

Accelerated  
Reader

Book  
Level 4-8

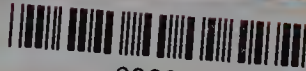
# Shadow Forest



NESTLÉ CHILDREN'S BOOK PRIZE  
GOLD AWARD WINNER

Matt Haig

NEVER - UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES - GO INTO THE FOREST!



03694

On loan from

**SCHOOL  
LIBRARIES  
RESOURCES  
SERVICE**

Telephone: 020 8359 3931

Fax: 020 8201 3018

E-mail: [srs@barnet.gov.uk](mailto:srs@barnet.gov.uk)

**BARNET**  
LONDON BOROUGH

[www.shadowforest.co.uk](http://www.shadowforest.co.uk)

# Shadow Forest

*London Borough of Barnet*  
LONDON BOROUGH OF BARNET  
LIBRARY SERVICES  
WITHDRAWN AND OFFERED  
FOR SALE  
SOLD AS SEEN

PRICE	
-------	--

30131 04419980 7



London Borough of Barnet



# Shadow Forest

MATT HAIG

Illustrated by Sandy Nightingale

CORGI BOOKS

SHADOW FOREST  
A CORGI BOOK 978 0 552 55563 0

First published in Great Britain by The Bodley Head,  
an imprint of Random House Children's Books  
A Random House Group Company

The Bodley Head edition published 2007  
Corgi edition published 2008

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text copyright © Matt Haig, 2007  
Illustrations copyright © Sandy Nightingale, 2007

The right of Matt Haig to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted  
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,  
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,  
recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the  
leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on  
Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement  
policy can be found at: [www.rbooks.co.uk/environment](http://www.rbooks.co.uk/environment)

Set in Baskerville Classico 13/19pt by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd

Corgi Books are published by Random House Children's Books,  
61-63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA

[www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk](http://www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk)  
[www.rbooks.co.uk](http://www.rbooks.co.uk)

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:  
[www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm)

THE RANDOM HOUSE GROUP Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

*To Andrea*

LONDON BOROUGH OF BARNET SCHOOL LIBRARIES RESOURCES SERVICE	
02-Jul-2008	PETERS
JF	£5.99





There is a place you must never enter. It is a place where evil has many faces, and where creatures of myth and legend live and breathe. And kill. It is a place beyond dreams or nightmares – a place that has so far been too feared to be called anything at all. Now, in this book, I will explain the unexplained, and give fear a name that suits it well. That name shall be ‘Shadow Forest’, and it will plant terror in your hearts.

Professor Horatio Tanglewood

*The humans and other creatures  
you will meet in this book*

## THE HUMANS

### THE BLINKS:

**Samuel Blink** A twelve-year-old boy, with worse luck than most, who has never considered himself to be a hero. Which is a shame, as he'd really make quite a good one.

**Martha Blink** Samuel's younger sister, who thinks she's in a musical. She's not. She's in the back of her parents' car singing annoying songs in Samuel's ear. Well, it is her birthday.

**Liv Blink** Mother of Martha and Samuel. Thinks Martha's singing isn't annoying at all, unlike her husband's driving.

**Peter Blink** Father of Martha and Samuel. Angry driver. Going to be lucky if he makes it through the first chapter.

## THE NORWEGIANS:

**Aunt Eda** Liv Blink's Norwegian sister. Samuel and Martha Blink's aunt. Former Olympic javelin thrower. Owner of a happiness lamp, ten pairs of long-johns, a house near Shadow Forest and a hairy chin. She misses her husband, Uncle Henrik, who disappeared in the forest ten years ago.

**Uncle Henrik** Ssssh! Don't mention Uncle Henrik when Aunt Eda's around. She'll probably start crying.

**Oskar** A grocer in the village of Flåm, with a soft spot for bow ties and tall women (especially Aunt Eda).

**Fredrik** Oskar's son, who likes to play on his calculator. Don't worry too much about him – he's only in two chapters.

**Old Tor** He's old. And . . . er . . . he's called Tor. He paints pictures of mountains and fjords. And the occasional two-headed troll.

## OTHER HUMANS:

**Professor Horatio Tanglewood (aka the Changemaker)**

An evil Englishman who lives in a wooden palace in the middle of Shadow Forest, which he rules under the name of the Changemaker. He wrote a book called *The Creatures of Shadow Forest* and keeps the pickled heads of his enemies in jars. His favourite music in the world is the sound of a child screaming. He is currently working on his autobiography.

**The author** Goes by the rather boring name of 'Matt Haig', although he was in fact christened Zerebubul Osrich Winterbottom the Third. He rudely interrupts the story on two occasions, just when you're getting into it. He once bumped into Professor Horatio Tanglewood in his local library. The professor asked to borrow his pen but never gave it back.

## THE DOG:

**Ibsen** A Norwegian elkhound, owned by Aunt Eda. Loves brown cheese, sleep and human children. Hates the forest.

# THE CREATURES OF SHADOW FOREST

## THE WITCHES:

**The Shadow Witch** Uses the power of shadows to transform herself and other forest dwellers. Lives with her master, Professor Horatio Tanglewood, in his wooden palace. She breathes shadow-clouds, and usually turns herself into a cat when she leaves the forest.

**The Snow Witch** The Shadow Witch's sister, who used to cast weather spells. Currently in an underground prison with weakened powers, she faces certain death. She has known better times.

## HULDRES:

**Vjpp** A thoroughly cruel prison guard who, like all huldres, fears daylight and lives underground. In case you're wondering how to pronounce his name, you can't. It's impossible.

**Grentul** A slightly less cruel prison guard, who is extremely loyal to Professor Tanglewood (known to huldres as the Changemaker). He dreams of the old days, when huldres weren't scared of the sun.

## TROLLS:

**Troll~the~Left and Troll~the~Right** Two heads of the same troll, who hate each other's guts (which, technically speaking, they share).

**Troll~Father, Troll~Mother, Troll~Son and Troll~Daughter** A friendly family of trolls who have only one eye between them.

## OTHER CREATURES:

**The tomtegubb** A golden, barrel-shaped creature who wears brightly coloured clothes and sings happy tunes, even when he knows there is nothing to be happy about.

**The truth pixie** A pixie living in a log cabin in the eastern region of Shadow Forest, who poisons passing visitors and finds it impossible to lie. (If he invites you to dinner, have a good excuse ready.)

**The flying skullpeckers** Highly lethal creatures who fly about pecking any skulls they can find, in order to feast on the brains – their favourite food.

**The slemp** A giant furry creature, combining physical aspects of a bear and a lion, with a belly comfier than any pillow. It spends most of its life asleep, dreaming of berries. Can gobble up a human head in one bite.

**Greytail the rabbit** An old rabbit who has convinced the others in his pen that Thubula, the rabbit god, is going to save them all. In fact, they're probably going to end up in troll casserole.

**Calooshes** Even more stupid than rabbits, calooshes are tall three-headed birds who run around the forest squawking and falling into holes.





## ON THE WAY TO THE BIG SURPRISE

The tree trunks lying on the back of the lorry were stacked up like a pyramid, and fastened with three grey straps made from a material Samuel Blink didn't recognize. One of the straps was a bit too loose and this caused the trunks to vibrate as if they were restless, or as if they were trying to escape and make it back to the forest.

The lorry overtook the car at a reckless speed.

'Have you seen anything like it?' Samuel's dad Peter was saying. 'What a maniac!'

Samuel's dad thought that every driver apart from himself was a maniac, and lorry drivers were the biggest maniacs of the lot.

'Great,' he said, as the giant vehicle began to slow down. 'Now we'll never get there.'

The timber lorry was in front of the car, hogging both lanes, so that the white lines on the tarmac shot out from under it like lasers.

‘There’s no hurry,’ said Samuel’s mum, who was called Liv. She was never more relaxed than when his dad was getting cross.

Samuel didn’t know where they were going, but he knew he didn’t want to spend another minute having to listen to his sister’s singing. Well, ‘singing’ was hardly the word for it. ‘Cat-strangling’ was a more accurate description of the sound.

‘Mum, tell Martha to stop making that horrible noise.’

His mum tutted. ‘It’s not a horrible noise. It’s beautiful singing.’

This was a lie. One of the million parent lies Samuel had grown used to during his twelve years on the planet. But he knew he wouldn’t get any support today. After all, it was Martha’s birthday – a fact indicated by the two badges on her jumper saying ‘I AM 10’ and ‘10 TODAY’.

The singing got louder. Samuel’s head vibrated like the logs as he rested it against the car window, staring out at the fast blur of grass on the side of the road.

‘Dad,’ he said, asking the second-in-command parent, ‘tell Martha.’

His dad ignored him. He was too busy grumbling about the timber lorry in front.

‘This is ridiculous! Why bother overtaking if you’re going to then go slower?!’

Martha twisted round in her seat belt and sang really loud in Samuel’s ear: *‘I’m your baby girl, And you could be my world . . .’*

Ugh! Samuel thought he was going to be sick. He hated his sister’s singing at the best of times, but especially when he was tired. He’d only had two hours’ sleep the night before, because he was having his usual nightmare. A nightmare about strange grey-skinned monsters with tails and eyes that never blinked. He’d woken in a cold sweat and couldn’t get back to sleep.

‘They should make murderers have to listen to you as punishment,’ he told Martha.

‘Shut up, Smell-uel. You’re just jealous.’

And then she started again, singing bits of silly girly love songs. He knew she would sing all day. After all, she sang every day. It was like Martha’s whole life was one big long song. As if she was trapped in one of those rubbish musicals she always watched on TV.

Samuel went back to looking out of the window and prayed for Martha to be quiet.

*Quiet as a log.*

Even when she said something normal, she turned it into a song, going high and low to make each word a different note.

So instead of just asking, 'Where are we going?' she sang:

*and* *-ing?'*  
*Mum* *where*  
*Dad,* *are*  
*we*  
*go*

To which their mum said, 'You don't want us to spoil the big surprise, do you?'

'Yes,' sang Martha.

'Well, you'll find out soon,' said her mum.

'Not if we stay stuck behind that thing,' said her dad, talking about the timber lorry.

Samuel wondered what the big surprise was going to be. He hoped it was a trip to a theme park, like it had been for his last birthday. A loop-the-loop roller-coaster would stop Martha singing, if only for a short while. He had gone on a ride with his dad called The

Catapult that went so fast you couldn't move your face. Samuel had loved every high-speed second of it, and his dad had pretended to feel the same way until he had to rush to the toilet and throw up his lunch (parent lie number 910,682).

But Samuel suspected that the big surprise was going to be something far more boring than a theme park. He thought of all the rubbish things Martha liked doing.

*Horse-riding . . .*

*Doing hairstyles . . .*

*Spending her pocket money on rubbish music . . .*

*Listening to rubbish music . . .*

*Singing rubbish music . . .*

So Samuel had, on the basis of Martha's interests, narrowed the options down to a day trotting on a horse, watching his sister have her hair cut at a posh hairdresser's, or – worst case scenario – going to see a musical. Possibly even a musical about a hairdresser who becomes a show jumper and sings to her horse.

Samuel smiled at the unique version of hell he had created in his mind.

*Beeeeep!*

The daydream of people singing on horses ended

with the sound of his dad blasting the car horn at the timber lorry in front.

‘This is ludicrous,’ his dad said, switching on the indicator.

‘Peter, what are you doing?’ his mum asked.

‘I’m turning off. We’ll be on this road all day if we stay behind this timber truck. And have you seen the way those logs are strapped up? It’s an accident waiting to happen.’

‘But we don’t know the roads.’

‘We’ve got a map. In the glove box.’

Uh-oh.

Samuel and Martha knew what the map meant. It meant their mum and dad having a massive row for an hour, arguing about where they should have turned left.

‘OK,’ said their mum. ‘We need the B six four two. Kids, look out for the B six four two.’

‘*B six four two,*’ sang Martha.

‘*B                    two.*’

*six*

*four*

The car went round a roundabout three times, until Samuel spotted the B642, hiding in brackets on a small green road sign.

‘There it is,’ he said.

The car turned off the roundabout, and within five minutes the map had managed to create the usual left-turn row. Samuel kept staring out of the window and the birthday girl kept singing as their mum and dad’s argument took root and began to grow.

‘Left.’

‘What?’

‘Too late. We should have turned left back there.’

‘You could have told me. You’re the one with the map.’

‘I did tell you.’

‘Well, you could have told me before we reached the flaming turn-off.’

‘It’s this stupid old map. It’s too hard to read.’

Samuel thought about what his mum had just said and he wondered how a map could be stupid. And then he thought about the tree that was turned into paper to make the map. Maybe the map was hard to read as a kind of revenge.

Whatever the reason, they missed the left turn and were now stuck on the B642.

‘If we keep going, we’ll be able to get back on the dual carriageway,’ Samuel’s mum said, as she analysed the map.

‘Fan-flaming-tastic,’ said Samuel’s dad. ‘Back where we started!’

‘It was your idea to turn off.’

‘Well, we’d have been fine if you could just read a flaming map!’

‘Oh no,’ said Samuel’s mum.

‘What’s the matter?’ Samuel’s dad shook the question out of his head.

‘It doesn’t join the dual carriageway . . . It goes *under* it.’

And, to prove her point, the view round the next bend revealed a large concrete bridge directly above the B642.

Samuel saw, to his far left, the timber lorry rising at a steady angle towards the bridge. What he couldn’t see – something that would have required Samuel to have telescopic vision – was that the loose grey strap that helped fasten the logs had come completely undone. The other two straps were also now a lot looser than they should have been, causing the tree trunks to jump about in an increasingly violent fashion.

By the time the second strap came undone, it was almost inevitable that the third would follow. And it did, which led to another inevitability – that the logs would start to fall.



As the car headed towards the bridge, Samuel tried to keep his eyes on the lorry. He had worked out that if they kept going at the same speed, the car would go under the bridge at the exact moment the lorry went over it.

So when he saw the first tree trunk bounce off the lorry, he knew the potential danger.

‘Dad! Stop the car!’

‘Samuel, what on earth’s the matter?’

‘Stop the car! The logs! Falling off the lorry! Stop the car!’

‘Samuel, what are you talking about?’ His dad was showing no sign whatsoever of stopping the car.

The first log broke through the roadside barrier one hundred metres before the bridge and started rolling down a slope towards the field at the side of the B642.

‘Stop the car! Stop the car!’

‘Samuel?’ His mum always added a question mark to his name when she was cross.

‘Stop! Stop! Just stop!’

But the car kept going, the logs kept falling, and his sister kept singing.

*‘Happy birthday to me . . .’*

‘Stop!’

‘Samuel?’

‘We can’t just stop the car.’

‘*Happy birthday to me . . .*’

‘Can’t you see?’

‘What?’

‘Look – those logs, rolling down the hill.’

‘*Happy birthday to Martha . . .*’

‘Logs? What logs?’

‘Honestly, Samuel. I think you’ve got an over-active—’

‘*Happy birthday to—*’

That was the moment. That was when Samuel’s dad finally decided to brake. That was also the moment when the last of the ten logs that had formed the pyramid rolled off the lorry and crashed through the barrier.

Only this time the tree trunk didn’t roll down a slope into a field. It fell over the bridge and straight onto the only car that was travelling on that particular stretch of the B642.

*Smash!*

It landed on the front portion of the roof. A heavyweight Scottish pine that had travelled three hundred miles south on its way to a paper mill in Lincolnshire.

Within less than a second of it hitting the thin metal, Samuel and Martha lost both their parents, while they themselves, along with the entire back half of the car, remained physically unharmed.

Samuel held onto his sister's hand as they stayed sitting on the back seat. They were too shocked to move. Or to speak. Or to make any sound at all. Their eyes had seen more nightmares in the space of a second than in the course of their combined lifetimes.

Neither of them knew where their parents had planned to take them for Martha's birthday. All they did know was that, whatever else happened, nothing would ever be the same again.

## AUNT EDA

The crushing of their parents by a giant log wasn't Samuel and Martha Blink's first encounter with death.

Indeed, most of their direct relatives had been wiped out within the two children's lifetimes, although they hadn't been present at any of these other deaths.

They weren't there, for instance, when Granddad had a heart attack carrying a box of ornamental gnomes into his back garden. Or when Nan, two months later, tripped over one of the gnomes and fell head-first into the greenhouse.

Nor were they there when Uncle Derek electrocuted himself trying to rescue a tiny piece of toast from the bottom of the toaster with his fork. Or when Aunt Sheila collapsed and banged her head against

the door-stop after getting five numbers in the lottery.

And they weren't there when their Norwegian Uncle Henrik had . . . Well, the case of Uncle Henrik was something of a mystery.

Unlike all the other deaths, Samuel and Martha were never told how Uncle Henrik had died. In fact, they weren't told much of how he lived, either.

You see, Uncle Henrik was from Norway. That is the country where Samuel and Martha's mum Liv was from and a country the two children had never visited. Their mum had a twin sister called Eda. Liv and Eda grew up in a town called Fredrikstad, near Norway's capital city, Oslo. When they were twenty, their long-widowed mother died. The next year Liv moved to England, to study at university, where she met her future husband Peter. That same year Eda fell in love with a ski jumper called Henrik in Norway.

Samuel and Martha knew very little about Aunt Eda and Uncle Henrik. But one thing they did know was that Aunt Eda had been a very good javelin thrower, the best in the whole of Norway, and she had made it to the Olympics in Moscow. Samuel had always thought this was an amazing fact – that a blood relative had made it to the Olympics – and it

had always made him try harder at Sports Day. But when a javelin he had thrown nearly skewered his games teacher, he realized he probably wasn't going to be following in his aunt's footsteps.

Whenever Samuel and Martha had asked about Aunt Eda, their mother had always given the same reply: 'She is a kind and wonderful woman.'

So why had they never seen this very kind and wonderful woman?

You may well ask. Samuel and Martha certainly had done, about one hundred times each, but they never got a satisfactory answer.

Here are three of the not-very-satisfactory answers they received:

- 1) 'Your Aunt Eda is scared of boats and aeroplanes, so she never leaves Norway. Now, no more questions, I have got a headache.'
- 2) 'We cannot afford to go to Norway as it is a very expensive country and we are not made of money. Now, no more questions, I have got a headache.'
- 3) 'It is very cold in Norway. I am sure you would like to go somewhere warm with nice beaches. Now, no more questions, I really have got a very bad headache.'

And that was it.

Well, it had been it until six days after their mum and dad died. That was the day the letter came, placed in Samuel's hand by Mrs Finch, the kindly old neighbour who had been looking after them.

Samuel looked at the handwriting, but didn't recognize it. The looped 'g's and 'y's and 'l's reminded him of the way his mother used to write, but his mother's writing was far scruffier.

He opened the envelope and found two aeroplane tickets along with a letter, which he started to read.

Eda Krohg  
1846 Flåm  
Norway

Dear Samuel and Martha,  
I am the sister of your mother and, as I am to understand it, your only surviving relative. It is a terrible shame that the first time I write to you is under these most horrid circumstances, but it is important for you to know that you are not on your own. You will not have to go to a children's home, or be passed around like a parcel no one wants to open.

As your next of kin, I invite you both to come and live with me here in Norway, and have included two aeroplane tickets for that purpose.

I don't know what your mother has told you about me. You are probably aware that we never saw each other, and little more than a Christmas card has passed between us since before you were born. It is a shame we did not speak to each other more often as your mother was a kind and wonderful woman.

I live near the pretty village of Flåm, which I am sure is not as big or exciting as Nottingham, but we have a fjord and snow-capped mountains nearby. I also have a dog called Ibsen, who is an elkhound, which is a Norwegian breed. He would very much enjoy the chance to sniff new people for a change!

There is a school in the nearby village. It is a small school, with only twelve children in total, and I am sure it will suit you very much. I have already spoken to the principal and you will be able to enrol (is that the word?) in two weeks.

As for me, well, I have certain rules that



you must follow. These rules must not be broken, as they are there for good reasons.

There is an old expression in Norway - 'A life without rules is a drink without the cup!'

Without the cup, what good is the drink?

Anyway, I am sure we will get along just fine, and I look forward very much to the meeting of both of you.

Oh, we will have such happy times - you will see!

Your loving aunt,

Eda

## THE YES-NO GIRL

**A**unt Eda was waiting for them at the airport, with a piece of cardboard that said:

*Samuel + Martha.  
Hello, I am Aunt Eda.*

Samuel saw the sign. 'There she is.'

Martha looked and saw a tall thin woman with greying hair tied into a bun. The woman, wearing a long stripy scarf and a big orange coat, was smiling straight at her.

Martha followed her brother through the crowds of people and tried to smile back at the woman, but she couldn't. She had lost the ability to smile seven days ago. The day she stopped speaking.

In the case of Samuel, he didn't smile because he

didn't like the look of Aunt Eda. She certainly didn't look like someone who had ever been in the Olympics. She looked tall and strict, and wore weird clothes. He didn't like her stupid long scarf or her silly round-toed ankle-boots or her big orange coat. He didn't like her red cheeks or her long neck or her weird sloping shoulders that gave her the look of a wine bottle.

When they reached their aunt, she held out her arms.

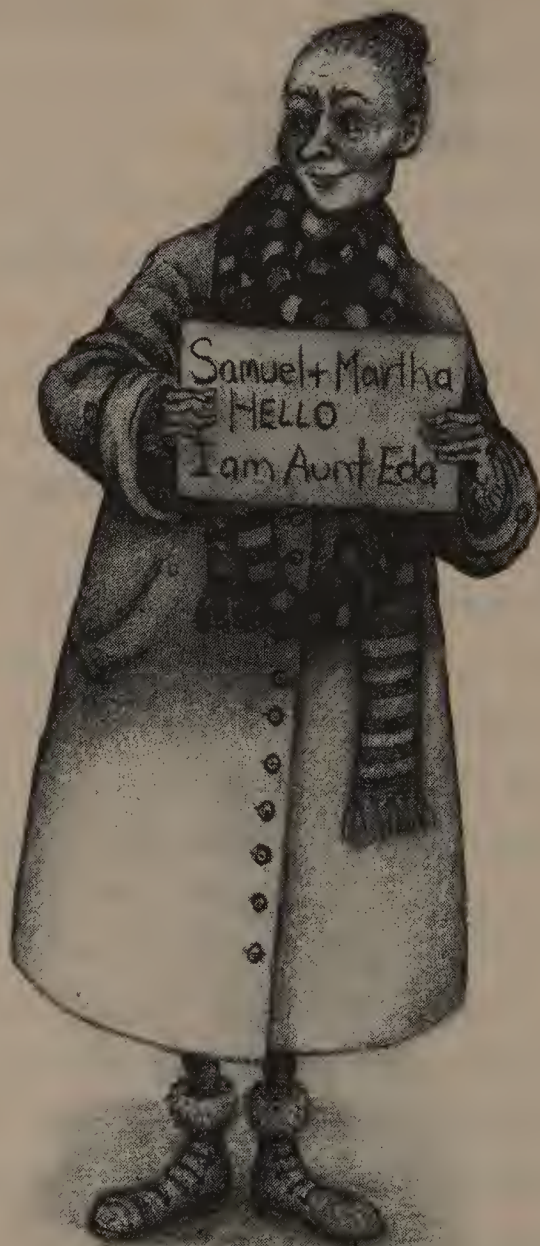
'Samuel,' she said, still smiling broadly. 'Martha.'

She hugged them both, squashing their faces together as she brought them into her arms. Samuel couldn't help but notice that these arms – although thin – were very strong. The wiry hairs on her chin and upper lip prickled his cheek.

'You poor children,' she said, holding the hug for as long as possible. And then she whispered something in Norwegian, which neither Samuel nor Martha could understand. It was something that seemed to mean a lot, because when she stood back, there was a tear in one of her eyes.

She looked into both their faces, searching for something that wasn't there.

'Oh dear, oh dear,' she said. 'We'd better go to lost



luggage and ask if they haff seen the smiles of two children.'

'I'm twelve,' Samuel said crossly. 'Martha's ten. You don't have to speak like we're babies.'

Aunt Eda looked like she was ready to tell Samuel off but she thought better of it.

'Right,' she said, nodding towards the luggage trolley Samuel was pushing. 'I'll take your bag, shall I, Mr Twelf Years Old?'

'I can manage it,' Samuel said, tightening his grip on the metal handle of the trolley. In fact, he had chosen the one trolley with a wobbly wheel and couldn't manage it very well at all, but he tried to hide the strain on his face.

'Werry well. Then let us go to the car, shall we?'

Aunt Eda had a slight accent that sounded rather surprised, as if the words had never expected to be used. It also turned all 'v's into 'w's or 'f's, which Samuel would have found quite funny if he wasn't so cross about being in Norway.

'She looks stupid,' whispered Samuel as he and Martha followed their aunt through the airport.

Martha gave her brother a look. *No she doesn't*, she thought (but she was too sad to say it). *She looks nice*.

*She's got Mum's eyes and Mum's smile and she's being very friendly.*

'Look at her clothes,' Samuel went on. 'Look at her stupid scarf. And those boots. And what's she wearing that weird big coat for? She must spend an hour buttoning it up to the top.'

Aunt Eda turned round. 'Sorry? Did you say something?'

'Er, I was just saying how much I like your clothes,' he said.

'Oh,' said Aunt Eda. 'Thank you verry much.'

The children followed their aunt through the door that had a sign saying 'UTANG – EXIT' and outside into the cold air. Suddenly Samuel realized Aunt Eda's scarf and coat weren't so stupid.

'I hate this country,' Samuel told his sister. 'I've been here five seconds and I know I hate it.'

His words were lost on the wind as they walked across the tarmac to a scruffy-looking white car on its own in a far corner of the car park.

'Look at her car,' he mumbled to Martha as they helped put their luggage in the battered old boot. 'It's ancient!'

Samuel climbed in the back, and was surprised when he saw Martha sit in the front.

‘Now, it is old,’ said Aunt Eda, acting like she’d heard Samuel talking about the car. ‘But cars are loyal, I think. If you stand by them, they won’t let you down.’

The car coughed its disagreement as she tried the ignition.

‘Come on, you old thing,’ she said. ‘Come on . . . Ah, there it is . . . purring like a Skogkatt.’

Samuel felt a sense of unease in his stomach as the car pulled away, as if he expected another log to fall out of the sky.

‘It was terrible, what happened,’ Aunt Eda said. ‘I couldn’t believe it. Your mother was a brilliant person. And your father—’

The softly spoken words ran through Samuel like nails down a blackboard.

‘You didn’t know my dad,’ Samuel said. ‘You hardly knew Mum either. You never saw her, so I don’t know why you want us to live with you. You never wanted to see us before.’

‘This is not true,’ said Aunt Eda quietly.

‘Why did you never see our mum, if you liked her so much?’ Samuel asked, surprised at how angry his voice sounded. ‘Mum said you were scared of flying in planes. And going on boats.’

‘She did?’ Aunt Eda looked confused for a moment, as if she was learning new things about herself. ‘Oh yes . . . yes . . .’

Her words trailed off.

Samuel looked at his sister. She was tracing circles on her palm with her fingertips. A week ago Samuel had prayed for her to stop singing and now he wondered if he was ever going to hear her sing again. He wondered if there was a song sad enough.

*Probably not*, he thought.

Probably not.

Samuel had only been in Norway for thirty-six minutes but he was already sure that it was the worst country he had ever visited. What was the point of all the mountains and trees and water? Why live somewhere so cold you have to wear stupid coats and woolly hats? And what was with the words on the road signs?

ENVEISKJØRING

REKKVERK MANGLER

ALL STANS FORBUDT



The names of the towns they were driving through were just as weird –

LØKKEN VERK

SKOGEN

KYRKSÆTERØRA

The small town they were in now was called ‘Hell’. It even had a sign, written in English, that said ‘WELCOME TO HELL’.

And what did Hell look like? The same as all the other villages they had been through.

Brightly coloured three-storey houses and a fat grey church that clung to the gentle slope of a hill, with a short steeple that seemed scared to reach too high into the sky.

‘In Norway, “*hell*” is the word for prosperity,’ explained Aunt Eda. ‘Do you know what prosperity means?’

She looked at Martha and then in the rear-view mirror at Samuel. Neither were about to tell her if they knew what prosperity meant or not.

‘If you prosper at something, it means you are successful, like if you earn a lot of money, people say you are prosperous,’ Aunt Eda said. ‘And Norway is

always called a werry prosperous country. Efferybody earns a nice amount of money. The postman earns nearly as much as the doctors and lawyers. It is a werry equal society. In Norway people don't get too jealous of each other. We are a peaceful people. There is enough money and enough land to go around so efferyone is happy . . . That is what they say.'

Samuel could see his aunt's face in the mirror and noticed that her eyes were not showing the happiness she described. *She doesn't want us here*, he thought. *That is why she has unhappy eyes. She probably hated Mum, really. And she probably hates us.*

He didn't care about peace or rich postmen. He just wanted it to be the week before, when everything was normal.

'How far is it?' Samuel asked his aunt.

They had gone past Hell now and they were somewhere else, without houses or a name.

'Oh, not too far now,' she told him. 'But on the way we must stop and get some food at the grocer's shop in Flåm. Flåm is the willage nearest to my house. It is a luffly place.'

The words were no comfort. Samuel had never felt further away from home in his whole life. And it

wasn't just the two plane journeys or the long car ride or the weird scenery that were making him feel like this. It was the thought that even if he made the long car ride and two plane journeys back in the opposite direction, he would be no closer to home. He knew, ever since his parents died, that he would never feel at home again – even if he lived to be a hundred years old.

'I haff a dog,' Aunt Eda said. 'A Norwegian elkhound. He is a werry good dog, if a little bit greedy. He is called Ibsen. I told you about him in the letter. He barks a lot but he is a big soft thing really. Do you like dogs?'

'No,' said Samuel.

Martha said nothing.

'Oh well, I am sure you will like Ibsen.'

The scenery suddenly disappeared, replaced by darkness on both sides of the road.

'This is a werry long tunnel,' explained Aunt Eda. 'It is elefen kilometres, and goes right under the mountain.'

Samuel looked at his sister. She used to be scared of tunnels, but her blank face showed no sign of fear.

'You are werry quiet,' Aunt Eda said, turning to

Martha. 'Why don't you tell me about your hobbies? What games do you like to play?'

The questions made Samuel cross. 'She can't answer you. She doesn't . . . speak.'

Aunt Eda made a questioning face, so Samuel explained.

'She hasn't said anything since Mum and Dad died. She only nods and shakes her head. Only ask her things that need a yes or no for an answer.'

Samuel thought the idea of his silent sister might shock Aunt Eda, as she seemed the shockable type, but she took this piece of news as if it were perfectly normal. He watched his aunt's face under the flickering lights of the tunnel and detected nothing except a warm smile below the same sad eyes.

## THE TALE OF OLD TOR

‘**N**ow,’ said Aunt Eda, turning a corner. ‘This is Flåm, the nearest willage to my house. This is where we must stop and get some food from the grocer’s.’

Flåm was a very quiet and clean village with hardly any traffic. It reminded Samuel of a model village he used to own when he was little, but this was a model village blown up so big it was full-sized. Like Hell and all the other places they’d driven through, the streets were lined with gabled timber houses – some painted white or blue, others left dark and natural. Aunt Eda drove them slowly past a church, which was also made of wood and shaped like all the other buildings, except for the short pointed steeple sticking out of it.

‘Your Uncle Henrik used to joke that it wasn’t a church at all,’ said Aunt Eda, as she waited at a

crossroads. 'He said it was just an ordinary house that had ideas abuff its station.'

Aunt Eda parked the car in the middle of the high street.

'Come on, children. Let us get some food, shall we?'

Samuel huffed, but he and Martha did as their aunt said, following her past a bookshop, then an art shop, towards a shop which had a sign outside, painted in bold yellow letters:

### **DAGLIGVAREBUTIKK**

'This is Oskar's shop,' explained Aunt Eda. 'Oskar is the grocer. This is where I get my shopping. It is a werry friendly place.'

She pushed open the door and a bell rang.

Samuel nearly choked on the smell. It was like walking into a giant block of smelly cheese.

The shop was busy with villagers talking and laughing, but when they heard the bell and turned to see Aunt Eda and the two children, their conversation stopped.

'*Goddag!*' Aunt Eda said cheerily, but the greeting bounced off their stony faces.

Aunt Eda did her best to ignore the villagers staring at her, and picked up a shopping basket. She began to take groceries from the shelves – a packet of flat-bread, a carton of cloudberry juice, a jar of pickled herrings – while Samuel and Martha shuffled along behind her.

When she reached the cheese counter, another customer – a chubby woman in three cardigans – tutted at Aunt Eda and shook her head at Samuel and Martha.

‘What’s her problem?’ Samuel muttered.

But it wasn’t just the cardigan woman. All the other customers were giving Samuel and Martha equally funny looks.

‘Now, Samuel and Martha, is there anything you would like to add to the basket?’ Aunt Eda asked, doing her best to ignore the villagers.

Martha shook her head.

‘No,’ said Samuel, because he wanted to leave the shop as soon as he possibly could.

‘If you’re sure,’ said Aunt Eda with a smile as she waited at the cheese counter for Oskar to appear.

‘*Goddag, Oskar,*’ she said to the shopkeeper, once he’d walked over.

Oskar was a rather odd-looking man. He was

short, with a bald head and an impressive yellow moustache. He also wore a yellow bow tie and yellow shirt, tucked tight over his round belly. He didn't return Aunt Eda's greeting. He just stood there, silent in his yellow clothes, as if he was another cheese waiting to be picked.

'Oskar?' Aunt Eda enquired. She then began talking in Norwegian and pointing at different cheeses.

Oskar began slicing cheese, but didn't talk.

It was then that a boy appeared from the doorway at the far end of the shop. The boy was about Samuel's age, with white-blond hair and green eyes magnified by thick, gold-rimmed glasses.

He came and sat on a stool behind his father, Oskar, and began playing with a calculator.

*It must be the closest thing to fun around here,* thought Samuel. *Playing with a calculator.*

'*Goddag,*' the boy said to Samuel. His smile revealed a silver brace.

'Hello,' said Samuel.

'Fredrik!' Oskar clicked his fingers and sent his son away, as if Samuel was infected with something dangerous.

To Samuel's surprise, the poor boy did exactly as he was told, disappearing from where he had



come without question.

The other villagers in the shop were leaving, each one tutting or grumbling or throwing scornful looks as they passed Aunt Eda and the children. When the last villager had left, Oskar's face softened, like a chunk of cheese that had been left too near a fire. And, in a voice that sounded both friendly and cross all at once, he began to talk.

But what it was he said to Aunt Eda Samuel and Martha couldn't imagine, although the bulging eyes made it clear it was something quite serious.

Samuel wished he could speak Norwegian so he could understand properly. But if he *had* understood the conversation, he might have wished it the other way round, as the words coming out of Oskar's mouth would have made him think everyone around here was totally mad. Including Aunt Eda.

**The conversation between Aunt Eda and Oskar  
(that Samuel and Martha couldn't understand)**

AUNT EDA: What is the matter with everyone today?

They seem so unfriendly.

OSKAR: Eda, it seems strange that you have to ask.

AUNT EDA: Well, I *am* asking.

OSKAR: The children! Who are they? What are you doing with them?

AUNT EDA: They are my sister's children. They have come from England. My sister and her husband died in a terrible accident and they have no one else. No one. They must come and live with me.

OSKAR: Near the forest?

AUNT EDA: Yes, near the forest.

OSKAR: Then you might as well kill them now. It would be kinder. Because you know if they go into the forest they won't ever come back.

AUNT EDA: They won't go into the forest. I will make it clear that they must never go in.

OSKAR (*shaking his head*): As soon as they hear about all the creatures that live there – the huldres and the pixies and the trolls and all the others – they will want to see them. You know what children are like.

AUNT EDA: No, I will make it very clear to them that they must not go near the trees. So long as they never go into the forest, they will be safe.

OSKAR (*leaning over the counter*): No, Eda, forgive me, but I fear you are wrong. You might be able to keep the children away from the forest, but can you keep the forest away from the children? Did you hear about Old Tor, the painter?

AUNT EDA: Old Tor? Who has the art shop down the street? Whose wife was just so rude to me? I have bought pictures from him before. What about him?

OSKAR: Well, he says he was out near the fjord on Friday, painting a moonlit scene, when he saw a great monster. A monster that had run out of the forest. A troll with two heads!

AUNT EDA (*gulping*): A troll with two heads?

OSKAR: Yes, and it was being chased by even uglier creatures. Huldres!

AUNT EDA: Huldres! Just like the professor said?

OSKAR: Yes. They were on horseback. Old Tor saw them throw a net over the two-headed troll and then beat it to the ground. They dragged the troll back to the forest.

AUNT EDA: So what did Tor do?

OSKAR: He hid behind his canvas and prayed to God that no one would notice him. He sat there shaking for two hours before he dared make a move.

AUNT EDA: Was he sure? I haven't seen anything come out of the forest for years. And how could he see? He only has one good eye, hasn't he?

OSKAR: Yes. I know. But it is a *very* good eye. You have

seen his paintings. Old Tor is the most respected man in the village . . . And if the creatures are stepping out of the forest, you can see why people worry. About the children. Your house is too close, Eda.

AUNT EDA: Yes, it is close. Don't you think I know that? But what do these worried people think I am going to do? Do they think I am going to send the children into the forest? Do they think I won't tell them not to go there? Do they think I won't tell them not to be outside after dark? Of course I will. What else can I do?

OSKAR: You could . . . move. Maybe.

AUNT EDA: Oh, and what would my dear Henrik say then?

OSKAR: Henrik? Eda, Henrik has . . . gone. You must realize that.

AUNT EDA: Yes. Of course. I know that. I know that just as well as I know that he is coming back.

OSKAR: But it has been ten years, Eda. Ten years since he walked into that forest. You must know he isn't coming back.

AUNT EDA: If I knew that, I would have gone into the forest years ago and finished myself off too.

OSKAR: Eda, you don't mean that. There are plenty of

men out there, you know. Maybe some who need a little company too, from time to time.

AUNT EDA: Well, yes, maybe. But now I've got Samuel and Martha to look after. And anyway, I know Henrik is still alive. Somewhere. Inside that forest. And I know he is going to come back.

OSKAR: Yes. But now? After ten years? Wouldn't it be easier if you—?

AUNT EDA: No. He is alive. And he is coming back. I can feel it in my heart. If you believed in love as much as you believed Old Tor, you would understand me.

OSKAR: Oh, Eda, if only you realized how much I believed in true love.

AUNT EDA: And what does that mean?

OSKAR (*blushing*): Nothing. It means nothing.

AUNT EDA: Now, here is twenty kroner for my groceries. You can keep the change. *Morna, Oskar.*

OSKAR: *Morna.*

And then, in a strange kind of English, Oskar said to the children: 'Remember, do as your aunt does tell you so – stay away from the cheese.'

*The cheese?* thought Samuel. *What's so dangerous about the cheese?* (He didn't realize that the shopkeeper

had been talking about the forest, and meant to say 'trees', not 'cheese'.)

Aunt Eda, Samuel and Martha left the shop and walked back to the car. On the way, Samuel looked in the window of the art shop run by Old Tor.

He saw the chubby woman with three cardigans who had been so rude. She was talking to a man with a very long beard and clothes specked with paint. Catching the old man's stare, Samuel saw that one of his eyes was as white as milk. Samuel pretended to be interested in the canvases by the window. Most were of mountains and fjords, but then he saw another picture. It wasn't in the window, but hanging on the wall behind the old man. It was a picture of a wild-looking creature with two heads. It was so lifelike it made him jump, as if the creature could have leaped out of the painting.

Samuel shook the picture out of his mind, like a dog shaking off water, and followed his aunt and sister to the car.

'Why is everybody so creepy around here?' he asked his aunt as they loaded the shopping into the boot.

'They're not creepy, really. Not when you get to

know them. They are just a bit frightened, that's all. And fear can make you act a bit strange.'

'Why are they frightened?' Samuel asked. 'What is there to be scared of?'

'Nothing,' Aunt Eda said, too quickly to be believed. 'That is, nothing if we all follow certain rules. Now, Samuel, I can see from your face that you don't like the sound of that werry much. But they are not just for you, they are for me as well. If all three of us follow the rules, we will be fine. And we will not become strange like those scared old willagers.'

Samuel curled his lip as he climbed into the back seat. All his life he'd had to listen to other people's rules. *Do your homework on time. Make your bed. Change out of your uniform after school.* And where had following these rules got him? All the way to Norway and his hairy-faced aunt.

No. That was it. Samuel Blink wasn't going to listen to rules any more.

After all, what else had he got to lose?

## THE UNMENTIONABLE PLACE

**A**unt Eda lived in a white wooden house with a steep, sloping grey roof, a few miles outside Flåm.

Most visitors to the house would have been mightily impressed with its setting, as it perched on a lush green hillside overlooking one of the most beautiful Norwegian fjords. The fjord was called the Aurlandsfjorden – a giant inlet of water so still and so pure that it looked like a massive mirror reflecting the tree-covered hill and snow-capped mountains all around.

Samuel, however, was not like most visitors. He hated the house and he hated the view from the first time he saw it. He felt exactly the same about the grassy slopes of the hill that led up to the thick, dark forest behind the house.



‘This is the worst place ever,’ he mumbled to his sister, who neither nodded yes nor shook her head no.

Where were the people? Where were the *things to do*?

‘Come on, children, let me show you inside,’ said Aunt Eda as she walked them from the car to the narrow front door. Samuel couldn’t help but notice the easy way Aunt Eda’s skinny arms managed to carry both the suitcase and the shopping bags, as if they contained nothing but feathers.

‘This is the hallway, where we leaf our coats and our hats and where we take off our shoes,’ she said, putting the bags and suitcase down. ‘And there is the kitchen and the washroom, on the left . . . and on the right, if we go on through, is the liffing room.’

She walked them into a large room with wooden walls, rugs on the floor and a fireplace. A shiver went through Samuel as his eyes scanned the room. He had a very strange feeling he had been here before. He recognized everything, but couldn’t think where from. The rocking chair, the sofa covered with a multi-coloured woollen blanket, the dark wooden table, the shelves full of glass vases and ancient-smelling books, the framed paintings of

the mountains and fjords on the wall, and more mountains and fjords outside the front window.

‘Ah yes,’ said Aunt Eda, noticing Samuel was looking at the paintings. ‘They were painted by an old man in the willage. Old Tor, they call him. He sits out sometimes, late at night, painting the water and the mountains under the stars.’

Through the back window was a different view entirely – the grass slope stretching towards the strange army of dark pine trees on the horizon.

Samuel shook off the feeling that he had been here before, and noticed something even more unsettling. ‘Where’s the TV?’

‘There’s no television here,’ Aunt Eda told him. She almost seemed proud of the fact. Proud of not having a television!

‘But I’ve brought my PlayStation,’ he said. ‘And I need a TV to play it.’

Aunt Eda did not seem to appreciate the seriousness of this situation, as she said: ‘Well, for now you will haff to find someone else to play with.’

‘Like who?’ sulked Samuel.

‘Like . . . like’ – Aunt Eda nearly said ‘like your sister’ but decided against it after looking at Martha’s sombre, speechless face – ‘like dear old Ibsen.’

At the sound of his name, a large grey and black dog padded his way into the living room and introduced himself by wagging his tail. The tail was white, and curled round so that the tip touched his back, as if it was the handle of a dog-shaped jug.

‘Get off me,’ Samuel said, pushing the dog’s snout away.

He expected the dog to growl at him, but he just wagged his curly tail and looked up at Samuel with the kind of complete love in his eyes that most humans would take a lifetime to develop. Then Ibsen padded his way over to Martha, and just for a second she seemed to forget herself. Happiness tugged the corners of her mouth – not into a smile exactly, but into something that might grow into one.

‘Martha!’ Samuel said, pointing at her face. ‘You’re smiling!’

But as soon as the half-smile was pointed out, it disappeared like a frightened deer, and Martha remembered her sadness once again. A sadness that was mildly comforted by Ibsen’s rough tongue licking her hand.

‘Looks like you haff got a friend,’ Aunt Eda said, but it was unclear whether she was talking to Martha or Ibsen.

The dog followed everyone upstairs, where the children were shown their bedroom. There were two beds with sheets and blankets tucked in tight in a way that reminded Samuel of a hospital. A tall antique wardrobe stood like an awkward stranger in the corner of the room, from where it seemed to look down on the children.

‘I know that wardrobe,’ Samuel said. ‘I’ve seen it before.’

Aunt Eda looked frightened for a moment, as if Samuel’s words were dangerous creatures let out into the room.

‘It is a werry popular type of wardrobe,’ she said.

‘But I’ve seen the wallpaper too.’

‘The wallpaper is especially popular all ofer the world, I am sure . . . Now, here are your beds . . .’

The beds faced two windows, out of which Samuel could see the green sloping field and the dark forest behind.

Ibsen, who was now at Samuel’s side, looked up at the boy and began to whimper. And he kept whimpering until Samuel stopped staring out at the forest.

Aunt Eda was busy showing Martha where to put her clothes in the wardrobe when Samuel asked: ‘What’s in the trees?’

Aunt Eda's head spun round as if Samuel had just said the worst swear word he knew.

'In the forest,' Samuel went on. 'Are there bears? Or wolves? Or something else? Is that what those stupid villagers were scared of?'

Aunt Eda walked from the wardrobe to Samuel, and bent down until her face was level with his.

As Samuel looked into her eyes, he felt his heart-beat start to quicken. His question about the forest had a transforming effect on his aunt, making her face look so stern it could have been carved from stone.

*'Don't mention that place,' she said in the most serious voice Samuel had ever heard. 'Don't let your mind think about what is inside there. When you go outside, you must stay on the grass, where I can see you. Both of you. This is the most important rule I will tell you. Neffer go in the forest. Neffer. And don't talk about it effer again. Do you understand?'*

Of course, Samuel didn't understand. He had more questions in his head than ever before. What was so dangerous about the forest? And if it was so dangerous, why live so close that you could see it from your windows?

But Samuel was so shocked by the sudden change

in Aunt Eda that he found himself unable to say anything except: 'Yes, I understand.'

Aunt Eda breathed in through her nose, as if testing the truth of his words by smelling them.

'Good,' she said.

And then she straightened herself back upright and forced the smile to return to her face.

'Right,' she said. 'Now, let's go and feed those empty stomachs.'

## RUDOLPH SOUP

‘**W**hat is it?’ Samuel asked, looking at the bowl of murky brown liquid.

‘Reindeer soup,’ Aunt Eda replied, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to eat a reindeer.

Samuel looked at the hairs on her chin and upper lip.

*She’s as disgusting as the soup*, he thought to himself, finding it hard to believe that she and his mum had been twin sisters.

His mum was pretty, and always wore nice clothes and make-up. She used to put stinky cream on her upper lip that got rid of her moustache, and she used to do workouts twice a week to keep her figure. She wore jeans and brightly coloured T-shirts, and went to the hairdresser’s every Saturday morning to get it styled or to put highlights in.

Samuel looked at the grey and black hair his aunt scraped back in a bun. He looked at her red cheeks. He looked at her blouse and her cardigan that might as well have been two hundred years old. It was hard to believe that she and his mum belonged to the same species, let alone that they were twins.

‘Reindeer? That’s disgusting.’

*Ugh*, he thought. *Rudolph soup*.

‘It is really werry nice,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘I think you’ll find it tastes like beef.’

Samuel watched his sister take a sip from her spoon, with no visible pleasure or disgust. He did the same, and nearly retched.

‘That *is* disgusting,’ he confirmed.

‘It was Henrik’s fafourite,’ said Aunt Eda.

‘Well, Henrik must have had very bad taste,’ said Samuel.

Aunt Eda leaned across the table. ‘*Don’t talk that way about Uncle Henrik. Do you hear me?*’

Her voice wasn’t much louder than a whisper, but it had the sudden quiet anger of a cat’s hiss. It wasn’t her voice that worried him though – it was the expression on her face. Her eyes looked so hurt that, for the first time since he had arrived, Samuel felt guilty for being so rude.



He wanted to say 'I'm sorry' but somehow couldn't get the words out. However, the apology was there on his face, as Aunt Eda nodded and sipped her soup.

There was an awkward silence, which was only interrupted by the sound of Ibsen's whimpering. 'Oh, Ibsen, what is it?' Aunt Eda asked.

Ibsen was looking at the window, pointing his nose towards the forest. Samuel looked at the dog and thought there was something strange about it, but couldn't decide what.

Aunt Eda ignored Ibsen and carried on sipping her soup.

'Now,' she said. 'After we haff eaten I will explain the rules to you both. After all, you can't follow rules unless you know what they are in the first place. OK?'

Martha nodded. Samuel did nothing. He didn't want to hear the rules. Why should he do as his aunt said? After all, no one ever did what *he* said. Not even when doing what he said was a matter of life or death – like stopping his parents' car before a log crushed it.

'Rules keep things in place,' Aunt Eda said. 'And me and you must be kept in certain places too. And for our own good.'

Samuel looked at her cardigan, buttoned right up to the top, and realized exactly what Aunt Eda was. She was a person buttoned right to the top. He wondered what it was that kept all her invisible buttons in place.

‘OK,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘Now you haff finished your soup, it is time to hear the rules.’

Samuel was going to argue, but he looked at his sister and saw she was listening to his aunt. *Maybe Martha’s interested*, he thought. *Maybe she wants to know the rules*. So Samuel decided to be quiet and sit perfectly still as his aunt ran through her list from one to ten.

## THE RULES

- 1) Never go up to the attic.
- 2) Don't say anything bad about Uncle Henrik, as he is not here to defend himself.
- 3) Take your shoes off at the front door.
- 4) Never feed Ibsen between meal times, even when he begs.
- 5) Eat all your meals. One day you might need all the strength you can get.
- 6) Always ask my permission before you go outside.
- 7) Don't ever go outside after dark.
- 8) If it starts to get dark when you are already outside, come in straight away as fast as you can.
- 9) *Never – under any circumstances – go into the forest.*
- 10) Never question any of the rules. Especially number nine.

## THE HULDRE-FOLK

**I**t was dark outside the windows.

Samuel and Martha had never known darkness like this. In England the nights were always softened by some distant streetlight. But here, next to a dense forest and miles from the nearest village, the darkness was so intense it almost had a weight. You could feel it pressing in outside the windows, as if the whole house was in the grip of a giant.

Samuel saw something reflected in the glass and turned round. 'What's that?' he asked. He was pointing to the weird light that shone up at Aunt Eda's face.

'It's a special lamp,' she said softly. 'A happiness lamp. It stops me getting too sad when it is so dark.'

Samuel looked at his sister and wondered if the lamp might help her.

‘Could Martha have a go?’ he asked.

‘If she wants a go. Martha, do you want to use my happiness lamp?’

Martha looked at the ultraviolet tubes of light and shook her head.

Aunt Eda turned from the lamp and smiled at Martha. ‘You might be a huldre,’ she said, smiling sadly. The look on her face indicated that she hadn’t meant to say this aloud.

‘What’s a huldre?’ Samuel asked, on Martha’s behalf.

Aunt Eda paused for a long time and looked through the gap in the curtains at the darkness. *Maybe it would be a good idea to tell them about the huldres, she thought. Just in case anything happens.*

‘The huldre-folk are creatures who are said to be scared of light,’ she said eventually, changing the angle of her lamp. She was trying to make the huldres sound less serious than she knew they were, as if they were just something out of a story book, rather than creatures living in the forest behind her house. ‘They effaporate if they are exposed to the sun. They liff in a separate world under the ground and only come out at night. They get jealous of the humans who don’t haff to spend their days in the dark. *Huldre*

in Norwegian means “underneath”. The huldre-folk are supposedly as tall as you and me, but they are werry ugly. They haff a tail and grey skin and strange eyes and bony bodies. They are said to trap humans and other creatures in prisons underground . . .’

She went quiet suddenly, remembering what Old Tor was meant to have seen.

Samuel thought of the nightmares he sometimes had, about grey-skinned monsters with tails and wide-apart eyes. But these were only nightmares. He knew they weren’t *real*.

‘Do you believe in the huldre-folk?’ Samuel asked.

Aunt Eda moved her mouth as if the question was something to chew on. Then she said: ‘I believe there are more things out there than we understand.’

*She’s mad, thought Samuel. Absolutely raving mad.*

OK, so Mum might have believed in star signs but she didn’t believe in creatures with tails who lived in underground worlds. Maybe the happiness lamp made his aunt mad. A madness lamp, sending mad ideas into her brain.

Later on, lying in bed, Samuel told Martha: ‘I hate this place.’

Martha said nothing.

‘And I hate her. I hate her hairy chin and her Rudolph soup and her no TV and her buttons and her rules.’

Martha still said nothing.

‘Martha . . . Martha, say something . . . Please . . . Just sing a song . . . make a sound . . . Please . . . I can’t take it, just listening to her all the time. Please, sis. Please . . .’

But still Martha said nothing. Somewhere, deep inside, she wanted to talk to her brother, but the words weren’t there.

‘Do you know what you are, Martha?’ he asked, getting out of bed. ‘You’re a selfish cow. You might as well have a cow’s tail because that’s what you are. You’re selfish and I know it’s because you’re sad about Mum and Dad but I’m sad too and I’d be less sad if you spoke to me. Martha? Speak! Say something!’

He was shaking her now, but she still didn’t say a word. She just scrunched her eyes shut and – when his hands left her – burrowed deep down into the darkness under the blankets.

*Like a rabbit, thought Samuel. Or a huldre.*

When she heard Samuel climb back into bed, Martha came out from under the blankets and stared

at him, at the dark, crumpled silhouette lying in the next bed. She felt as if there was a whole universe between them. In fact, she felt as if there was a universe on every side now.

She didn't mind feeling like this. She knew, actually, that it was the best way to be. If you weren't really a part of the world – the world that spoke and smiled and sang – then you could never feel truly upset.

After all, she had felt close to her parents and look what had happened.

No. This was how it was going to be. Martha Blink, with a universe on every side to defend herself against all the pain and tears and happiness of the world.



## THE CAT WITH TWO COLLARS

The next afternoon, having asked his aunt for permission, Samuel was out playing on the grass that ran from the back of the house to the border of the forest. He knew Aunt Eda was watching him from the kitchen window, making sure he didn't head too far towards the trees.

*What can I do?* Samuel thought.

He had only wanted to go outside because there was nothing to do inside. No TV. No PlayStation. A sister whose voice had died with their parents.

So he'd headed out onto the grass slope that ran between the house and the trees. But now he was outside he realized there was nothing to do out here either. Just a forest he couldn't enter, and grass. Lots and lots of grass.

He was about to head back inside when he saw a

black cat with the brightest green eyes, staring straight at him.

*Strange*, thought Samuel. *Aunt Eda doesn't have a cat.*

As he got closer, he saw that the cat was wearing two collars. One black. One white. Both made from a kind of cloth, with a small metal disc attached to each.

'Here, kitty-kitty.'

Samuel crouched down and beckoned it closer with his fingers, but the cat didn't make a move. It just stayed there, as proud as a queen, watching the boy with its emerald eyes.

'Here, kitty-kitty. Here, kitty-kitty.'

Samuel moved his hand closer, stroked the cat's head and tucked his finger inside one of the collars. He tried to lead the cat forward with the collar, but met resistance. The cat tried to reverse away, and did so, but lost its collar in the process.

Samuel examined the metal disc that was fastened to the white fabric, and read the engraving.

HEK

'Hek,' said Samuel. 'It suits you. Weird name for a weird cat.'

The cat stayed sitting in the same spot, and hissed up at the boy who had just stolen one of its collars.

‘Nope, I’m sorry,’ Samuel said. ‘It’s mine now. And what do you need two collars for any—?’

Samuel’s question sank into a shocked silence. He was sure – as sure as you can be about such things – that the cat’s eyes had just changed. He could have sworn that they switched from green to black, or a very dark grey, just for one second.

He felt a coldness run through him, a coldness that was more than a product of the chill wind, as he realized there was something unnatural about the feline creature in front of him.

‘Creepy cat,’ mumbled Samuel. ‘Freaky, creepy cat.’

He turned and looked back at the house. Through the living-room window he could see Aunt Eda as she walked towards the kitchen to begin preparing Ibsen’s supper.

Although he was scared, he was reluctant to go back inside. After all, finding this strange cat was probably going to be the most exciting thing that could happen to him in this boring place.

‘What are you looking at?’ Samuel said.

The cat’s eyes, which were now back to normal,

were staring directly at the white collar Samuel had just stolen.

‘You really like this collar, don’t you?’

The cat hissed again, but this wasn’t a normal hiss. It was a hiss that drew from its mouth a small cloud of black smoke, which rose up into the air.

It was then that Samuel began to feel a slight dizziness. A kind of confusion that made him forget himself.

*Who am I? Where am I?*

*I am Spamuel Link.*

*I am in Boreway.*

*I am Lambuel Sink.*

*I am in Snoreway.*

During this strange state of mind, Samuel’s whole body felt itself loosen, including the hand that had been clutching the white collar.

His fingers fell open and the collar dropped down to the ground. He blinked his eyes, and blinked again, and gradually the feeling of dizziness went away.

*I am Samuel Blink. I am in Norway.*

He looked down at the grass and saw a black cat with a black collar staring up at him.

‘Here, kitty-kitty. Here, kitty-kitty.’

Samuel looked at the cat's green eyes, and had no idea that only a few moments before he had seen them switch to black. Nor did he remember the small cloud of black vapour that had been hissed towards him, or the white collar that now rested on the ground beside his feet.

The cat hissed, and kept hissing, frustratedly trying to produce another vapour cloud, but none came. Of course, Samuel didn't realize this was what the cat was trying to do, as the events of the last minute were no longer inside his mind.

'What's your problem?' he asked as the cat kept hissing out nothing but air. He crouched back down and reached again towards it. 'Come on,' he said. 'You could be my pet.'

Just as he was about to touch his finger inside the black collar, the cat turned and ran as fast as it could towards the forest. Samuel began running up the slope after it, but only made a few steps before hearing his aunt behind him.

'Samuel! Stop! Stop! Come here this minute!'

He turned to see Aunt Eda standing outside the house, holding the knife that was being used to chop up Ibsen's dinner.

Under normal circumstances he would have

carried on running. After all, the things parents and aunts don't want you to do are normally the best type of things to do, and worth double effort.

But when Samuel saw the black cat dart over pine cones and disappear into the soupy darkness between the trees, he stopped. Not because Aunt Eda told him to. Not because he was getting out of breath as he pushed against the wind. No, he stopped because of a sudden fear as he got closer to the forest, a fear that felt as real and solid as a brick wall.

He stood still for a moment, looking at the rough trunks of the pine trees that were only a few metres in front of him. They stood like awesome gateposts to the shadowy and unknown land beyond. He thought he heard something, a strange and distant calling that didn't seem to belong to the world he knew.

Then he saw a shifting shape. Darkness moving amid darkness, where the cat had just been. A bird? He didn't know. He didn't want to. He turned round and walked the way of the wind back to his rather frightened-looking aunt. And as he headed down the slope, he did not see the white collar lift up on that same wind and roll off down the grass, over the drive, tumbling towards the distant fjord.

## THE FLIGHT OF THE SHADOW WITCH

With a simple arch of her neck the Shadow Witch turned from a black cat into a raven, and the remaining collar shrank around her to become the most perfect fit.

She flew low through the trees, past the old huldre village, where skeletons lay inside the houses; on and on she kept flying, past the stone cottages of trolls, weaving her way through pine trees until she reached the clearing in the north of the forest.

There was a tree there. A broad and dark-trunked tree, larger than any found in the outside world, with a wooden palace cradled in its branches. The vast tree stood alone, away from the pines that bordered the clearing, and was known – by those who called it anything at all – as the Still Tree.

The Shadow Witch flew in through a window of the large tree palace and turned into her true form. A grey and wizened old woman, with black eyes, and shadows leaking from her mouth as she breathed.

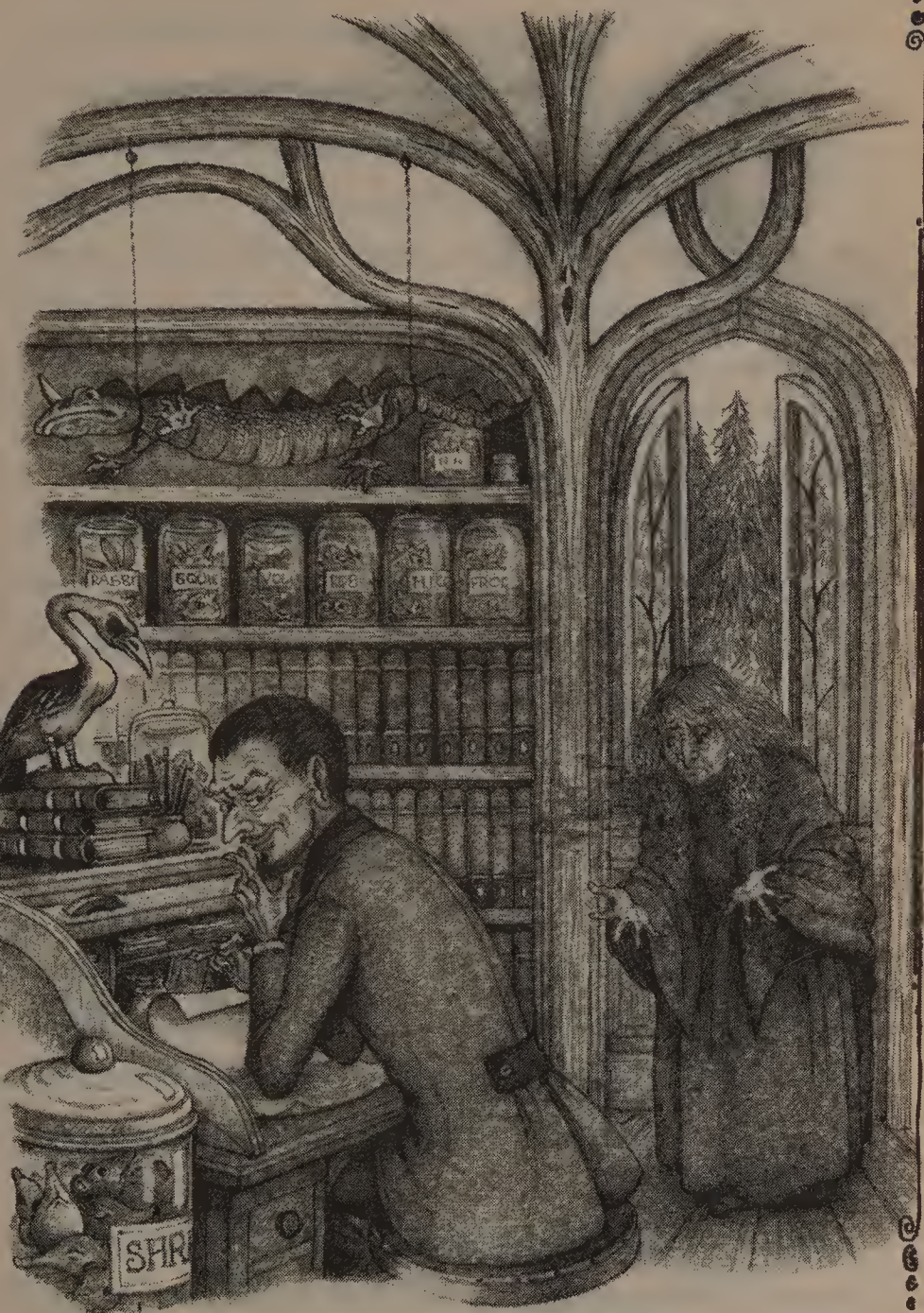
‘Master, I have news.’

The man she was addressing was hunched over his desk, with a quill in his hand and a blank piece of parchment in front of him, both of which had been conjured with the help of his servant, the Shadow Witch. This was the room in which he now spent most of his time. It was his study, and his desk was by a bookcase containing nothing but the bestselling book he had written years ago, *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*. There were other shelves in the room, but instead of books they contained heads. Pickled heads. In jars. The heads of what he called the Enemies of the Forest. All those creatures who had tried – and failed – to escape to the outside world.

The man, whose name was Professor Horatio Tanglewood, had been working on his latest book for ten years. He was trying to write his life story for ten years, but he was still struggling to find the right first sentence.

“I was born on a clear and star-filled night,”





he mumbled aloud. 'No! Rubbish! Useless!'

The Shadow Witch cleared her throat. 'Master.'

'Yes! What is it?' he barked, but didn't turn round.

'Master, I bring you some news.' The Shadow Witch could hear the weakness of her own words. After all these years, she was still terrified of the man who controlled her.

'Go on,' he commanded. 'Go. On.'

So the Shadow Witch carried on talking to the back of the man's head.

'Master, I was outside the forest, keeping an eye on the white wooden house as you told me to do. I was just sitting on the grass when I saw . . . a boy. A human boy, master.'

'A boy?' Professor Tanglewood turned round in his chair. He had a long thin face, aged but not as ancient as the witch. Underneath his left eye there was a narrow horizontal scar. His hair was still dark, and in a more evil version of the world he could have almost passed for handsome.

'Yes. A boy, master. He came to me. And I stayed still so I could observe him better, but then he tried to take hold of me and—'

Her master's sharp eyes were staring at her wrists. 'You are only wearing one bracelet, Shadow Witch.

The black one. Where is the other?’ He stood up and came towards her.

‘Master, the boy tried to grab me so I pulled away but he still had hold of the white collar – the bracelet I stole from my sister. I tried to use my powers to retrieve it, but you know how weak they are outside the forest. The most I could manage was a memory spell, so the boy had no knowledge of the bracelet. Master, I am sorry.’

Professor Tanglewood closed his eyes and sighed, and said in a voice as calm and eerie as a graveyard wind, ‘You lost the bracelet.’

‘Master, I am sorry.’

‘Sorry? A rather useless word, isn’t it? What can it do, this “sorry”? Can it retrieve a bracelet? Can it stop a curious child from entering the forest? Can it write my memoirs?’

‘No, master, it cannot.’

Professor Tanglewood stared at the Shadow Witch for a long time, wondering when it would be, the day he was going to kill her and steal her powers.

‘I had a dream last night.’

‘A dream, master?’

The professor nodded. ‘A dream that two children entered the forest.’ The memory tugged his mouth

into a smile. 'And they were killed by creatures. A flock of flying skullpeckers, I think it was. Oh, you should have heard that delicious sound. I watched them die. I watched and I heard their screams, and I was comforted. And after the children died the whole forest applauded. All the huldres and the trolls and the pixies and all the others. They applauded me, as if they realized why I made the changes. They knew, in that moment, that I was their saviour from all the other humans. Which I am, of course. You see, even your foolishness cannot endanger the forest, Shadow Witch. For what is the worst that could happen? That the boy found the white bracelet and came to pay us a visit. We know that light magic is no match for the dark. And, as is more likely, what if he entered the forest completely unprotected? If that were the case, his death would be as certain as the sunrise.'

'Yes, master,' the Shadow Witch said, coughing shadows.

'Leave me,' he said. 'I must get on with my writing, for when the creatures know how much I have done to protect them, they will love me. And there shall be no resistance, and no attempts at escape, and everywhere I walk in the forest there will be the same cry: "Hail Professor Tanglewood, for he is the

Changemaker!” Now go, Shadow Witch. Go. But stay inside the forest. You cannot be trusted to head beyond the trees. Do you understand me?’

‘Yes, master.’

The Shadow Witch bowed her head and became a raven once more. She flew out of the window she had entered, and soared aimlessly over the trees, feeling deep sorrow for the bracelet she had lost. But the Shadow Witch’s sadness was also for the boy she had seen. A boy she felt was one day going to cross into the forest, never to return, or return so different he would never be recognized.

She flew so high she could see the distant white wooden house, and thought of the humans inside.

*Stay there,* she thought.

*Stay safe.*

## IN THE KITCHEN

The wind beat against the kitchen window with an anger that was only matched by Aunt Eda's face.

'You broke my rule,' she said, chopping up the last slab of red meat for Ibsen's supper. 'The most important rule.'

'I didn't break it,' Samuel said. 'I didn't go *into* the forest.'

'Well, what were you doing? You were right at the top of the' – she searched for the word – 'of the *slope* . . . you were about to go in, weren't you?'

Samuel paused. 'There was a cat.'

'A cat?'

'A black cat. I was following it. And it went into the forest. Keep your knickers on.'

Aunt Eda looked confused. 'I don't see what my undergarments haff to do with anything.'

‘It’s just a saying.’

‘Well, it’s not a saying in Norway. Anyway, you haff to understand that I do not make rules just for fun. It is not a hobby of mine. I do not sit and think, *Let’s make up a rule today just for the sake of it. Let’s only wear green clothes because it is Tuesday.* I tell you not to go into the forest for a reason.’

‘Well, I’m going to go into the forest.’ Samuel was only testing his aunt. He didn’t really want to go into the forest, but he wanted to know why it was so important.

And it was then, as he looked at his aunt’s cross face with her mouth as tight as a cat’s bum, that he realized something. *She has no control over me.*

All his life Samuel’s parents had controlled him by stopping him from doing things.

If he got a bad letter from school, he was stopped from playing on his PlayStation.

If he stayed out too late, he was stopped from going out the next evening.

If he fought with his sister, he stopped getting his pocket money.

So most of the time he kept himself in check by thinking of what he might lose if he misbehaved.

But what could he lose now?

He had lost his mum and dad. He had lost half of his sister (the half that spoke and smiled and sang). He had lost all his friends. He couldn't watch TV or attack alien planets on his PlayStation.

What punishment could Aunt Eda dish out?

He hated the food anyway, so the thought of missing dinner was less than terrifying. She could send him to his room, but so what? It was no more boring than all the other boring rooms.

She could inflict nothing so terrible as the memories he held in his head of what had happened on the B642, so he had absolutely nothing to lose.

'Yes, I am going to go to the forest,' he told her. 'One day, when you aren't looking, I'll go and see what is so special that you can't even talk about it. You won't be able to watch me all the time.'

Aunt Eda threw him a severe look. 'And why would you do that, when I haff explained that it breaks the most important rule?'

'Because I'm bored,' said Samuel. 'What am I supposed to do? There's no TV. There's nothing. Just loads of books written in Norwegian with stupid words and stupid letters like æ and ø and å.'

'Oh,' said Aunt Eda, 'you think this is some game? You think it is fun to break the rules of your boring



old aunt and her boring old house? If I told you not to run off the edge of a cliff, would you run off the edge?’

‘It’s not a cliff,’ said Samuel. ‘It’s only trees.’

Aunt Eda laughed. It wasn’t a happy laugh. It was a wild, high-pitched noise that shot out into the living room: ‘Ha!’

In the living room Martha looked towards her brother standing in the kitchen. The loud sound of her aunt’s laugh had brought her back into the world, if only for a moment.

‘Ha! Only trees!’ said Aunt Eda. ‘If it was only trees, do you think I would not show you the forest myself?’

Samuel shrugged.

‘Please, Samuel.’ As Aunt Eda struggled to saw the knife through a particularly tough part of the meat, Samuel noticed she was nearly crying.

And then he managed to say what he had found so hard yesterday.

‘I’m . . . sorry,’ he said. He realized it felt good saying it, rather like taking a heavy rucksack off his back.

‘Oh, Samuel,’ said Aunt Eda, buttoning up her tears. ‘You are right. Rules aren’t enough. I can’t just tell you not to go into the forest. You are a boy, after

all. And boys see a rule as a kind of toy – something to pick up and play about with and see how it breaks.’

Aunt Eda closed her eyes and blew air slowly out of her nose, to show that she was making a very big decision.

‘I must tell you about the forest,’ she whispered so only Samuel could hear. ‘I must tell you what happened to Uncle Henrik.’

‘What about Martha? Are you going to tell her?’ Samuel asked, looking behind to see through to the living room, where Martha was sitting on the rug with Ibsen.

Aunt Eda frowned. ‘Do you think she needs more dark terrors inside her brain?’

Samuel shook his head.

‘No. We will tell her, but not yet. It will be our secret, do you understand? Our secret. A werry serious secret. Now, I will go and giff Ibsen his food in the hall and then I will tell you. OK?’

‘OK.’

‘Ibsen! Ib-sen! *Mørbrad!* Steak!’

The dog looked up from his position on the rug and glanced at Martha, as if to tell Eda: ‘I’ll have my steak in a minute. But right now I’m keeping Martha company.’

Samuel watched as Aunt Eda laid the bowl of meat down in the hall.

When she returned, she had a look of determination, because the story she was about to tell required a lot of strength and courage. She closed her eyes again and took a deep breath, as if she was about to go underwater.

‘Are you listening?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Samuel.

‘Then I will begin . . .’

## THE STORY OF WHAT HAPPENED TO UNCLE HENRIK

‘**U**ncle Henrik was a wonderful man. He was the greatest I effer met. And it is only down to amazing luck that I met him in the first place. He was a ski jumper, and I was a jaffelin thrower.

‘This was twenty-five years ago. We were both sports people and it is not too much of a boast to say that we were rather good sports people, as we both made the Olympic Games . . . Yes, Samuel, that’s right . . . Your boring old aunt once made it to the Olympics. I threw the jaffelin! I neffer won a medal, but I came close. Werry close. I sometimes think that if I’d had one more hour of sleep, or had one more egg for breakfast that morning . . . But anyway, I am not one for regrets.

‘Two years later I was inwited to the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Innsbruck, which

is a town a long way past those mountains you can see out of the window. This was the Winter Olympics where Henrik won his silver medal for ski jumping . . . Oh, your uncle was an amazing ski jumper . . . He had no fear. None at all. He used to jump so far through the air it was like watching a man who had stolen the secret of flying from a bird. He would spend what seemed like whole minutes in the air, leaning so far forward his nose was nearly touching his skis. Oh, it was an incredible sight!

‘Anyway, I met him and we fell in love and we got married and it was lovely. We wanted to spend every moment together.

“I have the perfect idea,” Henrik told me. “We will move to a house further north and buy goats. We can make our own cheese.”

‘I thought this was a ridiculous thing to do, and I worried Henrik would regret the decision later. He had always loved cheese, but he had a good chance of winning a gold medal at the next Winter Olympics. And a gold medalist sounded a lot better than being a goat farmer!

‘But Henrik was insistent. “You are the only prize that matters to me now,” he told me. So we did it. We drove through the tunnels in the mountains and

arrived at this house where we are right now. It was perfect. Too perfect, I thought, because it only cost a hundred kroner. And I was right. You see, we soon discovered that the last person who had lived in the house had gone missing . . . in the forest.

‘The people of Flåm talked of creatures. Huldrefolk, witches, trolls, pixies and a hundred others. They talked of a terrible being who ruled all the forest, called the Changemaker. Of course, I thought the willagers were talking ignorant rubbish. Surely the only places such creatures existed were in fairy tales and story books.

‘But still, I was curious to know how a man could simply disappear. So I did a bit of research on the previous owner. He was an Englishman called Professor Horatio Tanglewood. The willagers told us all about him.

‘They said he was a werry arrogant man, who had asked Old Tor to paint his portrait ten times.

‘He was a professor of Norse folklore, which means he studied the kind of strange creatures that people in Norway used to believe in, before science and the Bible had shown them that trolls and huldrefolk and pixies couldn’t really exist.

‘It turned out that Professor Tanglewood had gone

missing on his second visit to the forest. He escaped the first time and it was then that he gave the forest its name. Shadow Forest, or Mørke Skog, as we Norwegians call it. He told everyone about his experiences in a book called *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, which said that the stories of trolls and huldrefolk were all true. He wrote about lots of other creatures too. Over a hundred in all. And all were equally deadly. He wrote that the creatures were all governed by an evil being called the Changemaker, who stopped at nothing to prevent humans from ever leaving the forest and revealing its secrets.

‘This book made the professor a laughing stock at the University of Bergen where he worked. They said he’d been studying myths for so long he had lost touch with reality. But no one was brave enough to go into the forest and see if he was telling the truth. And people became even more scared later.

‘Why? Because when the professor made his second trip to the forest, he was never seen again.

‘I told Uncle Henrik we must never go in the forest and Uncle Henrik agreed. Every morning we would get up and milk the goats we had bought and then Henrik would make the cheese in that room just

ofer there – past the kitchen. The one with the yellow door. It is a washroom now.

‘Our Gjetost cheese soon became the most popular in the area. The people in Flåm are no fools when it comes to cheese.

‘It had the most perfect taste and texture and it was lighter than normal Gjetost. It was a golden colour, not too brown. This is why Henrik named it “Gold Medal Cheese”. He said to me: “You see, I haff my gold medal at last!”

‘He was so proud of his cheese. So, so proud. He was starting to luff cheese more than he had effer luffed ski jumping. Oskar the grocer also luffed Henrik’s cheese and ordered a year’s supply . . . Me and Henrik were both so happy, and we were making a lot of money. We were *prosperous* – do you remember the Norwegian word for prosperous? . . . That’s right, Samuel. *Hell*.

‘Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, the cheese. We were making lots of money and efferything was perfect and it was a golden time of laughter and log fires and cuddles and tasty cheese, but then something happened. Something bad. And it changed our lifes for effer.’



## THE CREATURES OF SHADOW FOREST

**S**amuel was now gripped by Aunt Eda's story. He wondered if she had been the same then. If she'd been so strict and buttoned up. He doubted it. And what had happened to Uncle Henrik?

As she approached the crucial part of the story, Aunt Eda was clearly finding it difficult to go on talking. Her words had stopped as suddenly as people who have just realized they are running towards a cliff. She made herself a cup of egg coffee and poured Samuel a cloudberry juice.

Outside the door, Ibsen was dragging his metal bowl across the hallway as he licked up the last remains of his steak.

'Right,' Aunt Eda said, blowing ripples across the

surface of her coffee. 'I will tell you the rest of the story now.'

She took a deep breath, as if she was about to go underwater. And when she started talking, the wind that had been rapping against the window suddenly went quiet, as if it too had stopped to listen.

'We realized something was wrong.

'Our goats were going missing. Effery night one would simply disappear. Uncle Henrik was in such despair that he went to Flåm and he told the willagers . . . well, you can guess what they said. They blamed it on creatures in the forest. Trolls, in particular. Trolls were famous for stealing goats, they told him.

'I told Henrik not to listen to these ignorant people, who liffed by their superstitions. But Henrik said there was no other way to explain it. There were no other goat farmers in the area to steal our goats, and Henrik said that it was impossible to lose a goat effery night. *by accident.*

'So on the day we lost our eleffenth goat he went into the bookshop in Flåm and purchased a copy of Professor Tanglewood's book. And it said that trolls were known to steal goats, as well as to kill humans.

'The more he read, the more he beleefed *The*

*Creatures of Shadow Forest.* He sat there and his eyes would feed on the words for hours at a time.

‘After he’d read the book Henrik said that there was only one way to find our goats and that was to go into the forest. I reminded him of the promise he had made to me – about neffer being tempted to head into the trees where a man had gone missing. But I knew it was no good. He had the same eyes he had before a ski jump. He just kept on saying, “No one can get away with stealing – not efen trolls.”

‘I told him, “I’ll come with you,” but he said I had to stay and look after the nine goats we had left. I told him, “People don’t come out of that forest.” He said that, “The only people who don’t come out of forests are people who don’t *want* to come out of forests. Don’t worry, Eda, my sweetheart, what-effer happens, I will find my way back to you. No troll will stop me. I promise.”

‘So he headed out into the forest and I waited for him. I waited and waited. After three days I went to Flåm. I told the police he had gone missing, but they made excuses. They said Shadow Forest wasn’t part of their area. I told efferylene he had gone missing, but no one dared to go into the forest to look for him.

Not even Oskar, who had made so much money from Henrik's cheese.

'I would keep watch over the goats every night like Henrik had told me, but I couldn't stay awake for ever, and when I eventually fell asleep, another goat went missing. And this happened until there were no goats. No goats, and no Henrik.

'On the morning the last goat disappeared it had been snowing heavily. I went out early into the field and I saw footprints in the snow, heading away from the forest. My heart lifted for a moment. Henrik had returned! But then I realized the footprints curved back round into the forest. I took a closer look and realized it wasn't the pattern of a shoe, but the mark of a bare foot. And not just any foot – a big foot with three toes. *A troll's footprint*. Henrik had been right all along. Trolls had been stealing our goats and taking them back into the forest! And heaven knows what they had done to Henrik.

'I was in despair. I didn't know what to do. I would lie awake thinking about what might have happened to him in the forest. But I got hold of such thoughts and kept them in check – I wasn't ready to lose my mind just yet.

'I know what you're thinking. You're wondering if

I was tempted to go and follow him into the forest. Well, I can tell you, there were many occasions when I packed my rucksack, put on my boots and grabbed hold of my jaffelin, ready to go and find him.

‘But effery time I headed up through that goatless field I always felt something hold me back. I remembered him telling me to wait in the house and I kept on hearing his last words: “Whateffer happens, I will find my way back to you.” Maybe it was my own weakness. Maybe I was too frightened. But I neffer was able to step into the forest.

‘I just stayed in the house and occupied myself as much as I could with books or knitting or other things that might distract me. I kept praying for some company, for something to keep me busy, and someone decided to take note of my prayers because one morning I found a stray dog asleep on the grass. That’s right. It was Ibsen. He might not haff been as good company as your uncle, but he was certainly a lot better than a goat. And he made me feel safe. He was my protector from the trolls.

‘Ofer time, I am pleased to tell you that the horrible thoughts about what might haff happened to Henrik in the forest were replaced with better things. Like memories of him flying through the air on his

skis, or smiling at the smell of his “Gold Medal”.

‘Of course, it would be easier if I didn’t haff to look at those horrible dark trees efery day. But I can’t moof house, any more than I can head out into the forest. And anyway, I’ff got you and Martha now . . . What a team, eh? Ibsen, Samuel, Martha and old Aunt Eda.’

Samuel looked at his aunt and saw the tears she was trying to hold back glaze her eyes. He sipped his cloudberry juice, as if trying to get rid of a bad taste.

Trolls and huldres and a hundred other creatures, all living in the forest behind the house. It was too much to believe in, and he didn’t. Not fully, anyway. After all, what does a footprint in the snow prove? And why should anyone believe a mad professor?

But he remembered his own fear when he had stared into the darkness of the forest, and gulped back the rest of the juice.

‘So,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘Now you know.’

‘Yes,’ said Samuel, although he didn’t really.

He went and joined his sister in the sitting room. She was staring out of the back window, towards the forest.

'Martha,' he said.

His sister turned to him. He saw those eyes that had been made blank from too much fear.

'Martha—'

He didn't know what to say.

## NIGHT SONGS

Samuel woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of singing.

It was only a faint sound, but as he couldn't sleep deeply, it was loud enough to make him open his eyes and wonder at what he'd heard.

He lay in the dark and waited for the voice to return, but there was nothing. Just the gentle patter of rain against the window. He rolled over and saw the dark shape of his sister, sleeping her deep and dreamless sleep.

Then he heard it again. The singing.

*'I once knew a tree  
That could talk like you and me,  
And I taught it how to smile.*



*I said, "Excuse me, tree,  
If you wear a face like me,  
You'll never go out of style."*

It sounded familiar, like a nursery rhyme his mum used to sing, and he knew he recognized the voice from somewhere. And the language. Samuel pulled back the covers and went to the window. Peeping through the curtains, he looked out into the dark and rainy night and couldn't see anything at first. Everything was the same purple-black as the sky.

But then slowly, as his eyes adjusted to the pale moonlight, he could see varying degrees of darkness. The thick black of the distant forest and the lesser dark of the grass slope in front. He scanned the grass slope, letting his ears lead his eyes until he saw a small round shape, like a walking barrel, heading down the hill towards the fjord. *A creature. From the forest.* He opened the window to hear the creature's voice a bit clearer.

*'It's raining, it's raining,  
But I'm not complaining,  
For what's the worst it can get?'*

*It might soak your clothes  
Or drip on your nose,  
And make you a little bit wet.*

*But why try and be dry,  
When the sky wants to cry,  
And send tears that rain down on your head?’*

Samuel stayed there at the window, listening to the creature’s funny songs as he watched its small, fat silhouette walk down the hill.

*‘I’d better be right,  
To escape in the night,  
When the darkness wears its cloak.*

*But if I am wrong,  
I’ll be singing my song  
Till the huldres make me choke.’*

The rain stopped and the singing died with it, after which there was nothing to be heard but the eerie silence of the moon.

Samuel lost sight of the creature, and the pitter-patter of the rain began again. Or at least, that is

what it sounded like. Yet when Samuel put his hand out of the window, he felt no drops on his skin.

*That's not rain.*

He was right. And within moments he saw something in the distance. A dull throb of light from inside the forest, like a dying and fallen sun. As this golden glow grew closer, Samuel felt his heart begin to race, almost in time with the sound that was moving forward, out of the forest.

And then he realized what the noise was. It was horses. Three white stallions, and the figures riding them were each holding a flaming torch. They were out of the forest now, although the faces of the riders were still too dark and far away to be seen.

Samuel, believing he'd get a better view downstairs, left the bedroom. He tiptoed past Aunt Eda's door and headed softly down to the living room. Once there, he went to the window and pushed his head between the curtains. He could see the flaming torches move closer, illuminating the three riders. At first he'd thought they were humans, but now, by the light of the flickering torches, he could see that they were strange, bony, grey-skinned creatures with wide-apart eyes and flattened, screwed-up noses.

It was them. The monsters of his nightmares.



*I'm dreaming*, he told himself. *I must be dreaming.*

They were shouting orders and whipping their horses as they galloped after the barrel-shaped singing silhouette.

'Samuel? Samuel? What is the matter?'

Aunt Eda was standing behind him in her nightgown, looking very worried indeed.

'I don't know,' Samuel said as his aunt joined him at the window. He now realized this wasn't a dream.

'*Huldres*,' his aunt whispered urgently.

The huldres rode out of view, heading towards the fjord. It went quiet for a while, and Samuel and Aunt Eda stood as still and silent as the glass vases on the shelves. When the huldres galloped back into sight, they were dragging the singing creature inside a net.

'Come away,' Aunt Eda said. 'Away from the window. Away! Now!'

'Ow,' said Samuel as she yanked his arm. 'Get off me.'

He resisted his aunt's grip and stayed looking out of the window.

'Samuel. Come away or they'll see you. Come away. Now. If they see you, they will come for you. And me. And your sister.'

‘I’m not scared,’ he told her, but he couldn’t hide the fear in his voice.

‘Scared people stay alive,’ she said.

Samuel could hear the genuine terror in his aunt’s voice, so he stepped back and listened as the huldres and their horses dragged the poor singing creature back to the thick darkness of the trees.

Aunt Eda held him, and this time he didn’t resist. He felt the fading gallop of her heart and the tight grip of her strong arms.

‘Who was that creature? The one who sang?’ Samuel asked.

‘A tomtegubb,’ said Aunt Eda.

‘Have you seen one before?’

‘Yes,’ she said, her voice trembling like a loose log. ‘Yes, I haff. And . . . and so haff you.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Was that singing not familiar to you? Like the wardrobe and the wallpaper you recognized.’

‘I . . .’ said Samuel, pulling away. ‘I . . . don’t . . . I . . .’

And that is when Aunt Eda told Samuel something she hadn’t told him before. About the time her sister – Samuel’s mother – came to visit, bringing her husband and children along too.

‘That’s right, Samuel. You . . . you . . . came here when you were two and Martha was just a baby. Your mother heard about Uncle Henrik going missing and came to comfort me. She didn’t believe my stories about the creatures of the forest, of course. Well, not until she heard you scream in the night.’

Samuel was more than confused as he stood there, straining to see his aunt’s face in the dark.

‘No. My mum said she’d never gone back to Norway. You’re lying. She said—’

‘She said that to protect you, Samuel,’ interrupted Aunt Eda. ‘She wanted you to forget you’d ever been here and forget that you saw something similar to what you have just seen now. Your parents never came back after she knew the creatures were real because they thought you and Martha would be unsafe here. And I was never able to see you in England, because I wanted to stay here for when Henrik returned.’

Samuel wanted to think this was all a lie, but he remembered the strange dreams he had always had, about creatures he now knew were huldres.

‘I’ve been here before,’ he whispered, as the thought became solid in his mind. ‘I knew it. I’ve been here before. The monsters were real.’

‘Yes,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘And now do you realize why my rules are so important? Why you can’t go out after dark or go near the forest?’

‘But I don’t get it,’ Samuel said. ‘Why don’t you just move?’

He could hear his aunt gulp back her sadness. ‘I told Henrik I would stay,’ she said. ‘If I left the house, I’d be giffing up on him. Do you understand?’

‘Henrik’s not coming back,’ Samuel said.

‘No,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘He will. I know it. He made a promise, and he neffer broke a promise in all his life.’



## FIVE SLICES OF BROWN CHEESE

The next morning Samuel was surprised to see Aunt Eda acting like nothing had happened. He wanted to talk about huldres, but knew he shouldn't in front of his sister, so he tried to act normal too.

Unbeknown to Samuel, Aunt Eda had made a decision. They were going to move. They could not stay another night here. Oskar had been right. It was one thing stopping them going into the forest and quite another stopping the forest coming to them. It was what Henrik would want, she'd told herself. Indeed, she had woken up especially early and hung out all the washing as soon as it was light, to make sure that everything was ready for the move. But she wasn't going to tell the children until later, until she'd done the packing, because it would only worry Martha and put her off her breakfast.

‘Take this to the table,’ Aunt Eda said, handing Samuel a breakfast tray full of plates of flat-bread and cheese.

Samuel didn’t like cheese at the best of times, but he had never seen one that looked like the one on the tray. The cheeses he had tried at home had been yellow or white, but this one was a strange brown colour.

‘What is the matter with your face, young man?’ Aunt Eda asked him as she handed both children glasses of cloudberry juice. ‘Haffn’t you seen cheese before?’

‘Not cheese that is brown,’ came Samuel’s reply.

‘That is because you haff neffer seen Gjetost cheese,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘Like the cheese Uncle Henrik used to make. It is werry popular with skiers. They take chunks of it on the slopes to keep them going. This particular one is not as nice as Henrik’s Gold Medal cheese, but it is still a Norwegian speciality. It’s a sweet goat’s cheese. The taste is a little bit like caramel. Or efen chocolate. Children haff it for breakfast, and grown-ups haff it as well.’ She was speaking faster than usual, as if scared of the silence between words.

As she spoke, Aunt Eda was peeling paper-thin

slices of the strange cheese with a funny-looking slicer. Samuel noticed her hand was trembling. Ibsen was also watching very closely, as he loved cheese more than anything. Even steak. Not that he was ever given any. He just had to make do with the smell, which teased his nostrils and made him drool saliva into his basket.

‘You see this handle?’ Aunt Eda asked Martha, but didn’t wait for a reply. ‘It is made with the horn of a reindeer.’

Samuel sighed, remembering the sight of the hul-dres. ‘Who cares?’

Aunt Eda decided to ignore the sulky face that accompanied the question. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘I should imagine the reindeer cared werry much indeed.’

She smiled, as if she had made a joke, but her eyes looked scared.

‘I don’t like goat’s cheese,’ said Samuel. ‘I like cow’s cheese.’

Aunt Eda’s shaking hands placed five thin slices of Gjetost on his plate, along with some flat-bread. ‘Well, young man, in this part of Norway we haff goats, not cows.’

She gave Martha the same amount of cheese and flat-bread, and Samuel watched as his sister started to

eat it without any sign of complaint or enthusiasm. Then he looked out of the dining-room window at the empty grass fields that lay in front of the forest, and thought of the charging huldres and the creature they had captured. A shudder went through him.

Again, Samuel shook the feeling away and picked up his brown cheese and flat-bread.

If a stranger had arrived in the room during those five minutes it took Samuel to finish his breakfast, he could have been perfectly mistaken for thinking that the suddenly quiet young man was the most well-behaved twelve-year-old on the face of the earth.

However, if the stranger had a sharp eye – a sharper eye than those belonging to Aunt Eda – he would have noticed that Samuel was only eating the flat-bread.

He flicked his wrist before taking his first mouthful. This meant the cheese fell onto his lap. He could then put the fallen slices into his pocket with the hand he kept out of view under the table. He smiled, knowing he was breaking his aunt's fifth rule.

And then, right after breakfast, Samuel decided to break another of Aunt Eda's rules.

'I'm going to go up to the attic,' he told his sister, when they were sitting upstairs on their beds.

Martha shook her head.

‘Yes,’ said Samuel. ‘When she goes out to the washing line, I’m going to see what’s so special up there that she doesn’t want us to see.’ He was determined to find out more about the forest, especially after last night, and he was convinced there would be clues in the attic.

Again Martha shook her head, for a moment looking like she was genuinely concerned.

‘Yes,’ said Samuel. ‘I’m going.’

And so, when Samuel heard his aunt head out to the washing line, he left his sister on her bed and walked down the landing towards the ladder. The ladder led up to a small, square wooden door in the ceiling.

Halfway up, Samuel faced a problem. The problem had four legs and a wagging tail and was starting to bark.

‘No, Ibsen! Ssssh!’ pleaded Samuel.

But Ibsen was not a dog to be shushed, and kept on barking the news of Samuel’s rule breaking out to Aunt Eda.

And then Samuel remembered. The cheese! He pulled the thin slices of Gjetost out of his pocket and let them fall onto the landing.

It worked. The barking stopped. Ibsen's silence was bought with five slices of brown cheese.

Samuel undid the latch and pushed open the door, before clambering up into a room full of dust and cobwebs.

## THE TEA-CHEST

**I**t was dark in the attic, and Samuel had to wait for his eyes to adjust. There was a tiny window, but it was so caked with cobwebs that the weak Norwegian sunlight hardly made it past the glass.

The ceiling was low, and anyone taller than Samuel would have had to hunch their back as they walked over the creaking floorboards. Being considerably smaller than his aunt, Samuel could walk around the dark room with relative ease, although he did manage to bang his knee on a tea-chest that had been sneakily hiding in the semi-dark.

‘Ow!’ Samuel said, then covered his mouth.

He felt inside the box, expected to find something interesting, but came across nothing but old clothes. They were men’s clothes, so Samuel guessed they had belonged to his Uncle Henrik.

There were pictures on the wall. Photographs in frames. Samuel squinted and saw a man standing on a snowy mountainside, clutching a pair of skis. The man was smiling – or laughing maybe – and he was wearing a purple bodysuit that clung so tightly to his body that if his skin had been purple you wouldn't have been able to tell where the bodysuit ended and where his skin began.

There was another photograph next to it. A man jumping through the air on his skis. And another of the same man standing in front of a large block of brown cheese.

Samuel looked back at the photo of the man standing in the snow, and as he looked, Samuel got a strange feeling that he had seen this man only yesterday. The laughing eyes seemed as familiar to him as those of Aunt Eda. He realized it was Uncle Henrik, but the sense of recognition was still strange.

'Weird,' he said to himself.

He looked around and saw something lying behind the tea-chests along the side of the room. It was the skis that he had seen in the photo. Then he noticed something else on another wall. A framed glass case containing his uncle's silver medal.



Samuel went over to get a closer look, but became distracted by another tea-chest. The chest was covered with an old tablecloth, as if it was hiding something. He looked around at all the other tea-chests, but it was the only one hidden in this manner.

Intrigued, Samuel started to peel back the checked cloth. Before he had seen what was inside, he jumped, startled by a sudden gust of wind slapping against the attic's small window.

He didn't know why he was so scared. Maybe it was because of what he had seen last night. Or maybe it was just because of the strange feeling he had got when looking at the photograph of his uncle.

Anyway, Samuel knew he didn't have long before Aunt Eda caught him nosing about up there, so he closed his eyes and whipped the tablecloth off the chest as fast as a magician wanting to keep a tea-set in place.

He opened his eyes and was instantly disappointed. The chest was full of books, and not even interesting-looking books. These were old books, in boring hard covers with dull colours and no pictures on them. And they were written in Norwegian.

Samuel hadn't read a book since his parents died. He had tried. Mrs Finch, the neighbour who had looked after him and Martha before they flew out to Norway, had suggested that Samuel should read to take his mind off things. But he hadn't been able to concentrate enough to finish reading a single sentence. His mind was still so full of the car accident that his eyes had slid off words like feet on an icy pavement.

Picking through the books in the tea-chest, Samuel looked at the titles on the spine.

*Niflheim og Muspellsheim*

*Ultima Thule*

*Ask og Embla*

*Æsir*

*Per Gynt*

And then he saw another book, underneath all the others. It was right at the bottom and Samuel had to stretch his arm as far as it would go in order to reach it.

It was heavy – heavier than its average size suggested – as if the words weighed more than in the other books. The cover was the dullest of greens, like grass in a March fog, but it somehow looked better than the rest.

Samuel looked at the spine, and felt a chill as the wind kept blowing against the side of the house.

The book had a title he could understand. It was called *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, by Professor Horatio Tanglewood.

## THE FASCINATING DARKNESS

While her brother was nosing around in the attic, Martha stared out of the bedroom window and watched her aunt collect the washing from the line.

The wind was strong, and kept blowing the vests and long-johns and jumpers into Aunt Eda's face as she unpegged them. One bed-sheet even wrapped itself around her head and body, as if in some desperate farewell hug, before she placed the mischievous sheet in her basket.

What was Martha thinking about as she stared out of that upstairs window? Whether you were ten thousand miles away or right in the same room, you wouldn't have been able to understand what was going on behind those dark brown eyes as they observed Aunt Eda battling the wind.

The truth is, she wasn't paying much attention to anything her eyes were witnessing. Since her parents' death, everything she saw in the outside world struck her as being pointless. What was the purpose of doing anything? Where did it get you? Everybody dies in the end; whether that end comes sooner or later, it didn't really matter. She knew that some people – like Aunt Eda – could try and spend time talking and smiling to cover up the sadness inside them, but words and smiles belonged to another world now. A world to which Martha knew she would never be able to return.

So when she watched the bed-sheet that her aunt had placed in the basket fill like a cotton balloon and fly up into the air, she didn't open the window and tell Aunt Eda that the washing was escaping in the wind.

It was only when her aunt turned round from unpegging her last pair of long-johns that she caught sight of the rebellious bed-sheet.

Aunt Eda shoved the long-johns in the basket and started running after the white sheet as it swooped up into the air, and back down again, cartwheeling over the grass towards the forest.

Martha saw other items were now leaving the

basket as well, due to the increasing strength of the wind. And pretty soon all the washing was travelling through the air towards the trees, flying over Aunt Eda's head or whizzing past her on the grass.

Vests, long-johns, jumpers, cardigans, woolly socks, underpants – all tumbling and soaring like birds with injured wings . . .

Aunt Eda managed to catch hold of some socks and a vest and a jumper; then she saw the bed-sheet come to rest only a few steps away from the forest. She ran towards it, pinning the rescued items of washing to her chest with her left arm. Then, once she had got to the bed-sheet, she stretched out her other arm – her javelin arm – but just as she was about to clutch hold of the white cotton, it escaped her as it responded again to the call of the wind.

Aunt Eda ran a few more steps forward, awkwardly holding the bundle of dry washing, but then stopped suddenly as the sheet disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

Martha watched as her aunt stood facing the trees.

Aunt Eda was either unable or unwilling to step forward and retrieve any item of washing that made it beyond the giant trunks in front of her. And it was only then, at the moment when Martha was

reminded of the dreaded fear that the forest seemed to inspire in her aunt, that the ten-year-old girl at the window started to become interested in what she was watching. As her aunt began to walk back towards the empty basket and the washing line, Martha's eyes stayed rooted on the darkness between the trees.

It seemed beautiful.

Beautiful, and strangely inviting. She became fascinated by it as she stood there, at the window. It seemed so different from the pointless smiles and pointless words she had been surrounded by since her parents died.

Something about the black spaces between the trees seemed to speak directly to her, drawing her in – the darkness as irresistible in a world of false smiles as a cool pool of water on a hot summer's day.

As Martha stared out of the window, Samuel was a floor above her, opening *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*. He turned to the first page and began to read:

There is a place you must never enter. It is a place where evil has many faces, and where creatures of myth and legend live and breathe. And kill. It is a place beyond dreams or nightmares – a place that has so far been too

feared to be called anything at all. Now, in this book, I will explain the unexplained, and give fear a name that suits it well. That name shall be 'Shadow Forest', and it will plant terror in your hearts.

Samuel gulped, and sweat moistened his palms. Then he flicked to the next page and began to read about the creatures of his nightmares.

#### THE HULDRE-FOLK

The huldre-folk are human-sized creatures who spend most of their lives underground. They have hunched and very bony bodies and long tails and claws instead of fingernails. They have scrunched-up noses and their eyes are set wide apart, and never blink or cry. They only come above ground in the dark – to hunt for caloosh, to catch creatures trying to escape and to escort doomed prisoners to the clearing in the forest where the Changemaker lives. The Changemaker is the fearsome overlord of Shadow Forest and he is loved and worshipped by the huldre-folk.

Years of living underground have had a very negative effect on the huldres, leading to a profound jealousy and hatred of creatures who live freely in the forest. Indeed,



their natural cruelty was one of the reasons the Changemaker chose them to be his prison guards.

Most creatures in the forest speak Hekron, a universal language that everyone – even humans – can understand. The huldre-folk are the exception. They hate being understood almost as much as they hate the sunshine and so they invented their own language called Okokkbjdkzokk, a language that sounds almost as cruel and sinister as the huldres actually are.

Weakness: Their flesh evaporates if exposed to daylight.

Samuel turned over the page, and he read as fast as he could about another kind of creature – trolls:

## TROLLS

Trolls are the most terrible creatures in the whole of Shadow Forest. These are the creatures a human should be most scared of meeting as they are horrible right down to their bones. Not only do they steal people's goats, but they also kill any humans they can get their hands on. They come out when it is dark and can smell human blood from a great distance away, and are drawn to it like bees to pollen.

They are generally very strong, and use their strength to drag people back to their homes, where they cook them alive in a giant pot. All trolls have three-toed feet and they are universally ugly but the type of ugliness varies greatly. There are two-headed trolls, no-headed trolls, one-eyed trolls and four-armed trolls. Despite their differences in appearance, trolls are all equally dangerous and should be avoided at all costs.

Weakness: Trolls have no weakness at all. They are pure evil.

Samuel shivered with terror after he had finished reading, and flicked through the pages, catching glimpses of other creatures' names – slemps, truth pixies, tomtegubbs and many others. He decided to keep hold of the book, tucking it in his trousers and hiding it under his sweater. He then put the checked cloth back over the tea-chest. He stepped across the creaking floorboards towards the ladder that leaned against the opening in the floor.

*I'd better go.* He realized his aunt would have probably finished taking the dry washing off the line.

As he placed his foot on the ladder, he noticed an object like a spear leaning against the corner of the room.

*Aunt Eda's old javelin.*

But there was no time to inspect it.

He heard Aunt Eda downstairs, so he quickly climbed down the ladder and tiptoed back to the bedroom with Professor Tanglewood's book still tucked under his jumper.

'Martha, there's a jav—'

Samuel's sentence was left unfinished, hanging in the air as he scanned the room for his sister. But it was no good.

Martha was nowhere to be seen.

## MARTHA GOES MISSING

‘**M**artha? . . . Martha?’  
Where was she?

Samuel ran downstairs and looked in the living room, but the only presence was that of Ibsen, his four legs jerking as he lay in his basket, lost in cheese-fuelled dreams.

Martha wasn't in the hallway or the kitchen either. Maybe she was in the washroom, helping Aunt Eda sort out the dry clothes. This possibility led him through the length of the kitchen to the yellow door with the wobbly handle. He opened it and walked into the small room, which had once been used as a tiny cheese factory. Aunt Eda was grumbling to herself in Norwegian while trying to match socks together on top of the washing machine. After she had finished with the washing she was going to

phone Oskar and ask if it would be all right to stay until she had found somewhere else for them all to live. These thoughts preoccupied her so much that she was completely unaware that Samuel had stepped onto the stone floor beside her.

‘Where’s Martha?’

His question made Aunt Eda jump. She turned from her half-rescued pile of washing.

‘Good heffens, Samuel. You shocked the life out of me.’ Then she remembered his question and frowned. ‘Martha’s upstairs. In the bedroom. With you. By the way, I haff made a decision. Today we are going to moof—’

‘No,’ Samuel said. ‘She’s not there. Martha. She’s not in the bedroom.’

Aunt Eda turned towards Samuel, and as she looked him in the eye, a sudden terror seemed to grip her.

‘When did you last see her?’ she asked him.

‘Ten minutes ago,’ Samuel said. ‘I went to—’ He managed to stop himself from telling her ‘the attic’.

Aunt Eda looked around the small, windowless washroom. After all those years, it still smelled of cheese. ‘I haff been in here fife minutes,’ she said, as

much to herself as Samuel. Then, with a sudden urgency: 'Look out of the window.'

Samuel went back through the yellow door and looked out of the kitchen window, with *The Creatures of Shadow Forest* still under his jumper. He saw nothing except empty fields with the fjord and the mountains in the distance.

'No!' barked Aunt Eda, behind him. 'The window at the back of the liffing room!'

They ran towards the living room, but Aunt Eda paused by the doorway.

'Her shoes,' she said. 'Her shoes are missing.'

Samuel looked out of the window that was positioned above Ibsen's basket. (Ibsen, owing to the sudden commotion, was now yawning himself awake.)

Samuel strained his eyes but there was nothing except the empty washing line and the grass field sloping up towards the—

He saw something. A dot in the distance. As his eyes focused, he saw that the dot was a person, heading straight for the forest.

'No!' Samuel screamed when he recognized the dark blue of his sister's dress, blowing forward in the wind.

He ran out of the room and down the wooden hallway, shot past his aunt and opened the door. Once outside, he started sprinting up the slope towards Martha and the forest. As he ran, he pulled the book from under his jumper and held it tight with his right hand. He thought about dropping it, but if Martha reached the forest, he would need to keep it with him.

‘Martha! Martha! Stop!’

As he got closer, he was hardly conscious of the wind that blasted him or the soft muddy grass that pressed into his socks.

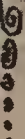
‘Martha!’ Aunt Eda called. Then: ‘Samuel! Samuel!’

Even his aunt’s voice was only half in his mind. It was as if the Samuel she was calling was someone else, running alongside him.

‘Marth-aaaaa!’ he called.

The only thing he focused on now was the dark-blue dot, which was becoming more recognizably his sister with every step across the grass. He wasn’t even aware of all the muddy hoofprints left by the huldres’ stallions the night before.

‘*Don’t go in the forest!*’ Samuel screamed, pushing the air out of his lungs. He was now able to see





Martha's long hair blowing forward like the branches of the tall trees in front of her.

*'Martha! Stop! Creatures! Huldres! Trolls! In the forest!'*

Martha was only walking, but she was so far ahead that Samuel knew he couldn't reach her.

*'Martha! No! Come back!'*

Martha didn't turn or show any outward sign of having heard her brother. She just kept on walking – neither quickening her step nor slowing down – until she had reached the trees.

And even then she kept on going, further and further, until she disappeared into the darkness of the forest.

## RUNNING UP THE HILL

She had gone.

Samuel kept running towards the space between the trees where his sister had been visible only a moment before, and tried to see further into the darkness.

*'Martha! Come back! Martha!'*

He was running fast. Faster than when he had run to the forest before, in pursuit of the cat. And Aunt Eda was finding it difficult to catch up with him.

True, he'd had a head start. He had shot, shoeless, out of the front door while Aunt Eda was still looking out of the window. But Samuel was running at such speed, and with such single-mindedness, that his aunt's old legs couldn't narrow the distance.

'Don't follow her!' she cried, breathless, as she ran. 'Don't go into the forest!'

Of course, her words were useless. The fear of the forest was never going to be as great in Samuel's mind as that of losing his sister.

Even though she had explained to Samuel the story of what had happened to Uncle Henrik, Aunt Eda knew that he would imagine he could enter the forest and bring his sister back. After all, Martha had only walked between the trees a few seconds ago. She wouldn't have got very far, so Samuel would have every reason to believe he could find her.

But Aunt Eda knew better. She knew that in this instance the usual rules of space and time couldn't be trusted. She knew that whoever or whatever entered the forest never returned. It didn't matter whether it was a white cotton bed-sheet or a flesh-and-blood husband – the forest never let go of whatever came its way.

And so when she saw Martha disappear between the trees, Aunt Eda knew she was already lost. The only hope she had now, as she ran up the grassy slope, was in reaching Samuel before he too disappeared for ever.

*Damn these old legs*, she thought as she struggled against the angle of the ground to gain speed.

*'Samuel! Stay there! Samuel!'*

But the boy still wasn't listening. He was sprinting ahead with unlimited energy, desperate to catch a glimpse of his sister's long hair or navy dress.

He was nearly there.

'*Samuel! Samuel! Stop!*' The words stole Aunt Eda's breath and seemed to make the ground even steeper.

But then, just when she thought it was too late, she heard something. A noise. Behind. In an instant she recognized it as the jangle of Ibsen's collar.

And sure enough the dog was there, galloping fast across the grass towards Samuel. It was an incredible sight. The dog who had always been too scared even to point his nose in the direction of the forest was now charging headlong towards it at ferocious speed. It was as if something had been woken up inside him. Ibsen, who of late had shown little interest in anything other than begging for cheese and snoozing in his basket, was tearing across the grass as fast as a cheetah chasing a gazelle.

Not that Samuel was aware of his canine pursuer. For Samuel, everything that was now behind him might as well have stopped existing. The only thing that mattered was reaching the forest, and then finding his sister.

He was nearly there now. He could see other trunks of pine trees, further into the dark.

But just as he was ready to dive headlong into the shadows, he felt something tug his arm.

At first he thought it was Aunt Eda's hand.

'Get off me!' But then he saw the hand had teeth – teeth that weren't letting go of his sleeve.

Ibsen, having jumped into the air to catch hold of Samuel, was now digging his four paws into the ground to stop the boy running into the forest.

Although the dog was lighter than the twelve-year-old he held onto, he had gravity and the force of two extra legs on his side.

'Get off me, you stupid dog!'

But Ibsen took the words to mean the opposite, and held firm. Samuel raised his arm, causing the dog to stand up on his hind legs. Despite such rough treatment the steadfast elkhound didn't once let go, or seek a better grip by sinking his teeth into the arm itself.

'Get off! Get off! Get off!' Samuel cried, staring into the dark abyss of the forest.

Samuel kept shaking his arm, and threatened to hit Ibsen with the book. Then he turned to see Aunt Eda running up the hill towards him.

'*No!*' screamed Samuel, the word rising with his foggy breath into the cold Norwegian air.

At that moment – the moment just before his aunt's hand would have been able to reach him – Samuel's jumper ripped, leaving Ibsen with a ragged patch in his mouth.

Realizing he was free of the dog's grip, Samuel darted straight into the forest. As he ran into the darkness, he ignored Ibsen's barked warning and the scream of his aunt. A scream so agonizing it sounded like a woman giving birth.

Or mourning the dead.

## THE FEATHER PIT

**M**artha walked in as straight a line as she could manage, which wasn't very straight at all given the number of pine trees in her way.

She didn't know where she was going.

There was no plan involved with her walking other than to head as deep into the darkness of the forest as possible. So she just kept on going through the green plants that brushed against her knees towards a thin dirt path lined on both sides by little shrubs covered in berries.

And then she heard something.

A kind of squawking.

It was a horrible noise, and it was getting closer.

*Squawk! Squawk! Squawk!*

That was when she saw them.

Three giant birds, taller than her, running fast on

thin legs. The birds had grey feathers and tall, swan-like necks. Their heads were darker grey than the rest of their bodies, with a white stripe on their foreheads and with very long (and very loud) squawking beaks.

As they kept running straight towards her, she saw the front bird's fat body and tiny, flightless wings. She kept looking for the other birds' bodies but couldn't see them.

And then she realized.

It wasn't three birds at all.

It was one bird with three heads on three separate necks. A 'caloosh' was one of the many creatures described in Professor Horatio Tanglewood's book *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, but Martha didn't know anything about this book, as neither her brother nor Aunt Eda had told her about it. (Calooshes, by the way, are as scared of leaving Shadow Forest as humans are of entering it, and never head out into the open, which is why you've probably never bumped into one.)

Martha stared at the caloosh running towards her. Then the bird suddenly stopped. All of its three beaks squawked at the same time as the ground opened up and the bird fell down a hole. Then the



ground closed back up again and looked exactly as it had before. Martha looked around, wondering if there were any other hidden holes in the ground.

'Martha! Martha!' It was the faint call of her brother.

*He must be getting close to finding me,* she thought. And she suddenly realized that wasn't such a bad thing. Maybe she had been hasty coming into the forest. Maybe she should have listened to Aunt Eda.

She decided to go to her brother, but she couldn't work out where he was. His voice bounced off the trees, making it seem like he was everywhere. She walked a bit in one direction, then in another, watching the ground for holes, but Samuel still sounded just as far away.

She kept walking, then started to run, and she sensed she was now getting closer to Samuel.

'Martha! Martha!'

Yes, he was definitely near now.

She ran faster.

One step after another after—

Her foot fell into nothing, and her body followed. The ground had opened up and now she was falling down a hole into darkness. There was a low branch hanging over the hole but she couldn't reach it in time.

She screamed.

It was the first sound her mouth had made for over a week, and she only made the sound because she had no choice. That is simply what mouths do when they find they are falling down a black hole into apparent nothingness. They scream.

*'Aaaaaaaaargh!'*

Martha landed on something soft and feathery. In fact, it was so feathery that she had to conclude it was indeed feathers. She looked up at the small circle of light. A hidden trapdoor.

She rolled over and tried to stand up but she only managed to get onto all fours. She clambered over the feathers as her eyes slowly adjusted to the dark. Her hand reached out and touched the dug-out earth on the side of the giant hole.

There was a soft yellow lightness, getting slowly brighter. Soon she could see the feathers – they were grey, like those of the three-headed bird that had fallen into the other hole.

She looked around and saw the source of the light. An underground window with metal bars. Moving closer to the window, she heard voices and glimpsed the fire of a torch. The torch and the voices were coming towards her, down some kind of corridor.

*Maybe they are coming to rescue me.*

But even as she had the thought, she realized it wasn't true. People don't set traps in order to let you go again.

Martha knew that whoever or whatever was coming towards her was not wanting to make friends. So she lay down and pulled feathers over herself, hoping she wouldn't be seen.

## THE SCREAM

*‘Martha! Martha! Maaarthaaaaaaa!’*

Samuel kept calling his sister’s name, but only received an echo in response. He looked around, trying to locate Martha amongst the trees, but he could see no sign of her.

This was odd, to say the least. After all, she couldn’t have gone that far. She’d only run into the forest two minutes ago.

He kept running through the green vegetation, book in hand, and tried to ignore the pain of his shoeless feet as they cracked twigs and landed on stones.

*‘Maaarthaaaaaaa!’*

He stopped again. It was like she had vanished into the air. He stared up at the tall trees, as if they were strangers who might be able to help, but was

greeted with nothing but silence. He tucked his book back under his jumper and scanned through three hundred and sixty degrees.

The trunks were so close together that it was hard to see for a long way in any direction. The closeness of the trees seemed to steal the sky, or at least smash it into so many little pieces that it was only visible through the leaves like stars on a clear night.

Samuel strained his eyes around the dark and green landscape, but he still couldn't see Martha. Nor could he see back where he had come from. None of the gaps in the trees revealed a view of the distant fjord and mountains. There was no sign of Aunt Eda.

The compass of his brain no longer worked properly. He couldn't tell which way would lead him back to the soft grass and the white wooden house, any more than he knew how to get to Martha.

It was as though the trees had somehow moved around behind him, the way clouds change position when you aren't looking at them.

'Martha. Please. Martha.'

Samuel's voice was quieter now. Not scared exactly, but not confident either.

'Who's there?' he said as he stood still. He thought

he had heard the cracking of a twig behind him.  
'Martha? Is that you?'

But she wasn't anywhere to be seen.

He heard another twig snap, and another. Definite footsteps, coming closer towards him.

Samuel waited to see who it was. 'Hello?' he said.

There was no answer, which made him think it could still be his sister. Samuel felt sick with panic as he waited to see who it was.

'Martha?'

Samuel tried to move, but fear rooted him to the ground. In the distance he heard a sound. A faint scream, like someone falling. Was it Martha?

'Martha!' he called as he carried on walking. But then he heard something else.

A bark.

He turned round and saw Ibsen.

The dog barked again.

'Go back!' Samuel told him. 'Go to Aunt Eda!'

Ibsen seemed to be barking exactly the same thing, but neither of them listened to the other.

'Go home!' Samuel tried again.

More barking.

'Go home, you stupid dog! Go back home!'

Ibsen stopped barking but stayed precisely where he was.

Samuel began walking deeper into the forest. Ibsen followed.

'Do what you like,' Samuel muttered, and kept on going. 'But I'm not going back, so you can rip my jumper all you want.'

The dog lowered his head, as if he had understood, and Samuel kept calling his sister's name.

'Marth-aaa! Marth-aaa!'

He headed in the direction of the scream, with Ibsen close at heel.

## THE SNEEZE

**W**hile Samuel and Ibsen kept trying their hardest to find her, Martha herself was trying her hardest to hide. She had managed to cover herself entirely with feathers and now she lay at the bottom of the hole, as still and as quiet as she could manage.

This is what she heard:

Footsteps, getting closer.

A clinking sound – keys.

Muffled voices.

A key sliding into a lock.

A door creaking open.

The voices got louder, but they spoke a language Martha had never heard before. A bit like Norwegian, but completely different at the same time.



FIRST VOICE: *Enna fregg oda blenf?*

SECOND VOICE: *Ven! Froga oda klumpk!*

FIRST VOICE: *Kyder fregg lossvemper.*

SECOND VOICE: *Froga oda blenf. Froga oda caloosh!*

The whispery voices hardly sounded like voices at all. They were more like a sinister wind blowing through leaves, only a wind that had shaped itself into words.

Unbeknown to Martha, the voices belonged to huldres, and she had just fallen into one of the many traps designed to capture calooshes and stray forest wanderers. Yet, even though Martha couldn't understand their language, she sensed correctly that she was in grave danger. She didn't want to stay trapped in the feathers, but she thought that whatever fate awaited her beyond the door would be even worse.

So she decided to stay quiet and wait for the two creatures to leave.

But deciding to be quiet and actually being quiet are two very separate things. Although Martha had hardly made a sound since her parents were crushed to death, she was on the verge of blowing her cover.

You see, the thing with feathers is that they tickle.

And the thing with noses is that when they are tickled, they have a tendency to sneeze.

Martha knew the sneeze was coming. She just hoped it would be after the two creatures had shut the door and walked away.

*'Froga oda blenf,'* the first voice was saying, which roughly means 'I heard something' – although it has no exact translation.

He thought he had heard a caloosh, the squawking three-headed bird that huldre-folk depend on for meat and eggs and feathers, as well as for entertaining them with caloosh fights.

*'Nip. Keider fregg løssvemper,'* said the other huldre in a slightly less sinister voice than his fellow guard. He was convinced that there was no caloosh or anything else amid the feathers.

They were just about to shut the door when they heard:

*'A-a-a-atchoo!'*

And when Martha sneezed, the feathers that had been lying over her face shot high into the air, making it easy for the two huldre guards to spot her straight away.

Martha saw them for the first time. Their too-far-apart eyes, their claws, their hunched bodies, their

grey skin and their cow's tails that flicked at the sight of the human girl lost in the caloosh feathers. They were two of the huldres Samuel and Aunt Eda had seen the night before, who had chased the singing creature and taken it back to the forest. They were wearing clothes made from caloosh skin, with weapons strapped to their belts. A sword, a small throwing-axe, daggers, and something Martha didn't recognize.

'*Ig kippenk,*' said the slightly less sinister huldre, whose far-apart eyes had a deep sadness to them.

He was called Grentul, but it wasn't the name his mother had given him. It was a name he had given himself, a long time ago. A time when everything changed and the huldres had been forced underground.

'*Ig kippook,*' said the other, who was so skinny it seemed his ribs were about to burst out of his skin.

He leaned over the feather pit towards Martha, tilting his head the way a cat does before pouncing on a mouse. He was called Vjpp, which is an impossible name for human tongues to pronounce.

Martha didn't know what they were saying, but judging from their gestures they seemed to be

debating how they should get her out. At first Vjpp smiled an evil smile and beckoned her with one of his clawed fingers.

Needless to say, Martha did not do as the finger asked and stayed exactly where she was.

The two creatures debated a little while longer, and Martha saw Vjpp point to the flaming torch Grentul was holding. This prompted the other huldre to nod reluctantly and hand it over.

*'Fugappuk ky brekk!'* Vjpp shouted.

The next thing Martha knew, the flaming torch was flying through the air above her head. She turned and saw it land with a crackle as rising sparks danced upwards in the dark.

Feathers quickly turned to flames as the fire roared and spat its way towards her.

*'Fugappuk!'*

Vjpp was rattling his keys in excitement. This was the cruellest and most enjoyable thing he had done all day.

*'Fugappuk! Fugappuk!'*

Martha could feel the heat blast her cheek as the fire inched closer, and knew she had no choice.

She had to get out of the feathers, or else share their fate.

So she sat up, choking on the smoke, and raced on all fours against the fire.

The huldres' clawed hands pulled her out just in time, then shut the thick heavy door, leaving the fire to burn itself out. She was led down a dark corridor, but was too busy coughing to worry about the caged creatures on either side, their faces grotesque in the flickering light.

## PRISON SONGS

**M**artha was thrown into a cell at the end of the corridor, which had metal bars instead of walls and nothing much else.

No bed. No toilet. No window.

No hope of escape.

'*Ob kenk,*' said Vjpp, his ribs shaking under his tight skin as he laughed.

Grentul looked at Martha with his sad wide-apart eyes as if he wanted to say something. An apology? An explanation? Whatever it was wouldn't have been understood, so he walked away. Vjpp waited a moment longer and spat blue spit through the bars at Martha. Then he too turned and walked down the corridor.

When Vjpp's cruel laughter had faded and his flickering tail had vanished into darkness, Martha looked around at the inhabitants of the other cells.

An old woman with long white hair down to her ankles and wearing a white tunic and shawl stood watching her from the cell opposite.

Further down the corridor she saw a fearsome-looking creature with two heads and four eyeballs peering at her from behind the metal bars. Both heads had shaggy black hair and beards, but the head on the right looked a lot grumpier than the head on the left. She had never read about trolls in *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, but the sight of the creature was enough to terrify her.

Then she heard a noise coming from the cell next to hers. The noise was singing, and not particularly good singing either:

*'There's nothing wrong  
With a little song  
When things aren't going your way.*

*For there's no crime  
In a silly rhyme  
On the most unhappy day . . .'*

She looked to see who would be capable of singing so happily while trapped in an underground prison.

The creature she saw was a tomtegubb (although she didn't know that yet), the exact same tomtegubb that Samuel and Aunt Eda had seen being caught by the huldres (although Martha didn't know that either). He was shaped rather like a barrel, with a short roundish body and no neck – or none that she could see, anyway. He had golden skin, very hairy eyebrows and a flat nose with long blond whiskers that shone from his face like rays from the sun.

His clothes were most unusual too. A tunic made of multi-coloured patches – bright green and bright yellow and shiny red. The tunic was short, and only covered half his body. The other half was covered by purple trousers. Indeed, his trousers – as the other prisoners would have been able to tell her – were the subject of one of the tomtegubb's self-written songs, called 'The Purple Trouser Song'. It was a very long song, with twenty-two verses and three different choruses, and the tomtegubb regarded it as his masterpiece.

His clothes looked quite ridiculous in the dark and dingy underground prison, but even more ridiculous was his broad smile when his circumstances should have made him very sad.

It went quiet for a moment, a moment during



which the troll with two heads seemed very relieved, then the tomtegubb launched into another song.

*'There may be no window,  
There may be no bed,  
But at least there are no prison bars  
Inside my happy head.'*

The song prompted the two-headed troll to rub both his foreheads.

'Tomtegubb, please stop, I'm begging you,' he said out of his grumpier head, which was on his right side.

*'If our shared tomorrow  
Is filled with death and sorrow,  
There's only one thing to say:*

*And that's, "Get up and dance,  
Let's sing and let's prance  
For we've still got today!"'*

The tomtegubb's singing, accompanied by the troll's moans about his double headache, kept going for quite a while.

During this time Martha sat herself down in one of

the back corners of the cell, with her legs out straight in front of her. She looked around at the other prisoners and wondered what they would do to her if there were no bars between them. Would they kill her? She looked at the white-haired old woman in the opposite cage, who was staring at her with kind eyes. Could that kindness be trusted?

She didn't know.

All she knew was that she was dirtying her dress on the ground – a dress her parents had bought for her birthday – but no one was there to tell her off about that.

## RISING SMOKE

Still walking in the direction of the scream, Samuel now noticed something else.

Smoke.

It was rising from the ground in the distance ahead of him and Ibsen. They walked through the ferns towards it, but kept looking around for a human form amid the trees.

‘Martha? Martha? Are you there?’

If she was near, she certainly wasn’t making any sign of the fact.

Then something weird happened.

The smoke, which had until that point been thick and heavy, stopped completely. Samuel sped up, to see how the fire had gone out so quickly, but Ibsen stayed behind and growled.

‘What’s up, you hairy idiot?’ Samuel asked him.

Seeing that Samuel wasn't going to listen to his growled warning about the imminent threat lying ahead, Ibsen followed a few paces behind. He kept growling and even barked as Samuel got closer to where the smoke had been.

'Ibsen, shut up! I'm trying to li—'

Samuel stepped onto the same trap that Martha had and fell into empty nothingness. The smoke hadn't stopped at all. It had just been hidden when the trapdoor closed. Now it was all around him, and he could feel the terrible heat of the fire below.

As he'd been turning to talk to Ibsen, his hands were able to reach the side of the hole just in time. His fingers clawed desperately into the earth, trying to get a better grip.

Looking up, Samuel could see the low branch of a tree hanging over the hole, just out of reach.

'Help!'

He looked down. Clouds of black smoke hit his face, and he flinched away from the intense heat of the fire. The blazing flames below almost reached his shoeless feet. Sparks rose and singed his socks.

'Ibsen!' he choked. 'Ibsen! Help!'

Samuel managed to pull himself up enough to see Ibsen backing away from the hole.

'Ibsen!' he shouted as he started to lose his grip.  
'Come back!'

Of course, he didn't know what Ibsen would have been able to do. He was only a dog, after all. But when you find yourself clinging onto the edge of a hole, hanging above a blazing fire that is already starting to cook your feet, you hold onto even the slightest of hopes.

'Ibsen . . . Ibsen, come here. Help! Come back, you coward!'

But Ibsen, although terrified, wasn't a coward. He was only walking away from Samuel to take a run-up. Having paced back a few steps, he now ran directly towards the hole and jumped through the smoke to land on the other side. This was a truly remarkable achievement, especially as the size of the hole was considerably more than the size of the dog.

Once Ibsen had landed safely, he got his footing and jumped again, pushing off from his front paws first, then lifting up with his back legs. A second later he had the low branch in his mouth and was dipping it down into the choking smoke.

'Help! Help!'

Earth crumbled under Samuel's fingers. He was

about to lose his grip and fall into the hellish flames below.

But then he felt something prodding his shoulder. Turning his head, he saw it was the low branch that had been such a cruel sight moments earlier.

He didn't know how the branch came to be there, but he was very pleased to see it. He had to be quick though. The crumbling earth under his left hand meant that his right hand couldn't take too long to grab hold of the branch.

It was an awkward move, especially in the smoke. But he did it. Once both hands were around the wood, the branch half snapped and whipped Samuel to the other side of the hole. The branch hung on just long enough to let him climb out and clamber away from the smoke.

He coughed, bending double, for about five minutes. Then he looked at Ibsen and realized he must have jumped over to save him.

'Thank you,' Samuel said, checking he still had the book tucked under his jumper. 'And, I'm . . . er, sorry. For calling you stupid. And I don't think you're a hairy idiot.'

Ibsen gave a brief wag of his tail. *Apology accepted*, the wag seemed to say.

Then a terrible thought hit Samuel. What if Martha had fallen down the hole? What if she had been burned alive? There was no way of answering those questions.

‘Martha, where are you?’ Samuel mumbled, looking around at all the trees for anything that might give him a clue.

Then he saw something. A flash of grey amid the landscape of tall brown trunks.

A house.

He felt cold with fear, yet there was a chance that whoever lived there might be able to help him find his sister. It was a small chance, but no smaller than that of escaping from the fire. So Samuel started walking towards the house, with Ibsen treading carefully by his side, checking the ground for hidden holes.

## THE VILLAGE

As they got closer, Samuel's heart began to race. He realized the small house wasn't on its own. There was another, further back. And another, and another . . .

'It's a village,' Samuel told Ibsen, although what Ibsen was to do with that information wasn't exactly clear.

The village consisted of twelve small houses, with stone walls and wooden doors and roofs. The windows of each house were round, as was the layout of the village itself. Together, the houses formed the perimeter of a perfect circle.

In the middle of that circle there were tree stumps with pictures carved onto the part of the wood that faced the sky. Each picture was of the sun, with its rays flowing like a kind of mane. The exact same



image was also carved into the door of each house.

Samuel went over to one of those doors and knocked, his hand beating against the middle of the wooden sun.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’

No answer.

‘Hello? Excuse me, is anyone home?’

He went over to the glassless window and asked the same question. Poking his head inside, he got his answer. No one was there.

In fact, it looked like no one had been there for quite some time, as the whole place was shrouded in a veil of dust and cobwebs.

He found the same situation at the next house along. And the next. By the time he and Ibsen reached the fourth house in the circle, Samuel decided to try the door.

It creaked open, tearing the mesh of cobwebs along its top edge.

Ibsen growled his nervous warning.

‘Stay there if you’re a scaredy-cat,’ said Samuel. ‘I mean, scaredy-dog.’

But Samuel was the one who was really feeling scared. If it hadn’t been for his desperate need to find his sister, or any clues that might lead to her, then he

would have been running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

But what was he hoping to find?

A map of the forest? Some kind of creature, still living among the dust and cobwebs, who might be able to help him?

He looked right and saw a small kitchen with a wood-burning stove. There were logs inside, still waiting to be lit.

*That's strange,* thought Samuel. *Why put fresh logs in the stove if you were never going to use them?*

Samuel inched his way into the dining room, which had a round wooden table with the same image of the sun carved upon its surface. Around that image were four wooden bowls and four wooden spoons. Prepared for a meal that no one ever got to eat.

'Ow!'

His toe hit something.

Something hard but light, which skidded a short distance across the floor.

He looked down and what he saw caused him to gasp.

It was a skull.

A skull that Samuel's foot had just detached from the rest of its skeleton.



For the second time today he was wishing he'd listened to Ibsen.

He was torn between the two different Samuels that lived inside his head. There was the Samuel who wanted to run away and the Samuel who wanted to stay and look. It was that second Samuel who won a short victory as he stared at the remains of the dead body on the floor.

The skull wasn't human.

The eye-sockets were too far apart, as close to the sides as to the front of the head. Samuel remembered the creatures of his nightmares – the huldre-folk he had seen with Aunt Eda – and thought of their strange eyes.

*No, thought Samuel. It can't be a huldre. Their homes are under the ground.*

He dared his own eyes to scan the rest of the skeleton, and tried to compare it with the pictures of human bones he had seen in science books. There were clear differences. Too many rib bones. Longer feet and hands. A tail bone. It *was* a huldre.

*Whatever has killed this creature could be still around to kill me.*

The door creaked shut behind him in the breeze. It was then that shock turned into total fear.

Samuel was so scared he felt sick.

His heart was a mad drum beating three times too fast.

Ibsen barked.

This time Samuel listened and headed back outside.

‘Come on,’ he told the dog. ‘Let’s go.’

And they both ran as fast as they could away from the empty village. But even as they ran, Samuel couldn’t shake off the image of the skull, and the secrets that seemed to be lost somewhere in the hollow darkness of those wide-apart eyes.

## A RUDE INTERRUPTION FROM THE AUTHOR

**N**ow, you may be wondering what exactly Aunt Eda was doing at this time.

Of course, you may not be wondering this at all. You may just be wondering about what had happened to the huldre-folk to make them go underground, or you might be thinking about Martha in her prison cell, or you might just be wondering what you are going to have to eat for breakfast tomorrow. I don't know. I'm only the author; I'm not a mind-reader. But if you *are* wondering about what Aunt Eda was doing, then you'd better read the next chapter. If not, then you can skip it and go straight to the one after, which is called 'Troll-the-Left and Troll-the-Right'. But if you do that, it might make the ending a bit confusing. Not that I'm trying to tell you how to read the book or anything. You can read it

back to front if you really want. It's your book. Anyway, I just thought I'd better let you know that the next chapter is about Aunt Eda, just in case she's your least favourite character. She's one of my favourites, but everyone's different. And also, if you've just eaten your evening meal, you might want to let it digest before reading 'The White Bracelet' as it contains a rather disgusting kiss involving cheesy breath and a furry moustache.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

## THE WHITE BRACELET

**A**unt Eda had never driven fast in her life. She had always been scared of the roads and the wheeled boxes of metal they were made for. Since she heard what had happened to her sister Liv, fear had turned into mild terror.

But as she drove towards Flåm, she travelled so fast her battered old car had no idea what speed it was travelling. The numbers on the speedometer only went up to ninety kph, and she had passed that as soon as she'd hit the main road.

'Come on, old car,' she begged. 'You can go faster than this.'

The car moaned its disagreement, but kept racing towards the village.

Outside the window, the grass became a blur. Only the distant mountains and fjords stayed still,



as calm and beautiful as one of Old Tor's paintings.

The car screeched into the village, past the houses, past the church, left at the crossroads and down the main street. Aunt Eda slammed on the brakes just outside Oskar's store and ran inside.

Some of the villagers were there. Eda looked around to try and find Oskar, but he was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she saw his blond son Fredrik sitting on a stool and playing with his calculator.

'Fredrik, where is your father?' Aunt Eda asked in Norwegian.

The boy looked confused, as if Aunt Eda was a sum he couldn't solve.

'Er . . . he's upstairs.'

'I need to see him. It's an emergency.'

Aunt Eda pushed past the tutting villagers and went through the doorway at the back of the shop.

'Wait!' said Fredrik. 'My dad will kill me! I've broken his rule.'

But Aunt Eda knew there was no time left for following rules. She climbed a dark narrow staircase and followed the sound of Oskar's voice to a large white room with wooden floors and a reindeer's head looking down from one of the walls.

Oskar was on the phone to his new cheese supplier, and had his back to Aunt Eda.

‘No, no, we don’t want any more of your Gjetost cheese. Your Jarlsberg cheese is fine. Very white and very creamy. But I am afraid your Gjetost cheese is no good. It is too brown. It needs to be more of a golden colour, and it has to taste more like caramel . . . At the moment I am afraid to say that it tastes like it came out of a reindeer’s—’

Aunt Eda cleared her throat.

Oskar jumped out of his skin, but looked relieved when he saw who it was. Maybe he thought it was going to be a two-headed troll.

‘Er, excuse me, I have to go,’ he said to whoever was on the phone. Then, once he had hung up, he turned to his uninvited guest.

‘Eda. What are you doing here? Who let you up? Didn’t Fredrik try and stop you?’

‘He tried,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘But there is no stopping me today. I am sorry but I have come to ask you a very big favour.’

‘A favour? Eda . . . I don’t know . . .’

‘Well, think of it more as Henrik asking you a favour. After all, a favour for me is a favour for him. And you do remember how he helped you out when

your shop had no customers. He gave you free Gold Medal cheese. A month's supply.'

Oskar looked sorrowfully at the phone. 'Oh, if only he was still here! If only I didn't have to rely on these dimwits from Oslo with their stinky brown cheese. It's like eating socks. They wouldn't know proper Gjetost if it threw them down a mountain. If I still had Henrik's Gold Medal, I would have queues from my cheese counter all the way to Lillehammer.'

'So you will help me?'

Oskar nodded. 'All right. What is it?'

Aunt Eda took a deep breath and then came straight out with it. 'I need a man.'

Oskar straightened his yellow bow tie and raised his eyebrows. 'A-ha,' he said. 'Well, I must tell you, it is not a big surprise.'

Aunt Eda looked confused. 'It isn't?'

'I have a nose for these things, you see.' He wiggled his gigantic nostrils to prove his point. Suddenly he was feeling quite happy that Henrik *wasn't* there.

'You do?'

'Love is much like a cheese. It gets stronger with time. And people like us, Eda, we are not good at being alone. Sleeping in an empty bed is too much

like eating flat-bread with nothing on it. Don't you think?'

He walked over to Aunt Eda and held her head in his hands, and before she had time to object, she was being kissed. She pushed Oskar and his cheese breath and furry moustache away.

'No,' she said, wiping her mouth. 'No! Oskar. *No!*'

She was going to be cross but then she remembered why she was there. 'Listen, Oskar, I think you might have got the wrong idea. You are a lovely man, but I'm not looking for a new husband.'

Oskar paused and gazed up at the reindeer head as if he was worried it might tell someone what a fool he'd just made of himself.

'Oh, I see. So what do you need me for?'

Aunt Eda closed her eyes and blurted it out: 'To go with me into the forest.'

'The forest? As in Shadow Forest? As in the most dangerous place in the whole world? The place where people disappear and never come back?'

'It's Samuel and Martha,' Aunt Eda explained. 'The two children I am looking after. They have gone into the forest. With Ibsen. And I have to find them.'

'Oh no. The children. Those poor children.'

'I have to bring them back, but I can't do it alone.'

I know you've said no before, when I wanted you to help find Henrik. But you've got to help me this time. Please. I beg you.'

But Oskar was already shaking his head and talking over her words. 'Eda, Eda, listen. I so want to help you, and I would do anything else . . . Anything . . . It's just . . . terrible things are in that forest. Even the creatures are trying to escape. Old Tor saw another yesterday. I told you he had seen the two-headed troll. Well, he went back to the fjord last night and saw something else. A tomtegubb, and more huldres.'

Aunt Eda gulped, knowing she and Samuel had seen the same thing.

'But this time they saw him,' said Oskar. 'The huldres. They saw him and chased after him. And he ran away.'

Aunt Eda remembered how the huldres had galloped towards the fjord. 'But Old Tor can't run. He can hardly walk.'

Oskar nodded. 'I know – it is something of a mystery . . . but he swears it is true.'

Aunt Eda didn't see what this had to do with going in the forest, so she asked again.

'Please . . . Please, Oskar . . .'

But there was no persuading Oskar.

‘I can’t go with you into the forest,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t do it. I have responsibilities. I have the shop. I have Fredrik. I’m sorry, I can’t help you. I am too old to be a hero.’

‘Then what can I do?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘You must ask the other men in the village. Maybe they will help.’

‘I might as well ask your reindeer for help. You know what the villagers think of me. They will think it was my fault for letting the children be so close to the forest.’

The rising of Oskar’s eyebrows told her that maybe he shared the same view. She thought about pleading some more, but she didn’t have the time. She left the room and ran down into the shop. Apart from Fredrik, there were a few old ladies, a few more old cheeses, but no men.

She left the shop and ran down the street, knocking on doors, asking as many men as she could find. But everywhere she went, there were excuses.

First there was Jonas, the bookseller, who had helped turn the new Norwegian translation of *The Creatures of Shadow Forest* into Flåm’s most popular book:

‘I have children of my own. I am sorry. My wife needs me here.’

Next was Thomas, the local policeman, who showed her a map:

‘The forest is on the wrong side of the line, I’m afraid. It is out of my jurisdiction. You cannot police trolls and huldres and pixies.’

Third was Kristoffer, the local hairdresser, who told her he was allergic to pine trees.

Next was Ulf, at the post office, who pulled off his false leg by way of excuse. ‘Skiing accident,’ he explained.

Then to Andreas, at the gift shop, who said he was too busy.

‘But your shop is empty,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘You haven’t had a customer for years.’

Andreas shook his head. ‘My sale starts tomorrow. Ten per cent discount on all my reindeer-antler-handle cheese slicers. And a two-for-one offer on my figures.’ Eda glanced around at the wooden figures of pixies and trolls, some with one eye and some with two heads. She shivered at the thought that Samuel and Martha could be encountering such creatures for real.

After that, Eda went to the local church to see Martin, the vicar.

‘God will shine a light and help them home,’ said Martin.

‘And you – will you help?’

‘Who am I, next to God? And who are you? I am sorry. There is nothing we can do. Except pray.’

And last, and almost certainly least (Aunt Eda presumed), was Old Tor, who was perched on an antique chair in the middle of his shop. He was painting a hideous-looking huldre on horseback, riding by the light of the moon.

‘Old Tor, you must help me – the children I am looking after have gone missing in Shadow Forest.’

The old man’s eyes widened in terror and he fell into a kind of trance.

‘Old Tor? Old Tor? Can you hear me?’

At that point his wife walked in, the chubby woman with three cardigans who had been so rude to Eda at the cheese counter.

‘Leave us alone,’ she said. ‘We can’t help you!’

‘My children have gone missing in the forest. I can’t find them alone. And your husband has seen the forest creatures before—’

‘You don’t have to tell me,’ said the old woman, nodding at the canvas. ‘He hasn’t seen anything else since. People want paintings of mountains and fjords.’



Nice scenic things. They don't want to be hanging pictures of monsters on the wall.'

The cardigan woman was making Aunt Eda quite cross.

'You don't seem to understand. The children are missing in the—'

'Well, that is your business. If you are foolish enough to keep them so near to such a dangerous place.'

Aunt Eda decided to ignore that last comment and plead again with Old Tor. 'Listen, I know you will not come to the forest with me, but I am going. I have no choice. I have no more to lose. Please, is there anything you can tell me about the creatures you have seen?'

Old Tor turned away from his painting for the first time and looked up at Aunt Eda. One of his eyes had a milky-white surface, and Aunt Eda remembered what Oskar had told her. *He's lost all his sight in one eye.* She wondered how old he was. Eighty? Ninety? How could a man like that outrun a galloping horse? She looked at the time-withered hand that held the paintbrush.

The hand, and the paintbrush, stayed motionless in the air as Old Tor made some sort of decision. Then he stood up and walked in slow pain away from Aunt Eda.

‘Great,’ mumbled Aunt Eda. ‘Another helpful man.’

But he wasn’t walking away. He was simply walking over to his jacket, which was hanging on a hook in the corner of the room. His hand reached inside and pulled something out. Something white. Like a bracelet. Or a cat’s collar.

He hobbled back over, ignoring the grumbles of his wife, and handed it to Aunt Eda.

‘Take it,’ he said, placing it in her hand.

What was it? Some kind of charm?

Old Tor’s wife made a grumbling sound, as if a miniature explosion was going off inside her head, and walked in disgust out of the room.

‘What is it?’ asked Aunt Eda.

‘I found it by a rock near the water’s edge, last night when I went back to finish my painting of the fjord . . . Do you see that pewter disc, hanging from it? Well, read what it says.’

Aunt Eda looked at the white cloth bracelet and the silvery disc attached to it. She saw there were three letters engraved in capitals:

HEK

‘Hek,’ whispered Aunt Eda. *Witch.*

Old Tor nodded. 'I had it in my pocket when huldres chased after me.'

Aunt Eda still didn't understand. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I don—'

Old Tor pointed to his blind eye. 'It came back. The sight in this eye. Just for those few seconds I needed it, when I was running away. I could see better than ever, even though it was dark. It was the most amazing thing. And my legs too. It was almost as though my feet had sprouted wings, as though I was a boy again, but the fastest boy who ever lived.'

Aunt Eda clutched the bracelet in her hand. 'Maybe it was fear,' she said. 'Fear can have powerful effects.'

The old man shook his head. 'It can't make you see the brightness of colours in the dark. It can't make an old man outrun a horse.'

Aunt Eda looked at the painting he was halfway through. The scary wide-eyed creature with pointed ears and a cow's tail, on top of a galloping white stallion. 'And now? Can you run?'

He smiled. 'No. You've seen me. It takes me a minute to cross the room. The bracelet gave me certain . . . abilities . . . but only when I was in danger.'

Take it, please. If there are more of those creatures in the forest, you will need it.'

Aunt Eda slipped the white bracelet onto her wrist. 'Thank you, Old Tor,' she said. 'But what about the children? They have no bracelet to protect them.'

'No, but they have you,' he said. 'Now go. And may God bring you luck.'

A quarter of an hour later Aunt Eda was upstairs in her attic, searching for *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*.

'Where is it? Where is it? Where is it?' she asked as she dug through the contents of the tea-chest. 'Oh no,' she said. 'Someone's taken it.'

But who?

It could only have been Martha or Samuel. She looked around to see if there was anything else to help her.

Old clothes. No.

Photographs of Henrik. No.

And then she saw it, leaning against the wall. The javelin. She hadn't used it for years, as her arms weren't what they used to be. It felt strange, looking at it, as if she was looking at her younger self.

'You are coming with me,' she said as she picked it up.

She went downstairs, left the house and climbed the hill as fast as she could. When she reached the pine trees, she stopped and called into the forest once more.

*'Samuel! Martha! Ibsen!'*

But the only response was the echo.

'Well, Eda,' she said to herself. 'This is it.'

She tightened her grip on the javelin and made sure the white bracelet was still on her wrist, with the pewter disc attached. Finding everything where it should be, she inhaled a deep breath of cold air, as if sucking in courage, and stepped forward into the shade of the trees.

## TROLL~THE~LEFT AND TROLL~THE~RIGHT

**M**artha was still sitting down on the hard floor of the prison cell.

‘You do not speak, human child,’ said the white-haired woman in the cell opposite. ‘Where are your words? Where did you lose them?’

Martha said nothing, but the old woman nodded her head as if there was an answer inside her silence.

‘Do you know why they have locked you up?’

Martha shook her head.

‘You are a human. Humans are not safe in the forest. Once you are caught, you are not allowed to leave . . . It’s not fair, but nothing in this forest is fair. Not any more. Not since the forest was transformed. No one in here deserves their fate; none of us are criminals.’

‘None of us except the tomtegubb,’ said the troll’s right head. ‘The Changemaker was right to ban singing, especially that sort of singing.’

The troll looked at Martha with both its heads and decided to introduce his selves.

‘I’m Troll-the-Left,’ said the left head.

‘And I’m Troll-the-Right,’ said the right head.

‘Some folk think of us as one troll because we’ve got just the one body, but we’re not.’

‘We’ll be no troll in no body tomorrow,’ moaned Troll-the-Right. ‘We’ll be nothing but a couple of stones. And it’s all your fault.’

‘Oh, stop your moaning,’ said Troll-the-Left.

‘If you’d listened to my moaning, we wouldn’t be here now,’ said Troll-the-Right.

‘I’ve been listening to your moaning all my flenking life. I could never bathe in the forest lake because you said the water was too dangerous.’

‘The water *was* too dangerous.’

‘No wonder we stink.’

‘Better to stink than to be dead.’

‘You’re a big flenking coward,’ said Troll-the-Left.

‘And you’re a flenking maniac,’ said Troll-the-Right. ‘I told you what would happen if we tried to

escape from the forest. I told you, but would you listen? No.'

Then Troll-the-Left remembered they were in the middle of introducing themselves to Martha.

'You must excuse our manners,' he said. 'We're only trolls. We're not evil, like a lot of folks think. We be good creatures really. But we're not clean and polite like you humans. And me and Troll-the-Right don't get on too well, you see. Living in the same body doesn't give you much space. And he's a flenking coward, if you'll pardon my Hekron.'

'I'll give you coward,' said Troll-the-Right, as the right hand pulled Troll-the-Left's hair.

'Scared of having a wash. That's a flenking coward in any language,' said Troll-the-Left, as the left hand yanked Troll-the-Right's beard.

The fight between the two troll sides had no clear winner as both halves of the body had an equal amount of strength.

'Take that,' said Troll-the-Left, twisting the other's nose.

'Take that,' said Troll-the-Right, yanking the other's bottom lip.

After the trolls had eventually fought themselves



into exhaustion, the old woman with the long white hair spoke again to Martha. The words she uttered seemed to chill the prison, because they told the deepest secrets of the forest.

## GOLDEN CIRCLES AND HEAVY SHADOWS

‘I am the Snow Witch,’ the old woman said. ‘Have you ever met a witch before?’

Martha shook her head.

‘Don’t be scared, human child. Magic is not an evil thing. It is only the reasons for using magic that can be evil.’ The Snow Witch nodded in quiet sadness. ‘Fear reasons, child. Don’t fear magic . . . And the magic I have is fading. I hardly have a spell left. Even to make the tiniest bit of frost, it sends such pains through every part of me. It is my sister. The Shadow Witch. She stole something from me. A bracelet. A Hek bracelet. It offers protection from harm in the forest. And then, once she had stolen my bracelet, she stole my magic.’

‘Do you hate her?’ asked Troll-the-Left with a grudgeful side-glance at Troll-the-Right.

‘No, I don’t hate her,’ said the Snow Witch. ‘She is my sister. And besides, it’s not her fault—’

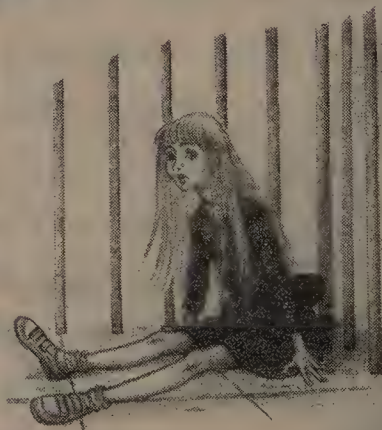
Troll-the-Left frowned. ‘She stole your magic but it’s not her fault? That doesn’t make sense.’

‘She was forced to change,’ explained the Snow Witch. ‘The Changemaker who rules the forest forced her to steal the shadows of good creatures and make them evil. The forest was once a paradise, but now it is a terrible place and I am stuck in prison feeling as old as I really am.’

Martha looked into the other cells, at the two-headed troll and the tomtegubb, and wondered if they were dangerous. Troll-the-Left had said trolls were harmless, but maybe he was lying.

‘I know what you’re thinking, human child,’ said the Snow Witch. And she did, because the next thing she said was: ‘You don’t have to worry about trolls and tomtegebbs. They’re the Unchanged. Their shadows have never been stolen. Tomtegebbs never even had shadows to steal.’

Martha looked at the tomtegubb, who was smiling at her like a best friend, and saw that the Snow Witch was right. Instead of a shadow, there was a faint



circle of golden light around his feet, as if he was a kind of lamp. She then looked at the two-headed troll, but saw he *did* have a shadow. Even in the dim light of the prison it was clearly there. The blackest shadow she had ever seen.

Again the Snow Witch knew what she was thinking.

‘Yes, human child, trolls do have shadows, but a troll shadow can’t be raised off the ground. They’re too heavy, even for magic to lift.’

Troll-the-Left and Troll-the-Right looked at each other in surprise, and then shrugged a shoulder each. ‘Well,’ said Troll-the-Left, ‘that explains a few things.’

The Snow Witch sighed. It was a sigh that seemed to contain the sadness of a whole forest. ‘That is what this prison is for. If the Changemaker can’t control you, he can’t make you obey his rules. So he has to use fear. If you break his rules, if Unchanged creatures stray out of their villages, or out of the forest, they end up here.’

‘Waiting to go to our deaths,’ added Troll-the-Right miserably.

The Snow Witch nodded. ‘Yes. I have been here many years. All the other creatures have been sent to the Changemaker and condemned to death. Fear is

his weapon. Those he can't change, he fills with terror. And terror is everywhere. All the other creatures are evil and dangerous now. And the most evil of all are huldres. The ones who locked you in here. Yet you must know, human child, if you hadn't fallen down the trap, you would have been caught soon enough by someone else. Even the most honest and pure of all the creatures – the truth pixie – has been turned into something most violent. Most violent indeed. Oh, it chills my fragile heart just to think of it. That dark and most terrible day.'

## ICICLE TEARS

**A**fter the Snow Witch had finished talking everyone fell into a glum silence. Even the tomtegubb stopped his humming for a short while and thought of all the other tomtegubbs who had been killed by the Changemaker. It was only Martha who felt no fear at what the Snow Witch had to say.

She knew how cruel life liked to be, and she expected nothing better.

She closed her eyes and saw life as a kind of person in her brain. No, not a person. A cruel huldre, spitting at her as she lay inside the cage.

But cruelty feeds on fear, and all those other feelings. If she didn't feel anything, cruelty wouldn't work.

*I'll give up feelings as well as speaking,* Martha thought to herself. But giving up feelings is not as

easy as all that. And the feeling that wouldn't let go was the one called guilt. She felt guilt for her brother, for leading him into the forest. She thought of the scary creatures, like the truth pixie. They were out there now, ready to harm any human who crossed their path. She closed her eyes and prayed for her brother and spoke silent words in her brain.

*Samuel.*

*I'm sorry.*

*I'm very, very sorry.*

It was then that she began to cry.

She hadn't wept since the day of the falling log. Her tears had been kept prisoners the way she was kept prisoner now, but the thought of her brother lost in this terrible forest released all those locked-up tears all at once.

It wasn't her normal type of crying.

It wasn't the type of crying she had used when Samuel had hidden all her hair bands. Or when her mum had been late to pick her up from horse-riding. Or when her parents hadn't stopped shouting at each other.

Those tears were always used to get something. Whether it was her hair bands, a mum who picked her up on time, or peaceful parents.



The tears she cried now were a different variety. They were quieter, for a start. And much less blubby. And there was no practical use for them whatsoever. They were like the wrong money in a foreign country and couldn't get her anything at all.

'Don't cry, human child,' said the Snow Witch.

But the quiet tears kept on coming, enough to fill a water glass.

The Snow Witch began to mumble something under her breath, and seemed to be in some kind of pain.

'What's up with the Snow Witch?' Troll-the-Left asked.

'You ask too many questions,' said Troll-the-Right.

'You're just scared of answers,' said Troll-the-Left.

'A world with no questions is the safest world,' said Troll-the-Right.

'You mean the dullest world,' said Troll-the-Left.

'I mean the safest.'

'That's what I said.'

Martha felt a coldness in her eye and on her cheeks. She looked at the Snow Witch, who still seemed like she was in great pain.

Then Martha realized something.

She wasn't crying any more.

Her hand went to her cheek. She felt her tear. It was hard. Frozen. It was exactly the same on the other cheek. Another thin icicle.

The tears broke off in her hand, and turned to little puddles on the floor.

‘I have got rid of your tears, human child,’ said the Snow Witch. ‘But my powers are too weak to take away your sadness.’

Or Martha’s sadness was too strong.

‘Come on,’ said the tomtegubb, in the kind of light sing-song voice Martha herself would once have used. ‘Cheer up. It’s not all bad, you know.’

But Martha knew, the tomtegubb was wrong.

It was all bad.

And what was more, it was only going to get worse.

## THE MAGICAL SMELL

**S**amuel and Ibsen had been walking for hours, and had no idea where they were going. They had run so fast and so far away from the deserted village and the huldre skeleton that they had no clue where they were.

‘My feet are killing me,’ the boy told his canine companion. ‘It’s all right for you. You’ve got paws.’ Samuel tried to keep his shoeless feet on the grass at the side of the path, rather than the hard earth in the middle.

Ibsen looked up and laughed with his eyes.

‘Martha!’

Samuel’s cries were less frequent now, and increasingly hopeless. His sister’s name bounced off the trees like a ball no one wanted to catch.

‘Martha!’

He felt weak with hunger. His feet had cuts and bruises. The wind chilled his bones. He wondered if he should try and find his way back to Aunt Eda, but decided against this idea. Martha was all that mattered, and he wouldn't leave this forest without her.

On and on he walked, with a weary Ibsen beside him, not knowing if they were heading closer to or further away from the girl they hoped to find. Samuel held Professor Tanglewood's book, *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, close to his chest, and looked at his watch with his free hand. It said half past ten, but it had said half past ten ever since he had entered the forest. It was as though time had halted the moment he set foot between the trees.

He stopped.

There was a rumble like distant thunder.

When it happened again, Samuel realized what it was.

*That's not thunder. That's my stomach.*

He thought longingly of those five slices of cheese he had given Ibsen earlier. He could eat a whole block of brown cheese now.

His hunger was weakening him. He saw food everywhere and nowhere. Tree trunks became giant

slabs of well-cooked meat. The muddy path took on the sight of gravy.

As he staggered on, memories came back to him as smells and tastes.

He remembered his dad coming in on a wet Friday evening with warm parcels of fish and chips for the family. The magical smells of malt vinegar and his dad's rain-soaked coat had filled the house.

He remembered the day before the accident. His mum had made a birthday cake for Martha, and he'd been allowed to lick the icing out of the bowl.

He shut his eyes, as if closing them could take him back to that kitchen. Back to the sugary mixture on his tongue, and the safe warmth of his mum's smile.

But it wasn't enough. Memories can only tease you; they can't fill your stomach any more than they can bring the dead back to life.

Then, in the darkness of his closed eyes, a scent tickled his nostrils. It was a real smell this time, and not a remembered one.

In fact, Samuel's nose had never sniffed anything quite so delicious.

He opened his eyes and found himself faced with a decision. The path made a Y in front of him,

breaking off in two directions. One way led up a steep hill, the other slightly down.

His nose made the decision. Although his legs were tired, Samuel's nostrils directed him up the thin winding path on his right and this time Ibsen didn't growl any obvious objection.

Samuel had no idea what the smell was. He had never smelled anything like it before. It was sweet and savoury all at once. Strong yet subtle. It was a smell that made every other smell in the world completely pointless.

'Mmmm,' he said, because his nose was now commanding his mouth as well as his feet.

The path flattened, and the canopy of leaves became less dense, letting in more of the soft light. A small log cabin appeared in a gap between two trees.

The cabin had an arch-shaped green door and two windows, one of which was open. *This is it*, thought Samuel. *This is where the smell is coming from.*

He stopped, worried. He thought of the last house he'd seen, with the skeleton inside. He remembered what his aunt and the book had told him about all the different deadly creatures that inhabited the forest. But then, maybe whoever lived in this house knew where Martha was.

He staggered forward along the light-dappled path, still entranced by the smell that seduced his nostrils and teased his stomach. Ibsen whimpered, but even he seemed to be captivated by the dream-like aromas wafting over the air.

‘Food,’ mumbled Samuel.

Then the door opened, and out of the log cabin stepped a small creature – a man about a metre tall. No. Not a man. It was a small, child-like being, with pointed ears and an angelic little face that looked as pure and delicate as a snowflake.

It would have been very hard to imagine that such a face could belong to a murderer, but murderers come in very many shapes and sizes. As Samuel was about to find out.

## THE TRUTH PIXIE

Samuel's heart began to race, and fear travelled through his every nerve. The skull had been scary, but at least it had been dead. Sure, he had seen huldres and a tomtegubb before, but only from a distance, and in the dark. Now that, in broad daylight, he was faced with this living creature who wasn't a human or an animal, it seemed very different. He felt like he couldn't trust his own eyes.

'Hello there, friend,' the pixie said, as if he had been expecting Samuel to arrive.

*Friend.*

Samuel was worried. Why was the creature calling him his friend? And how could he understand what he was saying? He remembered what he had read in the book he held in his arms.

*Most creatures in the forest speak Hekron, a universal*



*language that everyone – even humans – can understand . . .*

He held the book close to his chest. In a world he no longer trusted, Professor Tanglewood's book was going to be a lifeline. It gave him faith.

'Are you all right, friend?'

There it was again. *Friend*.

Samuel was suspicious of the word.

But the innocent little creature had the kindest eyes and the kindest smile Samuel had ever seen. Everything about him seemed so welcoming – even his strange upturned nose and pointy ears had a softness to them. Samuel felt the terror leave his body, and the hunger return.

'Hello,' he said, as the smell surrounded him like an invisible cloud.

'You look tired, friend. And hungry. Why don't you come inside and have some soup?' The creature stepped out onto the grass, but Samuel didn't notice that he had no shadow.

'I'm looking for my sister,' Samuel said. 'She went into the forest but I can't find her. She's ten years old and is wearing a dark-blue dress. Have you seen her?'

'No, friend. I have seen no sister.'

'I have to find her. Do you know—?'

Before Samuel had time to finish his question, the creature interrupted him and said: 'Well, an empty stomach won't help, will it? Come on, what do you say?'

Samuel didn't say anything, but his stomach answered with the most enormous rumble.

The pixie clapped his hands. 'Exactly!'

One minute later Samuel and Ibsen found themselves sitting inside the log cabin, watching the creature stir a pot of soup on top of an iron stove. It was sort of like being in a doll's house, as everything seemed out of proportion. Samuel looked around and noticed the strange way the cabin had been decorated. The log walls were painted white, with splodges of purple and grey.

'I really need to find my sister. Are you sure you haven't seen her?'

'No, friend. I am sure.'

While the pixie had his back turned, Samuel opened the book under the table.

Why weren't there any pictures? It would have been much easier if Professor Tanglewood had taken photographs of the creatures, or drawn illustrations.

Instead, he had just written the name of each creature in capital letters at the top of every page,

with a written description underneath. This meant it would take Samuel longer to work out which of the many forest creatures his host was.

A huldre? No.

A troll? No.

A tomtegubb? No.

A slemp? No.

A flying skullpecker? No.

He turned over the next page but didn't have time to look at it as the creature came over with a bowl of bright yellow soup. The bowl looked very big in the pixie's hands, but was a normal size for a human.

The flavour rose up with the steam and delighted Samuel's nostrils. He trembled with hunger. Even if it had reindeer in, he knew he would gobble up the soup in five seconds flat.

'Mmmm,' he found himself saying. 'That smells delicious.'

The creature rubbed his hands together in excitement, as if he was going to enjoy watching his guest taste the soup almost as much as Samuel was going to enjoy eating it.

'It is my special recipe. Special, *special*.'

'Oh,' Samuel said.

Ibsen barked and Samuel took the bark to mean, 'I'd like some soup too, if you don't mind.'

'It's all right. I'll save you some.'

Samuel picked up his spoon and was about to start tucking in when Ibsen jumped up at him, causing the soup to shake off the spoon and land on the page he hadn't yet seen.

Samuel looked down at the book and saw the words 'TRUTH PIX'. It was meant to say 'TRUTH PIXIE' but there was a splodge of soup over the 'IE'.

Samuel read on:

This creature lives in a small log cabin high on one of the eastern hills. He is a metre tall, and has the most innocent-looking face imaginable. Distinguishing features include pointed ears, an upturned nose and feet that look too big for the pixie's body. Don't be fooled by his appearance, as this creature is very dangerous.

Samuel stopped reading because the truth pixie was talking.

'What is the matter? Do you not want to eat the lovely soup?'

'No,' said Samuel, staring at the pixie's large feet.

‘I mean, yes . . . I mean, I wasn’t not eating it. I just dropped a bit. On my knee.’

He pushed the book further under the table, so the truth pixie couldn’t see. The creature gave his guest a suspicious look.

Samuel didn’t want to explain what he was reading, for obvious reasons.

He spotted a brown loaf on a silver tray on top of the small oven. ‘Can I have some bread, please? It’s just . . . I like to dip it into my soup.’

The truth pixie stood as still as a picture, with a face halfway between a smile and a frown.

‘You want bread with my soup?’

‘Er . . . yes . . . please.’

‘Bread with soup! What a funny request!’

‘It’s . . . um . . . quite normal where I come from. And I can share it with my dog.’

The truth pixie looked like he was about to get very cross, but he kept the crossness inside and said: ‘Very well. Bread with soup.’

So the creature turned and walked over to the silver tray and started slicing the bread with a knife. While Samuel wasn’t being watched, he quickly pulled the book from under the table and carried on reading.

The truth pixie is very dangerous because he lures other creatures (including humans) with kind smiles and promises of rest and food, before serving them a poisonous soup. The soup smells delicious but contains a deadly herb called hewlip, which grows naturally on the hillside.

One minute after tasting the soup the hewlip expands your brain until your head explodes. This inevitably is a bloody and painful death, which the truth pixie enjoys – occasionally applauding this most terrible sight.

But then, in smaller print at the bottom of the page, there was something else.

Weakness: An inability to lie.

## A FEW FACTUALITIES

‘Five slices.’

Samuel jumped. He hadn’t heard the truth pixie walk back over to the table with the bread.

The book slammed shut between Samuel’s legs. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘What is that?’ The truth pixie’s finger was pointing towards Samuel’s lap.

‘Oh, it’s just . . . er . . . a book. A book of stories. It’s nothing important. It’s all made up.’

‘Stories.’ The truth pixie made a face and stuck out his tongue as if a story was a type of disgusting food. ‘I hate stories very much. I like factualities, not fictionalities.’

The truth pixie sighed slowly, and Samuel wondered for a moment if such a sweet-looking creature could really be very dangerous.

‘It is getting cold.’

‘What?’

The truth pixie pointed now at Samuel’s bowl. ‘The special soup. It is nicer when it is warm. You should eat it – mmmm. Good soup. *Special* soup.’

Samuel picked up one of the pieces of bread and tore it in half. The truth pixie’s eyes were wide with excitement as the bread was dunked into the soup.

Of course, Samuel had no intention of eating the soup but he still hadn’t thought of how he was going to escape. He knew he had to do something, but what?

Then he remembered – *Weakness: An inability to lie.*

‘Are you a truth pixie?’ Samuel asked, as the bread hung between the bowl and his mouth.

The truth pixie screwed his face up, as if the question had just punched him on his upturned nose. ‘Yes,’ he said, then covered his mouth with his hand.

Samuel nodded. ‘And is this soup poisonous?’

The truth pixie scrunched up his face even more. ‘Yes,’ he said as his hand left his mouth.

‘What will it do to me?’

The truth pixie winced. ‘It is very poisonous and it will make your brain burst out of your head and splatter on the walls and give you a death of the most horrible pain you can imagine.’





Samuel kept asking questions and the truth pixie kept blurting out answers in between slapping his own face and biting his hand.

‘So you are trying to kill me?’

‘Nnnnnnnn-yes!’

‘Why?’

‘Because I enjoy it! It makes me feel not so small!’

‘What will happen if I don’t eat the soup?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Won’t you try and hurt me?’

‘No!’ By this point the truth pixie was biting his hand so hard he was bleeding.

‘Why not?’

‘Because I am scared you will hurt me back!’

‘Why?’

‘Because I am a small, weak pixie who feels pain more than any other creature.’

‘What would you do if I stood up and walked out of your house? Would you follow me?’

‘No!’

‘What if I took your sandals?’ Samuel asked, staring at the sandals on the pixie’s big feet. ‘Would you do anything?’

‘I might call you names.’

‘What names?’

‘Stinkymudfungle. Elf-breath. Bottom-squelch.’

‘Those names wouldn’t hurt a five-year-old.’

The truth pixie sighed. ‘They’re the worst I know.’

‘And would you do anything else?’

The truth pixie desperately tried to lie. ‘*Yo*. I mean, *nes*. I mean—’

‘You mean no, don’t you?’

‘Nnnnnnnn-yes!’

The truth pixie was exhausted with all his hopeless efforts at lying. ‘Don’t hurt me. Please. Please. I can’t help it. I didn’t used to be like this . . . I didn’t used to try and poison anyone. I used to be good. I didn’t used to put hewlip in my soup, I just used to enjoy being a good . . . a good . . .’

Samuel couldn’t believe it. A minute ago the pixie had been trying to kill him and now he was on the edge of tears.

‘Why did you change?’ Samuel asked. ‘Why can’t you make normal soup? Why can’t you just . . . be good?’

‘It’s my shadow,’ the pixie said. He looked surprised at his words, as if three little mice had just run out of his mouth. ‘I don’t . . . understand. When I had my shadow, I used to like gentle things. I used to like spickle-dancing and singing flower songs, but no

pixies do those things any more. They aren't enough. We like evil things now . . . violent things. Exploding heads. Trolls, mainly. Stupid creatures not worth their height. Think with their stomachs. Make a great mess when they blow though, that's the problem. Their blood and brains stain the walls.'

Samuel gulped as the grey and purple on the walls gained new meaning. But the thought of splattered brains wasn't enough to ruin his appetite.

He picked up the slices of bread. 'Are these poisonous?'

'No.'

Samuel shared the bread with Ibsen and didn't stop munching until there wasn't a crumb left. Then Ibsen fell asleep on the floor and Samuel decided to find out as much as he could from the murderous little creature with no shadow.

## THE QUESTIONS SAMUEL ASKED THE TRUTH PIXIE AND THE ANSWERS HE RECEIVED

SAMUEL: What happened? Who stole your shadow?

TRUTH PIXIE: It was the Shadow Witch. She is one of the two Forest Witches. I didn't understand it. She was here before and I cooked her soup. Soup without hewlip in it. Her and her sister. The Snow Witch. They were nice to me. And I was nice to them. And I showed them my spickle-dancing. But then one day two ravens landed on the grass outside my cabin. One of them transformed into the Shadow Witch while the other just stayed there, outside on the grass. The Shadow Witch knocked on my door and I let her in. She had a much sadder and older face, even though it had only been six moons since I had last seen her.

SAMUEL: What happened? What did she do?

TRUTH PIXIE: She kept mumbling things under her breath. Things that were less than words but more than silence. After she finished mumbling, she left and I showed her out, but when I looked on the ground I realized something was missing. I looked down on the grass and saw I had no shadow. And it was a sunny day. Without a cloud in the sky. Look now, even as I stand by the window, I have no shadow whatsoever.

SAMUEL: Are you a ghost?

TRUTH PIXIE: No. But sometimes I . . . I feel like I am. I have changed so much I might as well have died. All that was good has been lost . . . Oh, it is terrible. I am terrible. How I would love to see your head explode. That sounds so bad, doesn't it?

SAMUEL: A bit. Yes. Do you know where my sister might be?

TRUTH PIXIE: No. No. I don't know that.

SAMUEL: I heard a scream. Near the edge of the forest. And then I found a hole. With smoke coming out of it. I think she might have fallen down it.

TRUTH PIXIE: The huldres. They have holes all along the border. They work for the Changemaker. He

rules the whole of Shadow Forest. I have never seen him, but his name chills the heart of every creature, especially those who still have their shadows. They are the Criminals. And if your sister is caught by the huldres, she will be sent to the Changemaker, like all the other prisoners.

SAMUEL: And what will happen to her?

TRUTH PIXIE: I don't know. All I know is that those who are sent to the Changemaker don't come back.

SAMUEL: I wish that wasn't the truth.

TRUTH PIXIE: So do I.

SAMUEL (*who did not know that the Changemaker was really Professor Horatio Tanglewood*): But who is the Changemaker?

TRUTH PIXIE: I do not know.

SAMUEL: Is he evil?

TRUTH PIXIE: Evil is not what you are. It is what you do. He does evil. And so do I.

SAMUEL: I must find my sister. What is the best chance of finding her?

TRUTH PIXIE: The best chance is to go to the Changemaker. That is where the huldres will take her if she's in prison.

SAMUEL: Where is the Changemaker?

TRUTH PIXIE: The Changemaker lives in a clearing in the

north of the forest. He lives in a wooden palace with the Shadow Witch. The palace is in the middle of a clearing in a tree called the Still Tree.

SAMUEL: How do I get there?

TRUTH PIXIE: You must follow the crooked path down the hill. Keep walking in a very straight line. Not too far left. Not too far right. After a while you will see the hewlip bush. You will recognize the hewlip bush from its bright yellow leaves with a jagged edge like this one I have here. Once you have passed this bush you will be entering *the most dangerous part of the forest*. The closer you get to the Changemaker, the more deadly the forest becomes. And remember, the creatures with no shadows are the lethal ones. You must keep on walking in a straight line for a long while until you reach a road. It is a wide road with wagon tracks pressed into the earth. You turn right when you reach that road and it will lead you past the lake and towards the Changemaker's clearing.

SAMUEL: What else must I look out for?

TRUTH PIXIE: Flat circles of earth with no plants growing on them. They are caloosh traps. If you step on them, you will fall down into the huldre territory



below the ground. You must also be careful to keep hold of your shadow. So long as you have your shadow, you are always going to be you. If your shadow is stolen, you are whatever the Changemaker wants you to be. If you try and challenge him, he will kill you.

SAMUEL: What are the chances of escaping the Changemaker once I find my sister?

TRUTH PIXIE: One in trinkinion.

SAMUEL: Trinkinion?

TRUTH PIXIE: It's a pixie number. It is higher than infinity.

SAMUEL: There's nothing higher than infinity.

TRUTH PIXIE: Yes there is. Trinkinion. It is so high it makes infinity look small. It is the number that is used to count sadness and happiness and memories.

SAMUEL: So there is not much chance of escaping the forest with my sister?

TRUTH PIXIE: No. Not much. It is about the same chance as the sun turning to butter.

SAMUEL: Can I have your sandals now?

TRUTH PIXIE: They are my only pair.

SAMUEL: You tried to poison me. The least you can do is give me your sandals.

TRUTH PIXIE: Oh, all right.

SAMUEL: Thanks. They're a good fit . . . Ibsen, Ibsen, wake up. We've got to go and find the Changemaker.

IBSEN (*jolting awake*): Woof.

TRUTH PIXIE: Are you going?

SAMUEL: Yes. We are.

TRUTH PIXIE: Very well.

SAMUEL: Try to be good.

TRUTH PIXIE (*waving from the door*): I always try . . . good-bye.

SAMUEL: Goodbye.

TRUTH PIXIE (*under his breath*): Stinkymudfungle.

## THE TIGHTROPE WALKER

Samuel and Ibsen walked down the steep crooked path as the truth pixie had instructed, and kept a lookout for shadowless creatures.

Like his sister, Samuel was feeling rather sad. But unlike his sister, Samuel's sadness was mixed with crossness and so he didn't really know what he was feeling. It wasn't pure sadness or pure crossness but more of a *cradness*. He knew that wasn't a word, but he thought it should be.

As he saw it, the two main things that had gone wrong with his life were to do with people not listening to him.

If his dad had listened when he'd said 'Stop!' then both his parents would have still been alive.

If Martha had listened when he'd told her not to go into the forest, then he wouldn't be facing a one-

in-trinkinion chance of successfully rescuing her from the Changemaker.

‘Why don’t people listen to me?’ he asked Ibsen. ‘Why can’t they just do as I say?’

Ibsen wasn’t listening. Or if he was, he couldn’t provide a satisfactory answer.

‘If they did as I say, everything would still be all right. Mum and Dad would still be here and Martha would still be singing stupid songs and I wouldn’t be in a dangerous forest, checking that everything has got a shadow.’

As he kept treading further down the twisting path, he thought briefly of this other world. The world where he was listened to. What would he be doing there, right at the moment? He would be at school. His old school, in Nottingham. It was a Tuesday afternoon so he would probably be having a maths lesson. Square roots or something. He would be bored, flicking bits of rubber with his ruler, but underneath the boredom would be a happiness. The happiness he used to take for granted. The happiness that came from having a mum and a dad – even if they never listened to you. Because mums and dads weren’t just people; they were a kind of safety net. You always knew that, however boring maths lessons

were, or however much trouble you got into at school, they would always look after you. They might tell you off, but they would always be there to help you bounce back up.

And now that they were gone it was like he was high on a tightrope all on his own. If he fell, if he made one tiny mistake, then that would be it. There would be no net to catch his fall.

‘Walk in a straight line,’ said Samuel the tightrope walker, staying close to the tree trunks in his path. ‘Not too far left. Not too far right.’

He passed rabbits and a caloosh and an elk, breathed relieved sighs at the sight of their shadows, and continued on his way towards the Changemaker.

But as he walked, Samuel felt tears roll down his face. Not cold icicle tears. These were hot and angry tears that leaked from his nose as much as his eyes. They were as unstoppable as a waterfall, no matter how many times he wiped them away.

Ibsen looked up, offering as much comfort as he could with his floppy tongue and dopey eyes, but the boy kept on crying.

*Get a grip, Samuel told himself. You big baby!*

And then he saw it. The bush with jagged yellow leaves.

‘The hewlip bush,’ he mumbled, and recalled what the truth pixie had said.

Ibsen whimpered, as if understanding the bush’s significance.

*Once you have passed this bush you will be entering the most dangerous part of the forest . . .*

He looked beyond the bush at the slope of the land in front of him, studded with the same type of tall pines he had just passed. He could see no creatures, shadowless or otherwise. No signs of danger. But as he stood and stared in front of him, he sensed something. A brooding kind of menace that seemed to charge the air, warning those who were about to head closer towards the Changemaker.

The feeling made him tingle with fear, as though he was about to jump off his imaginary tightrope and land on hard ground miles below.

Samuel wiped away the tears. That was the last time he was going to feel sorry for himself.

‘Right,’ he told Ibsen. ‘This is it.’

He carefully picked off some of the jagged yellow leaves, placed them inside his wet pocket, and then headed into the danger zone.

## ANOTHER RUDE INTERRUPTION FROM THE AUTHOR

**H**ello. It's me again. The author.

Yes, I know, no one likes to be interrupted, especially when they're reading a book. But I should just warn you that the next two chapters are about how Professor Horatio Tanglewood became so evil. Some people like to think people are born evil, and if you want to stay thinking that, then why don't you skip the next few pages and head to 'The Wagon'.

Go on.

Off you go.

Now, is there anyone left?

Oh yes. Just you.

Well, never mind.

I suppose I had still better tell you a bit more about Professor Tanglewood and his very peculiar type of evil.

## THE TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH OF PROFESSOR HORATIO TANGLEWOOD

While Samuel continued his journey, Professor Horatio Tanglewood sat alone in his tree palace trying to work out exactly what to call his new book. He was feeling very happy with himself, as he had just given the order to the huldres to deliver the Snow Witch to him tonight, along with the other prisoners. Recently he had been sensing a weakness in the Shadow Witch, especially when the Snow Witch was mentioned. So he had decided it was best to finish off her sister once and for all.

Excited by this prospect, he felt a new energy and decided to get working on a title. He had hardly written any of his autobiography yet, but was sure that if he found the right title, all the words would fall like rain into his head, just like they had for *The*



*Creatures of Shadow Forest.* Up and down he paced, past the jars of pickled heads, thinking of different possibilities.

And then, when he'd thought of something, he stopped pacing and stared into the face of a tomtegubb, a cousin of the tomtegubb who was in prison with Martha. Like all tomtegebbs, this one had died with a smile, a smile that was now preserved for eternity.

'What do you think of *Professor Horatio Tanglewood: The Reluctant Hero*? Or how about *Making Change: The True Story Behind the Changemaker*?'

The pickled head said nothing, but kept smiling.

'Yes, I agree,' said the professor. 'They're good, but they're missing something. Ah! I have it! A name that wraps it all up and puts a bow around it. Are you ready? What about *The Tragedy and Triumph of Professor Horatio Tanglewood*? Yes, it's perfect, isn't it? Absolutely perfect. Oh, it will come to me now, don't worry, my old golden friend. I can already feel my life bleeding into the words as I stand here. It will be written in a month. No! A week. Not even that! A day! And then the Shadow Witch will conjure a thousand copies and do a translation spell so every single creature can understand exactly

who the Changemaker is and what he – or rather *I* – have been through. It will be exactly the same as *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*. That is to say, it will be the exact opposite. Instead of telling humans about the dangers of the forest creatures it will tell the forest creatures about the dangers of the humans in the outside world. Not me, of course. I shall be the hero. The tragic, triumphant hero. The creatures shall worship me. They shall know then that the Changemaker is really just me, just Professor Tanglewood. And they shall love me, as much as they have feared the Changemaker. This book shall become their sacred text. Oh, there might be the odd creature who could prove difficult – the trolls, for example. We'll have to get them to overcome their book phobia, of course. But no. These obstacles are nothing. This book is going to capture their hearts, I know it. I have ruled them by terror for too long. After this book has been written, love will make them obey. They shall love me, you heads. Love me, Professor Horatio Tanglewood – the Changemaker. Do you hear?'

The pickled heads in the jars said nothing as Horatio walked back over to his desk and began to

write his life story. He sat there, with his quill and pages of parchment, and wrote one hundred thousand words without once getting up, not even for the toilet. He just sat there, with tears running down his face, as he relived his horrendous life.

Professor Tanglewood was an evil and cruel man, who could imagine no music more pleasant than the scream of a dying child. But you must know that he did not start off this way.

On the contrary, Horatio Tanglewood began his life as the most adorable baby any parent could imagine. Indeed, his mother and father would spend whole hours gazing over his cot, in wonder at their calm and happy only child.

When he grew a little older, it was clear that Horatio was turning into a model of politeness. His first spoken word was 'Please', followed by 'Thank you'. He loved all vegetables, especially carrots, and never left any food on his plate. Unlike other boys his age he had no interest in pirate swords or cowboy pistols. He preferred to learn how to spell words like d-i-s-s-i-m-u-l-a-t-i-o-n and a-n-t-h-r-o-p-o-m-o-r-p-h-i-z-a-t-i-o-n and f-r-a-c-t-o-c-u-m-u-l-u-s.

He particularly enjoyed folk tales, and could read them on his own when he was still only two years old.

In his first school report, the head teacher wrote:

*Horatio is the most exceptional child I have ever had the fortune to come across. His ability at mathematics and English is quite astonishing for a boy of only four and I am told he has a great love of nature. He is polite and courteous to teachers and pupils alike, and the dinner ladies inform me he eats all his vegetables. He is a perfect miniature gentleman, surrounded by frightful little nose-pickers. If we could mould all our children like Horatio, we would be making the world a better place for generations to come. I am sure he will grow up to become an asset to our great nation.*

*Mr Montague Smythe-Hogg, Headmaster*

Horatio's great love of nature included a special interest in trees. On long woodland walks with his mother he learned how to recognize a beech tree by

looking at its smooth trunk, or a sycamore by the shape of its leaves.

He loved his parents intensely, but when he was five his happiness vanished for ever, and his life became marred by some very horrible things.

Thirteen horrible things, if we are to be precise about it.

THE THIRTEEN HORRIBLE THINGS  
THAT HAPPENED IN THE LIFE OF  
PROFESSOR HORATIO TANGLEWOOD  
BEFORE HE BECAME EVIL AND  
CALLED HIMSELF THE  
CHANGEMAKER

- 1) At the age of five, on the windiest day of the year, Horatio witnessed his father die while chasing a picnic blanket over the edge of a cliff.
- 2) Two years after this most appalling event, Horatio and his mother hired an abandoned wooden house in Norway. On their return, Horatio's mother was considered completely insane after telling her family doctor that she and her son had witnessed truth pixies take part in a spickle-dancing competition in a forest near the village of Flåm.

- 3) Immediately afterwards, Horatio was sent to Blandford-on-Trent to live with foster parents, Mr and Mrs Twigg. Mr and Mrs Twigg lived in a house so tidy they didn't take the plastic cover off their sofa, and spent all their time watching boring TV programmes. They were very strict and made Horatio do all the vacuuming as well as all the washing up, and banned him from woodland walks and visits to his mother.
- 4) From the age of seven, Horatio never received a birthday card from anyone, so he decided to make his own and send them to himself. But when Mr and Mrs Twigg found them, they called them 'awful clutter' and put them in the bin. All he ever wanted was for someone to sing 'Happy Birthday' to him, but no one ever did.
- 5) When Horatio was eleven, he wrote a school essay called 'How I Know That Pixies Are Real', which a teacher read aloud to the whole class. Everyone laughed, and the laughter kept echoing inside Horatio's brain for ever more.
- 6) The following year Horatio was caught sucking his thumb in morning assembly. From then on he was known as 'Horatio Thumbsucker the Pixie Lover'.

- 7) When he was thirteen, he wet the bed on a school trip to York. His nickname was amended to 'Horatio Thumbsucker the Bedwetting Pixie Lover'.
- 8) Three years later, when he was old enough to do what he wanted, he made his first trip to see his mother in hospital, but she got confused and thought he was a pixie. She told him to go away after he refused to show her his spickle-dancing.
- 9) Two days before his eighteenth birthday his mother died in hospital after choking on an overcooked Yorkshire pudding. At her funeral Horatio vowed to the vicar (there was no one else there) that he would prove his mother had been right about what they had seen in the forest.
- 10) Only one week later Mr and Mrs Twigg also died after their overheated television exploded during an episode of the popular show '*Ooh, What a Lovely Clean House You've Got!*' Horatio survived the explosion – he was sitting at a table doing his homework at the other end of the room. However, a shard of flying glass from the screen left a permanent scar underneath his left eye.
- 11) After studying Norse folklore at Christminster University and then gaining a professorship in



the same subject, Horatio wrote a book called *On the Existence of Pixies*. One reviewer said that he would 'rather drown in raw sewage than read another book from the pen of Horatio Tanglewood'. That same reviewer fell down a loose man-hole cover outside his home two days later. He drowned in raw sewage.

- 12) After being found with a screwdriver and a wrench at the scene of the crime, Horatio was forced to spend eleven years in Bleakmoor Prison, sharing a cell with a bodybuilding bank robber known as 'Mad Dexter the Muscle Flexer'.
- 13) On leaving prison, Horatio moved to Norway and bought the holiday home he and his mother had stayed in years earlier. The childhood memories contained in the house made Horatio so sad that he stayed in bed for seven weeks, crying and sucking his thumb and screaming for his mother. And then one day, all of a sudden, the tears ran out, and Horatio got out of bed and cycled to the village of Flåm. He was going to buy some groceries and then, once he returned, his plan was to head off into the forest and see the pixies and other wonderful creatures he knew awaited him.

## THE WAGON

**W**hile Professor Horatio Tanglewood was writing his life story, explaining the truth behind the Changemaker, his most loyal huldre – Grentul – was watching a caloosh fight. But unlike the other huldre guards, Grentul found little thrill in the sight of blood-soaked feathers and thrashing, flightless wings.

Of course, he never admitted this to anyone else. He could only imagine the ridicule he would get from the others, especially Vjpp. After all, a love of caloosh fighting was meant to be what made you a true huldre. The guards always talked of the grace of each fight. The skill and tactics of their favourite birds. But all this was a cover for blood-lust, and their hunger for cruelty and death.

He watched Vjpp now standing on the other side

of the caloosh pit. He was clapping and cheering as one of the three-headed birds collapsed to the floor.

*'Vemp oda caloosh!'* Vjpp's eyes bulged with proud excitement as his favourite bird began pecking away at the other with all three of its beaks.

Grentul always found it strange how birds who were so peaceful when they were running free above ground could become so violent towards each other after a few days of training underground. It wasn't that Grentul had any morals about such things. He didn't. It was just that he could find no pleasure in anything nowadays, not even violent sport. His only love was for the Changemaker. He was his life. His duty. As he was for all the huldre-folk. Protecting the forest from the Unchanged was the only thing that motivated him, and he liked to believe his sense of duty was greater than that of the other guards, even Vjpp.

He knew that one day the Changemaker would see the strength of his devotion and reward him for it. It was this thought that prompted him to walk through the roaring crowd to the other side of the pit.

Once there, he leaned towards Vjpp. *'Ipp kensh,'* he told him, in an urgent whisper.

*It is time.*

\*

The Snow Witch heard them first.

‘They are coming,’ she told Martha. ‘Show them no sign of fear, for fear is a gift to them and you owe them no gifts.’

The tomtegubb and the two-headed troll woke up to the sound of Vjpp’s laughter as he, along with Grentul and five other huldre guards, walked down the corridor towards them. They carried belts full of weapons and held flaming torches.

‘This is it,’ said Troll-the-Right. ‘The next time we’ll sleep is when we’re dead. Dead! . . . Our bodies turned into stone. Our spirits lost in the big black nothingness as though we’d never been born, as though we’d never known the simple pleasures of hurgleberry wine or rabbit casserole.’

‘You hate rabbit casserole,’ said Troll-the-Left. ‘And hurgleberry wine makes you sick.’

Troll-the Right scowled and made a grumbling sound. ‘No it doesn’t. I was only sick last time because *you* drank too much.’

‘I can’t help it if we share the same stomach.’

‘Well, we won’t share the same anything soon enough. Look, they’re coming for us first.’

Troll-the-Right was right. The huldre guards opened the cage and held out their swords.

‘Don’t do anything stupid,’ Troll-the-Right warned Troll-the-Left.

As Troll-the-Left currently had the blade of Vjpp’s sword tickling his neck, he decided for once to take Troll-the-Right’s advice, and so the two-headed troll was escorted peacefully down the corridor.

Next was the tomtegubb, who cheerfully thanked the guards for opening the cage door for him.

‘I can’t wait for some fresh air,’ he told them, before humming his favourite section of ‘The Purple Trouser Song’.

Then they opened the Snow Witch’s door. The Snow Witch looked confused.

‘Why now?’ she asked Grentul. ‘Why after all this time does he suddenly decide to sentence me to death, along with the others?’

She got no answer, or none she could understand, and so she walked out and said to Martha: ‘Remember. No fear, human child.’

Martha nodded, but fear couldn’t help but rise up inside her as Vjpp unlocked her door and walked towards her. He sheathed his sword and crouched down, bringing the burning torch near her face, causing Martha to cower from its heat. He licked his lips

with his blue tongue, as if Martha was a delicious meal set before him.

There had never been a human in huldre prison before, and so Martha was a kind of exotic prize.

Vjpp whispered strange words into Martha's ear. *'Venn op cunneef.'*

Then another huldre addressed him. It was Grentul, who seemed to be hurrying Vjpp along.

Martha was pulled out of the cell and down the corridor, with Vjpp's grip unnecessarily tight around her arm. They went up a dark staircase and out into fresh night air, where four white stallions and a wagon awaited them.

The wagon held a large cage that already contained the Snow Witch, the tomtegubb and the two-headed troll by the time Martha was thrown inside.

One of the huldre guards – the eldest, judging from his wrinkled face and dry, tattered tail – climbed onto the wooden seat at the front of the wagon. He had a long whip, and used it to startle the horses into motion.

The other huldres walked beside the cage, threatening their captives with torches if they got too close to the bars.

*'Oggup flimp!'* they kept shouting. *'Oggup flimp! Oggup flimp!'*

Martha sat cross-legged in the middle of the cage floor. The tomtegubb sat next to her, humming happy tunes.

The Snow Witch sat down close to the front of the cage, away from everyone else. A gentle wind blew her white hair over her face, and she made no effort to pull it back.

Martha looked beyond her, past the wagon driver, at the four white horses in front. She could see, in the torchlight, the thin scars on their backs, and she flinched every time she heard the whip.

Behind her, she could hear the two troll heads talking in gentle voices for a change.

'Are you scared?' Troll-the-Left asked.

'Yes,' said Troll-the-Right. 'I'm as scared as a rabbit.'

'Me too,' said Troll-the-Left, almost to his own surprise. 'Me too.'

Martha closed her eyes and tried to imagine herself in her mum's arms. She remembered her warmth. Her smell. The little kiss she always planted on the top of Martha's head. A kiss-plant.

It was still there.

The love she used to feel from her mother. It would have taken more than a falling log to crush that. And she could still feel it now. The love from all those hugs wrapped around her like a warm blanket, telling her everything was going to be all right. Telling her that even in the cruellest moments of life, love could never die.



## A RESTING PLACE

Night fell quickly in the forest. Or rather, it *rose*. As Samuel and Ibsen walked down the slope, it seemed as though they were heading down into a lake like divers, as if the night was something they could drown in. And with the darkness came the fear.

By day the forest had been scary, but in the dark it was absolutely terrifying. Every crack of a twig or hoot of an owl caused Samuel to turn round and look for approaching trolls or other scary creatures. Every tree trunk slid out of the darkness as if to surprise him. Even the three-quarter moon seemed to be gasping in horror as it stared down at the boy and the dog below, walking in such a dangerous place after dark.

At least in daylight Samuel had been able to see if creatures had a shadow or not. Now, in the dark, it was impossible to tell the good from the bad.

He looked at the ground, and could make out three-toed footprints. *Trolls*. He kept walking and tried not to think too much about what would happen if he bumped into a troll. After all, the book had said trolls have no weakness at all, and the book would surely be right, as it was right about the truth pixie and all the other creatures.

(But of course, you shouldn't believe *everything* you read in books.)

Fortunately Samuel's instinct to keep walking down the hill had been correct. They came to a wide road with wagon tracks pressed into the earth and Samuel was certain it was the one the truth pixie had talked about. The one that would lead to the Changemaker.

'Here it is,' Samuel said, feeling he needed to say something. 'Here's the road.'

He turned right along the road and kept walking, and noticed that Ibsen was beginning to get very tired. The dog's body seemed to be falling asleep as they walked. His tail drooped. His tongue hung out of the side of his mouth like a piece of ham. His paws grew heavier and heavier.

Samuel too was finding it hard.

*Stay awake*, he kept telling himself.

But it was difficult. His eyelids had become heavy weights that could only stay open with the greatest of effort. And his pixie sandals were beginning to rub uncomfortably against his aching feet.

*Well, maybe it won't hurt if I have a nap,* he thought.

After all, in the dark it was probably safer to stay still than to move around. And if they had a little sleep, they would wake up feeling more refreshed and alert and would therefore have a better chance of finding Martha. With that thought in mind, Samuel looked for a suitable hiding place where he could lay himself down.

He led Ibsen off the road and headed in amongst some pine trees. If they found one with a wide enough trunk, they would be able to lie down behind it and stay safely out of view.

So he walked over to the largest trunk he could find and lay down, holding the book to his chest like a hot-water bottle. Ibsen curled up by his side and dozed off in seconds. Samuel found it more difficult. First he rested his head against the trunk, but it made the most hard and painful of pillows. Staring up at the night sky – a dot-to-dot drawing of glowing stars – he knew he wasn't going to fall asleep here.

Next he lowered his head and placed it on the ground, but the earth was hard too. And awkward from all the pine needles. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but it was as much use as trying to catch up with a rainbow. Every time he seemed to be getting nearer, it slipped further away.

He was exhausted, but too uncomfortable. And he kept thinking of something his dad had said after his first day of secondary school:

*'Happiness is everywhere, son – you just have to know where to look for it.'*

His dad had been wrong. Where was the happiness in this forest? There was nothing but fear and cruelty and loneliness. And pine needles.

*This is no good. I'll never fall asleep lying here.*

He stood up and brushed the pine needles off his cheek. Everywhere he looked it was the same. Hard trees and hard ground. It was as if the whole forest had been designed to stop him from sleeping.

He walked away from Ibsen, in a kind of daze between sleep and wakefulness, forgetting he was in the most dangerous part of the forest. Then, when he was just about to try the ground once again, he tripped over something. Or, more precisely, *onto* something.

Something soft. Like a large furry pillow. Or stomach.

‘My berries!’

The creature Samuel had fallen on was clearly startled to be woken up from its berry-related dream.

Samuel panicked. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, reaching for the book that had slid down the other side of the creature’s belly. ‘I’m sorry . . . I was just . . . I was looking for . . .’

‘Somewhere to sleep?’

‘Yes.’

‘You can sleep here,’ said the creature with a yawn. ‘You can sleep on my belly. I’m sure it must be the comfiest thing around here.’

Samuel couldn’t see the creature’s face very well. It was just dark fur leaning against a darker trunk. But its voice was warm and welcoming and sounded rather like a drink of hot chocolate (if a drink of hot chocolate had a voice).

‘I think I might . . . find my own place to sleep.’ Samuel didn’t know what to do. If he ran straight away, the creature might chase him. But if he stayed still . . .

‘Berries,’ said the creature, which already seemed halfway back to its dream.

Samuel turned onto his side, so that his right cheek was against the soft fur. The creature was right. There surely couldn't be anything comfier than its belly around here.

*So warm.*

*So soft.*

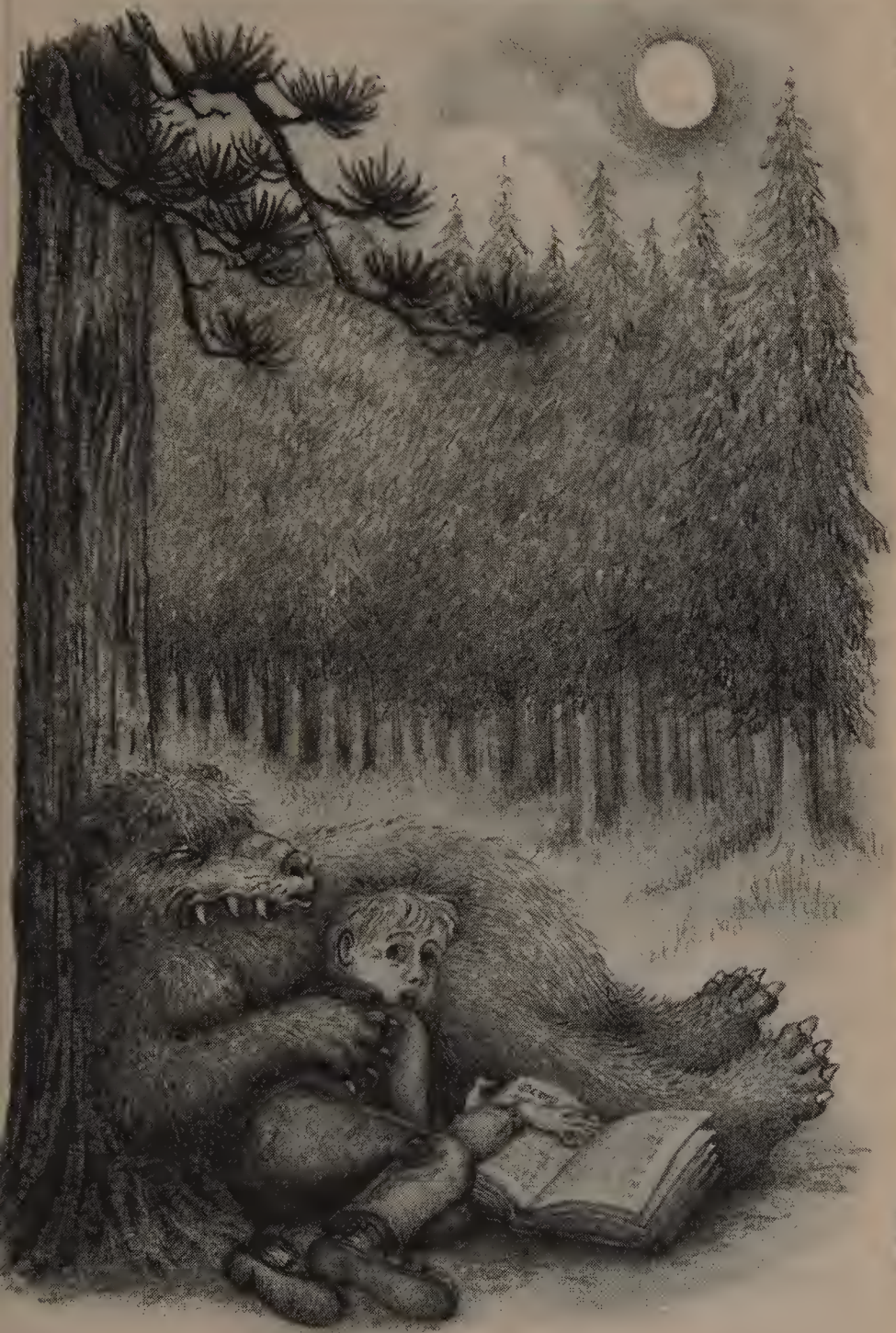
The gentle rise and fall of the creature's breathing had a hypnotic effect. And the smell of its fur seemed to be the smell of sleep itself, as if it sweated dreams the way people sweat off their food.

'Don't sleep,' Samuel said to himself, knowing that the creature could be dangerous. Knowing it might have no shadow. Knowing he should go back to Ibsen. 'Don't . . . sleep.'

But tiredness was winning the battle, tugging down his eyelids and switching off the lights in his mind.

Before his eyes closed fully he looked at the open book on the ground beside him. The moonlit words on the page blurred and slid apart in the way words do when they are looked at with tired eyes.

Reading in the dark made him even more sleepy, so he was nearly away when he found the page that mattered. The one that read:



## THE SLEMP

The slemp is a large and fur-covered creature which spends most of its life asleep. In most respects the slemp is bear-like in appearance, with round ears and soft fur all over its body, but its large protruding jaws are similar to those of a lion.

Due to its fat, comfortable stomach, the slemp is viewed by weary travellers as a living pillow. In its waking moments the slemp encourages passers-by to rest their heads on it, in a voice so warm and soothing it is almost impossible to resist.

But resist you should, for if you make the mistake of falling asleep on a slemp, you are unlikely ever to wake up again. Slemps have extremely sensitive noses, and love the smell of dreams that wafts out of sleeping ears, which reminds them of luscious berries.

Not only do slemps like the smell of dreams, they also like the taste of them. Even in their sleep they can bite the heads off their dreaming victims without even thinking. Sometimes it is one complete bite. Sometimes it is a series of nibbles, but the jaws are so fast and so strong that in either instance you wouldn't stand a chance of survival.



Weakness: The slemp is so tired it rarely has the strength to run after its victims.

Samuel gulped. His body was now wide awake with fear. The fear intensified as one of the slemp's giant paws fell across the top of the boy's pounding chest.

Pressing the paw away from him, Samuel slowly raised his head off the furry stomach.

'More berries,' mumbled the slemp, as Samuel lowered the paw back down.

Samuel stood up. Started walking. Stopped.

*The book. You idiot, you forgot the book.*

He tiptoed back and picked up the book, his hands trembling with fear.

The slemp growled, as Samuel was disturbing its sleep. The growl was so deep it seemed to come from the very centre of the earth, and there was nothing hot chocolatey about the slemp now.

In the space of a second it sat up and snapped its wide jaws in the direction of Samuel's head. Its sharp teeth were in time to catch a few strands of Samuel's hair, but nothing else. Samuel had pulled back just in time, and was now running at Olympic speed away from the deadly creature. He turned round and saw

that the slemp was asleep again and felt relieved. The feeling didn't last. A moment later he heard something.

At first it sounded like heavy rain, but then he recognized it from the night before. It was the sound of horses on the road. Heading his way.

Having run towards the noise, Samuel now hid behind a tree that was near enough to the road for him to peep out and get a clear view. Already, in the distance, he could see them.

Flaming torches, like those he'd seen when the huldres caught the tomtegubb. He waited until the torches were close enough to help him see the rest of them.

Four white horses, lined two-by-two, pulling a wagon. The wagon held some kind of cage, and there were huldres marching beside it, carrying the torches. They had swords too, and other unidentifiable weapons attached to their belts.

When one of the huldres on the near side turned round to scan the trees, Samuel could see the creature's unblinking, wide-apart eyes.

He shot back behind the trunk, then dared himself to look again a second later. Inside the flame-lit cage he saw a woman with long white hair in a long white

tunic, with skin so pale it seemed to shine in the dark.

There was a round, barrel-shaped creature who was singing a faint song. Samuel recognized the tomtegubb instantly as the one he and his aunt had seen leave the forest. Then, at the other end of the cage, he saw a large creature with two bearded heads.

*A troll, thought Samuel with a shudder. A real-life troll. Just like the one in the painting at Old Tor's shop.*

But it was the sight of the fourth prisoner that really shocked Samuel.

This prisoner wasn't a witch, or a troll, but something far more familiar.

A ten-year-old girl in a navy-blue dress, sitting down on the floor with crossed legs and a face that didn't look happy or sad or anything at all.

He said her name in a gasp.

*'Martha.'*

He felt a total and complete joy surge through him.

*She's alive. Alive!*

'I'll save you.' He whispered the promise. 'I'll get you back.'

He walked down the slope and waved his arms. Martha couldn't see him, so he walked a few steps closer and tried again.

Later he would realize that he should have waited, then followed at a safe distance behind. But that was later, and this was now.

A guard turned round. The same guard who had scanned the trees before. This time Samuel was spotted. Orders were shouted in a strange language, then two of the guards jumped down from the wagon and began to race up the hill towards him.

## THE OPEN DOOR

Ibsen had woken to the sound of hooves on hard ground. Samuel wasn't there, so Ibsen had followed his scent trail all the way to the spot where the boy was now standing. The spot which the guards were now running towards.

Ibsen barked behind Samuel to tell him to get moving, but for a moment Samuel stayed exactly as he was. If he got captured, then he would be with Martha again and that was what he wanted, wasn't it?

*No.*

It would be easier to rescue Martha if he stayed free. If the huldres caught him, they would both end up dead.

So Samuel ran.

Fast.

His pixie sandals hardly touched the ground as he

chased after Ibsen's tail, jumping rabbits and dodging trees, hopping over pine cones. He looked behind.

The huldres were getting closer. One pulled a dagger from his belt and sent it spinning through the air towards Samuel. It landed by his feet.

Samuel thought about picking it up, but it would have taken too long. He kept running, ferns and bracken whipping his legs as he shot past.

They sped by the slemp, who was still sleeping.

Ibsen galloped further up the hill. Samuel followed, his chest burning with every uphill step.

The slope got less steep, then levelled out. Ahead, through the trees, there were stone houses in a crooked line, with fenced-off rabbit enclosures behind each one.

'Ibsen!'

The dog ran between two of the enclosures and round to the front of the second house. He ran under an outside table and in through the open front door.

Samuel glimpsed the curve of Ibsen's tail just as it disappeared inside.

Glancing behind, he realized the two huldres hadn't yet made it up the hill. If he went through the open door, they wouldn't see him.

A knife was resting on the outside table. It was stained with fresh blood.

He picked it up and went inside the stone house, shutting the door behind him. And that is when he felt a metal thud on the back of his head, causing his mind to swirl into darkness.

## A TROLLS' HOUSE

The first thing Samuel was aware of was the pain. His head was pounding with the worst headache of his life.

The second thing he was aware of was the softness beneath the pain. A pillow. He was lying on a bed.

*Where am I?*

For a moment he thought he was back at home. He thought that everything that had happened since Martha's birthday had been part of a horrendous nightmare.

He opened his eyes. A blurred figure was leaning over the bed with two sparkling maternal eyes looking down into his.

'Mum?' he said. 'Mum? Is that you?'

As his vision sharpened into focus, the two maternal



eyes became one, and the person he had thought was his mother turned out to be the ugliest-looking woman he had ever seen. In addition to having only one eye – positioned in the middle of her forehead – she had various other hideous features. Her black hair was wild and tatty, like a strange kind of plant. She had a bulbous red nose with hairs dangling out of her nostrils, and her mouth contained five wonky teeth, each as grey and desolate as old headstones in a graveyard.

‘It’s awake, Troll-Father!’

Her booming voice did nothing for Samuel’s headache. Each word was a brick banging the inside of his skull.

*Trolls.*

‘I’m coming, Troll-Mother.’

A male troll of slightly less ugly appearance (if only because most of his face was covered with a beard) came into Samuel’s view. He too had an eye-socket in the middle of his forehead, but with no eye inside.

He held his hands out blindly over the bed, in the vague direction of Troll-Mother.

‘All right, grabby fingers,’ she said. ‘Keep your beard on!’

Then something disgusting happened.

Troll-Mother dug her fingers into her eye-socket and, after a little effort, pulled out her eyeball. After that she passed the eye to her husband, who promptly squeezed it into the hole in his forehead.

‘What is it?’ Troll-Mother asked, wanting to know what kind of creature was lying in her bed.

Once the eyeball was in place, Troll-Father looked at Samuel, his jaw dropping in disbelief. ‘A human,’ he said. ‘A human boy.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘A human! A human boy!’ Her voice suddenly changed, and she looked full of sorrow. ‘Oh . . . oh . . . I’m so sorry, sir . . . If I’d have known, sir, I’d never have hit you with my rabbit pan, sir! Oh, what must you think of me? Oh, I do apologize, sir. And for the house as well, sir. It is a terrible scruffy mess. If we’d known you was coming by, we’d have tidied the place up a bit. It’s just that it’s terrible hard to keep on top of things, what with only one eye between us all.’

Samuel sat up and looked around. The whole house was packed into one room, and lit by fat candles. He could see a stove and a dining table and another bed. Two troll children with single empty eye-sockets were sitting on the floor and stroking

Ibsen, who was lying down and staring straight at Samuel.

‘You’re trolls,’ said Samuel, in a terrified voice.

‘We be that, sir,’ said Troll-Father, in a much more gentle voice than that of his wife.

‘Are you . . . going to eat me?’ Samuel asked, fear intensifying his headache.

Troll-Father looked confused. ‘Eat you, sir?’

‘I thought trolls ate humans. I thought they boiled them in a pot. It says so in’ – Samuel looked around for his book and saw it lying by the front door, where it must have fallen when he was knocked out by the saucepan – ‘in that book.’

‘Well, sir, we don’t eat humans,’ said Troll-Father. ‘I can assure you of that. You don’t want to believe in books, sir. They be normally full of lies.’

Samuel saw troll shadows, flickering in the candlelight.

He remembered what the truth pixie had said: *The creatures with no shadows are the deadly ones. Those with shadows are harmless.*

‘The only thing we cook in a pot be rabbits. Unless you’ve got long fluffy ears you’re safe with us, sir,’ said Troll-Mother. ‘I be so sad for clouting you round the head like that – it’s just you have to be careful,

don't you not? With all this evil all about us. Anyway, we hid you well and true from those horrid creatures. They came and knocked on all the houses in the village but we said we hadn't seen you, we did. I thought they was about to search us up and down and sideways but I think they was in some kind of hurry. Must be taking prisoners.'

*Prisoners.*

The image of Martha sitting in the cage flashed back into Samuel's mind.

'I've got to go,' he said. He tried to get up but the pain from the bump on his head pulled him back. 'I've got to find my sister.'

'Your sister?' Troll-Mother asked.

'She was in a cage. There was a wagon. It was those—'

'*Huldres.*' Troll-Father whispered the word, as if it was something that could do evil if spoken aloud.

'Yes, they've got her. They're taking her to . . .'

He tried to remember the name of the overlord of the forest. *The Rainmaker? The Changemaster?*

Troll-Father suddenly seemed to regret having the eye. He didn't know where to look. It was then that Samuel realized the book really might have got it wrong about the trolls.

'They'll be taking her to the Changemaker,' said Troll-Mother.

As soon as she said *Changemaker*, two gasps rose out of the eyeless boy and girl on the floor.

The little troll girl nearly cried, but no tears could stream from her empty eye-socket.

'Don't be scared, Troll-Daughter,' said Troll-Father.

'Be the Changemaker coming to get us?' the boy asked.

'No, Troll-Son,' said Troll-Father.

'He will if you don't eat all your casserole,' said Troll-Mother.

There was a silence, and Samuel tried to sit further up in the bed.

'Can I see the human?' Troll-Son asked.

'Me! Me! Me!' said Troll-Daughter. She shot both her hands in the air as if she knew the answer to something.

Troll-Mother went red with embarrassment. 'I must be saying sorry for my children,' she said. 'They not be clean and polite like you, sir. They be horrible little things, the both of them. They have no idea how to behave.'

Samuel wondered why her children made her so cross, as they seemed perfectly normal to him.

‘Oh well,’ sighed Troll-Mother. ‘I suppose they’ll want to have a look at you. Troll-Father, give them the eye.’

Troll-Father unplugged the eyeball from its socket and tapped his son on the shoulder. Troll-Son blindly felt for the eyeball and, after he eventually found it resting in his father’s palm, squeezed it into his forehead.

‘Hello,’ said Samuel.

‘Hello,’ said Troll-Son, who – now his parents couldn’t see him – was picking his nose. ‘I be Troll-Son.’

‘I’m Samuel,’ said Samuel. ‘Samuel Blink.’

‘Samuel Blink,’ said Troll-Son, in clear admiration. He tried the exotic name over and over on his tongue. ‘Samuel Blink. Samuel Blink. Samuel Blink. Samuel—’

‘Forgive my son, sir,’ said Troll-Father. ‘We be only humble trolls. We’re not used to fancy names like that. We’re not worthy of them, you see.’

‘Troll-Son, stop picking your nose!’ said Troll-Mother, though how she knew where her son’s fingers were Samuel had no idea. ‘Now, give the eye to your sister before you be shaming yourself any more.’

The boy troll wiped his grubby finger on his even grubbier tunic, then pulled the eye out of his forehead, making a kind of sucking sound as he did so. Troll-Son tried to give the eyeball to his sister but the little girl – who must have been no older than six – couldn't find her brother's hands.

'Where it be?' said Troll-Daughter. 'Where it be? Where it be?' And she kept opening and closing her hands, saying over and over, 'Where it be? Where it be? Where it be?'

Samuel watched as Troll-Mother went red with embarrassment again. 'I am being ever so sorry, sir,' she said, walking blindly past her husband towards her children. 'They are troll children, with no manners at all.'

'It's OK,' said Samuel.

But then, just as the little girl's fingers found the eyeball, both children received a slap on the back of the head from their mother, who knew the heights of her children well enough to make sure she hit the right spot.

'Behave yourselves! You useless little pixies!' she shouted as she whacked them. (To call someone a pixie was the biggest insult a troll could give.)

'There's no need of hitting them,' said Troll-Father,

wincing his eye-socket as if it was he who was being hit. 'They can't see what they be doing.'

'No, but the human can. What in Shadow Forest must he be thinking?' And she whacked her children again, only this time she swung a little bit too fast and knocked the eyeball out of Troll-Daughter's fingers.

'I lost it! I lost it! I lost it!'

Samuel watched in horror as the eyeball flew through the air. It landed on the bed and rolled across the sheets until it rested a centimetre away from his left hand, from where it looked straight up at him. Staring.

Just staring.

Well, what else could an eyeball do?



## THE TRUTH ABOUT HUMANS

The four blind trolls started searching in every direction, their hands feeling the bed and down on the floor, desperately hunting for the missing eye.

‘See what you’ve done!’ said Troll-Mother crossly, although neither of the two children she was speaking to could *see* what they’d done at all. ‘Fancy! What you must be looking like! In front of the human!’

‘Now, now,’ said Troll-Father in a calming voice. ‘There’s no point in getting all hipperty. It will be here somewhere, it will.’

Samuel wondered why no one asked him where the eyeball might be, especially as he was the only one who could see anything.

‘It’s . . . er . . . here,’ he said. ‘It’s by my hand.’

‘Oh,’ said Troll-Father, embarrassed. ‘Would you

possibly maybe just if you wouldn't mind perhaps possibly maybe . . . pick it up for us?'

*'Honestly! How can you ask a human to do such a disgusting thing! Have you no shame?'* boomed Troll-Mother, who was now very hipperty indeed.

She looked like she was going to start whacking her husband, and Samuel had seen enough violence for one day.

'It's OK,' he said. 'I'll . . . er . . . pick it up.'

Samuel looked at the slimy eyeball, with its thin red veins around the green iris. He lifted his hand but was scared to touch it.

*'What are you staring at?'* He mumbled the question under his breath to the eyeball.

When his hand was near enough, he closed his own eyes tight shut, because somehow it made it all seem less disgusting if he couldn't see what he was actually doing.

'There,' he said, picking it up. 'I've got it. Who shall I give it to?'

'Well, I think it be Troll-Daughter's turn to—' said Troll-Father timidly, but he was interrupted by his wife.

'I think it's probably best to give it back to me, sir,' said Troll-Mother.

She moved towards the bed and Samuel handed her the eyeball, which she forced back into place in the centre of her forehead, blinking a few times until it felt just right.

‘What a helpful human!’ she said. ‘I be so sorry that you had to see my children behave so awful badly.’

‘I didn’t notice,’ said Samuel, looking at the two eyeless child trolls as they stood perfectly still and quiet once again.

‘Now, now, that is very kind, but most untrue,’ said Troll-Mother. ‘That is just your human manners shining out. They be most horrid. Most horrid. Not clean and polite like you, sir. Not like you at all.’

‘They not be *that* bad,’ insisted Troll-Father.

‘You are too soft with them, that’s the trouble,’ said Troll-Mother. ‘When I was a youngster, my father would whip me for two hours, just for scratching my eye-hole. These two little rotters only get to see the whipping post two times a month, and even then it is only for ten lashes. Ten lashes! What use that be?’

Samuel gulped. Maybe it was better to have no parents at all than troll parents. Even Aunt Eda didn’t seem very strict compared to Troll-Mother.

‘Now, why don’t you stay for some supper? I’ve

already skinned the rabbit. It will be ready in no time . . .’ She smiled at the thought of having a human stay for supper. ‘The villagers will be so jealous! A real-life human!’

Samuel stared at the floor and tried not to look too disgusted at the sight of the trolls’ three-toed feet. ‘I need to find my sister,’ he said, but Troll-Mother didn’t seem to be listening. She just went into the kitchen and began chopping the skinned rabbit with the bloody knife Samuel had carried into the house.

While his children tormented Ibsen, Troll-Father found the bed and sat down near Samuel’s legs.

He offered a meek smile. ‘She’s always dreamed of having a human come to visit,’ he said. ‘I think she just wants to make up for clouting you around the head with that flenking great rabbit pan.’

‘I know,’ said Samuel. ‘It’s very kind, really. But I have to go and find my sister. I have to get back to the road.’

Troll-Father closed his eye-socket. ‘If you don’t mind me saying, sir, it’s probably not a good idea you going to the Changemaker.’

‘But I have to rescue my sister.’

Troll-Father sighed a heavy sigh. ‘Nobody who be sent to the Changemaker ever comes back, if you

understand me, sir. He be . . . very dangerous, sir. He has turned the forest into a very bad place. That is why we trolls never go out in the daylight. We've got to protect our shadows, see.' Troll-Father believed what he was saying. He didn't know that the Changemaker and the Shadow Witch couldn't steal troll shadows because of their heaviness. In fact, troll shadows are a lot heavier than troll brains, which might explain why Troll-Father had never worked it out. But the next thing he told Samuel was perfectly true. 'If the Changemaker gets your shadow, you're doomed, like them huldre-folk. They're slaves to him. They didn't used to be like that. They used to be nice, gentle fellows, so they did, sir. Living peaceful in a village near the border.'

Samuel remembered the deserted village and the skull with the wide-apart eyes.

'But I *have* to find her. I have to try. She's . . . she's all I've got.'

Troll-Father looked sad, and slowly nodded his head. 'Very well, but you don't want to take the road. It will take far too long. I will tell you a short cut that will take you to the Still Tree. That is the tree the Changemaker be living in. I haven't been there for years. Not since the Changemaker came and made

all these laws . . . I've never seen him myself, sir. No. He just sends his huldres or his witch servant to do his dirty work round here . . . I would be going with you, but I've got my family to look after, you see, sir. I don't want to end up like our neighbours. They were two trolls in the same body. Troll-the-Left and Troll-the-Right, they called them. One night they headed out of the troll territory and tried to escape the forest but they got captured by the huldres . . . I can't let anything like that happen to me. I can't leave my family, sir. I'm most awfully sorry, sir.'

'It's OK,' Samuel said. 'I understand.'

So Troll-Father told Samuel the short cut, which was: 'Head away from the road on the narrow path that leads out of Trollhelm. Keep going until you reach an open plain. This is not the clearing, but you must cross it to get there. Travel over the plain to the woods on the other side. You will see a path. This path be leading directly to the Changemaker's clearing . . . But before you set off, you and your dog should eat. You'll go a lot slower on an empty stomach, you will. A bit of food will help that aching head, sir. Come on, sir. I'll be helping you out of bed. Troll-Mother, can I have the eye while I help Samuel Blink out of bed?'

And so it was that Samuel came to eat rabbit casseroles with the troll family. He had never eaten rabbit before, and didn't particularly like it, but he was hungry and would need all the strength he could get if he was to face the Changemaker. He found it weird eating such a big meal in the middle of the night, but he tried to be as polite as he could.

'Would you like some hurgleberry wine, sir?' Troll-Mother asked, pouring herself and Troll-Father a goblet of purple wine.

'No, thank you,' Samuel said.

'You don't mind if we be having some, do you?'

'No. Of course not.'

Troll-Mother shook her head. 'Such good manners you humans be having.'

During their meal-time conversation Samuel corrected a few of the trolls' beliefs about humans.

Troll-Father in particular looked increasingly disappointed as he discovered that:

- 1) Humans do *not* live to be eight hundred years old.
- 2) Humans do *not* have a belly button in their backs as well as their fronts. (Samuel had to lift up his jumper to prove this.)

- 3) Humans did *not* climb a big ladder and cut two holes in the sky for the sun and the moon to shine through.
- 4) Human babies do *not* know longer words than human grown-ups.
- 5) Humans do *not* all get along together in peace.

This last point saddened Troll-Father so much that a tear ran down the middle of his face and dripped off the end of his nose.

‘Do humans have wars?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Samuel said.

Troll-Father shook his head in disbelief. ‘No. *No*. You are not like that. I can tell. Have you started any wars?’

Samuel laughed. ‘I am twelve years old. I’m only a child. Only the leaders of countries make those decisions. Prime ministers. Kings. Presidents.’

There was a pause, and then Troll-Son asked: ‘Do humans got parents, Samuel Blink?’

‘What sort of question is that!’ Troll-Mother boomed. ‘That’s a rude, hipperty question. I be so sorry, sir . . . Troll-Daughter, I hear you be scratching, get your finger out of your eye-socket right now!’



Anyhow, I be so sorry, sir. You do not be answering him if you not be wanting.'

'It's OK,' said Samuel. 'Yes, they have parents.'

'Do *you* got parents, Samuel Blink?'

'No. They're . . . dead.'

There was a long, long silence. And then Troll-Father, who still had the eye, looked around the stone walls of his house. 'There is an old troll saying, sir: "The present is a home built with the stones of the past."''

'Oh,' said Samuel, not knowing what Troll-Father was going on about, but pretending to all the same.

'It is all about how you look at things, sir. When you look at that wall over there, you probably be seeing a load of old stones.'

Samuel looked at the wall and nodded, for that was indeed what he saw.

'Of course you do. But when I look at that wall, my heart fills with warmth for my dear father.'

'Why?' asked Samuel. 'Did he build it?'

'Not exactly,' Troll-Father said. 'Do you know what be happening when trolls die?'

'No,' Samuel said.

'Their bodies slowly change shape and then be turning to stone,' Troll-Father said matter-of-factly.

‘Stone! Stone! Stone!’ chanted Troll-Daughter.

Troll-Father pointed to another wall. ‘They be my grandparents,’ he said. ‘And that wall behind me is my wife’s mother.’ He smiled at some distant memory.

‘She was the toughest stone to break into pieces!’ Troll-Mother laughed. ‘As stubborn in death as in life, she was, sir.’

Samuel looked around at the four walls and felt a strange chill travel through him, as if all the stones were watching the conversation.

‘Trolls have always lived inside their families,’ said Troll-Father, after taking a sip of his wine. ‘Ever since time began. What are you meant to do – be burying them in the ground?’ He laughed, as if that was the most ridiculous idea he had ever come up with.

‘That is what humans do,’ Samuel said. He tried not to think of his parents’ wooden coffins being lowered into the earth.

‘Oh. Sorry. I didn’t realize.’

‘It’s OK.’

Troll-Father tapped the side of his head. ‘But they are in here, aren’t they?’

Samuel nodded.

‘Well then, that is where you must be building a

house. A house made of memories, for you to visit any time you be pleasing.'

The meal ended, and it was time for Samuel and Ibsen to leave.

'Goodbye,' said Samuel, tucking the book back under his arm. 'And thank you. For the casserole. And everything.'

'Goodbye,' said Troll-Mother. 'And be excusing my children, sir.'

'Goodbye, Samuel Blink,' said Troll-Son. 'Samuel Blink. Samuel Blink.'

'Bye bye bye bye,' said Troll-Daughter.

'Be careful,' said Troll-Father. 'Please, be most ever so careful.'

'Yes,' said Samuel, looking to see all four members of the family wave him off. 'I will.'

Walking away from Trollhelm, Samuel thought about what Troll-Father had said.

*The present is a home built with the stones of the past.*

Maybe there was truth as well as comfort in those words. Maybe his parents were still alive, in a peculiar way, in the minds of Samuel and Martha. And maybe they always would be.

But it wasn't enough. As far as Samuel could see, memories were only useful if they could be shared. And Martha was the only person in the world he had left to share them with.

If he never rescued Martha, he knew he would be truly alone.

## THE FLAKING MOON

**M**artha hadn't seen her brother.

Like the other prisoners, she had no idea why the wagon had stopped moving or why two of the guards had run up the hill. And when, a little later, an empty-handed Vjpp and Grentul came back to the wagon, Martha thought nothing of it.

'Perhaps they were practising a song for us,' suggested the tomtegubb. 'A surprise song that they didn't want us to hear.'

'It's a nice thought,' said Troll-the-Left. 'But somehow I doubt it.'

With a crack of the wagon driver's whip, the horses were off again, faster than before. The huldres were anxious to make up lost ground. They knew the Changemaker would be expecting them, and they

knew they had to be back home, safely below ground, before sunrise.

The Snow Witch lay down on the floor of the cage and closed her eyes. She was frowning, deep in concentration. Whispered words left her lips, so soft they blended with the breeze.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Troll-the-Left, shaking her with his right hand. ‘You’re making yourself ill.’

‘Leave her,’ said Troll-the-Right. ‘She knows what she is doing.’

‘Look!’ The tomtegubb was pointing at the air in front of his eyes.

A snowflake danced sideways on the breeze, before floating out of the other side of the cage. Martha and the other creatures watched as the snow began to fall all around them, getting heavier and heavier until the ground was a white carpet.

‘The moon is very flaky tonight,’ said the tomtegubb. Like all tomtegubbs, he believed that snow was made of moon-flakes. ‘Isn’t it pretty?’

He began to sing:

*‘Moon-flake, moon-flake, what do you see?  
Floating from the sky to me?’*

‘It’s her,’ said Troll-the-Left. ‘She’s making it happen.’

‘Look,’ said Troll-the-Right. ‘Look at her face.’

Everyone looked at the Snow Witch’s face. The lines in her skin were getting deeper. Her thin lips were getting even thinner. The hair that went down to her ankles was spreading across the cage floor.

‘She’s getting older every moment,’ said the tomtegubb. ‘She can hardly breathe.’

‘It’s a spell,’ said Troll-the-Left. ‘She’s casting a spell. She’s making it snow.’

‘She’s flaking the moon!’

Martha looked at the flakes melting into the hul-dres’ flaming torches. Then she looked at the ground around them.

The snow was ankle-deep now, and the guards were getting worried.

*‘Enna oder kullook?’*

*‘Nit fijoo. Nit fijoo!’*

As the snow got deeper, the horses that were pulling the cage were finding it increasingly hard work. The wagon driver kept whipping the animals harder and harder, but it was no good. Being whipped on the back didn’t give them any more strength in their legs.

'*Obkenoot!*' Grentul's cry prompted all the huldres to start pushing the wagon.

The Snow Witch's frown had become a grimace. She was in tremendous pain as the spell sucked the last years out of her body.

It was a blizzard now. There was as much snow as there was air in between.

'We should stop her,' said Troll-the-Left.

'Leave her,' said Troll-the-Right.

'She's in pain.'

'She knows what she's doing.'

Martha felt the Snow Witch's white hair tickle her ankles as it kept on growing. She looked at the ageing witch, and saw her fingernails lengthening so fast they stretched out of the cage. Martha moved over towards the Snow Witch and crouched down in front of her. She shook her head.

The Snow Witch coughed, and whispered an answer. 'My winter had already come. Your summer is still waiting. Let it be, human child.'

Martha shook her head again.

'You will escape,' said the Snow Witch. 'You will find your words. Leave me. It is better this way.'

Martha looked out of the cage and saw the huldres



struggling to lift their legs out of the knee-deep snow. She looked in front and saw the horses being whipped harder than before as they strained to keep pulling the carriage.

Snow was everywhere. It was in the troll's two beards. It was making the tomtegubb look like a large snowball. It was getting stuck behind the huldres' ears and up their scrunched-up noses and it decorated their caloosh-skin clothes.

Then it finally worked.

The wagon, and the cage it carried, came to a halt. At first the horses were blamed, and the wagon driver's whip punished them. But then Grentul noticed that the wheels were stuck because the snow had risen above the axles, and was continuing to rise.

*'Nit da enna kullook,'* he said, as he watched the thick snow extinguish the flaming torches. *'Enna kullook!'*

He caught sight of the Snow Witch's long nails growing fast out of the cage.

*'Odduck felk!'*

His order was swiftly followed, and Vjpp and another guard entered the cage, threw Martha aside and started shaking the Snow Witch.

But it was too late.

The spell was complete.

And the Snow Witch, lying under a shroud of white snow and white hair, was dead.

## THE STUBBORN SPOON

Further south in the forest, Aunt Eda was sitting at the truth pixie's table, with a bowl of gorgeous yellow soup tickling her nostrils.

Outside the window, snow was falling heavily. It was the middle of the night, but Aunt Eda had promised herself not to sleep until she found Samuel and Martha. She'd also told herself not to stop walking, but that was before she had caught a heavenly smell wafting through the air. A smell so tantalizing, it made Aunt Eda think of nothing else. The smell was the truth pixie's hewlip soup, which he always kept on the stove overnight, just in case anyone should be passing.

Aunt Eda had, of course, read *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, including the page about truth pixies. But she couldn't remember precisely what it had

said. Or she didn't want to. And anyway, Aunt Eda had been so hungry she hadn't even asked what type of creature the truth pixie was. You see, Aunt Eda had gone a day and half a night without eating and now she would have found anything tasty, let alone a soup that was designed to hypnotize people with its smell.

Before she picked up her spoon she decided to say something nice to the chef, who was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

'I must tell you, I haff eaten lots of soups in my time. Reindeer soups, cod soups, beetroot soups. Lots of different soups. But I haff never smelled a soup like this.'

The truth pixie nodded nervously. He did not care about nice words. The only thing he cared about was the sight of exploding heads. It had been so long! For months he had kept this soup on the stove, hoping to tempt passers-by. And he had been so close earlier this evening. Now, at last, it was finally going to happen.

He watched, with an extreme sense of giddiness, as Aunt Eda picked up the silver spoon and lifted it slowly towards her bowl.

'You will like my soup very much,' the truth pixie said, rubbing his hands together.

‘Yes,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘I’m sure I will.’

But then, just as she lowered her spoon to sink it into the steaming and deadly soup, something strange happened. The spoon stopped in mid air. She tried to press it further towards the soup but it was no good. It was like trying to join the wrong ends of two very strong magnets together.

‘How strange,’ Aunt Eda said, and not for the first time that day.

Ever since she had entered the forest, strange things had been happening. For example, she had nearly fallen into a caloosh trap, but had managed to hold onto her javelin, which had lodged across the width of the hole, and then pull herself up and out with the greatest of ease. Where had that extra luck, and that extra strength, come from?

‘How strange,’ Aunt Eda had said, before continuing her journey.

Then there was the encounter with the flying skullpecker. Now, for those of you who don’t know, a flying skullpecker is the most dangerous kind of bird you could ever hope to meet.

They were once straightforward woodpeckers, but when Professor Tanglewood transformed the creatures, he changed the forest’s woodpeckers as well.

Once the Shadow Witch had stolen their shadows, he told her to make their beaks strong enough to peck through human heads. When Aunt Eda saw one of them flying with its large, sharp beak pointed towards her, she tried to run away. The bird eventually caught up, and landed on Aunt Eda's bun. Its beak quickly began to peck her head, but she didn't feel a thing.

When she grabbed hold of the bird, she saw that its sharp yellow beak had bent and broken, no longer able to cause harm. She let the bird go and felt her head, which had no injuries at all.

'How strange,' Aunt Eda had said again, without even the slightest sign of a headache.

And now, on the strangest of days, she was faced with a bowl of soup that didn't want to be eaten. Or a spoon that didn't want to go near the bowl.

She leaned forward over the truth pixie's table and tried again. This time the spoon slid left and hit the table.

'What are you doing?' the truth pixie asked. 'Why aren't you eating my soup? My special soup?'

'I don't know. I'm . . . *trying*.' Aunt Eda was now standing up, thrusting the spoon towards the soup and not getting any closer. 'But this spoon is so stubborn.'

She put the spoon down and tried to use her hands, but just as she was about to grab the bowl, it slid across the table. When she reached out to touch it, just to check she wasn't imagining things, the bowl flew through the window that the truth pixie always kept open for people to smell his cooking.

'Oh no,' the truth pixie said. 'You're a witch.'

'A *witch*?' Aunt Eda was appalled at the pixie's rudeness. 'I most certainly—'

And then it dawned on her. The bracelet she was wearing. The one with the pewter disc. She looked at it. She looked at the engraving: *HEK*.

'Look, I've got no shadow,' the truth pixie said, backing away. 'You can't do anything to me. Another witch already stole it.'

'Oh,' Aunt Eda said. 'Oh . . . oh . . . oh . . .'

She remembered how easily she'd climbed out of the hole. She remembered the skullpecker's broken beak. And now it made sense. The magical bracelet was protecting her from danger, just like Old Tor had said. And if that was true, danger must have been inside the soup.

'You were trying . . . to poison me.' Aunt Eda spoke the words as the memory reached her. The memory of the page she had once read in Professor

Tanglewood's book. 'Weren't you?' She bent down and stared at the little creature with eyes so sharp, they could have cut through even the greatest lie. But, of course, the truth pixie's mouth couldn't squeeze out small lies, let alone great big ones.

'Nnnn-yes!'

He went on to tell her what he had told Samuel. About his unstoppable truth-telling, about the Shadow Witch and the Changemaker, and how the truth pixie couldn't help his murderous ways.

'Haff you seen any human children?' Aunt Eda asked, caring little for the pixie's excuses.

'Yes, I saw a boy.'

'Not a girl?'

'No. A boy. A boy with a nice juicy head.'

Aunt Eda gasped in horror. 'Did he try the soup?'

'No, but he tried my sandals.' The pixie sighed wearily. 'No shadow, no sandals, and no exploding heads. My life is empty.'

Aunt Eda looked at the pixie's bare feet and felt relieved. Not that she knew how sandals were going to protect Samuel in such a dangerous forest.

'You are a very dangerous little fellow, aren't you?' said Aunt Eda. 'Very dangerous indeed. Now, what if



a little girl came walking past your house. What would you do?’

‘I would give her my soup.’ The truth pixie slapped himself very hard on the face, but he could not stop telling the truth. ‘My poisonous soup.’

Aunt Eda looked at her javelin and wondered if she should skewer the pixie’s little heart.

‘Is there any way I could stop you?’ she said. ‘From your murderous ways?’

The truth pixie held his hand tight over his mouth, but then blurted out: ‘You could lock me in the cupboard! That cupboard there. You could lock me in and turn the key and take it with you. My arms are too weak for me to escape.’

Aunt Eda considered. ‘Are you telling me the truth?’

The truth pixie sighed. ‘The truth is all I can tell.’

‘I must go,’ she told the truth pixie as she pushed him into the cupboard. ‘You will tell me where the human boy went and then I will go.’

And the truth pixie gave her directions as Aunt Eda turned the key. Then she picked up her javelin and went out into the snow, which was fast becoming a blizzard. Aunt Eda was worried this might slow her down, but it didn’t. In fact, the snow didn’t even

touch her. As it fell, it parted like a curtain, leaving a clear dry path for Aunt Eda to follow. A straight black line on the sloping white ground, which seemed to be leading her where she wanted to go.

‘How strange,’ said Aunt Eda, rubbing her bracelet. ‘How werry strange.’

## THE TRIUMPHANT TOMTEGUBB (AND THE HEROIC HUMAN)

**W**hile Martha stared at the dead Snow Witch, the other prisoners were noticing something else.

‘Look,’ said Troll-the-Left, nodding towards the open cage door. ‘There’s our escape.’

‘Are you out of your ugly head?’ asked Troll-the-Right. ‘The door’s only open because they’re standing right by it. We’d get caught straight away. And have you seen their weapons?’

The huldres’ weapons were indeed pretty terrifying. Each huldre guard carried on his belt one small throwing-axe, one sword, one tongue-stretcher and two daggers.

‘We’re going to be killed if we stay here. At least if we escape, we’ve got a chance,’ said Troll-the-Left. ‘Look, their torches were put out by the snow. It will be harder for them to find us in the dark.’

The tomtegubb jumped to his feet. ‘Come on, human! Let’s go!’

Vjpp turned round and saw the prisoners heading towards the open door. ‘*Fregg vemper,*’ he hissed as he struggled through the snow.

All the huldres were now aware of the possible escape.

‘Now!’ Troll-the Left said, overruling his right side. ‘Let’s go now!’

But his command came too late.

Vjpp and a really tall huldre were now completely blocking the doorway – Vjpp holding a dagger, the other a sword.

‘*Ober jann oggipdiff,*’ Vjpp said. His blue tongue was licking his lips at the idea of using his weapon, ready to taste violence.

No one knew what to do. They didn’t understand the huldre’s words, but they understood his dagger.

Troll-the-Left placed a protective arm in front of Martha.

‘See?’ said Troll-the-Right. ‘I told you it was a bad idea.’

‘Just shut your ugly face, will you,’ said Troll-the-Left.

‘Come on,’ said the tomtegubb. ‘Let’s look on the bright side.’

While everyone was trying to find the bright side of a situation that was made only of very dark sides, something happened.

Vjpp moved closer. Close enough for Troll-the-Left to strike out, knock the dagger out of the cage and pick the huldre up by his throat.

‘Watch out!’ Troll-the-Right shouted, gesturing towards the really tall huldre crunching over the snowy cage floor with his sword.

But this time it was the tomtegubb who lent a hand – or rather, a foot – as he tripped up the massive huldre, sending him flying into the snow.

‘Let’s go!’

Everyone followed Troll-the-Left’s orders and charged out of the cage door, where the other huldres – including the old wagon driver – were waiting.

Swords and daggers came towards them.

Grentul sent an axe flying through the air, spinning its way between the two troll heads.

*‘Psst, under here.’*

Martha turned round and saw that while the two-headed troll was being attacked, the tomtegubb was pointing under the wagon.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Hide!’

But Martha kept perfectly still, standing in the snow, until the tomtegubb grabbed her hand and pulled her under. They stayed there for a while and watched Troll-the-Left reach into the cage and grab the axe that had just been thrown at him.

He then began to swing it around, slicing through the crisp night air.

‘Not so flenking tough now, are you?’ he shouted.

‘This is a bad idea,’ said Troll-the-Right. ‘Why can’t we just—?’

Troll-the-Right never got to finish his question. His head was sliced neatly off by Vjpp’s sword and landed right in front of Martha.

‘No!’ Troll-the-Left was in despair, and swung the axe in wild revenge, killing the wagon driver, then grabbing his sword. Within moments he had sliced the life out of four more huldres, so only Grentul and Vjpp remained.

‘The horses,’ whispered the tomtegubb to Martha, as the bloody spectacle continued. ‘Let’s go to the horses.’

The tomtegubb then started crawling on his elbows under the wagon. Martha followed, keeping her head as low as possible in the narrow space

between the freezing snow and the wooden panels that she could feel touching the stray hairs on the back of her head.

Once he was out in the open, the tomtegubb unfastened two stallions.

‘Get on,’ he said, making a stirrup out of his hands.

Martha climbed up, and the tomtegubb clambered onto the seat of the wagon, then jumped onto the horse he had unfastened. The horse winced as the fat creature landed on his back and kicked him into motion.

‘Come on,’ the tomtegubb said, turning back to Martha. ‘What are you waiting for? Let’s go.’

Martha was a good horse-rider, but she had never ridden a horse that didn’t have a saddle. The other reason she didn’t kick the horse into gear was because she was worried about Troll-the-Left.

‘Come on!’ The tomtegubb’s cry caused Grentul to turn and look at the two escaping convicts.

‘*Pijook ediss,*’ said Grentul. ‘*Enna bikk.*’

‘*Enna bikk!*’ agreed Vjpp.

The two huldres turned away from Troll-the-Left and ran towards the front of the carriage. Realizing that they were more interested in a human than in a troll, Martha kicked the large white stallion into a gallop.

She followed the tomtegubb's horse, holding onto the mane and using it as reins. Turning round, she saw two huldres on two horses chasing after her in the dark, galloping through the snowy landscape.

'Faster!' the tomtegubb shouted, realizing the huldres were rapidly approaching. 'As fast as you can!'

Martha leaned forward, so her arms were holding onto the horse's neck. She did not kick her legs into the creature's sides again or threaten it with any more whipping, but simply patted it and blew warm breath onto its skin.

The horse responded to softness much better than to harshness, and instantly galloped faster. Soon Martha was neck and neck with the tomtegubb.

'To the trees,' said the tomtegubb, with a massive smile on his face. 'Stick with me, human girl.'

He turned to look behind him and his smile fell like a stone at the sight of a fast-approaching axe. 'Watch out!'

Martha directed the horse so that the axe flew past and landed in the snow.

'Whoo-hoo!' the tomtegubb said, enjoying himself once again. 'This feels amazing, doesn't it?'

Martha said nothing.



'Now,' said the tomtegubb, over the sound of hooves pounding snow. 'Stay close . . . I'll lead.'

His horse went off the road and through the trees that stood like vertical shadows in the night. Martha sat up a bit to look behind. The huldres were showing no sign of giving up, their cruel faces fixed firmly on hers.

'Isn't this the best game?' the tomtegubb asked her.

But if this was a game, it was a very strange and dangerous one. And it was still impossible to say who was going to win, as the huldres remained exactly the same distance behind.

No closer.

No further away.

Two more axes whizzed past but they thudded into tree trunks, and even though the huldres held their swords in the air, there wasn't much they could do with them until they got nearer.

As the chase went on, Martha started to feel a oneness with the horse she was riding, the rhythm of the hooves matching the rhythm of her heart.

'Keep going!' the tomtegubb shouted. 'Run them into the sun!'

At first Martha didn't know what the tomtegubb



was going on about. After all, the sky was still dark.

But then they reached an open plain stretching before them like a large sheet of white paper. She could now see a faint line of purple on the horizon. As the snow melted into the earth, night was slowly melting into day.

She didn't understand why this was important, but she did notice that the two huldres were gaining ground. She noticed also that there seemed to be a new desperate urgency in their voices.

'*Felooka. Felooka!*' Grentul shouted, and turned his horse back towards the cover of the trees.

'*Bastipool!*' Vjpp kept going, thinking of nothing but the delicious cruelty he was going to inflict on the human.

The purple was joined by orange now, pushing the night sky up towards the stars.

'Any time now,' said the tomtegubb in a singful voice.

Vjpp galloped alongside Martha's horse. He swiped his sword and Martha ducked just before it sliced her in two.

The tomtegubb looked up at the brightening sky. 'Any . . . time . . . *now* . . .'

Right then, just as the tomtegubb was muttering

the word *'now'* up to whatever God he believed in, something happened to Vjpp.

He evaporated.

The first light of day had caused his flesh to vaporize, leaving his skeleton to clatter off the horse. Martha turned to see the huldre's skull, with its wide-apart eye-sockets, staring up at her from the snow.

'Whoa there,' said the tomtegubb to his horse, which was more than happy to slow down. The horse that carried Martha did the same.

'That was a close one, wasn't it?'

Martha nodded.

'Where do you want to go now?'

Martha said nothing, but the tomtegubb knew the answer. 'You want to go home,' he said. 'Back to the Outer World.'

Martha nodded. If Samuel was still alive, he would have surely headed back.

'I will lead the way,' said the tomtegubb, turning his horse. 'I will take you as far as I can, and then tell you how to get back.'

Martha felt a great relief, and wanted to thank the creature.

'I might write a song about our adventure,' said the tomtegubb, fiddling with his golden whiskers.

'Yes . . . It will be a long song. Even longer than "The Purple Trousers Song". Now, what shall I call it? "The Lucky Escape"? Or maybe "Galloping to Glory"? What about "The Triumphant Tomtegubb and the Heroic Human"? No, that's too long. Maybe I could just call it "The Triumphant Tomtegubb" and then mention the "Heroic Human" in the verse . . . Oh, all right, I'll mention it in the chorus. But it's hard to find things that rhyme with "human" . . . Now, before we decide on the words, we really ought to get working on a tune . . .'

Martha felt something happen to her face. Her cheeks lifted and her mouth widened. She was *smiling*, and it felt good.

The tomtegubb saw the smile but decided not to comment on it. Instead, he started humming different melodies, and the horses slowly carried him and Martha back towards the trees.

Just as Samuel and Ibsen began to follow Troll-Father's short cut, it had started to snow. Broad white snowflakes fell around them like feathers. Within moments it had become a blizzard. Ibsen kept his mouth open, to catch the flakes on his tongue, while Samuel found shelter under a tree.

The snow was so heavy that there was no use trying to walk any further until it stopped. So Samuel sat himself down on the patch of sheltered ground and, as there were no pine needles, found it a lot comfier than before. Ibsen curled up beside him, and within no time they had drifted off to sleep.

They were still asleep when the snow stopped, and when a two-headed troll walked past on the nearby path. One of the heads had been chopped off and was being carried under an arm, but was still alive. And still very cross. The two heads were so busy arguing they didn't even notice the dog and the human boy under the tree.

'I told you we shouldn't have tried to escape,' said Troll-the-Right, as the purple blood dripped from his neck. 'I told you, but you didn't listen.'

'Would you just stop moaning? Just for a second? If you'd had it your way, we'd be lumps of stone by now.'

'If I'd had my way, we'd never have been locked up in the first place. Why was it me? Why did they slice *my* head off? That's what I don't understand. Where's the justice in that? It wasn't my idea to escape. It wasn't my idea to pick up the axe.'

‘It could have been worse, that’s all I’m saying,’ said Troll-the-Left.

‘Oh, right. Worse. Sure. Could you tell me something worse than having to be carried around by a great, ugly, stupid flenking idiot like you until the end of time?’

Samuel’s half-asleep eyes opened to see Troll-the-Left squat down and place the head of Troll-the-Right on the snowy ground, and then walk off towards Trollhelm.

‘Hey! *Hey!*’ Troll-the-Right’s head shouted. ‘What are you doing? You can’t leave me here! Come back! . . . Hey! Get back here! . . . I’m . . . I’m . . . I’m sorry . . . I didn’t mean to call you ugly . . . or stupid . . . or a flenking idiot . . . Hey, come back!’

Samuel closed his eyes, and sank deeper into sleep.

## GRENTUL'S REWARD

**G**rentul pulled his horse back just in time. He waited in the shade and saw Vjpp become a skeleton, his skull and ribcage clattering together as they hit the ground.

He looked around, desperate. Where was the nearest caloosh hole? If he stayed above ground any longer, even in the shade, he would die. Light was filtering through the canopy of leaves, lending the forest its terrifying daytime colours.

He felt the light pressing down on him, like a drowning man feeling the full weight of the ocean.

Then he saw it. A familiar circle of earth that he knew was a caloosh trap. He dismounted and ran towards it, out of the safe darkness, and felt the light burn his grey blood, ready to dissolve his body.



He reached the circle just in time and down he fell, onto feathers. He called for help. Help came.

Other huldres wanted to know what had happened. Their questions tore at his head like angry wolves. He didn't answer. He just kept running through underground tunnels, heading always in the same direction.

North.

Eventually the tunnels became smaller, less well maintained. These tunnels he was now entering were hardly ever used. They provided a connecting route to the Changemaker that could only be used during the greatest of emergencies. Normally the Changemaker wanted them to travel to him above ground, under cover of night, so they could police the forest along the route.

But if ever there was an emergency, then this was it. Huldre guards had died. Prisoners had just escaped. Two humans were loose in the forest.

Grentul kept running through the unlit, unpopulated tunnels until he was finally there, right under the Still Tree. He felt for the ladder and climbed up. After about twenty steps he rose up through the latch-door and into the darkest chamber of the tree palace.

He rang a bell and waited. A few moments later Professor Tanglewood entered the windowless room. He was in a bad mood because it was the day before his birthday, and he knew no one cared.

‘Shadow Witch!’ he called, having seen the huldre in the candlelight.

‘I am here, master.’ The witch emerged from her chamber. Dark vapours left her mouth, then drew back inside.

‘*Enna klemp oder flimp tee Jangoborff,*’ said Grentul nervously.

The Shadow Witch closed her eyes and mumbled her usual translation spell. The huldre spoke again but was this time understood.

‘I have brought some news for you, Changemaker. About the prisoner.’

‘Is it bad news that you bring?’

‘Yes, Changemaker. It is.’

‘Tell me.’

‘There was a snowstorm. The wagon got stuck . . . in the snow.’

The Shadow Witch looked worried. ‘A snowstorm?’

‘Silence,’ Professor Tanglewood commanded her. And then, to Grentul: ‘Go on.’

‘The wagon . . . got stuck . . . and . . .’

Like a wheel in the snow, the huldre was finding it hard to continue.

‘Go on,’ said the professor.

‘It got stuck and . . . and . . . we noticed the Snow Witch was mumbling something, over and over. A prayer. A curse. At first we didn’t know what. So we . . . opened the cage door. And we went inside to try and stop the Snow Witch . . . to stop her magic . . . and that is when they escaped and attacked us, killing five of the guards.’

The Shadow Witch looked confused. ‘My sister? Why was she there?’

‘Quiet!’ barked the professor.

‘I don’t understand,’ said the Shadow Witch. ‘Those that are brought here are killed. You said my sister could be spared.’

‘Silence!’ boomed the professor.

‘You were going to have me kill my own sister,’ said the Shadow Witch quietly, as the realization took hold.

The professor flapped her words away. ‘Silence, you witch. Silence.’

He turned back to the huldre. ‘Who? Who escaped?’ asked the professor. His voice was calm.

Too calm.

‘The prisoners . . . A tomtegubb, a two-headed troll and the human girl.’

‘The human girl? What human girl?’

The huldre grimaced, as though in pain. But why was he so worried? His master would reward his honesty. Surely he would now understand the strength of Grentul’s devotion.

‘The girl who fell down the hole. Yesterday.’

‘Yesterday? Are there any other humans?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes . . . a boy.’

‘A boy?’ The professor turned to the Shadow Witch, with a look in his eyes that seemed to require a response. The Shadow Witch said nothing. Her mind was somewhere else, lost in a snowstorm.

‘Yes,’ said Grentul.

‘Was he in the cage? Did he escape?’

‘No . . . no, Changemaker. We passed him. By the side of the path. We went after him but he got away.’

‘Away? Two humans? Running free in the forest? This is the news you came to tell me?’

‘Yes, master.’ Grentul allowed himself a slight nervous smile. Surely now the professor was about to reward him for carrying this news so far underground.

The Shadow Witch dared to break her prescribed silence. 'My sister. The Snow Witch. Did she escape as well?'

'No,' said Grentul proudly. 'She's dead.'

The word paralysed the old witch for a moment. Then black tears clouded her eyes and fell down her cheeks. The tears went unnoticed by the professor, who still had more questions.

'Where did you last see the humans?'

'The girl rode off with the tomtegubb. We lost her on the plain.'

'And the boy?'

'He ran towards Trollhelm.'

'Well told,' said the professor.

The huldre looked relieved. 'Thank you, Changemaker.'

Professor Tanglewood looked at his reflection in a mirror. He turned, his face flickering in the candlelight.

'Almost told well enough to let you live.'

'Master? I thought—'

The professor turned to the Shadow Witch and told her: 'Finish him. Do it. It is my order.'

The Shadow Witch hesitated, but then obeyed. She was still thinking of her sister as she blew the

dark vapours towards Grentul. They surrounded him like a cloud and he began to choke.

The professor smiled and took a closer look. ‘That really is quite a cough you’ve got there . . . Not enough air, that’s the problem. All those years living under the ground, walking through those tunnels. Never seeing sunlight . . . But you can remember it, can’t you? You can remember the golden days, chanting your hymns to the sun. The warm light on your face. The happy times when you could stand up straight and see your own shadow, stretched across the grass. When the sun was something you worshipped, not something you feared.’

It felt to Grentul as if he was choking as much on words as on shadows. As the words kept digging deeper, he remembered the last tender moments before the Shadow Witch had arrived in the village. His mother making dinner at the log stove, laying four places at the table, then going outside to see the two ravens that had landed outside the house.

‘Do you remember, Shadow Witch? Do you remember?’ asked the Changemaker. ‘The shadows fled to you like lost children.’

He was closer to the huldre now. Standing over him as the sun-fearing creature cowered at his feet,

choking inside the shade that hung like a mist around him.

‘If you get to live your life again, huldre, which I doubt very much, I give you one piece of advice. Save a witch’s life. If you save a witch from the clutches of death, you own her life much like I own yours.’

The professor laughed and turned round to look at the Shadow Witch. He noticed her black tears.

‘Why are you crying?’

‘It is for nothing, master,’ said the Shadow Witch.

‘If it is for your sister, then you are right, for death is nothing. Nothing at all.’ He laughed again, as the huldre choked below him. ‘Your tears are too late, Shadow Witch. I have tested the love you held for your sister, and it was no match for your servitude . . . Keep going! More shadows! He’s still alive.’

The huldre held onto his own neck, struggling for air as more black vapours swirled around him.

Professor Tanglewood stopped laughing and tried to look serious. ‘Don’t think this is any easier for me, huldre, than it is for that witch. Today I can taste the full burden of my role. I am not evil. Understand that. I am the Protector of the Forest. If you could read my new book, you would understand. If I

hadn't made changes, the forest would be a safe place for humans. And what do you think would happen then? It would be swamped with tourists. Day-trippers. Or they'd have taken you all away and locked you in a zoo. Or a science laboratory. And before long they'd chop the forest to the ground.'

More shadows blew over the huldre.

'Please' – choke – 'please . . .'

'There have to be sacrifices for the greater good. Yours is an honourable death. You die for the forest. Take pride in that. Take pride . . .'

Grentul could see nothing but blackness. As a suffocating pain filled his body, he held onto one last remembrance. Sitting outdoors with his mother as she made one of her sun-carvings, watching the wood peel back and drop on the grass. Her soft, gentle face, lost in concentration.

'Mother,' he said, or tried to, as the last remnants of life were sucked from him.

The Shadow Witch inhaled the shadows back inside her as she stood watching the dead huldre heaped on the ground. His blank, unblinking eyes. The motionless tail, curled in a kind of question mark.

Her sad thoughts broke off with another order from her master.



‘Shadow Witch,’ he said. ‘The two humans are still in the forest. If they are still alive, take their shadows. Change them, in accordance with my policy. Together, Shadow Witch, you and I, we must protect the forest from the Outer World. Now go! Find them!’

Professor Tanglewood watched the Shadow Witch fly away, becoming a dot, then disappearing completely into the sky. He closed his eyes and smiled sadly as he thought of how different it had been in the beginning, when he first met her, all those years ago.

## HOW PROFESSOR TANGLEWOOD MET THE SHADOW WITCH

**B**y the time he arrived in Norway, it can be safely said that Professor Horatio Tanglewood was already thoroughly evil. His horrible life had made him enjoy being nasty in the way other people enjoy a game of tennis or a nice peanut-butter sandwich.

However, he still had a very tiny piece of goodness left inside him, which was evident one day when he was cycling back from Flåm. When he reached his driveway, a very important event happened, although Professor Tanglewood didn't realize its importance at the time.

He saw a cat dangling from the roof. It was a black cat, clinging desperately onto the gutter. Another cat – a white cat – was meowing up from the grass, as if to say, 'Hold on! Hold on! A man with a bicycle is coming to save you!'

A memory came to him from the foggy reaches of his mind. He remembered seeing the two cats before, a long time ago, when he had holidayed here with his mother.

‘Such beautiful darlings, aren’t they, Horatio?’ his mother had said, as she had tickled the white cat’s neck.

‘Yes, Mummy,’ he had told her. ‘Yes, Mummy, yes, they are.’

He mouthed the words again as he halted his bicycle. Suddenly he felt as if he was someone else – not Professor Tanglewood the evil murderer, but seven-year-old Horatio, the boy who still loved the world and the creatures it contained.

Within no time at all he was off his bicycle and galloping into the house. He climbed the stairs three at a time and opened his bedroom window.

‘Here, kitty, here, kitty, it’s all right,’ he said as he stretched his arms as far as they would reach and grabbed hold of the cat’s neck.

Horatio looked at the collar. The protective Hek bracelet had given the Shadow Witch enough strength to hold onto the roof for over an hour.

But no more. The Shadow Witch knew that the Hek bracelet’s powers were not quite as strong

outside the forest. She knew, in short, that the professor had saved her life.

‘*Hek,*’ he read aloud. ‘Who would name a cat after a witch? Unless of course . . . you *are* a witch.’

The black cat ran downstairs and out through the open door, where it joined the white cat in running towards the trees.

The mystery wasn’t solved until Professor Tanglewood explored the forest the following day and found the pixies and other creatures he and his mother had once seen all those years ago.

He suddenly realized that he no longer needed the Outer World.

*How does that world compare to this?* he wondered.

He understood that he could start a new life in this wonderful forest.

He met friendly huldres, learned the art of spickle-dancing, ate gorgeous truth pixie soup and enjoyed comfy naps lying on the belly of a large furry creature called a slemp. But what Professor Tanglewood enjoyed most was that there were no humans whatsoever. All he had was a world of wonderful food, beautiful music and peaceful sleep. He enjoyed the most perfect air, the clearest drinking water and the kind of scenery that only belongs in happy dreams.

In short, the professor had discovered paradise, and his happiness was about to intensify. One night, while he sat talking about sun-worship with an old huldre, he came across two beautiful women.

They were almost identical, except one was dark and one was fair.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘I’m Professor Horatio Tanglewood. You may have heard of me. I’m quite important.’

‘Hello,’ said the fair woman, who breathed a cloud of frosty breath. ‘I’m the Snow Witch. This is my sister, the Shadow Witch.’

‘Hello,’ said the other, whose words rose out of shadows from her mouth. ‘You saved my life.’

The professor was entranced. ‘Did I?’

‘I was the cat who nearly fell to her death.’

‘Oh,’ said the professor. ‘Oh yes. Of course. I remember.’

The Shadow Witch nodded her head. She lifted up her wrist to reveal a black bracelet with a pewter disk hanging from it. He noticed a similar one, but white, on the wrist of the Snow Witch.

‘You saved my sister’s life,’ said the Snow Witch, her pale face melting into a smile. ‘You are a kind and wonderful man. Not like some humans we hear

about. The ones who chop down forests and attack nature. That is why we were there, you see. That is why my sister was on the roof. We keep a lookout, to make sure the forest stays safe.'

Professor Tanglewood was, by this point, most intrigued. He turned to the Shadow Witch, who was, if anything, the more beautiful of the two. 'So,' he said, 'I am a hero. I saved your life. What *exactly* does that mean?'

'There is a code,' said the Shadow Witch. 'The Hek code. A special code of honour for forest witches. So from now on I am your servant. Whatever spells you want to cast, I must cast for you.'

Professor Tanglewood nodded, as if this was the most normal thing he had ever heard in his life.

'So what spells can you cast?' he asked the Shadow Witch, raising his eyebrows in a way that he was convinced made him look exceptionally handsome.

'Any spell at all. So long as it affects the forest. I cannot work magic in the Outer World, but anything inside the forest I can change.'

'You saved the right witch,' said the Snow Witch. 'Her powers are much stronger than mine. I can conjure the snow and make a frost, and do a few

other weather spells, but a Shadow Witch is really the best kind of witch. She can change anything that casts a shadow.'

'Most interesting,' said the professor. 'Most interesting indeed.'

The professor's first wish was for a home. A wooden palace, perched in the branches of the largest tree in the forest.

His second wish was for a pen and paper, which the Shadow Witch conjured out of an old caloosh feather and a pine tree.

'Now,' he said, 'we really need to make sure those stupid villagers stay out of the forest for good.'

'But, master,' said the Shadow Witch, 'my powers are only strong inside the forest.'

The professor nodded. 'I know. I wasn't talking about you. I was talking about me.'

He had decided to cast a spell of his own. He would write about the place where he lived, which he now named Shadow Forest in honour of the beautiful witch he had just met.

In that book he managed to transform all that was wonderful about the forest into something that was terrifying.

The truth pixie's soup became poison.

The comfortable, pillow-bellied slemp became an eater of dreams.

And the sun-loving huldre-folk became underground creatures who worked for an evil being called the Changemaker, which the professor had made up. Of course, to make it realistic, the professor gave each creature a weakness. After all, how would he have been able to leave the forest and publish the book if there wasn't any chance of escape? The huldres, for instance, evaporated in daylight. The truth pixie couldn't tell lies. And so on.

Then, once it was written, he headed back to the Outer World to publish his book, sell his house (to a newly married couple – a javelin thrower and a ski jumper) and wait for the reviews to arrive. They were all bad, of course, but this time Professor Tanglewood wasn't bothered. All that mattered was that the superstitious villagers of Flåm believed every word. They did, as the book only served to confirm their own nightmares. The local bookshop ordered 1,000 copies and sold out in a week.

That the professor then returned to the forest and never came back would only have added more power to his book, and instilled fear in those who read it.



A few months later, he decided to make the creatures even more convincing.

He asked for the Shadow Witch to turn him into a troll, so he could go and steal goats in the Outer World.

‘If the goats in the field were stolen by a troll, then they would know for sure that my book was real and never dare to enter the forest,’ he told the Shadow Witch.

‘Yes, master, but—’

And then, as the professor was looking at the Shadow Witch, he noticed something. ‘You look rather ugly today, Shadow Witch,’ he said. ‘Are you getting wrinkles?’

The Shadow Witch looked sad. ‘Yes, master, yes, I am. Every time I use my magic I get older and uglier. That is how witches age. It takes so much out of us, you see.’

‘Oh well, Shadow Witch. You’re going to get even older and uglier, aren’t you? Now, turn me into a troll. No buts. That is my command, Shadow Witch.’

And so it was. The professor was turned into a troll and he went and stole a goat. And the next night he stole another. And so it went on.

Every goat he stole he roasted over a fire and ate all by himself, until he was sick.

But his plan back-fired . . . In fact, the goat stealing became the very reason why someone decided to enter the forest.

That's right, it was Uncle Henrik.

He left Aunt Eda and followed the three-toed footprints all the way back to the clearing. He knocked on the door of the Still Tree, expecting a troll to answer, but of course he got a human instead. And then he asked the professor to give him his goats back.

The professor viewed Uncle Henrik with interest. He was very stubborn, even by human standards. Rather like a foolish dog.

And then the professor had another idea. He commanded the Shadow Witch to make sure the man could never talk about the forest to anyone in the Outer World.

'But, Professor,' said Uncle Henrik, 'I won't tell anyone about the forest. I don't care about it.'

'Don't care? Don't *care*?! It is paradise.'

'I already have my paradise. On the other side of the forest. I have my wife.'

The professor was not a stupid man. He knew that

a tiny goat farm was not paradise, and was determined not to let this human have the chance to tell others about the wonders of the forest.

‘Shadow Witch. Do as I command. Turn this stubborn man into a stubborn dog.’

‘No!’ Uncle Henrik shouted. And he kept shouting it, over and over again, as his body grew thick hair, as he fell onto all fours, as he shrank and changed shape. ‘No! No! No!’ Eventually the word became something else. A bark. ‘Bark! Bark! Bark!’ And Uncle Henrik began to realize there was nothing he could do to stop himself turning into a dog.

‘Good,’ said the professor as he stared down at Uncle Henrik. ‘It is done.’

## THE SADDEST SIGHT THE SHADOW WITCH HAD EVER SEEN

The Shadow Witch flew over the forest as a raven, scanning the ground for signs of the two human children. She flew over the truth pixie's small cabin and remembered the happy time she and her sister had once spent there, enjoying his wonderful soup. She remembered too the less happy second visit, when she had returned with her master and stolen the creature's shadow.

Of course, she had never wanted to turn the professor's book, *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, into reality. In fact, she had argued with him:

'But, master, it will destroy everything you love. Everything you want to protect. And it will bring great danger. You will be placing your life at risk.'

'Not if you make me the most terrifying creature of all,' said the professor. 'Make them scared of me.'

The one who changed their lives. Let them know me as . . . the Changemaker. Infect that name with terror. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, master.’

‘Then do as I command. Steal shadows and then make the changes I ask for. All of them.’

Of course, there were a few problems. Certain creatures couldn’t be changed.

The tomtegubbs, for instance, cast no shadow. And the trolls’ shadows were too heavy to be stolen. So these Unchanged creatures became enemies of the Changemaker. That is, of Professor Tanglewood, although the professor never let the creatures know his real name.

If the Unchanged were ever caught outside their own regions or trying to escape, the huldres placed them in prison. Then they were sent to the professor, who would command the Shadow Witch to kill them in a cloud of shadows.

Another problem had been the Snow Witch, who made a blizzard that lasted for days, making it more difficult to change all the creatures. The professor ordered the Shadow Witch to steal her sister’s protective Hek bracelet, then rob her of her powers. After this was done the Snow Witch

was sent to huldre prison, never to return.

Now, years later, as the Shadow Witch flew over the forest, she remembered the appalling deeds she had done in order to fulfil her master's command. Such terrible things.

She scanned the ground but there was no sign of the humans.

Maybe they had escaped. The thought consoled her, but she knew it was unrealistic. The chances of two human children escaping the forest alive were close to none. They were either dead, or still to be found.

She swooped lower and followed the main road from above. Gliding down through the air, she could see the tracks of the wagon that had carried the human girl. And the Snow Witch.

When she reached the empty cage, her raven feet landed on one of the top bars. She saw the huldres' skeletons, lying outside on the ground. Inside, she could see no sign of the human girl. There was nothing but some drops of troll blood and the last remnants of snow.

The snow was only on one side of the cage, and in the form of a mound. Body-shaped.

She flew down inside and landed in a shallow puddle of icy water.

*Sister. I am sorry. I never meant to weaken you. Forgive me.*

The melting crystals of snow struck her as the saddest sight she had ever seen. She flew away, her heart heavy with the order she knew she had to follow. Her eyes searched between the trees and across the open plain but there was no sign of the humans. Then she saw something.

At first it was just two dark slow-moving specks heading south through a wide path in the woods.

When she got closer, the specks became a human girl and a tomtegubb riding on white horses. She landed in front of them and shocked them into a stop as she turned back into a witch.

## THE CHANGES

‘Get off!’ the tomtegubb shouted to Martha. ‘Get off the horse and find some shade! Hide your shadow!’

The Shadow Witch tried to shut the tomtegubb up with a silence spell, but she had absolutely no power over him.

‘Get off!’ he told Martha again.

But it was too late. Martha had dismounted from the horse but before she could find shade, the Shadow Witch had almost finished her spell.

Martha stared at the ground and watched as her shadow detached itself from her feet and rose up in a dark vapour, before it was sucked inside the Shadow Witch’s mouth.

‘I am sorry, human child,’ said the Shadow Witch.

The Shadow Witch transformed herself back into



a raven and flew away. The tomtegubb turned to Martha and, for once, looked less than happy. ‘Oh no,’ he told her. ‘You’re going to change.’

And he was right.

Martha felt her dress tighten and sink into her as though it was a second skin. She felt itchy all over, and watched as blue feathers – the same colour as her dress – sprouted out of her arms. This was such a strange sight that she hardly realized she was shrinking at the same time.

For once the tomtegubb was speechless. But in his head he couldn’t help working on the final verse of ‘The Triumphant Tomtegubb’.

*‘And then something happened that was quite absurd:  
The human sprouted wings and became a bird.’*

Martha spread her wings and flew up into the air, finding it as easy as walking. It was as if she had known how to fly all her life, but no one had ever given her the wings she needed to find out.

*‘The songless bird flew high in the air,  
While the tomtegubb just stopped to stare.’*

Martha flew over the forest and, finding the Shadow Witch, decided to follow her, in the hope that she might be changed back into a human.

The Shadow Witch caught sight of a familiar dog's tail sticking out from beneath a tree and swooped down to get a closer look. Martha followed, not realizing she was heading straight for the tree her brother was sleeping under. She landed on one of the branches, while the raven landed away from the shade and turned back into the Shadow Witch's true form.

Ibsen awoke, and growled.

'So,' said the Shadow Witch to the elkhound. 'We meet again.'

Ibsen barked to wake Samuel, and moved out from under the shade.

'Ibsen, what's the matter?' Samuel asked.

Ibsen ran and jumped high into the air, with his growling jaws heading for the Shadow Witch's neck. Samuel opened his eyes and saw the old woman with long black hair and a long black tunic who breathed black vapours as she spoke.

'Still,' said the Shadow Witch. The dog duly froze in the air, as static as a photo. 'Sleep.' The spell caused Ibsen to fall and land softly. He was already deeply asleep as he touched the ground.

‘Hey! What have you done to my dog?’

Martha waited for Samuel to become a bird but he didn’t. The Shadow Witch knew that birds all understand each other, and she knew that the two children talking to each other, even as birds, would be against her master’s wishes. So she had to think of an animal of the land, not the air. And one hopped along the path just at that moment.

‘Please,’ said Samuel, standing up. ‘Don’t hurt me. I’m only in the forest to find my sister.’

He ran out from under the shade of the tree, his shadow stretching before him in the morning sun. Then he had a sudden feeling of lightness as he ran straight over the shadow, as if it were a black rug on the ground. He watched it rise into dark vapours that floated back towards the Shadow Witch.

Not knowing what to do, he pulled the book out from under his sweater and held it between him and the witch to try and block her magic. It was no good. The witch closed her eyes and spoke words that crept inside Samuel’s ears like insects, making his head feel itchy from the inside. Soon his whole body itched.

He dropped the book and felt his face. Soft fur was growing on his chin, his cheeks, his forehead. And



then he noticed his ears begin to change shape, stretching high over his head.

‘I’m sorry . . . We didn’t mean to enter the forest . . .’

His mouth, his tongue and his teeth were changing as he spoke.

‘Please, I won’t—’

Before he had time to finish his sentence, the transformation was complete. Samuel the human had become something else.

Not a bird, like his sister, but a rabbit.

‘I must leave you,’ said the Shadow Witch as a black tear rolled down her wrinkled cheek. She became a raven again and flew slowly back to her master, leaving the rabbit and the blue-feathered bird to fend for themselves.

## INSIDE THE SACK

**S**amuel the rabbit tried to wake Ibsen.  
'Ibsen! Wake up! Wake up!'

It was no good.

Either Ibsen couldn't understand rabbit language, or he was so deeply asleep he wouldn't have heard anything anyway.

The blue-feathered bird was still sitting on the branch. Still watching.

'What do you want?'

The bird didn't answer.

Samuel tried Ibsen again. 'Wake up! We've got to find Martha. We've got to go to the Changemaker.'

Of course, Samuel didn't have a clue what he was going to do when he *got* to the Changemaker. What match was a rabbit going to be for a creature who terrified a whole forest? And even if his sister

was still alive, how was she going to recognize him?

All he knew was that he had to keep trying to find her, no matter what. So he tried to wake Ibsen one last time and then set off, hopping down the path, with the blue-feathered bird landing on branches in front of him, watching his every move.

He spent the afternoon trying to remember the troll's directions, but he soon realized that a rabbit's memory wasn't a match for a human's.

Before long he was completely lost. The afternoon turned into evening, and the forest became bathed in orange light. Trees loomed for miles above him, casting shadows that seemed to stretch for ever.

It grew dark.

The infinite shadows disappeared under the blanket of night. Rabbits ran past him looking desperate. They were all headed in the opposite direction.

One stopped in front of him.

'They're coming! They're coming!' she told him.

'Who are coming?'

The rabbit had no time to answer. She hopped towards the undergrowth, while Samuel turned and watched her fluffy tail bounce away into the distance.

Then his newly sensitive ears heard something. Something behind him, getting closer. It sounded

like a stampede of elephants, but when he turned round, he discovered it was in fact a stampede of giants, running in a line towards him.

*Oh no*, thought Samuel as he realized he was totally exposed.

He started to hop towards the ferns and high grass where the other rabbit had headed. But Samuel was too slow, as he still hadn't got used to having his back legs bunched up by his sides.

'Come on! You can make it!'

*Who was that? Where had that voice come from?*

And then he saw a pair of eyes in the grass. It was the rabbit who had told him 'They're coming!' She was now giving encouragement from her hiding place.

'Hop! Use your legs!'

'I can't,' Samuel said. 'I'm not used to it!'

'You're thinking too much. Stop thinking! As soon as you stop thinking it will come naturally.'

Samuel couldn't stop thinking. He tried and he tried, but his brain was working far quicker than his body.

'Push down on the ground. Thump that earth! That's it! That's—'

Just as Samuel was starting to get the hang of



hopping like a proper rabbit, something tugged him by the ears high into the air.

‘Argh! Get off! Get off my ears!’

He was pulled upwards, feeling sick as he watched the ground shoot away from him at incredible speed.

‘Help! Please! Get off me!’

He was hanging in the air, face to face with the giant who held him.

*No. It couldn't be.*

The huge eye, perched directly above the enormous red bulbous nose, stared in wonder at the furry creature.

‘We be having a fine one here, Troll-Mother,’ said Troll-Father. ‘A right tasty specimen, I reckon. He’ll bubble up real good, this one will.’

Samuel could see the three eyeless members of the troll family behind, holding onto each other’s dirty clothes. They passed the rabbit sack down the line towards Troll-Father.

‘No!’ Samuel said, the furry skin above his eyes stretching back to the point of pain. ‘No! It’s me! Samuel! The human boy! You liked me. You gave me directions. You gave me rab— food.’

But it was no good. Troll-Father might have understood the fear in Samuel’s eyes, but as far as he

was concerned it was fear belonging to just another rabbit, not the human boy who had run into their house.

‘Right, into the sack with you.’

The next thing Samuel knew he was dropping through the air and into blackness.

‘Aaaaaaargh!’

He landed on the rough woven fabric and tried to get his balance, but the sack was bouncing on Troll-Father’s back as he walked. A tiny hole let in the light of distant stars.

The trolls marched on, but found no more rabbits. Samuel’s heart thumped fast inside him, and his furry skin itched with fear. He remembered the knife he had held, soaked with rabbit blood.

Amid such bleak thoughts, something else grew inside his mind. A feeling that, whatever happened, things might still be all right. This was the most ridiculous feeling he had ever had in his life.

After all, he was a rabbit. He was trapped in a sack. He was intended for a casserole.

But like the distant stars that kept shining through the hole in the rough weave of the sack, this feeling of hope stayed with him. After all, he’d survived evil huldres, a murderous pixie and a deadly slemp.

And he'd done this by concentrating on what really mattered – finding Martha.

So in his mind he kept saying his sister's name.  
Just her.

Just Martha.

*Martha.*

Until there was nothing else.

## THE SERVANTS OF THUBULA

**A**fter a length of time – somewhere between a second and for ever – Samuel was pulled out of the sack by his ears and roughly thrown into the pen with some other rabbits.

‘Please!’ Samuel called after Troll-Father. ‘This is a mistake! It’s me! Me! The human boy!’

Troll-Father wasn’t listening. Samuel pressed his face into the criss-cross pattern of wire as he watched Troll-Father direct his eyeless family through their crooked door. ‘Left. Left. Right a bit. Left. That’s it. Straight through. Be minding your feet, Troll-Daughter. There you go.’

The door closed, along with Samuel’s hope. Turning round, he saw about thirty other rabbits in the opposite corner of the pen.

Samuel hopped over and, as he got closer, heard

a low and solemn voice.

‘O Thubula, we thank you for letting our brother travel safely to your green field, with its endless supply of carrots . . .’

The old grey rabbit who faced the other rabbits stopped talking and looked at the new arrival to the pen. The others all turned to stare.

‘Sorry,’ Samuel said. ‘Carry on.’

The old rabbit carried on with what he was saying. Samuel guessed it was some kind of religious service, judging by the bowed heads and serious words.

More prayers were made to ‘Wise Thubula’, ‘Almighty Thubula’, ‘Most Gracious Thubula’, ‘All-seeing Thubula’, and Samuel worked out that this much-respected Thubula must be the god of rabbits.

He also figured out that Thubula must be the type of god who likes to be flattered for a very long time, because the service went on until dawn.

Samuel looked past the solemn old rabbit and through the wire fence. As he looked over the trees at the wakening sky, he knew he might only have a day. He had to escape.

He quietly left the huddled rabbits and hopped around the perimeter of the fence. Yesterday he

would have been able to step over it with ease, but now it was ten times his height.

He tried to lift his front feet and slot them through the fence in order to start climbing, but it was no good. He kept on getting trapped in the wire mesh.

Then the voice of the old rabbit was right behind him, up close.

‘My name is Greytail. I am the spiritual adviser for our community. I am here to welcome you to the— What are you doing?’

‘I’m escaping,’ Samuel said, pulling a foot free of the wire. He didn’t turn round.

‘And why in the name of Thubula would you want to do that?’

‘Because I’m not a rabbit. I’m a human. I’m a boy called Samuel. I went into the forest to find my sister but now I have fur and . . . these ears . . . and . . . I’ve got to escape.’

Samuel’s nose began to twitch really slowly. At first he wondered what was happening, but then he realized this must be how rabbits cry.

‘There is nothing to fear,’ said the old rabbit.

‘What’s a human, Daddy?’ Samuel turned to see a bunny looking up at Greytail.

‘A human is a rabbit from the other side of the

forest. Don't worry, bunnies. Humans are just like us, only maybe a little more confused.'

'I've got to escape,' Samuel said.

'Escape?' The word rippled through the rabbits like a pebble falling into water.

'It's dangerous. It's important to get out,' Samuel told them. 'You should all try and get out.'

The rabbits all laughed at the same time. It was only Greytail whose whiskers didn't move at all.

'Some rabbits want to leave when they first arrive,' he said. 'That is normal. But I will educate you about the Truth the way I have educated the others.'

'The Truth?'

'Yes,' said Greytail. 'The Truth. Because I have a feeling you might believe in the rumours.'

'Rumours?' asked Samuel.

'The rumours that often go around the forest – about our captors. Some say they are trolls who skin us and chop off our heads and cook us in casseroles.'

When Greytail said the words 'chop' and 'cook', more waves of laughter filled the pen.

'But that's true,' said Samuel, his words drowning in the commotion.

'The truth is, we are lucky,' said Greytail. 'We are the Chósen.'

‘The Chosen,’ said the other rabbits all at once, in a tone of reverence.

Samuel couldn’t believe what he was hearing. ‘The Chosen?’

‘We were brought here by the Servants of Thubula.’

*‘The Servants of Thubula?’*

Greytail explained to him that the rabbits in the pen were all very lucky indeed, because they had been chosen by the servants of Thubula (who Samuel knew were really the trolls) to enter the Green Field on the other side of the cottage. Of course, there was a real green patch of ground that Samuel had run through when he was escaping the huldres. But the Green Field the rabbits believed in was very different indeed.

‘The Green Field of Thubula is a beautiful paradise where rabbits roam free, with no need to hide in warrens,’ said Greytail. ‘It is a magical place where old rabbits become young again and no rabbit ever dies.’

‘No,’ said Samuel. ‘The place on the other side of the cottage is the exact opposite of that. It is the place where rabbits always die. The trolls have a bench and a knife and—’



Greytail closed his eyes and lifted his head towards the light blue sky. 'They are *not* trolls. There is no bench. And no one dies. I can see that I'm going to have my work cut out freeing your mind from nonsense.'

Samuel hopped past Greytail and addressed the crowd directly. 'Listen to me! All of you, listen to me! The only thing that waits for you on the other side of that cottage is certain death. There is no Green Field of Thubula!'

A few bunnies began to cry, and the adults kept saying over and over: 'Shame! Shame! Shame!'

Greytail whispered in Samuel's ear, 'Don't upset the bunnies. No one will forgive you if you upset the bunnies.'

The rabbits were surrounding Samuel from every angle now, moving closer.

'Shame! Shame! Shame!'

Samuel wondered for a moment if the angry rabbits could be more dangerous than the trolls. But Greytail stopped the advancing mob by raising his ears and commanding: 'Quiet.'

A short silence followed.

Then he said: 'Leave him. He is a human. They are the most ignorant type of rabbit. Leave us to talk,

and I will educate him on Thubula and His plan to prepare us for the Green Field.'

Samuel watched as the mob of angry rabbits moved away from him, comforting their bunnies as they did so. 'No, no, he didn't mean it,' he overheard one parent saying. 'There are no trolls. Don't worry.'

The old rabbit's eyes fixed on the new arrival in front of him.

'You are mistaken,' he said. 'The Truth is, once you have proved the purity of your soul, the mighty Thubula will send His servants to carry you to the land where we are free.'

Samuel was getting cross now, and as he was a rabbit he had no way of hiding his crossness.

'You're wrong, you stupid old rabbit! The creatures who catch us and put us in here are *trolls*. They are not servants of Thubula. I don't even know who Thubula is, and I don't think they do either.'

'Thubula is the giant rabbit who created everything,' said Greytail. 'Thubula hopped around the world and made the valleys with His heavy feet. Thubula created you and me and every other living thing just by imagining us.'

Samuel was completely confused. The only thing he knew for certain was that he still had to get out.

‘Even if you want to escape, there is no way out,’ said Greytail, surveying the enclosure. ‘The fence is too high, the wire is too strong, the ground is too hard. I am telling you the truth. There is no way out of here.’

‘But how do you know if you’ve never tried?’

Greytail sighed. ‘You must understand that there are different kinds of escape.’

Samuel followed the old rabbit’s stare towards the crowd on the other side of the enclosure.

‘I don’t . . . understand,’ he said.

Two bunnies were playing a game that involved trying to stop the other one from touching their ears.

‘You see how happy they are?’ asked Greytail.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that is the kind of escape I offered them, and their parents. And everyone in here.’

Samuel was hardly listening now. He was trying to dig a hole in the ground, but Greytail had been right – the soil was very hard.

‘It will take you more than a day to dig a tunnel . . . and then you will get caught and they’ll block it up,’ said Greytail. ‘I tried it once the night I got here, five full moons ago . . . I am the only rabbit from that time who is still here now . . . Oh, but it was a very

different place then. Total chaos. Everyone was panicking, praying for the sun never to go down, dreading the fate that awaited them.'

Samuel stopped digging. 'But I thought everyone was happy to be here.'

'They are,' said Greytail. 'I have made sure of it.'

'You? How? I don't—'

'Rabbits kept disappearing. Night after night after night. Everyone lived in dread that it would be their ears that would be grabbed next.' Greytail paused and stared at the small blue-feathered bird that had just landed on the fence.

'So what happened?' asked Samuel.

Greytail sighed again. 'When new rabbits arrived, I started telling them a story.'

'A story?'

'About Thubula. The giant rabbit.'

Greytail stared at Samuel for a very long time, as if he was a problem he didn't know how to solve.

'Two nights ago we lost one of our most dear friends, Flicker-Nose,' he said. 'A young rabbit, in his prime. They came in the night and took him away from us. Now, what is it better to believe? That he's been killed and skinned and cooked and then digested inside a troll's stomach? Or that he's been

chosen by Thubula's servants to live a happy life in a rabbit's paradise on the other side of that cottage?'

Samuel didn't know the answer, so he kept quiet. And then a dreadful thought came to him, arriving with an echo of Greytail's words.

*Two nights ago . . . cooked and digested . . .*

The rabbit he had eaten in the casserole had been Flicker-Nose. Samuel felt sick, and wondered if it made him a cannibal.

Greytail pointed his nose towards the happy crowd of rabbits and bouncing bunnies. 'Look at them. Look at the peaceful and content community we have here. There's no fear or anarchy any more. And that is all because they have hope. The shadow that used to be cast across the mind of every rabbit put in this enclosure has been replaced by light. And you aren't going to change that with your frightening stories, do you understand me?'

'It's not a story,' said Samuel. 'It's the truth. And I've got to escape and find my sister.' He made one final plea. 'If we don't work together, we're all going to die.'

'No rabbit lives for ever,' said Greytail. 'Just ask my aching bones. The question is, do we live happily or miserably in the meantime?'

He didn't wait for an answer. He just turned and hopped his slow body back over to the other rabbits.

Samuel knew he was on his own now. Without Greytail's help, the other rabbits wouldn't believe him.

He looked towards the rising sun, and the bird on the fence lost in its glare. *Why is it following me?* he wondered. *What does it want?* Samuel didn't know, and right now he had bigger things to think about. He moved towards the wire, passing through the grid of shadows. And then, when he was as close to freedom as he could possibly get, he started to dig.

## DIGGING THE TUNNEL

‘He’s mad!’

‘What a weird style of digging!’

‘Why would he want to escape?’

‘What in the name of Thubula is he doing?’

Samuel tried to ignore the other rabbits as he dug his tunnel. They sat around him, laughing and passing comment, as if it was a kind of theatre. The only rabbit who didn’t laugh at Samuel was Greytail, who sat in silence for the whole day.

As Samuel dug deeper, the voices became more distant. His front legs were aching but he kept going, determined to get as far as he could before nightfall. All day he dug and dug and dug, the earth above him sprinkling down onto his fur and into his eyes.

‘Please,’ he called back at one point. ‘Please, could one of you help me?’

But no one offered.

He longed to have his human arms back, or his human legs, which could so easily stride over the fence, but he made do with what he had. And what he had was determination. No matter how much soil went in his eyes, and no matter how scared he was of the dark closed space of the tunnel, his paws kept on digging.

All the time he only had one thought, and that thought was: *I have to escape.*

There were other voices in the dark.

Earthworms, beetles, tiny insects and all those other animals of the ground he could now understand so clearly.

‘Hey, you just tore me in two.’

Samuel looked down to see where the voice had come from and could just about make out the shine of half an earthworm.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

‘What a week,’ grumbled the earthworm as it tried to wriggle its half-body back into the earth.

Samuel kept on burrowing, with his long ears pressed against the top of the tunnel. At one point the blue-feathered bird flew in and stood there watching him.



‘Go away,’ said Samuel.

The bird said nothing. It just stayed with its unblinking eyes staring in the dark.

‘Go away. You’re blocking the light.’

The bird did as it was told, and Samuel kept on digging. He was dizzy with hunger. His eyes were stinging from the crumbling soil. His tiny heart was beating so hard he could feel blood pulse against his skull. As if that wasn’t enough, his skin itched from the combination of fur and sweat.

Eventually he had to stop. The pain in his paws and legs was too much.

‘Five minutes,’ he told himself, although now he was a rabbit he had no idea how to keep track of time.

There was a noise behind him.

He turned his head and saw soil falling like rain.

*Oh no. This can’t be happening.*

He tried to turn his whole body round, but the tunnel was too narrow. As he struggled, he made the situation a lot worse.

A cloud of soil covered his fur and filled his lungs – the tunnel behind him was collapsing.

‘Help! Help! Somebody!’ But his voice was blocked by a wall of earth.

*This is it, thought Samuel. I'm going to be buried alive. This is the end.*

But it wasn't. The earth stopped falling just before it reached Samuel's hind legs. He was trapped under the ground with earth all around him like a coffin.

*Coffin.*

The word stuck in his brain as he started to dig, forward and upward, with new energy.

The ground could collapse on him again at any moment, making him one more dead rabbit in a world of dead rabbits. He dug uphill, no longer caring which side of the fence he came out on. Panic had given him more energy, but he was finding it harder and harder to breathe.

At school he had been able to hold his breath for whole lengths of the swimming pool and pick up plastic bricks underwater. But now he was a rabbit he couldn't hold his breath at all.

Just as he was about to run out of air completely, the earth fell down on him and everything was darkness.

*I am dead, thought Samuel. No. I am still thinking. I must still be alive.*

The earth felt light, not heavy on his head. He shook it off and blinked and found himself out in the open.

*It is night-time. I must have been digging all day.*

He looked behind him and saw the other rabbits staring at him from behind the fence.

‘He has betrayed Thubula!’

‘He has refused paradise!’

‘Shame on him!’

‘Shame!’

At the end of the line of rabbits was Greytail, saying nothing.

After all, what could the old rabbit say? Samuel had shown him that it was possible to escape before the—

*‘Aaaargh!’*

Samuel was yanked high into the air by his ears. He recognized the grip instantly as that belonging to Troll-Father.

‘No!’ the rabbits shouted. ‘Pick me! Pick me! He’s not worthy! He’s not worthy of the Green Field!’

But Troll-Father begged to differ. ‘Nearly got away there, didn’t you?’ He held Samuel up in front of him as he walked round to the other side of the cottage. ‘Don’t think you’ll be escaping now though, furry fellow. Not unless you be digging a tunnel out of our stomachs!’

## THE MIRACLE

**B**y the time they reached the wooden bench, Samuel's ears felt like they were about to tear off. He saw the brilliant white moon reflected in the metal knife, and became fully aware of what was about to happen.

The booming voice of Troll-Father sounded miles above him: 'Troll-Mother, I've got him ready. He'll skin good, this one will.'

The door opened, and Troll-Mother walked blindly towards the bench. 'Where he be hiding then?' she asked, her hands out in front of her, the fingers opening and closing like dangerous plants.

Troll-Father placed Samuel on the table, with a heavy hand fixing him in place. Samuel's rabbit face stared up at him from the blade of the massive knife.

‘Ah, yes, he be there . . . *he be there . . .*’ said Troll-Mother, her fingers reaching his fur. She pressed deeper, to feel the life she was about to take. ‘*He be there.*’

Samuel could hardly believe that these were the same trolls who had been so kind two nights ago.

‘It’s me,’ he said. ‘It’s me. I’m not a rabbit. I’m a human. A human. I know I look like a rabbit but I’m not one. I just changed. Please . . .’

It was useless, of course.

They couldn’t hear him. Trolls may understand humans and humans may understand trolls but neither understand rabbits.

Samuel tried to work out how long he had left. Troll-Mother had to put in her eye and sharpen her knife, and then . . . well, that was all she had to do. However long these two jobs were going to take was the precise length of the rest of Samuel’s life.

Something flew over Samuel’s head. A tiny dot, reflected in the cold metal in front of his face.

*What was that?* he wondered.

Before he had time to think, he heard Troll-Mother’s voice again.

‘Give me the eye. Let me see the little beauty. Come on, pass it over, you useless lump.’

‘All right,’ said Troll-Father, sticking his finger into his eye-socket.

Samuel heard a wet clicking sound as the eye was pulled out.

‘Right, Troll-Mother, there you be. There’s the—’

Troll-Father’s words were replaced by the sound of fluttering wings. And just at that exact moment his hand, as well as Troll-Mother’s, left Samuel’s back. Samuel looked up and saw what was happening.

And so, what *was* happening?

A miracle, that’s what.

Just as Troll-Father was passing the eyeball over to his wife, a bird flew right in front of his face. It was the bird that had been following Samuel. The one with blue feathers that had flown into the tunnel.

‘Argh, get off! Who’s there?’ Troll-Father said as the feathers flapped in his face.

Then Samuel saw the eye slip out of his hand and drop onto the bench in front of him, rolling straight towards the edge.

‘I’ve dropped it,’ Troll-Father said. ‘I’ve dropped the eye . . . There was a bird—’

Troll-Mother started screaming. ‘You stupid flenking idiot! Find it! You hairy lump! Find it!’

‘All right,’ said Troll-Father. ‘Don’t be getting



hipperty.’ His hands landed on the table, searching for the eye. They were about to reach it when the bird flew down and picked it up in its clawed feet, before flying off high in the air.

‘Well?’ Troll-Mother asked. ‘Have you found it?’

‘I’m . . . er . . . it’s here somewhere.’

While Troll-Father searched for the eye, Troll-Mother searched for Samuel.

‘Come here, rabbit,’ she said as her hands moved like crabs across the bench. ‘Where are you? Come here, fur-brain . . . come to Troll-Mother . . .’

Samuel hopped as fast as he could away from the hands heading his way. After three hops he was at the edge, staring down at the ground below.

*Jump*, he told himself. *Jump. Do it.*

A finger touched his fur. Samuel closed his eyes. He remembered his dad taking him up to the high diving board at the swimming pool. He hadn’t dared jump. Now, though, he had no choice. He had to be brave, like a hero.

He closed his eyes and hopped out into the empty air. It seemed ages before he hit the ground.

*Thud.*

The landing hurt, but he could still hop. Which he did, as fast as he possibly could, away from the blind



trolls, who kept feeling along the bench for their missing rabbit and eyeball.

Samuel hopped round to the other side of the cottage and saw the bird fly towards the rabbit enclosure.

If his eyes had been stronger, he would have been able to see that same bird letting the eyeball drop directly into the hole Samuel had dug his way out of earlier that day, giving it an almost perfect view of the shining stars and the brilliant white moon above.

## THE ELKHOUND'S RETURN

Professor Tanglewood had been writing a birthday card to himself when the Shadow Witch flew back to him and brought him news.

'Well? Is it done?' Professor Tanglewood studied the Shadow Witch but she wasn't looking into his eyes. He began to worry that she hadn't found the human children. Maybe that was why she had been so long.

'Yes, master. The humans have been changed.'

'Into what, if I may ask?' The professor was clearly relieved, and his question had an almost happy playfulness about it.

'Into a bird. And a rabbit.'

'A rabbit!' The professor looked startled at the thought. 'Who? The boy or the girl?'

'The boy, master.'

‘A stroke of genius. What a fantastic birthday present for me. He will never survive.’

She was looking straight at him now, but he couldn’t read her expression. Studying her too dark eyes was like staring down two bottomless wells.

‘He was with someone,’ she said.

‘The boy?’

‘Yes. He was with a dog.’

‘A dog? What type of dog?’

‘An elkhound.’

Professor Tanglewood’s eyes widened in disbelief.

‘No.’

The Shadow Witch suddenly looked worried, and regretted giving this information. ‘Master, I don’t thi—’

The professor raised his hand to silence her. He took a deep breath, as if the news was something that needed to be inhaled in order to be fully understood. ‘He must have told them.’

‘Master?’ The Shadow Witch didn’t understand.

‘The elkhound must have brought them into the forest.’

‘But, master, it makes no sense. Why would he want to do that? Why would he want to return? Why would he put the children’s lives in danger?’

And how can a *dog* tell a human anything?’

The professor flapped away the Shadow Witch’s questions as if they were annoying flies. ‘Our laws are no longer enough. We must reconsider what we are to do with humans who enter the forest.’

‘Master, if we transform the humans into animals, the forest will always be—’

‘Safe? How can you say that when you know that is no longer the case? We transform a human into a dog and what happens? The dog brings more humans into the forest.’

‘Master, we don’t know—’

‘Silence! You are not here to question me. You are here to obey me. I saved your life. I *saved* your *life*. The Hek code. You do remember the Hek code, don’t you?’

‘Yes, master. Of course. I am a witch. The code is what I am.’

He stood up from his desk. ‘Very well. Then you must do as I command.’

‘Master, what is it that you command?’

‘I want you to find the human children and kill them. Both of them. The girl as well as the boy. That will teach that stupid elkhound.’

There was a pause – a long pause – and the

Shadow Witch said: 'Yes, I understand.'

The professor shook his head. 'No.'

'Master?'

He was looking at her, and saw something new inside those dark, gleaming eyes. Something he didn't trust. After all, why had it taken so long for her to return to him? Was she weakening?

'Give me your Hek bracelet.'

'My Hek bracelet, master? Are you going out of the clearing? Is that why you need it? To protect you?'

'Yes,' lied the professor. 'Now. I command you.'

The Shadow Witch reluctantly slipped the bracelet off her grey wrist and handed it over to her master.

'Now, give me your powers,' he demanded.

'Master?' She had heard, but she did not understand.

'I command you to give me your powers.'

'But, master, my powers are a burden you do not want.' She looked at the birthday card he was writing to himself, and felt a deep hatred for her master.

Professor Tanglewood took a deep breath and closed his eyes. 'Give. Me. Your. Powers.'

The Shadow Witch thought of her sister, melting in the cage, and found a new strength inside her.

‘Master, I can’t.’

The professor opened his eyes and looked at the Shadow Witch as if she was someone new. ‘You can’t? You *can’t*? What about the Hek code? It is inscribed into the essence of your being. My order is your command.’

‘Master, there is something even more powerful than the Hek code. Something which has been buried, but which has now risen once again inside me.’

The professor gasped in disbelief. ‘Pray, tell me. What is this deep and powerful thing?’

The Shadow Witch paused, as if hardly believing her own resistance. ‘The love I have for my sister.’

‘Your sister is dead.’

She nodded. ‘I know. But the love lives stronger than ever before.’

‘I don’t understand. What has your sister got to do with anything?’

The Shadow Witch cried more black tears. ‘I have done terrible things in your name. Terrible things. I have turned paradise into a nightmare. And I can’t do it any more. I can’t give you my powers . . . I’m sorry.’

Her head dropped when she finished talking, as if the words had been keeping it upright. She turned and walked past the pickled heads, out of the room. She kept walking through the windowless chamber, passing the skeleton of the last huldre she had been forced to kill, and headed towards the door of the tree house. She was so lost in miserable thoughts that she did not hear the professor creep across the floor, unsheathe the huldre's sword and pull it back through the air, ready to deliver the fatal strike.

'I am sorry too,' he said, before pushing the blade through her body and back out. Black blood dripped from the sword.

The Shadow Witch found strength enough to turn round.

'*Why?*' she whispered.

Following the word, shadows left her mouth in vapours. Professor Tanglewood understood that the shadows were the source of her magic and so pressed his mouth against her dying lips; he felt a new and dark power enter his body. All the shadows of every changed creature – including Samuel and Martha – were now drawn into him. He could control them all. And do exactly what he wanted.

'Now I truly am something to be feared,' he said

as his skin changed from pink to grey. 'I am a true Changemaker.'

The Shadow Witch collapsed into his arms, and he held her there for a moment, in the windowless room. Waiting as the dark vapours he had inhaled began to take over every part of him.



## THE BOY WHO JUST ABOUT KNEW HE WAS SAMUEL

The blue-feathered bird was hard to keep track of. It was dark and, from a distance, the bird didn't look either blue or feathered. It was just a small dark dot vanishing into a dark and windy night.

Samuel kept hopping, aware of the blind trolls behind him, still groping around for their eyeball.

'Shame!'

'Shame!'

'Shame!'

'Shame!'

He ignored the chants of the rabbits, but there was something else bothering him. The ground seemed to be tilting forward. He looked around, but none of the rabbits seemed to notice.

'What's happening?' he asked the rabbits. 'The ground's moving. Can't you feel it?'

Of course, the ground wasn't really tilting. What had happened was that the professor – or rather, the being the professor had become – was using his new powers to draw Samuel back to his shadow. A shadow that was now contained, along with all the others, inside the professor's body.

The effect for Samuel, though, was of gravity shifting ninety degrees, turning the flat ground into a vertical cliff face. A cliff face with trees sticking out of it.

His body dropped.

*'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!'* He twitched really fast, which is how rabbits scream. Fortunately (if such a word can be used in such a situation) the spell made sure that Samuel avoided crashing into any trees. On and on he fell, sliding down upward slopes, flying over each descent, skimming over the open plain that Troll-Father had told him about. The sensation of falling was so strong that he was unaware that he was also changing back from a rabbit to his normal self.

*'Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!'*

The scream came out of his mouth now, not as a series of fast twitches, and it lasted right until he reached the clearing. There, the ground lay back

down and gravity stood back up and Samuel skidded to a complete stop.

He was a boy again. A human. His skin no longer itched with fur.

He lifted his head. In the distance he could see a small fire. Behind the fire was a huge tree with a wooden palace perched in its branches. The tree was darker than the trees that were further away, even though it was near the fire. And it seemed too still, even for a tree, its branches completely unaffected by the wind.

## THE SISTER BIRD

‘**C**hangemaker!’ Samuel shouted towards the Still Tree. ‘Where’s my sister?’

A grey figure stepped out of the wooden palace and turned into a raven. He flew towards Samuel, landing in his natural form a few metres in front of him.

Samuel noticed how strange the figure looked. Like a man who lived in a world of no colours. His skin wasn’t pink or yellow or brown like human skin, but various shades of grey. Indeed, it wasn’t possible to think of Professor Tanglewood as a human any more. Consumed by shadows, he had at last turned into his own invention, the sinister overlord known to all the forest – and Samuel – as the Changemaker.

His lips were dry and black, as if they were made of thin pieces of charcoal. That shadowy darkness

was in his eyes too, and under them, blackening the vertical scar on his face.

It wasn't his looks that made the Changemaker so terrifying, however. It was the way he made Samuel feel as he walked nearer. He was casting a memory spell, like the Shadow Witch had once done, but Samuel couldn't remember that. He only knew what he was feeling.

Weak. Confused. A stranger in his own shadowless body.

'Who am I?' Samuel mumbled to himself. 'I am Samuel. Remember. *Samuel*. Samuel. Sam-uel?'

His own name sounded foreign to him, as if it belonged to someone else.

'Hello, Samuel.' Black vapour left the Changemaker's lips as he spoke, and went up his nostrils.

'You . . . are . . . the . . . Change . . .' Samuel found it a strange effort to speak, as if the words were heavy things to be carried.

'I'm so glad you could join me. It's my birthday, you know.'

Samuel felt like he was about to faint, but he kept himself together enough to say: 'My sister . . .'

The Changemaker looked irritated that Samuel hadn't acknowledged his birthday.

‘Your sister. Yes? What about her?’

‘She . . . where . . . she . . .’

‘I’m sorry. You’re not speaking any sense. What is it with young humans nowadays? Where’s their grasp of language? All right. I’ll make an educated guess. You want to know the whereabouts of your silent sibling. Am I right?’

Samuel didn’t have any idea if this was what he wanted to know. It was as though his mind had been stolen along with his shadow. In fact, his mind was so lost that he no longer felt scared. (You might think this was a good thing, but there is only one thing worse than feeling scared, and that is feeling nothing at all.)

‘Well,’ said the Changemaker, ‘there she is. Up there in the tree. Can you see her?’

Samuel looked but couldn’t see anything.

‘Look closer . . .’

Samuel strained his eyes and saw a dot at the end of the branch that stuck out higher and further than any other. A bird. Why was his sister a bird?

A single memory entered the desert of Samuel’s brain. A memory of the bird that had saved him from the trolls when he was a rabbit.

‘I don’t know why you would care,’ said the

Changemaker. 'What use is a songless bird? It's about as good as a body without a shadow . . . or a child without his—' He stopped, and a look of sadness fell across his grey face. 'Never mind. Don't worry about your sister. If she wants to be up the tree, let her stay there.' He called up to Martha: 'Say hello to your brother. Say hello . . . Oh, silly me. How can a bird say hello?'

The Changemaker closed his eyes as his cracked lips began chanting some kind of spell. When he was finished, Martha was suddenly transformed from a bird into her original form. A ten-year-old girl in a navy-blue dress stuck on the highest branch of the tree.

Samuel looked and could see what was happening, but his mind was too weak to know what to do or why to do it. Even if he had thought of something, it would have been too late. The thin branch could hold a tiny bird much more easily than it could a human, and gave up trying.

Martha fell, down and down and down, her dress making the most hopeless of parachutes. But centimetres before she hit the ground her body froze in the air. Then she sat up as if she was lying on an invisible bed and placed her feet on the ground.

‘Come, children,’ said the Changemaker. ‘Let me tell you a story.’

Samuel noticed something speed past his head, flying through the air. At first he thought it was another bird, but when he saw it stop in the air and float down into the Changemaker’s hands, he realized that it was in fact a book.

*‘The Creatures of Shadow Forest,’* said the Changemaker, catching the book and then giving it imaginary reviews. *‘A towering masterpiece. A most extraordinary achievement. Professor Tanglewood has excelled himself with this work of jaw-dropping genius. I can’t wait for his autobiography.’*

He beckoned Martha and Samuel towards him, and they walked over, as if pulled by some invisible thread.

‘Have you read his book?’ The Changemaker leaned his grey face towards Samuel. ‘What did you think of it? Tell me. Did you like it? Speak! Speak! Speak!’

‘I . . . don’t . . . I . . .’

‘Mmm. Not sure? Maybe you need to read it a little more closely. What do you think?’

‘I . . . er . . . I . . .’

‘Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!’



On that final ‘squeak’, Samuel shrank down to the ground and found himself turned into a small white mouse.

The Changemaker picked him up by his tail and placed him inside the open book.

‘I am now going to tell you a story,’ said the Changemaker. ‘It is a true story. It is the story behind the story these pages have to tell. And when it is over, you will be over too. Your sister will watch as I close the book and squash your little mouse guts inside these pages. Blood and ink – it is much the same, you know . . . Oh, what an exciting birthday this is going to be!’

He then told Samuel and Martha the story of his life. He told them everything. About his childhood. His forgotten birthdays. His time in prison. On and on, reciting extracts from his autobiography as well as *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*, unaware of the time.

It was early morning now. Pink light softened the forest, casting long shadows.

The fire had died.

‘Since then, I have had to – how shall I put it? – *relieve* the Shadow Witch of her duties, and take matters into my own hands,’ the Changemaker said

with a heavy sigh as he reached the end of his story. 'And whatever is going to happen next, one thing is certain. No one will ever leave the forest alive.'

## INSIDE THE BOOK

**T**he grey and evil creature closed his eyes and blew Samuel's shadow towards him, which was in the shape of a mouse now.

The Changemaker began to close the pages of the book with Samuel inside. He did it very slowly, savouring every moment, as though it was the last mouthful of a very tasty meal.

Samuel saw the other page coming down towards him, and he could see the word he was going to be squashed into as the shadow of the paper rose over him. The word was:

terror

He tried to run to the edge, but the Changemaker tilted the book upwards so that Samuel

slid back to the middle.

What was going to happen to his sister after he died? What cruel game was going to be in store for her?

He felt the page on his back, beginning to press down.

‘Martha,’ he squeaked, knowing she couldn’t hear him but still having to say it. ‘Martha, I—’

He stopped. The pressure on his back was too much. This was it.

The end.

But then he heard something.

Something soft and beautiful that almost cancelled out the pain.

And just at that moment, the book stopped right where it was. He was alive. Squashed, but alive. And the sound – the *singing* – kept going, in a soft and slow voice that seemed strangely familiar.

‘*Happy . . . birthday to you . . .*’

The whole forest had gone silent just to listen.

‘*Happy birthday to you . . .*’

Through the tiny opening between the pages, Samuel could see his sister, who seemed a giant to him.

‘Martha. You’re singing.’

He watched Martha's mouth open and close around the words, and saw her looking directly at the Changemaker.

*'Happy birthday to . . . Horatio . . .'*

The weight on Samuel's back lessened as the being who had once been Professor Horatio Tanglewood began to cry shadowy tears. That was all he had ever wanted – to hear someone sing that song to him, and now it was really happening.

*'Happy birthday to you.'*

When Martha stopped singing, she seemed as surprised as Samuel by her rediscovered voice. The book went limp in the Changemaker's hands and Samuel slid down the page, fell through the air and landed in a cool puddle, where he swam to safety.

'Happy birthday . . . to *me*,' said the Changemaker, drying his eyes. 'Happy birthday to *me*. That is the most beautiful thing I ever heard. Did you mean it? Did you really mean it? Is that how powerful my story was? That you understood everything I have done?'

'Yes,' said Martha, looking at her brother as he crawled out of the puddle.

Martha still didn't have her shadow, and the

singing had taken everything she had left out of her. The only thought she had space or energy for was the thought of her brother, and all the trouble she had got him in by running into the forest.

In a rare moment, the man the Changemaker used to be overruled the monster he had become. Or, at least, that is how it seemed. Why else would he decide to return Samuel to his human self and, at that same moment, release Martha's shadow?

'Samuel,' she said, her voice still sounding as fresh and delicate as the morning dew, 'I'm sorry.' She had found words again, when they were needed most, and for as long as she was alive she wasn't going to lose them.

The professor looked at the two children, and as he looked, he grew more than a little jealous of the love the siblings had for each other.

'She doesn't care about my birthday,' he said in a voice of quiet sadness. 'Nobody cares about my birthday. Nobody has ever cared.' He remembered how his foster parents, Mr and Mrs Twigg, had forbidden him to have any birthday cards and, through some twist of logic, suddenly became determined to destroy both Samuel and Martha in the most horrible way possible.

He closed his eyes and began to work his terrible magic.

‘Let there be dark,’ he said as he began to inhale the long tree shadows that stretched across the clearing. And the more he inhaled, the more power he felt, and he drew shade from further into the forest.

A black, swirling fog crept over the ground and covered Samuel and Martha. They couldn’t see anything in the darkness and struggled for breath. If the fog had stayed around them, they would have choked to death, but the Changemaker wanted to watch an even more entertaining kind of end.

After all, it was his birthday.

So the shadows went straight past Samuel and Martha, and were sucked inside the former professor, whose body suffered a kind of fit trying to contain them.

‘Oh, Shadow Witch,’ he whispered. ‘Why did you never want power like this?’

Samuel looked at his sister.

‘Run!’ he shouted. ‘Run!’

He grabbed her hand and they started to race across the clearing, but after only a few steps they

realized something. Something that made their hearts pound in terror and their eyes bulge in disbelief.

It wasn't just that they were heading towards the trees.

The trees were heading towards *them*.



## THE WAKING FOREST

The sight was scarcely believable.

An army of trees, with their twisting and misshapen wooden limbs, moving over the earth towards Samuel and Martha. Branches moving independently of the wind. Roots pulling themselves out of the ground like feet from shoes.

The sounds were as terrifying as the sight.

The terrible creak of bending wood.

The hideous whisper of churning earth.

The pounding heartbeat of two terrified children.

Samuel and Martha stopped running and froze in horror. The natural order had been reversed: humans rooted by fear; free-moving trees heading their way.

Of course, their free movement was an illusion. The trees *were* in motion, but there was nothing free



about it. Having gained possession of the shadows, the being who had once been Professor Horatio Tanglewood was guiding the forest as a conductor might an orchestra.

‘What do we do?’ Martha asked.

Closer and closer came the trees, branches stretching forward, twigs reaching out like fingers.

‘Turn back,’ said Samuel, pulling his sister’s hand as he started heading away from the trees.

But it was too late. The trees were too close now – close enough for a root from the nearest tree to coil itself around Martha’s ankle.

‘Sam-uaaargh!’ she screamed as the tree pulled her away from her brother’s hand.

But there was nothing Samuel could do: he was about to become the victim of another tree. A branch swooped down and wrapped around his waist before raising him high into the air.

Up he soared, his body folded forward over the branch as the ground dropped away from him. He could see the Changemaker, laughing clouds of black vapour as he conducted the trees; and Martha, trapped close to the trunk of another tree, its roots and branches around her like the arms of an over-protective parent.

‘Marth-aaaaaaaargh!’

Samuel felt two sensations. The feeling of rising too fast, and the feeling of being gripped too tight around his middle. But two sensations became one as the branch suddenly released Samuel, throwing him higher still.

His arms windmilled through the air, desperately trying to find something to hold onto.

The tree had thrown him outwards as well as upwards, and he was soaring over what was left of the clearing. He waited to hit the ground and die, but he didn’t. Instead, he fell into the soft branches of another tree. Or rather, the branches of another tree had reached out and caught him.

Again he was held by the waist and thrown back into the air.

If he had been able to form a clear thought amid all the sensation his body was feeling, Samuel would have realized what was happening. He would have realized that the Changemaker was orchestrating a game of catch, with Samuel filling the role of the ball.

Back and forth he was flung, from tree to tree, while his sister was being slowly squeezed to death down below him.

‘Let’s hope no one’s a butterfingers.’ The

Changemaker's laugh echoed through the clearing.

'Stop!' Martha shouted, as the branches tightened around her legs, her chest, her neck. 'Please.' The shout had weakened to a choke. 'Stop.'

She watched in desperation as the two trees throwing Samuel began to pull him in separate directions. The game of catch became a game of tug-of-war as Samuel's role switched from ball to rope.

He had never known pain could reach such intensity. The agony was everywhere, taking over his whole body – his shoulders, his knees, his wrists, his ankles – as the two trees pulled further and further apart, testing the strength of his bones.

'Now, children, I am afraid we must say goodbye,' said the Changemaker. He raised his hands, ready to make the final instruction for the trees to follow. The instruction that would tear Samuel in two and tighten the stranglehold around Martha's neck.

The Changemaker closed his eyes.

He hummed 'Happy Birthday'.

He savoured the delicious power he felt inside. Power over the species that he had once belonged to. The species that had bullied him at school, and called him names, and sent him to prison, and never let him celebrate his birthday.

He opened his eyes.

‘Now, children, it is time – as they say – to die.’

And that is when they saw it.

Both of them.

Their eyes were squinting against the pain, but still they saw it.

A small straight line soaring high through the air towards the Changemaker. Some kind of spear.

He turned round, following the children’s eyes. And he was just in time to catch sight of the javelin before it hit him, but too late to stop it entering his body.

‘No!’ he screamed, black blood spilling over his hands as he clutched the weapon that pierced his chest and back. As he screamed, shadows left his body from his mouth and headed back towards the forest. He fell to the ground.

Samuel glimpsed someone at the far edge of the clearing. It was Aunt Eda, with Ibsen by her side.

After that, everything was swallowed in choking darkness, as shadows flew back to the trees, the plants and all the creatures they had once belonged to.

Inside that darkness, the branches let go of Martha’s neck and body, and the roots crawled away

and tucked themselves back under the earth they had emerged from. At the same time the two trees that had been pulling Samuel stopped their game of tug-of-war, and he clung onto the wood that had been wrapped around his arms and feet. When the darkness ended, Samuel dropped down from the low branch and landed softly. He went over and hugged his sister as Aunt Eda and Ibsen ran towards them.

But then they heard something.

‘Help!’ It was Aunt Eda.

As she had run past him, the Changemaker had reached out and grabbed hold of her ankle, and a new cloud of shadows emerged from his mouth. Aunt Eda and Ibsen choked, trapped inside the cloud.

Samuel and Martha ran to help.

‘Stay back,’ said Samuel to his sister. ‘I know what to do.’

He approached the cloud of shadows and held his breath, digging his hand into his pocket. Before the Changemaker knew what Samuel was doing, the boy had dropped a hewlip leaf into his mouth.

‘Oh no,’ said the Changemaker as he exhaled the last of the shadows. ‘This isn’t how it’s meant to—’

'Run away,' Samuel told Aunt Eda, Martha and Ibsen.

And they did. They ran away, and didn't turn back when they heard the dreadful splatter of the professor-turned-Changemaker exploding behind them. A noise that sounded, to Samuel, like a triumph and a tragedy all at once.



## THE RETURN OF UNCLE HENRIK

‘Martha! Samuel!’

Aunt Eda held her arms out, as she had done at the airport, but this time even Samuel welcomed the hug. He held her close, and felt something he hadn’t felt since his parents died. A feeling of being filled up, right to the very top, like lemonade in a glass. He didn’t know exactly what this feeling was, but he guessed it was being loved.

‘You followed us,’ he said. ‘You came to save us.’

Aunt Eda planted kisses on both their heads and tried not to cry. ‘Well, yes, what else was I to do? Now, now, now, you must tell me, are you both all right?’

‘Yes,’ said Samuel.

‘Yes,’ said Martha, and it was that long-awaited

‘yes’ that brought a tear to Aunt Eda’s eye.

‘Oh, children, I haff been so worried about both of you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Martha said.

Aunt Eda waved the sorry away. ‘No, Martha, you did not know what was in the forest. It isn’t your fault.’

Samuel turned to look at the javelin sticking out of the ground. The hewlip leaf had been so powerful that there were no visible remains of the Changemaker at all.

‘How did you get here?’ he asked his aunt.

‘I had a bracelet. A witch’s bracelet,’ she said as she showed him the cloth band and pewter disc attached to her wrist. ‘It was werry useful. It protected me. And then I found Ibsen by the side of a path. He led me here.’

Martha thought about the Snow Witch, and remembered what she had told her about the bracelet. She wondered if it was the same one. But then she wondered something else. ‘Where is he now?’ she asked. ‘Where’s Ibsen?’

‘Oh no,’ said Aunt Eda, looking around for her dog. ‘Oh no. Ibsen? Ibsen? Where are you? Where are . . .?’ Then she gasped. Her eyes widened in

disbelief. 'No. No, it can't . . . no . . . I'm seeing things . . . no . . .'

There was a tall man walking towards her, smiling gently.

Samuel looked at the man and recognized him from the photographs. The ones he had seen in the attic of the Olympian standing triumphant on a ski slope. The beard. The smile. The eyes. He looked older and greyer, but it was definitely him.

'*Uncle Henrik.*' The name fell out of Samuel's mouth as a whisper.

Uncle Henrik said something in Norwegian to Aunt Eda, who was still open-mouthed in shock. Then he turned to the children and spoke.

'Hello, Martha. Hello, Samuel.' He had a gentle accent that melted his words the way toast melts butter. 'Yes, it is me. I am your Uncle Henrik.'

'Where haff you been?' said Aunt Eda, feeling his face to make sure it was true. 'Haff you been hiding in this terrible forest? Did I do something wrong?'

'No. You did nothing wrong. And I haven't been hiding. I have been with you the whole time. By your side.'

Aunt Eda didn't understand.

Uncle Henrik pointed to the javelin and to the space where the Changemaker had been. 'He let me leave the forest. But he changed me. All those years ago. He turned me into an elkhound. I was transformed, but I was still me. I still kept my promise. I came back for you.'

*'Ibsen,'* she said.

Uncle Henrik wiped the tear from her cheek. 'I have never left your side all these years.'

'All these years,' echoed Aunt Eda, unable to hide the sadness in her voice.

They held the moment, and then Uncle Henrik said to Samuel, 'Thank you for the cheese, by the way. It wasn't as nice as the Gold Medal, but it was tasty all the same. And not as deadly as truth pixie soup.'

'Oh,' said Samuel, embarrassed as he remembered how rude he'd once been to the dog. 'That's all right.'

Aunt Eda was going to say something else when she noticed a distant sound. A sound that hadn't been heard in the forest for many years.

Uncle Henrik had heard it too, a strange but musical chanting. 'I know that sound,' he said. 'I heard it years ago. When I came into the forest before. It is

the sound of huldres worshipping the sun. They must all be back in their village.'

Martha gasped in horror. '*Huldres?*'

Aunt Eda was confused. 'But huldres don't come out in the sun.'

'They used to,' said Uncle Henrik. 'Before the changes.'

Samuel looked around at the trees that lined the clearing. They didn't look evil or menacing any more. They looked calm and peaceful and exactly the way trees should look.

'The Changemaker's wishes must have been reversed,' he said. 'That's why Uncle Henrik is human again. All the other creatures must have changed too. The forest will be safe now.'

Uncle Henrik nodded. 'It will be a paradise again,' he said. And then they began to think about what paradise might mean.

'We could liff in peace and eat truth pixie soup and it wouldn't hurt us,' said Aunt Eda, whose mouth watered at the thought.

'We could listen to songs all day long,' said Martha, who knew the tomtegubb could sing wherever he wanted now.

'And we could sleep on a slemp every night,'

added Samuel, who was still rather tired. He noticed a tattered book lying on the ground near where the professor had died. *The Creatures of Shadow Forest*. The book that had nearly squashed Samuel to death. It was weird to think that all the descriptions of the creatures had changed, and that it was now no more truthful than a fairy tale.

‘Well, everyone,’ said Uncle Henrik. ‘What shall we do?’

Aunt Eda considered. ‘Paradise is not a place,’ she said. ‘Paradise is the people who share your life. If I am with you, all of you, I will be werry happy wher-effer I am.’ Aunt Eda looked at the two children. ‘Samuel? Martha? Do *you* think we should stay in the forest?’

Samuel turned to his sister. ‘Martha,’ he said, ‘what do you want to do?’

Martha frowned, as if thinking about a very hard sum. A sum that measured the value of singing tomtegubbs against other things.

‘I want to go home,’ she said eventually.

‘Me too,’ said Samuel.

‘Home?’ Aunt Eda wasn’t sure which home they meant.

‘With you,’ said Samuel. ‘And Uncle Henrik.’

‘Home, where you haff to go to school?’ Aunt Eda asked. ‘Where you haff to eat smelly brown cheese?’

This was a good point, and Samuel considered it for a while.

He remembered what his dad told him. *You can find happiness anywhere, son, if you look hard enough.* It might be harder to find happiness in a foreign school and breakfasts of brown cheese than in a magical forest, but he was willing to try.

‘Yes,’ said Samuel. ‘Home.’

And so it was that they began their journey home, passing spickle-dancing pixies, harmless woodpeckers, sleeping slempts and singing tomtegubbs.

They walked softly through Trollhelm, and past the stone house, where the eyeless troll family Samuel had known were inside asleep, unaware that the forest outside had been changed.

They walked through the huldre village, where smiling creatures were carving sun sculptures out of wood and chanting their hymns to the sun. Samuel knew, in that moment, that huldres would never appear in his nightmares again.

‘Now,’ said Aunt Eda as they approached the edge

of the forest, 'are you sure you want to leaf the forest behind? Because when we are back in the outside world, we will haff to keep this a secret. We can't tell anyone. Do we all understand?'

'Yes,' said Uncle Henrik, Samuel and Martha all at once, like people saying a prayer in church. 'We understand.'

Then they hesitated, just for a moment, before stepping out from the shade of those final pine trees. And there it was – the white wooden house, the driveway, the washing line. In the distance they could see the fjord, and the mountains, and the road leading to Flåm. Aunt Eda slipped the bracelet from her wrist and placed it in her pocket, not knowing if she would ever need it again.

Martha smiled when she saw the house, and placed her hand in her brother's. It felt as natural as the grass beneath their feet.

'So,' said Uncle Henrik in his melted-butter voice, 'here we are again.'

As they walked down the grass slope, Samuel gently squeezed his sister's hand, and she gently squeezed his back. They both had the thought at the same time.

*This is it. This is our home.*



The thought made them happy. Happy for the past, for the memories they could cherish together. And for the future. For the life ahead of them, and all the magical times they knew would come.

THE END

(Which was really just a beginning.)



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A rather long list of thank yous.

First of all, I must say a very big thanks to you for reading *Shadow Forest*. I thought you did so brilliantly, and put the book down in precisely the right places. If only all my readers were as good as you!

Secondly, I must thank two very exceptional people, who played a very big role in getting this book into your hands. They are my agent Caradoc King and my editor Charlie Sheppard, whose agenting and editing powers are so magical they almost qualify as superheroes.

Other people I must thank are:

Everyone at Random House Children's Books, particularly Annie Eaton, Lucy Walker and all those people I don't know but who clearly work very hard.

The brilliant team at A. P. Watt, who include such wonderful human beings as Elinor Cooper, Judith Evans, Christine Glover, Teresa Nicholls and Linda Shaughnessy.

All the Haigs and Semples.

And last but not least, thanks to the Torhaug clan in Norway, who gave me the wonderful experiences that first inspired this book.

# THE SPOOK'S APPRENTICE

by

Joseph Delaney

*'The Spook's trained many, but precious few completed their time,' Mam said, 'and those that did aren't a patch on him. They're flawed or weak or cowardly. They walk a twisted path taking money for accomplishing little. So there's only you left now, son. You're the last chance. The last hope. Someone has to do it. Someone has to stand against the dark. And you're the only one who can.'*

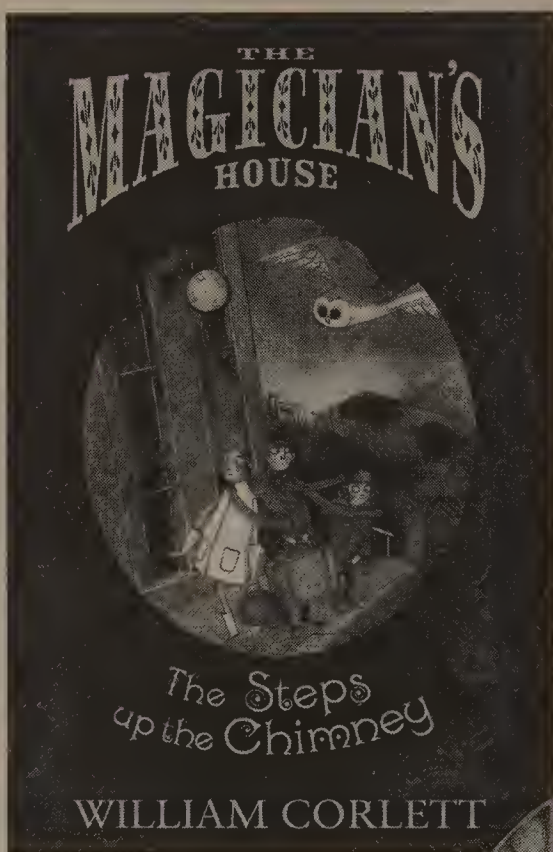
Thomas Ward is the seventh son of a seventh son and has been apprenticed to the local Spook. The job is hard, the Spook is distant and many apprentices have failed before him. Somehow Thomas must learn how to exorcise ghosts, contain witches and bind boggarts. But when he is tricked into freeing Mother Malkin, the most evil witch in the County, the horror begins . . .

ISBN: 978 0 099 45645 2

# The Steps up the Chimney

by

WILLIAM CORLETT



This is where the magic of Golden House begins. William, Mary and Alice Constant have come to spend Christmas with their uncle.

But little by little, they discover that things in this remote old house are not quite what they seem.

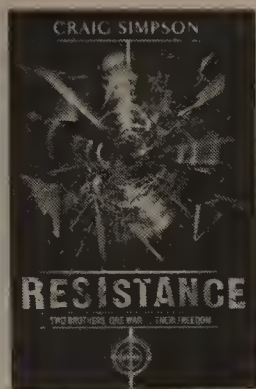
There are powerful forces at work, calling to the children from across the centuries; forces that pull them up the hidden steps in the chimney to the secret room where the Magician lives.

ISBN: 978 0 099 48217 8

# RESISTANCE

by

CRAIG SIMPSON



Short bursts of frenzied machine-gun fire filled the air and I saw the radio operator slump forward. The radio crackled. I could hear a German voice. A shiver went down my spine . . .

NORWAY, SEPTEMBER 1943

Returning home from a hunting trip, brothers Marek and Olaf witness the horror of their father's arrest by the Gestapo. When their daring plan for revenge against the Nazis goes horribly wrong, the brothers are forced to seek refuge in the vast and frozen Norwegian wilderness.

Saved from an icy grave by Resistance freedom-fighters, fourteen-year-old Marek is captivated by their courage and determination. He is quick-thinking and a talented mechanic, and with youth on his side the Germans probably won't suspect him – perfect for a part in the ambitious sabotage attack planned by the group. But can he keep his nerve, especially when the final assault throws his friends and family into the path of the enemy?

ISBN: 978 0 552 55571 5

*The* NEW POLICEMAN  
by  
KATE THOMPSON



There is never enough time in Kinvara. When Helen Liddy is asked what she wants for her birthday, she says, 'Time: That's what I want. Time.'

Fifteen year-old JJ is continuing the Liddy family tradition with his fiddle-playing. But one day he discovers that music might not be the only thing that runs in his veins. Can it be true that his great-grandfather was a murderer?

When JJ sets out to buy his mother some time he discovers the answer, as well as some truly remarkable things about music, myth and magic.

Who knows where the time goes?

JJ does.

Winner of both the Whitbread Children's Book Award  
and the 2005 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize

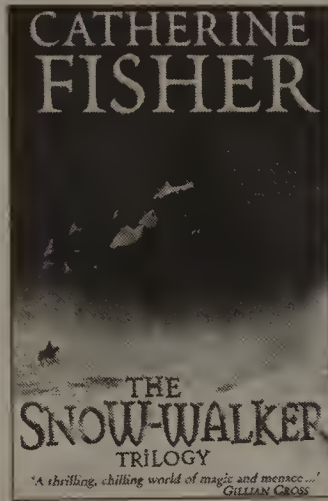
ISBN: 978 0 099 45627 8



# THE SNOW-WALKER TRILOGY

by

CATHERINE FISHER



From the swirling mists and icy realms beyond the edge of the world came the Snow-walker Gudrun – to rule the Jarl's people with fear and sorcery. No sword is a match for her rune-magic and it seems the land may never be free from her tyranny. But there is a small band of outlaws determined to defeat Gudrun and restore the rightful Jarl. This trilogy follows their quest from the first terrifying journey to meet the mysterious Snow-walker's son, to the final battle in the land of the soul thieves.

*This book includes:*

**The Snow-Walker's Son**  
**The Empty Hand**  
**The Soul Thieves**

ISBN: 978 0 099 44806 8

# The Devil's Footsteps

by

E. E. RICHARDSON



It was just a bit of fun, a local legend.

The Devil's Footsteps: thirteen stepping stones, and whichever one you stopped on in the rhyme could predict how you would die. A harmless game for kids – and nobody ever died from a game.

But it's not a game to Bryan. He's seen the Dark Man, because the Dark Man took his brother five years ago. He's tried to tell himself that it was his imagination, that the Devil's Footsteps are just stones and the Dark Man didn't take Adam. But Adam's still gone.

And then Bryan meets two other boys who have their own unsolved mysteries. Someone or something is after the children in the town. And it all comes back to the rhyme that every local child knows by heart:

*Thirteen steps to the Dark Man's door,  
Won't be turning back no more . . .*

ISBN: 978 0 552 55171 7

# THE SPOOK'S APPRENTICE



JOSEPH  
DELANEY

*Charming, seductive and completely enthralling*  
LOIN COLLEGE

# KATE THOMPSON



## The NEW POLICEMAN

*Winner of the  
Whitbread Children's Book Award*

# SEBASTIAN DARKE

Prince of Fools



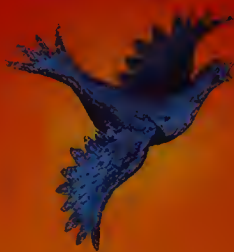
PHILIP CAVENEY

# CATHERINE FISHER



## THE SNOW-WALKER TRILOGY

*'A thrilling, chilling world of magic and menace...'*  
GILLIAN CROSS



**S**amuel Blink is the hero of this story, but he doesn't know it yet. Right now, he and his sister Martha are in the back of his parents' car. He has no idea a giant log is about to fall from the sky and change his life for ever. He doesn't know that he and Martha will be forced to move to Norway and eat their Aunt Eda's smelly brown cheese. He hasn't the slightest clue Martha will disappear into Shadow Forest. A forest full of one-eyed trolls, the sinister huldre-folk, deadly truth pixies and a witch who steals shadows. A forest ruled by the evil Changemaker. A forest so dangerous that people who enter never return.

No. Samuel Blink doesn't know any of this. So don't tell him. It might ruin the book . . .

• Weaves horror and humour into a terrific tale

*THE TIMES*

ISBN 978-0-552-55563-0

£5.99



9 780552 555630

[www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk](http://www.kidsatrandomhouse.co.uk)

Cover design [www.blacksheep-uk.com](http://www.blacksheep-uk.com)  
Cover artwork by Sandy Nightingale  
Lettering illustration by Sally Taylor

KN-965-455

