead with brass knobs on each corner post, a small cupboard on the wall, several shelves with ceramic and wooden bowls on them, and a pot plant on the window sill.

'Is that you, child?' called out Grandpa Hedgehog from the bed. 'Come in, don't stand on the doorstep. Your Grandpa Hedgehog has got a bit of a fever today, that's why he's gone to bed. Aa-choo! Now tell me, what's the matter?'

'Well, I wanted to ask you something.'

'Ask away. I don't charge.'

'The rocking rabbit told me you know something about everything.'

'Oh that good-for-nothing tends to overdo the praise. Ever since I caught him stealing my cabbages he doesn't dare show himself around here. But look how he tries to suck up to me! Oh well, never mind. Now, what was it you wanted to ask me?'

'I... I'm looking for a way out of the forest. I'm lost, you see, and I want to go home to my mum.'

‘Oh, poor thing!’ groaned the old man. ‘You’re asking the wrong person. I’m not one for getting about much, child, so I wouldn’t have any idea how you can leave the forest. For something like that you’d have to ask a bird. Only a winged creature that sees everything from high above can be of help to you. As for me, if I walked around for a month, I’d be lucky if I reached the swamp. The rabbit gave you bad advice, but then you can’t expect anything else from him, as I know only too well.’

‘So there isn’t any way you can help me at all?’ Anne felt as if she were going to cry.

‘Well, one thing comes to mind, but I’m not sure if it’s much help. There’s an old lady in the forest called Madame Owl. If you can find her she will certainly be able to give you better directions.’

‘Madame Owl? Who is she?’

Madame Owl, my child, is a fortune-teller. They say she can give you advice about anything. Every poor wretch in this forest goes to her for help because she can tell their fortunes. She’s a bit strange, bless her, and doesn’t always agree to help, but if she does agree, then there’s no one better around.’

‘And how do I find her, this Madame?’

‘Well, I’ve never gone there myself, but I know that you can get to her by going through the great swamp and then via the meadow with the orchids. They are not nice places, both having a bad reputation in the forest, but there is no other route.’

‘Through the swamp?’ Anne bit her lips. ‘But you can’t get through unless you’ve got money.’

‘Yes, so I’ve heard. Heino put some kind of machine there for collecting fees. It’s always too little for him, he wants more and more, the scoundrel. You haven’t got any money?’

‘Not a penny.’

‘That’s not good. Money, my child, can’t make you happy, but not having any at all is sure to make you unhappy. All right, let’s think about it tomorrow. Sleep now, it’s getting dark. Over there next to the fireplace you’ll find a pile of small rugs. Put a few down on the floor so it’s not too hard. It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing. If you’re hungry, you’ll find bread and salt in the cupboard. I’m afraid that’s all I can offer right now.’

Anne only realized then that she had become very hungry. She hadn't had anything to eat all day except some blackberries. Grandpa's stale wheat bread tasted as good to her as Easter cake. After she had eaten her fill, she made a small nest out of the rugs, snuggled down into them with the backpack and fell asleep instantly.

In the morning, however, Grandpa Hedgehog couldn't get out of bed. His forehead had broken out in a cold sweat, he was shivering under the blankets and his eyes had become dull and glazed. Anne was extremely worried about him, and tried for a long time to pour a little water between his tightly closed lips, but the feverish old man thrashed about like a fish on dry land and refused to drink. After that, he started talking in his sleep. 'The garden! My garden! Everything is ruined. My life's work wasted. My garden!'

Anne looked at him helplessly. Clearly the old man had fallen ill from worrying about his ruined garden. But what could she, a little girl on her own, do to help? Just as helplessly, the backpack stood beside her staring down at the ground. Eventually, they couldn't stand it any longer, and went outside in the fresh air.

'What shall we do?' asked Anne. 'Who can we call? If we leave him like this, he could easily die. What do you think? Do you suppose they have doctors here?'

'Even if they do, by the time we'd found them it would already be too late. If you ask me, only one thing can help him.'

'What's that?' asked Anne.

'For the wheel to start turning again so that the garden could be watered. That's all he's been talking about, isn't it? With the garden back in shape, Grandpa will be back on his feet in no time, I reckon.'

'Hmm, maybe you're right,' said Anne pensively looking at her in disbelief. She would never have guessed that her old backpack could be so clever. 'Why don't we go and have a look at the wheel? I don't think we'll manage to fix it, and still...'

The two of them went over to the large water wheel and started examining it carefully. It was made from rounded pieces of wood skilfully held together with grooves and pegs. They were so well joined that you couldn't slip a finger between them.

'Well, shall we try to move it?' suggested the backpack.

They got down to work, straining to turn the wheel, but it stood firm and didn't even creak.

'Damn stupid thing!' said Anne, getting angry. 'It won't budge. Why has it seized up like this?'

'Anne, come over here a minute,' called the backpack from the other side. 'What do you think is this thing sticking out of the water?'

Anne came over to take a look at whatever the backpack was pointing to. On closer inspection, she saw the end of a thick, tapering branch that disappeared under the water. She tried to reach it, but wasn't able to as the branch was on the other side of the wheel.

'Aha, there is something there,' she agreed. 'Help me climb up. I want to have a look at the other side.'

It wasn't at all easy to climb up onto the wheel, but Anne was very nimble and she'd had a lot of climbing experience anyway, so she eventually managed to reach the top. The surface was still slimy, making it rather slippery, and she had to be very careful not to fall. Red eased herself down onto her front, slowly leaning her head over the other side and almost fell over on seeing the sight below. She let out a whistle of astonishment.

'What is it? What can you see?' cried the backpack from down below, bursting with curiosity.

'You'd better come and see for yourself,' replied Anne, reaching out her hand. 'I'm not quite sure what to make of this.'

The two friends lay down side by side and stretched their necks over the edge. This was the view that met their eyes:

Constructed out of thick, crudely woven branches, something like a large nest – both spacious and comfortable – was wedged into the base of the water wheel. It was lined with smoothly planed and varnished floorboards that shone like a mirror in the sun. Two armchairs with embroidered white antimacassars draped over them were arranged around a small table upon which stood a giant piggy bank with a proudly puffed-out chest. Large vases containing artificial flowers decorated the nest's corners. In the centre there was a television set. In front of it, reclining on a comfy chaise longue, was a fat figure in boxer shorts, with a huge tankard of beer in his hand. A little to one side, a woman no less fatter than her husband, wearing a dressing gown and with rollers in her hair, was dusting the furniture.

‘Kick him! Go on, put the boot in! That’ll show him how football’s played!’ roared the fat husband. Froth spewed out of his mouth like a fire extinguisher. As fast as lightning, the wife wiped the splatters from the floor.

‘Blimey, if it isn’t Heino!’ muttered Anne. ‘Look how comfortably he’s settled in. It looks like Grandpa Hedgehog’s got a long wait before his wheel turns again.’

‘Too right,’ agreed the backpack. ‘The way he’s woven it into the wheel, there’s no way it’ll ever move.’

‘So what should we do now?’

‘I don’t know. I’m a little afraid, to tell you the truth. It’s maybe best to disappear before he notices us. Otherwise we may be in for it.’

‘And Grandpa Hedgehog? Are we just going to leave him like that?’

‘I don’t know, I really don’t know,’ whimpered the backpack. ‘But I don’t want to get in trouble with this one here. Look how evil he is. Just the sight of him scares me.’

Although uncertain, Anne agreed and they both got off the wheel, being careful not to make much noise. They sat down under the trees in the shade and tried to talk about something else. The conversation didn’t flow, however. Every now and again one of them would cast a guilty glance in the direction of the wheel, and very soon they both fell silent.

‘Child! Child!’ the old man’s weak voice came from indoors. ‘Are you still there, little girl?’

They jumped up and dashed towards the mill.

‘Ah, good, you’re still here, my child,’ the old man called from his bed. ‘Get me a little water to drink; my throat is parched.’

‘Bless you!’ he added after satisfying his thirst. ‘What’s happening with the wheel? Is it still stuck?’

Anne and the backpack exchanged worried looks.

‘Well,’ said Anne reluctantly, ‘it seems to be the same as before.’

‘Actually, no,’ she added hurriedly, noticing the despondent look on Grandpa Hedgehog’s face. ‘I heard it creaking a minute ago. I reckon it’ll be moving soon.’

‘Oh really?’ asked the old man, sitting up. ‘Hold on then while I go out and have a look.’ He tried to get up, but was too weak and fell back again. ‘Oh dear, I seem to be good for nothing today! The darn fever has really got to me. Ex-

cuse me for keeping you, child, but it seems I must ask you to stay another day or two. Only while I'm recovering, and then you can continue on your way. I'm sure your little furry friend will keep you entertained so you don't get bored.'

'Of course we'll stay, Grandpa Hedgehog. We're not in any hurry, anyway. You lie here and rest. We'll try to water the garden a little.'

'Bless you, child! I didn't dare ask you because it's very slow using a bucket, but it seems there's no other way. Just a little at a time. The pumpkins first as they need the most water, poor things. And don't water the leaves or the sun will scorch them. Just the roots.'

Several days passed. Anne didn't dare tell Grandpa Hedgehog the real reason for the wheel stopping for fear of upsetting him. They were hardworking days because carrying water from the river wasn't at all easy. But thanks to that the garden revived a little and brightened up, refreshed by the watering. It was clear, though, that things couldn't go on like that for ever. The old man lost more and more weight, his face turned grey, his eyes were sunken, and his expression became indifferent, even resigned. He didn't enjoy the vegetable soup made by the backpack, nor did the various herbal teas help. The two friends felt very down in the dumps.

'Listen,' said Anne at long last, unable to take any more. 'This isn't working out. The way things are going we'll be watering pumpkins for the rest of our lives. Besides, the old man isn't going to live much longer. Whether we're afraid or not, we're going to have to speak to that lout Heino.'

'If you insist,' said the backpack doubtfully. 'But you do the talking. I'm no good at speaking. Anyhow, it wouldn't be a bad idea for one of us to stand guard in case something happens and we have to make a run for it.'

The wheel was completely dry by now, and much easier to climb. The view below hadn't changed in the slightest. Heino was still lying on the chaise longue watching football and his wife interrupted her dusting every now and then to serve him beer. They both looked very happy.

'Ahem,' coughed Anne. 'Good afternoon.'

Heino was so taken aback, he began to choke on his beer. At first, his wife tried to pat him on the back and wipe the foam off the floor at the same time.

Then she decided the floor was more important and left him to take care of himself as best he could. The fat beaver sneezed and coughed till his face turned as blue as an aubergine. Anne started to get worried, but he finally managed to catch his breath and roared out, 'What a cheek! Can't a man enjoy a little peace and quiet in his own home? As if pestering me when I'm out there isn't enough, now you're starting here! But you mark my words, young lady, no matter what paper you're working for, first thing tomorrow morning I'll personally see to it that you're fired! You journalists are just like vultures, feeding off others' misfortunes; you just rake around in the muck trying to ruin honest people's reputations. Haven't you got enough dirt on me already without having to invade my home life?'

'Honey,' his wife called to him, 'can't you see, it's just a kid?'

'What?' For a brief moment Heino was extremely confused. Then he pulled himself together and started shouting again. 'You'd better get down from there quick sharp, 'cos if I get hold of you, I'll tear your ears off! Just wait till I tell your parents and you won't be able to sit down for a week! Insolent brat!' He turned towards his wife. 'Heidi, what's the matter with kids today? I just don't understand it. Worse than fleas, they are! Hey, get me a beer sweetheart, I'm dying of thirst.' He swallowed down several gulps quickly before continuing his stream of abuse. 'Well, do you hear what I'm saying, or do I need to get a cane and give you a good hiding? Look at the cheeky minx, climbing onto other people's roofs, peeking into other people's homes! Go on, get out of here quick, or I'll fetch my cane!'

Scared out of her wits, Anne ducked down and hid behind the wheel's edge. Insulted and angry, she was left gasping for breath. No one had ever been so rude to her before and so undeservedly. She clenched her fists feebly and chewed on her lip. Oh, if only there were some way she could get back at him! That would be so fantastic!

She was already imagining some very strong man beating Heino black and blue when the conversation down below caught her attention.

'I think you overdid it a little this time, honey,' said Heidi. 'Kids will be kids, but what can you do? Weren't you climbing on roofs when you were her age?'

'At her age I was already working and earning money,' replied Heino angrily but then, after a short pause he added more gently, 'to tell you the truth, it really shook me because I thought it was some journalist. You know the situation

I'm in after the business with the bribes, don't you? They watch my every step; I can't even breathe without them knowing. If the press get wind of the fact I've built this villa illegally, I'm done for. And the idiots from the Inland Revenue are just waiting for that. If a journalist shows up here I'm finished.'

'Do stop worrying about it, please. What journalist is going to show up in this out-of-the-way place? That's why we chose it, isn't it? To be far away from all our problems? Don't worry, no one's going to find us here. And once the fuss over that business dies down, you can go back to work again like before. I can see you're suffering badly from boredom. You're not used to being without work, I know you.'

Heino grunted in a satisfied sort of way and then went quiet. Anne climbed off the wheel silently and led the backpack to one of the distant corners of the garden.

'Hmm, so he's afraid of scandal, is he?' muttered the backpack thoughtfully. 'Then we must find someone who knows the local journalists. If we bring two or three of them, then maybe they'll get him really scared.'

'Ok, but where will we find them? As you well know, you can't take a step here without paying Heino. Besides, who'll take us seriously? By the time we've found someone, Grandpa Hedgehog will have been long dead.'

'You're right, but what else can we do? Pretend to be journalists ourselves? Horrors like us are bound to scare him right away!'

'I don't know, but we can't just leave things as they are. We've got to think of something. Come on, let's water the garden. Everything's starting to get dry again.'

Most of the rest of the day passed uneventfully. Absorbed in their thoughts, the two friends worked until the heat became unbearable, then sat down in the shade. The backpack was fidgeting nervously.

'Listen, I've got an idea going round my head, but it isn't exactly clear yet,' she said. 'As Heino mistook you for a journalist, that means he's really very afraid of them. You know they say everything looks bigger when you're scared?'

'Yeah, but what about it? He won't be fooled a second time. What we need is someone really grown up, preferably with a beard and moustache.'

The backpack became quite animated. 'With a moustache, you say? Someone who looks very surly and angry, right?'

'Yeah, but where are we going to find someone like that?'

‘There’s no need to look. He’s right under our noses!’

‘What are you trying to say? Hey, wait! Where are you running off to? Heeeyyy!’

Before disappearing down the path, the backpack yelled out without turning around, ‘I won’t be long. Wait till I get back and then you’ll see how we’ll take care of that jerk! He’ll never forget us as long as he lives!’

Chapter Seven: The Lessons of Inspector Colombo

Night was falling. Mr Heino had just eaten a sumptuous dinner and was now enjoying an enormous cigar. Reclining on his cosy chaise longue, he was dreaming out loud about buying up the whole forest someday when suddenly he was interrupted by a gruff voice.

‘Mr Heino, if I’m not mistaken?’

Startled out of his sweetest dreams, Heino sprang up, very nearly knocking over the chaise longue. The angry face of an important-looking, moustached man was peering down at him from the wheel above. The beaver was on the point of shouting, but something in the stranger’s face troubled him and he lost courage.

‘With whom do I have the honour?’ he asked haughtily. ‘I don’t remember having met, Sir.’

‘Ravenhead from the News of the Forest. If you wouldn’t mind, there are a few questions I’d like to put to you.’

‘Sorry, no chance. I’m on leave at the moment and I don’t give interviews. Call my secretary at the office if you want to make an appointment. Now, leave my home, if you don’t mind. I don’t remember inviting you.’

‘We’ve heard a rumour that you’ve been on leave from work for quite some time now,’ continued the moustached man without paying any attention to Heino’s angry tone. ‘The affair with the bribes is still of great interest to our readers. Would you care to comment on this?’

Heino started to go red in the face, swelling up like an overripe tomato.

‘I already said all I had to say about that long ago. Now leave my home! By-the-way, how did you get this address?’

‘A little bird told me. I must say, it’s really a rather luxurious nest. Now, I wonder how much it cost?’

‘That’s going too far!’

‘Oh, I do apologise. Just one last question, if you don’t mind. Is it true that this location is part of the property of a gentleman by the name of Grandpa Hedgehog? Forgive my curiosity, but you must understand that I can’t allow our paper to print unconfirmed reports. After all, it is a serious publication.’

Heino suddenly started shrinking even faster than he had swelled up. ‘Wh...what are you trying to say?’ he stammered.

‘Nothing in particular. Rumour has it that this house was built illegally. But, of course, I don’t believe a word of it. That’s why I came here to speak with you personally. I’m confident that you can dispel all suspicion once and for all.’

‘That’s slander!’ cried Heino, but his voice sounded as pathetic as a penny whistle.

‘As I thought,’ said the moustached man shaking his head without once changing the expression on his face. ‘That’s all I wanted to hear. Oh, and before I forget: my colleagues from the independent forest television will be here tomorrow morning. I hope you won’t mind us showing everyone your beautiful nest. A very good evening to you, Sir. And to you, too, Madam.’

The moustached face disappeared behind the edge of the wheel. For a long while Heino just gazed after it, mouth agape, not noticing that the cigar had burned a hole in the expensive fabric of his beloved chaise longue.

‘Oof!’ Anne jumped down to the ground and removed the mask from her face. She had been sweating buckets from the tension, and her nervousness had almost given her away towards the end. During their conversation she had been terrified that Heino would have recognised her voice despite the two green plums crammed into her mouth to alter it. What’s more, the mask was rather big and it had kept slipping. It was lucky that it had begun to get dark, otherwise Heino would have caught onto the trick immediately.

The backpack looked at her in amazement.

‘Oh my, Anne, how did you manage to think all of that up? If I hadn’t known it was you, I’d have swallowed it hook, line and sinker. It was just as if a grown up were speaking!’

‘Hey, if you only knew how many episodes of Colombo I’ve watched on TV!’ replied Anne, grinning. ‘It’s quite simple: first, you drop a few hints here and there, and then you go away and leave the criminal to sweat over it. Inspector Colombo always does it like that. Incidentally, it’s great that you thought of that mask. It wouldn’t have worked at all without it.’

‘Thanks to the magpies who left it behind in the meadow. Hey, what was that?’

Muted noises were coming from behind the wheel. At first they were faint, but they gradually got louder as if heavy objects were being dragged over the floor of the nest. Now and again the wheel gave a mournful creak and trembled. There was no doubt that over on the other side the beavers were working very industriously.

Anne and the backpack would have gladly spent the evening outside listening if they hadn’t felt so tired. Besides, they were also afraid to stay out in the dark so close to Heino’s home. But even through the water mill’s shuttered windows they could hear the sound of sawing late into the night. The noises didn’t stop until the small hours when the two friends were finally able to fall asleep.

Anne was in a very deep sleep when she felt herself being shaken vigorously. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes.

‘Anne, Anne, quick, get up!’ whispered the backpack excitedly. ‘Come and see what’s happened!’

‘What? Where?’ stammered Anne, still half asleep. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Come on, quick, outside! Come and look! It’s fantastic!’

Red stuck her dishevelled head round the door warily. Then her eyes opened wide.

The mill wheel was turning again.

Grandpa Hedgehog walked slowly around the garden, beaming with delight. He hadn’t yet completely recovered, but nothing could keep him in bed any longer. The backpack had been completely right: only a few hours after learning that the wheel was turning once more, Grandpa’s fever broke and he had his first walk outside the next morning, though he still had to be supported by the two companions. A day or so later, he was feeling so well that he had started to do a little work. Today he was walking around without any trouble, and if it weren’t for his pale face and the bags under his eyes, no one would have been able to guess that he had been gravely ill only a few days before.

‘Grandpa’s little treasures,’ he whispered with tear-filled eyes as he caressed his beloved plants. ‘I thought I’d never see you again, but good fortune brought

me this marvellous little girl. Without her we'd all be goners. There's a God looking after your Grandpa Hedgehog!

He turned to Anne who was looking at him impatiently. 'Anne, come here, my child. Let's sit in the shade. I know you're anxious to leave, but be patient a little longer and then you can go on your way. I want to ask you a few things, and show you something. Come, come over here. The path can wait.'

'Now, tell me exactly what happened once more. I'm still troubled by this business with Heino. I know that scoundrel too well. To be frank, my stomach churns when I think about what he might do if he finds out you have deceived him. He's wicked and would never forgive a trick like that. I hope all goes well and he never gets to know. All right, now tell me everything again.'

'Oh, it wasn't really difficult at all!' Anne looked at him proudly and started kicking her heels while she was speaking. 'Heino built a nest right against the wheel so that the branches blocked it. I realised that he'd built his home illegally, and knew right away how to get him out.'

'Ahem,' interrupted the backpack with a little cough.

'Yeah, well, the backpack helped a bit, too.'

'Very well, keep going.'

'Well, there's nothing more to tell. I just hinted to him that he'd be on television in his illegal house, and he did the rest himself. By morning, there wasn't a trace left of his nest.'

'Goodness! You well and truly pulled the wool over his eyes! I don't know whether to laugh or cry. But that's the way it is – even the slyest of the sly will be outsmarted sooner or later. Yet I'd never have believed it if someone had told me a mere child would pull a fast one on that bandit. Dear oh dear! It's quite incredible.'

'Now, look here, my child,' he said, reaching into his belt and taking out a small, leather pouch. 'Your Grandpa Hedgehog knows how to return a favour. All the good you did me deserves a rich reward.' He opened the pouch. Inside it there were some shiny yellow coins. 'This, my child, is the most valuable thing I have. They're gold pieces from the old days.'

'But they must be worth a lot. I can't take them just like that,' said Anne, embarrassed.

'Am I giving them to you just like that?' said Grandpa frowning. 'And isn't it a fact that I wouldn't be here now if you hadn't helped me? Listen now, listen

and watch carefully as the most important is yet to come. Do you see this little thing here?’ He reached into the pouch and took out a small, wrinkled lump of something that looked like dried fruit.

‘What is it?’

‘That is your Grandpa Hedgehog’s greatest treasure,’ said the old man proudly. ‘It’s a dried piece of something; whether a mushroom, fruit or scrap of leather, I really couldn’t tell you. Anyway, that’s not important as far as I’m concerned. What is important is that the little thing is magical, child.’

Anne frowned in disbelief until she remembered she was in a magic world, so she then leaned forward with greater interest and asked, ‘it’s magic? So what does it do? Does it grant your wishes?’

Grandpa Hedgehog scratched his head thoughtfully. ‘That’s the problem, my child, nobody knows. This little thing is so old its secret has been lost over time. As long as we Hedgehogs have been in this world, it’s been passed down from father to son. But as I haven’t any children, it will be your good fortune to keep it.’

Anne was so disappointed that for a moment she felt like stamping her foot. She could scarcely stop herself from snapping back rudely at the old man.

‘Just my luck! And there I was thinking that it might help me to leave the forest! What’s the use of a wrinkly old lump whose secret has been lost, Grandpa? It’s completely useless!’

‘Not exactly, my child. My father, God rest his soul, was always telling me; “Hedgehog, prepare yourself to go over to Madame Owl’s. She’ll tell you what to do with this thing.” Well, I got ready to prepare myself over and over, but, as you see, I still haven’t managed to get there. Anne, that old lady knows everything. She’ll be able to tell you what that thing does. But one thing I can tell you for sure is that great power will come to whoever discovers its secret. Wondrous power! You may think that it’s useless now, but you’ll see when the time comes because it will help you.’

Something in the old man’s tone made Anne stop and think. The dry little scrap looked so non-descript that she wouldn’t even have bothered to give it a second glance anywhere else. In the Ghost Forest, however, nothing was quite usual, nor could anything be judged by its outer appearance. She sighed, stretched out her hand and accepted the pouch.

‘Thank you, Grandpa Hedgehog! I’m sure it will help me. But even if it doesn’t, at least I’ll be able to cross the swamp. With these gold coins, I can go anywhere now.’

‘I hope so. Unfortunately, the money will go back to that thief Heino, but there’s no way to avoid it. And once you’ve crossed the swamp, watch out for yourselves in the orchid meadow. I’ve heard it’s very dangerous, but just what’s there, I really don’t know. In any case, keep your eyes peeled and don’t hurry. You must be very careful there otherwise you could easily find yourselves in trouble.’

‘Grandpa Hedgehog, I’d like to ask you just one more thing.’

‘Ask away, child.’

‘Those ... ghosts. Do you know anything about them?’

Grandpa Hedgehog started, but tried to conceal his fear. ‘Why do you ask? Leave evil well alone. It’s best if we don’t even speak of them.’

Anne swallowed and looked around nervously while telling him in a whisper what had happened to her in the meadow with the magpies. Grandpa listened in silence, scratching his forehead from time to time. When Anne had finished, he relit his pipe and sighed heavily.

‘Oh, that doesn’t sound good to me, but I couldn’t tell you what it means. Something made them very angry, if you ask me. You must be careful not to meet them again because you might not escape a second time. You can’t mess around with the ghosts. It’s no accident that everyone is afraid of them.’

Deep down Anne had hoped to receive some explanation, or at least some consolation, so now she bowed her head in despair.

‘Come now, let me give you some things to eat for the journey. There’s no telling how far you’ll have to go.’

The old man got up and started walking slowly towards the mill. ‘There’s a little of everything I have here, child,’ he said, handing her a little string bag. ‘Some bread and cheese, a few tomatoes and apples. And in this jar there’s honey – the finest in the forest. I collected it myself. It’s very sweet.’

He looked at her sadly.

‘Oh, I’ve got used to having you around, child. I’m very sad you’re going, but it has to be that way. Well, goodbye. I do hope you’ll find the way.’

He took a large handkerchief out of his belt and started blowing his nose noisily. Then he bent down and kissed Anne's cheek very carefully, making sure his whiskers didn't prick her.

'Goodbye, Grandpa Hedgehog.' Anne tried to look cheerful, but her heart felt like a heavy weight was pressing on it. 'Who knows, maybe we'll meet again. Thank you for the gifts, and for everything. Farewell!'

The backpack took her leave of Grandpa, too. The two friends turned and set off along the path feeling very dismal. For a long time, they kept looking back, waving farewell. Even after the old man himself could no longer be seen, his handkerchief still shone between the branches of the trees, flapping like the wing of a large, white bird.

They had already gone quite a way when they heard him yelling something after them. They stopped and listened. Despite the other forest noises, it was still just possible to hear his words. 'You will find the way, child. I know it! It's in your eyes. You will find it. Little by little everything will fall into place. You will find it!'

Chapter Eight: The Hospitality of Heinomat

The way back seemed much shorter because it was already quite familiar to them. However, a surprise was waiting for them at the swamp. Scarcely had they emerged into the clearing when they heard Quirk's squeaky voice above their heads.

'Boo, my dear friend, look who's coming!' yelled the flying clock at the top of his lungs while coming in to land. 'The proud victor, the slayer of the beast, the flame-haired Amazon! My most heartfelt compliments, Red! Your heroic deed will be charted in the history of the forest for all time!'

'What are you trying to say?' Anne asked warily. She suspected some new joke was afoot, and was on the point of turning her back on him with a sharp comment at the ready. 'What heroic deed are you talking about? Is this another of your jokes?'

'Joke? Heavens, what modesty! What an astonishing demonstration of true character! Boo, isn't she a heroine worthy of a poet's quill? She doesn't even want to talk about her valiant deed! Hail, hail o Victoria!'

'Wait, wait a second,' interrupted the backpack. 'You're not talking about...'

'Of course, of course! The humiliation and defeat of that villain Heino. All hail the heroine! Hail!'

'But how do you know?' asked Anne aghast. 'We haven't told anyone.'

'I saw everything with my own eyes. How Heino was outwitted and crushed, and then how he himself demolished his fearsome castle – everything from beginning to end. A great event! Oh, joy! Oh, glory!'

'You weren't spying on me, were you?'

'Spying? Such a vulgar word! I observe and then I praise in song. That is my task in this forest, o Amazon Red! Without me no one would ever come to hear of your heroic deed!'

'Listen, you haven't gone around telling everyone, have you?'

'I don't tell, I sing. Listen to this!' He cleared his throat and started declaring in a rasping voice:

Ghost Forest

Shimmer ye treetops!
Rustle ye beeches!
Sing out ye comrades!
Tremble ye fools!

For here in our forest
Intent on a bold quest
To free us from dread
Comes the brave Red.

Fat Heino the cheater
Has met his defeater.
He'll soon be outdone;
Then we'll have won.

So to Anne sing your praises!
Her glory his disgrace is!
She shows us the art!
While he's just a ...

'I haven't found the right rhyme for that bit yet,' he confessed, while scratching his head thoughtfully. 'All those that come to mind don't sound quite poetic enough. But if nothing else occurs, I can always say something like 'he's just all lard', can't I? I'm working on it, though, and I am sure to come up with something more befitting your heroic deed.'

Anne's jaw dropped. 'Are you saying that everyone in the forest already knows what happened?'

'But of course! What do you expect? The power of the quill is invincible! ... I say, what's wrong? Why are you looking so glum?'

Anne had slumped to the ground, clutching her head in despair.

'Oh my, how on earth did we manage to stumble over this idiot!' growled the backpack sullenly. 'As if our troubles weren't enough already!'

'But what do you mean?' asked Quirk, somewhat confused. 'Is my poetry not to your satisfaction?'

‘Listen, haven’t you ever asked yourself what Heino will do once he finds out what exactly happened?’ the backpack asked spitefully.

‘What do you mean, what he’ll do? He’ll feel ashamed, of course.’

‘Uh huh, and what else?’

‘Well... nothing. What do you think, Boo?’

Boo was already demonstrating how Heino would go mad with rage.

‘Your friend seems to catch on quicker than you, doesn’t he?’ said the backpack. ‘So let me spell it out to you in simple terms: when Heino realises what has happened, he’s bound to turn the forest inside out to get his revenge. That means that the two of us are in for it, thanks to you. Now do you understand what you’ve done?’

Quirk stood motionless, his mouth wide open. All of his parts had frozen; even the pendulum had stopped swinging. All of a sudden, he sprang high up in the air and started beating himself on the head with his wings. Springs and little wheels came flying out of his mouth.

‘Oh, what have I done, what have I done! Old fool that I am! Shame on my rusty head! Shame! Why couldn’t I see something so obvious? How could I have let this happen?’

‘Stop making a clown of yourself!’ cried Anne angrily. ‘You idiot!’ Then, seeing that he was truly miserable, she felt sorry for him and added more softly, ‘forget it. There’s nothing we can do about it now.’

‘No, no, it’s unforgivable!’ Quirk continued to rant. ‘I won’t rest as long as I have not paid for my mistake. Give me some task to do! Something difficult, perilous, impossible!’

‘Well, for a start, it would help if you cut out all the fancy talk,’ said the backpack venomously. ‘A little less “poetry”, if you don’t mind.’

Quirk gave her an offended look, but remained silent.

‘Now, do we go on, or not?’ asked the backpack.

‘No change!’ replied Anne abruptly. ‘We go on. We haven’t got time to waste. The spiders are sure to be searching the whole forest for us already.’

‘Where are you hurrying off to?’ Quirk asked with some curiosity. ‘Can I be of any help?’

‘No thanks,’ Anne rebuffed him. ‘You’d better save your help for Heino, then maybe things will get better for us.’

Poor Quirk! Had he been able to, he would certainly have dissolved into tears of humiliation and hopelessness. No less dismayed, Boo nestled against his shoulder.

‘Believe me, I really would give anything to change the past,’ said the clock in a shaky voice. ‘I know I don’t deserve your trust, but there must be something I can do to help. If I could, I’d even try to carry you, but I’m unable to as you’re too heavy. I may not be the cleverest in the forest, but I’d like you to think I’m not entirely useless.’

Anne and the backpack exchanged quick glances. That already sounded different. Quirk was obviously no longer putting on airs and had really decided to help.

‘We’re looking for Madame Owl,’ said Anne. ‘Grandpa Hedgehog said she was the only one who could help us. Do you know where she lives?’

‘Of course I know, how wouldn’t I!’ said Quirk, perking up. ‘It’s just past the meadow with the orchids, not far from the riverbank. She lives in an old hollow tree. It’s not hard to find at all - once you’ve got through the meadow, that is.’

‘No, wait!’ he said with a start. ‘What a nuisance! You can’t get through the meadow at the moment as the orchids are just starting to bloom. Don’t even begin try; it’s very dangerous. You’ll have to wait till the end of summer.’

‘What? To the end of summer?’ cried Anne. ‘That’s impossible – it’s more than two months! What’s so dangerous about the orchids, anyway? Do they bite or something?’

‘Well, no, they don’t bite, but they’re still rather dangerous. The point is that while they are in bloom their scent has a soporific effect on every living thing. If you try to pass through the meadow you will fall asleep on the spot, and then stay that way. Believe me, it’s full of bones; you can see it all from high above. When the orchids aren’t in bloom the meadow is just like any other. During the summer, though, it’s deadly.’

Anne hung her head. She had just started to believe that she would soon find the way home, and now this! She felt like jumping in the swamp.

‘And is there no other way?’ asked the backpack. ‘We’ve got to think of something. We can’t just sit here and wait till the spiders come to get us, can we?’

‘No, there’s no other way. First of all, you’ve got to find a way to cross the swamp; that won’t be easy either. Then we’ll have to discuss it again.’

‘Ha!’ said Anne proudly. ‘Look at this! What do you think; is that enough money or not?’

She took Grandpa Hedgehog’s pouch out of her pocket and showed him the gold coins. Quirk’s eyes bulged.

‘Well, that’s more than enough,’ he said hesitantly. ‘But that bandit Heino always twists things so that no matter how much you give him, it’s never enough. I don’t know. Just be careful. They say that these machines are very sneaky. I’m just glad that I don’t need to use them myself.’

‘Well, we’ll see!’ said Anne bravely. ‘With so much money we could buy the whole machine if we had to, couldn’t we backpack?’

The backpack looked less confident, but didn’t say anything and just followed her. Anne took out one of the coins, approached the slot machine with a self-assured stride, and tossed it into the slot. Everyone waited anxiously.

A short while later a buzzing sound came from the machine that gradually got louder, then, kerplunk! From the narrow vent in the middle of the stump a thick, wide plank slowly started to rise. At the same time the TV screen lit up and the female beaver announcer began thanking them at great length for using the system. Lively marching music blared out from the loud speakers.

The same process repeated itself with all the remaining stumps in the swamp, and there were many of them, the last ones disappearing far into the distance. Once all the planks were fully extended, they then started to lower themselves so that each of them connected two stumps. It wasn’t long before there was a strong bridge providing easy access across the swamp. It looked so spectacular, everyone was speechless.

‘Welcome, welcome!’ said the fat announcer, oozing politeness. ‘Please be my guest. Don’t be shy!’

Anne and the backpack held hands and cautiously tested the first plank. It seemed quite stable, and so they moved ahead more confidently.

They had hardly taken a few steps when suddenly the plank started shaking and before they knew it, it had started to rise up. Everything happened so fast that the two friends found themselves rolling down it like balls. Creaking terribly, all the boards were disappearing at rapid speed back into the stumps. By the time Anne looked round, not a trace of the bridge was left.

The face on the screen also changed. Anne couldn’t help shuddering when she recognized Heino’s face.

‘I’m very sorry, ladies and gentlemen,’ the beaver announced with an air of great self-importance. ‘We live in unsettled times, and in the meantime, we have been forced to raise our prices. We apologise for the slight inconvenience. It was a great pleasure speaking to you.’

Click! The screen went dead and silence reigned.

There was an atmosphere of dejection on the edge of the swamp. Two days had already passed in feverish attempts to outsmart the machine. At first they had tried putting more coins in the slot, but were soon convinced that however much they put in, the result remained the same. The money disappeared and each time Heino’s insolent face assured them that it had been a pleasure speaking to them. Enraged by this, Anne was about to tamper with the machine again, but the backpack convinced her it was too risky. After that, they discussed at length the chances of finding a way round the device, but Quirk was absolutely sure there was no other way. In her anger, Anne insulted him several times, and the poor clock looked sadder than ever. Still, he put up with her sharp remarks and didn’t go away. He clearly felt he owed Anne a great debt.

‘Okay, then,’ said the backpack, taking up from where she had left off, ‘let’s have another think. What possibilities are we left with?’

‘Possibilities, blah blah!’ Anne snapped back crossly. ‘The only “possibility” we’ve got now is to wait till the spiders get us.’

Boo shuddered and started making quick signs. Quirk tried, rather clumsily, to pat him on the head.

‘Boo is very afraid of Heino and the spiders,’ he explained. ‘He was asking if we could maybe stop talking about them.’

‘Oh, was he?’ cried Anne. ‘So everyone’s afraid, but so what? We just sit here in silence like stumps, is that it?’

‘Anne!’ interrupted the backpack, ‘If you want to pick a fight with everyone, you’re going about it the right way!’

‘Too bad!’ replied Anne, pouting. ‘Anyway, there’s not much point in talking. Didn’t Buzz the fly tell us it’s useless trying to trick these machines?’

‘Hey, that’s an idea!’ said the backpack enthusiastically. ‘Let’s call Buzz. She may be able to help. Quirk, can you find her?’

‘Well, yes, I suppose I can. She usually flies around these parts. With any luck, we’ll soon find her.’

Boo flapped his wings cheerfully. He was obviously tired of having to put up with Anne’s bad mood. The two of them flew off quickly, disappearing behind the treetops.

The next few hours passed without anything special happening. Anne sat tossing pebbles into the swamp, and the backpack picked blackberries and gathered mushrooms from the meadow. At long last Quirk and Boo reappeared followed by Buzz. From the distance she yelled out to them, ‘Hello, hello! Quirk has just been telling me what’s happened.’

‘It’s a tricky business. I haven’t a clue about this weird thing,’ she continued after she’d landed and had taken a look at the machine from a safe distance. ‘But let’s try to do something, at any rate; we mustn’t give up too easily. First tell me what you’ve tried so far.’

The backpack told her everything quickly. Buzz nodded thoughtfully. ‘Mm, yes, you’ve got to hand it to Heino,’ she said eventually. ‘He may be the biggest crook in the forest, but you have to admit his machines are very well made.’

All of a sudden she started sniffing around.

‘Hmm, I smell something... very tasty. Yes, I’m sure of it; there’s honey around here somewhere. Mmm, I’d die for some honey!’

Anne smiled and took Grandpa Hedgehog’s jar out of the string bag.

‘You’re hungry, eh? Here’s some honey – Grandpa Hedgehog gave it to me. You flies are crazy about sweet things, aren’t you? You can even smell it while it’s still in the jar.’

Buzz was overjoyed. She snatched the little jar, stuck her long snout into it, and began guzzling the honey. Her eyes were half-closed in ecstasy, and she even started purring softly.

‘Mmmmmm, wonderful!’ she said when the jar was virtually empty. ‘There’s nothing more delicious than honey. Well, I’m ready to get back to work now. Let’s have a look at one of those coins you mentioned. Maybe it’ll help me think of something.’

Anne passed her one of the gold coins. Buzz reached out to take it, but it slipped and fell – plop! – right into the jar.

‘Butter fingers!’ said Anne grumpily. ‘Now I’ve got to wash it. It’s no use if it’s all sticky like that.’



Buzz was staring at the coin, lost in thought. She wasn't listening to anything Anne was saying.

'Are you deaf or something? Give me the coin so I can wash it.'

'Wait, wait a second!' Buzz responded suddenly. 'I've got an idea.'

She stepped a little uncertainly towards the machine, once again looked at the coin smeared with honey, then suddenly smiled broadly, went up to the slot and ... inserted the coin.

'What! Have you gone mad?' screamed Anne. 'Do you think that fat gob hasn't scoffed enough money already?'

'Hang on, let's see what happens,' Buzz replied cunningly. 'Maybe this time it's bitten off more than it can chew.'

'Rubbish!' said Anne, trying to start a quarrel, but the backpack tugged at her sleeve. Reluctantly, Anne gave up. Ever since the backpack had thought up the trick with the mask, Anne had gained real respect for her.

At first, everything happened just like before: the planks rose up out of the stumps, the television came on and the chubby female beaver started her nonsense about hospitality and so on. It soon became clear, however, that this time something wasn't right. The beaver's voice was becoming slow and deep, and the marching music that had been so lively began to sound like the slow droning at a funeral. But that was just the beginning, for after that it got much more interesting. The three metal hands jumped out from their hiding places and methodically started destroying everything within reach. First, they broke open the slot machine. A glittering stream of coins poured out of the beaver's mouth onto the ground. Then the hands ripped out the satellite dish and tossed it down. With several blows they smashed the television to pieces. Finally, having nothing else left to wreck, they set about beating each other up until they were just hanging like dry branches from the sides of the stump. The planks between the stumps continued to bounce around a while longer, then stopped moving and lay still. It was totally silent.

Anne stared, not believing her eyes.

'You haven't really beaten it, have you?' she asked in disbelief.

'I'm still not quite sure, but it looks like it. Wait, I'll check.'

The fly walked cautiously along the wooden bridge. She crossed one plank, then the second. It didn't budge an inch. Gradually, she gathered courage and started jumping up and down on the planks to test their stability.

‘Hey, Heino!’ she shouted from the middle of the bridge, ‘Why have you gone so quiet? Come on,’ she called out, ‘show us what you’re made of! Try putting the prices up again if you can! Hooray! We’ve done it, everyone! No kidding, we’ve beaten the worst machine in the whole forest! Down with Heino!’

Overcome with joy, Anne quickly ran along the bridge. The two of them joined hands and started jumping up and down. Quirk and Boo circled over their heads in a cheerful dance, and the backpack settled for showing her joy by jumping along the riverbank instead. They all shouted at the top of their voices. Unused to the competition, the frogs from the swamp were straining to show how well they could croak, too. Only the Heinomat remained silent – this time for ever, it seemed.

Chapter Nine: The Orchid Meadow

‘Hmm, maybe I’m not as strong as Pippi Longstocking, but the way things are going, I’ll soon be as rich as her,’ said Anne contentedly, while patting the little pouch stuffed with coins. ‘It’s incredible how many coins that little mouth swallowed. Only, I just don’t know how we should use them.’

‘I suppose if we pierced them, we could make necklaces out of them,’ she added pensively, while examining a large silver coin. ‘Or we could give them to local old folks homes, couldn’t we? No, as heavy as they are, I reckon it would be best to give them to the frogs. I’m joking, I’m joking, of course. Let’s go, shall we?’

The two friends set off cheerfully across the bridge, accompanied by their flying escorts Quirk, Boo and Buzz. The sun’s first rays were just beginning to shed their light on the forest, although the early birds had long since begun taking turns in outsinging each other. If the morning was anything to go by, it promised to be a magnificent day. Everyone looked enthusiastic and confident. Just Quirk was shaking his head and muttering to himself from time to time, ‘So far, so good, but we’ll see what happens.’

‘So, this is the notorious orchid meadow,’ said Anne. ‘I must say it doesn’t look at all dangerous to me. It’s actually rather pretty.’

‘Yes, it is beautiful,’ agreed Quirk, ‘but don’t let that fool you. The meadow doesn’t show mercy to anyone. Don’t forget that.’

The small group had stopped not far from the edge of the swamp and everyone looked in wonder at the scene in front of them. It was truly very beautiful; a wide glade opened out among the trees and led to an enormous meadow – the largest they had seen in the forest so far. Most of it was covered in meadow grasses and flowers, but one fairly narrow strip near the edge was dotted with fiery red orchids – not the ordinary sort, but enormous ones, taller than a person.

‘If you look at it from above, the meadow looks like a giant bottle with a cork in it,’ Quirk continued. ‘The orchid end of the meadow is the cork, and all the

rest is the bottle. Most of the year the bottle is open, but in summer it's completely stoppered. During that time, you can only get past by flying over it.'

'You said things like that back at the swamp, and we saw what happened then,' Anne responded. 'Wait a moment while we think what to do. We'll solve this puzzle, too, won't we backpack?'

The backpack didn't reply as she was lost in her own thoughts.

'Listen, Quirk,' she said at last, 'Didn't you say that the meadow has a soporific effect on all animals and people?'

'Yes, why?'

'I'm just wondering whether it would have the same effect on us.'

'Which "us"? ' said Quirk, puzzled.

'Well, you, me and Boo. Because we're not animals or people, are we? We're something else. I don't know what exactly, but we're different, don't you think?'

'Hmm, I'd never really thought about it. But all right, let's say that's true. What of it?'

'I'm wondering if I shouldn't try to cross the meadow myself. If I succeed, maybe I can find help on the other side. In any case, it's worth trying, isn't it?'

'I don't know. It's very risky. They say that even big animals fall asleep after just a few steps.'

'I've heard that, too,' confirmed Buzz. 'We'd better think of something else. There's something about that idea I don't really like.'

'I'll be very careful. Look, like this; I'll take a few steps and wait. Then a few more. Like that. I've almost reached the edge and I don't feel anything. Buzz, you fly overhead to guide me. Once I get into the orchids I'll probably lose my way.'

Buzz agreed and started giving directions from above. The backpack bravely stepped in among the deadly plants. Everyone held their breath. Only Buzz yelled out from overhead, 'Good, good, you're doing well. Now a little to the left. A little more. Good, keep straight. You'll soon have reached the half-way point.'

Suddenly, she went quiet. Everyone became alarmed.

'What's happening, Buzz? Hey, why have you gone quiet?'

'Buzz, have you lost your tongue?'

From among the orchids came a sound like someone running as fast as they could. Then the backpack appeared between the plants with scarily wide eyes

and her tongue hanging out. She was staggering as if she were drunk. She managed just a few more steps and then collapsed, lifeless, onto the ground.

They all jumped to her aid. Anne began giving her the kiss of life, Buzz splashed her with water, and Quirk and Boo fanned her with their wings to revive her. Little by little the backpack came round, but a lot more time passed before she was able to speak again.

‘Phew! I’d just begun to think that there was nothing to worry about any longer,’ she managed to blurt out in fits and starts. ‘I could already see the other side. I’m sure I could have made it, but then I realised that I wouldn’t be able to get back. That’s why I gave up. If I had got through, we would have been separated.’

‘It was awful!’ she added when she had fully recovered. ‘It feels as if someone’s rocking you to sleep in a cradle. Suddenly everything starts spinning and you don’t know what’s up and what’s down. I haven’t a clue how I got back.’

‘But you were right, though,’ said Buzz. ‘Animals don’t even last a few steps. No one has ever gone as far as you did. From above you can clearly see all the...well, their remains.’

‘So it was worth it, after all, wasn’t it?’ the backpack said hopefully. ‘At least we know now that Quirk, Boo and I can last two or three minutes among the orchids. That’s something, isn’t it?’

The others just hung their heads, however. Anne pouted and started throwing stones into the swamp. Quirk and Boo went and sat down quietly to one side, while Buzz, who was getting hungry, started talking about food. Exhausted from the experience, the backpack soon fell into a deep sleep. Not a trace of their former high spirits was left.

‘Hey, Quirk!’ Anne called out at some point. ‘Maybe it’s worth trying something else, don’t you think? I’ve got a new idea.’

‘What idea is that?’

‘Instead of trying to reach Madame Owl, why don’t we bring her here? She can fly, can’t she? So for her the orchid meadow isn’t an obstacle. What do you think of us inviting her here? Or is she too old for such things?’

‘Well, all right,’ Quirk replied timidly. He didn’t look very enthusiastic. ‘I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything. She really doesn’t like to be bothered.’

He got up from where he had been sitting, but it was obvious that he had no real desire to go.

‘Listen, Anne,’ he began hesitantly, ‘Madame Owl is ... well, a little peculiar. If she’s in a good mood, she’s the pleasantest person you can imagine. But if not...’

‘What are you trying to say?’ asked Anne, looking at him crossly.

‘I don’t know if it’s worth it. We’ll just annoy her, that’s what I think.’

‘Listen, are you a friend or not?’ said Anne, seething. ‘If you’re scared, then just say so. Don’t bother to beat about the bush. I’ll manage without you.’

Quirk looked at her, deeply offended. He signalled Boo to follow him and disappeared without saying a word. Buzz, who had been listening closely, walked up to her and said sullenly, ‘Excuse me, Anne. I have to go. I don’t believe I can help any more, and besides, I’m restless. We flies enjoy our freedom and we don’t like to stay long in any one place.’

‘Nor do we like being given orders,’ she added, while looking at Anne knowingly. ‘So, take care. If you need me again, just call. But be sure to be in a good mood, otherwise you may start shouting at me. And that’s not a good recipe for a friendship, if you see what I mean.’

Anne pursed her lips stubbornly and didn’t say anything. Buzz merely shook her head, waved goodbye and disappeared. When she had gone, there remained an unpleasant, heavy silence.

‘Good riddance,’ muttered Anne. ‘Friends like that aren’t much use anyway.’

She sat down on the edge of the swamp once again and started throwing pebbles angrily. Not long after, the two flying friends reappeared. Even from a distance, you could see they were glum and downhearted.

‘She sent us packing,’ said Quirk, looking at her timidly. ‘She said that those who need her will have to find her themselves. I told you, it’s never easy with her.’

Anne felt a hot, dark wave rising in her belly and filling her head until it blinded her completely.

‘I knew it!’ she snapped at him spitefully, ‘You just can’t be relied on. You couldn’t even handle one simple task. You stupid, useless good-for-nothing!’

‘Anne, what’s the matter with you? Have you gone mad?’ said the backpack from behind her. ‘Why are you talking like that? And where’s Buzz?’

‘Ah, so now you’re going to teach me lessons, too, are you?’ snarled Anne, turning on her. ‘First Buzz, then this good-for-nothing, now you! Everyone’s so good when it comes to advice, but when it comes to getting something done...’

‘Stop it! Right now!’ exploded the backpack. ‘What is all this nonsense? What’s it all about?’

‘Oh, nonsense, is it?’ hissed Anne. A malicious resolve gleamed in her eyes. ‘Fine. I don’t need such friends. You think I can’t manage without you? Well, now we’ll see who can do what!’

She took a deep breath, pinched her nose, closed her eyes, and plunged in among the orchids. They’d see, all those idiots! Now she’d show them!

She hadn’t even gone five steps when she was overcome by a delicious weakness. She felt dizzy, her legs turned to jelly and she sank helplessly down among the sturdy stems of the orchids. Before falling asleep, she managed to whisper, ‘You’ll see! I can manage without you. You’ll see!’

‘I think she’s coming round. Splash her a little more,’ Quirk’s voice said.

‘Enough, that’ll do. She’s soaked. Leave her now. She’ll soon revive,’ replied the backpack. ‘Boo, fan her a bit more, if you don’t mind. The fresh air will help her most of all.’

Anne slowly opened her eyes and looked round. She was lying on the ground not far from the edge of the meadow. Quirk and the backpack were leaning over her with worried looks on their faces, and Boo was diligently flapping his wings to fan her.

‘What’s happening? Where am I?’ she asked in a weary voice, but immediately remembered everything and felt so ashamed that she closed her eyes again.

‘We nearly killed ourselves, that’s what happened,’ said the backpack angrily. ‘We had to drag you out of the meadow. It was lucky you were near the edge otherwise we certainly wouldn’t have managed to get you out. My head’s still spinning. I didn’t think you were so heavy.’

‘Thank ...you,’ said Anne. Her throat felt tight, and two disobedient tears rolled out from beneath her closed eyelids.

‘We’ll try to forget what happened,’ said the backpack, ‘won’t we, Quirk?’

‘Well..., yes,’ replied the clock, though he didn’t sound very sure.

‘I’m sorry, I’m very sorry,’ whispered Anne. ‘Buzz also left because she was insulted. I think it would be best if you just left me here alone.’

‘Not still talking rubbish, are we?’ said the backpack impatiently. ‘You’d better have a little nap now. We’re not making any more plans for the moment, anyway.’

Anne tried to imagine growing wings and flying far away to where there was no need to feel ashamed. In her dreams she sailed high above the trees, higher than Quirk and Boo, higher than the ghosts even, and with just a few flaps of her wings she returned home to Mum, who greeted her as if nothing had ever happened. The house was so cosy, and everything looked so lovely that she grew really sad and almost wept.

‘What’s that noise?’ asked the backpack. ‘Can you hear it?’

Red jumped up in fright, even though she still felt very weak. There was no doubt – somewhere beyond the treetops, hidden from their view, someone was strumming a guitar and singing an old Beatles song, completely off key.

Anne trembled. The ghosts! Terrified, she looked around for a hiding place, but the dense forest was like a wall, and the area on the edge of the swamp didn’t offer any refuge either. In desperation, she prepared for the worst and curled up against the backpack.

Quirk remained calm, however, and Boo didn’t show even the slightest sign of fear.

‘What is it?’ she asked in a hoarse voice. ‘Are the ghosts coming?’

‘Oh, that?’ asked Quirk, grinning, and only just then noticing his companions’ fear. ‘Don’t worry, that’s just the elves. You can recognize them right away by their bad singing.’

‘The elves? Who are they?’ asked the backpack, still a little fearful.

‘Oh, you’ll see them in a moment. They’re a right bunch of clowns! They think of themselves as great musicians, but nothing could be further from the truth, in fact. At any rate, they understand nothing about real art. Ah, here they come.’

Flying low above the trees, from the direction of the orchid meadow there appeared four odd creatures. At first glance, they looked just like ordinary people, but the huge, gauzy wings on their shoulders gave them the appearance of giant, shiny flies.

They were dressed in brightly-coloured military tunics complete with epaulettes and piping, and tight-fitting flared trousers. Guitars were slung over three of them, and the fourth was carrying a tall, slim drum under his arm.

When they saw the little group on the edge of the swamp, they stopped playing and landed not far from our adventurers. One of them – a tall, attractive young man with high cheekbones and a Roman nose on which sat a pair of round, wire-rimmed glasses – walked up and looked them over with interest.

‘Hey, boys, look who’s here! Why, if it isn’t Quirk, himself! Our forest poet. The one and only! Hey, Quirk, when are you finally going to write us some lyrics? We’ve been waiting so long, and you still haven’t found the time.’

Quirk winced as if all his teeth had started aching at the same time – including those that had already fallen out.

‘Why write your own songs when you can just steal other people’s?’ he answered sourly. ‘It’s so much easier and cheaper.’

‘Wow, what a misery! Well, as far as I’m concerned, we can wait another year or two. Who are these kids? I haven’t seen them around. Hi, I’m John.’

‘Also known as Ivan,’ Quirk added tetchily.

‘Quirk, don’t be petty, please!’ the second elf replied good-naturedly. He had big, almost childlike, innocent eyes and soft, round cheeks. ‘Everyone in the forest knows our names, so there’s no need to go on repeating them. Those are our stage names: John, Paul, George and Ringo. They’re on all our posters – see for yourself. For example, I’m Paul, not Pavel.’

‘Ivan, Pavel, Goran, and Rangel. Those are your names, boys, and that’s what I’ll call you. Otherwise I’ll get confused and start forgetting who’s who,’ said Quirk peevishly.

‘Oh, leave him alone,’ called out the third elf; a thin youth with a large moustache and nice white teeth. ‘Quirk is incorrigible, as you well know. Besides, John’s always stepping on his toes. It’s no wonder he gets fed up with us. All right, let’s get back to work. Time’s flying, and there aren’t many days till the concert. The way we’re going now, we’ll never get anywhere.’

‘George is right,’ said the fourth elf who was noticeable for his full lips and rather large nose. ‘Our music is pretty good, but our singing isn’t going anywhere.’

‘Okay, we’ll go and rehearse,’ said Ivan-John. ‘But we also have to look after our fans, don’t we? I bet the little one is dying for an autograph. Has anyone got a pen?’

‘Well, actually, I’m not from around here,’ said Anne shyly. ‘I mean, I haven’t heard of you yet. Who are you?’

‘Well, what do you know!’ exclaimed a rather surprised Ivan-John. ‘There are still people who haven’t heard of us.’

He took a step back, bowed theatrically, and announced in a loud voice, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please. The sole rock group in Ghost Forest: the one and only, unique and totally maniacal “Beetles”. On our posters it says: “We keep the legend alive!”’

‘Aha, now I understand,’ said Anne. ‘You’re musicians.’

‘So did you think we were porters carrying suitcases?’ Goran-George asked her sarcastically.

‘Of course not,’ replied Anne, angrily. ‘I just thought you were porters carrying guitars.’

‘And drums,’ she added, looking Rangel-Ringo over crossly.

Then suddenly she stopped, struck by a novel idea.

‘Hey, wait a second. Speaking of porters, I’ve just had an idea. You look very strong to me. Surely it wouldn’t be difficult for you to carry me over to the other side of the meadow, would it? Look at me, I’m not heavy at all. It would be easy for you; one, two, three and off we go.’

The four elves roared with laughter. Anne’s suggestion obviously struck them as hilarious.

‘Ha, ha, ha!’ chuckled Ivan-John. ‘That was the best joke I’ve heard in ages. Do you hear that boys? So, are we going to give her a lift? And then maybe she’ll decide to allow us to carry her suitcases, too. Ha, ha, ha!’

‘No, only the backpack,’ said Anne. ‘Here, look how small she is.’

That comment provoked a new wave of laughter.

‘Hey, you’re great!’ said Pavel-Paul. ‘I haven’t heard such good jokes in a long time. You ought to be on the stage, you know.’

‘Now, there’s an idea!’ said Goran-George. ‘How about putting her on between the songs as a kind of show-g..., er, a, erm, show-kid?’

‘Come on, now, you’re getting carried away,’ said Pavel-Paul. ‘We need a singer, not a – what did you call it? A show-kid? What an idea! Half the audience would run a mile as soon as they heard the word. You’re always coming up with stuff like that!’

‘But I can sing!’ Anne had thought of something new. ‘Listen, listen!’

She opened her mouth and started singing the only song she knew by heart:

Sur le pont d'Avignon
On a danse, on a danse
Sur le pont d'Avignon
On a danse tout le monde.

The elves stared at her in astonishment, as if wondering whether to take her seriously or not. Then, once again, they exploded into uncontrollable laughter. Only on this occasion it went on for a very long time. Anne waited sullenly for them to stop laughing.

'So what's wrong? Didn't you like it?'

'Wow, it was just great!' laughed Ivan-John in tears. 'Just imagine: the Beatles sing 'Sur le pont d'Avignon'! Hey, if that isn't the hit of the year, then my name's not John. We'd be well on our way to a gold disc. Incredible! Great gag!'

'Listen, you've really got talent,' cried Rangel-Ringo. 'What would you say to me becoming your manager, eh? Fifty-fifty, I'm not stingy.'

Another wave of laughter swept over the meadow. Anne, who was already very angry by now, stamped her foot and glowered at the elves. The stupid idiots! Whatever you said to them, all they'd do was laugh!

'Oi! In case you're interested, the last time I heard singers like you one of them gathered up the money in a hat!' she sneered.

Of course, that remark made them laugh just the same. The cheerful elves would have laughed at anything – even at the evening news, it would have seemed. Anne had grown extremely glum, but then she suddenly thought of something else which charged her with new hope as she started to explain.

'Hey, listen, I've got money. Lots of it. I mean, I could pay you well if you agreed to take me.'

The elves fell about laughing again, but then their faces suddenly grew serious.

'Is that some kind of joke or something?' asked Pavel-Paul uncertainly.

'No, I'm not joking. Here, take a look.'

She opened the pouch and showed them a few of the shiny coins. To her surprise, they quickly drew back and looked at her angrily.

'What do you take us for, little lady?' asked Ivan-John in an insulted tone. 'Do you think that just because you're so rich you can buy everything, eh? Is that it?'

'You're lucky you made us laugh a moment ago, otherwise you'd have paid dearly,' added Rangel-Ringo sullenly. 'We are free elves; no one can buy us, is that clear?'

'Well, I...' Anne stuttered, 'I didn't mean to insult you. Please forgive me. In fact, I'm not rich at all. This money...'

Just at that moment they heard a faint noise coming from somewhere in the air behind them. It slowly drew nearer. Everyone was terror-struck and cast fearful glances all around. Before long, a giant flying dinosaur with just one leg and one eye appeared above the trees. When it saw the company on the edge of the swamp it roared with all its might: 'Revenge! Revenge!'

'The ghosts! Run for your lives!' screamed Quirk, and everyone who could fly suddenly vanished.

Anne and the backpack managed to jump into the bushes by the skin of their teeth. Trembling uncontrollably, they clung to each other and shut their eyes tight. It was obvious that it was all over for them.

The dinosaur circled over their heads, gradually coming in lower and lower. It was already so close that they would have been able to touch it if they jumped. Eventually it landed and began sniffing around. Even with only one leg, it moved very nimbly.

'Revenge! Revenge!' it kept saying in a croaky voice.

'Just don't move!' Anne whispered to her little friend. 'It won't see us if we keep still.'

But their efforts were in vain. As if it were programmed, the dinosaur approached the exact place where they were hiding. It started rummaging through the bushes systematically with its slobbering muzzle. His enormous shadow loomed over the friends as he huffed his putrid, meaty breath on them. Her eyes tightly shut, Anne was chanting, 'Don't move whatsoever! Don't move whatsoever!'

But while she was repeating this, her legs suddenly decided quite independently to make a dash for it. She found herself bolting towards the swamp, shrieking frantically, 'Mu-u-u-m!!'

At first, the dinosaur couldn't grasp what had happened, but it soon pounced after her. The distance between them narrowed rapidly. Anne was already beginning to feel his disgusting breath on the back of her neck when....

'Dino!' said a stern, familiar voice. 'So, you're still playing games, are you?'

The dinosaur looked embarrassed like a child caught with his hand in the biscuit tin. Quite out of breath, Anne stopped and looked around to see who was speaking, but there was no one in sight.

‘But I...I wasn’t really,’ growled the dinosaur. ‘I only wanted to scare her a bit.’

‘Aha, so that’s it, is it?’ the voice said in a suspicious tone. ‘Didn’t the bear tell you to leave her alone?’

‘I... forgot. I mean... All right, it’s okay. I’ll go home right away. It won’t happen again, I promise.’

And in an instant he had disappeared.

‘Hey!’ cried Anne. ‘Who are you? You’ve saved me twice now. What does it all mean? Why don’t you show yourself? I want to see who you are. Hello! Why are you hiding?’

Her only answer was the croaking of the frogs in the swamp. Her unknown saviour obviously had no intention of showing himself.

Chapter Ten: Justa Diva

“Thankfully, they live on the other side of the river and only rarely appear on this side,” Anne repeated angrily. ‘Good grief, if you call that rarely, then I’m the king of Patagonia! They’ve come after me twice already. It makes you wonder what they want. It’s so depressing! What do you think? Why are they after me?’

‘If I knew that, we’d already be far away from here, that’s for sure,’ replied the backpack. ‘Maybe they react to red like bulls do.’

‘You think so? Hmm, maybe you’re right. I’ll have to try and hide my hair then. But where can I find a hat or a scarf? Oh, darn it! What’s the point! Anyway, there’s no way to get out of here, so what does it matter if they eat me now or later?’

In the meantime, Quirk and Boo had returned and were looking around nervously. The backpack hastily told them what had happened.

‘Do you have any idea who that mysterious voice could belong to?’ she asked them.

‘It’s the first time I’ve ever heard of anything like it,’ replied Quirk. ‘I’d have said it was just one of you imagining things if you hadn’t both heard it. No, I don’t know of any invisible creatures. And to be perfectly honest, it’s highly unlikely. It’s true that our forest is rather strange, but we know very, very little about magic here.’

‘But Grandpa Hedgehog gave me a little lump of something that he said was magic. Here, take a look for yourself! He told me it possesses hidden powers.’

Quirk examined the tiny scrap curiously, then handed it back.

‘Have you tried doing anything with it?’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, like nibbling a bit of it, or putting it under your tongue. That’s what they do in fairy tales.’

‘What? Do you think I’m stupid? What if it’s poisonous? No, it’s best to wait till we see Madame Owl. Grandpa Hedgehog said she’ll know its secret.’

‘Listen, don’t you think we should maybe have another go at finding a way round?’ said the backpack. ‘If we look along the edge of the swamp we might find a new clearing.’

Quirk gave them his solemn word that there was no other clearing, and what's more, according to him, the swamp was too treacherous to walk around. Nevertheless, Anne and the backpack decided to try. There was nothing else they could do, after all. They set off along the narrow strip between the muddy water and the trees, taking care not to get stuck.

They hadn't gone a hundred metres when they were suddenly startled by a high-pitched voice calling out in desperation, 'Help! Help! I'm sinking! For pity's sake, help me!'

Alarmed, the two friends hastened their steps. Fortunately, it didn't take them long to reach the place from where the cries were coming. However, they had difficulty finding the actual owner of the voice because it turned out to be... well, a flower. Of course, it wasn't just an ordinary flower like the hundreds growing in the forest meadows. No, the one Anne and the backpack discovered was actually a rather stout lady ... planted in a flowerpot. From beneath the flowerpot protruded two short legs, which by now were almost completely sunk in the swamp. Above it there was a chubby torso, which could perhaps better be called a stem because this was undoubtedly some unknown species of plant. The stem-body possessed all the parts of an ordinary human body – a plump belly, bosom, hands, and a head, naturally. Her wild hair, consisting of petals, was even more fiery in colour than Anne's. Her face, which seemed slightly pale against the bright red of her hair, looked fine-boned and attractive. She was wearing a peculiar pair of triangular glasses, and was clutching a small bag.

Once she saw someone coming, she started yelling even more loudly. A great deal of effort was needed to pull her out of the mud. She was not satisfied until they had also rescued her shoes from the swamp – they were dreadfully expensive, as she explained right away. No sooner did she feel safe than she produced a little mirror from her bag and hurriedly set about repairing her damaged hair-do.

'Oh, the humiliation! Oh goodness, what have I come to! Lost in this wasteland, helpless, with no clue of my whereabouts, and on the point of dying! I, who have moved so many admirers to tears! To have come to this, all alone in a wild, forsaken place...'

'Oh, do excuse me, dear child. I am so distressed that I've even forgotten to say thank you,' she said turning to Anne, having convinced herself that her hair was back in order. 'Without your help I would certainly have perished.' She looked in the mirror again. 'Do I still look bad?'

‘On the contrary, madam. You are positively blooming,’ Anne assured her.

‘Hmm, I’ll take that as a compliment. Forgive me, I haven’t introduced myself. You will probably not have heard of me, but your parents will be quite astonished when they hear you have spoken with the one and only...’ She gave a dramatic pause. ‘Justa Diva.’

‘Justa Diva? An interesting name. It sounds... well, a bit strange.’

‘My dear child, you are talking to a living legend!’ the woman said sulkily. ‘Try to commit this moment to memory, please. Many would have paid a great deal of money to be in your place. Now listen!’

Justa Diva assumed a proud pose, took a deep breath and began singing in a wondrous voice:

Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen
Tod und Verzweiflung flammet um mich her!
Fühlt nicht durch dich Sarastro Todesschmerzen,
So bist du meine Tochter nimmermehr.¹

The silver trills of her singing soared high above the forest’s hush, and for an instant filled everything with magic – that old magic telling of the terrible pride of a mother cursing her own daughter. Long after Diva had stopped singing, no one dared utter a word. Finally, Anne broke the silence.

‘I know that music. It’s the Queen of the Night from *The Magic Flute*. I’ve got it at home on a cassette for children.’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Justa Diva, astounded, ‘what a wonderful surprise! It seems I am singing to an educated audience after all! And I thought today’s children only listen to rap or some other sort of modern savagery that blares out of the radio.’

Anne started to say that she enjoyed listening to rap, too, but she realised just in time that Diva would hardly have been pleased to hear that.

2 Hell’s revenge boils in my heart,
Death and despair blaze around me!
If Sarastro does not through you feel
The pain of death,
Then you will be my daughter nevermore.

‘By the way, I hope I’ve at least partly repaid my debt now,’ the singer continued. ‘I’m afraid I’m unable to reward you in any other way at the moment. But that situation will change, of course. After the first few concerts, I mean.’

Anne jumped at this. ‘Concerts? You’re not planning on doing some concerts, are you?’

‘But of course. I hope people here value the classical arts, too.’

Aha! Red was thinking fast. The elves had said they were looking for a singer. Now, if she could convince Justa Diva to take part in their concert, then maybe they would agree to carry her over the orchid meadow.

‘Quirk, go and look for the elves, quickly!’ she cried. ‘Bring them here as fast as possible. Tell them I’ve got some fantastic news for them!’

Quirk was a little taken aback, but left without complaining. Anne seemed so very excited.

‘Miss Diva, I’ve got a suggestion for you,’ she said, turning to the singer. ‘What would you say if I helped you organize the concerts? With a real group even?’

‘My, my, we are very enterprising, aren’t we?’ the woman said, smiling indulgently. ‘What group are we talking about?’

‘Four musicians. They’re looking for a singer. They’re very good and their concert is in just a few days.’

‘I see,’ said Justa Diva thoughtfully. ‘But I must confess, this suggestion doesn’t interest me a great deal. I only work with professionals, you understand. Although, perhaps under the circumstances... ahem, do you happen to know who the sponsors of this concert are?’

‘Sponsors? What does that mean?’

‘Well, those who support it – financially, I mean.’

‘Ah! Those who give the money, is that what you mean? Well, it’s just got to be the big shots here in the forest.’

‘What? Are you saying that Mr Heino himself is supporting the concert? In that case, I may consider it.’

‘Heino? To hell with...! I mean, yes, of course. If it’s about making money then Heino will be behind it for certain.’

‘Are you sure? In work-related matters I insist on absolute accuracy.’

‘Of course! He told me himself,’ Anne lied quickly.

Justa Diva took a step back and studied her suspiciously.

‘It seems to me you allow your imagination to run a little too wildly, don’t you, child? Are you perhaps trying to tell me that you know Mr Heino personally?’

‘Yes, I have already had the pleasure of meeting him.’

‘Forgive me, but I find that hard to believe. Can you give me some kind of proof?’

Anne suddenly felt very embarrassed. ‘I can’t prove it, but I really do know Heino,’ she said awkwardly.

‘Don’t you see,’ said Justa Diva, looking at her in a disapproving way, ‘I would be feeling quite offended if it wasn’t for our pleasant conversation a moment ago.’

Anne’s heart sunk. The hope she had just gained was beginning to disappear. She tried to think of something else, but nothing came to mind.

‘I give you my word of honour!’ she said, trying to strengthen her position, but Justa Diva was no longer listening to her.

‘There’s no sense in trying any more,’ the backpack whispered to her. ‘It’s best to leave her alone for now. Maybe we’ll think of something else later.’

Reluctantly, Anne was forced to agree. The prima donna obviously had no wish to be bothered any longer.

‘Ms Diva, it was a pleasure. We... have to hurry. Thank you for the song.’

‘For the aria,’ Justa Diva corrected her. ‘Not at all, not at all. Forgive me for not giving you my autograph. I don’t have anything to write with.’

‘Some other time,’ muttered Anne, and hurried away.

‘What a stuck-up old goat!’ she exclaimed furiously once they had reached a safe distance. ‘We saved her life and she returns the favour with singing! “Forgive me for not giving you my autograph!” As if I need her autograph! Huh! I suppose I could always spread it on a slice of bread, couldn’t I?’

‘Still, I have the feeling your suggestion interested her,’ said the backpack thoughtfully. ‘If only you hadn’t been so quick to say you know Heino, she might have agreed. Did you see the way her eyes lit up when she asked about those .. er.. tonsils?’

‘Sponsors,’ Anne corrected her. ‘But I really do know Heino, don’t I?’

‘Yes, you do. But there’s no way you can convince her of that. She doesn’t set much store by talk, it seems to me.’

‘That’s so stupid! Whenever I tell the truth no one believes me. It seems to me it would be better to lie, wouldn’t it?’

She hesitated before adding uncertainly, 'But maybe it would have been worth offering her the money pouch. What do you think; would she have agreed then?'

'To tell you the truth, I don't know anything about money, but I reckon it's probably not a good idea to keep shoving money in people's faces. You saw how angry the elves got. If you ask me, it's best not even to try.'

'Strange. I thought money could buy everything. I don't understand any of it any more. What's money good for if you can't use it? It seems it really would be best to give it to the frogs!'

In the meantime, they had arrived back at the orchid meadow. The elves were already waiting for them there. Anne was anxious to know whether they were still angry with her, but was relieved to see that they were looking at her without any irritation. They clearly weren't resentful.

'Quirk said that you have some kind of a surprise for us. Have you thought of a new joke?' said Ivan-John, still from some distance away.

'Listen, didn't you say that you needed a singer?' said Anne, ignoring him.

'Yes. What about it?' replied Pavel-Paul.

'If I find you a female singer, will you carry me across the orchid meadow?'

The elves stared at her in surprise.

'We'll think about it,' said Goran-George cautiously. 'As long as she's a professional.'

'There's nothing to think about,' exclaimed Rangel-Ringo. 'If you find us a singer we'll take you across the meadow and back as much as you like. Just find us someone who can sing, and we'll take care of the rest.'

'What are you getting so excited about?' Ivan-John said mockingly. 'Can't you see she's just kidding? Listen, why don't you just sing that little song of yours again ... What was it? "sur le pont".'

Of course, that caused the other three to split their sides laughing. Annoyed at that, Anne moved away from them, followed by her friends. The elves had soon completely forgotten her.

She quickly explained what had happened. Quirk shook his head sadly.

'What misfortune! I thought we had almost clinched it. So that's that; she wants some kind of proof, does she? But what proof can one give of acquaintance with someone? I don't quite understand that.'

'Well, grown-ups sometimes write each other letters. Or they're photographed together. I suppose it's something like that. What do you think backpack?'

‘I agree.’

‘Wait, wait! Boo has something to say,’ exclaimed Quirk.

And Boo was indeed flapping his wings hurriedly. He was too excited to be able to explain himself clearly. Several times Quirk had to ask him to repeat until he could understand.

‘Boo said that he could find such proof. And quite close by.’

‘What, that little midge? I don’t believe it!’ said Anne dismissively.

The backpack frowned and looked at her angrily. Boo suddenly hung his head and stopped flapping his wings.

‘Listen, you are absolutely and totally impossible!’ exploded Quirk. ‘To think I took you for a heroine... Now I know you better, I can see that you’re no more than just a spoilt brat! And you don’t deserve any help!’

Anne squirmed with guilt. Quirk, Boo and the backpack were all looking at her reproachfully.

‘I don’t know what to do any more,’ continued Quirk. ‘Boo, what do you think?’

Boo scratched his head thoughtfully and then started making quick signs.

‘Are you sure?’ Quirk asked him doubtfully.

Boo nodded.

‘Right then, let’s see what comes of this. Boo says that we’ll stay with you, but first you must promise that never, ever again will you insult us and order us around.’

Boo made several more signs.

‘And you’ll never again call him midge, that goes without saying.’

Anne stood there, her eyes averted, not daring to look at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said at last, in a hesitant voice. ‘Sometimes I do things even I don’t understand. You know, before I realise... I promise that... I’ll do my best... to be a...friend.’

Everyone was silent. Then Boo started making signs again.

‘He says there’s no time to waste,’ exclaimed Quirk. ‘Wait here, we’ll be right back.’

The pair of them disappeared towards the other end of the swamp. Not long after, they reappeared. Boo was clutching a sheet of paper between his teeth. He walked up to Anne proudly and gave it to her.

‘What’s that? Show me,’ asked the backpack curiously.

It turned out to be a large photograph. It showed Heino with a slimy grin, and at the bottom was written, "You can always depend on me: Heino the Beaver!". Under that was his large, illegible signature.

'But that... is it real? Where did you find it?' asked Anne, racking her brains to remember where she had seen this photo before.

Boo smiled at her and didn't say anything. Quirk was also grinning happily. The backpack, who had already guessed what was going on, burst out laughing.

'Wait, wait a second! Don't say anything! It's coming to me,' said Anne. 'Aha! Of course! The sign by the Heinomat! Am I right?'

Boo nodded excitedly.

'Boo, you are... you are... the greatest pair of ears I've ever met!' cried Anne. 'Come here, let me give you a kiss!'

She grabbed the fluffy flying creature and started kissing him. It was lovely the way the hairy ears tickled her.

'I'm sorry, I'm really sorry,' she whispered while hugging him. 'I'm not as horrid as you think. I can change, you'll see. But that's just between you and me, okay?'

Boo looked at her with surprise and then nodded his agreement. His huge eyes showed amazement mixed with curiosity. The two of them exchanged knowing glances, and then Anne announced with mock seriousness, 'Ladies and gentlemen, let us now return to Justa Diva. It is time to surprise her with something completely different!'

'You are such a strange generation,' pondered Justa Diva while examining the photograph for the hundredth time. 'At your age we were still playing with dolls, but you are already interested in work and success. Whatever happened to childhood? I don't understand anything any longer; the world is getting more and more confusing. Children are running businesses and adults are playing games. Everything is turning upside down!'

'Anyway,' she continued after a short silence, 'very well, lead me to these musicians of yours. I'd like to see whether they are any good.'

The elves had just finished their rehearsal and were about to leave when Anne shouted to them from a distance, 'Hey, wait! I've got a surprise for you!'

They stopped and looked at her in astonishment. Anne strutted out in front of them and started making an introduction the way she had seen that on television. ‘Gentlemen, allow me to present the one and only Justa Diva – a living legend in the world of singing.’

‘What? A real singer? Here in the forest? It can’t be!’ snapped Ivan-John. ‘If there were, we’d have already heard of her!’

‘I’m a foreigner, young man,’ Diva interrupted him coolly. ‘And yes, I am indeed a real singer. My name can be found in every reference book on the singing arts. Incidentally, might I learn something more about yourselves? Just a few details, in the proper professional manner.’

‘Well, we...’ stammered Ivan-John, ‘we’re just starting out, really.’

‘That’s not important. They’re still very good, though,’ interrupted Anne, already sensing that things could be going wrong. ‘And that goes without saying in Diva’s case,’ she said, turning towards the elves. ‘She’s just great. Ms Diva, why don’t you sing that aria again? Listen to how she sings the Queen of the Night; you’ll be lost for words.’

‘Aria? What aria?’ asked a very surprised Goran-George. ‘We play rock music, not classical. You’ve got it all mixed up, haven’t you, Red?’

Anne clenched her fists... More problems! ... Damn it!

At that very awkward moment, Justa Diva herself came quite unexpectedly to her aid.

‘Rock music? What kind of rock music would that be, young man? Could I hear a sample?’ she asked.

The elves exchanged uncertain glances, then, encouraging each other, they began singing their Beatles song.

A broad smile appeared on Justa Diva’s face.

‘Ah, at least our tastes seem to be similar, as far as I can tell. Wait a moment, I have to get into the mood.’

She closed her eyes and concentrated. Everyone waited, filled with anticipation.

It was not long before Diva opened her eyes, looked at them smilingly, and started singing. It was the same Beatles song but somehow it sounded completely different now.

Little by little, Anne felt a strange sensation of happiness wash over her – a sweet, joyful feeling that made her close her eyes and imagine walking along

with many other people, everyone happy and smiling. Her heart swelled with joy, her eyes filled with tears, and before she knew what she was doing, she too had started to sing in a delicate, shaky voice.

The elves had also joined in the singing, drawn into the magic of the song. The simple melody unwound and gained strength – powerful, beautiful, intoxicating – until it eventually seemed as if the whole forest had joined in, caught up in the irresistible longing for warmth, happiness and joy.

Long after the last notes had died out, everyone remained calm and silent, completely under the spell of the music. Finally, Ivan-John dared to break the silence.

‘Ms Diva, that was ... magic. Yes, real magic. For the first time in my life...’ His voice cracked with emotion, and he coughed in order to hide his embarrassment. ‘For the first time in my life I actually believed in what I was singing. Never, ever before have I felt so happy!’

‘Well, well,’ smiled Justa Diva, ‘it seems to me you’re beginning to understand the secret. We can all work miracles, but the hard part is believing it.’

Anne remained speechless, lost in wonder. Was that the proud, vain prima donna she’d been speaking to only a moment ago? It seemed that not a trace of that person was left.

‘Take me, for example,’ continued Justa Diva, as if she had been reading her thoughts. ‘To some people – well, more than just some – I might look just like an ageing and not particularly pleasant woman. But when I start singing, I can turn myself into whatever I want – a young girl, a sorceress or a witch – simply because I believe in what I sing.’ ‘That’s the magic.’ She smiled again. ‘It’s easy.’

The elves were listening as if she was delivering a revelation.

‘Look, I was thinking,’ she said, turning to Anne, ‘there’s no need for you to use your ... contacts. I really like these young men, and it doesn’t matter if our work is a success or not. Sometimes you have to let yourself do foolish things, too, otherwise the soul begins to dry out. Oh dear, I’m already talking like an old grey-beard! Well, gentlemen, will you allow me to join your ... young group?’

The elves looked at each other, then yelled out in turn:

‘But, of course!’

‘It’d be a great honour for us!’

‘Hooray! Now we’re the greatest already!’

‘Long live Justa Diva!’



The glade echoed with their cheerful voices. The backpack walked up to Anne and whispered, 'I don't know why, but it seems to me that for once we've probably done something very nice. Something very, very magical, don't you think?'

'Yes,' replied Anne dreamily, 'that really was something very magical.'

Chapter Eleven: Madame Owl

When the elves carried Anne and the backpack to the other side of orchid meadow, it was already growing dark.

‘See, I told you; I’m not heavy at all!’ chirped Anne when she was back on the ground again. ‘Didn’t everything happen quickly?’

‘The best part of it is that we’re all satisfied,’ said Pavel-Paul. ‘Okay, bon voyage. If we hurry, we can have our first rehearsal with Justa Diva. And don’t forget, if you need us, Quirk knows where to find us.’

‘I’d like to thank you all once again, and tell you how happy I am we met.’

‘Us too.’

‘Come to the concert, won’t you?’

‘And if you think of any new jokes, write them down. We may have a laugh together again some day.’

Anne nodded amicably. This time their jokes didn’t bother her. She waved as she watched them disappear into the twilight.

‘Really nice boys. And to think how angry they made me at first!’ she whispered thoughtfully, then shook her head and turned to her friends. ‘Well, are you ready to go? Just a little farther and soon we’ll be home!’

She put the backpack on and followed Quirk who was leading the way. They crossed the large meadow and came out near the river. It was much wider and calmer there than it had been up by Grandpa Hedgehog’s water mill. They were separated from it by a wide, grassy strip that was almost totally occupied by an enormous and very ancient tree.

‘That’s where she lives,’ said Quirk.

Anne was looking at the tree with great interest. Wooden steps wound around the thick trunk for those who couldn’t fly. At different levels along the trunk, there were a number of hollows with heavy doors all fastened with large padlocks except for one. A wooden sign was nailed to each of them: “Library”, “Dining Room”, “Parlour”, etc... The sign on the one that wasn’t padlocked said “Reception”. Anne climbed the wooden stairs and gave a timid knock.

‘Come,’ said an elderly female voice. ‘And don’t forget to shut the door behind you. The window’s open, it’s draughty.’

The entrance to the hollow was rather low and Red had to duck down low to get in, but inside it was surprisingly roomy and cosy. Her first impression was of being in a library, only a very untidy, maze-like library. There were piles of books covering every nook and cranny of the reception area so that it was only possible to move by stepping very carefully to avoid them. The worktable in one of the corners was literally bending under the weight of the heavy volumes stacked on it. An old-fashioned gramophone with an enormous horn sat there side by side with a small computer. The shelves along the walls held a whole array of knick-knacks which Anne would have enjoyed investigating in more detail: little watches, assorted shells, sparkling crystals and porcelain cups as tiny as thimbles... Red stood staring and almost forgot why she had come.

‘Come in, come in, it’s getting late. Something must have delayed you,’ said the elderly voice, startling her.

Only then did Anne notice Madame Owl. The old lady was sitting in a comfortable rocking chair next to the open window. She was holding a book in one hand, while clutching one of the miniature porcelain cups in the other. She was dressed in a rather faded, thick housecoat and a long shawl was wrapped around her neck despite the warm weather. Her round, yellow eyes looked enormous behind the thick lenses of her glasses, and her dishevelled, greying feathers lent her an almost comical air.

‘But you weren’t expecting me, were you?’ asked Anne in surprise.

‘Of course I was expecting you. Your friend Quirk has been pestering me with requests for help since this morning. It was clear that you would appear at some point. Where is he, anyway? Didn’t he want to come along?’

Anne realised just then that Quirk and Boo had remained outside. She went to call them, but Madame Owl waved her wing.

‘Oh, he’s probably far away by now, forget him. I had words with him, so I doubt if he’ll be keen to show himself around here... So... sit on one of the chairs if you can find a space, but don’t move the books or I’ll never be able to find them again. I’m not too keen on order and cleanliness; that’s my nature. First, would you like something to drink? Or eat?’

Anne had almost finished Grandpa Hedgehog’s provisions, so she was glad to accept something to eat. The old lady went outside jangling a giant bunch of keys and not long after returned with a large portion of sausages. Anne’s eyes lit

up; she hadn't eaten any meat over the last few days and the sight of the sausages made her mouth water.

'Mmmm, they're very tasty,' she said while munching away with satisfaction. 'What are they made from?'

'If I told you it would only spoil your appetite,' mumbled Madame Owl. 'Just eat and don't ask. Who knows when you'll have the chance to eat sausage again.'

Anne decided that Madame Owl was quite right, and finished her meal in silence. The backpack had found a comfortable spot between several piles of books and was examining the room carefully.

'So, now you can tell me what brought you here,' said Madame Owl when Anne had finished. 'It certainly won't be anything very pleasant or simple. No one comes to me on happy quests.'

'Grandpa Hedgehog sent me,' Anne began, wiping her greasy mouth on her sleeve. 'I... I'm not from around here and I'm looking for a way out of the forest. I want to go back home to Mum.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Madame Owl, looking surprised. 'So young and already making such difficult requests... And what else?'

'Well... he gave me this,' Anne took the little dry scrap out of her pocket and handed it to Madame Owl. 'He said it's magic and that only you could tell me how to use it.'

Madame Owl took the tiny lump and set it down on the table in front of her. She then took a large magnifying glass from one of the shelves and began examining it intently.

'Interesting, interesting. Quite remarkable,' she murmured. 'Finally, something truly interesting.'

That went on for a while and Anne had started to fidget around impatiently in her chair when Madame Owl's creaky voice claimed her attention once again: 'So, time for bed! Come, I'll show you your room.'

Anne looked at her in astonishment.

'But aren't you going to answer my question? What's the matter?'

'All in good time. The questions you asked are very difficult and require a clear head. Now first put that scrap away so you don't lose it. It is really very important. When we get up tomorrow we'll see what we can do.'

'Can't you at least tell me something, no matter how small, otherwise I won't be able to sleep at all!' begged Anne.

‘I can’t tell you anything yet, but I can at least show you something. Look here. We will use this tomorrow morning to seek the answers to your questions.’

She was pointing to a large glass sphere that was lying between piles of books on the table.

‘This is my crystal ball. You’ve surely heard of such a thing, haven’t you? Sometimes, on a good day and if I’m lucky, it gives me answers... Well, not exactly answers, but at least some kind of explanation. Tomorrow we’ll try to learn something more towards answering your questions.’

‘And...will I find it easily then? The way back, I mean.’

‘Let me warn you,’ said Madame Owl looking at her sternly, ‘You mustn’t expect clear or easy answers from me. All I can give you are directions, at most explanations, but you must seek and find the way yourself. That’s how it is with difficult things. They wouldn’t be difficult if someone else could solve them for us. Alright, let me show you to your room as tomorrow we’ll need all our strength.’

Anne followed the old lady to one of the other tree hollows in silence. There a real bed awaited her – the first since she had landed in the forest. She curled up with the backpack and in spite of her anxiousness, managed to fall fast asleep. She even overslept. She was woken by Madame Owl who had made pancakes and had set up a neat little breakfast table on one of the wooden platforms. Anne was beginning to think that life in the forest was maybe not so bad after all.

‘Well, are you ready to start?’ asked Madame Owl after they had finished breakfast. ‘If you ask me, we shouldn’t delay any longer.’

‘Uh huh,’ replied Anne, hurriedly cramming the last pancake into her mouth. ‘I’m ready.’

She was brimming with curiosity, and Madame Owl seemed suddenly to be terribly slow: she cleared the table very carefully, climbed the steps to the reception without hurrying, and took a long, long time searching among the big bundle of keys. At last! Anne was about to explode with impatience.

‘So-o-o.’ said Owl while slowly squeezing her way between the piles of books, which she managed quite miraculously without knocking into any of them. ‘Now, let’s see!’

She suddenly went quiet and stood completely still, her eyes fixed on her worktable, which was out of Anne’s sight.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Red, while trying to peek over Madame Owl’s shoulder. ‘Aren’t we going to start?’

‘It can’t be!’ muttered Madame Owl. ‘That’s absolutely impossible!’

‘What? Why? What on earth is it?’ asked Anne. Risking knocking the books over, she crawled on all fours between the stacks. Then she stood up, looked at the table and ...let out a gasp.

The crystal ball had disappeared.

‘There’s no point in searching. Clearly the ball has gone missing,’ snarled Madame Owl, brushing off her dressing gown and raising clouds of dust everywhere.

‘But where could it be?’ cried Anne in utter desperation. ‘Last night it was right there. I saw it with my own eyes.’

‘Hmm, I have my suspicions, but it’s still too early to say,’ said Madame Owl as she looked out of the open window. ‘A lot of my things have started disappearing lately. There’s no doubt someone’s been rummaging through my house.’

‘So what do we do now?’

‘It seems to me the thief is probably beginning to enjoy what he’s doing. He’s sure to come again. Sooner or later I’ll catch him.’

‘But what about me? And my questions? How long will I have to wait?’

‘Why wait? Walk around, look here and there. Before you know it, you might have discovered something interesting. You’re looking for a way out, aren’t you?’

‘But where should I start looking? Without your help I don’t know what to do at all.’

Anne couldn’t understand how it was possible for anyone to remain calm like that after such a huge loss. The absent-minded and slightly batty old Owl gave her doubts; would someone who cared so little for the things around her really be of much help? It seemed Madame Owl wasn’t in any condition to look after herself, let alone someone else.

Then, on top of everything, Madame Owl suddenly became angry.

‘Listen, I told you yesterday that you can’t expect easy answers here. If you insist on having advice, then here’s some: go outside, take a good look round and try to learn something! What do you expect me to do? Take you by the hand and

lead you to your mother? Stop whining and start looking! I have enough worries of my own without you. If you want me to help, then first help yourself!

Anne stared at her with big, non-comprehending eyes. At first she felt like crying, then she felt ashamed, and finally she herself became really angry.

‘Right!’ she announced stubbornly while crossing her arms in defiance. ‘Fine then. If that’s the way it is, then I’ll help myself. Do you reckon I can’t? And don’t come running to me for help if tomorrow someone steals the slippers of your feet!’ she yelled from the doorstep as she was on the point of leaving. ‘Because that’s the way things are going.’

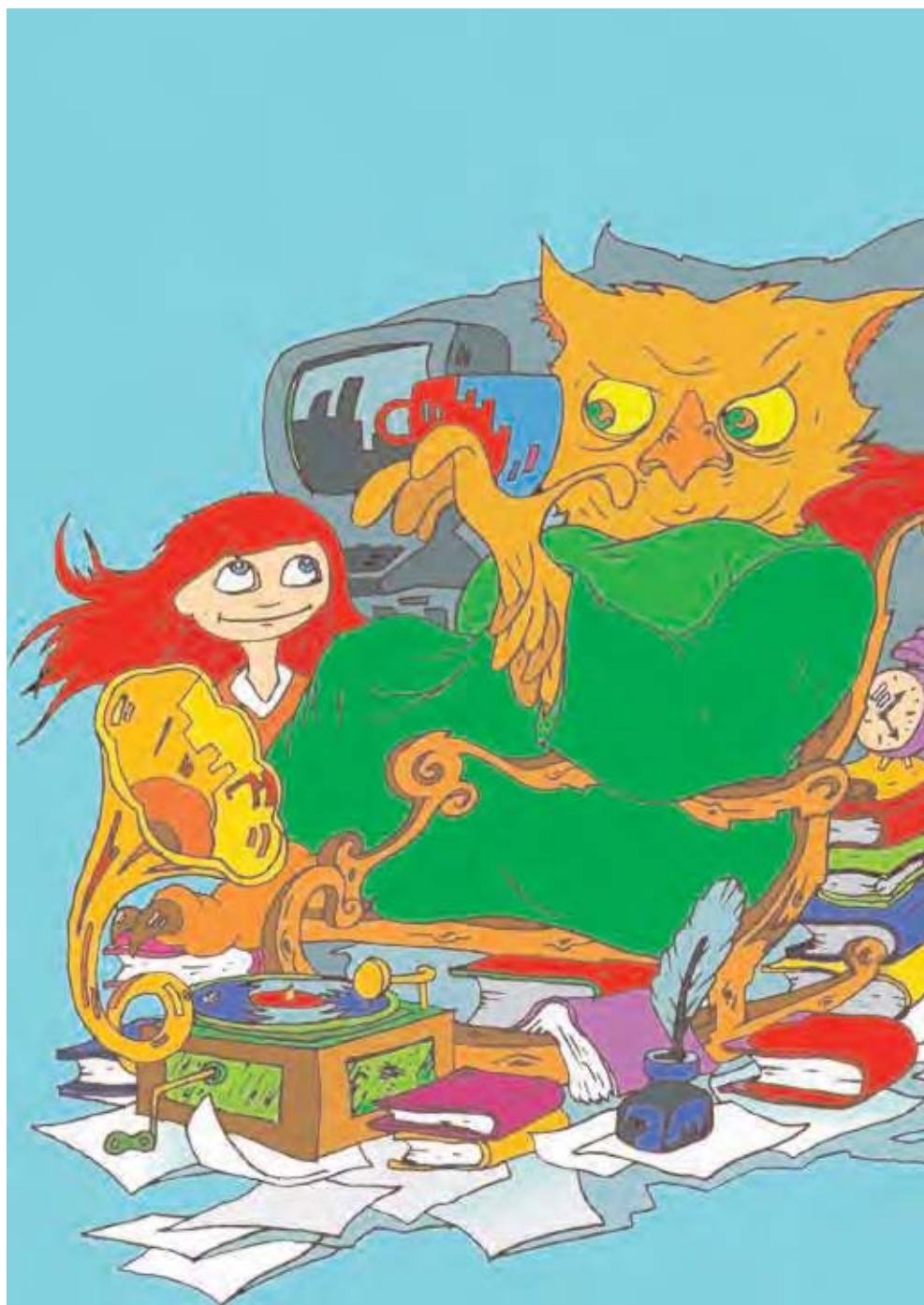
She slammed the door behind her and set out along the path, venting her anger by kicking the pebbles in her path. But if she could have seen Madame Owl’s face at that moment, she would have been rather astonished. The old lady was sitting smiling to herself and murmuring under her breath, ‘That’s how I like you ... you mischief, you, ...Red!’

The path led through the trees and bushes along the riverbank, no more than a hundred metres from the river. Soon Anne and the backpack reached a fork. The main path turned off to the left towards the forest interior, and a narrow, hardly noticeable path led to the right towards the river. They chose the smaller path, and had to push their way through some rather nasty thorn bushes before finally reaching a small clearing. Anne, who had pricked herself in the effort, sat down next to a big anthill and started sucking her finger. The backpack sat down next to her.

‘Help yourself! How pathetic! The old hag was just looking for someone to take her own anger out on. That’s why she chased me off like that,’ said Red, who still hadn’t quite calmed down. ‘Well, it’s obvious! She leaves her window open and is then surprised that someone burgles her house. Thieves are just waiting for a chance like that!’

‘Listen, I want to tell you something,’ interrupted the backpack. ‘That window is very high up. I checked it just a moment ago, and from the ground there’s no way you can reach it, neither by climbing nor jumping.’

‘What, you’re not trying to say that the thief.... Hey, wait a second! I’m beginning to understand... To get through the window, the thief has got to be...’



‘A bird. Simple and logical.’

‘Oh, that’s not a bad start. If I weren’t feeling so angry with the old dear, I’d run to tell her right away. But never mind, we’ll surprise her later. Go on.’

‘Well, there isn’t much more to think about. Thieving birds...’

‘The magpies!’ cried Anne triumphantly. ‘Of course, why didn’t we think of that earlier? That’s just like the magpies! Don’t you remember how one of them threatened that she would tell Madame Owl everything? We can’t waste any more time. Let’s hurry back to the old woman!’

Wait, wait! There’s something else.’

‘Come on then, quick, don’t keep me in suspense!’

‘Take a look at this.’ The backpack dipped into a side pocket and took out a crumpled piece of paper.

Anne snatched it and started reading it. In heavy, painstaking handwriting it said:

My dear neybour,

At the time you wrote about I was visiting my friend Peggy. If you don’t believe me, ask her. I don’t know who stole your wollet. I don’t do things like that.

Maggie the Magpie

‘But that’s a letter from the magpie... It can’t be. Where did you find it?’

‘It was lying crumpled up next to the wastepaper basket.’

‘But that means that...’

‘Madame Owl knew long ago who was stealing from her house. As she’s written a letter to the magpie, she must be well aware of everything.’

‘Ah! So that’s why she seemed so calm. Well, isn’t she something! And there I was thinking that she was just an old hag! But she really is a clever woman. I can hardly believe it!’

‘I just wonder why she has continued to be so careless. Maybe she’s waiting for an opportunity or something like that...’

‘Hey, you’re amazing!’ said Anne looking at the backpack with sincere admiration. ‘Tell me what we should do from now on.’

‘The letter says ‘neighbour’. That means the magpie lives somewhere nearby. It’s best if we look for her and see if we can’t learn something more. Have you still got the money pouch?’

‘Of course.’

‘Good, I’ve got an idea. Listen....’

Chapter Twelve: The Cunning Magpie

They had just set out on the big path beyond the fork when they came upon the magpie's nest. In fact, it was a proper cottage built into the lower branches of a stout tree, constructed out of woven branches with a thatched roof. A wooden ladder led up to a veranda at the front of the house upon which stood a table and several chairs. The magpie was sitting in one of the chairs with her long legs crossed casually. She held a huge, steaming cup of coffee in one hand, and a long cigarette holder in the other. When she saw the two friends approaching in the distance, she yelled at them, 'Don't come any closer! I don't want to buy anything, and I've nothing to give away either. You'd better get out of here right away! I like my peace and quiet. I don't want anything to do with anyone!'

'I don't think this is going to be as easy as we thought,' Anne said quietly to the backpack. 'See how bad-tempered she is.'

'But we don't want to sell anything,' she called out to the magpie. 'Quite the opposite. We're buying. Old things, that is.'

'What?' said the magpie, wide-eyed. 'You're buying? It's the first time I've ever heard of such a thing – a kid buying old stuff. Hey, you're not trying to trick me, are you? Have you got any money?'

Anne dipped into the pouch and took out a couple of shiny gold coins. The magpie choked on the coffee and splashed her fashionable short skirt.

'Have you got a lot of those?' she asked, weighing up the coins with a greedy look, and taking no notice of her ruined skirt.

'Unfortunately, just what's in this pouch,' Anne replied modestly. 'They're very heavy; I can't carry more than this.'

It was lucky that there was no more coffee in the cup! The magpie's eyes nearly popped right out. She suddenly became very polite and started speaking oh so smoothly.

'No problem, no problem. That'll be enough. In fact, now I come to think of it, I've got a lot of things to sell. Lovely old things, first-rate merchandise, you won't be sorry. What can I show you first?'

'Well, we're mainly looking for glass.'

‘Wonderful!’ cried the magpie. ‘I love glass things very much, too. My place is full of glassware. I see we’re going to understand each other perfectly. One can always do business with such clever youngsters, I knew it right away.’

‘Yes, but we’re not looking for just anything.’

The magpie, who was already dashing inside, stopped, and failing to hide her impatience asked, ‘What exactly are you looking for, then?’

‘Well, old, very old glass things.’

‘Okay, like what, for example?’

‘I don’t suppose you’d have such a thing, but still.... An old, glass ball, for example.’

‘Why suppose I haven’t? Why, of course I’ve got one!’ screamed the magpie triumphantly. Then she suddenly stopped and looked at Anne suspiciously. ‘Hey, wait a second.... Someone didn’t send you, did they? Well?’

She gave a false smile and continued in a kinder tone, ‘I can see you’re an honest child, so do tell me who sent you!’

‘No one sent me. I’m here on my own business.’ Anne tried to speak confidently but her voice cracked from nervousness. ‘Didn’t you see the money?’

‘Oh yes, I saw it, how could I not have?’ the magpie drawled a little uncertainly. She stopped and started to think something over. A cunning look came into her eyes. ‘Fine, now I’ll tell you how we’ll do this. The ball costs... fiveno, let’s say ten of these gold coins. That’s it exactly. Ten gold coins – and the ball is yours.’

Anne gasped.

‘Ten coins! That’s out of the question!’

‘Well, as you wish,’ replied the magpie lazily. ‘I’ve nothing urgent on at the moment, so if you change your mind, call back later. Right, now I’m going to sit down and rest.’

‘Wait, wait!’ Anne cried hurriedly. ‘That’s fine, we don’t need to haggle. Here’s the money.’

She reached into the pouch and counted out ten coins. The magpie sprang up to take them. Anne was about to hand them over when she suddenly had second thoughts, and quickly put them back. Maggie started grumbling.

‘No see, no deal!’ said Anne in a businesslike manner.

Maggie thought about it briefly, then entered the cottage and soon returned carrying the ball. There was no doubt – it was Madame Owl’s crystal ball.

‘Are you satisfied now?’ she growled in an unfriendly tone while carefully putting the ball down on the floor of the veranda. ‘All right, out with the money, what are you waiting for? One old glass ball, just as you asked for. Top quality merchandise, you can see that for yourself, can’t you?’

Anne reached out and handed her the coins. The magpie darted down from the veranda, snatched them and then began screaming at the top of her voice, ‘Stop thief!’

‘What’s the matter with you? Have you gone mad?’ cried Anne, frightened.

Instead of answering, Maggie began to push her and strike out at her blindly. Her bony wings were surprisingly strong. Anne curled up in pain, trying to protect herself with her arms.

‘Stop thief!’ the magpie continued screaming. Then she stopped and hissed, ‘Get out of here before I beat you to pulp!’

Anne felt hot tears streaming from her eyes, not so much from pain as from insult and outrage.

‘Liar! Thief!’ she cried. ‘I’m going to tell Madame Owl everything!’

The magpie looked at her with contempt.

‘Stupid kid. You thought you could fool me! I knew the old hag had sent you.’

‘You’ll see. I’ll tell her everything.’

‘Tell whoever you like! I’m not afraid of anyone. If she wants anything from me, tell her to come herself. Now get out of here before it gets worse!’

She turned and climbed back onto the veranda. Anne wiped her tears away silently, gave her a hateful glance and headed back along the path. Behind her the magpie was whistling merrily.

‘That’s all we needed! Damn it! A thousand times damn it!’

In sheer anger, Anne shook the enormous padlock, but it didn’t help much at all. Madame Owl’s reception remained locked. She looked once more at the thick wooden door, hoping to find some additional instruction or note, but in vain. There was just the sign “Back soon” hanging on the doorknob.

‘Now what? Do we just sit here and wait, is that it? And meantime, that thief will hide everything away in a safe place. And she’ll be laughing behind our backs, of course!’

She had run from the magpie's nest without stopping for a second – and was now quite out of puff – just so she could explain everything and expose the mean crook as quickly as possible. And there, just look! Not a trace of Madame Owl, just a sign on the door that didn't explain anything. Anne was on the point of exploding.

'But maybe she will be back soon,' suggested the backpack. 'Let's wait a while and see.'

Anne sighed heavily; she had no choice but to agree. They sat on the wooden step in front of the entrance and waited.

'Hello!' someone called from above their heads. 'Is Madame Owl at home?'

Quirk and Boo had appeared out of the blue, as silent as ghosts.

Anne was so happy that she almost forgot the troubles with the magpie.

'Hey, Quirk, hello! Hi Boo! Where have you been? We were beginning to think you were angry with us.'

'Oh no... we just had a little work to do,' said the old clock a little hesitantly. 'But now we're free. We'll gladly stay with you if you've got nothing against it.'

'No, of course not, please do. We'd really like that,' Anne babbled away, very happy to see her lost friends again. 'You can even help us with something.'

She rapidly told them what had happened. She changed the story a little, omitting the part where the magpie had given her a good beating. Quirk and Boo nodded and listened without saying a word.

'To tell you the truth, that doesn't surprise me at all,' said Quirk after hearing her out. 'That Maggie is notorious throughout the forest; everyone runs away from her as they would from fire. The one thing I can't understand, though, is why Madame Owl is so careless as to let herself get robbed. That's not in her character. In fact, no one would ever be allowed to play such tricks on her. The magpie is just looking for trouble if you ask me.'

'But don't you think she's maybe setting some kind of trap for her?' said the backpack. 'You know the saying: "the cunning magpie jumps into the trap with both feet".'

'If that's the case, then I don't understand how she can part with something as precious as the crystal ball,' replied Anne. 'She can't answer people's questions without it, can she? It all seems rather confusing to me. Whichever way you look at it, something just doesn't fit. Anyway, it would be better for us to think about what we can do about the magpie. Do any of you have any ideas?'

‘If we could lure her outside...’ Quirk began cautiously, ‘maybe that would give us the chance to grab the ball and run, what do you think?’

‘Good idea!’ said the backpack. ‘But a bit risky, I have to admit. I wouldn’t like to fall into her hands, you know what I mean, don’t you?’

Anne blushed slightly, but didn’t say a thing.

‘So, we have to find a way to keep her outside,’ continued Quirk. ‘All right, try and think. What could keep the magpie outside her house?’

‘Something to steal, something shiny...’ the backpack suggested uncertainly.

‘It’s not safe,’ said Anne. ‘Who would risk entering the house when she could return at any second? Besides, she’s bound to lock the door when she goes out.’

At that moment Boo began flapping his wings excitedly. Quirk translated, ‘Boo says that only a trap would work. Do any of you know how to make a trap?’

‘I do,’ called out Anne. ‘You take a crate or basket, prop it up with a stick, and tie a cord or thread to the stick. You put something to eat under the crate and when the bird walks up to it, you pull the cord ... The boys in the neighbourhood taught me,’ she added, a little ashamed. ‘But I’ve never caught birds, cross my heart. I’ve only watched how others do it.’

Quirk and Boo looked at her in horror, appalled by that example of human genius for cruelty. Anne was rather embarrassed.

‘Anyway we haven’t got a crate or a basket,’ she added quickly. ‘And the magpie is too big for such things. What’s more, she’s very clever and we wouldn’t fool her with such a simple trap.’

‘Anne!’ cried the backpack. ‘Don’t you remember the fishing basket? It’s big enough, isn’t it?’

‘That’s true, I’d completely forgotten it! Hey, what a great idea! That basket’s just right...’

She jumped for joy, then became thoughtful and hesitated a moment.

‘But how will we drag it over here? And even if we do, once the magpie sees it, she’ll understand our plan right away. She’s not stupid.’

‘I’ve got it!’ cried Quirk. ‘The magpie may be cunning, but her greed is far greater than her cunning. You’ll see how we’ll take care of her. Wait while I explain, and then you’ll laugh yourselves silly!’

The magpie was sunbathing on the veranda in front of her cottage. She was so pleased with the day's takings that she'd indulged in two whole glasses of red wine at lunch, and was now lying there feeling pleasantly tipsy, her mind full of images of shiny gold coins. The one thing that spoiled her mood was the thought of the money left in the little girl's pouch which she'd completely forgotten in her haste.

'Well, never mind,' she thought, trying to console herself, 'I still made ten gold coins without lifting a finger. Ten gold coins, eh! Heino himself hardly makes that much in a single day!'

She was suddenly startled by two faint voices arguing over something. She sat up and listened hard. Aha! What luck! The two kids were still hanging around. Maggie stepped down to the ground, taking care not to make a sound, and slowly sneaked her way through the bushes. Soon she discovered the kids in a little clearing. She eavesdropped on them from her hiding place in the bushes.

'It can't be, we divided everything equally!' cried the red-haired girl. 'There, look, the two piles are just the same.'

'Equal, eh?' said the other kid, foaming with rage. 'Don't think I can't see how you're trying to trick me! I'm not having any of that. Come on, we're going to count again!'

The magpie cautiously poked her beak through the bushes and couldn't believe her eyes. In the middle of the meadow, divided into two gleaming piles lay the coins she had been dreaming of all day. Sitting next to the piles, the two kids were obviously fighting over who would get how much. 'Now you'll see who is going to get all of them,' she thought to herself. 'Come to Auntie Maggie, my little darlings!'

'Thieves! Stop thieves!' she roared at the top of her voice and jumped out from her hiding place, showing her fists. 'Police!'

'Oh no! Save yourself! Run!' cried the red-haired girl, who took to her heels followed by her furry companion. The magpie threw herself at the money greedily, grasped handfuls and tossed them in the air, thrilled at the glorious sound of their clinking. Never before had she felt so happy.

'Now!' came the sound of the little girl's voice. The magpie looked around to see what was happening, but at that very moment a strange noise – "shoop" – came from above her head, and something heavy covered her. She squawked wildly and tried to free herself, but too late.

'The stones! Quickly!' the little girl ordered. At once two large stones were rolled in to secure the edges of the basket covering her. Maggie realised then that she had fallen into a trap and started screaming madly, 'Wait till I get hold of you, I'll break your little hands, you hooligans! Just wait till I get out of here. When I get hold of you, not even God will be able to save you! I'll tear your ears off and string them up! Take this cage away at once or else you've had it!'

At that moment, four strong lads descended from overhead, buzzing about with their thin, filmy wings. The magpie was startled, but to her credit, it must be said she wasn't a coward.

'Aha!' she hissed viciously. 'So there are the assistants! I was wondering how you'd managed to lift such a heavy basket so high. Be warned, heroes, you'll see what happens when you mess with old Maggie. I don't let tricks like that go unpaid. You'll remember me!'

'Hey, Maggie, stop frothing or you'll ruin your lipstick!' cried the lad with the glasses. The other three were grinning like idiots. 'By the way, you're so red already, there's no need for it! What do you think, boys? She's red all over, isn't she?'

The magpie struggled to overturn the basket, but in vain. She was so furious that she would have been ready to fight all four of the lads. However, the trap was strong and didn't yield. She soon gave up and sat down on the pile of coins, twisting her beak in a scornful smile.

'Go on, laugh! Laugh! We'll see who has the last laugh!'

Suddenly, out of nowhere popped the little red-headed girl. She stood in front of the cage and put her hands on her hips in a defiant pose.

'Maggie, you've got all the money this time. Well, are you happy now?'

'You wait!' growled the magpie. 'You'll be sorry you ever set eyes on me, you cheeky brat!'

'It seems to me you've first got to learn to eat money,' the girl replied. 'Why don't you start practising right now or else you may not have enough time? I've heard it's not an easy thing to do.'

In her fury, Maggie grabbed a handful of coins and pelted the child with them.

'So you think you're a bunch of heroes, eh?' she said maliciously. 'Six against one defenceless young lady. Wow, I'm so impressed!'

‘Okay, let’s not lose any more time,’ said the little girl turning to her accomplices. ‘Madame Owl will decide this thief’s punishment. Now it’s time to search her house. I think we’ll find most of the stolen things there.’

‘You wouldn’t dare!’ screamed the magpie. ‘Thieves! Help!’

But no one paid her the slightest attention. The plotters disappeared among the trees and left her to out-shout the wind.

Chapter Thirteen: Madam Owl's Answers

Fortunately, Madame Owl was at home this time. Anne climbed the stairs three at a time, gave a quick knock at the door and burst in without waiting for an answer.

'Here it is!' she announced triumphantly, holding the ball above her head. 'We found the thief. Everything is okay now. Maggie the magpie stole it!'

'Slowly, slowly!' demanded a startled Madame Owl from her rocking chair. 'I had just dozed off. You scared me half to death! All right, now put it somewhere in the corner. We won't be needing it, anyway.'

'Why not?' asked Anne, rather worried. 'We were going to look for answers to the questions, weren't we? What's happened?'

'Nothing has happened. Our agreement remains the same. Only, we don't need the crystal ball.'

'But doesn't it give you the answers...?'

'Oh, nonsense,' replied the owl, still a little angry. 'It's just an ordinary glass ball; there's nothing special about it. If it were so important, would I have let that rascal Maggie make off with it right under my nose?'

Anne gaped in astonishment. She almost let the ball drop in her surprise and confusion.

'But then what was all the panic about? I don't understand anything any longer.'

'First, put the ball down and find somewhere to sit; I get a crick in my neck looking up at you! Now I'll explain. But bear in mind you're not going to like everything I'm going to tell you. So sit down and pay attention because we haven't got time for childishness.'

Anne obeyed. Owl's enormous yellow eyes no longer looked vacant, and there was no trace left of the bedraggled, crazy old lady. Now she radiated a calm, businesslike manner that had been completely missing before.

'First of all, I have to tell you that the whole matter with the ball and Maggie was just a test,' Madame Owl continued after a short pause. 'By the way, where is she now?'

'Sitting in a trap not far from her house,' answered Anne, more amazed than ever. 'I thought it would be best for you to decide her punishment.'

‘Hmm, two or three days without food probably wouldn’t be bad for her. She’s needed to be taught a lesson for some time now. That’s fine, and now let’s get back to our business. You’re probably wondering why it was necessary to put you to the test.’

‘Yes, I am.’

‘There was a good reason for that. We have an ancient legend here which says that someday a person would come seeking a passage, and that this person would change the forest completely. That’s why I put you to the test. It was necessary to see how well you could cope in difficult situations. I would never have believed that this person would be a child. Now do you understand me?’

‘No... I’m not quite sure.’

‘Good. I mean, it doesn’t matter,’ said Owl. ‘Anyway, I can’t tell you any more. You can’t talk at length about these things, that’s the way it is. Now pay good attention because I want to tell you what I’ve seen in the future. Here are the answers to your questions. Firstly, I heard a voice that told me: “She will have to earn the friendship of the little big people.”’

‘The little big people?’

‘Yes, exactly. Don’t ask me what that means because I can’t tell you.’

‘Okay,’ agreed Anne in a despondent voice.

‘Then I saw you flying like a bird in the sky.’

This time Red didn’t say anything. She felt completely confused by now.

‘And this book here,’ continued Madame Owl, ‘you must always carry with you. Sooner or later you’ll need it; that’s what the voice told me. And take care not to damage it! It’s very old and precious.’

She took a tatty old book from the table and handed it to Anne. The little one took it and began examining it. “Riddles” was written in large gold letters on the thick leather cover. However much she tried she just couldn’t open it. The book was fastened with a thick strap whose metal stud was rusty and refused to budge. Anne turned the book over in disappointment, then gave it to the backpack who shoved it in one of her many pockets.

‘Now, brace yourself!’ Madame Owl warned her. ‘The hardest part comes at the end.’

Anne was trembling even harder.

‘I saw the Ghost Mansion,’ the old lady explained with great seriousness. ‘And the voice told me: “She’ll find the answer there.”’

‘What?’ cried Anne, ‘the ghosts? I don’t want to. What am I supposed to do with them? It can’t be, there must be some mistake!’

Madame Owl remained silent and continued looking at her sternly. The pressure of her stare made Anne slowly lower her own eyes.

‘I know it’s not easy for you, but I can’t do any more than that,’ said Owl after a short silence. From now on it’s all up to you.’

Anne was silent. The more she learned from the old fortune-teller, the more powerless she felt.

‘Ah, before I forget,’ added Madame Owl, ‘concerning your other question about the little scrap of fungus; this is your answer.’

She reached out, took a small, thin book from the table, opened it at a marked page and began to read:

‘This time Alice waited patiently until it chose to speak again. In a minute or two the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth and yawned once or twice, and shook itself. Then it got down off the mushroom, and crawled away in the grass, merely remarking as it went, “One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.”’

‘But that’s *Alice in Wonderland*!’ cried Anne, happy at last to hear something familiar and understandable. ‘At that point the Caterpillar explains to her how to use the two pieces of mushroom. So... that means that Grandpa Hedgehog’s scrap does the same thing, doesn’t it? Is that the answer?’

‘That’s not all,’ replied the old lady. ‘The voice went on to say: “The scrap must find its place.”’

Anne was already eager to leave and didn’t hear those last words properly.

‘Thank you, thank you,’ she said hurriedly. ‘Just a moment, I’ll be right back.’

She dashed outside followed by the backpack. Finally, something was clear! Finally, here was something that didn’t need an explanation! In her impatience, she only just managed not to drop the dried mushroom in the dark. She hesitated slightly before making up her mind. Then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and took a tiny nibble.

Several long seconds passed, then a whole minute. Nothing was happening. Anne waited a little longer just to be sure. Still nothing! Even more disappointment! Her head and shoulders drooped.

‘Try once more,’ suggested the backpack. ‘Something might happen.’

Anne quickly followed her advice. Several more minutes passed. But nothing this time, either. Anne felt that if she didn’t do something right then, she would burst into tears and cry a whole flood just like Alice had done.

She ran back into Madame Owl’s reception area.

‘This.. this answer... must be wrong,’ she said, trying hard not to hiccup. ‘Nothing’s happened and we tried twice. There has to be some mistake. Please, ask again.’

Madame Owl remained silent. Anne began to wring her hands and added, ‘I beg you!’

‘I see it’s hard for you to accept what I told you,’ replied the old bird. ‘Hmm, as you’re so young I suppose I’ll have to explain to you once again. But I don’t know if that will help. I just hope it does.’

‘Now listen carefully,’ she continued after a brief pause. ‘I’ve done everything I could. Everything! You mustn’t expect any more help from me. If you want, you can stay here a few more days, and that’s only because you’re still a child. After that, though, you must continue on your way. Such is ... the nature of things. Do you understand me now?’

‘Yes,’ muttered Anne, bowing her head.

‘From tomorrow I shall no longer be here,’ added Owl in a stern tone. ‘I’m leaving these keys; you can get into the guest room and kitchen with them. Just be careful. When I return I don’t want to find any mess and dirty utensils. And when you go out, always leave the keys under the doormat. Have you got any questions?’

‘No.’

‘Fine. Now go to sleep. With any luck, you’ll find tomorrow will seem much better than today.’

Anne obeyed and didn’t try to prise any more information out of her. The future seemed darker than ever to her. One urgent question was echoing around her head, “Why me? Why me of all people?”.

Chapter Fourteen: The Secret of the Mushroom Piece

The morning didn't bring much relief. Anne's head felt completely empty except for one single thought bouncing around inside it like a ping-pong ball: 'The ghosts!' The ghosts again! Her hair bristled at the thought of having to deal with those horrible monsters. No, no, anything else but that! She was desperately racking her brains for a solution; for something that would allow her to escape that terrible prospect. The backpack was also sullen and silent. The two of them sat there on the grass looking down, thoroughly downhearted.

'Hello, hello,' the sound of Quirk's voice made them start. 'What happened? Did you manage to find out anything?'

But after hearing what had happened, he also became gloomy. And when he heard about the ghosts he seemed really frightened.

'But that... that's impossible,' he said while trying not to let his fear show. 'Even if you could fly, it still wouldn't be easy. And since you can't, it's just nonsense anyway. You can't just cross the river; there's neither a bridge nor a ford. Besides, to tell you the truth, no one knows just what is on the other side. The forest is ...well, quite different over there.'

He broke off and paid careful attention to Boo's signs.

'Boo wants to see the book Madame Owl gave you. Maybe it will help us to come up with something.'

The backpack reached into her pocket and produced the big, leather-bound book. Quirk and Boo bent over it. They spent a long time trying to open it, but eventually had to give up.

'If I were you, I'd just cut the strap,' said Quirk. 'What use is a book that can't be opened?'

'I thought about that, too, but Madame Owl particularly warned me not to damage it. It's very valuable.'

'Well then, tell us about the other answers,' Quirk replied with disappointment as he handed the book back. 'That one about the people. What was it exactly?'

'The little big people,' said the backpack. 'She has to win the friendship of the little big people.'

'Strange,' remarked Quirk. 'Boo have you heard of such a thing?'

Boo just shook his head.

‘Very well, and the other answers?’ asked Quirk.

‘I would have to fly like a bird,’ said Anne.

‘Well, that’s about as clear as mud,’ Quirk said, annoyed. ‘How on earth can anyone make sense of all that!’

‘Listen,’ said the backpack, ‘if you ask me, the only answer that can get us anywhere is that one about the mushroom piece. The instructions are very clear; we just have to find out why our piece doesn’t work. Anne, you remember Madame Owl said the scrap has to find its place? Maybe it doesn’t have to be swallowed, but used in a different way.’

‘That’s true, I completely forgot!’ said Anne, perking up. ‘Okay, let’s get to work!’

The next few hours were spent in feverish attempts to do something with the magic scrap. Anne held it under her tongue for a long time, then they dried it in the sun, tried to grind it into powder, to bake it and boil it. They mixed it with dry tree bark, buried in the ground to see if it would sprout.... All in vain. Gradually, their enthusiasm faded and by sunset they had already lost hope.

‘The way things are going, soon there’ll be nothing left of it,’ Anne said gloomily while staring at the remainder lying in the palm of her hand. ‘Wouldn’t it perhaps be better to think about the rest of the answers first? For example, that one about the little big people. What people can be both little and big? There’s something familiar about that riddle, I’m pretty sure, but I can’t remember what.’

‘Why don’t we ask someone else?’ suggested Quirk. ‘Buzz the fly, for example, or the elves?’

‘Hey, we completely forgot about Grandpa Hedgehog!’ cried Anne. ‘As I got the scrap from him, maybe he’s the best one to know what the riddle is talking about!’

Everyone exchanged surprised glances. All along, they had been overlooking such a simple idea.

‘Darn it!’ Anne exclaimed angrily. ‘We can’t cross the orchid meadow now. We’ve wasted the whole day, and it’s already too late to call the elves. Oh, what a pity!’

But nothing could be done about it. They agreed to meet again on the meadow early next morning. Quirk promised to find the elves.

They went their separate ways feeling fairly excited, filled with a new, though fragile hope. That evening, Anne tossed and turned for a long while and couldn't get to sleep. During the night she had nightmares in which dreadful monsters asked her riddles and threatened to eat her if she couldn't find the answers.

'No, my child, I've never heard of such a thing,' said Grandpa Hedgehog shaking his head after listening to Anne. 'Little big people... Strange. I can't tell you what that means.'

They all hung their heads. Anne bit her lip. Up to the very last moment, she had been hoping to get her explanation here.

'But I can tell you that the business about the mushroom piece is certainly true,' continued the elderly hedgehog. 'My father always told me that one of my great grandfathers could appear and disappear whenever he wanted. I wouldn't wonder if he was able to shrink like the girl you told me about. What's more, that great grandfather of mine was a master of all sorts of cunning and crafts. There's a drawing of his left – it's old, very old. Let me see if I can find it.'

Grandpa Hedgehog went in the back room and soon returned carrying a yellowed sheet of paper.

'Look what strange things my great grandfather drew! It makes you wonder how he thought them up.'

Anne took the sheet and looked it over. The drawing showed strange creatures dressed in something like space suits. Their heads were hidden beneath round helmets each bearing two antenna. The creatures had four hands that ended in sharp pincers clutching clubs. In the background there was an enormous tower with a round top, and with hundreds, maybe thousands of entrances and exits constructed at many different levels. Many more creatures similar to them – some in space suits, others wearing something like overalls – were going in and out of the tower's doors. Although very old, the drawing's colours hadn't faded and the scene looked full of life. It was clearly the work of a master.

'That's odd. Now where have I seen something like that?' said Anne.

As crazy as it seemed, the drawing reminded her of something, as if there were another, simpler picture hidden within it. For a long time she tried to recognize it, but without success.

The yellowed sheet passed from hand to hand. No one could tell what it was; the strange tower and its inhabitants were obviously imaginary. Just Anne stubbornly insisted she had seen something like it before. Eventually she gave up. Feeling very down in the mouth, they said goodbye to Grandpa Hedgehog.

‘And don’t forget my child, with patience you can achieve anything,’ said the old fellow, while blowing his nose in his large white handkerchief. ‘Sooner or later you’ll learn what the riddle means, so don’t give up. Sometimes the solution remains hidden for a long while, but then suddenly it jumps up out of nowhere and makes you wonder why you didn’t think of it before. This riddle’s time will come, too. Just be patient.’

But Anne was feeling too hopeless to take any comfort from his wise words. She said goodbye quickly, then let herself be carried by the elves without saying a word. The flight back was so depressing that they took their leave of each other the moment they arrived.

‘To be honest, I can’t help feeling we’re missing something very obvious,’ said the backpack when they had returned to Madame Owl’s. ‘But one thing I don’t understand is who the little people could be. Everyone in the forest is actually big. You must have noticed that even the flies here are huge.’

‘Well, not exactly,’ said Quirk. ‘Some of us are big, whereas others are small. There are also flies smaller than Buzz, and some are almost as small as ants.’

Anne jumped.

‘Did you say ants?’ she asked him excitedly, then she slapped her forehead and cried, ‘The tower! The tower in the drawing! Now I remember where I’ve seen it. Come on, I’ll show you the place!’

She darted off along the path and didn’t stop till she reached the clearing where the anthill was.

‘Well, what do you think?’ she asked proudly, while the others were still catching up with her. ‘Do you see the similarity now?’

At first they remained quiet, but then they started to shout excitedly. The resemblance between the enormous tower in the drawing and the anthill in the clearing was unquestionable.

‘There’s the answer to the riddle!’ continued Anne, her eyes shining brightly. ‘Here are the little big people! Little because ants are tiny and big because the ant people are bigger than all other peoples.’

‘So the ants have some kind of connection with the mushroom piece, is that it?’ the backpack asked uncertainly.

‘That question,’ said Anne, taking the remainder of the dried mushroom out of her pocket, ‘is best answered by the mushroom itself. Let’s see whether it’s found its place.’

She broke off a little piece and popped it into her mouth.

Whoosh! Where Anne had just been standing there was suddenly nothing but air! The others stared at the space utterly dumbfounded. There was no doubt – Red had disappeared. But before they could begin to take it in, she had reappeared like a rabbit out of a magician’s hat.

‘Hooray!’ she yelled at full volume. ‘Did you see? I just shrank and then grew back! That’s the magic Grandpa Hedgehog was talking about. Do you understand now? The scrap only works near the anthill. Anywhere else it’s useless.’

The other gasped in astonishment, quite taken aback by the miracle they’d seen in front of their eyes.

‘Hey, don’t look at me like that! I’m just Anne, not some kind of witch!’ she said, laughing happily. ‘At last we’ve found the key to the magic we’d been looking for since yesterday!’

At this, everyone’s spirit was restored. The other three immediately insisted on trying out the effect of the mushroom for themselves. It was decided each would try it one after the other, but for no longer than a minute or two. Soon they managed to discover the following:

1. The magic worked like clockwork. With the first bite you shrank, and with the second you returned to normal size.

2. The shrinking and growing affected not just the body, but any objects touching it, too. Clothes, shoes, even the scrap itself shrank and grew along with the person.

3. Finally, Anne discovered that it was enough just to grab someone’s hand before eating the scrap and the changes would affect them both.

In the meantime, the day was beginning to wear away and everyone agreed it would be best to leave any further experiments till the next day. The most important question still remained unanswered: what did the words “to win the friendship of the little big people” mean? So far none of them had met ants or other insects down in the grass. It was clear that sooner or later they would have to meet them, and the thought of that filled them all with anxiety. Quirk and

Boo were even beginning to lose their taste for further experiments and suggested that they should just watch instead.

‘You do understand, don’t you?’ muttered the old clock with some embarrassment. ‘If they start to crawl around inside me, I might stop working altogether. That’s the way it is; a clock’s mechanism can’t be put to such tests. It’s too delicate to be messed around with like that.’

Boo, who suddenly looked as though he had somehow shrunk, nodded his head eagerly. The bells on his hat jingled softly.

Chapter Fifteen: **Antazonia**

Next morning they had an unpleasant surprise: Quirk and Boo didn't come. The two friends waited a while and finally decided to go alone, although in a much gloomier mood. They had almost reached the meadow where the anthill was when the backpack stopped and started to listen.

'There's something strange about the forest today,' she fretted. 'It seems to me something's not right.'

Anne also stopped and listened.

'It's unusually quiet,' she whispered, 'as if the birds have fled.'

'Yes, you're right. It was so noisy in the forest before... Hmm, I don't like this. Let's hurry; I'm getting scared.'

They had hardly gone a few steps, however, when a piercing cry stopped them in their tracks. There was no doubt – it was Quirk's voice coming from somewhere among the trees.

'Run Anne! Run for it! The spiders!'

As if by magic the forest suddenly came alive. From above, below and from all sides huge spiders rushed towards the two friends; black, hairy, their faces twisted into cruel grins.

'Stop!' roared a familiar voice from behind. 'I want her alive, you fools! Gently, she can't escape us!'

Heino! It was the voice of Heino himself. The spiders stopped for a moment. Anne and the backpack took advantage of their confusion and made a run for it. The giant vermin started trotting after them.

They reached the anthill meadow. Beyond it was the river. They couldn't go any farther.

'Anne,' the backpack gasped, 'the mushroom, quickly!'

Anne didn't need asking twice. She took the piece of magic mushroom out of her pocket, took the backpack by the hand and hurriedly ate a bit.

Shoop! The sensation was not so strange to her by now, and yet that peculiar giddiness once again took her by surprise. It was like suddenly diving into very deep water. Her ears started ringing, and noises from the surrounding world – that is, from the normal-sized world – sounded muted like the far-off rumbling of a passing storm. However, they were instantly replaced by strange, new,

threatening sounds Anne had never heard before: a shrill whine like a gigantic chainsaw; the deafening sounds of simultaneous hammering, rattling, fizzing and cracking as if from a thousand whips or who knows what.

‘Wow! We nearly had it this time,’ said the backpack, breathing heavily. ‘If they’d caught us, we’d be done for.’

Anne was still too scared to speak; she was looking around wildly.

‘I already thought we’d had it,’ she said once she’d calmed down a little. ‘Did you see how many of them there were? A whole army.’

‘Yeah, Heino is obviously determined to get us’, replied the backpack glumly. ‘I don’t suppose anyone’s duped him in a very long time, and he’s unlikely to rest until he gets his revenge.’

Anne remained silent, lost in gloomy thought.

‘I just hope nothing bad’s happened to Quirk and Boo,’ added the backpack. ‘At least they can fly so they shouldn’t be afraid of Heino, should they?’

‘Let’s hope not. But we’re not going to find out soon. I for one have no intention of going back in a hurry. My hair stands on end just thinking of those ugly faces.’

‘Yes, you’re right,’ agreed the backpack. ‘All right, let’s think about what to do now. Where to go, for example. Compared to this jungle, the forest up there is like a city park, isn’t it?’

Anne looked around her helplessly. They were surrounded on every side by thick green stems rising high above their heads. The ground in between, uneven and pitted with numerous holes, resembled the landscape of an unknown planet.

‘All right, it doesn’t really matter where we go,’ continued the backpack. ‘Aren’t we looking for the ants – wherever we go, sooner or later we’ll meet them. This place must be swarming with them.’

Indeed, they hadn’t even taken a few steps when from between the stalks a big, black head with two antennae peeped out at them. The enormous bulging eyes looked them over curiously. The head nodded several times, and then suddenly disappeared.

‘Oh boy!’ said the backpack. ‘It looks like they’ve found us, doesn’t it?’

Anne was listening to something with an alarmed expression. From somewhere up ahead came the sound of numerous feet wearing heavy boots. Suddenly the stalks in front of them parted and three strange figures literally

dropped in. Red and the backpack gasped: they were the very creatures they had seen in the drawing at Grandpa Hedgehog's. Their armoured bodies looked heavy and threatening, and their long clubs didn't inspire much confidence.

The first ant appeared again. In contrast to the other three, she was not wearing armour. She was dressed instead in very old, carefully patched overalls with numerous pockets and buckles.

'I found them. I found them citizen soldier!' she said, jumping around. 'Will I get a double portion this evening, citizen soldier?'

'Shut it, citizen worker!' one of the three soldiers interrupted rudely. He approached the two friends and started sniffing at them like a dog.

'They're trespassers – no question,' he said, turning to his comrades. 'We'll have to escort them to the post. But first they must be searched.'

Before they knew it, Anne and the backpack had been grabbed by strong hands and lifted into the air. In only a few seconds the contents of their pockets vanished.

'The mushroom...' groaned Anne. 'They took my mushroom. Now we can't go back even if we wanted to.'

'Hey, you two!' roared the other soldier. 'Forward! Are you waiting for an invitation? Or do you want the clubs to do their stuff?'

Annoyed at his rude tone, Anne was about to respond likewise but was stopped by the backpack's warning glance. No, she clearly couldn't afford to upset them. The two of them obediently walked ahead, followed by the soldiers who didn't let them out of sight even for a moment.

'I don't like this,' whispered the backpack. 'Look how evil they are! If I wasn't so afraid of getting lost in this jungle, I'd suggest we should run away this instant.'

Anne just shrugged her shoulders. Compared to the spiders, everything else seemed to her like a stroll through a rose garden. Besides, where could they run to? Without the magic mushroom, they didn't stand a chance.

In the meantime, they had covered a great distance and had already left the grass jungle. Now they found themselves on a vast, levelled square in the middle of which was the anthill. Anne and the backpack exchanged glances – it was clearly the very same tower in the drawing of the old master-hedgehog. They obviously weren't the first outsiders to visit this place.

'Halt!' commanded one of the soldiers once they had reached something resembling an enclosed pen with high walls made of interlocking bars. 'The citi-

zen officer will interrogate you here. Break for one minute. And none of your chit-chat; I'll stand for no nonsense.'

Another soldier appeared from the direction of the pen. Anne couldn't see any difference between his dress and that of the others, but their behaviour made it plain that he was their superior. He stood in front of the two friends and frowned as he examined them.

'Who are you and where do you come from?' he asked sternly.

'Well... we're... children,' spluttered Anne. 'We're lost and we don't know where to go.'

'Aha, interesting,' muttered the ant officer. His face relaxed a bit and he continued speaking less severely. 'And do you know where you have ended up, children?'

'No.'

'This is the free land of Antazonia,' he explained with an air of importance. 'Here everyone works and is paid equally. Remember that well... Do you two go to school? In our country everyone goes to school.'

'Yes, of course. In our country all children go to school, too,' replied Anne.

'That may be so,' agreed the officer reluctantly. 'But in Antazonia the most important thing is that the children are also free. Over in your country there are surely different schools, am I right?'

'Yes.'

'There, you see!' cried the officer, delighted, 'I knew it! There are no such things in our country. Here every school is the same. Ah, yes, that's Antazonia – to each person the same, no one can have more than another. That, dear children, is called freedom.'

The three soldiers nodded their heads approvingly, obviously stunned by their superior's great knowledge. Anne, who was wondering how all schools could be the same, was about to argue, but then thought better of it. Something in the officer's behaviour told her that it would be best just to agree and keep quiet.

'All right then,' said the officer abruptly while looking at his watch. 'I have no more time. I must go. Citizen soldier, lead the children to the nearest school and make sure they are accommodated in a hostel. Since they have had the good fortune to find us, let's allow them to live here. In Antazonia there is a place for everyone who is ready to learn and work.'

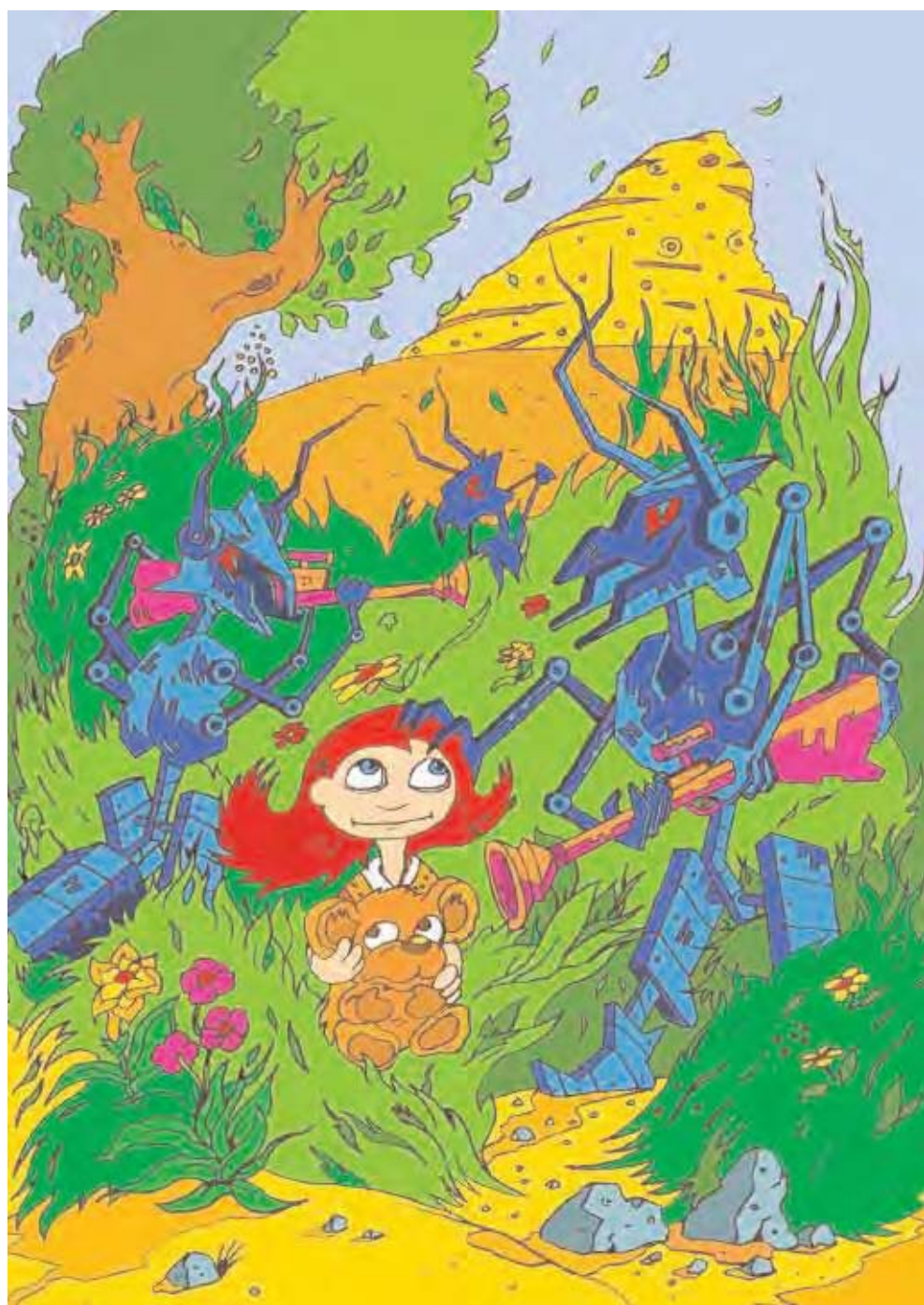
The enormous classroom was crammed with wooden desks set out in four rows. The aisles between them were so narrow that it was only possible to walk along sideways, and if two children met in the middle one would have to climb on the nearest desk so the other could pass. Actually, it didn't bother them in the least because they preferred to run along the desks instead of the narrow aisles – during breaks when the teacher was absent, at any rate. In addition to the desks, the room also contained a number of cupboards – old and battered, but all carefully fastened with large padlocks. Along the walls hung pictures of ants with important-looking faces. Above the blackboard, away from the others, was a larger portrait of a stout ant in army uniform. In a prominent position above it there was a large placard bearing the inscription: "Long live the great chief Antolini!"

Tucked away at one of the desks at the back, Anne and the backpack looked around timidly. It was break time and the little ants had divided themselves into two groups that were fighting with each other so violently that the two friends were expecting it to turn bloody very soon. However, it looked like it was all part of the usual routine there as no one seemed in the least bit worried. As soon as the corridor look-out yelled from the doorway that the teacher was coming, everyone calmed down immediately. There was no longer any trace of the racket and fighting, and for a few seconds the room was transformed into the most peaceful place on earth.

The teacher entered and looked sternly at the children. They jumped from their seats at once and stood up as straight as rods. Anne, who still couldn't understand why everyone jumped up when the teacher came in, stood up reluctantly. In her school the children only stood when they had to go to the blackboard, otherwise everyone sat because that was more comfortable.

'Number forty-eight, you're slow again!' called out the teacher showing his displeasure. 'It's been a week already and you still haven't learned. I really can't see what is so difficult about standing up.'

'Number fifteen, stop picking your nose!' he continued in the same sour tone. 'If you produced a penny every time you did it, we'd have bought new desks for the whole school by now.'



The children all burst out laughing. Number fifteen – an ant with glasses and giant antennae – cringed and hid his hand shamefully behind his back.

‘So,’ continued the teacher, ‘as you know, we have a history lesson today. Your two new friends come from far away and that’s why they don’t yet know the history of Antazonia well, but with time they will come to learn it, too. So, are you ready?’

The little ants sunk down in a frightened manner as if they wanted to hide under their desks.

‘All right, all right, there’s no need to be afraid!’ the teacher added with a big smile to reassure them. ‘Today we’re just going to remember the most important things to help your new friends become familiarised. Well then, who can tell me who the ant in the first portrait here on the left is?’

The children forgot their embarrassment and raised their hands boldly.

‘That’s what I want to see!’ the teacher said approvingly. ‘Right now, tell me number five.’

‘That is mother Antazon,’ said number five, a chubby little ant with curly antennae and a cheerful sparkle in his eyes. ‘Everyone here comes from her. We are all her children.’

‘That’s right,’ confirmed the teacher. ‘Mother Antazon is our common mother, the queen of Antazonia. We see her every evening on the television when she delivers a speech to us at the end of the day. Do you understand now, number forty-eight?’

However, Anne didn’t have time to answer as just at that moment the door opened without anyone knocking. An enormously fat ant dressed in a sombre, black suit entered the room. All the children jumped up from their seats, except Anne who was slow as usual. The fat ant inspected her with a long look but didn’t say anything.

‘Citizen Headmaster!’ exclaimed the teacher with surprise. ‘To what do we owe this honour?’

‘At ease, at ease, citizen teacher,’ said the headteacher patronizingly. ‘This is just a routine visit, nothing special. Continue please. I’ll find somewhere to sit.’

As it turned out, it wasn’t such an easy task finding a place for the citizen headmaster because he just couldn’t sit at the little desks. They had to bring the large armchair from his office, move the desks to make a space for it, and then several children had to be seated elsewhere. A long time passed before every-

thing calmed down and the teacher could continue. However, something in his manner changed; he was no longer smiling, but looking at the children with stern, searching eyes.

‘And so, children, today we’re having a lesson to study the general history of Antazonia,’ he said while coughing. ‘Please tell me who is the founder of the first ant kingdom?’

The pupils looked at each other uncertainly. Finally a few timid hands went up.

‘You, number twenty-three.’

‘The founder of the first ant kingdom was Antasia the Great,’ said the little ant of that number.

‘Very good, sit down,’ said the teacher.

At this point, however, the headteacher interrupted rather unexpectedly. He obviously thought that it wasn’t enough because he asked a long question made up of a lot of difficult long words. Anne didn’t understand a thing.

The little ant started blinking guiltily. His eyes filled with tears and he swallowed a few times with difficulty. It was obvious he hadn’t understood the question either. The citizen headmaster began writing something in his little notebook. There was an oppressive silence in the classroom.

From then on, every time the teacher asked a question, the head added to it, but in such a way that none of the pupils was able to answer him. The teacher was clearly becoming disheartened, and everyone realised that the head’s visit was leading towards a bad conclusion.

It was nearly the end of the period. Anne had been hopeful that she would escape any questions when the citizen headmaster suddenly stood up and pointed directly at her.

‘Are those the two new children, citizen teacher?’ he asked, while fixing them with a chilly look. ‘I haven’t yet heard from them; it’s time for them to answer some questions, too.’

‘But they are still very ... new,’ replied the teacher hesitantly. ‘I don’t know whether they will be able to.’

‘Never mind. It doesn’t matter. In that case I’ll ask them a question myself. Here’s a simple one for beginners...’

Another string of incomprehensible words followed. The only one that Anne was able to understand was the name “Antolini”.

She stood up and remained silent. She was terribly ashamed and hadn't felt so foolish in a long time. If only the ground would just swallow her up!

'Tell me, number forty-eight, who is General Antolini?' asked the teacher, trying to help her by simplifying the question.

'Well, I don't know,' she said quietly. 'I mean, I'm not sure. It says up there over the blackboard that he's a great chief... but in my books all the great chiefs have feathers in their headdresses. That man there doesn't much look like any of them. Is he actually so great?'

If flies could fly in an anthill, several of them would certainly have landed in the citizen headmaster's mouth as it was gaping widely in utter astonishment. But that astonishment was instantly replaced by rage that gave Anne a huge fright. His antennae writhed around like snakes, and he turned from red to blue to green in his anger.

'Come to the front at once! I'll show you what's what. So you think you can mock me, do you? Quick! Quick! Out you come! To the front of the class! Hold out your hands! Right... Now, don't you dare move!'

He went to the blackboard and took the long, thin pointer propped up against it. Then he turned round and with all his strength struck Anne hard across the fingers. She screamed with pain and thrust her hands behind her back.

'Hold out your hands,' screamed the headmaster, still mad with rage. 'That was nothing; I've only just started!'

Never in her whole life having experienced such pain, Anne went totally berserk. There was just one thought in her head: out! get out! She needed to get out of there at once, to run as far away as she could. The headmaster's huge belly stood in her way like a rock. She took a step back, gathered her strength and then shoved into him with all her might. The headmaster, who had just been preparing to strike her again, was so taken by surprise that he fell backwards, stumbled into one of the desks and pitched over onto his back, rather comically waving all six arms and legs in the air. Red didn't wait to see what would happen next. She jumped over him, with one kick knocked the classroom's rotten door off its hinges, and dashed through the long dark corridor of the ant school.

Chapter Sixteen: The Deep End

‘Faster, faster!’ came the guard’s voice from behind. ‘The way you’re going, we’ll be stuck here till tomorrow! Get a move on! We all want to get home sometime.’

Shaken, Anne struggled to lift the heavy pickaxe and tried to drive it into the wall of the tunnel. A few small stones tumbled down in front of her feet. The pickaxe slipped from her hands and fell to the side.

She looked around timidly. Thank God the enormous underground gallery was so full of fiercely roaring machines, otherwise the guards would surely have noticed long ago that she had stopped digging. In the narrow corner where they had placed her there wasn’t much to do anyway, so she had managed to escape their attention so far. But it couldn’t go on like that forever, she knew it from experience.

The gallery was a vast space dimly lit by thousands of luminous toadstools. It was divided into numerous work areas and floors, most of them supported by elaborate scaffolding. This was the central gallery at the deepest level of the anthill. Hundreds of tunnels led off from it, some of them leading to higher levels, others going even deeper underground. When she saw it for the first time Anne was stunned. She had never imagined that the ants were capable of building such complex underground structures. Compared to this hall, a central railway station in a large human city would look like a child’s toy. In fact, as she was just beginning to understand, the greater part of the anthill was situated beneath the ground and occupied hundreds, maybe thousands of square meters. But meanwhile, she had started to get used to all that; well, not so much used to it, as totally sick of it. Yes, Anne was beginning to hate the anthill from the very depths of her being. And the reasons for that were very simple and understandable.

After the matter with the headmaster, she ended up in another school called a: “Vocational Education Colony”. In fact, it had little or nothing to do with either vocation or education; it was just a kind of prison for children. Anne didn’t understand that at the beginning. However, by the third day when the hooligan ants in the new school had beaten her black and blue, she ran away again.

The third school was even worse than the second, although she wouldn't have believed that was possible. There were almost no children in the fourth school, and from then on she stopped counting or comparing them until she finally landed up here – in the underground galleries of the anthill. Worst of all, though, was that she had completely lost contact with the backpack who had remained in the first school.

'What's up? Is the pickaxe too heavy for you?'

Anne jumped in fright. Standing behind her was the biggest ant she had ever seen – a gigantic, robust fellow in overalls, with a pickaxe tossed carelessly over his shoulder as if it were a twig. Everything about him was enormous – his muscles fit to split the seams of his overalls; his head sticking out from his shoulders without a trace of neck; even his antennae curved like the horns on a mountain goat. He had a kind face, though, and he was smiling so Anne immediately forgot her fear.

'Hi, I'm Big Sid,' continued the ant. 'I don't understand why you've been sent to work here. Are there no strong men left so they're sending children instead?'

'I... I'm from... the penal group. Anne's my name. I'm also called Red.'

'What? From the penal group?' said Sid, frowning. 'Since when have children been treated as criminals?'

'I'm not a criminal!'

'Then why are you in the penal group?'

'Oh, it's a long story.... And even if I told you, you wouldn't believe me.'

'But you don't look all that dangerous.'

'Nothing much,' Anne said perkily. 'Just nine escape attempts.'

'What?' Sid looked at her suspiciously. 'Nine escape attempts? I don't understand. Why do you want to escape, don't you like it here?'

'Hey! You two over there!' came the guard's voice. 'Start working or I'll start swinging this club!'

Anne and Sid stopped talking and got down to work. But the big ant was obviously curious to learn more; he kept glancing at the little girl with red hair and shaking his head in disbelief.

'So tell me, why do you want to escape?' he asked after a while. 'Life here isn't all that bad, if you ask me. It's true the work is hard, but the food's good and we've got television.'

‘It’s hard to explain,’ Anne said with difficulty as she strained to raise the pickaxe. ‘I want to go outside in the sun and fresh air.’

‘But that’s completely crazy! Okay, running away I can understand in a way, but why on earth do you want to go outside? Every child here knows that outside the enemy is waiting for us. Besides, it’s eternal night out there and everything is dark and cold. Anyone who sets foot outside dies instantly.’

‘Yeah, I see,’ said Anne gloomily. ‘You’re one of those who spend their whole lives down here in the tunnels, aren’t you? The guards call you “the deep end”?’

‘What, what was that?’ Sid was so surprised he forgot about work and rested his pickaxe on the ground while looking at Anne in amazement. ‘What do they call us?’

Anne wasn’t able to answer him. One of the guards, who had been silently creeping closer, landed his club on Sid’s back with all his might. The giant ant winced with pain, grabbed the pickaxe and continued digging with all his energy. A long time passed before either of them dared to speak again.

‘I’m sorry I got you into trouble,’ whispered Anne.

‘No problem, I’m used to it,’ replied Sid without a trace of anger in his voice. ‘In fact, they’re not so bad. And anyway, someone has to take care of us, don’t they?’

‘Take care of you? But why, are you children?’

‘No, we’re not children, but without the soldiers and the engineers everything here would fall apart in just a few days. You do understand, don’t you? All these complicated machines as well as the system of order in our vast state. Every day we see on television what great efforts and knowledge are needed to maintain the order of the anthill. Those things require specialists, not ordinary workers like you and me. Without them we’d be lost, that’s for sure.’

Now it was Anne’s turn to gape in astonishment.

‘So what does that mean? They beat you and you thank them! Now that’s a nice system, all right!’

‘Well, it hardly ever gets to the point of beating,’ replied Sid. ‘The strongest and hardest ants work down here – only the really tough workers. We’re very proud of our work. Without us the anthill wouldn’t grow, you know. Every evening mother Antazon thanks us on TV.’

‘Hmm, I’ve heard other things, too,’ muttered Anne.

‘What other things?’

‘That everyone is afraid of you, for example. Once I heard two soldiers say that if you all seized the picks and rose up no force could stop you.’

‘If we seized the picks, did you say?’ Sid almost stopped working again, but noticed just in time that the guards were watching them. ‘I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life. What, to fight the soldiers and engineers, is that it?’

‘What... a... sheep!’ said Anne, looking daggers at him. ‘Don’t you want to be free even for a second?’

‘But I am free, kid!’ cried Sid, amazed. ‘Don’t I live in the only free country in the world? I work, get food, and I watch television... What else could I want?’

‘You ants!’ replied Anne with contempt. ‘If only you took a look at the outside just once, you would start singing a very different tune.’

‘Outside, outside... Haven’t I told you already there’s nothing good out there?’

‘Nonsense! Outside there’s grass, flowers, meadows... Outside there is real sunlight – not artificial light like down here. Oh, why am I wasting my time? You can’t understand a thing I’m saying anyway.’

‘Hold on, hold on! I’m not so stupid. How do you know all those things? Who has filled your head with such nonsense?’

‘I come from there, clever clogs! And everything I’ve told you, I’ve seen with my own eyes and not just on your.... “stupidovision”!’

‘That can’t be right! You’re talking rubbish! Every child here knows...’

‘Yeah, right, every child knows... you wish. That’s the problem; you don’t know anything. Otherwise, why would you have stayed here in the dark?’

For a long while they both continued working without speaking again. Sid threw the pickaxe around as if it were as light as a feather, and under his powerful blows the wall of the tunnel seemed to melt. However, something was obviously bothering him; he kept shaking his head and muttering under his breath. Finally, he couldn’t bear it any longer and asked once again, ‘Listen, do you really...?’

‘Do I really what?’

‘Do you really come from the outside? Don’t joke with me, please. I can’t believe it. I still think you’re pulling my leg.’

‘You said yourself that you’d never seen children working down here, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Well, what do you think? Would they have put me here if what I’m telling you wasn’t the truth?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s very simple: everyone I tell about the outside wants to go and see for themselves. Well, that messes up the order, it creates chaos. But with you lot down here there is no danger because you can never leave anyway. Now are you beginning to understand?’

‘I don’t know. I’m completely confused. It’s probably best for us to work without talking. The way we’re going we won’t be able to fulfil the quota.’

Sid started working like mad. Boom, bang, boom! The pickaxe whipped through the air. Anne barely managed to protect herself from the clods of earth flying in every direction. Despite the noise, you could still make out how from time to time he muttered between clenched teeth, ‘It can’t be; I don’t believe it!’

The digger ants’ sleeping quarters were divided into three sections. The first, immediately behind the massive wooden door, was a large open space meant to prevent any congestion in the constant coming and going. Then there were long rows of bunk beds. There were so many that even though it was roomy, the quarters looked like the inside of a can. Beyond the beds was another open space filled with numerous wooden benches without backs. An enormous television screen that wasn’t turned off even during the night occupied the whole wall behind the benches. Against the wall to the right of the screen were shelves for storing the tools, and to the left of it was a door leading to the big shower room and toilets. Thankfully, most ants spent the majority of their free time in front of the television, otherwise it wouldn’t have been possible to walk around.

Although dead tired from all the heavy work, Red wasn’t even thinking about sleep. There was no point in trying to go to bed before the queen mother’s evening speech as she was expected to get up and go to the TV when it started. At first she had tried to get out of the annoying duty, but she soon found out that it could get her in serious trouble. The ants loved the queen mother blindly and any insult to her filled them with rage. Boring or not, the evening speech had to be listened to if you didn’t want to get beaten up regularly.

At last! From the television came the familiar solemn music. Anne got up and began to squeeze her way between the beds. It wasn't a good idea to be late either.

She arrived right on time. The familiar old face criss-crossed with hundreds of wrinkles had just appeared on the screen.

'My children!' the queen mother began. 'Another day has passed filled with arduous work for the welfare of our great motherland. As everyone knows we are surrounded by powerful enemies just waiting for us to drop our guard, to relax and start living pleasurably so they can conquer and enslave us. That's why you must work, my children. Work and don't forget even for a second: freedom demands sacrifice! Only with continuous struggle, increased vigilance and constant readiness for war can we preserve this most valuable of all goods. Be strong, my children!'

Anne had to make extreme efforts to avoid yawning. The speech was almost exactly the same each evening. There now came the series of thank-yous: first, to her beloved son General Antolini, then to the soldiers, then to the engineers, and finally to the workers – and therefore, to Anne herself.

'No, please, not at all,' muttered Anne under her breath. 'Just send me a sausage or two instead of the thanks, would you?'

The food in the anthill consisted entirely of a thick, sweet syrup everyone drank from plastic bottles. Red had come to hate it so much that if it weren't for hunger, she would no longer be able to stand even its smell.

Thank God, the broadcast finally ended. She turned her back on the television with relief and was just about to return when she spotted Sid in the crowd.

'Hey, boys,' he said, turning to the group of ants around him. 'Come and ask her yourselves. If you don't believe me, then speak to her.'

Anne looked at them suspiciously. They were all very tall and extremely strong-looking. But then so were most of the workers there.

'Well, then!' piped up one of them. 'Sid says you come from outside. And that out there it's warm and light... Are you going to tell us the same rubbish?'

'It's not rubbish,' replied Anne glumly. 'I'm telling you the truth. If you don't believe me, go and see for yourselves.'

'Of course, why not?' said another of the group. 'First of all, the door is locked at night, then even if it wasn't, the soldiers wouldn't exactly be overjoyed when we told them we were going for a walk...'

‘On the outside,’ added someone else.

The ants all started laughing.

‘Listen, maybe it would be better to tell us about the nine escape attempts,’ said the first speaker, ‘and how they finally promoted you to the rank of digger.’

A wave of laughter followed. Anne shrugged her shoulders, turned round and started walking back to her bed. The ants continued laughing behind her back.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around in surprise. Sid was smiling at her awkwardly.

‘Don’t be angry with them, they’re not bad guys really,’ he said. ‘They just don’t like wasting their time on silly stories. You do understand, don’t you? We don’t get a lot of free time here.’

Anne just gave an angry grunt.

‘Listen, if you need me, you can always find me,’ he added. ‘Thirteenth row, fifth bed. Big Sid, you remember, don’t you?’

She went off without turning round. As if it wasn’t enough that he’d brought those jokers to her, he wasn’t even embarrassed about it! ‘There’s an ant for you!’

In the meantime she had reached her bunk and threw herself with relief onto the bed. Life there had a least one comfort: no one made you get undressed before going to bed, let alone brush your teeth.

Her relief, however, was premature. From the entrance area came a terrible racket that wouldn’t let her sleep. She sat up and looked unhappily in that direction. Two technicians, surrounded by robot porters, were drilling holes in the wall. Anne tossed and turned on her bed a little longer, but couldn’t stand it and went up to them.

‘Hello, citizen technicians,’ she greeted them as she approached. ‘May I ask what task you are... erm... fulfilling here?’

They didn’t even bother to turn round. The technicians were rather arrogant and normally didn’t like speaking with the workers. However, Anne continued to question them until one of them finally turned round looking angry.

‘Go back to your bunk, citizen worker!’ he said sharply.

But when he saw he was speaking to a child, his jaw suddenly sagged in surprise.

‘Hey, Zev, look here,’ he said, turning to his friend. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it before. A child down with the diggers! Who’d have believed it! And she

looks so weird. There've been a lot of strange folks turning up here lately, haven't there?'

The one called Zev turned and looked over his shoulder without interrupting his work.

'Some foreigner again, is it?' he said resentfully. 'We haven't got enough to go round ourselves, and now we have to lavish it on the foreigners. We never used to have these troubles before.'

The drill in his hands suddenly jumped as if it were alive. He almost fell off the ladder he was standing on. He swore loudly and only just managed to switch off the machine.

'Damnation, look what's happened!' he yelled. 'I've gone right through the ceiling; now we'll have to call the builders in to repair it! What are you staring at?' he shouted at Anne angrily. 'Haven't you got anything better to do, or have you just come here to get in our way?'

'All right, don't get angry!' said his friend, trying to calm him down. 'Big deal, one hole. Anyway, it's getting late. Let's put the tools away and go. We'll call the builders tomorrow; they'll have it fixed in five minutes. Come on, let's go to the canteen. Don't worry, it's my treat.'

Zev grumbled a bit more, then decided his friend was right and followed him out through the huge door. You could hear the key turning several times, then all went silent.

Anne looked around with great curiosity. Through the little hole in the ceiling there seeped a slender ray of light. She climbed up the ladder and looked through the hole. Oh! She hadn't realised that the sleeping quarters were located so close to the surface. Lit up by the last rays of daylight, the enormous blades of grass could be seen swaying gently in the distance. Lone ant-scouts returning home late were hurrying back to the anthill before the curfew.

'Aha!' she exclaimed under her breath. 'Here's your eternal darkness and cold! Sid should take a look at this.'

She slapped her forehead. Her tiredness disappeared instantly, and without looking around, she rushed off towards the opposite end of the quarters where the thirteenth row was.

Sid had already fallen asleep. She had to shake him for a long time before she managed to wake him. Eventually he opened his eyes and looked at her angrily.

'What's the matter? What do you want?'

‘Shhh, quiet! Come with me. I want to show you something interesting.’

‘At this hour? Listen, I’ve been working all day, can’t it wait till tomorrow? What is it that’s so interesting, anyway?’

Anne leant over and whispered something in his ear. He opened his eyes wide.

‘It can’t be! You’re joking!’

Meanwhile, he’d jumped out of bed and put on his battered old shoes.

‘Where? Right here? Nonsense, it can’t be!’

However, his eyes lit up eagerly. He followed her along the narrow passage between the beds without asking another question. At that hour, most workers were already asleep, so moving about was much easier than usual.

Once they had reached the place, Anne pointed silently at the ceiling. Sid climbed the ladder, put his eye to the hole and looked out.

A minute passed, then two, three... Anne started to worry.

‘Hey Sid, what are you doing? You’re not stuck, are you?’

He didn’t answer.

‘Sid, don’t you hear me?’

‘Okay, I’m coming, I’m coming.’

Sid reluctantly tore himself away from the hole and climbed down.

‘Let me sit down, my legs are shaking,’ he muttered. ‘I feel like I’m going mad. It seems I’ve been believing in nonsense all my life, isn’t that right? Now I’m beginning to understand why you’re trying to escape.’

Anne’s eyes lit up.

‘Listen, until now I didn’t dare ask you, but I’m not afraid anymore. Do you want to try and escape with me? I can’t manage it by myself, but with your help...’

Sid thought hard, then shook his head.

‘No, there’s no life outside the anthill for me. As phoney as this place is, it’s still my home. My brothers and sisters are here, and our mother is here, too. Without them, I’m lost.’

Anne hung her head in despair.

‘Hold on, I haven’t finished!’ continued Sid. ‘Your home is out there, and no one has a right to keep you here against your will. Now... I can agree to help you.’

‘Are you ...sure?’

‘Big Sid always keeps his word. I’ve promised, so I’ll do it.’

‘I’ve already thought everything out,’ said Anne hurriedly. ‘If we start digging a tunnel then we should be outside in two hours at the very latest.’

She thought about the backpack and suppressed a sigh. It was very unlikely that she would ever see her again.

‘A tunnel from here?’ Sid looked at her suspiciously. ‘Just like that, under everyone’s nose?’

‘No, of course not!’ Anne interrupted impatiently. ‘First, we’ll wait for everyone to fall asleep, and second, we won’t dig here but in the toilets.’

‘Aha, that’s more like it. In which direction?’

Anne shrugged her shoulders. ‘Since we’re so close to the surface, the direction doesn’t really matter. In about the same direction as the hole.’

Sid hesitated a moment, then agreed.

‘Listen,’ Anne began uncertainly. ‘These friends of yours...’

‘What?’

‘Maybe if you show them the hole and they, like you...’

‘Go on, I’m not sure I understand..’

‘What is there to understand?’ said Anne, beginning to get annoyed. ‘Those scoundrels here keep you in the dark so they can use you as they please. Now you can all see they’ve been deceiving you, maybe you can finally do something!’

‘Oh, is that what all this is about?’ Sid gave a doubtful smile. ‘It seems you still don’t understand how things are here. First, most of them prefer to believe television rather than their own eyes. Second, even if they do believe, what can they do? Before all the diggers line up to have a look, a whole year will have passed. Tomorrow the builders will plug up the hole and not a trace of the outside world will be left. But even if it were left as it is... you must understand that no one stands a chance against the soldiers!’

‘But that’s not true! Didn’t I tell you what I heard? You workers make up the majority in the whole anthill. If you rose up, nothing could stop you!’

‘The majority, yes, but we’re not organised. Listen, let’s forget this nonsense and have another think about your escape. Come on, let’s go and have a look at the place where we’re going to start.’

Chapter Seventeen: The Escape

Despite Sid's worries, everything went smoothly. They chose a far dark corner of the toilets, waited for everyone to fall asleep and then began working at an excellent pace. The tunnel grew with every passing minute. In her mind's eye, Red could already see her freedom. She still didn't have the faintest idea what she would do outside without the magic mushroom, without friends and help, but at that moment she was only concerned with being free.

Sid stopped and raised his hand to alert her.

'I think we're almost there,' he said. 'It's starting to sound hollow. Be careful; we don't know what's waiting for us on the other side.'

He went on with his work. Indeed, the pickaxe's sharp point soon broke through the ceiling. With several skilful strokes Sid widened the opening. Light filtered through from the other side.

'Wait here, I'll be right back,' he said, turning to Anne before disappearing through the hole.

All of a sudden, there came a horrible commotion from the other side. Shouts rang out, then there were muffled sounds like punches and furniture being knocked over. Anne dashed towards the hole, took a quick look and then withdrew in panic.

They had clearly been digging in the wrong direction. Instead of reaching the outside, the tunnel had taken them into one of the many guardrooms where ant soldiers spent their rest periods. Five or six soldiers had thrown themselves on Sid and were now beating him with their clubs. Although they were about half his size, there were enough of them to overpower him. Even so, they didn't win easily. Wild with rage, Sid swung his pickaxe like a club. Two or three of them were already lying lifeless on the ground, and the others hadn't got away without injury either. However, they finally managed to disarm him and tie him up. One of them, who was obviously their superior, began giving quick commands.

'You three, come with me. First, we must take him to the prison where others will deal with him... You,' he said, turning to one of the soldiers, 'stay here and make sure nothing happens while we're gone. He may not have been alone. Right, come along, quickly!'

With the stomping of heavy boots, they departed. The guard they had left behind walked over to the hole. At first he kept his distance, but then curiosity got the better of him, and he poked his head into the tunnel.

Anne was waiting for just that. She swung the pickaxe and struck him on the head with its flat edge. It made a dull clang as it hit his helmet, and he fell back without a word. She quickly climbed out the tunnel and looked around desperately. What now?

The guardroom wasn't that big. Facing her was the open door through which they had taken Sid. Next to it was a large, metal shelf, and a little to the side of it stood a battered writing desk. A simple bed, several chairs and a coat rack completed the basic furnishings. Evidence of the fight was everywhere: the chairs were overturned, the bed, too, and there were several soldiers, unconscious and groaning, scattered about like toys.

Anne cracked her knuckles and started thinking feverishly. She had no more than a few minutes before the soldiers returned. She looked around once more. Where could she go? They would catch her instantly if she went out looking like she did. If only she could hide somewhere!

She looked around desperately. Her glance fell on a helmet that was rolling around on the floor. Hey, wait a moment! What if...?

Without wasting any more time, she set to stripping the armour off one of the soldiers. It took her untrained fingers a long time to unfasten it. Finally, it was done! She hastily tried to squeeze herself into the suit. But would it fit? Yes, thank God, the armour fit her well enough! Okay. Now for the helmet. Would she look convincing?

Out in the corridor came the sound of heavy boots. Anne grabbed one of the clubs, tried to put on the confident look of a typical soldier, and went outside. The soldiers had already appeared at the other end of the corridor. She quickly set off in the opposite direction and turned into the first corridor she came to. Seeing that it was empty, she dashed off as fast as she could.

She stopped only when she couldn't hear the slightest sound behind her. Phew! They had almost caught her again. Poor Sid, what would happen to him?

There really wasn't much time to think. With any luck she might eventually reach one of the exits. In any case, no one would recognise her in the armour. Now she just had to find a way out.

It turned out, however, that this was much easier said than done. The glossy panelling of the anthill's corridors made it impossible to distinguish one from another. Anne soon realised she wasn't going to get anywhere without help or a plan. After only a few turns she lost track of every landmark and found herself wandering aimlessly. To the left, then right, now straight ahead... Wait, I think I've already been this way... Or have I?

'There he is!' shouted someone behind her.

Anne looked around frantically. Soldiers were running along the corridor pointing at her excitedly. She turned to run. One corridor, then a second one, then a third... No, that wasn't going to work; by now footsteps were coming from several different directions at once. She opened the first door she came to and slipped inside.

'Ugh!' She was almost sick at the terrible smell. She pinched her nose and started looking around the dark room.

The stench came from the hundreds of rubbish containers that filled the room from end to end. This was obviously the anthill's waste disposal area. Long rows of containers moved along one after the other on a narrow rail track that circled the room. There was a large square opening set into one of the walls. Mechanical hooks on either side picked up the containers and tilted them sideways, emptying their contents into the hole.

The voices of her pursuers sounded quite close. She panicked. There was no doubt they were coming that way. She looked around desperately for a way out. Now what?

The heavy metal door started creaking under the pressure of someone pushing it. Without any more thought, Anne leapt into the nearest container and burrowed down into the rubbish like a mole. Thankfully, the contents were mainly empty plastic bottles, so it wasn't hard to hide. She curled up and waited quietly.

'I'm sure I saw him running in here, citizen soldier,' said a voice. 'There's no doubt he's here somewhere; there's no way he could escape.'

'So what should we do now? Search the containers?' said another, harsh voice. The speaker was obviously very angry. 'Even if we worked all night, we'd never finish here... And anyway, the stench! Ugh, it's unbearable!'

'I'm used to it, citizen soldier,' replied the first voice. 'The smell doesn't bother me. You wait outside; I'll search everything right away.'

Anne couldn't understand whether or not the ants had reached a decision. Suddenly, the container rose, was tilted sideways, and before she could even let out a cry, she found herself falling headlong down into the dark.

Red fell for an eternity, or at least it seemed that way in the thick darkness. Finally, she tumbled onto something soft. She tried to get up, but teetered as she realised the floor beneath her was moving. She struggled onto all fours, looked around and ...all but screamed in terror. She found herself on a long conveyer belt that was moving slowly towards the mouth of a large furnace into which the rubbish was being poured. Her fear gave her unexpected strength. She threw herself in a ball from the conveyer belt just moments before reaching the hot opening. Weak and frightened, she just lay there on the ground until the heat from the furnace finally forced her to move away. She was covered from head to toe in a sticky, foul-smelling liquid. Her arms and legs were still trembling from fear and shock, but in spite of that, she felt extremely happy. She had managed to escape her pursuers, and from the appearance of the room she had fallen into, it was very unlikely that anyone was going to follow her there.

She was in a dark underground room lit only by the glare of the furnace. Apart from the conveyer belt, it looked completely neglected. Piles of rubbish carpeted the floor, a thick layer of dust coated everything, and the ceiling was overgrown with plant roots that looked like they hadn't been cut back for ages. It was clear that machines did all the work here, so there was no danger of running into workers or soldiers. Anne sighed with relief and started looking for a way out.

All she managed to find was a large hole in the wall that opened onto darkness. With great difficulty, Red tried to forget her fear and began sorting through the rubbish looking for something to use as a torch. Luck was with her this time – she came across a miner's lantern that was still in working order. The luminous toadstool in it was old and dim, but gave off enough light to see several metres around. Delighted at her lucky find, she stepped through the hole. Come what may, the most important thing was that she had escaped her pursuers.

Little by little, though, her optimism started to fade. She soon realised she had fallen into a real maze. After only a few minutes she was completely lost and carried on wandering around aimlessly while desperately trying to ignore the

fear that was rising in her throat. There was corridor after corridor, all exactly the same, without any directions or signs on the walls. Everywhere was the same musty smell; the same roots dangling from the ceiling like bony hands; the same muffled noises that made her look around in fright. Soon she grew so tired and discouraged that, if she hadn't been so afraid of making a noise, she would surely have burst into tears. Having lost all hope, she sat down on the ground to rest. And there tiredness finally defeated her. She didn't even manage to lie down, but just eased her head onto her knees before falling asleep instantly.

She woke up feeling completely numb from the uncomfortable position. She hadn't the slightest idea of how much time had passed. There in the dark, time just ceased. She stretched her arms and legs painfully. Brrr, cold! It was strange that everywhere else in the underground maze was warm and musty, but here it was so chilly.

The thought interested her, and she began turning it over in her head trying to reach a conclusion. Chilly... why is it chilly here?

She stood up with some effort. Aha! It seemed that the cold air was only at ground level. The air around her head was much warmer and mustier than down at her feet. She bent down again. No, there was no doubt; she felt it quite clearly – lower down the air was cooler than higher up. She reached out, took the lantern that was a little to the side and examined the floor carefully.

She soon found the source of the cold air. A light draught was coming from a narrow opening in one of the corners. Anne jumped for joy. A draught! That meant it connected to somewhere outside. Without a moment's hesitation, she pushed herself through the opening and crawled along on all fours.

Luckily, the narrow tunnel was clean and dry so she wasn't forced to wade through mud and rubbish again. However, the farther she went, the more clearly she could hear a peculiar noise – a kind of constant rumbling that grew louder with each step. From time to time along her way the tunnel forked, but she kept to the main branch using the noise as a guide. Gradually, the tunnel began to widen and the noise grew much louder. Soon a dim light appeared somewhere up ahead. Anne felt her strength returning. At that spot the tunnel had become so tall she could almost walk without stooping. She hastened her steps and after just a few turns she reached the source of light and noise.

At first Anne shouted out triumphantly, confident that she had finally found the long-sought exit. But then she stopped in despair. The tunnel's opening real-

ly did lead outside, only it was blocked by a big, fast-spinning fan that made escape quite out of the question. She stood just a few steps away from the outside world. Through the opening she could clearly see part of the meadow, but an impossible barrier separated her from it. To try to get through there would be utter madness.

Anne felt weak at the knees. This latest disappointment was too much for her; she sat down on the ground and wept bitterly. Such effort, such pain – and all for what? She had lost all her friends, managed to get through impossible obstacles, roamed for hours in this dark underworld... All that only to end up here, one step away from freedom, yet as much cut off from it as in any other part of that hateful anthill. No, it wasn't fair! She clenched her fists tightly and tried to hold back the tears. She cursed the forest, she cursed the ants, she cursed everything! Why wouldn't they just leave her alone? After all, the only thing she wanted was to go back home to Mum! What had she done to deserve such dreadful hardship?

But, of course, those questions were unanswerable, so the little girl had to curb her useless rage. Her Mum had always said that it was better to do something stupid or wrong rather than just cry or wait helplessly. Anyway, here in the dark dungeon no one could help her. There was only one thing left to do – to try to help herself.

Red pursed her lips and started thinking very hard. She had obviously stumbled into the anthill's airshafts. In order for fresh air to circulate inside, the shafts would certainly have to branch out and pass through more important rooms. Maybe if she looked long enough, she'd eventually find an open exit somewhere.

She looked around again. Yes, of course; to the left and right she could see other openings leading back into the interior of the anthill. After some brief indecision, she chose a tunnel with a red sign hanging over it. She ducked her head and headed off into the thick darkness with firm determination.

Although dark, the airshafts were at least clean and didn't smell as disgusting as the lower passages had. For a long while Anne wandered through them and was just starting to get seriously worried when she finally came across a room with a spiral staircase leading upwards. The narrow steps took her up to a metal door that was fortunately unlocked. She opened it cautiously, stuck her head

through the crack and ...finding herself blinded by unexpected light, blinked in surprise.

She found herself in a spacious, brightly lit room full of machines – all sparkling clean and purring like giant metal cats. Thick pipes disappeared into the walls. Everywhere there were bright dials, and panels and instruments with flashing lights. In the centre of the room was a large semi-circular console with numerous monitors and a large swivel chair in front of it. Anne scanned the room carefully, but couldn't see a soul. Strange... Could this be some kind of trap? She stepped in cautiously, ready to flee at the slightest sound.

Chapter Eighteen: Together Again

She hadn't taken two steps before regretting her hasty decision.

'Freeze!' commanded a voice from behind her. 'Put your hands up where I can see them, and don't even think of reaching for your club, do you hear me?'

Anne went cold. Damnation! To let herself get caught so stupidly...

'Now take off the helmet!' ordered the voice. 'I don't like dealing with masked bandits.'

Anne shuddered. That voice... No, it couldn't be... That voice...

She threw her helmet on the ground, and without thinking of the consequences, she turned and rushed at her captor.

There right in front of her looking rather shocked stood... the backpack! The club she was clutching ready to strike slipped from her hand and clattered across the floor.

'Anne, is it you?'

'Backpack!'

They gazed at each other as if stupefied for a few more seconds, then they threw themselves together in a mad hug.

'Where did you come from? You're the last person I expected to meet.'

'What about you? What are you doing here? They didn't give you a job, did they?'

'Oh it's a long story, I'll tell you later. Ugh! You stink! You haven't been playing hide and seek with pigs, have you?'

'Oh, if only...'

They were so thrilled to see each other they were in tears one moment, laughing the next, all the while jumping around like sparrows unable to keep still even for a second.

'I didn't think I'd ever see you again!'

'Me neither!'

'If you only knew how much I've missed you!'

'Me too!'

'Hey, that smell is unbearable! Come and clean yourself up. And get rid of the armour, too. I get scared every time I look at you!'

Anne did as she was told. She washed herself under the tap in the corner, while also telling the story of her trials. The backpack sat next to her and listened without interrupting.

‘There’s just one thing I don’t understand,’ Anne said finally. ‘How did the soldiers recognize me in the armour?’

‘Well, you forgot one small thing,’ said the backpack smiling. ‘Look at the helmet again.’

Red picked up the helmet and looked it over. Her eyes fell on two holes near its centre.

‘The antennae!’ she cried. ‘I forgot the antennae! How stupid! And I thought they could smell me or something. What a pity – all that wasted effort!’

‘Hmm, this armour could still come in handy,’ replied the backpack, scratching her head thoughtfully. ‘Even without the antennae you look much more threatening dressed as a soldier than as a little girl – and that could be of help to us. Anyway, the most important thing is you managed to escape. If you only knew how miserable I was! I thought we’d never see each other again. Honestly, I was sick with worry.’

After that she explained how she had ended up there. It turned out that the headmaster hadn’t been satisfied with punishing Red alone. He had soon accused the backpack of conspiring with her against the school rules. In her defence, she was forced to admit that she wasn’t really a child, but a kind of talking bag. But that didn’t help at all. The headmaster decided that his school was no place for a bag, not even a talking one.

‘The next day two soldiers came and took me off to a big storeroom full of all kinds of odds and ends. I spent several days there till Ben came and got me.’

‘Ben? Who’s that?’ asked Anne while scrubbing herself with a large brush. For the first time in her life she was actually enjoying having a wash.

‘Oh, Ben, you’ll meet him soon. A big fellow. He’s the engineer in charge of the machines here. But first he needs to calm down a bit. Ever since I locked him in the cupboard he’s been quite angry and won’t talk to me.’

‘What? Locked in the cupboard? The engineer in charge of the machines?’

Anne’s eyes got wider and wider. She sat down on the ground and started laughing so hard she had to hold her sides. It had only just hit her how much she had missed the backpack and how lonely she had felt during the past few weeks. Dear backpack, always full of surprises, always ready for some new mischief

even at the most difficult times! What could be more fun than laughing with a friend till your sides ached?

‘Well, yes,’ the backpack went on rather innocently, ‘he’s so greedy it wasn’t at all difficult to get him into the cupboard. A bottle or two of the sweet juice, then shut the door behind him – and that was that. He’s been sulking in there for several hours now, but as soon as he gets hungry he’s bound to give in. He’s not usually spiteful, though he can be a little stuck up. It won’t do him any harm to stay locked up for a while.’

‘And what do you plan to do with him?’

‘I’m not sure yet. At any rate, he knows the anthill like the back of his hand. If we want to find our way out of this maze we’ll need his help.’

‘That’s a great idea!’ Anne’s eyes lit up. ‘Let’s get out of here as fast as we can. I’m suffocating in this dungeon!’

The backpack scratched her head again.

‘Hmm... I don’t think there’s much point in hurrying. First, we can’t go anywhere without the magic mushroom piece. And second, remember what Madame Owl said: “you must win the friendship of the little big people”. But right now there isn’t even a hint of friendship, is there?’

Anne bristled with anger.

‘Friendship? With this lot of louts? No chance! I’d rather make friends with Heino and the spiders!’

‘Hey, take it easy, calm down! Not all of them are louts. This Sid, for example. Just think, he risked so much and ended up in prison for your sake. And I’ve met quite a lot of ants who were wonderful friends, too. Okay, they like to put on airs sometimes, but you can always get on with them. You just have to be patient. Even Ben seems quite a decent chap, even if he only ever thinks about eating.’

Anne scowled but said nothing.

‘In fact, getting out of here isn’t too difficult,’ continued the backpack. ‘But I don’t think it’s worth it, at least not for the time being.’

Red looked at her in surprise.

‘Not difficult? You have a go at wandering around the airshafts and then we’ll see if it’s so easy!’

The backpack smiled, reached into one of her many pockets and took out a folded piece of paper.

‘This will make it a lot easier for us. Bless Ben for being so thorough about everything he does!’

‘What is it?’

‘A plan of the entire anthill. Ben made it himself. It’s quite detailed. A good thing he likes to boast because he showed it to me the first day we met.’

‘Let me see it!’

Anne grabbed the plan impatiently, spread it out on the floor and began examining it. The anthill’s many halls and rooms were indeed drawn in immense detail. You could easily find the way to wherever you wanted to go. Even the airshafts were marked with narrow red lines that covered the whole structure like the blood vessels in a huge body. Anne quickly traced several of them to see if they led outside, but to her great disappointment, little ventilator fans were sketched at each of the openings.

‘Fans! Those darn fans are everywhere! I told you it wasn’t so easy to get out of here!’

‘The fans aren’t a problem at all,’ replied the backpack calmly. ‘They’re all controlled from here. If we wanted, we could turn them off right now – I forgot to tell you earlier this is where the air-conditioning system is centrally controlled.’

‘It is?’ Anne clapped her hands in excitement. ‘Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!’

‘Hey, not so fast! I already told you there’s no point. Without the mushroom a bird or something would eat us up in no time.’

‘Darn it, I’d completely forgotten!’

‘And anyway, we’ve still got a lot more to do.’

‘Like what, for example?’

‘Well, like trying to free your friend Sid. Don’t you think you owe him that?’

‘But he’s in prison. I told you, I watched them leading him away. You’re not suggesting we should attack the guards, are you?’

‘No, not that, but maybe we can think of something else. Look here,’ she tapped an area of the plan marked with thick black lines. ‘There, that’s the prison. Look, the airshafts cross it from end to end. Each cell has its own air vent. With any luck we’ll find a way to get to Sid.’

At that moment came the sound of knocking on the cupboard door. Anne jumped in fright.

‘Ah, it looks like Ben’s getting peckish,’ smiled the backpack. ‘Let’s see if he’s calmed down yet.’

The two friends went over to the cupboard where the imprisoned engineer was pounding noisily on the door. Despite the banging they could hear his muffled shouts quite clearly.

‘Let me out! How long are you going to keep me locked up in here? Do you think this is a kindergarten or something?’

‘Oh, is that you, Ben?’ said the backpack in her most innocent voice. ‘You know, I would be glad to let you out, but I seem to have lost the key. I’m so ashamed at how forgetful I can be.’

‘Stop messing around! The anthill’s entire operation depends on me. Without me the machines can’t be left to function for a moment. Imagine what disasters might happen! And besides, I’m hungry!’

‘Hey, wait! Didn’t you say yesterday that everything here is automatic, and that there’s no real need for you at all? Or did I misunderstand you?’

A long silence followed.

‘Okay,’ he called out finally. ‘The bit about the machines was maybe not quite true, but I’m not making it up about being hungry. I could eat this door I’m so famished!’

‘No problem,’ replied the backpack. ‘I’ve got some new supplies. I won’t let you starve. After all, we’re friends, aren’t we?’

‘Do you want to keep me locked up like this then?’

‘No, why should I? I could let you out sometime, but first you’ll have to promise me a few things.’

‘Like what?’

‘First, you must give me your word you won’t try to make a run for it or turn me in.’

‘Oh, is that all? Fine, I promise.’

‘As well as that, you have to come with us and show us the way.’

‘What? Nonsense, that’s out of the question! What way? Which us? Who’s there with you?’

‘Okay, as you wish,’ said the backpack, pretending to sound disappointed. ‘And I thought we were beginning to understand each other. Oh, by the way, I’ve got a friend here with me. He’s an armed soldier, so don’t even think about trying any funny business! He won’t put up with any nonsense. All right, goodbye.’

‘Hey, wait a second! You were going to give me something to eat!’

‘I’ve already told you I’ve lost the key. I’ll have to look for it a bit more first.’

‘Stop playing games with me, you hear me! I’m an important engineer, not a child! And anyway, I haven’t eaten anything for three hours! That’s... that’s an outrage!’

‘Ben, I really wish I could help you, but I can’t. Don’t you understand, the stupid key is missing.’

The backpack gave a warning sign to Anne who was struggling not to laugh.

‘But don’t worry, I always find the things I lose... sooner or later,’ she said. ‘I’m sure I’ll find it somewhere in the next two days at the longest.’

‘Two days! I’ll be long dead by then! Two whole days without food! I can’t last that long! Have you no mercy? How can you be so cruel?’

‘But what are you so angry about? Two days will pass just like that, you’ll see. I put up with a whole week in a dark storeroom without so much as a word of complaint. You’ll manage it, too, don’t worry.’

‘Hey, listen! What you said just then about wanting me to come with you, were you serious?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘And where do you want to go?’

‘Here and there; we’re still not quite sure. But without your help we won’t manage it, even with the map. We need you, Ben.’

‘Look, you’re not planning anything bad, are you? I don’t help terrorists or spies!’

‘Come on, Ben, give me a break! Terrorists? Spies? We just want to get to know the anthill better... and to help a friend. That’s all.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘Well then I might think about it. Now let me out.’

‘First you must promise to come with us.’

‘Oh, you’re so stubborn! Fine then, I promise. I’ll come with you.’

‘And you’ll show us the way if we get lost?’

‘Yes, yes, yes! I promise everything! Now are you going to let me out or not? My stomach feels as empty as a soldier’s head!’

‘Anne, put the armour back on,’ said the backpack turning to her friend. ‘He must never find out you’re not a real soldier, otherwise he may try something stupid.’

She waited while Anne got ready, then took the key and turned it in the lock. The door creaked open and from the cupboard emerged the funniest looking ant Anne had ever seen.

First of all, Ben was really fat. Most of the ants were thin and bony, but Ben was quite the opposite. The upper segment of his body merged with the lower one with no visible distinction between the two – as if his body were a single balloon inflated to the point of bursting. His face was a mass of rolls of fat stacked one upon the other. It was as if a volcano on top of his head had gradually covered his face with layer after layer of lava. His clever, suspicious little eyes could hardly be seen between the rolls of blubber. His arms and legs were rather thin by comparison with his body. They looked as if they were made of clay and then stuck to the sides of the round torso.

Secondly, Ben was dressed in a very strange boiler suit that had obviously been made by hand. It seemed that he had let it out many times to fit himself, using a different fabric on each occasion. As a result, the suit looked like an old patchwork quilt, as bright and colourful as a peacock’s tail. What’s more, the fat ant didn’t seem to be at all bothered about cleanliness. His clothing was spotted and stained from top to bottom, which added to the interesting design of the range of motley fabrics. In short, if the anthill had had a circus, then Ben would have made a very suitable clown.

However, none of that seemed to bother him. Without wasting any time he headed straight for one of the cabinets, wrenched it open and started noisily emptying the bottles of sweet juice he found there. It all happened so fast that the empty bottles came flying over his shoulder like popping corn. He didn’t stop until there wasn’t a single bottle left in the cabinet. Then he let out a belch like a foghorn, rubbed his belly contentedly and turned towards the two friends.

‘Ah, that’s better!’ he said. ‘Dear me, I almost died of starvation in there! I was beginning to think I’d never get out of that hole alive! And you’re a sly one, you are,’ he continued, wagging a fat forefinger mockingly at the backpack. ‘You really scared me, that’s for sure. But just to show you there are no hard feelings, I’ll forget your little joke. Right now, back to work! It seems to have got quite

late. As the saying goes, those who don't work don't need to eat, if you see what I mean.'

'But Ben, you've got a short memory, haven't you?' said the backpack in a friendly manner. 'Have you already forgotten our deal?'

'My, aren't you the petty one! Listen, why don't we settle this another way – I stay here and you go wherever you want by yourselves. Just imagine, if I had to go through those narrow shafts I'd get stuck just like that. Then what would we do?'

'Hey, wait a second! How do you know we want to go through the shafts?'

'Do you think I was born yesterday? If you wanted to go through the main corridors, would you take me with you? Don't look at me as though I'm stupid. Old Ben knows a thing or two. Okay, joking aside, let's get back to work. You do your thing and I'll do mine. Don't worry, I won't give you away.'

'No way!' said the backpack shaking her head. 'A deal's a deal. You've got to come with us, otherwise we'll get lost.'

'I knew you'd say that,' grumbled Ben. 'Just my luck. Why couldn't I have picked some ordinary bag from the storeroom? ... Okay, then, let's get going so maybe we can finish sooner rather than later. Where do you want me to take you?'

'To the prison.'

Ben was so surprised that the fat folds on his face started to wobble like a jelly.

'Hey, you really aren't joking, are you?' he said while looking at them suspiciously. 'What do you want to do at the prison?'

'To give the guards our very best,' replied the backpack casually. 'My friend here is dying to meet them.'

'A friend, eh?' Ben looked hard at Anne's club then decided it was best to keep quiet. 'You've found yourself some nice friends. And so have I, obviously. If I only knew where all this was leading!'

He turned and without further comment, he headed off down the stairs towards the airshafts. His face wore a sad, even embittered, expression.

Chapter Nineteen: High Level Talks

It had been proved to Anne many times that the backpack's hunches were right. This time was no exception. Without Ben's help they certainly couldn't have got anywhere. The system of airshafts turned out to be far more complex than they had thought. The fat ant clearly knew every tunnel down to the very last detail. He had almost no need for the map. He even knew how to avoid the narrowest tunnels where he could get stuck. But even so, getting to the prison took long hours of strenuous clambering, creeping and crawling flat on their bellies. To Anne's surprise, Ben took it all without grumbling, while squeezing his enormous body through the tunnels with amazing agility. It was quite obvious that he was familiar with these passages. To reduce the risk of him escaping they always kept him in the middle with one of them in front and the other at the rear. Ben accepted the role of captive without complaint or fear, but the expression on his face showed he wasn't willing to put up with it that easily. At any rate, he didn't try any tricks or make any trouble, and so the two friends had no reason to treat him roughly or with suspicion.

'Now, where to?' he asked them gloomily once they had reached the spot on the map marked as the prison. 'Or maybe you're looking for lodging here?'

'We have to find someone,' replied the backpack ignoring his biting remark. 'One of our friends is imprisoned here.'

'Ha! Just as I thought,' said Ben unhappily. 'So I really have fallen in with terrorists.'

'Rubbish!' Anne struck back. 'Sid hasn't done anything wrong, he just wanted to help me get out of here.'

'Well, well,' replied Ben, shaking his head in disbelief. 'And sweet juice rains from the sky, doesn't it? The honest ones are in prison and the criminals go free. Is that what you're trying to tell me?'

'Listen, we don't have time to argue,' snapped the backpack. 'We need to find Sid's cell as quickly as possible and free him.'

'Even though you don't believe us, for the time being you have to help us,' she continued, turning to face Ben. 'What you do after that is your own business.'

‘I brought you this far, but from now on you’ll have to find your own way!’ the fat ant responded stubbornly. ‘I’m only familiar with the airshafts. I haven’t a clue about the layout of the prison.’

Anne and the backpack exchanged silent glances. What should they do? It was clear that Ben wasn’t a coward and so threats weren’t going to get them very far. And besides, perhaps he was right; maybe he couldn’t do anything more.

As is often the case, they were helped by mere chance. At that moment, muffled cries from the airshafts up ahead caught their attention.

‘You villains! You frauds!’ came the cries of someone hoarse with shouting. ‘You can’t hide the truth! The workers all know it’s warm and light outside! All of them!’

‘That’s Sid!’ cried Anne joyfully. ‘I recognise his voice!’

Following the shouting, they began crawling from tunnel to tunnel. Finally, they reached a very narrow tunnel through which Anne and the backpack were able to squeeze, but not Ben. They decided that the backpack would stay with him while Anne crept ahead.

So off she went. The tunnel led her to a sturdy, barred iron frame that was bolted to the wall. Anne shook it as hard as she could but in vain. The frame stood firm. She looked down through the bars. The light in the cell wasn’t that strong, but enough to see inside. There was a simple wooden bed, a small table, a chair and a grimy toilet. And, of course, Sid – looking a little ragged and scratched, but otherwise alive and well.

‘Sid!’ she called to him quietly. ‘Hey Sid!’

The giant ant stopped in mid-shout and looked around in surprise.

‘Look up at the bars,’ Red called, ‘it’s me, Anne.’

Sid glanced up in disbelief. His eyes widened.

‘It can’t be!’ he whispered croakily. ‘But where did you come from?’

‘There’s no time for that now. I’ll tell you later. Listen, I’m not alone. We’re going to try to free you soon.’

‘You’re going to free me? But how?’

‘We’ve got to find a way to remove these bars. Then it’s easy.’

The ant rubbed his hands together with glee.

‘Okay, but hurry because they may soon transfer me to another cell.’ His face darkened. ‘They have special cells for serious offenders.’

‘You’re joking! You mean they see you as a serious offender?’

‘That’s right. They’re charging me with treason,’ he said.

‘Just because you tried to help me? Surely not! That’s... that’s...’

Just at that moment she heard the sound of fighting behind her. Darn it! What was happening now? The tunnel was so narrow she could barely turn round to look.

‘Help! Anne!’ came the backpack’s voice.

‘Sid, hold on, I’ll be right back,’ she cried, and started crawling back along the tunnel.

The backpack was waiting for her at the end of the tunnel doubled over in pain.

‘Oh, that trickster! He hit me on the head and ran off. Let’s hurry; maybe we can catch him. He went that way!’

The two friends ran after him. Ben could still be seen at the end of the tunnel. Puffing like a steam engine, the fat ant was running as fast as he could.

‘Stop!’ yelled Anne without thinking who else might hear her. ‘Stop, I said!’

But he kept on running and disappeared round a bend. The other two followed as fast as they could.

It turned out that catching up with Ben wasn’t at all easy. He moved through the tunnels as if he were strolling through a well-lit hall, while Anne and the backpack often tripped and fell. Still, at least they managed to keep up with him, but even that took extreme effort. The chase continued for a long while until little by little they finally began to catch up with him.

‘Ben there’s no reason to run. We don’t want to hurt you,’ shouted the backpack, panting with tiredness. ‘Don’t be silly, we’re just wasting our energy.’

But just when they were sure of catching him, he disappeared quite unexpectedly into the wall right in front of their eyes. When they reached the spot where he had vanished they just saw part of the wall move back into place, blocking his escape route. Anne desperately tried to find a way of opening it, but in vain. Fat Ben had really outsmarted them this time. They had no choice now but to think of their own escape.

‘You liar! You fraud!’ shouted Anne, kicking the wall. ‘We should have left you in the cupboard! Is this how you repay our trust?’

‘Anne, there’s no point,’ the backpack called to her from behind. ‘No one can forbid him from escaping. Ben has as much right as us. It would be best if we

thought about how to get out of here as quickly as possible. He's probably called in a whole battalion of soldiers.'

However, it didn't come to that. Just as they were about to run back the thick wall slid sideways to reveal a passageway leading to a staircase like the one in the machine room. The two friends exchanged confused glances. What was this, some kind of trap? Or had Ben perhaps changed his mind?

'Come in, the door will close any second,' said a voice from somewhere overhead, startling them both. 'And don't try anything clever! I can see every move you make. The slightest trouble and I'll sound the alarm!'

Anne and the backpack only then noticed a little camera above the entrance. The voice came right out of the wall; clearly there was a loud speaker built into it. They looked at each other uncertainly, then obeyed and entered the tunnel cautiously. The wall closed silently behind them sealing the exit. Now there was no escape.

'Climb up the stairs. And just so we understand each other, only unarmed visitors enter here. Leave all weapons down below. I don't want to use force, but I shall do so if necessary. Don't forget I'm watching you the whole time!'

'Where do I know that voice from?' whispered Anne. 'I've got the feeling I've already heard it dozens of times.'

'Me too,' replied the backpack. 'This is weird. I'm confused.'

'Faster!' the voice called again. 'I have no wish to wait all day.'

They obediently began stomping up the spiral staircase. It seemed that the speaker was used to having her orders carried out quickly and without question.

An enormous, dimly-lit room awaited them above. In the semi-darkness they could just see the outline of a massive bed that was much bigger than any others they had seen in the anthill.

'Come closer!' the voice called out again. 'There was no need for a loud speaker here as the voice came straight from the huge bed. I want a better look at you.'

They took a step forward.

'I told you they didn't look much like criminals to me. Are you sure you're not mistaken?' said the voice to someone standing in the shadows. 'To me they look like just two frightened children, not terrorists.'

‘There’s no mistake,’ came Ben’s voice from somewhere in the dark. ‘They are very dangerous terrorists. They just tried to free a terrorist friend of theirs from prison.’

‘We are not terrorists!’ Anne exclaimed angrily. ‘If you hadn’t run away, this wouldn’t have turned into a game of tag. And Sid isn’t a terrorist either, I’ve already told you that. His only crime is that he helped me to escape. And all of you here are just liars and frauds! You tell the workers a load of mumbo jumbo to keep them in their place. And you use big words like freedom and equality but there’s not a trace of them in the anthill!’

‘Well, well, it seems we’re dealing with a feisty little one here,’ said the first voice. ‘Take off that helmet. I want to see you more clearly.’

Anne took off the helmet, and threw it crossly on the ground. It made a dull rattling sound as it rolled under the bed.

‘But you’re not one of my children at all!’ exclaimed the voice. ‘Ben, why didn’t you tell me she’s an outsider?’

‘Wait, hold on!’ cried Anne vaguely beginning to suspect something. ‘Who are you? Why do you hide in the dark?’

‘Because you will be frightened if you see me, that’s why,’ replied the voice calmly.

‘We won’t be scared,’ said Anne. ‘Show yourself! We want to know who we’re dealing with.’

‘If you insist. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

Suddenly the room became very light. The glare made Anne blink quickly. Then, when she was able to see who she was dealing with, she took a frightened step backwards.

Watching her from the enormous bed was the queen mother herself.

Anne could hardly disguise her fear. She had only seen the old ant’s face on television and hadn’t a clue how huge she really was. Compared to the other ants, the queen mother looked like a giant. Even lying in bed, she was much taller than Anne. And if she could stand up on her legs – a complete impossibility in that room – she would be at least ten times taller than Sid.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ stammered Anne. ‘I didn’t realise who I was talking to. I apologise.’

‘There’s no need to apologize,’ replied the queen mother. ‘Ben, stop hiding and tell us everything! So these two children are dangerous terrorists, is that right?’

Ben came out from behind a curtain rubbing his hands in embarrassment.

‘I didn’t know they were children. How could I tell with that armour? I just saw someone dressed like a soldier, but without antennae so they couldn’t be an ant. I thought they were foreign spies. Would I have let them play such tricks on me otherwise?’

‘Will these stories about spies and terrorist never end!’ cried the queen mother unhappily. ‘Antolini fills your heads with so much nonsense and fear that you can’t even recognise a child when you see one. It’s sad when an engineer turns into a baby as soon as he imagines he’s dealing with spies. Is that how far we, the ant people, have come?’

Feeling ashamed, Ben remained silent, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. His four hands couldn’t find anywhere to hide themselves.

‘Now tell me everything in the order it happened,’ the queen mother said to the two friends. ‘Who you are, where you come from, why you’re trying to escape. I want to know everything down to the very last detail. It looks like too many things here have gone wrong if even children are forced to run and hide.’

Anne and the backpack exchanged glances then started telling their story. It took them a long time because it was so tangled and needed such a lot of explanations, backtracking and full descriptions of the different hardships they had experienced. The queen mother listened with great attention, and the expression on her face got gloomier and gloomier.

‘So, that’s that, then...’ she said sadly when the story had finally reached its end. ‘Beatings in schools, children working down in the galleries, workers living in ignorance and darkness. Is that what we dreamed of in our youth? Is that why we worked our whole lives without sparing any effort? Look at what we wanted, and then see what we have got! Shame, shame on us all!’

No one dared to say a word. The queen mother became lost in silence. Anne thought she had fallen asleep when she finally spoke again.

‘And now I must have a very important conversation. It would be best if you hide yourselves. I don’t think the General would be particularly pleased to see me speaking with ordinary people behind his back.’

‘The General?’ said Anne. ‘You don’t mean...?’

‘Yes. I’ve put off talking about this for a long time, but I can’t wait any longer now. For years I haven’t involved myself in the affairs of state. I left everything in Antolini’s hands. That was unfortunate as I’m now beginning to understand. Right, now hide behind the curtain. I’m eager to know how my... my wayward son will try to mislead me. When I think of how much I believed in him, and how much hope I put in him! Oh, that’s enough complaining. I’m starting to get senile. Are you ready?’

She reached out and pressed a button on the little table next to the bed. Soon after, the big door opened and a dashing soldier stepped into the enormous room.

‘What can I do for you, mother?’

‘Contact General Antolini’s office and inform them that I want a meeting with him at once. I repeat, at once! The meeting cannot be delayed!’

The soldier disappeared without saying a word. Not long after, the telephone on the little table started ringing.

‘Yes,’ said the queen mother answering the phone. ‘Yes, it is important. I want to see you personally. No, I can’t wait. It’s been a while since we last spoke. You will have to put aside your other commitments. Yes, I know you are very busy, but I insist. Fine, I expect you in five minutes.’

Time somehow seemed to be passing very slowly when finally there came a knock at the door. Anne had the feeling that hours, not minutes had passed. Her heart was pounding from the suspense, and she chewed nervously at her fingernails.

The door opened and in rushed a whole battalion of soldiers who instantly began searching every inch of the royal bedroom. Anne shivered. Now what?

‘Get out!’ roared the queen mother in a voice that made everyone jump. ‘What a liberty, you idiots! Do you think you’re in some sort of back yard?’

The soldiers looked at each other in confusion.

‘But we have our orders,’ one of them called out timidly. ‘The General’s security is of the utmost importance.’

‘The General’s security is guaranteed in his own mother’s bedroom. Get out, I said! Here of all places there is no need for this ... savage spectacle.’



‘Our dear mother is right, men,’ said a husky voice from behind the door. ‘Here all of us are secure. Leave us alone, will you.’

The soldiers marched out. In the doorway was left just the figure of the fat General Anne had seen in so many portraits and posters.

‘To what do I owe this unexpected honour?’ he said ill-temperedly while sitting down on a chair that creaked under his weight. ‘I didn’t think you would contact me again, mother.’

‘I have good reason for doing so, Antolini. Recently I have heard increasing rumours that ... *discipline* is being taken to extremes. It seems that recently even children are being persecuted as criminals – if what I heard is true.’

‘I see you’ve been conducting one of your little investigations again. You’re remarkably curious for your old age. I must admit, you really surprise me, mother.’

‘Antolini, I don’t need sarcasm, I want the truth!’ replied the queen mother angrily. ‘Would you be so kind as to answer my question; is it true that in Antazonia even children work in the galleries just because they don’t know about General Antolini and his great ideas?’

‘Our great ideas, mother dear!’ hissed the General, clearly rather offended. ‘Have you forgotten that everything that happens in this country is a result of our common ideas? The ideals we believe in, the values upon which this society is built, the grand objectives we laid out years ago – all that came not only from me but from you too, dear mother. I’m not the only one who must accept the responsibility... and the glory for all we have achieved. Let’s be clear, Antazonia is the product of our combined efforts.’

‘It is true that I believed, and still do believe in everything we once repeated like a prayer, my son. But tell me, what’s the connection between our past ideas and what’s happening now? How can we talk of freedom to the children when at school they get beatings instead of knowledge? To the workers who live in darkness and ignorance? Or to the engineers shaking in terror at the sight of a foreigner because he might be a spy or a terrorist? Is that the freedom for which we struggled? Is that freedom at all? Answer me, my son!’

‘But freedom requires sacrifices, mother. You yourself say that on television each evening.’

‘Forget the slogans, please! We have no need of them here. I expect an honest answer from you. Tell me what you believe in. Tell me why you do these... horrible things.’

He sank into deep thought, then got up from his chair and started pacing the room nervously.

‘Okay,’ he said finally, ‘but only because you’re my mother. Until now no one has heard what I’m about to tell you.’

He cleared his throat and continued.

‘I believe that on the way to achieving a grand goal the leader may not choose the means. Even the tenderest flower must be stepped on if it stands in the way of that goal. The good of the many justifies the misery of the few. That is all, dear mother. Do you have the ... strength ... to accept this simple truth?’

The queen mother looked at him, her eyes filled with horror.

‘But that’s ... that’s .. insanity,’ she whispered. ‘Even the greatest goal can’t justify a single tear of a child. Is that so difficult to understand?’

‘Sentimental gibberish!’ the general spat back angrily. ‘A house is built with mud, dear mother. The one who can’t stand mud cannot be a builder! But I’m building a palace, not a house! A monument to the ants’ strength, will and spirit, that’s what I’m building! Along the course I’m taking, there is no place for soft talk.’

‘Soft talk!’ cried the queen mother enraged. ‘Are you accusing me of being weak? I who sent my best sons to die in numerous wars! And all in the name of the future and progress, in the name of that very ant strength and will that you so proudly uphold. Antazonia above all! Antazonia above all! So many times I’ve repeated those words, blinded with pride and stupidity! So many times! And all this only to have built at the end a .. a perfect prison. And to rejoice in a son blinded by the brilliance of his own greatness. Has my life amounted to no more than that?’

The General clenched his fists, bent forward slightly and hung his head between his shoulders like a bull preparing to charge. At first Anne thought he was going to spring at his own mother.

‘Now listen, you foolish old woman!’ he growled threateningly. ‘Just one word from me would be enough for there to be no trace left of you. That’s first. Second, even if I leave you alone, don’t think you are free to do as you please. From this moment on there will be a guard keeping watch outside your door. You may speak on the telephone only with permission, and all of your letters will pass through my hands before being sent out. And remember, don’t imagine even for a second that you can say some foolishness during your sweet evening

speeches. The slightest attempt at such a thing and the broadcast will be interrupted at once. And then...' he gave a wicked smile. 'You know what's next, don't you? "The queen is dead; long live the queen!"'

The queen mother watched him with a stony expression. She looked the picture of despair. Without saying another word, he left the room slamming the door. Lingered behind him was a sharp, sour smell, heavy and oppressive, though tinged with the scent of expensive cologne.

Chapter Twenty: The Power of the Word

‘Ben, stop it! That doesn’t do any good. It would be better if you helped us find the way back to the prison.’

Anne was very angry. If it wasn’t enough that they had only just managed to escape the bedroom through the secret exit, but now they were forced to restrain the fat ant who was insisting on going back. He was so furious that if the queen hadn’t commanded him to leave, he would certainly have rushed after the general and tried to fight him, so strong was his rage.

‘Don’t you understand?’ snarled Ben, ‘No one has the right to speak to the queen mother like that! No one! She’s the most important thing in the anthill. Without her, everything here collapses. And that... that villain... threatened her! That’s... that’s... I can’t find the words... Oh, why did I let him get away with it! Shame, shame on you, Ben!’

‘But she herself said you’d be more useful if you got away, than being locked up in prison,’ said the backpack.

‘No, I can’t accept such an outrage. I must do something or else I’ll just explode with rage!’

‘Well, if you insist on doing something, then come and help us free Sid. That’s no small task,’ said Anne.

Ben thought a moment then waved his hand.

‘Very well, I’ll help you, but then I want you to help me.’

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘Do you remember what the queen mother said before we left?’ he asked. ‘She said the one thing she really wanted to do was tell her children everything she thought without the pretence and the lies.’

‘Of course I remember. Well, what about it?’

‘I know how we can sneak into the television centre. Everything there runs automatically; there’s normally a single officer on duty at night and he just dozes most of the time. If we could catch him unawares...’

‘Hey, what are you plotting?’ said Anne, looking at him in surprise.

‘If I achieve nothing else, at least I’ll have fulfilled my mother’s wish,’ he replied in a determined tone. ‘Everyone here must know the truth about her situation. They have told us enough lies; now it’s time to hear the truth for once.’

Hey, why are you staring at me like that? You look as though you've never seen me before.'

Anne and the backpack started hugging him madly.

'Ben, you're incredible! I had no idea you were so strong-willed,' said Anne in short bursts. 'Oh, with friends like you I'd dare to do anything! Just wait, Antolini, you'll be sorry you met us!'

With Ben's help, freeing Sid turned out to be quite easy. The fat ant took a bunch of spanners out of a secret pocket, and a minute later the airshaft grating was lying to the side, as useless as a lid on a leaky barrel. However, it took a lot of effort to get Sid out of the cell because Anne had to hang upside down in order to give him her hand. The backpack held her by the legs, while wedged into the narrow tunnel like a cork in a bottle. Thank God everything finally worked out. Sid managed to crawl through the shafts, although at first he had claimed that he would rather have squeezed his way through a garden hose. Meanwhile, Ben had assumed the leadership of the little group, and everyone was now standing in one of the wider tunnels awaiting his instructions.

'So, the television centre's main entrance is here,' he said pointing to a place on the map with a fat finger. 'But we're going in this way. This is an extra entrance that no one uses. I programmed the alarm system myself. I know all the codes. The one difficulty will be to overcome the officer before he panics and raises the alarm.'

'Leave that to me,' said Sid. 'My hands are itching to do something useful. This is the second day they've been idle.'

'Good,' said Ben, sizing him up in a hard stare. 'And remember, we're a maintenance crew; we've come to the centre because we got a warning signal about damage in the airshafts. That should confuse him for a few seconds. That's just about all the time we'll have.'

'And what happens after that?' asked Anne.

'That's my problem,' replied Ben confidently. 'Don't worry, old Ben knows about more than just airshafts. You'll see when we get there, trust me!'

After a few more short explanations, the group set out in the direction of the television centre. They were being particularly careful this time, and went well

out of their way to avoid all possibility of running into patrols or maintenance technicians. They didn't speak except from time to time Ben would whisper orders to stop and wait. Several times they saw lights in the distance. Once they even had to change direction quickly when a team of technicians passed through a connecting tunnel. Otherwise, everything went without a hitch.

'Stop!' cried Ben at last. 'We're here. Now, single file down the stairs. Follow me!'

The corridor they entered didn't look any different from the dozens of other corridors Anne had wandered through earlier. The same panels along the walls, the same smooth flagstone floor, the same grilles on the ceiling air vents. Only a small computer hidden in a small niche in the wall suggested there was something special here.

Once everyone was together, Ben looked around cautiously, went up to the computer and started typing. Several wall panels slid aside revealing a passageway leading to a corridor further along. They looked around nervously then crept through the opening.

Unlike the other corridors, this one was decorated with many pictures showing scenes from various battles. What's more, instead of being straight, it twisted this way and that as if trying to prevent visitors from seeing too much of what was inside the television centre. Ben walked on ahead confidently, however. He had obviously been here before and knew the place very well.

Finally, they reached the end of the corridor. They were standing in front of a massive iron door that was both locked and bolted. Ben stood in front of the camera hanging above the entrance and pressed a red button next to the door. A few tense seconds followed. Anne felt that a whole eternity had passed when suddenly an irritated voice came from the speaker over the door.

'What now, another inspection? Will you never leave me in peace? You've already been here three times this shift! It's amazing, in just two hours you've all gone mad!'

'There was a breakdown in the airshaft,' replied Ben. 'We need to do a detailed inspection of all the rooms in the centre. This is Ben, head engineer. Here's my ID card.'

From his pocket he took a small plastic card and held it up close to the camera. Through the speakers you could hear the whispering of the ant reading the card's writing.

‘Blast! Why do these things always have to happen to me?’ he exclaimed. The locks and bolts started clicking, the door gently opened, and the young officer’s head poked round it. ‘As if there weren’t enough inspections, now this...’

At that moment he caught sight of the rest of the group and started to turn back inside, clearly alarmed. However, Sid had already sprung at him, and the officer’s head was suddenly locked between his four mighty arms.

‘Gently, Sid,’ Ben warned. ‘We’re not criminals. You’re not going to break his neck, are you?’

‘Don’t worry,’ replied Sid, while holding the motionless officer in his arms as if he were a baby. ‘I’ve just given him a little dusting. His neck may be a little sore tomorrow, but that will pass in a day or so.’

Without wasting any more time they entered the small control room. There were TV screens all over the walls showing dozens of different programmes. In the middle of the room was a large, semicircular console covered with computers, videocassette recorders, cameras and many other devices Anne didn’t recognise. Lights of different colours were flashing all over the place, making you feel quite dizzy.

But Ben obviously felt right at home here. He sat himself down comfortably at the console, looked around with bright eyes and rubbed his hands together with delight.

‘So far everything has gone exactly to plan. Just imagine the General’s face when we start broadcasting! We’ll give him a good surprise, I promise you!’

He turned a few knobs, typed a bit and... His friends gasped in astonishment. All the screens on the walls now showed the same picture: the queen mother’s dark bedroom. The fat ant tapped gently on one of the microphones, cleared his throat and said, ‘Mother, can you hear me?’

‘Who’s there?’ replied the queen mother in a sharp voice.

‘It’s me, Ben.’

‘What’s the matter? Why are you bothering me at this hour? No, wait a moment, this is a direct connection to the TV centre. What have you done, boy? What nonsense is this? Don’t you realise what will happen when the General finds out? Oh, children, you don’t give me a minute’s rest!’

‘Listen, mother, we don’t have a second to waste! We’ve managed to get into the centre and so at least for a while all broadcasting is under our control. Do you understand what that means?’

‘Go on, I’m listening,’ replied the queen mother. Her voice had taken on a steely edge.

‘If you’d still like to, you can say everything you wanted to. Anything at all, do you understand? We’ll make sure that no one interrupts you.’

The queen mother thought deeply.

‘Children, children,’ came her voice from the dark, ‘what wouldn’t I do for your sake? And this too, I’m only doing it for you.’

Suddenly the bedroom was bathed in light. The queen mother sat herself up in bed as best she could. Then she leant back, straightened her antennae absent-mindedly and said with conviction, ‘Go ahead! What happens, happens!’

Ben quickly typed something then he grabbed one of the microphones with a trembling hand and announced in a croaky voice, ‘Attention! Attention! Everyone, this is a special broadcast given by the queen mother. Please stop what you are doing at once and make your way to the nearest television screen. I repeat: this is a special broadcast by the queen mother.’

He typed again and whispered into the microphone, ‘Ready. You can start as soon as you like.’

‘My dear children, please don’t be worried! There’s no time to explain why I must speak to you at this unusual hour. I would just like to assure you that I am in good health and there is no reason to panic.’

She paused briefly then continued, often breaking off to find the right words.

‘Through all these years, I’ve called upon you daily to... give your best and to be ever ready to ... to make new sacrifices. First, we had to win the wars, then repair the destruction that came with them. After that came the years of intensive development because ... we couldn’t allow one of our neighbours to outdo us. We have always been struggling, always ready for the next big test ... not stopping even for a second for rest or peace.

‘I don’t know how many times I’ve called upon you not to spare anything in the pursuit of our great aims... I have asked you to fight, to go to war, and even to die for freedom. And not once was I able to tell you that the thing I most wanted was for you to ...live for freedom. Just to live, nothing else.’

The telephone on the console in front of Ben started ringing. Everyone jumped in surprise. He hesitated then picked up the receiver and looked around nervously before holding it up to his antennae. Even from a distance you could hear the speaker at the other end screaming at the top of their lungs, 'Stop the broadcast at once! This instant!'

'Stop screaming General,' Ben said glumly. 'I can't hear what our mother is saying because of you.'

He replaced the receiver, took hold of the telephone cable and yanked it out from the wall. The queen mother was continuing with her speech in the meantime.

'Go outside, my children, go outside! Enjoy the light and the fresh air, live in peace! There's a place for everyone under the sun, believe me. And if anyone tells you that for us to live in peace we need ever newer weapons and more wars, don't believe them! The one thing we need to live in peace is the ... strength to ... overcome the hatred that is poisoning our hearts.'

Suddenly soldiers filled the queen mother's bedroom. Impatient commands rang out and confusion spread.

'For once ... I wanted to tell you ... how proud I am of you,' she continued without paying any attention to the cries and commotion. 'And how much I love you... You... You are... the most wonderful children I could ever imagine.'

'The old witch!' screeched General Antolini from somewhere among the soldiers. 'What are you waiting for, you fools? Gag her! Shut her up! Hit her!'

At first the soldiers were stunned, then one of them grew bold and started striking. Soon the other were doing the same. The queen mother's enormous body writhed under the hail of clubs.

'Remember, my children, hatred is our one and only enemy!' cried the old ant with her last ounce of strength. 'Ant don't forget, whatever happens, I'll always love you! Always! To the last!'

'You idiots! The camera, smash the camera!' yelled the General again. The next moment all the screens went blank and everything was silent.

But not for long. Up from the depths of the anthill there came a dull rumbling as if the waves of a great flood were beginning. Ben listened hard, then grabbed the duty officer's club that was leaning against the console and with a bitter smile he announced, 'The time for talk has passed, my friends. Now it's the turn of the clubs!'

Silence, silence at last. Sheer bliss!

After the constant rumbling of the past few hours, the complete silence that set in felt like a hot bath after back-breaking work. Anne lay back, closed her eyes and tried not to think of anything. That wasn't so easy, though. Like in a kaleidoscope, chaotic images changed shape in front of her eyes: corridors filled with angry workers and engineers, fleeing soldiers, brief but fierce battles here and there, General Antolini's face filled with fury and malice as they arrested him.

Even Ben and Sid were surprised at the determined way in which the ants rose up to defend both their mother's honour and the rights they themselves had been denied. To Anne, who knew them less well, the waves of ants looked like an elemental force wiping out anything and everything it met in its path. The feeble attempts of a few loyal soldiers to protect the General would have seemed funny if the result hadn't been numerous smashed bodies thrown about like matchsticks. Red shivered as she remembered how terrifying the powerful wave of ants had looked, and the dreadful wreckage that had been made of places where they had met resistance. Brrr! No, it was better not to think but to rest at least just a little before the last, so important moment.

'Attention, citizens!' Ben's voice bellowed from the enormous screen on the wall. 'Soon we'll be ready. Can we have complete silence, please.'

Taken aback, Anne sat up and looked around. She was surrounded by thousands and thousands of ants all sitting on benches in the anthill's enormous central auditorium. Sid and the backpack sat either side of her, frozen in tense anticipation. For more than an hour they had been waiting to see if the queen mother would be able to speak for a last time or not. A whole team of ant doctors was trying to restore her to life but the chances looked grim. The old ant had obviously suffered greatly, and for several hours had been struggling with death, as she was determined to speak to her children one more time.

Eventually, the familiar old face appeared on the screen. Hardly daring to breathe, the ants paid attention as if their lives depended on it.

'My dear children,... I don't know... if.. I'll be able to speak for long ... or even .. if I need ...to speak long.'

‘Many years ago we started something we tied our brightest hopes to... A great experiment as we all believed ... then.

‘We were blinded by pride, we were stubbornly set on achieving everything that ants had ever dreamed of: freedom, equality, brotherhood... prosperity and justice for all... a bright future that would last for ever.. strong and secure like eternity itself... We followed this goal without sparing any effort, without asking the cost ... or asking what the rest of you ...thought of it.

‘More and more, that was our only wish. More knowledge, more progress, more future... More and more and more... And only now we are starting to understand that more doesn’t always mean better.

‘We built the most perfect machines.... and began to turn into machines ourselves. We built a society that had to run like clockwork... only to find that we were starting to tick like clocks, too. We gained knowledge our forefathers could never have dreamed of ... and with it we lost the ability to enjoy the simple things in life.

‘In going for progress, we forgot that the simpler things are often better than the complex ones... Simple food instead of processed substitutes, simple love instead of complex educational concepts, living simply instead of constantly competing for first place...

‘If we are to keep the hope that we’ll still be here tomorrow, we’ll need love and compassion rather than almighty science.... Generosity and fairness more than control and cold reason... Friendship instead of competition... Caring for others rather than looking for more and more victories...’

She suddenly choked on a dry, scratchy cough, and put a white handkerchief to her mouth. After glancing at it briefly, she hid it behind her back.

‘Before I finish, I just wanted... to tell you something. This... has been tormenting me for a very long time.’

She made a long pause as if trying to recall something long forgotten, then whispered in a trembling voice, ‘If you can, please forgive me! I... truly believed in what I did.’

Suddenly her eyes went dark. Her head started tossing in her desperate attempt to catch breath, then her body relaxed and became motionless.

The queen mother had finally found peace – for ever.

Chapter Twenty-One: Captive Again

‘If I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, I wouldn’t have believed that the anthill extended right through the river bed. It’s amazing what the ants can do!’

‘Oh yes,’ smiled Ben, ‘we dig very deep.’

It fell silent again. Everyone was trying to hide the sadness that had struck them when Anne had made it clear that she was going to leave the anthill. Several days had passed since the last of the official funeral ceremonies for the queen mother. Little by little life in the anthill was returning to normal, though no one yet knew what the future would hold. Only Sid and Ben had stayed with Red to help her find the way.

‘It’s a shame that Quirk isn’t here,’ continued Anne. ‘His eyes would pop out if he saw that I’d reached the other side of the river! And by going underneath it, at that! So passing through the anthill is the only way to get over the river. I mean, get under it. That’s what Madame Owl’s prophecy meant. Now we just have to find our way to the ghost mansion... once we’re back to normal size, I mean. Sid, you promised to take care of that, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, everything is in order,’ said Sid. ‘Your personal belongings are here in this pouch. Everything the soldiers took from you when you came to the anthill is there. I don’t think anything is missing.’

Anne grabbed the little pouch, searched through it quickly and took out the little mushroom piece triumphantly.

‘Hooray! We’re saved! Are you ready to go, backpack?’

‘Wait, hold on,’ Sid said shyly. ‘Let’s sit together a while. We don’t know when we’ll ever see each other again.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. Of course we’ll stay a bit. I can’t leave you all just like that, either.’

‘Are you sure you don’t need an escort?’ Sid asked yet again.

‘Oh, Sid, I’ve explained it to you a hundred times. Trust me, you can’t imagine what it means when I become big again. I could crush you far too easily.’

‘Okay, okay, I believe you,’ replied the big ant sullenly, though he didn’t look completely convinced. ‘All right then, maybe it’s time to go.’

‘All right. Goodbye my friends. Thank you for everything!’

‘Actually, we’re the ones who should be thanking you,’ replied Ben. ‘If it wasn’t for you we would still be carrying on in the old way. The people of Antazonia will never forget you!’

Now the time to say goodbye had really come. Sid embraced her so hard that he squeezed the breath right out of her. Ben’s hug wasn’t as hard, but it lasted much longer.

‘Well now,’ said Anne, rolling her eyes playfully, ‘are you ready, backpack?’

‘Ready!’ called the backpack from behind as she had already climbed onto Anne’s back.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we present the greatest trick of all time; the fly that turns into an elephant!’ announced Anne in a ceremonious manner. ‘One, two, three!’

She closed her eyes and nibbled a piece of the mushroom. Whoosh! The world around her began spinning and was filled with dancing light. Her ears started ringing, and for a moment she felt as if a great force was yanking her upwards...

And in the next moment she was blinking rapidly, blinded by the intense light. She went away from the anthill, taking care not to crush any of the ants crawling around below. She turned and waved one last time (she was sure Ben and Sid could see her from down there). After that, she set out along a dim, narrow path leading into the forest. She whistled happily along the way. Now nothing was keeping her from her final goal.

There were only a few steps to go until the path entered the forest when suddenly an enormous shadow fell over her. She ducked instinctively in an attempt to protect herself from the unknown attacker, but that didn’t help her. Powerful talons grabbed her and lifted her effortlessly up into the air as if she were no heavier than a feather. Red waved her arms and legs around desperately, throwing wild punches in vain. The ground beneath her quickly grew more distant and soon she was being carried above the trees that now seemed the size of toys.

‘I’m done for,’ she thought. ‘This time the ghosts really have got me.’

To her great surprise, her attacker didn’t continue in the direction of the forest, but turned and carried her away from it. The mountain was coming more clearly into view, and they gradually approached it, making circles over the

canyon and descending at a smooth, steady pace. Anne looked up and shuddered with fear. She was in the clutches of an enormous eagle, much bigger than any other bird she had ever seen on television or in books. She stopped struggling and turned her attention to the perilous mountainside with a sense of horror. The desperate thought came to her as she looked at the winding river down below: 'If he dropped me, not a single bone would be left in one piece.' The backpack was also scared out of her wits and clinging on to her for dear life. Red was on the point of closing her eyes when a strange sight caught her attention.

Against the backdrop of the dark mountainside, something that looked like a giant building site – or that's how it seemed at first – could clearly be made out. Set into the cliff face was an enormous nest, or more precisely, a collection of several nests connected by numerous staircases and bridges. It looked so strange that Anne forgot all about her fear. The nests were built one on top of the other forming something like an upside down pyramid whose sides grew wider upwards in a series of terraces resting on huge pillars. The structure looked a complete mess with branches, sticks and rope poking out on all sides. Despite that, it was clearly very stable because it didn't even wobble with the force of the strong winds that pounded the mountainside. From the distance the nests looked tiny, but it soon became clear that they were huge, each as big as an average-sized room. Anne was then able to pick out various details about the place: furniture, objects, even two little figures moving about.

There wasn't time for a more detailed examination. Before she knew it, she had been plopped right into the middle of the nest. Stunned, she lay there a while, then as she was starting to sit up, the eagle grabbed her and threw her straight into a small iron cage close by. The door slammed behind her and the bolt clunked into place.

Only then was Anne able to have a good look around her. The nest she had fallen into didn't have a roof, of course, but the walls were rather high so it looked just like a normal room. Scattered about on the floor were toys that had been broken, dismantled and reassembled in the strangest fashion. On a big table lay various tools and parts of toys. At the other end of the nest there were some shelves with every imaginable gadget on them: a computer, a microscope, a variety of soldering irons, and whatever else besides. On the wall were a couple of posters: one of an old man with long white hair sticking out his tongue, and next to it a picture of a man sitting on a rock, deep in thought and resting

his chin on his fist. There was a large electric clock-calendar to one side, ticking away steadily. Two young eagles dressed in expensive but rather dirty clothes were tinkering with something on the table. Their father's arrival didn't seem to interest them in the least. They went on with their work without looking up.

'Hi boys. I've brought you some breakfast,' said the father eagle in a shrill, piercing voice.

'Good morning, Papá. What grub have we got today?' replied one of the eaglets – an arrogant kid with a big ring dangling from his pierced beak.

'Come and see for yourselves.'

The eaglets approached the cage and had a good look at Anne.

'Wow, what's that?' asked the other eagle, noticeable for his massive hairdo dyed in all the colours of the rainbow. 'It looks like a sheep without wool.'

'To tell you the truth, I don't know myself, but it looks delicious. And please remember I don't want you playing with your food. I've told you a thousand times that well-raised birds don't play with their food.'

'Yes, yes, Papá,' replied the eaglets in a bored tone.

'Okay, then, I'm late for work.'

'Papá, how much longer before our first flying lesson?' asked the eagle with the ring.

'Boys, we discussed this a long time ago. I've told you a hundred times, on the seventeenth.'

'Can't we start a bit earlier? As a special case? Just the once, please daddy!'

'It's out of the question!' the father replied sharply. 'Your wings aren't strong enough; you'll break your necks.'

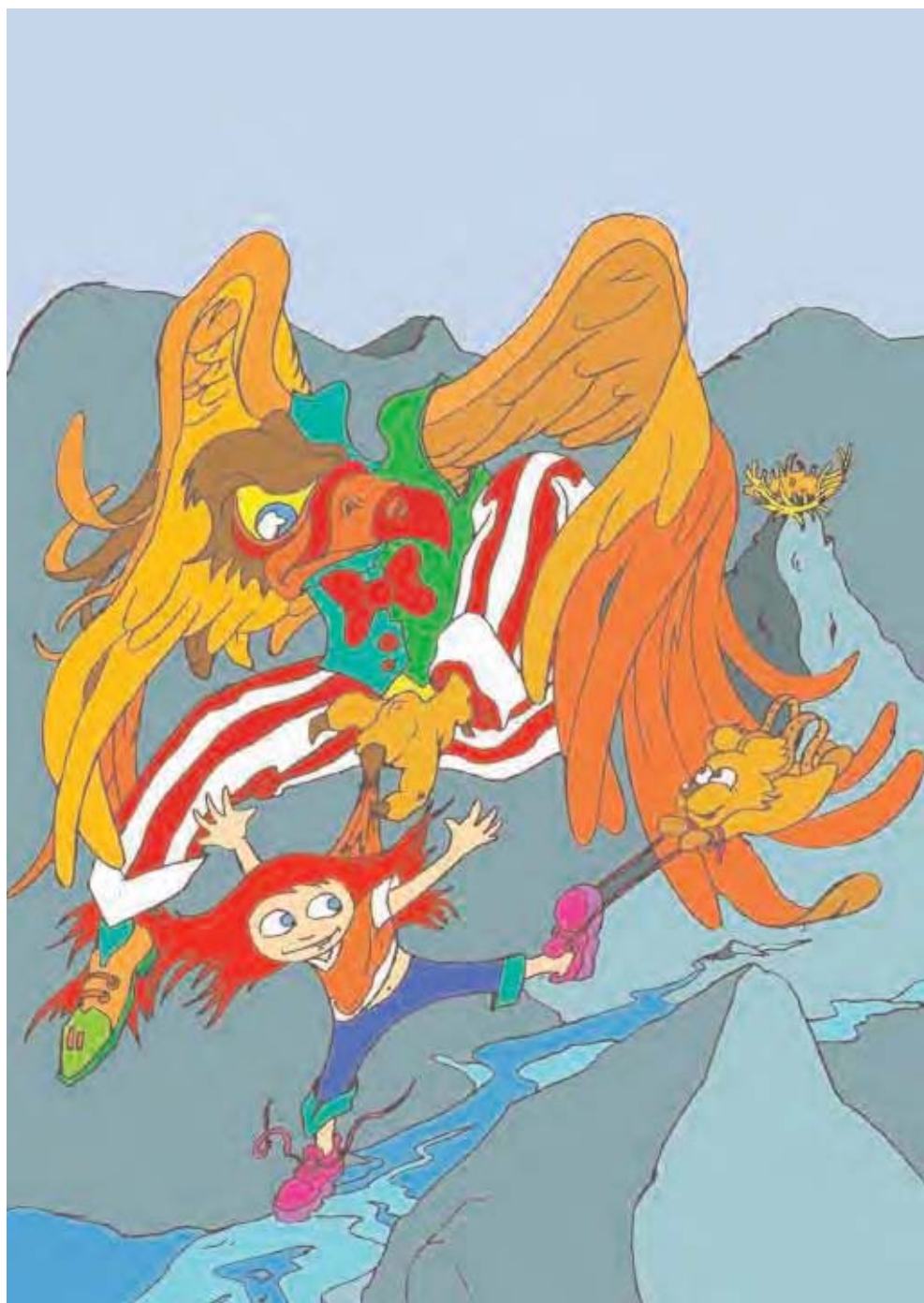
'Oh nonsense,' they chirped sulkily. 'That stupid doctor doesn't understand anything.'

'That's enough of that tone, too!' scolded the eagle. 'I've already told you about that. Now I really have to go or else I'll be late for work.'

'Work, work, always work. And when will you find time for us?' snarled the eagle with the multi-coloured hairdo.

'I'd also like us to spend time together, but you know I'm very busy. When you're older you'll understand. Right, I'm off.'

He spread his wings, flapped them hard and flew off. The eaglets grumbled a bit more, then shrugged their shoulders and got back to their work without paying Anne the least attention.



Red started losing patience. More than half an hour had passed and the two eaglets hadn't thought about her, still being completely absorbed in their work. Whatever else, it would be better to be eaten then and there, rather than have to wait like that, stuck in a cramped cage.

'Hello!' she cried.

The two eaglets looked at each other, confused.

'Ollie, was that you?' asked the one with the ring.

'I was just about to ask you the same thing,' replied the other one.

'Hey, look over here again!' Anne shouted.

'Wow, talking breakfast! My, there's a surprise!' the eaglets exclaimed, completely shocked.

'Well, not for me, it isn't,' said Anne. 'Listen, can we talk a minute without playing prisoners and guards? It's really cramped in here.'

'Hey, hey, slow down a bit. First tell us what you are: a talking sheep? A robot? An alien?'

'A human, what else?'

'A human? What's that?' asked the eaglet with the rainbow hairdo.

'Hold on, I'll look it up,' said the other one. He quickly typed something into the computer and soon after exclaimed, 'Hey, check this out! It looks like Papá has caught something really interesting this time. Look what the computer says.'

The eaglet read out loud: '“Human: an intelligent creature on two legs without feathers.” This is a bit of luck. At last, something interesting. What do you think?'

'An intelligent creature, is that right?' said his brother thoughtfully, then he turned towards Anne. 'Hey, you, if you're so intelligent then why are you in the cage?'

'I was wondering that myself,' she replied sullenly.

'Allow me to help you with the answer,' added the eaglet with mock politeness.

'If you insist.'

'Because we are cleverer than you!' bellowed the eaglet triumphantly. 'The clever one eats the stupid one; simple and logical.'

‘Hey, hey, don’t rush to conclusions,’ the backpack called out angrily. ‘We still don’t know who is the cleverer one here. The only thing that is certain is that we don’t want to eat you.’

‘Look at that, she’s not alone,’ said the eaglet, even more surprised. ‘Well, that’s even better. We won’t have to fight over how to share her.’

‘In any case, they’re quite a cheeky pair,’ said the other eaglet. ‘This could get really interesting. What do you think?’

‘I’m not hungry yet,’ replied the first one. ‘And no, I wouldn’t mind having some fun.’

He turned to Anne and looked her up and down.

‘Hey you, the intelligent one, show us what you’re made of.’

‘What do you want me to show you?’

‘That you’re smarter than us, what else? Okay, let’s see what you can do. Give us some problem to solve, make us sweat. We’re dying for intelligence tests.’

They watched her impatiently as if they were expecting her to perform a trick at any moment. Anne scratched her head in thought.

‘Hmm, this won’t be easy. Can’t you let me out first? I can’t think in such a small space.’

‘Yeah, right,’ said the eaglet disappointedly. ‘And then we chase you round the whole nest, is that it? If that’s all you can show for your intelligence, then you’re a lost cause. Hurry up, you haven’t got much time. Intelligent or not, if you don’t come up with something interesting soon, we’ll start munching you.’

They turned around and busied themselves with their work again. In the silence only the quiet ticking of the clock could be heard. Tick-tock, tick-tock; time’s running out, time’s running out ...

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Game of Riddles

Anne was starting to sweat. So far she had managed to hide her fear, but now she was suddenly feeling quite helpless. The eaglets' cold, clear eyes signalled clearly that you couldn't joke with them. The very thought of what awaited her if she didn't think of something interesting quickly made her feel quite ill.

'Backpack, have you thought of anything?' she asked, turning to her friend.

'Not yet,' replied the backpack, 'but I get the feeling we're forgetting something ... Riddles, riddles... Didn't we..?'

'The book!' exclaimed Anne. 'Madame Owl's book! You've still got it, haven't you?'

'Good grief, I completely forgot about it!' cried the backpack slapping her forehead. 'Let me check. Thankfully, the ants really did return everything. Here it is.'

She took out the big book of riddles and handed it to Anne. The expression on her face suddenly changed.

'But we forgot that it won't open. What do we do now?'

Anne looked around helplessly. The rusty button on the book still refused to budge. No matter how hard she tried it just wouldn't open.

'We're running out of time, we have to think of something fast,' said the backpack, starting to get anxious. 'Otherwise these two will soon get hungry. What can we use to loosen the button?'

'Oil. Motor oil,' suggested Anne with some uncertainty.

'That's a great idea! But where can we find motor oil? Wait, wait a second, I've got it. Watch me pull a fast one on those two.'

'Hey, boys!' she yelled at the eaglets. 'I'm really thirsty. Have you got anything for me to drink?'

'There's some lemonade in the kitchen, but I can't be bothered to walk over and get it,' said the eaglet with the ring. 'Besides, you'll be okay without anything to drink. We're going to eat you soon anyway.'

'Ugh, lemonade!' said the backpack, pretending to be disgusted. 'How can you drink such muck? I'm talking about motor oil, boys. That's all I ever drink!'

'What?!' the eaglets cried in utter surprise. 'Did you say motor oil? Never! Prove it!'

They started rummaging through the shelves and soon brought her a can of oil. Anne took it and gave it to the backpack with a shaky hand. She still didn't understand what her friend was up to.

To her great surprise, the backpack accepted the can without the slightest hesitation, brought it up to her lips and started pouring in the motor oil as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The two eaglets, no less baffled than Anne, looked at her aghast.

'Mmm, that's a bit better,' said the backpack, belching loudly. 'May I keep the can? I really enjoyed it.'

'Well... yes, I mean, no...that's our last can,' stammered the eaglets, their eyes wide with astonishment.

'That's a shame,' said the backpack, handing back the can. 'You have wonderful oil here.'

The eaglets moved away, still staring at the backpack with stunned expressions. It seemed their appetites had shrunk a good deal.

'How did you do that trick?' whispered Anne excitedly. 'Where did you pour it?'

'In one of my pockets there's an old handkerchief,' replied the backpack quietly. 'I just poured a little oil on it, that's all. Anyway, I'm waterproof on the inside, so don't worry. At worst I'll smell a bit for a day or two, but there won't be a trace after that. All right, now, hurry up; we don't have much time. Here's the hanky; rub the button with it. Let's hope we're lucky.'

Anne followed her advice. After just a few strokes, the button began to shine like new. She carried on rubbing until it eventually gave way. Click! At last!

'We're saved!' whispered Red. 'Now we'll show them who they're dealing with!'

She started turning the pages impatiently. It turned out that the book contained lots of different kinds of puzzles and brainteasers which were divided into groups ranging from easy to very hard. They quickly skipped the first section with the easiest tasks and concentrated on the more difficult ones towards the end. Anne could hardly contain her excitement.

'Wow, just look at all that!' she whispered as she read through the titles of the various sections. 'Here we are: "Lateral Thinking Puzzles". Oh my, they really are difficult! I could never solve them if I tried! Not a single one! It's a good job we've got the solutions here. And look at these "Mathematical Brainteasers".

I'm not even going to try those, and I hate maths anyway. Hmm, these aren't bad either: "The World's Best Riddles". Honestly, we just can't lose. Those smart alecks are going to collapse with shock when we start asking them these riddles. Ha, ha, ha, I'll laugh myself sick! Look how the tables have turned now!

'Hey, boys, are you ready for the question and answer game?' Anne asked as she turned towards the two young birds of prey. Her eyes twinkled. 'I've got some riddles and puzzles here that'll make you sweat.'

They looked at her in surprise.

'You really think so? Okay, try us.'

'How about this one?' she said casually. 'Eskimos are very good hunters but they never hunt penguins. Why?'

The brothers smirked and quickly typed something into the computer. Before a minute had passed they were smiling triumphantly.

'Here's the answer: because Eskimos live at the North Pole and penguins at the South Pole,' they said. 'Ha, you reckon that's difficult! You're not going to get far with riddles like that!'

Anne was flabbergasted. Unbelievable! They were using a computer; that was plain cheating!

'But that... that's not fair!' she almost burst into tears of outrage. 'You're using a computer. Aren't we supposed to be playing by the rules?'

'Ah yes, the rules,' grinned the eaglets. 'We make up the rules ourselves. You didn't think we were going to let you win, did you? As we told you a short while ago: the clever ones eat the stupid.'

'Oh no! You can't do that!' yelled Anne, flying into a rage. 'We're going to play honestly or we not going to play at all. If that's the way you want it, I quit!'

'Are you trying to tell us that it's time for breakfast? Come to think of it, I am feeling a bit peckish,' said the eaglet with the ring, rubbing his belly. 'I think you should try once more. Just when it starts to get interesting, we have to eat you. Boy, this is getting boring!'

Anne chewed her lips. In her anger she had forgotten that she was in no position to argue.

'Very well,' she muttered through her teeth, 'we'll see who has the last laugh.'

Then she continued, 'Here's one more question for you: "He who makes it doesn't want it; he who buys it doesn't need it; he who needs it doesn't know he's using it. What is it?"'

This time it took them a little longer to solve, but the effect was no less disappointing than the first time. As proud as peacocks, the two eaglets finally came up with the answer.

‘A coffin. Hmm, that one was a bit better. Well, well, this is really getting interesting.’

Anne had become really angry by now. Furiously, she started firing questions like a machine gun, but no matter how much she tried she wasn’t able to stump the eaglets even once. Word games, mathematical problems, and riddles followed one after the other, each one quite different, more difficult, and more interesting than the last. But they were all useless in the face of the computer’s unfailing logic. Gradually, Anne’s self-control started to fall apart. A cold sweat trickled off her brow, she became stiff with fear and her voice – at first strong and confident – grew weaker and weaker. And if that wasn’t enough, the questions themselves started to dry up.

‘No, this isn’t going to work,’ she said wearily. ‘We can’t compete with that computer. We’ve got to think of something else.’

‘Yes, but what?’ asked the backpack. ‘I can’t think of anything.’

‘I don’t know why, but it seems to me we’re losing because we’re playing according to their rules. To beat them we’ll have to change the whole game, otherwise we won’t stand a chance.’

‘Well, that’s easy to say, but you can see for yourself there are no rules here. We’re playing tricks and so are they. But right now they’re doing a lot better than us.’

‘But the game isn’t without rules altogether. It’s all quite logical. We’re just asking questions whose answers are too easy to find – for a computer at any rate. To defeat it we’ll have to ask something extremely difficult, or’

‘Or what?’

‘Or something extremely simple. Something a computer wouldn’t understand. Right, let’s think. What wouldn’t a computer understand?’

‘I have no idea,’ replied the backpack, rather confused. ‘Maybe something about complicated things that no one understands. Something like....what d’you call it, “astroblobby” or “extrasensia” or whatever.’

‘Rubbish! Forget all that complex stuff. Let’s think of something simple. Something even a child would understand.’

‘Now you seem to be the one who’s confused!’ cried the backpack. ‘If a child can understand it then why would it be difficult for a computer? You’ve seen for yourself even the most difficult problems don’t slow it down.’

‘That’s just the point: those questions are exactly at its level. We have to think of something else, something that’s human not computerish. Hold on, let me think a second.’

Anne leafed through the book absent-mindedly then suddenly jumped up and started waving her arms around wildly.

‘Hey backpack, look at this! We’ve been so blind! The solution has been right under our noses all along, and we just didn’t see it! Read the name of this section.’

‘J-O-K-E-S,’ the backpack spelled out loud. ‘Okay, what about it? Just jokes, tall stories, that’s all.’

‘But that’s exactly what we need! Funny stuff, jokes, nonsense – the sort of things the computer would never understand. We were so hasty we overlooked the one way we could have beaten it straight off. We shouldn’t be asking it questions that make sense, but ones that are nonsense! It won’t know what to do with them!’

‘Hmm, I don’t know if it’s so simple. Maybe you’re right, but...’

‘Whatever. Just give me the questions, there’s no time to waste.’

‘Right,’ whispered the backpack, ‘try this one: “What has six legs, three ears, four tusks and two trunks?”’

Anne repeated the question out loud and lo and behold the eaglets immediately began scratching their heads in thought. They sat in front of the computer for a long time, then one of them went up to the two friends and said rather uncertainly, ‘Well, that question doesn’t make any sense. The computer searched all the logical possibilities. Such a thing doesn’t exist. There’s no answer to your question.’

‘Wrong!’ replied Anne triumphantly, ‘The answer is: “An elephant with spare parts!”’

‘But that’s... that’s just nonsense!’ cried the eaglet angrily. ‘What sort of a question is that? Is that some stupid joke?’

‘A joke maybe, but stupid it isn’t,’ snapped the backpack. ‘I for one find it rather clever. If it’s so stupid why couldn’t you answer it?’

The eaglets were quite embarrassed.

'Because... because... Very well, ask another question. We'll win in the end, you'll see. No one has ever beaten us at this game.'

'My pleasure!' said Anne confidently. 'Here's your next question: "What is big and grey and spins and spins without ever stopping?"'

The two young birds of prey stared once again at the computer screen. Several minutes passed filled with great tension on both sides. But it was clear that the youngsters were losing their confidence. The machine obviously couldn't help them with questions like these, but they weren't in the habit of giving up too easily. This time they even tried to find the answer themselves, but had to give up finally.

'Here's your answer: "An elephant stuck in the washing machine",' cried Anne victoriously. 'So, would you like me to ask the next question?'

'Okay, but this is the last one!'

"What is big and grey and weighs a ton and a half?"

'An elephant, an elephant!' exclaimed the eaglets one after the other. 'Game over! We win!'

'Hey, hey, hey, not so loud,' said Anne, interrupting them coolly. 'You're wrong! Go on, have another go. I'm not going to be petty about it.'

The eaglets looked at each other dismayed. They were clearly very unpleasantly surprised, but didn't want to admit it.

'A rhinoceros,' said the first eaglet unsurely.

'No.'

'A hippopotamus.'

'Nor that.'

'A crocodile.'

'You're starting to guess, boys. The way you're going, you'll soon reach the dinosaurs.'

'Alright then, you tell me the answer,' muttered the eaglet sadly.

'A mouse that seriously needs to think about going on a diet!' replied Anne in a matter-of-fact manner. 'Simple and logical, just the way you like it.'

'Rubbish!' the eaglet with the multi-coloured hairdo hissed angrily. 'You're not playing by the rules. Your questions don't make any sense!'

'Well, well, you've suddenly started thinking about rules,' said Anne with a mocking look. 'And you're allowed to use the computer, aren't you? As there are

no rules in this game, everyone can do as they like. See how things come back to you: don't throw stones if you live in a glass house!

'Keep your beak shut or it'll get worse!' the eaglet growled threateningly. 'I'm getting very angry.'

'So you'll win, but you'll never win over!' exclaimed Red, without realising she was repeating the words of a famous wise man. 'As far as I remember, this game was about who is the cleverest not the strongest.'

The eaglet's patience seemed to snap at those words. He went straight towards them and started unlocking the cage, clearly without good intent. Anne and the backpack were trembling. Luckily, at that moment the other eaglet pulled him aside and whispered something in his ear. The two friends watched closely, wondering what would become of them. The conversation turned into a quarrel; the eaglets obviously couldn't reach an agreement. For a long time neither of them would give in. Finally, the eagle with the coloured hairdo nodded in agreement and approached the cage with a menacing look at the two friends.

'Hey, you, the intelligent one, what's your name?'

'Anne.'

'I'm Ollie and that's my brother Ullie. We are inventors.'

'Aha.'

'Well, you gave us a hard time with your questions.' He forced a smile. 'Those elephant riddles are really very... funny.'

'Come on, Ollie, out with it! There's no point in beating about the bush, she wasn't born yesterday,' Ullie called from the corner.

'Okay, okay... We've decided it would be a shame to eat a toy that is so interesting. You're really rather good. That's why we're offering to let you stay with us. Sort of like a favourite toy. We're going to call our father now and ask if he'll let us keep you. If you agree, of course.'

'What?' asked Anne, bristling with anger. 'Like a toy? I'm not a toy, I'm a human, I've already told you that.'

'Human or not, to us you're a toy,' said the eaglet impatiently. 'Make your mind up fast. I'm tired of waiting!'

'As if I have any choice!' Anne muttered under her breath. Then she added out loud, 'Well, if that's the way it is, I accept. Will you let me out of the cage now?'

The eaglets jumped for joy and quickly unlocked the cage. Then Ullie ran to the other room to call his father. Not long after, however, he returned looking rather disappointed.

‘Papá won’t let us. It’s the same old thing, “don’t play with your food!”. He says that if he finds her here when he gets back he’ll stop us watching TV altogether.’

Anne shuddered. Now what?

‘I just told you, didn’t I, she’s not interesting enough to get in a quarrel with Papá,’ said Ollie. ‘Anyway, there’s still a lot more time before he gets back from work. We’ll be long bored of her by then. Big deal, one toy! And then, if we have to, we’ll just eat her, so what’s the problem?’

‘Look, we’ve got a little more work here,’ he said to Anne. ‘Meanwhile you can wander wherever you want around the nest. And it would be a good idea for you to think about how you’re going to entertain us later – we’re two very bored kids. As soon as you start to bore us you’re done for!’

‘You want me to entertain you?’ scowled Red. ‘Can’t you find something more interesting? Television, for example?’

‘If only!’ replied Ullie. ‘Papá won’t let us watch it while he’s away. They don’t show enough violence; he’s worried it’ll dull our predatory instincts. The remote control has been locked up in his desk for a week now.’

‘Can’t you try to find some other amusement – outside in the forest, for instance?’

The eaglets exchanged embarrassed glances.

‘Um... er...’

‘That’s the problem, we still can’t fly,’ admitted an ashamed Ollie. ‘Papá has already put off our flying lessons three times. Our wings are too weak.’

‘That’s why we ordered the hang glider,’ added Ullie.

‘What hang glider?’

‘The big box in the corner. That’s a hang glider kit.’

‘What do you need that gear for? You’re birds, for heavens sake!’

‘We hoped it would help us learn how to fly by ourselves and surprise Papá.’

‘And what happened?’

‘Oh, well, just trouble really! Those crooks from the firm cheated us. The fabric covering was missing so we couldn’t put it all together.’

‘Is that so? What a shame!’ said Anne mechanically while desperately trying to think of what to do next. ‘Well, okay, I’ll go and have a look around.’

Anne and the backpack were sitting in the eagles' kitchen – a spacious nest filled with beautiful light wood furniture. The food they had found in the fridge remained untouched on the table. The two had lost all hope. They had just a few more hours of life left; there was no doubt about that.

'It's quite clear,' said the backpack decisively, 'we've got to escape. There's no time to lose!'

'Escape, but how?' asked Anne desperately. 'Don't you see, only birds can fly away from the nest.'

'Remember what Madame Owl said? She saw you flying like a bird.'

'Of course I remember. I've been thinking about that the whole time. It's just that I can't come up with anything.'

'That... that... gland hider... or whatever it's called...'

'Hang glider.'

'Yeah, that flying machine. Maybe there's some way we can fix it.'

'What are you talking about? The eagles aren't going to let us near it, let alone tinker with it!'

'Yeah, you're right. So we're going to have to get rid of them.'

Anne gasped in astonishment.

'Get rid of the eaglets? Are you crazy? How are we going to get rid of them?'

'I don't know myself yet, but we have to think of something. Otherwise, you know what's in store for us, don't you? Alright, let's put our heads together; what would make the eaglets leave the nest?'

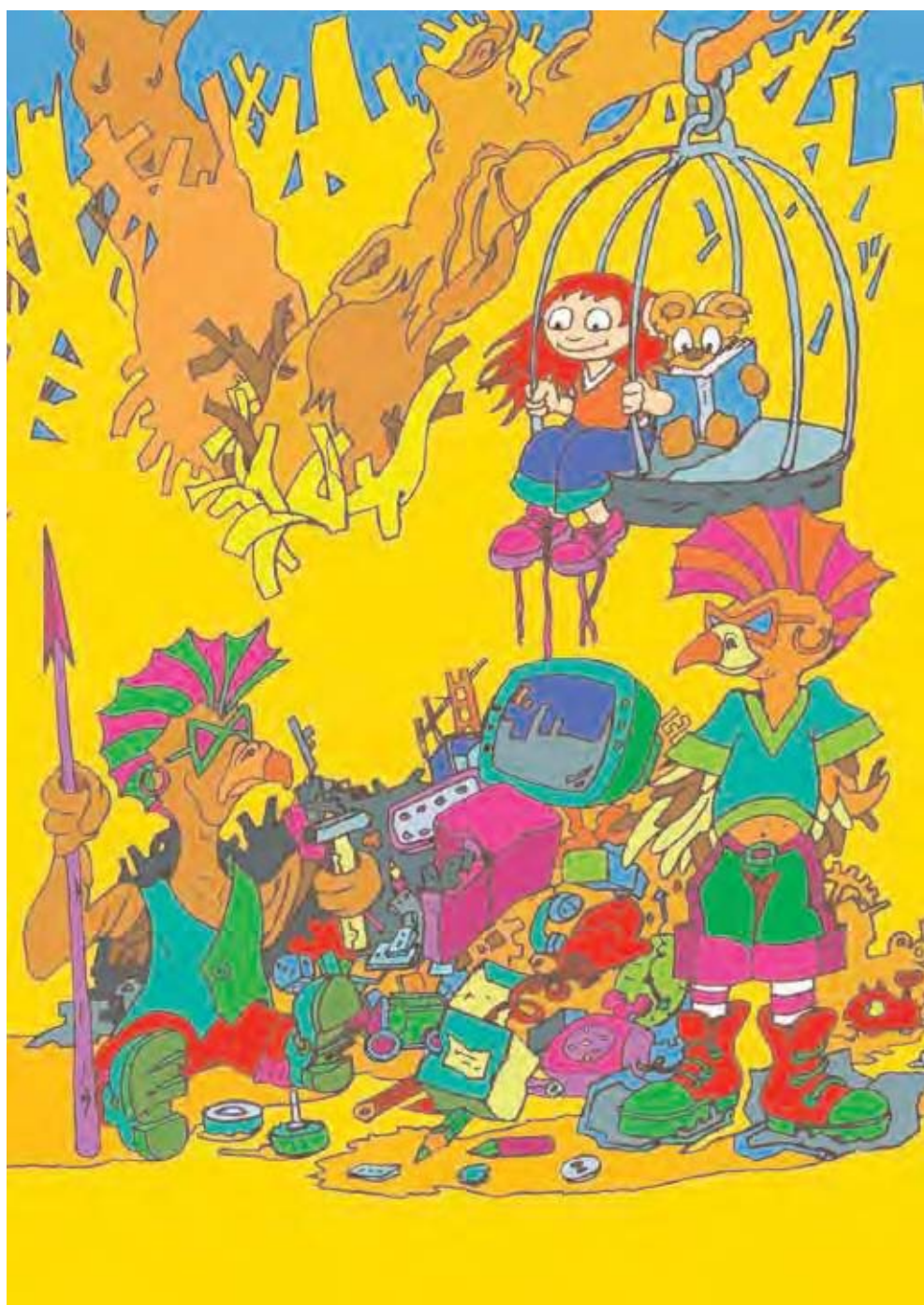
'How would I know? Something interesting enough to lure them outside ... Hey, wait a minute! Did you see how their eyes lit up when they spoke about the flying lesson? Yeah, now I remember: their father told them their lesson would be on the seventeenth. Do you know today's date?'

'The calendar in the workshop said the fifteenth.'

Again Anne was impressed at how observant the backpack was. She hadn't even noticed there was a calendar in the workshop.

'That means there are two days to go,' she continued. 'Darn it! In two days there won't even be a bone left of us.'

'Maybe if we somehow managed to change the date, do you think that would make them rush outside?'



‘Excellent idea! We just have to tear two pages off the calendar. That isn’t difficult at all.’

The backpack frowned. ‘Hmm, it’s not as easy as that. It’s not an ordinary paper calendar, it’s an electric one. I don’t know how to put it forward. Besides, the eaglets aren’t going to let us touch it.’

‘So, we’re back to square one. Whatever it takes, we’ve got to get the eaglets to leave the workshop. Then we’ll have the chance to work out what to do with the calendar. And then, if we manage to lure them outside, we can work on the hang glider. It all looks very tricky to me, but at least we’ve got some sort of plan now. What do you think?’

‘So far, so good. Now let’s work through it. First, we have to lure the eaglets out of the workshop. Let’s go and look at the other nests, we might find something there.’

It turned out that the whole nest complex had four more rooms, with each new nest connected by a handy rope bridge. The next room was a luxurious living room filled with modern furnishings – a massive writing desk, a giant leather sofa and a television on a one-legged stand.

‘The television!’ cried Anne. ‘If we manage to turn on the television half our work is done. We just have to find the remote control the eagles were talking about. What did they say?’

‘It’s locked in their father’s desk.’

‘Yep, the drawer is definitely locked,’ said Anne, having carefully examined the desk. ‘The remote control is sure to be inside. I just wonder where the key is. What do you reckon?’

‘The old eagle probably carries it with him.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I thought. This isn’t looking good.’

‘But maybe...’

‘What?’

‘I was just wondering whether there’s a spare key hidden somewhere around here. With any luck, I mean.’

Anne looked at her for a while, then gave a big smile.

A mad search began. The two friends searched every inch of the room, down the sides of the couch, even behind the paintings on the wall, but in vain – there was no trace of the key.

The children's room was next. Red felt right at home there because the eaglets' nest was just like her own room. Broken toys were strewn everywhere. An unlucky clown was hanging by his neck from the lamp, and torn books covered the floor. The life-size figure of a knight wearing an enormous cloak stood in the centre of the room surrounded by overturned chairs.

The backpack took one glance, shrugged her shoulders and turned back.

'There's no point in searching here,' she said, shaking her head. 'It's a familiar sight; we know it only too well, don't we?'

Anne looked at her with a guilty expression, but didn't say a word.

In sharp contrast the bedroom looked very clean and tidy. A huge four-poster bed took up most of the room. Next to it stood a dressing table with lots of little drawers and a mirror. An ancient wall clock tick-tocked rhythmically. They hunted for a long while without finding anything.

'We're running out of time,' exclaimed Anne nervously. 'We'll have to think of something fast. What time is it?'

'10.55,' the backpack replied automatically, then she looked back at the clock and started scratching her head.

'Anne, look over there,' she added a moment later. 'Do you notice anything strange?'

Anne looked at the clock, but didn't notice anything in particular.

'The cuckoo's door... Can you see, it's half open?'

'Okay, so what?'

'It looks to me as if there's something in it. Let's have a look.'

She climbed on a footstool, reached out and opened the clock door. Her face suddenly lit up.

'There it is, I can see it!' she cried excitedly, reaching in and taking out a small key on a chain.

'At last!' sighed Anne with relief. 'I was beginning to think we'd never find it.'

Chapter Twenty-Three: Flying Lesson

‘Hey, how dare you!’ Ollie’s eyes nearly popped out in surprise. ‘Have you any idea what will happen if Papá finds out someone’s been in his desk without his permission? Ullie, come and see what the new toy has done.’

Anne and the backpack were lounging on the comfortable leather sofa and continued staring at the television without paying any attention to the eaglets.

‘Listen, you’re going too far,’ said Ollie timidly. ‘I’m serious; if Papá finds out about this we’re in big trouble. He doesn’t let us get away with things like this.’

‘What daredevils you are!’ sneered Anne. ‘You’re not afraid your father can read your thoughts, are you?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘As long as you two don’t start blabbing about this he’ll never know you watch television while he’s gone, that’s what I mean! You just have to be careful he doesn’t catch you. Do I have to show you how to do that, too?’

The eaglets looked at each other in shame.

‘Here’s the key to your father’s desk,’ Anne continued self-confidently. ‘It was hidden in the big clock in the bedroom. Just make sure you put everything back in its place afterwards, and what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. It’s as simple as that.’

‘Ullie, we’ve got to be really careful with this toy. She seems too clever to me. Why don’t we just eat her now?’ suggested Ollie cautiously.

‘Nonsense!’ replied Ullie sharply. ‘This place is a lot more interesting with her around. Let’s leave her to wander about a bit; she can’t escape anyway.’

‘Give me the remote control,’ he said, turning to Anne. ‘The key, too. Now get lost! And mind what you get up to from now on otherwise something might happen to you. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

The two friends had been waiting for just that. They dashed off right away, heading back to the workshop.

‘Hurry!’ urged Anne, ‘we’ve got to see to the calendar.’

The calendar device had two parts: the clock time was displayed on the upper section, and the date on the lower. The numbers were on metal plates that flipped over.

Red grabbed a heavy screwdriver that was lying on the worktable.

‘Wait, what are you planning to do?’ cried the backpack, stopping her. ‘Are you going to force it open? The eaglets will notice what happened right away; they’re not stupid. We need a better idea.’

Anne shrugged her shoulders without saying anything and started prodding the calendar.

‘Listen, that’s not going to get us anywhere!’ continued the backpack. ‘Please put the screwdriver down! We’ve got to think of something; forcing it won’t help.’

‘Alright, if you insist,’ Anne agreed reluctantly. ‘Okay, give me some ideas then.’

‘We’ve got to... we’ve got to find another way. Maybe we could get the clock to speed up. Then the calendar will turn, too. Isn’t there a button for setting the time?’

They examined the clock-calendar once again but couldn’t find anything. Meanwhile, Anne was thinking hard.

‘Any ideas?’ asked the backpack, looking at her hopefully.

‘I was just wondering about speeding it up like you said. In school there was a clock and the boys would fix it so the classes would finish faster, you know what I mean?’

‘Oh, the little devils!’ grinned the backpack. ‘And how did they do that?’

‘That’s the problem, I don’t know. Someone told me, but I’ve forgotten.’

‘Try to remember! It’s very important, everything depends on it!’

‘I’ll do my best.’

She put her head in her hands and became lost in silent thought. The backpack waited patiently.

‘Darn it!’ exclaimed Anne angrily, ‘It’s such a simple thing and I just can’t remember it! Okay, forget it. Let’s look at the calendar again. Maybe we’ll think of something else.’

Almost an hour passed and they still hadn’t come up with any new ideas. Anne was beginning to lose her patience.

‘To hell with it! As we can’t think of anything better, we might as well force it rather than wait around here for them to eat us. Pass me the screwdriver, please.’

‘Okay,’ the backpack agreed glumly, ‘but I’m sure nothing will come of it.’

Anne grabbed the screwdriver. Then she stopped and looked at it carefully. There were a number of little metal rivets sticking to the blade.

‘Hmm, what’s that?’

‘Nothing special, it’s just that the screwdriver is magnetic. It makes it easier to use.’

‘Magnetic!’ yelled Anne. ‘That’s it, I’ve got it! The boys sped up the clock with a magnet! You put a magnet near it and the hands move faster. Changing the calendar can’t be any different. Quick, let’s look! The eaglets are sure to have a magnet here somewhere.’

Luckily, on one of the shelves there really was a big magnet in the shape of a horseshoe. Anne grabbed it, ran over to the clock and held it up to the glass in front of the calendar, while worriedly biting her lip.

‘It’s not working,’ she groaned. ‘The numbers aren’t turning.’

‘Try putting the magnet under it,’ suggested the backpack. ‘The plates flip over downwards.’

Anne tried again and lo and behold the numbers on the calendar changed with a loud click. Once more and the calendar showed the seventeenth.

‘Hooray!’ cried the two friends, hugging each other for joy, ‘We’ve done it!’

‘Right, but we’ve got to be careful,’ advised the backpack when they had calmed down a bit. ‘They mustn’t suspect anything at all.’

‘Don’t worry,’ replied Anne. Then she cleared her throat and shouted in the direction of the living room, ‘Hey boys, do you know what day it is today?’

‘There’s a calendar in the workshop, see for yourself,’ shouted Ullie absent-mindedly.

‘Ah, thank you!’

Anne waited a moment before adding innocently, ‘Oh look, it’s the seventeenth already. Now why was I thinking it was only the sixteenth?’

The two friends waited anxiously. At first they heard nothing, then Ullie suddenly exclaimed, ‘What was that? Hey, say the date again!’

‘The seventeenth. I just told you.’

All of a sudden the eaglets forgot about television and everything else. They tore into the workshop and stared at the calendar with unbelieving eyes.

‘She’s right! It’s the seventeenth, the date for our first flying lesson.’

‘Oh, Papá’s forgotten about it. Work, work, work; that’s all he ever thinks about!’

‘Quick, let’s phone him! He’s not going to get out of it so easily this time! Just watch!’

They ran out again. The two friends heard them switch off the TV, and then Ollie's voice talking excitedly on the phone.

'Papá, haven't you forgotten something? What am I trying to say? Well, nothing in particular, except that for all your big promises you forgot that we're supposed to have our first flying lesson today. No, there's no mistake. I just looked at the calendar. I'm serious... No, I'm not joking. Really! Yes, yes, yes! It definitely says the seventeenth. ...Well, then your calendar must be out of order. Oh, Papá, you always find some excuse when it comes to us. No, that's not fair, a promise is a promise! Fine then, if you can't, then Ollie and I will go by ourselves... Well, it's quite simple, we're going to start flying without you. I don't care what happens! Pardon? Okay, we'll wait for you here.'

'Now we've got to hide ourselves as fast as we can,' whispered the backpack. 'The eagle won't be too pleased to find us here, that's for sure.'

'The hang glider box,' suggested Anne. 'There's room there for both of us.'

The box was definitely big enough for them both. They hurriedly squeezed themselves inside and waited with bated breath. Anne's heart was pounding fit to burst.

Not long after came the sound of the eagle's angry voice yelling at the kids in the living room. A moment later, the workshop was shaking with his heavy footsteps.

'How did she disappear? What is this nonsense? What do you mean you don't know? Your breakfast has disappeared and the calendar is showing the wrong date! You would think we're being haunted by ghosts! Well, I think you deserve a good hiding rather than a flying lesson!'

'But Papá, we really didn't do anything!' chirped the eaglets. 'Look, the calendar says it's the seventeenth!'

'Listen, stop all this nonsense at once or I'll get really angry! You're lucky I'm in a hurry otherwise I'd give your feathers a good hiding. But don't imagine that's the end of it; we'll speak about this again tonight! Right, now get a move on, I've got an important meeting in an hour. And do exactly as I tell you or else there'll be trouble. Do you understand?'

'Yes, yes, Papá,' the eaglets shouted excitedly.

'Alright, let's go! And watch out for the wind. Don't get too far away from me. We'll just fly close to the nest to start with. Come up to the top platform as it's easier to take off from there.'

The three birds' footsteps faded into the distance. Anne and the backpack waited a little longer then cautiously stuck their heads out of the box. Once they were sure they were alone they jumped out of their hiding place, quickly took out the hang glider parts and started planning what to do with them.

The construction turned out to be very straightforward. All they had to do was join several aluminium poles in the shape of a triangle. Unfortunately, the material that was supposed to cover it really was missing, just as the eaglets had said. Once again, the two friends were forced to find another solution.

'We'll have to find something to cover it – some sort of cloth or sheet,' Anne cried, looking around anxiously. 'And fast, fast as possible. The last thing we need is for them to come back and find us here!'

They hastily began testing anything and everything that just might be what they needed: sheets, tablecloths, curtains, blankets... all in vain. Nothing worked. They had already begun to lose hope when suddenly the backpack sprang to her feet.

'I've got it!' she cried. 'Hold on, you'll see!'

She ran into the children's room and returned a moment later clutching a large piece of cloth.

'Will this do?' she asked proudly.

'It's just right! Where did you find it?'

'Simple. I left the poor knight naked,' replied the backpack casually. 'If he catches cold, too bad for him.'

Soon the hang glider was ready. As impatient as ever, Anne wanted to leave right away, but the backpack first took some tinned foods from the fridge then shoved some tools from the eaglets' workshop into her pocket.

'A good workman is known by his tools,' she said, patting her pocket. 'We don't know what's in store for us so we have to be ready for anything.'

The big moment had arrived. It wasn't at all easy dragging the hang glider to the top platform, especially along the swaying rope bridges. The two friends sweated a lot in the process but driven by the urgency of their situation they finally managed it somehow. Panting from the effort, they stood next to each other looking fearfully at the precipice below them. The wind blew mercilessly.

'Let's hope Madame Owl was right when she saw the future,' Anne pondered as she tightened the many straps around her waist and shoulders. 'Right, get on my back and hold tight so the wind doesn't blow you away.'

The backpack did as she was told right away.

‘One, two, three!’

For a moment they went into free fall and their hearts stopped. Not long after that, the wind caught the flying machine and carried it along the length of the canyon. Anne pulled at every available cord in an effort to steer the glider. It swerved here and there like a frisky colt, and once or twice it came within a hair’s breadth of the canyon wall. Yet their speed had slowed down a lot and Red even began to enjoy the flight.

‘Yee-haa! This is great!’ she cried joyfully. ‘Backpack, we’re flying just like birds!’

The backpack just muttered something incomprehensible. If you could have seen how she clung to Anne’s neck, you wouldn’t have imagined she was enjoying the ride.

It was time to think about landing. And at this point Anne suddenly realised she didn’t know how to deal with the glider. Luckily, the wind became calmer the lower they got, but the roaring waters of the river drew nearer with every passing moment and there was still no suitable place to land in sight. Little by little, she started to panic. She pulled at the cords wildly, but the only result was that she lost the little control she already had. The glider tossed about, the sky and ground started spinning like a kaleidoscope and then – wham! – the two friends crashed into the canyon wall. The trusty machine collapsed into pieces. Anne let out a mighty scream before falling painfully onto something hard and then everything went dark.

She slowly came to. She was lying on a sand bank she hadn’t noticed from the air. The backpack was gently dabbing at her face with a wet handkerchief.

‘What happened? Where are we?’ murmured Anne while trying to lift herself up onto her elbows. She felt a sharp pain in her side and fell back again with a loud groan.

‘Keep still, keep still!’ said the backpack. ‘We were lucky we were so low otherwise you wouldn’t have survived the fall. And the sand reduced the impact. Everything else is okay; we’ve managed to get to the bottom of the canyon. Now we’ve just got to find a way back to the forest.’

Anne gritted her teeth as she sat up painfully. She felt as if a thousand little needles were sticking into her. Gradually the pain faded. Nothing was broken, it seemed.

‘Hmm, it’s not going to be easy getting out of here,’ she said through clenched teeth as she stared at the churning waters of the river. ‘It would be dangerous to take a boat through here let alone try to swim.’

‘It could have been worse,’ suggested the backpack, pointing at something behind Anne.

Red turned and gasped in surprise. A few hundred metres upstream roared a tall waterfall shrouded in a haze of spray. Only then did she realise she had been aware of its roaring all along without noticing where it was coming from.

‘Now I remember,’ she said, unable to tear her eyes away from the awesome sight. ‘I saw it when I was back home, except then it looked like a toy. It’s completely different here. You’re right, it’s good we fell here and not farther upstream. We’d never have got out of here then.’

The backpack suddenly grabbed her and started pulling her aside until they were under cover of some overhanging rocks.

‘Ouch, that hurts!’ cried Anne. ‘What are you doing, have you gone mad?’

Instead of answering, the backpack silently pointed upwards. Anne stuck her head out cautiously and drew back at once. Against the background of the clear sky were the silhouettes of three birds, one big one and two smaller ones.

‘The eagles!’ she whispered, feeling her hair standing on end.

‘Let’s hope they haven’t seen us,’ muttered the backpack. ‘If they catch us again I don’t think they’ll show us much mercy.’

Luckily, the outlines of the birds soon disappeared. The two friends had not been spotted it seemed. Nevertheless, they waited a long while before coming out of hiding.

‘Now what? Any ideas?’ asked Anne while spitting in the river. ‘If you ask me, this doesn’t look good at all. Look how the water rages and tosses. I really don’t like the look of this place.’

‘We’ll have to play cowboys and Indians,’ said the backpack pulling out a long rope. ‘Can you throw a lasso?’



‘Darn it! There’s no point, it’s not working!’

Anne angrily threw the wet rope aside and sat down on the sand. This was the second day they had been trying to catch some of the passing driftwood without success. It turned out that lasso throwing wasn’t at all easy. No matter how much she tried she couldn’t reach any of the pieces of wood, let alone catch them. She was so annoyed that she almost fell in the water several times. The backpack was no longer even trying – her stubby paws weren’t meant for throwing rope. The two friends sat on the narrow sandbank feeling miserable and wondering what to do.

From above their heads came a piercing cry. Out of the corner of her eye Anne saw a giant shadow and she ducked in fright.

‘The eagles!’ she cried despairingly. ‘They’ve got us now!’

Several long seconds passed. She didn’t dare look up for fear.

‘Don’t worry, it isn’t the eagles,’ said the backpack. ‘But I’m not sure if that scoundrel is any better than them. Just look how vicious he looks.’

Red looked up warily.

On the rocks not far from them squatted an enormous seagull wearing a faded sailor’s waistcoat and trousers with only one leg, the other one being replaced by a roughly cut wooden leg. The old scoundrel’s neck was covered in numerous tattoos, and he sported a pair of big earrings. He took a pipe out of his pocket and started smoking it contentedly without paying the two friends any attention.

‘Stop wriggling!’ he exclaimed at one point, looking down at his single leg. ‘Jumping around isn’t going to change anything. If I were younger and not so hungry I might have let you go, but at my age I can’t afford to be choosy.’

Just then Anne noticed that something was squirming about under the seagull’s foot. The scoundrel had caught a small fish that was desperately trying to free itself.

‘Please let me go!’ squealed the fish. ‘I’m so small I won’t be enough for you. Dad will give you a big reward if you let me go, believe me!’

‘That’s what they all say!’ replied the seagull without loosening his grip. ‘Wait a bit I smoke my pipe and then it’s every man for himself.’

‘The rotten devil!’ said Anne. ‘Anyone can see the fish is too small. No, I can’t just turn a blind eye to this!’

She went and stood in front of the seagull with her hands on her hips looking him up and down defiantly.

‘Excuse me, sir!’ she yelled. ‘Don’t you have any thought for the little fish? It’s not enough to fill you up, so why don’t you throw it back?’

‘Hunger doesn’t ask questions. I haven’t eaten anything in two days, I have no choice,’ replied the seagull glumly. ‘And you’d better not go around poking your nose into other people’s business or else someone might end up tearing it off!’

Anne was about to give a sharp reply, but decided against it on second thought. She grunted angrily and returned to the backpack shaking her head.

‘The poor fish! So tiny and it has to die! That loathsome scoundrel won’t hear a word against it!’

‘Hmm, maybe all is not lost,’ said the backpack vaguely. ‘Let’s hope that bandit has at least a little reason in his head.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Anne curiously. ‘Come on, tell me what you’ve got in mind.’

‘You’ll see. Just give me a minute.’

The backpack walked up to the seagull and started shuffling from one foot to the other.

‘Good catch today, was it?’ she inquired cautiously.

‘Good? Yeah, right,’ the seagull grunted with contempt. ‘This tiddler isn’t even an appetiser. But hungry beggars can’t be choosers. Small fry is better than nothing at all.’

‘Well, yeah,’ agreed the backpack, ‘but it would’ve been better if there were five or six, wouldn’t it?’

‘And even better if fish grew on trees!’ snapped the seagull. ‘Stop blathering before I get angry! As if being hungry wasn’t enough, now I’ve got to listen to your nonsense on top of all that!’

‘Well, as you wish. I was simply wondering if you’d want to swap this little fish for five big ones. But since you’re in such a bad mood...’

She turned and started walking away.

The seagull suddenly stopped smoking his pipe.

‘Hey, shorty, wait a second! What did you say?’

‘I was just asking if you’d like to swap one small fish for five big ones,’ repeated the backpack readily.

‘Who would be so stupid as to suggest such a swap?’

‘Well me, for a start.’

She took a big tin out of her pocket. There was a picture of five large fish on its lid.

The scoundrel suddenly changed his tune. 'Hey, let me see that!' He reached out and grabbed the tin. 'Oh boy, it's true! What an idiot!'

Then he thought of something, and started examining the tin carefully.

'Hey, wait a moment! You're not trying to rip me off, are you? How do you open this thing?'

'Easy. You just have to pull the ring up. Like this.'

She showed him how to open the tin. Out came the delicious smell of fish.

'Okay, okay,' said the scoundrel impatiently, 'take the little one; he's yours.'

He quickly shoved his pipe back in his pocket, gave the backpack another suspicious glance, then spread his wings and flew away. Without wasting any time, she picked up the little fish, walked over to the water's edge and threw it into the river.

'It was almost a goner. The poor little thing had already gone quite limp.'

Anne watched her with admiration.

'You're incredible! If it wasn't for you, the poor fish would have died!'

'Good lord! Don't be so sure! Bad pennies always turn up!' a weak voice called from the river.

Anne looked around in surprise. The little fish had poked its head out of the water and was waving a fin at them.

'By the way, I want to thank you for saving my life!' it went on, bowing theatrically. 'Isn't that what they do in fairy stories? From what I know about that sort of thing I'm supposed to say, "If you need me just call and I will come!". I mean, I wouldn't want you to think I wasn't grateful. Okay, goodbye for now, I must dash.'

He turned and was on the point of leaving.

'Hey, wait!' yelled Anne, 'We really do need your help!'

'Is that so?' replied the fish, clearly annoyed. 'Right now? Can't it wait?'

'What do you mean "right now?"?' demanded Anne angrily. 'A promise is a promise. Why are you trying to get out of it?'

'I'm not trying to get out of it. I just thought that promises like that are only carried out in fairy tales,' snapped the fish. 'Say it then, but hurry! I've got movie tickets.'

‘We have to get out of here and go back to the forest. We have very urgent business, do you understand?’

‘Urgent, yeah right!’ muttered the fish angrily. ‘And is my film any less urgent? I’ll go mad if I miss the beginning. But okay, have it your way. I’ll see what I can do.’

Anne couldn’t believe her eyes. Never in her life had she seen such an enormous fish, and moreover, a fish with a golden crown. The river no longer looked so big and terrifying; it was as if the fish king’s gigantic body filled it from end to end.

‘Good day, mademoiselle,’ said the king, bowing elegantly. ‘I understand that my rogue of a son has once again got himself mixed up in some unpleasant business. Thank you very much for saving his life!’

‘So you’re... so you’re the father of the little fish. Is that a real crown?’

‘Oh, forgive me!’ said the fish king in an embarrassed tone. ‘I was under so much stress that I completely forgot to introduce myself. I am Carpio the Third, king of all fish. My son told me everything. It was very noble of you. Really, very noble indeed.’

‘You’re welcome,’ replied Anne. ‘It was only natural; we had to help. Besides, we also need help. We can’t get out of here, do you understand?’

‘That’s easily solved!’ cried the fish king. ‘Get on my back. I’ll carry you wherever you like.’

‘Isn’t that somehow wrong?’ asked Anne shyly. ‘You’re the king.’

‘Oh, that doesn’t matter, I’m an enlightened monarch,’ replied the enormous fish casually. ‘Get on, get on, we’ll be there in a flash.’

Anne and the backpack clung to the fish king’s enormous fins, closed their eyes in terror and let themselves be carried. However, the trip turned out to be much gentler and pleasanter than they had imagined. In less than five minutes they had already left the canyon and were travelling along the rocky shore beyond which the forest could be seen. Soon they stopped by the bank not far from the place where the eagle had grabbed Red.

‘Well, good luck!’ said the fish king, waving a fin at them. ‘And if you need me again, just call!’

‘Farewell, farewell!’ cried the two friends waving goodbye. ‘It was wonderful meeting you!’

A moment later and the fish king had vanished without trace.

‘Well, what a nice king!’ exclaimed Anne enthusiastically. ‘He makes you feel like becoming a mermaid. Anyway, I shall call him again someday.’

‘That’s not going to be so easy,’ said the backpack grumpily. ‘We forgot to ask where and how to find him. What’s more, look what’s waiting here for us.’

Anne turned and gasped in fright. Carved into the bark of a tree were the words: “Best wishes, Heino”.

Chapter Twenty-Four: The Ghost Mansion

Walking through this part of the forest was anything but fun. First of all, it was so dark that the two friends had to hold hands to keep from trembling with fear. Then, even worse, the forest was so unnaturally quiet. All that could be heard was the wind howling mournfully through the trees, and from time to time there was a nerve-racking creak as if one of the ancient trees were about to crash down on them. With heads down, they pressed on along the narrow path, their hearts pounding fit to burst.

Thoughts of Heino and his bandits gave them no peace. What could that scoundrel be planning? Would they manage to reach the ghost mansion? Or was there another trap waiting for them just round the bend? Every noise made them jump, each shadow looked like a spider. Their faces pale with dread, they made their way fearfully through the forest expecting to be attacked at any moment.

It was hardly any wonder that they were more relieved than afraid when they reached the tumbledown old building. There was no doubt – they were standing in front of the ghost mansion! Everything around them spoke of ruin and decay, as you would expect with a building full of ghosts. The grounds were choked with weeds and bushes taller than a human being. Ivy and wild creepers clung to the walls; one could only suppose that the gaping holes that looked like eye sockets in a skull were actually windows. The roof tiles were crumbling, and the chimney, too. Green lizards were now sauntering lazily across the flagstone paving of the once magnificent portico. Everything looked as if there had just been an earthquake. Anne could have jumped for joy. At last! At long last!

She walked up to the double door and reached out to open it. As always, the backpack preferred to wait.

‘Hmm, don’t you think it’s dangerous?’ asked the backpack. ‘I mean, what if the ghosts are at home?’

‘Quite honestly, I really don’t know,’ Red replied thoughtfully. ‘But when I remember how that voice saved us twice already... It wouldn’t just leave us in the lurch this time, would it?’

‘Yeah, well, good luck can sometimes run out. If I were you, I wouldn’t rush in before finding out more about these... beasts.’

‘That’s just great!’ exclaimed Anne. ‘We’ve been through all kinds of hardships to get here almost getting eaten in the process, and just when we’re on the threshold we’re supposed to wait? Oh no, not me! You can wait here if you want. But like it or not, I’m going in. It’s time to find out who those ghosts are.’

She reached out, took hold of the door handle and pressed down on it without any further hesitation. The huge door creaked mournfully and gently gave way. The house gave off a stale, musty smell. Anne poked her head cautiously through the opening.

‘What’s the matter? Can you see anything?’ the backpack whispered from behind her.

Anne didn’t reply. Her courage was rapidly disappearing. It was so dark inside that, try as she might, all she could see was the very dim outline of a large entrance hall. By contrast, the house was alive with sound, each different noise stranger than the last. No doubt some of them were the sounds of the wind in the chimney, but Red could swear that she also heard footsteps coming from all directions, doors opening and closing, and even a low whisper echoing around the high arches of the dark hall. For a moment she regretted her hasty decision, but there was no turning back. As white as a sheet, she slipped in through the narrow opening, stopped a few paces from the door and waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. The backpack pressed against her shaking like a leaf.

‘Wouldn’t it be better to open the door all the way?’ she suggested in a trembling voice. ‘We can’t see a thing in here.’

As if in reply there came a deafening crash that sounded like two sharp objects colliding with each other. Somewhere off to the side was a sudden flash of light that momentarily blinded them and left them screaming in terror. They covered their eyes and stood there frozen like rabbits caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. For a long while only the howling of the wind broke the silence. Eventually, Anne gathered the courage to look around.

They found themselves in a large entrance hall paved with marble. Directly in front of them was a wide staircase leading up to the next floor. Hanging on the wall to the left was an enormous tapestry so faded and dusty that its design was almost impossible to make out. To the right there was a fireplace in which a bright flame now burned, or more precisely, it was a strange green light that illuminated everything but gave off no heat at all. A door led off to the left and another to the right, and there were a number of doors up on the first floor.

Trying to ignore the pounding of her heart, Anne took a few hesitant steps into the hall. Would the ghosts appear? And would they attack her as they had done in the past? Or maybe they had already learned to leave her alone – hadn't the mysterious voice always saved her before?

'So, you've managed to get this far, have you?' hissed a voice dripping with malice and hatred. 'I suppose you think you can do as you please here, too.'

Red jumped and nearly let out a terrified scream.

As if out of thin air, there appeared on the broad staircase two ghosts they had never seen before. The first – a huge clown with blue hair, green skin and a face like a worm-eaten apple – was wearing peculiar multi-coloured clothes, a garish hat and shoes big enough to accommodate two more pairs of feet besides his own. The other one was obviously a she-ghost; a thin figure with bright purple hair and clad in pink from head to toe. Just one single leg emerged from beneath her skirt; it was long and slender like that of a rare wading bird. With a nimble movement she slipped down the banister, landed in front of Anne and started looking her up and down with a fierce gleam in her eye. The other ghost was content to watch the scene from a distance, but there was no doubt that if the need arose, he was able to move in no less speedy or agile a manner than his one-legged companion.

'And so the red-haired scourge has finally reached the ghost mansion,' continued the thin woman without looking directly at anyone. 'That can only mean that we can expect great misery and disaster here soon. What do you think Toto?'

'I don't know, but just looking at her makes me want to crush her to dust!' replied the green-faced ghost, nervously picking at the huge hole where his nose used to be. 'If the old one hadn't forbidden it, I would have smashed her like a miserable fly a hundred times already!'

'The old man, the old man, it's always the old man! It's as if we were children unable to decide things for ourselves!' roared someone from above. 'What are we waiting for, let's throw her out! We can afford to do that at least, can't we?'

Before she knew it Anne found herself surrounded by all the ghosts, including those she had already met – the bear with the bloody eye sockets, the bony woman with the cloak and the one-legged dinosaur. Although it was clear they had no intention of attacking her, their very presence was so dreadful that she was scared out of her wits. She was pierced by hateful stares from all sides. The air was throbbing with an unbearable tension.

‘Wait!’ cried the bony woman in the cloak. The hood fell back and for a brief moment a ghastly, shiny skull was exposed. She hurriedly put the hood back again as if she were ashamed of her appearance. ‘Wait, shouldn’t we explain? She hasn’t any idea of what’s going on.’

‘Never!’ roared the bear. ‘I’d sooner die than have something to do with that... that tormentor. Never, I say, never!’

He crossed the hall in a single bound, threw the door wide open and yelled, ‘Out! Get out before it’s too late!’

‘But I...,’ Anne started to say.

‘GET OUT!’ screamed the bear and even the walls trembled.

Without waiting for another invitation, the backpack grabbed her by the hand and they both ran out. The heavy door slammed behind them with a thunderous crash. Without realising what they were doing, they dashed off along the path – far, as far as possible away from that terrible place.

‘Oh, my feet are sore from all the walking. I soon won’t be able to go another step, and besides I think it’s time we talked.’

After a long while walking, or rather jogging, they had reached a fork in the path. Even the fear of Heino had faded after what they had just been through. The ghosts’ hatred was still a mystery, but it no longer seemed to be without reason. And this was weighing down on them like an invisible burden. The backpack had tried to start a conversation several times, but Anne remained silent and carried on walking, frowning and lost in her thoughts. They were forced to stop here, though, if only to decide which direction to take. The backpack was determined to have a discussion even if it meant a quarrel.

‘Look, we can’t go on like this,’ said the backpack in a new effort to get them to talk. ‘It’s obvious the ghosts hate you – a lot, that’s clear. I wasn’t sure at first, but now there’s no doubt about it. Do you have any idea why?’

‘Am I supposed to be some sort of ghost expert?’ Red hissed. ‘If I knew that do you think I’d still be here?’

‘Alright, even if you don’t know exactly, maybe you’ve got a vague idea. Something that happened to you a long time ago, perhaps, that you didn’t understand or just forgot. Think hard, please!’



‘There’s nothing to remember!’ Anne replied angrily. ‘Let me tell you once and for all, I never have done, nor do I ever want to have anything to do with those disgusting monsters! I think it’s best we get out of here as fast as we can. Isn’t it already quite clear we’re not going to learn anything from them?’

‘Hey, what’s up with you?’ asked the backpack, looking at her in amazement. ‘A short while ago you were sure we were on the right track and now all of a sudden you want to get out of here. I just don’t get it!’

‘There’s nothing to get!’ snapped Anne, pouting so that her lips turned quite pale. ‘I’ve had it up to here with those monsters! I don’t want anything more to do with them, and that’s that!’

‘Wait, wait, think about it! Madame Owl told us quite clearly this is where we’ll find the answer. Am I right or am I wrong?’

‘Right,’ snarled Anne.

‘Then what’s all the fuss about? You haven’t suddenly decided we should stay here, have you?’

‘No, but...’

‘But what? Why are you always so stubborn? I don’t understand, what’s the matter with you? To tell you the truth, I reckon you’re hiding something.’

‘I’m not hiding anything!’ exclaimed Anne. Her lips started trembling and her eyes filled with tears. ‘If you don’t even believe me then what hope is there for me? Look me in the eyes! Now, do you still think I’m hiding something?’

‘Okay, okay, I believe you! I can see you weren’t lying to me. But I still want you to explain why you want us to get out of here after all we’ve been through to get here in the first place. You owe me that at least.’

Something inside Anne seemed to snap. She started sobbing uncontrollably and between tears she stammered, ‘I ... don’t ... know ... I...don’t... know. No one has ever hated me before. No one, do you hear? Wh ... what have I done? Why are they so mean to me? It would be better if ... if they just ate me instead of looking at me like that! I just can’t bear to see them anymore!’

‘Okay, okay, now I understand,’ said the backpack, hugging her tightly. ‘Listen, I promise we won’t go back to the house... at least not looking like this. I swear!’

‘Wh... what do you mean?’ asked Anne in surprise.

‘I mean we have to find a way to enter the house without the ghosts recognising us. Then we’ll be sure to get them to talk. After all, they’re the only ones who can tell us why on earth we’re wandering around here far from home and

friends. We won't get anywhere without knowing that. And that means we'll have to think of another way.'

Anne's eyes started to brighten: those words had had the same effect as hot breath on an icy window.

'Do you think we'll manage it?' she asked anxiously.

'Of course we will; haven't we so far?' replied the backpack with a big grin. 'Once we open our bag of tricks there's no stopping us, isn't that right?'

The left fork led them to a meadow surrounded by a crumbling stone wall. It had clearly been a maize field at some point – amid the grass and weeds a few lone stalks were still visible here and there. In the middle of the field and leaning to one side like the tower of Pisa stood a lonely scarecrow. It was made out of two crossed stakes and was dressed in ragged old clothes topped by a tattered cloak. The head was a big pumpkin with eyes and nose roughly carved into it. Bird feathers were pinned to it which gave it the appearance of an American Indian. Several crows had landed on the scarecrow's arms, quite unconcerned at its presence, and every now and then they cawed with an air of self-importance. Frightened by the sight of Anne and the backpack, they flew off in all directions.

'Ah, so there are still some animals here,' muttered the backpack with relief. 'Now I feel a little better knowing we're not the only living creatures around.'

'No good creatures, though,' said a rasping voice, startling them. 'Those scoundrels don't give me a moment's peace! If only I could get rid of them!'

Bewildered, Anne and the backpack looked at each other. The scarecrow watched them grouchy as if he was suffering from toothache, and shook his head angrily.

'Hey, you scared me!' cried Anne. 'Can't you at least say hello first?'

'Hi,' said the scarecrow, but it was clear his heart wasn't in it. 'So where did you come from?'

'Over there,' said Red signalling behind her with her thumb. 'What's your name?'

'Freddie,' replied the scarecrow proudly. 'Security expert. Twenty-five years' experience.'

'I'm Anne. Or Red, if you prefer. I like your cloak.'

Freddie relaxed and began to look friendlier.

‘Thank you. It looks a bit old-fashioned, but it’s still quite valuable. It’s said to have belonged to the famous Canterville ghost.’

‘Ghost?’ Anne looked around her nervously. ‘You wouldn’t know the ghosts by any chance, would you?’

‘No, but ... You could say we’re befriended.’

‘Really? Who are they? Where do they come from? Why are they so scary?’

‘Hey, not so fast!’ said Freddie, scowling once more. ‘They help me from time to time, that’s all.’

‘How do they help you?’

‘Well whenever they fly over the meadow the crows are frightened and fly away. So I have some peace – for a little while, at any rate.’

‘Ah, so that’s it. And I imagined you really knew them. Do you live here?’

‘I don’t live, I guard. A professional scarecrow, you understand? If it weren’t for me the birds would have got off with everything long ago.’

‘Hmm, these birds really get on your nerves, don’t they?’

‘Oh, forget it. Let’s talk about something else.’

Red looked at him curiously.

‘Why are you so unhappy?’

‘Do you really want to know?’ replied Freddie hesitantly.

‘Would I ask if I didn’t?’

‘Okay, think about it: what good is a scarecrow that doesn’t scare birds anymore?’

‘Ah, now I understand. And is there nothing that can help you?’

‘There’s no point, I’ve tried everything. Nothing can be done. I’m no good for anything now. I’m ready for the rubbish heap.’

He scowled and fell silent. If his pumpkin head hadn’t dried out long ago, he would surely have started crying. Suddenly moved by his words, Anne also went quiet. Her astonishment was all the greater when the backpack suddenly began tugging at her arm, signalling that she wanted to be followed.

‘What’s the matter? What’s got into you? You’re going to tear my arm off!’ Anne complained once they had reached the woods again. Lost in his own concerns, the scarecrow didn’t even notice the two friends had gone.

‘Shhh! Not so loud!’ the backpack interrupted her excitedly. ‘We’ve just had a stroke of luck. That hero Freddie has exactly what we need.’

‘I don’t get it. What luck? All I can see is just a miserable old scarecrow.’

‘Have another look at him,’ the backpack said mischievously. ‘Do you notice anything in particular?’

‘Alright, stop beating about the bush. What is it?’

‘The cloak!’ declared the backpack, as if she were shouting “Eureka!”. ‘Freddie’s cloak. Did you see how big it is? If you climb on my shoulders and we’re both covered everyone will think we’re a ghost. And the scarecrow said the cloak had belonged to the Baskerville ghost.’

‘Canterville ghost,’ Anne corrected her. ‘There’s a very interesting story about it.’

‘I bet, but let’s leave it for now,’ interrupted the backpack impatiently. ‘The main thing is for us to get our hands on the cloak. Once we’ve done that our work is done. The ghosts will never recognise us in it.’

‘But, but... you don’t think Freddie is going to give it to us just like that, do you? Didn’t you hear he said it was very valuable? I bet he wouldn’t part with it for anything in the world!’

‘Don’t be so sure!’ grinned the backpack self-confidently. ‘I already have an idea.’

She reached into one of her pockets and took out ... the mask they had used to trick Heino the beaver. Anne was astonished.

‘So, how many pockets have you got? I sometimes think you’ve got everything in there but the kitchen sink!’

‘I’m just a practical girl,’ said the backpack modestly. ‘You never know when something will come in handy. And to be honest, the first time I saw the mask it somehow seemed very important to me. I’d prefer not to part with it even now, but we’ve got no choice.’

‘But I still don’t understand what you have in mind,’ Anne confessed, feeling a little embarrassed. ‘Why does Freddie need that ugly mask?’

‘Hold on, you’ll understand everything in a second,’ boasted the backpack, dusting off the mask and starting to walk back to the scarecrow in a businesslike manner.

‘Freddie!’ she yelled from a distance, ‘I’ve got good news for you!’

The scarecrow didn’t look particularly pleased to have been startled out of his thoughts. ‘I hope this isn’t about retirement. Go on, then!’

‘How would you like it if we made you scary again? For the birds, I mean. So you can do your job properly.’

‘What do you mean “scary again”? What are you trying to say?’ Freddie looked at her with suspicion. ‘Those crows are very clever and can’t be tricked easily. I told you I’ve tried everything.’

‘Look at this,’ she picked up the mask and held it close to the scarecrow’s huge, short-sighted eyes. ‘Is this mask scary enough?’

Freddie suddenly came to life.

‘Hmm, that’s not bad at all,’ he said, sizing up the mask with an expert eye. ‘A few sound effects thrown in and it just might work. Okay, let’s give a try. Put it on my face and go and hide somewhere nearby. I want to see what will happen.’

Without waiting for a second invitation, the backpack did as he asked and hurried off to hide followed by Anne. Soon the crows began to return, looking as pompous and self-important as a group of court officials. According to habit, they landed on the scarecrow whose frame creaked wearily under their weight. They obviously hadn’t noticed the change yet.

Freddie waited until the birds had got comfortable before letting out a piercing roar and turning his masked face this way and that. Quite taken by surprise, the crows hurried off grumbling angrily. The scarecrow stopped and looked around him bewildered, as if he himself couldn’t believe what had happened. Then suddenly he let out another cry, but this time for joy.

‘Hooray! My goodness, did you see what happened!’ screamed Freddie so that the feathers on his head flapped about. ‘They fled like a bunch of chickens. Well, I suppose they are just a bunch of chickens anyway! Ha, ha! Hooray! Success! Watch out thieves, old Freddie is back! Okay, let’s see how brave you are now; come on, if you dare! If you ever show up around here I’ll send you flap-ping in every direction like chickens! La-la-la, ha-ha-ha, I don’t care, so there!’ he sang out of tune and even managed to jump once or twice.

‘He’s gone off his rocker,’ muttered Anne anxiously. ‘What’s up? You haven’t blown a fuse have you?’

‘Who, me? Blown a fuse? No, not at all! Nothing’s wrong with me. Old Freddie doesn’t give up so easily even if he does look like a scarecrow. Hey, I’m even making jokes!’

Then suddenly he came to his senses.



‘Hey, you don’t want the mask back, do you? Take anything else, but not that! I’m as good as done for without it. You wouldn’t leave me like that, would you?’

‘Don’t worry, the mask is yours,’ said the backpack, quickly putting him at ease. ‘If I didn’t intend to give it to you, I wouldn’t even have shown it to you.’

Freddie was so moved that he was on the point of crying.

‘I don’t know how to thank you. I’ve never met such generous creatures before. On my word, I haven’t!’

‘Well, I must confess you could help me with a small matter, too,’ the backpack said cautiously.

‘Just name it! I’m all ears!’

‘That old cloak. All my life I’ve dreamed of such a cloak.’

At first Freddie winced, but then he started to grin beneath the mask.

‘Oh, why not? One good turn deserves another. As you’ve been so generous, I must return the favour. Take the cloak, it’s yours. Wear it with joy!’

‘Are you sure? Hey, that’s wonderful! Are you sure you won’t be cold without it?’

‘No, I’m used to it. I’ve spent twenty-five years at this job without a single day off, would you believe! I reckon I ought to be in the Guinness Book of Records! Go ahead, take it, please. I’ll be offended if you don’t.’

Freddie lost something of his frightening appearance without the cloak, but that clearly didn’t bother him. Puffing out his chest, he looked around confidently and squeaked in a threatening manner, ‘If I catch just a glimpse of them I’ll rip them to pieces! Thieving scoundrels! I’ll teach them to steal corn!’

Although they were still feeling worried, the two friends couldn’t help smiling at the sight of the plucky forest hero. They had gradually started to like him and already regarded him as a friend. However, the time came to say goodbye – the meeting with the ghosts couldn’t be put off forever. Freddie was saddened by this, but once he remembered he would be able to scare the birds again, he quickly cheered up. They parted promising to meet in the near future, though Anne’s heavy heart reminded her that this wouldn’t be easy. Grinning from ear to ear, Freddie waved at them for a long while as they walked away, calling out to them in a thunderous voice, ‘And if you ever come across some lone bird, just send it this way. Old Freddie is impatient to do his job! Ha, ha, ha!’

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Secret of the Ghosts

The large hall in the ghost mansion was gaily lit. Not only was there a roaring fire in the fireplace, but a huge chandelier shone brilliantly overhead and cheerful little lights danced like fireflies along the walls. Even the mirrors had been polished to add to the festive atmosphere. Assembled in a circle in the centre of the hall, the ghosts were staring in awe at the tall, stooped figure draped from head to toe in an old threadbare cloak.

‘Don’t argue, Teddy!’ said the one-legged woman with purple hair, showing her annoyance. ‘If he says he’s a ghost, he is a ghost. Didn’t you hear him say he came from... er, I’ve forgotten what it was.’

‘Canterville. I’m the famous Canterville ghost,’ Anne stressed again. It was terribly hot under the cloak and her throat was so tight with fear that she wasn’t even able to recognise her own voice. ‘If you don’t believe me, read the story for yourself. It was written long ago.’

‘Nonsense!’ exclaimed the blind bear in a quarrelsome tone. ‘There’s no such thing as ghosts! They’re just old wives’ tales, caution stories for naughty children!’

‘You’d sing a different tune if you could see him for yourself,’ said the huge ghost with a face full of holes. ‘Just looking at him makes my hair stand on end.’

‘Wait, hold on a moment!’ said Anne. ‘What’s all this about there being no ghosts? If they don’t exist then what are you? Isn’t this the ghost mansion? I’m not mistaken, am I?’

‘You’re not mistaken,’ called out the one-legged dinosaur. ‘This really is the ghost mansion. At any rate, it’s called the ghost mansion.’

‘I don’t get it,’ said Anne. ‘Are you ghosts or not?’

‘Oh, it’s a long story and not very interesting either,’ said the purple-haired woman. ‘Tell us about yourself. A real ghost must have some very interesting stories to tell.’

Anne was choked with impatience, but decided she should satisfy the ghost’s curiosity first.

‘Well, there’s not much to tell. I’m about 500 years old, I live in a castle and everyone is terribly afraid of me. I mean, they were afraid. But that’s already been described in detail; haven’t you read the story?’

‘Well, we... we can’t read actually,’ said the woman with the cloak. ‘Go on, it’s very interesting.’

‘Well, so everyone was afraid of me,’ Anne went on uncertainly. How did the story go exactly? She could only remember bits and pieces.

‘Everyone’s afraid of us, too,’ said the blind bear more kindly. ‘It’s very boring, isn’t it?’

‘Well, yes, it really is boring,’ she agreed before continuing. ‘But one day these Americans came to the castle. I’ve forgotten their names, but that doesn’t really matter. There were three children, two boys and a girl. The boys were very naughty and annoyed me all the time, but the girl grew fond of me and helped fulfil the prophecy.’

The ghosts became excited.

‘A prophecy, did you say?’ they cried one after the other. ‘There was a prophecy with you too then?’

‘Hey, you wouldn’t happen to have a prophecy as well, would you?’ Anne was wondering nervously how far she could go with the story without getting tangled in lies and contradictions.

‘Our story is much less interesting,’ said the blind bear impatiently. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, there’s nothing more to tell. As I said, little Virginia helped fulfil the prophecy. End of story.’

‘So it’s true?’ said the one-legged woman, clasping her hands, ‘the prophecy was fulfilled? The saviour really came?’

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ replied Anne cautiously. ‘But now I’m dying to hear more about you. Who are you? Where do you come from? And if you’re not ghosts, then what are you?’

The ghosts looked at each other hoping for someone else to begin.

‘We are,’ stammered the bear uncertainly. ‘I mean to say we were... Oh, I’m ashamed to say it, can someone help me out?’

‘I’m not ashamed,’ spoke up the one-legged dinosaur. ‘We’re not ghosts, but children’s toys, that’s all.’

Anne was so startled she very nearly fell off the backpack’s shoulders. Toys? Now what could that mean?

‘You forgot the most important part, Dino,’ interrupted the ghost with the holey face. ‘We’re not just toys, we’re broken toys.’

Anne was totally confused, and of course, that really annoyed her.

‘What?’ she snapped rudely. ‘Broken children’s toys, did you say? Don’t play games with me. You don’t look anything like toys. No toy is as ug... as scary as you are.’

‘We haven’t always been this scary or ugly, Mr Ghost,’ said the bony woman with great dignity. ‘For example, I used to be a very beautiful talking doll.’

‘I was once a graceful ballerina,’ said the one-legged woman.

‘And I was a funny clown,’ called out the ghost with a face full of holes.

‘I used to be a dinosaur, but I was neither ugly nor scary.’

‘And I was a teddy bear,’ said the huge blind bear. ‘Have you ever seen a scary or ugly teddy bear?’

Anne began to tremble. A faint sense of foreboding started to grip her; a heavy, disturbing feeling like a half-forgotten nightmare. She summoned all her strength to banish it, but failed. Somewhere from the back of her mind there came a voice that was trying to creep through to the front saying something very, very unpleasant. But she pushed it back, and with a huge effort she went on speaking.

‘But how did you turn into gho... into what you are now? And how did you end up in the forest?’

‘All broken toys turn into ghosts and sooner or later end up in a forest like this one,’ replied the one-legged woman sadly. ‘That’s the way things are. At least, that’s what the old man says.’

‘The old man?’ asked Anne. ‘Who is he? And what is the story about the saviour?’

Now it was the ghosts’ turn to be astonished.

‘The same as yours,’ the bear replied in bewilderment. ‘One day our saviour will arrive and we’ll be turned back into what we used to be: beautiful toys.’

‘Who said so?’ Anne interrupted him. For some reason she felt the overwhelming need to prove that the ghosts were just making it up, that they were simply trying to trick her with their stories.

‘The old man, who else?’ replied the bear with annoyance. Clearly he didn’t have much patience either.

‘But who is this old man?’ exploded Anne. ‘If he knows so much then why doesn’t he show himself? I want to speak to him.’

Now all of the ghosts were beginning to lose their patience.

‘The old man is the old man, what else is there to say?’ said the one-legged dinosaur angrily. ‘He comes and goes as he pleases. If he wants to meet you, he’ll show himself.’

Anne knew she had already gone too far, but one question still troubled her.

‘Alright, but just one more question,’ she said, taking a deep breath. ‘Who did this to you? Who broke you?’

‘What does that matter?’ asked the bony woman, looking at her curiously. Anne had the feeling that her fiery eyes saw right through the Canterville cloak.

‘Nothing really,’ she stammered. ‘I was just thinking that... you must have come from horrible place.’

‘Not at all. We lived in a very ordinary house with a very ordinary child, as most normal toys do,’ said the ghost with the face like a colander.

‘The name! Tell me the name!’ hissed Anne. Her voice, gasping and weak, sounded like the whistle of a model steam train.

‘My, you really are strange!’ exclaimed the bear. ‘What does a little girl’s name matter? Didn’t we just tell you she’s a very ordinary child?’

Anne broke into a cold sweat.

‘That girl... has red hair, doesn’t she?’ she whispered, feeling completely drained.

The ghosts jumped back in fright.

‘Who are you?’ shouted the bear, putting up his paws in a defensive pose. ‘Tell me right now, how do you know about red-haired Anne?’

There was no reply. From under the heavy cloak of the Canterville ghost there came the sound of choked sobbing, then the cloth flew open and fell to the ground. The ghosts immediately stiffened with anger and started closing in menacingly.

‘Stand back! No one touches her!’ came a commanding voice from behind – the same one that had always saved Anne from the ghosts.

They all stopped dead in their tracks. Having in the meantime jumped down from the backpack’s shoulders, Red slowly turned to look for the speaker. At last! He really had appeared this time. She was about to rush towards him and thank him, but instead she stopped and looked at him dumbfounded. She knew

well the piercing eyes watching her from beneath the thickest eyebrows in the world.

‘Mr Laptsev,’ she whispered, ‘I didn’t expect to meet you... here.’

‘It was high time,’ replied the old man. ‘I was beginning to worry that you weren’t going to make it. Your toys have been expecting you for a long time.’

‘Nothing of the sort!’ roared the bear. Everyone jumped in fright. ‘No one here’s been expecting her. No one! She is ... the most despised creature in this world. We don’t even want to see her. Get out, get out of here! Right now!’

‘Please help me, I beg you!’ she appealed to Laptsev. ‘Tell him it’s not true, that I’m not what he thinks I am! It... it can’t be true!’

‘On the contrary,’ said Laptsev gently but firmly, ‘What you heard is true. And you know it as well as they do. Every one of these toys once belonged to you. And each one of them ended up here thanks to you. Do you remember how you cut off the doll’s hair? And the clown’s nose, the bear’s eyes, the ballerina’s leg? Shall I go on?’

Anne buried her face in her hands and started sobbing again.

‘No, no, I beg you!’

Mr Laptsev approached her slowly and rested his hand on her shoulder.

‘The time has come for you to learn that nothing happens in this world without leaving its mark, Anne. A broken toy, a cruel word, an angry look – they all remain somewhere and don’t disappear, even if they are long forgotten. Look at the unfortunate toys. For a short while, as long as you loved and cared for them they were the happiest creatures in the world. But now they are doomed to wander like ghosts in this gloomy forest – because you threw them away and forgot them.’

‘Please, have mercy on me, I beg you!’ cried Anne, dissolving once more into tears. ‘I can’t take any more!’

‘But do you deserve mercy? What do you think?’

‘Please give me a chance to make up for what I’ve done. Just one chance, please!’

‘What would you say? Can we trust her?’ asked the old magician turning towards the ghost-toys.

Again, they bristled with anger and shouted one after another, ‘No, no, throw her out! No forgiveness! Out! No mercy for those who show none!’

‘Wait! Wait a moment!’ broke in Mr Laptsev. ‘There’s one more thing I must tell you.’

Everyone fell silent and waited. Once he was sure they were all listening, he continued speaking.

‘You still don’t know the last part of the prophecy. I put off telling you this as I knew how hard it would be for you to accept, but I can’t delay any longer.’ He sighed deeply. ‘The end of the prophecy says: “No one may undo another’s evil deed. Only the hand that brought about misfortune may also undo it”.’

It had suddenly become very quiet. No one dared speak or move. The only movement came from the restless wandering of the lights on the walls, indifferent to the cares of humans.

‘But that means that...’ the noseless clown finally said.

‘That means that none of us has any choice at this point,’ Laptsev continued. ‘Only Anne can restore you to your old selves. Your only hope is that she will manage to pass the tests.’

At this the huge bear interrupted again.

‘No, no, anything but that!’ he growled. ‘I don’t want anything to do with her. It would be better to remain a ghost!’

‘Do you all feel that way?’ Laptsev asked, looking at them questioningly.

The ghost-toys shouted out one after the other: ‘Yes, yes! We don’t want to see her anymore. Anything else but that!’

‘I’m sorry, I really am,’ said the old man thoughtfully. ‘That means nothing more can be done. For the prophecy to be fulfilled at least one of you must ask her for help. Without that nothing will happen.’

‘No, wait!’ cried Anne desperately. ‘I really did love you, please try to remember that! Give me a chance, just one and only one, I beg you! Teddy! Dino! Will no one forgive me? Am I that bad?’

There was no reply. From all sides cold eyes full of hate and contempt were fixed on her.

And exactly at this moment the bony woman with the fiery eyes stepped forward. With a sudden movement she threw back the hood of her cape to reveal her ghastly skull.

‘Look at me everyone!’ she said to the ghosts. ‘You know I have suffered no less than the rest of you, don’t you?’

‘And you look at me too!’ she yelled at Anne. ‘Do you remember how you hacked off my hair? It was just a few days ago so you can’t have forgotten!’

Anne kept silent and stared guiltily at the ground.

‘I’m saying this so you know it’s not easy for me,’ continued the bald doll. ‘Hatred eats away at me no less than it does you. Yet I still want to give it a try. She must get one last chance. We all must get one last chance.’

‘Traitor!’ roared the bear. ‘I knew it, I knew it all along! Even then on the meadow when you held me back I knew you were a traitor!’

‘I’m no traitor!’ she replied enraged. ‘It’s just that I still haven’t forgotten how happy I used to be when Red played with me. I’m quite new here, I can’t get used to the thought of remaining a ghost forever. You are all so poisoned with hatred that you’re unable to feel anything else. Just blind, deadly hate. Forgive me, but I don’t want to become like that. Someone... is going to have to overcome... the hate. Otherwise we’re all lost.’

Again, silence reigned. Then the noseless clown eventually stepped forward and, turning to the bear, said, ‘Teddy, she’s right. Why don’t we try? Anyway, things can’t get any worse than they are now.’

‘Never!’ wheezed the bear in a dejected voice. ‘We would be better off dead!’

And then real confusion set in as all the ghosts started arguing at the same time. Tempers flared, voices got louder and louder. It was clear no agreement would be reached soon.

‘Silence! Silence!’

It was the voice of Nerod Laptsev. The ghosts suddenly calmed down.

‘Enough!’ demanded the old magician. ‘Each of us must decide for ourselves. As far as I’m concerned it’s enough that at least one of you has agreed to ask for help. The condition of the prophecy has been met; nothing more is needed. Now listen carefully as there is no time left to waste!’

He turned to Anne and continued: ‘Red, there is only one way to make good what has been done: you must pass three very difficult tests.’

‘I’m ready!’ she replied in a trembling but determined voice.

‘The first is the test of intelligence. You must prove that you are able to deal with difficult problems.’

She looked at him questioningly, but didn’t dare interrupt.

‘The second is the test of courage. You must show that you possess courage too because a clever coward can rarely be of any help in times of trouble.’

He went silent for a moment, lost in thought.

‘And the third test?’ prompted Anne timidly.

‘The third test is the most difficult of all. It’s so difficult that I’m not permitted to name it. You will have to discover it and pass it yourself. I’m sorry, but that’s all I can tell you. From now on you’re on your own.’

Red was speechless with astonishment.

‘What, is that all?’ she asked, completely baffled. ‘Aren’t you going to tell exactly what I have to do?’

‘That’s all I can tell you,’ Laptsev said once again. ‘You’ll have to find out the rest for yourself.’

‘But how can I pass a test I don’t know... without even knowing what it’s testing? That’s impossible!’

‘Listen to your heart! As long as you don’t forget to listen to its voice, the answer will come of its own accord. Just listen carefully, that’s all.’

Mr Laptsev turned back to the ghosts.

‘It’s time to go, friends. From now on everything depends on her. Let us wish her strength; she’s going to need it!’

The ghosts and the magician gradually began to dissolve into thin air as if they were made of smoke. Just before disappearing completely, Laptsev turned, looked at Anne once more and said, ‘Goodbye, Anne! And don’t forget, everything is in your hands now!’

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Intelligence Test

‘Well, maybe the test isn’t in the mansion,’ said the backpack for about the tenth time. ‘Something tells me we should start elsewhere; it’s no accident these doors are locked.’

They had searched the whole house thoroughly but hadn’t yet found anything interesting. All the doors were locked and Anne’s wild attempts to force them open merely left her with sore hands. Now she was slumped on a sagging sofa looking gloomily around her.

‘So do you suggest we search the entire forest, then?’ she replied sharply. ‘When we get out of here we could go on searching till we’re old and grey.’

‘I don’t think it’s so hopeless,’ said the backpack. ‘When you think about it, there aren’t all that many places to look.’

‘What do you mean there aren’t many?’ Anne snapped. ‘About ten places on this side - and scores more on the other side!’

‘Wait a moment!’ interrupted the backpack. ‘First of all, we can rule out the other side of the river.’

‘But why?’

‘Simply because we can’t go back there, that’s why! If this is an intelligence test, it can’t go against all rules of logic, can it?’

Anne agreed, though rather reluctantly.

‘Well, then,’ continued the backpack, ‘let’s now think about where to look on this side of the river. The path starts at the riverbank and ends at Freddie’s meadow. We’ve covered it from end to end but haven’t come across anything useful yet. All that’s left now is...’

‘The fork!’ cried Anne clapping her hands and jumping off the sofa. ‘That’s the only place we haven’t yet explored. It’s obvious. Let’s go!’

The backpack smiled and followed her without saying a word.

This time however they literally hit a brick wall, or rather one made of rocks. Just a few metres down the right fork they were forced to come to a halt as the path was blocked by an enormous pile of multi-coloured rocks. Anne tried to

clamber over it but soon had to give up. The rocks were very smooth and there wasn't the slightest space between them to gain even a finger hold. No matter how much she tried she always slid back, tumbling clumsily onto the ground.

'Hmm, I don't think we're going to get very far this way either,' she said disappointedly.

'Hold on, look at this,' said the backpack, pointing to a wooden sign to the side of the rocks, which Anne hadn't noticed in her haste.

Anne bent down and started reading:

I am heavier than rocks
And yet lighter than air.
If you want me to go
Onto me you must blow.

'I don't get it,' she said, looking puzzled. 'It seems to be some kind of riddle. Have you got any idea what it means?'

'First of all, I'd just try to do what the sign says,' replied the backpack, scratching her head.

'You mean blow on the rocks? Come off it, you can't be serious!'

'I don't think it'll work, but it's worth a try. In this forest you never know what's a joke and what's – well, for real.'

After exchanging uncertain glances, the two friends puffed out their cheeks and eagerly started blowing on the rocks. They stopped only when Anne began to feel dizzy.

'I knew this was a stupid idea!' she said angrily. 'Blow the rocks away – huh, some chance!'

'Well, if you've got a better idea, let's hear it!' replied the backpack sulkily. 'At least I suggested something.'

'I'm sorry,' muttered Anne, 'I didn't mean to upset you, it's just that I'm annoyed about that stupid rhyme.' Then she pulled a face and said mockingly, "'If you want me to go/ Onto me you must blow". You can't get much sillier than that!'

'At any rate, we're obviously on the right track,' remarked the backpack. 'This looks like a proper intelligence test to me. I reckon we're going to have to work really hard to solve this puzzle.'

‘You’re right,’ sighed Anne. ‘Compared to this one, the eaglets’ riddles were just child’s play. So what do we do now?’

‘I have no idea. It’s a tricky one and just thinking about it isn’t going to get us very far. If you ask me, we’re going to have to search everywhere again. We can’t do anything without more instructions. We’ll just have to look; there’s nothing more to it.’

Now that they had a definite task, they were charged with new energy. Forgetting all about Heino and his gang, they retraced the path from end to end carefully scouring every nook and cranny that seemed at all significant. But it was in vain – despite their efforts, they didn’t manage to find anything that could help them.

‘We’ll have to go back to the mansion,’ Anne said finally. ‘It’s obvious we’re not going to find anything here. I can’t stop thinking about those locked doors.’

So that’s what they did. And there the first big surprise was awaiting them: miraculously, all the locked doors were now open.

‘Aha, now I’m beginning to understand,’ said Anne, rubbing her hands together with delight. ‘Things have to be done in an exact sequence or else nothing happens. Now we have to search all the rooms paying careful attention to the smallest details. You see, things are starting to come together all by themselves.’

However, the backpack kept silent, just muttering to herself every now and then. It was clear she didn’t entirely share her friend’s optimism.

In fact, the initial enthusiasm soon started turning into dejection. Looking through the rooms just wasn’t getting them anywhere. Heaps of worthless old bric-a-brac were lying all over the place – broken chairs and empty suitcases in the cellar, rusty pans in the kitchen, old baskets in the pantry, dusty old books in strange languages in the library, and so on and so forth. There were no secret hiding places under the floor or behind the walls. Neither did the house have any faded writing on the wall or concealed passageways leading to hidden rooms. There was just soot in the fireplace, mildew in the bathroom, and lots of huge spiders’ webs in the other rooms. Nowhere was there anything like instructions or directions to be found. The old mansion guarded its secret very stubbornly.

Several days passed with ever-increasing dismay. The two friends’ efforts had amounted to nothing. More importantly, the provisions they had brought from

the eagles' nest were running low. Anne was deeply worried by the thought of starving. She gradually started losing courage and just looked on passively while the backpack carried on searching the mansion as tirelessly as a clockwork toy. Things would surely have turned out badly if chance hadn't come to their aid once again.

In one of the ghost mansion's bedrooms there was an old-fashioned phonograph with a horn. The friends had discovered it at the beginning of their quest but hadn't paid any attention to it. One day, feeling depressed and bored to tears, Anne decided to give it a try. After a long while rummaging around she even found a record in good condition in a box next to it. She fumbled for a while trying to discover how the old machine worked. When she'd finally managed that, she put the record in place, wound up the phonograph and sank into one of the sagging armchairs. All she wanted was some rest. Imagine her disappointment when she discovered that the record was scratched and kept repeating the same phrase: "... and the portrait is watching me from the wall"! At first she thought of throwing the machine out the window, but then decided that although it wasn't fantastic, it was better than nothing at all, and so she sank back into her armchair, listening with her eyes shut. That was exactly how the backpack found her: sunk in an armchair listening to the phonograph's tedious refrain ringing out endlessly: "... and the portrait is watching me from the wall".

'You're really going to pieces, aren't you?' said the backpack reproachfully. 'It would be better if you helped me look. Just sitting there isn't going to get us anywhere.'

'I don't know what's happening to me,' Anne said ashamedly. 'I've been sitting here listening to this nonsense for half an hour already. I'm mesmerised; I can't stop. We should throw the machine out right now or else I'll sit here like this all day unable to lift a finger.'

'Wait a moment,' said the backpack, thinking hard. 'What if this isn't just chance? Tell me how you feel again.'

'I can't stop myself,' repeated Anne obediently. 'I just want to sit here listening to that phrase even though it's quite clear to me there's no point in it.'

"And the portrait is watching me from the wall",' pondered the backpack. 'Listen, that doesn't sound accidental to me. What if it's just the clue we're looking for? "The portrait is watching me...". What could that mean?'

She hesitated a moment, then stopped the phonograph and tugged at Anne's arm eagerly.

'Hey, get up! It can't be a fluke, it just can't be! The phonograph has got to be telling us what to look for. We've got to find the portrait!'

'But there aren't any portraits here!' replied Anne. 'There's not a single picture in the whole mansion. If there were, we'd have found it long ago.'

'We have to look anyway,' insisted the backpack. 'The picture is probably hidden somewhere. If it were easy to find it wouldn't be a serious test.'

Heartened by this, they set about another search. But as expected, it came to nothing. Indeed, there wasn't one picture to be found in the entire house. Their hopes shattered, they were shuffling wearily through the big hall when Anne's glance happened to fall on the old tapestry on the wall.

'Backpack!' she yelled frantically. 'Look over there! There's our picture!'

The backpack jumped in fright. Then she followed Anne's eyes and started jumping for joy.

'We've been such idiots!' she cried. 'We've searched the whole house, turned everything upside down, and the whole time the picture was right under our noses. Not a painting, but a tapestry! It's so simple! And I was already feeling quite miserable!'

'Hmm, I wouldn't be too quick to start celebrating. Look at this – the tapestry is so old and faded that you can't make out anything on it. It looks to me as though it's not going to be of much help to us.'

The backpack went up to the wall, stood on tiptoe and gently patted the lower border of the tapestry. This raised a huge cloud of dust and the two friends started sneezing. However, it became clear right away that under the thick layer of dust the tapestry was still in good condition. The bottom part of the pattern could clearly be seen where the backpack had patted it.

'Hold on a second,' said the backpack, and she disappeared down into the cellar and returned soon after holding a large wicker carpet-beater. 'Hey, this thing should do the trick. Move a little to one side, please. Right, one, two!'

She swung the beater and struck the tapestry as hard as she could. It created such a cloud of dust that the two friends were forced to wait outside until it had settled. They continued beating the tapestry in shifts, running in and out, black with dust yet with eyes sparkling with delight. Finally, the moment came when

they could see the pattern of the tapestry clearly. Holding their breath, they started examining it.

The picture showed a kind of mythological story. On the left was the enormous head of some ancient god frozen in the act of a thunderous sneeze. To the right, swept away by the force of the sneeze were the remains of a semi-ruined town. Anne and the backpack gazed until their eyes ached, but try as they might, they couldn't find any writing or other kind of clue. The solution to the problem seemed even further off than it had been at the start.

'Now where to?' asked the backpack gloomily. 'It doesn't look like we're going to get much help here.'

Lost in thought, Anne didn't reply. The backpack waited and when she realised her friend wasn't going to respond soon, she sat down on one of the old sofas and waited patiently.

"If you want me to go, onto me you must blow",' said Red at last. 'Look, this chap has moved an entire city with a single sneeze. Could we do something like that?'

'Us sneeze?' the backpack looked at her in disbelief. 'I still don't get it.'

But Anne's eyes already had that special sparkle in them which meant she had come up with something.

'Wait here a second!' she cried, and ran up the stairs calling back, 'Just be patient, I've got an idea.'

She returned soon with a little wooden box in one hand and a smile as big as a slice of watermelon.

'What's that?' asked the backpack.

'See for yourself!' Anne replied proudly, handing her the little box.

'S-N-U-F-F,' the backpack spelled out. 'I don't understand. What does that mean?'

'Snuff, tobacco sneezing powder,' said Anne. 'I found it up in the library.'

'Wow, the world is full of strange things!' exclaimed the backpack. 'And what do we need that powder for?'

'I'm not sure myself, but something tells me we're on the right track. Let's go back to the rocks. Maybe something else will occur to us there.'

They followed the path to the multi-coloured rocks in deep silence. They were tense and impatient.

‘Now what?’ asked the backpack once they had arrived. ‘What are we supposed to do?’

‘If only I knew,’ sighed Anne. ‘I reckon we need to try sneezing a bit.’

She opened the wooden box, took a small pinch of the finely ground tobacco, closed her eyes and stuffed it in her nose. Then she sniffed as hard as she could and – a-a-a-chooo! She let out a thunderous sneeze.

The two friends froze in expectation. Would something happen or not? A minute passed full of uncertain hope. Soon, though, they realised that the rocks were not going to budge and they hung their heads.

‘Let’s look at the sign again,’ suggested the backpack uncertainly. ‘Maybe something else will come to us.’

They bent down and re-read the words:

I am heavier than rocks
And yet lighter than air.
If you want me to go
Onto me you must blow.

Just at that moment a gust of wind swept up some powder from the open box and blew it right up the backpack’s nose. She sneezed forcefully. Anne suddenly jumped.

‘Hey, aren’t we putting the cart before the horse? Instead of us sneezing, maybe we have to...’

She stopped as if the thought seemed so pointless that she decided not even to bother mentioning it.

‘Go on, say it,’ urged the backpack impatiently.

‘Maybe we have to make the rocks sneeze.’

‘What?’ the backpack gave her such a mocking look that Anne almost got angry. ‘Make the rocks sneeze? You’ve got to be kidding!’

‘Not at all!’ said Anne, pouting. ‘Just wait, and then we’ll see.’

She grabbed a handful of snuff, walked up to the rocks, and blew it over them while trying her best not to admit to herself that she was doing something completely ridiculous.

‘A-a-a-a-ch-oo-oooooo!’

Even though she had hoped for this moment with all her heart, Anne was still rather startled when it came. The sneeze, as powerful as a gunshot, came from somewhere under the rocks. For a split second it made them go both deaf and dumb. With their hands covering their mouths and frozen to the spot like wax figures, they watched in disbelief as the multi-coloured rocks stirred and rumbled. From somewhere near the bottom of the pile appeared a little, shrivelled head. The enormous pile suddenly started shaking and the turtle – for yes, it was indeed a giant turtle – slowly set off along the path grumbling to itself, ‘Lordy, lordy, what times we live in! A body can’t even take a quick five-year nap in peace these days!’

In less than a minute the path was clear. Limp with astonishment, the backpack stared at Anne with eyes as big as saucers.

‘So, have you solved the problem?’ asked she timidly. ‘Was that it?’

‘I don’t know. It looks like it, but I’m still not sure.’

The backpack leapt up, clung to Anne’s neck and hugged her tight.

‘We did it! We did it!’ she yelled and pressed Anne’s head to her hairy chest with all her might. ‘We finally did it! I could burst with joy!’

‘Okay, okay, you can let me go now,’ said Anne, fighting off her friend’s rough embraces. ‘I’m happy too, but I don’t want to be strangled. Besides, we don’t know what else lies in store for us.’

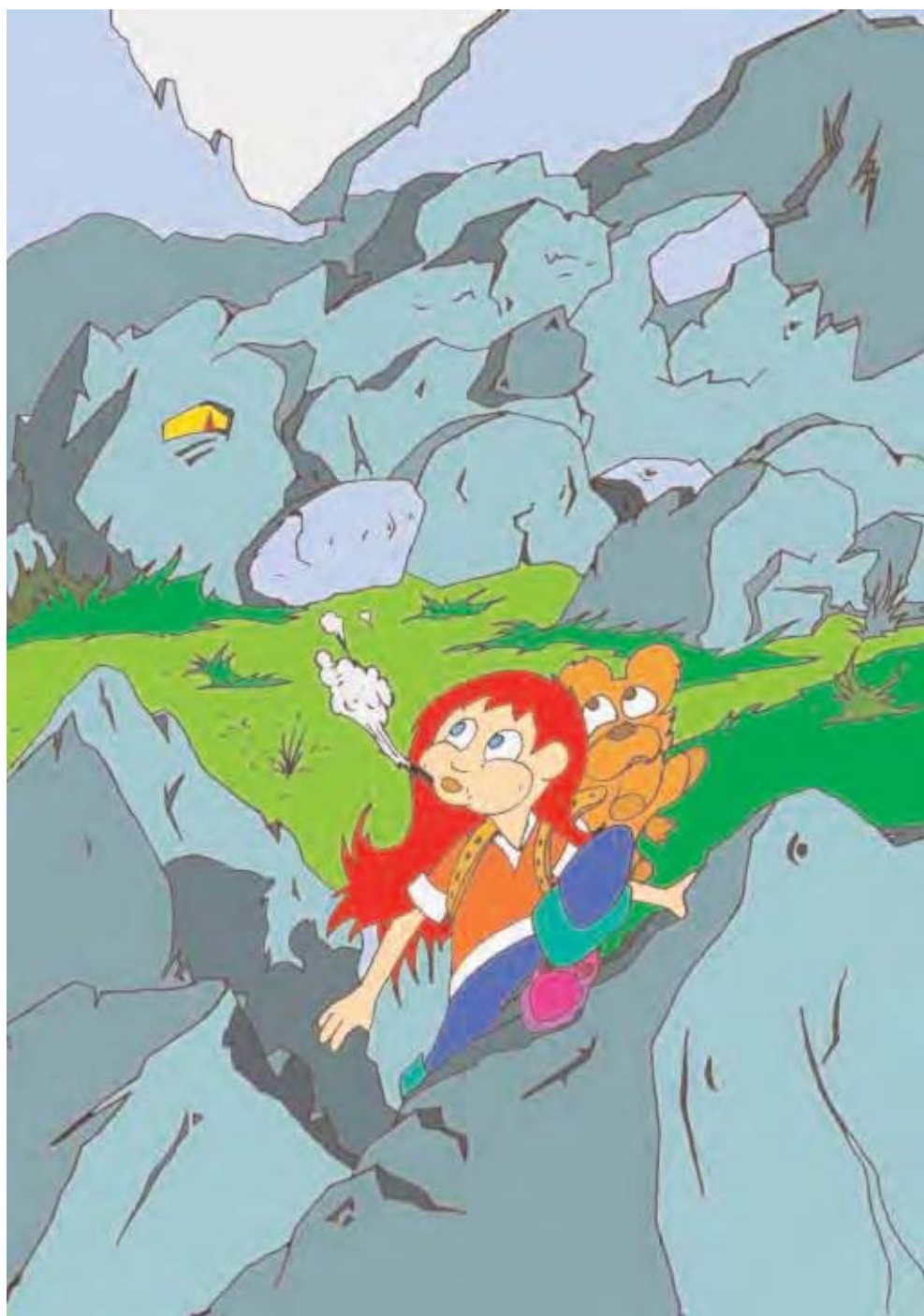
But it still wasn’t at all easy for her to free herself. The backpack kept on hugging her for a long time, and only let go when Anne threatened to sew her mouth shut. Breathless, the two of them sat down to recover.

‘Now we’ve got through that test, the others are in the bag, you’ll see!’ boasted the backpack.

‘Yeah, that’s right,’ agreed Anne, but her eyes twitched a little. ‘We’ll just have to see whether we end up untying that bag.’

‘Oh my!’ exclaimed the backpack, jumping up and down and slapping her knees in excitement. ‘I think we’re going to have to call Indiana Jones for help here. Just look at that!’

After a long walk they had reached something that looked like a kind of temple constructed out of enormous, roughly hewn blocks of stone arranged in a



circle. At their centre was a small raised platform made of stone slabs with a crude arch built over it. The air around them hummed quietly as if an immense machine was hidden somewhere deep underground.

‘Strange. It just doesn’t make sense,’ said Anne as she examined the mysterious symbols on the stone pillars. ‘I have the feeling that the first test is by no means over yet.’

‘Yes, so it seems,’ agreed the backpack with some annoyance. ‘We’ll have grown long beards long before this ordeal is over.’

‘Hey, look over here!’ Anne interrupted excitedly. ‘This inscription is written in real letters.’

A little to the side of the big arch there was something like a small table, or more precisely, it was a circular slab mounted on a short pedestal. From its centre rose a thin stone spike pointing upwards. Strange characters were inscribed at regular intervals around the edge of the slab. But Anne was pointing to an inscription on the pedestal. There in large letters it said:

In the muted light
Of the silver-faced beauty
The twelfth hour strikes
And from a deep sleep I wake

‘Riddles again!’ grumbled the backpack. ‘I’d hoped we would have finished with them.’

‘At any rate, this one seems simpler to me than the first,’ said Anne. ‘It’s got something to do with twelve o’clock. We may have to wait till twelve and then see what happens.’

‘Hold on! Look at this slab; do you notice anything?’

‘Yes, I’ve been wondering where I’ve seen something like it before, but haven’t worked it out yet. What are you waiting for, tell me!’

‘This is a sundial,’ said the backpack proudly. For once she knew more than Anne did! ‘Look at this; the symbols clearly indicate the time of day. You see, at the moment it shows that one. The sun is already setting which means it’s about eight o’clock in the evening.’

‘Alright, but what are the other symbols for then? The sun will set shortly, so in other words the shadow won’t go any further, but the symbols carry on despite that. The dial doesn’t look so ordinary, does it?’

‘It would seem to have symbols for the night time, too, don’t you think?’ asked the backpack, scratching her head thoughtfully. ‘But that’s pointless! No sundial can show the night time hours.’

‘The twelfth hour!’ exclaimed Anne. ‘We haven’t even asked ourselves which twelve o’clock that means – noon or midnight? Surely the riddle has something to do with that. Something wakes up at twelve o’clock, but it’s not clear whether that means day or night.’

‘I don’t think it means twelve noon. “Muted light”, “silver-faced beauty” – they’re clearly about the moon. If you ask me, it’s talking about twelve midnight.’

‘I think you’re right,’ agreed Anne. ‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter as we’ll find out for ourselves soon enough.’

‘Anne,’ said the backpack looking scared, ‘you’re not planning on us staying here till morning, are you? What if ... if some monsters appear at midnight? Then what will we do?’

‘I don’t think that’s likely,’ said Anne, but there was just a hint of fear in her voice. ‘Well then, you tell me what we should do.’

‘We should at least hide somewhere away from here. Over there in the bushes outside the sanctuary. We can still see everything from there. Why should we expose ourselves unnecessarily to danger?’

There was no serious disagreement over this. Although she tried to look brave, Anne didn’t offer any argument. The two friends settled down not far from the sanctuary and waited, trembling with fear. The nighttime hours seemed to pass like an eternity. Despite their tiredness, they didn’t once fall asleep and to their great relief nothing special happened. The night passed without any danger.

The next day they slept deeply, free of fear at last, and nearly missed discovering whether anything would happen at noon. Luckily, they woke up, still feeling slightly shaky. But this time too their fear was unfounded – just like the previous night nothing special happened.

‘Just as I thought,’ said Anne when they were certain that the twelfth hour had passed. ‘It can’t be that simple. There’s some sort of puzzle here. First we’ve got to work out what that is.’

‘It seems certain that whatever is the point of the riddle it’s not going to happen by itself. We probably have to do something ourselves.’

‘You’re right. Okay, let’s have another think. First, we’ve got a sundial with symbols even for the hours of the night. That can’t be unimportant. Then in the riddle it says, “the twelfth hour strikes”. That means that...’

‘The dial must show the twelfth hour – at night,’ added the backpack.

Red started jumping up and down excitedly.

‘That’s it, that’s what the problem’s about! We have to make the dial show twelve midnight. Now everything makes sense. The silver-faced beauty is the moon, of course. The task is for us to make the sundial work with moonlight, that’s all.’

‘Maybe so,’ said the backpack, still not looking quite convinced. ‘But moonlight is too weak, nothing will happen.’

‘So we have to make it stronger somehow or other. Any ideas?’

‘How about using a mirror?’

‘Hey, there were mirrors in the mansion, let’s give it a try!’ Anne was so excited she could hardly keep still.

Now it was the backpack’s turn to show off her skills of observation. ‘Wait a second,’ she said while pointing up at the stone that formed the top of the arch. It was a smooth, vertical slab that was giving off a blinding glare in the last rays of the sun. ‘Someone’s already seen to it, if I’m not mistaken. I bet that stone moves and can be turned in any direction. Shall we give it a try?’

Without wasting a moment, Anne quickly climbed up the arch. The stone was indeed on a pivot and could turn freely.

‘Voilà!’ she cried with relief. ‘You know, only a short while ago I still thought we were just letting our imaginations run away with themselves. Now I reckon we’re on the right track.’

‘Are you ready?’ whispered Anne croakily. ‘The moon has already risen high; I don’t think there’s much time left.’

‘Yes,’ replied the backpack as she strained to turn the stone. ‘How’s that?’

‘Just a little more to the right. Wait, that’s too far. Back a little. That’s it, that’s it. Great, now the light is falling right on the dial. Come on, you can come down now. We’ve just got to wait now.’

The minutes crept by as slowly as hours. It was as if the pointer’s pale shadow had grown stubborn and was refusing to move. Anne was beginning to think all was lost when suddenly the backpack gave her a nudge while timidly huddling up to her.

‘Anne, can you hear it? That humming... I think it’s starting to get louder. Anne, I’m scared. What shall we do now?’

It was true that the strange sound, which had all along been hovering over the sanctuary like an invisible spider’s web, was growing noticeably louder. Soon the two friends had to plug their ears to block out the piercing noise. However, it didn’t help much. Just when they were unable to take any more and were on the point of escape, there came a sharp sound like a gigantic bottle being opened. Powerful rays of light darted from the tops of the circle of stones, directed in towards the platform beneath the arch.

‘Aaahhh!’ wailed the two friends, covering their eyes with their hands to avoid being blinded by the dazzling light.

But even with their eyes covered, they could still see what was happening. On the platform at the centre of the sanctuary a blue-green fire flared up and quickly grew until everything around was illuminated by its brilliant, shimmering light.

‘Anne, look! The fire... it’s got... a face!’ the backpack cried out.

In the midst of the fire there really did seem to be something like a face, or at least two huge eyes that were gazing directly at Anne. As if hypnotised, she slowly stood up and moved towards them.

‘Who... are you?’ whispered Red.

‘I am you and you are me and all of us are one and the same,’ answered the fire in a strange, hypnotic voice. ‘I am the beginning and the end and all that lies between them. I make that which is beautiful, ugly, and that which is ugly, splendid. I am the opposite of everything.’

‘I’m sorry, but ... I don’t understand,’ stammered Anne. ‘Could you explain it again, please, but make it a bit easier as you would for a child.’

‘Everything that touches me turns into something else. I am the fire of eternal change, the element that destroys and joins together again. You summoned me, and now I am here.’

‘I didn’t know that... I had summoned you. What does “fire of eternal change” mean?’

‘I make that which is ugly, beautiful, and that which is beautiful, ugly.... Light becomes dark and dark becomes light. I turn everything into its opposite.’

‘Everything into its opposite?’ Anne was suddenly startled. ‘But can you...’ she stammered with excitement, swallowed hard and went on almost too quietly to be heard, ‘can you turn the ghosts back into toys?’

‘Nothing would be simpler.’

Red felt a hot wave strike her, making her blind and deaf. She remained like that for a moment before returning to her senses. Then a thought shot through her mind like a bolt of lightning: ‘it can transform anything!’, and before thinking what she was saying she had already asked, ‘And can you turn rocks into gold?’

The fire twisted around in a sudden movement and made a sound like a cracking whip.

‘Hurry up, child!’ it hissed angrily. ‘You don’t have much time left. Soon I’ll have to go back from where I came!’

‘What, go back?’ asked Anne. ‘Wait, I don’t understand. Explain again, please!’

‘You awoke me and summoned me. What happens now depends on you. You can use my powers twice, but don’t forget I’m not here for long. If you don’t achieve anything, you must wait an entire year before you can summon me again.’

‘Why are you here for such a short time?’ asked Anne, becoming rather flustered. ‘And why only twice? All the genies in fairytales give you three wishes. You haven’t forgotten something, have you?’

The fire shuddered and started to fade. For a moment it looked as if it was about to disappear, but then it once more grew stronger and flickered with a steady flame.

‘Be quick, child!’ came the soft but firm answer. ‘You’re losing time!’

‘Okay, okay!’ said Anne hurriedly. ‘I’ll just have to run back to the ghost mansion. Will you be able to transform them all at once?’

‘Go now! There’s no time!’

Realising there was no time to talk, she turned and was about to race back down the path. However, she hadn’t even taken a single step when something made her stop dead in her tracks and cry out in terror.

Directly across from her were the wicked eyes of the beaver Heino.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Night Skirmish

‘Well, well!’ leered the beaver. ‘What have we got here, boys?’

Anne looked around helplessly. All of the escape routes were blocked by spiders – each one uglier and hairier than the last. They watched her with terrible, unblinking eyes. Heino rubbed his hands together with glee and continued, ‘We knew we’d get our hands on her sooner or later, didn’t we boys? Old Heino may be a little slow, but he never forgets; everyone in the forest knows that. Only the little red-haired girl didn’t want to know, and she played tricks on Heino. And that’s bad, v-e-e-r-y bad for one’s health, isn’t that right boys?’

He twisted his face into a monstrous smile and hissed, ‘What were you thinking, eh? That you could make jokes at Heino’s expense and just get away with it? Oh no, I don’t think so. No one has ever played a joke on Heino without paying dearly for it. And the price is always one and the same, ha-ha-ha! Would you like me to tell you what’s going to happen to you shortly? I shall personally seize you and then I shall throw you to the spiders – that’s what! And after that I shall watch them suck you dry like a juicy little fly. That’s what’s going to happen to you!’

He frowned and started rolling up his sleeves.

‘Enough chit-chat! Are you boys ready?’

The spiders started stamping their many feet impatiently. Quite unexpectedly and incredibly quickly considering his weight, Heino lunged forward like a rugby player. Anne barely managed to jump out of the way in time. The sharp stench of animal sweat made her feel sick.

‘Nice reflexes,’ he remarked coldly as he returned with slow, stalking steps. ‘Right, let’s see how you manage this time!’

Feelings and images whirled around in Anne’s head like a never-ending, chaotic dream. Sharpened by extreme terror, her senses registered everything around automatically as if beyond her own will: Heino’s smell, the impatient cries of the spiders greedy for prey, the dazzling light of the fire that continued to illuminate the scene with no concern for the change of events – she experienced all these as if from a great distance, removed from their influence. She continued to dodge the beaver’s rabid attacks mechanically, all the while droning to herself in the pattern of a sports commentator, ‘Yes! We got clear again nice-

ly, now let's see how we manage next time.' However, it was also quite clear to her the whole time that this game couldn't go on forever. Sooner or later he would catch her and then....

'The fire, the fire!' a faint voice that seemed to come from miles away reached her ears. 'Jump in the fire!'

She looked around drunkenly and almost fell into Heino's clutches. She was saved simply because she slipped and fell, and in that way he was dragged down with her. While he was still wallowing on the ground she managed to get back to a safe distance. She now had a few seconds to catch her breath.

'The fire, the fire!' came the faint voice again. Anne turned to see who was calling. From behind one of the stones, crouched low to the ground, the backpack was waving to her. 'What are you waiting for? Jump in the fire! You've no other choice!'

Not for all the money in the world! Fear squeezed Red's throat so hard that she could barely breathe. Anything else but that! To disappear, to melt like a candle in the flickering abyss of the fiery monster – no, she wasn't bold enough to do that.

Swoosh! Heino's greasy paws passed within a hair's breadth once more. She carried on leaping about like a matador being charged by an enraged bull, but her strength was running out and she was seeing flaming circles whirling in front of her eyes.

'Jump Anne!' came the backpack's voice again.

'I can't!' Red whined. 'I'm scared!'

'Jump!'

'I'm scared!' she cried with her last ounce of strength before closing her eyes, flinging her arms out like someone diving from a high bridge, and throwing herself right into the middle of the fire.

'Anne, is that you?' croaked the backpack. Her wide eyes were dull with fear. 'Anne, say something, please!'

The enormous monster, slimy and quite repulsive, was lying not far from the fire and was idly flapping its scores of tentacles that ended in sharp, curved



claws. Its tiny, menacing-looking head that seemed to be all eyes and teeth was looking at the backpack with a vacant expression.

‘Anne, I’m scared. Please say something! Can you hear me?’ If she had been able to cry, the backpack would already have started sobbing her heart out long ago.

‘I-I... hear you,’ the monster-Anne replied finally in a voice that sounded like sloshing through thick mud. ‘Don’t be afraid, it’s me. Where are Heino and his spiders?’

‘They ran away. Right after you... became a monster. Ugh, if I didn’t know it was you I would have taken off myself long ago. It’s good I’m not human, otherwise I would surely have had... well, you know... an accident!’

‘Am I...am I that... scary?’

‘Good heavens! Compared to you the ghosts look just like little pussy cats! If you could just see yourself...!’ The backpack realised she had said too much and stopped in mid-sentence. ‘But otherwise you’re ... just fine. I mean to say, you did a great job. There’s not a trace left of Heino and his gang.’

‘Uh,’ remarked the monster with no show of interest. ‘Now what do we do?’

‘I don’t know. Would you like me to go and look for the ghosts and Mr. Laptsev?’

‘No need, we are already here,’ came the magician’s voice from the dark.

Nerod Laptsev stepped into the sanctuary followed by the ghosts who threw nervous glances at each other at the sight of the monster. His eyes, sharp and penetrating as ever, observed the disgusting pile of tentacles and claws without the slightest unease.

‘Don’t be afraid!’ slurped the monster-Anne. ‘It’s me, Anne. I’ve just changed a little on the outside. Just like you. You understand, don’t you?’

There was an awkward silence.

‘I... found a way to turn you back into toys,’ continued the monster-Anne. ‘You just have to jump in the fire. It knows what to do after that. It’s the fire of eternal change.’

‘But you? What will happen to you?’ the bald doll asked her anxiously. ‘Will you be able to turn back into a human again?’

‘I hope so,’ replied the monster-Anne. ‘If we all jump together.’

‘I’m sorry, but that’s impossible,’ said Nerod Laptsev. ‘Even the fire of eternal change is subject to rules; it cannot make everything possible. In this case,

the rule says that the fire can only be used twice while it is here, and the creatures that use it must be of the same type. Furthermore, there may not be too many of them using it at the same time.'

He was silent for a short while, then cleared his throat and went on, 'It has already been used once by you, Anne. Before you decide what to do next, you must understand that this is your last chance. Think well on it. If you turn back into a human, they will remain ghosts. On the other hand, if they are transformed into toys you will remain a monster.'

'For... forever?' groaned the monster-Anne.

'No, not forever, but for at least one more year. The fire cannot appear more than once a year.'

'Don't waste time, I must disappear soon!' came the fire's crackling voice.

'I can't! I can't decide!' cried the monster-Anne. 'To remain a monster – but that's terrible! I don't want to! I can't! I... I'm a human, not a monster!'

'Decide quickly! Time's running out!' said the old magician.

'I can't! I can't!' the monster-Anne squealed and squirmed around.

'Anne, hurry!' Nerod Laptsev insisted somewhat anxiously. 'The fire will disappear any moment now.'

'I can't!'

'Now or never!' hissed the fire, and visibly started to shrink. 'Farewell!'

'Decide! Now!'

'Okay, okay. Listen, then: I ... will... wait. Let the ghosts ... turn back into toys.'

'Hurry!' roared Nerod Laptsev furiously. Only now it became apparent how much effort it cost him to keep his outward calm. 'Jump! Quickly!'

The ghosts joined hands and – whoosh! They threw themselves headlong into the fire. That very same moment it disappeared. A thick darkness fell so that nothing could be seen.

'Wh...wh... what happened?' The backpack started shouting like a mad-woman. 'Hasn't anyone got a light! I'll go mad with fright in this darkness!'

There was a dry click and Nerod Laptsev held up a slender wand that shed light from high above his head. It wasn't as bright as the fire, but enough to see in the dark.

Huddled together on the ground, confused and still rubbing their eyes, sat five beautiful children's toys – probably as beautiful as they had been when Anne

loved them, thought the backpack. They stood up, looked around in disbelief, and reached out to touch each other.

‘Teddy, you’ve got eyes again!’

‘Hey folks, look at me, all my parts are back where they should be!’ cried Dino, frolicking joyfully in the grass.

‘I’ve got hair again!’

‘And I’ve got two legs!’

‘And my red nose is back in place! Hooray!’

They joined hands and started dancing around, wild with happiness. Nerod Laptsev watched them with tear-filled eyes and blew his nose on a large, striped handkerchief. Having forgotten everything else, the backpack was also jumping up and down full of joy, unable to keep still.

‘Ahem,’

Suddenly they all stopped and began exchanging guilty glances. The monster-Anne had crept up close and was watching them with eyes that were oozing some kind of disgusting yellow muck.

‘She’s.. she’s crying,’ whispered the clown, and his long lashes started trembling. ‘Oh dear lord, we’re so mean. We forgot all about her!’

The talking doll was the first to realise what had to be done. Without paying any attention to how slimy and scary the monster was, she approached it bravely, took one of its tentacles and started speaking while stroking it tenderly.

‘Anne, don’t be afraid. You’re not alone! We won’t abandon you. Just look, you have so many friends. One year will pass before you know it. None of us will leave you. Please don’t despair!’

The teddy bear also came up, and shifting his weight from one leg to the other, he said timidly, ‘Anne, forgive me, please. I really ... hated you ... with my whole heart, but now ... I’ve learnt to love you again. Let’s be friends, please.’

‘I want to be friends, too!’ the rest of the toys all cried out at the same time.

There was total confusion. Each taking hold of one of the tentacles, the toys all tried hard to outdo each other in being kind and sweet to the monster-Anne. Nerod Laptsev had meanwhile withdrawn to a corner and was silently observing the scene. The backpack, almost as despairing as the monster herself, was sitting on the ground with her head in her paws neither hearing nor seeing anything around her. And so it was that none of them noticed the little cloud of light descending from somewhere above that was covering the monster little by little.

Only when the tentacles began to disappear and out from under them the familiar unruly mop of red hair appeared did everyone jump back in alarm.

In no more than a minute Red was standing there in front of them once again. There she was, all in one piece and quite unharmed, as if she had never been anything other than the ordinary little girl in jeans and a T-shirt. No less frightened than the others, she looked as if she were about to run off before she could be turned back into a monster again.

‘Yes,’ came the voice of Nerod Laptsev from his corner. ‘That is that. Congratulations, Anne! You have just passed the third test!’

‘Stop it! Stop it, will you!’ exclaimed Anne, attempting to shield herself from the toys’ embraces. ‘You’ll suffocate me, you will!’

No one paid her any attention. Hanging from her like Christmas tree decorations, they kissed her, hugged her, tugged at her hair, patted her face – in short, it seemed they were doing everything that could possibly turn her into a monster again!! Nerod Laptsev watched them, smiling.

‘I don’t understand. What happened? Am I really human again?’ asked Anne turning towards him.

‘Yes, you are,’ confirmed Laptsev. ‘You honestly deserve it.’

‘But... how come? Hey, leave me alone now, will you? Didn’t the fire disappear?’

‘There’s other magic in this forest, too,’ he smiled. ‘I’m even sometimes very surprised myself. And thank god for that, otherwise my life would be rather boring!’

The toys had finally settled down and were sitting in a circle with their eyes fixed on the old magician. He began to speak, while stroking his beard in his usual habit.

‘You are all surely very curious to know how Anne came to regain her human form.’

‘Yes, yes, yes!’ came the toys’ impatient reply.

‘I am sorry; you will have to be patient a little longer. Let’s start from the very beginning. Well, the intelligence test, as we already know, was for her to reach this sanctuary and to awaken the fire of eternal change. Red saw it through with

honour, but the backpack deserves no less praise. To tell you the truth, I don't think there is a single problem that could stop them. These two make one very, very powerful team!

'Bravo!' cheered the toys. 'Long live the backpack! Long live Red!'

He waited until they had calmed down before continuing.

'With the second test the backpack's contribution was more modest, but still valuable. Anne passed it the moment she dared to throw herself in the fire, even though she knew it would do something horrible to her. That's why it required great courage.'

'And a little desperation,' added Anne under her breath. 'I had no other choice.'

Her voice was lost amid the toys' joyful cheers.

'But that wasn't enough,' Laptsev went on after a brief pause. 'She still had the third test ahead of her – the most difficult of them all.'

The old magician went silent and looked around. The toys were devouring him with their impatient eyes, hungry to learn more about the mysterious third test.

'The third test... the third test she passed the moment she agreed to give up her own right to be transformed, and therefore sacrificed herself for her friends. Because the most difficult test of all is that of self-sacrifice. Only those who find within themselves the strength to sacrifice themselves for their friends deserve the respect of the enchanted forest.'

This time no one called out. Laptsev went up to Red, bent down and gently kissed her forehead.

'Welcome, Anne! Welcome to the forest ... without ghosts!'

The silence continued for a short while. Then the toys jumped up and flew at Anne, swamping her in hugs and kisses.

Their clamour was so great that at first no one noticed the shadows that had sneaked up among the nearby trees.

'Freeze! Put your hands up!' came a squeaky voice. 'Nobody move! You're under arrest! And remember, you're surrounded so don't try anything funny! Anyone who does can say farewell to dear life!'

All the friends stopped dead in their tracks and put their hands in the air. Only Nerod Laptsev, as coolheaded as ever, realised what he had to do. Suddenly it went dark again and from the darkness there came shouts, then muffled sounds and the calm voice of Nerod Laptsev called out, 'Everyone stay right where you are! I've caught our great warrior; let's see who it is.'

The light returned. A second passed, then two. Anne suddenly burst out in surprise, 'But ... but that's Quirk! Let him go at once, Mr Laptsev – he's a friend of ours! Quirk, you scared us out of our wits! What are you doing here? Aren't you afraid of the ghosts any longer?'

The tin clock, more flustered and confused than ever, was for once quite speechless. Looking wildly this way and that, every single part of his mechanism clattering, he clearly didn't have any idea about anything. Eventually, he seemed to have pulled himself together a little when he opened his mouth and roared at the top of his voice, 'Help me! Help! They've captured me!'

The air was suddenly filled with the buzz of numerous wings. From all around winged creatures started descending on the sanctuary.

'Wait!' cried Anne. 'We're friends, don't attack! Quirk, have you gone mad? Don't you recognise me any more?'

'Hey, she's telling the truth!' came a voice from above. 'The attack is over; everything here is okay.'

Out from the darkness appeared... Buzz the fly, Boo and the four elves, each armed with large cudgels, their faces still looking tense and anxious. For a long, long time the heroes stared into each other's eyes, unable to utter a word. Then they let down their guard, and everyone started talking at the same time.

'Anne, are you free?'

'Where are the ghosts? Let's get out of here before they arrive!'

'Hey wait, how did you get the courage to come here? Weren't you afraid of the ghosts more than anything else?'

'Goodness gracious, it's Quirk! I thought Heino had returned!'

'Silence! Silence!' rang out the voice of Nerod Laptsev. 'Speak one at a time, please!'

Anne went first. For a long time she got tangled in all the details, trying to tell everything without leaving anything important out. Finally, she somehow managed to reach an end. Then it was Quirk's turn. She sat down with the others and started listening impatiently.

It turned out that the old clock had nearly fallen into the clutches of Heino and his bandits on the fateful day Anne and the backpack had entered the anthill. After that he had searched throughout the forest, desperately following the two friends' tracks, but it was in vain, of course. Eventually, he was forced to admit he would never see them again, '...and that, my dear friends, was the most horrible moment of my life. Truly the most awful, I assure you.'

'Then quite by chance I one day learned from little Carpio that his father, the king of the fish, had carried Anne and the backpack to the other side of the river. And then, .. oh then I stood on the riverbank, gazing into the muddy, inhospitable waters, and just like Caesar I said, "Alea iacta est! – The die is cast!"'

'Hey Quirk, you're talking over our heads again!' came Ivan-John's mocking voice. 'Before long you'll be telling us "veni, vidi, vici – I came, I saw, I conquered"!''

'In fact, he came to ask us for help,' Ivan-John continued despite Quirk's insulted protests. 'I mean, he seemed to be really very worried, the old fusspot! You just wouldn't believe how he took the whole thing to heart! As you see, he even managed to convince us to come this side of the river... among the ghosts, would you believe! Actually, if you ask me, it wouldn't be a bad idea to scram before they appear. So far, so good, but in all honesty, I've got no real desire to play cops and robbers again.'

'Don't worry,' said Anne. 'Didn't I tell you that the ghosts no longer pose any danger to us? Go on! I'm very interested.'

'If you insist,' replied Ivan-John, but it was obvious he still didn't feel comfortable on this side of the river. 'So we armed ourselves to the teeth,' he pointed to the discarded clubs on the ground, 'then we took to the air, and here we are. You've seen the rest for yourselves. It's good you called out in time or else we could easily have cracked each other's heads in the dark.'

'Right, where to now?' asked Anne after all the stories had been told. 'What do we do from now on? I still want to go back to Mum.'

'One moment!' Nerod Laptsev called out. 'The time has come for the last miracle in this story.'

He reached into the wide sleeve of his coat and took out another little wand like the one that had been shining all along.

'Anne, it's time to say goodbye to your friends,' he added. 'From here the way leads straight back home!'

‘Really?’ Anne felt her knees start to go weak. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’

The next few minutes weren’t easy for anyone because Anne and her forest friends had grown fond of each other, and although everyone was happy, a small corner of their hearts remained sad.

‘Goodbye, Red!’ said Quirk over and over, taking no notice of all the springs and cogs flying out of his mouth. ‘Your name will live on forever... and ever!’

Ivan-John looked towards Anne and tapped the side of his forehead significantly, but there were tears in his eyes, too. Boo waved his wings like a windmill, and Buzz kept running back and shaking Anne’s hand over and over again, on each occasion for the last time.

Pressing the toys to her chest, Anne didn’t try at all to hold back the tears, but bawled like a baby. The backpack, silent as always when there were lots of others around, kept looking around anxiously and listening to the forest noises. It was quite clear that she had not forgotten the meeting with Heino.

However, the moment finally came when there was nothing more to say or do. Nerod Laptsey, who had been leaning on one of the stones waiting patiently the whole time, stepped forward and silently took his leave of Anne.

‘And now, move back!’ he said, turning to the forest inhabitants. ‘Just a little more. That’s good. Don’t panic, please!’

He waved the wand and ... all of a sudden the air was filled with the sound of a hurricane-force wind. Anne’s hair bristled; she still remembered well how she had ended up in the ghost forest. The air around her began to spin faster and faster until it finally grabbed her and carried her up into the star-spangled sky. Just a few moments later she could see the treetops beneath her feet, and then everything blended into a dark nothingness.

Epilogue: He Who Laughs Last Laughs Best

‘Mr Laptsev, I just can’t believe it. Your game has had a completely ... well, magical influence on Anne. In just a few days...’

Mum was smiling awkwardly, constantly removing her glasses and replacing them again.

‘Mum, stop it!’ exclaimed Anne. ‘I’m exactly the same, nothing’s changed.’

‘I don’t know whether you’ll believe me,’ Mum continued. ‘In fact, I don’t even know whether to believe it myself; she not only tidies her own room, but she has even repaired the broken toys. Look over there in the corner, they’re just like new.’

Mr Laptsev smiled and stroked his beard every now and then.

‘To be honest, Madam, I never doubted for a moment that your daughter would manage to get through those.. erm... growing pains, as I believe they are called.’

‘I just hope this isn’t just a temporary phase.’

Mr Laptsev wrinkled his forehead.

‘What do you think, Anne?’

‘As long as I can’t hear I’m fine!’ snapped Anne.

The old man’s face stretched into a big smile.

‘The same old Anne!’ he said, chuckling, and then turned back to her mother. ‘Well, Madam, do you feel a little reassured by that reply?’

‘I don’t know, I really don’t know. I only hope so!’

‘I hope my next request will not seem strange to you, but ... would you allow me to speak with your daughter in private for a moment?’

Mum clearly wasn’t very happy with this, but she didn’t offer any objection.

‘Well, as long as she doesn’t have anything against it.’

‘Of course I don’t,’ Anne replied quickly, ‘I actually am quite glad of the chance.’

Mum left the room with a suspicious backward glance.

‘Ah, at last!’ Anne sighed with relief. ‘I’ve got a thousand questions for you, but I didn’t think I’d ever get a chance to ask them.’

‘Hmm, we haven’t really got enough time for a thousand questions. Ask away, but hurry.’

‘How come Mum didn’t notice anything? I was in the forest for over a month!’

‘Time here and there passes at different rates, that’s all,’ smiled the magician. ‘Sometimes one minute here lasts one hundred years there, and sometimes the opposite.’

‘What are my friends up to? Are they okay?’

‘Oh, we’re all just fine, don’t worry. But the whole forest has altered completely. There’s not a trace of the dreadful things that once inhabited the old ghost forest. Now it’s light and calm there. Everyone is grateful to you. Oh, and before I forget, Madame Owl sends you her special greetings, and Grandpa Hedgehog, too.’

‘Tell them I really miss them!’ said Anne excitedly. ‘I’d go back if only I could!’

‘I don’t mean to disappoint you, but I sincerely hope that won’t be necessary. The forest needs visitors... only when things go wrong here or there. Otherwise, we get along quite well on our own.’

‘I believe you, but even so, I really want to go back. At least for a little while, maybe just for an hour or two.’

Mr Laptsev took his big watch out of his pocket and looked at it swiftly.

‘You reminded me that I can’t stay any longer. It’s time to go.’

‘That’s a shame. Say hello to everyone for me.’

He bent down, kissed her forehead and went out. Not long after, Mum appeared at the door.

‘What a strange man! Very strange. He gives me the creeps.’ She hesitated briefly before adding, ‘May I ask what you talked about?’

‘Well, nothing special. About toys, of course.’

‘What about toys?’

‘Well, I hope to be able to help him with his work from time to time.’

Mum looked at her for a long while, but seemed to have decided that everything was fine because she gave a resigned sigh.

‘Okay, but only on the condition that your schoolwork goes well. By the way, I’ve just found this in front of the door. It seems Mr Laptsev forgot it.’

She reached into her pocket and took out a small glass dome like those that create a snowstorm when shaken. She gave it to Anne and went out. As usual, she had urgent work waiting for her.



Anne took the toy, started looking it over and gasped with surprise. There inside, just like in the larger game, was the ghost forest. It had changed and looked brighter, but still it was the familiar old ghost forest.

Red was about to put the toy on one of the shelves when a slight movement attracted her attention. She stared at it closely and then nearly dropped it. Inside, watching her and waving his fist threateningly was the beaver Heino. His voice, weak and shrill, carried beyond the glass.

Anne put the dome to her ear and listened hard. The beaver's small voice was screaming menacingly, 'We'll meet again! He who laughs last laughs best!'

'Blah, blah, blah!' said Anne contemptuously. She looked at the toy once again, then put it at the back of the shelf with the toys that were beyond repair. From the street the neighbouring children's voices could be heard calling her to come out to play. She slipped on her trainers and ran outside.

High above the big city the sun was shining brightly.