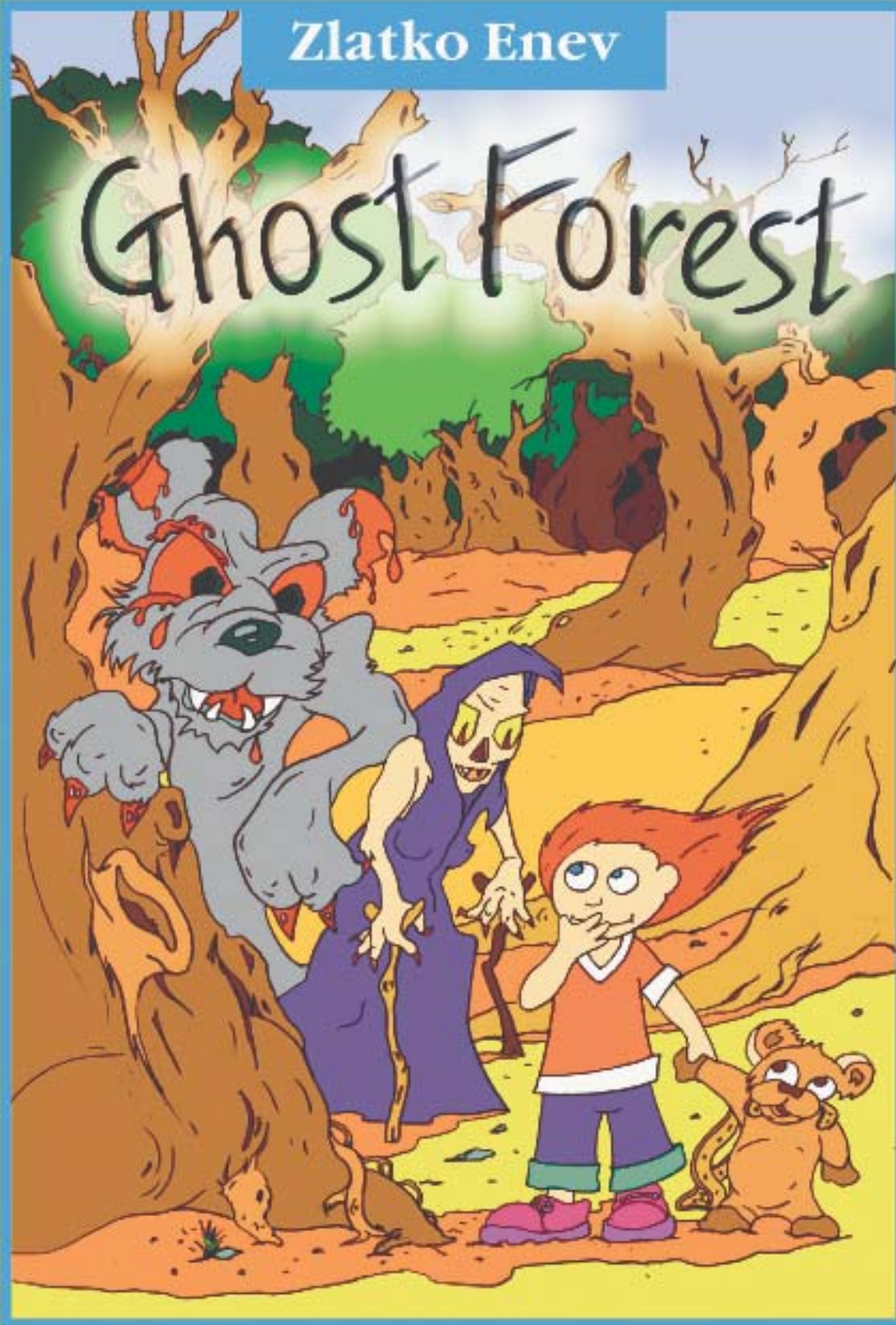


Zlatko Enev

Ghost Forest



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GHOST FOREST

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Ghost Forest

Illustrations:

Andrey Kulev

For Nerod

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

Thank you, my dearest friend!

I would also like to express my thankfulness to

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

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

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



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Introduction:

The River in the Box

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Have you been tidying my room?'

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

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

'How come in the bathroom?'

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

‘You... what?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Laptsev. Nerod Laptsev,’ he told her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The elderly gentleman gave a short bow.

'Precisely, dear lady.'

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

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

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

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

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

Mum looked a lot more relaxed when she heard this.

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

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

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

The next fifteen minutes were torture for Anne. She was so curious to know what was in the trunk that she could hardly restrain herself from begging Mr Laptsev to hurry up. As if deliberately trying to be annoying, he was so preoccupied with his search that he seemed to have forgotten about everything else. Very slowly and carefully, he examined every toy he came across in the room. He even

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

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

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

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

There was a river flowing inside the box.

Actually, the river was just one element of the game – it surely had to be a game, although Anne had never seen anything quite like it before. There was a mountain range in the far corner on the left-hand side, right under Mr Laptsev's elbow where he was leaning on the open lid. Anne couldn't imagine how moun-

tains so steep and high could possibly fit into that flat box. The river had cut through the mountains, frothing and roaring its way through the narrow gorge in between before it widened out into a gentle flow dividing the hill planes which made up the rest of the game. Those hills were covered with dense forest, except here and there you could see clearings with forest animals the size of insects roaming around in the meadowland. Set into the landscape at various points were a number of tiny buildings: there was a watermill, a fishing jetty, and a minute hut nestling in the branches of a huge tree with an ingenious system of ladders leading up to it. Even the clouds suspended just under the lid of the box looked real and drifted slowly over the misty mountain tops. The scene was so incredible that Anne was speechless and just stood there staring at it wide-eyed. Evidently pleased at this reaction, the old man gave a little smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘I want it!’

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

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

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

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

‘Anne!’ Mum exclaimed nervously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

‘Yeah, yeah...’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter One:

The Meadow with Three Exits

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘But... you can speak?’

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

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

‘Huh! Your *battered* old backpack.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Boo sniggered, covering his mouth with his furry wings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anne was livid. Those boneheads!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two:

The Spider

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Ah...Hmm...Mmmm.’

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

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

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

‘Yes, of course.’

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

Anne was so offended that her eyes filled with tears.

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

The backpack carried on picking its nose.

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

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

‘But I meant it.’

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

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

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

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

Anne went on crying miserably.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘That too.’

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

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

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

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

‘Whichever. Let’s take the right.’

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Wh-What should we do now?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Not a penny.'

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

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

‘What?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Heinomat[®]

Beneath that in normal type it said:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Is that some sort of a joke, or what?’ said Anne, becoming angry, but then remembering her promise she added more calmly, ‘Ok, if you insist. Let’s see what happens.’ The two of them slowly approached the stump and looked it over from every angle.

‘Where do we begin?’ asked the backpack.

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

‘Go on then.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

However, the machine continued spanking as long as it had been programmed to, and by the time it stopped Anne had already given up screaming and was accepting the situation with patient resignation. Finally, the hands dropped her unceremoniously on the ground and without further ado retreated behind the doors from where they had come.

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

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

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

‘Yeah, it looks like it.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three:

Mr Buck

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anne looked at him crossly, but kept silent.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Red started to feel her anger rising.

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘How can I get out of here?’

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

‘Back home, where else?’

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

‘What does that mean?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Well, it’s..’

‘What, another joke?’ Anne took a step forward.

‘No, but...’

‘Stop beating about the bush. Tell me!’

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

Anne stamped her foot in disappointment and frustration.

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

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

‘Who? Come on, quickly!’

‘Grandpa Hedgehog.’

‘Grandpa Hedgehog? Who’s that?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Ok. One last question.’

‘Well?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘To be honest, I am, too.’

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

Chapter Four:

Rescuing the Fly

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

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

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

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

‘Ghosts! Run! Save yourself!’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'If this isn't the best day of my life, then my name's not Buzz!' said the fly after they had introduced themselves to each other. 'At long last, one of those bandits has got what was coming to him! The whole forest suffers because of them, you can hardly breathe here anymore! They put this machinery everywhere, you can't take a step without their permission. It's unbearable, everybody's sick and tired

of it. Things have gone from bad to worse, I tell you. Those brutes aren't afraid of anything.'

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

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

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

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

'Where do they come from?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Mr Buck told us to see Grandpa Hedgehog.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No!' cried the fly. 'No, don't even think of it! That would be a big mistake. If we cut the threads there wouldn't be any way we could roll up the web. It would just be left hanging, and that would guarantee a completely blocked path. The machinery has to be broken properly. Look, I'll show you how that's done.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘To be honest, I’ve never had to worry about that. You see, I can just fly over. I’m afraid I can’t help you there. I haven’t got any money either. But at least I was able to help you here. The path is open for everyone now. Long live freedom!’

‘Hurray! Thank you for everything, Buzz.’

‘Hey, what are you saying! I should be thanking you. You saved my life, folks! Listen, if you ever need me, you’ll find me through the forest intercom. Buzz the

fly, everyone knows me. I don't have a fixed address, but when you call I'll find you.'

'How does this forest intercom work?'

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

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

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

'Ok, then, let's go. Take care, Buzz!'

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

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

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