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Corners

A novel by Ksenia Anske

83,289 words

For Peter.

Chapter 1. The First Corner

The world had corners. All kinds of corners. Dark creepy corners, dusty corners, corners full of spider webs—not that Bells was afraid of spiders, she wasn't, but we'll come back to that later. What was it again? Ah, corners. We were talking about corners. Secret forgotten corners (ohh, are you scared yet?). Hidden corners. Corners to be discovered, like pages of a book that hasn't been read. Hasn't even been written. Waiting to be opened and fallen inside. If you knew where to look, of course. Bells knew. And didn't. She didn't know she knew, she was about to find out.

"Piss it!" She yelled at Peacock.

"What?"

"Watch where you're going!"

"Gee. Bossy today." Peacock steered his bike out of the way.

Bells furiously pedaled past, head high, dark pony tail whipping in the wind.

"Girls." Scoffed Peacock.

"I know, right?" Came from Rusty.

"Shut up."

Rusty only shrugged. He always shrugged when Peacock scolded him. It was better not to argue with Peacock. His grandmother Agnieszka told him not to. "Never argue with your friends, Russell. You hear me?" She'd shake her veined manicured finger at him. That is, before pugs Teeny and Weeny would yap to her attention. It was no time to think about grandmothers, however. It was time to enjoy skipping school. The day before last of the fifth grade, to be specific.

Rusty straightened his shoulders. "Girls. Right?" He tried on Grand.

Grand didn't say anything. He pedaled last in the group, his jiggling girdle giving him trouble. His white socks grey from the dust kicked up by tires. His face red, sweaty, concentrated. Nothing ever was easy for Grand. It took him effort, deep thought, and lengthy pessimistic ruminations, mostly picked up from his mother, a funeral home cosmetologist. He was often envious of Peacock and his two dads and their nonchalant style of life, but kept it to himself.

"Here!" Cried Bells, turned into a dirt road, dropped her bike and ran up to the water, picking up stones and skipping them across the lake.

"Nice choice, Bells." Peacock carefully dismantled his prized multi-speed possession, passed a hand through bright periwinkle faux hawk—it was only periwinkle this week, last week

it was turquoise—and sauntered up to her. There were two things on his mind. What color hair he should pick for next week, acid-green or magenta, and if he could beat Bells this time. She always won, *always*. No matter how hard he tried, how many exquisitely flat and polished pebbles he found, Bells managed to tilt her head just so, lift her arm that special way, squint her right eye, and fling the stone, twisting it perfectly, watching it hop one time, two, five, ten!

“Glorious tulips! How do you do it?”

“With female grace, you dolt.” She clapped her hands to get rid of the sand. Female grace was something her mother mentioned quite often, when rehearsing for her next opera, and Bells thought that it was a great way to get back at the boys. It’s something she had and they didn’t, and it made her feel superior. In any case, she was feeling great. It was sunny. It was warm. It was a nice June day. And she didn’t have to see Ms. Carbuncle’s poisonous face. And it was poisonous, especially her lips, two slugs that dropped mean words like slaps in your face.

“Sit straight!” She’d yell. “Take out your notebooks! Use your pens! I don’t want to see any scratch marks, so better think before you write! Belladonna Monterey, what are you looking at?”

Bells didn’t hear her at first, fascinated by the spider weaving a net behind the window. See, I told you we’d come back

to the spiders, didn't I? Every girl in class was scared of the spiders, except Bells. Girls despised her unhealthy, in their opinion, love for the insects. Boys adored it, Peter Sutton especially. Peacock, that is. They were friends since first grade, since that moment when he picked up Bells' tooth-milk tooth, mind you, it was falling out already—that she lost after that fat redhead Wilma Pufpaff whacked her on the head with a heavy backpack for stepping on her foot. Bells bravely tore out a chunk of Wilma's hair for that, but that's a whole another story.

"Belladonna Monterey!" Ms. Carbuncle would shout right in her ear, and Bells jumped.

"I'm talking to you, miss! Answer me."

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Nothing??" Ms. Carbuncle's already purple face turned the color of it's-about-to-explode. What happened after is not as significant as is the fact that Bells decided it was reason good enough to skip school the next day.

Whatever Bells decided, Peacock, Rusty and Grand would do without question. When she declared last year that Belladonna Monterey is a grossly inappropriate and a rather pompous name for a ten-year-old future scientist, because, mind you, she would never, never, become an actress or a singer like her mother wanted, naturally, her being an opera singer and all, her

faithful friends agreed that they should do the same for all of them.

Conspiring behind the bushes in the farthest school yard corner—it was one of *those* corners, only they didn't know it yet—Belladonna became Bells, for the sound of her laughter. Russell—Rusty, for the sound of his screeching voice, too shrill sometimes for his small knobbly frame. Peter—Peacock, for his hair, obviously. And, collectively, they decided that George will be Grand, for his size. He neither protested, neither appeared excited about this significant change.

“My mom says—” He began. He always shared his mom's depressing wisdoms.

“That's enough about your mom,” interrupted Bells. “Let's go.”

And they did.

They went places since then, on their bikes, speeding furiously down the streets, scaring cats and looking for convenient places to drop their bikes and conspire on how to wiggle Bells out of her singing lessons with Mr. Yowl and explain to her parents that she didn't want to be a singer or any kind of a stage star, she wanted to ride bikes with her friends and study science. Insects, in particular. Not that her dad had any problem with that. He only grinned and winked and went back to fixing his cars, but her mother... Oh, that was a

different case entirely. A hot-blooded Spanish woman by the name of Catarina Monterey with savage curly hair and piercing eyes of a diva. Double eyes, in fact, because whenever she lectured Bells, her little seven-year-old sister Maria would appear and mimic her mother, her idol and object of adoration, which made Bells want to strangle Maria later, when they were it the room alone, and spend most of her time outside of the house, as much as she could help it.

Everything was always Bells' idea. Skipping school today was her idea too, of course. And now that they've tired of skipping stones, in other words, tired of trying to beat Bells, who always won, three pairs of eyes, Peacock's hazel eyes, Grand's grey, and Rusty's brown, stared at Bells' steel ones. She got them from her father, Trevor Monterey, a third generation car mechanic holding down Monterey's Repair just like his grandfather did when he came to Boston from Texas. Her dark hair she got from her mother, but not a trace of curl in it. It was straight as ropes, thick and shiny.

"Stand guard." She told Peacock.

"Why?"

"Stand guard, I said!"

"Why?"

"Because I need to pee!"

"Oh."

It no longer embarrassed any of them to watch Bells pick her way through the bushes, and, not caring if she could be seen from the road, lower her jeans, squat, and do her business. She firmly believed in nature taking its course as nature intended. "Restroom are bullshit." She would tell them, using her father's favorite expression. "If you feel like peeing, you need to be able to pee where you want and not hold it in your bladder. It's bad for you. It can give you kidney stones." Bells always knew what she was talking about, having picked up her facts from numerous science books she would pore over when not biking or attempting to strangle her little sister.

Such unorthodox life-view naturally attracted boys and repulsed girls in school, which Bells rather liked. She couldn't stand girly gossip, their fretting over what clothes to wear, discussions on whether or not they were old enough to wear a bra, what boy looked at whom and how and why and did it mean he'd ask one of them to go out with or not, or what going out meant.

Bells couldn't *stand* these pointless conversations. She was consumed with desire to save the giant flightless darkling beetles that lived in dead trees and were in danger of extinction and couldn't understand how picking out glittery nail polish at the mall could be more important than reading the latest news on emerald dragonflies.

She pulled up her jeans, zipped them up, and came back out to the beach.

The boys stood motionless, staring at her. A moment of awkwardness hung over them, threatening to dispel the magic of we-skipped-school-eat-that-morons. Morons here were, of course, all those who didn't skip school and had to sit in the hot classrooms, longing to be out, out of school, ready for the summer break.

A fat wasp buzzed around ripe with sweat Grand. "A wasp." He noticed dejectedly. "It will bite me." That's Grand for you, pessimistic and philosophical. "It will—"

"Guys, guys, let's climb trees!" Rusty pointed excitedly at a sad looking willow with branches hanging over water like long uncombed hair. Underneath it were empty beer bottles and a couple of sneakers, either lost or deliberately left unattended. There were also unidentifiable empty cans and a sock. One lonely sock sitting in the sand.

"That's dumb." Said Peacock.

"Why is it dumb?" Rusty's little face pinched in indignation. "Why is it everything I say you call dumb?"

"Because it is." Parried Peacock.

Silence.

"Bells, what do you suggest we do?" Peacock threw her an inquisitive glance. Bells was absorbed in studying a line of ants that marched across the grassy patch of the ground.

"Bells?"

"Shhh." She didn't raise her head, her finger pointing at the something.

"Bells, come on already."

"What?" He voice was exasperated.

"What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know. Read?" She tried very hard to hide the sarcasm. It was best to deliver it with a straight face. It had the most effect then.

"We didn't bring any books." Said Grand gloomily, his sneaker tracing a line in the sand.

"And how is that my problem?" Said Bells with fury typically reserved for Grand's pessimisms.

"I didn't say it was your problem." Grand said, cautiously taking a step back.

"Then why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?"

"You know like what."

"No, I don't. Honest." When Grand wanted to placate, he added the word "honest", as if it would persuade Bells to soften, which it never did, of course.

"We could write one?" Offered Peacock. He picked up a stick and wrote BELLS IS DA BOSS in the sand.

"Stop it." Bells said sharply.

"The uncalled for anger of—"

"I'm not talking to you." She cut him off. "I'm talking to Rusty."

"What did I do?" He covered his nose.

"It's disgusting and you know it." She pursed her lips.

Rusty grinned. He couldn't compete with her in witty remarks, but he could annoy her with his very special skill. That skill involved snorting out a long greenish line of snot from his right nostril—for some reason it never quite worked with the left one—and then sucking it back in with a rush of pride. Letting it hang, sucking it in. On very special lucky days Rusty succeeded in hacking it out far enough to catch it on his tongue, fling it up in the air, swallow it, and pass it back through his rather cavernous nasal passage to send it hanging out of his right nostril again, much to agitation of the boys in class, none of whom could manage the trick and watched Rusty with awe, while he performed it tirelessly at this back desk, that is, until Ms. Carbuncle noticed and gave him a timeout.

Rusty snorted it in, feeling rather accomplished.

"Boys." Professed Bells, putting as much meaning into this exclamation as she could into a thousand words.

"I'm bored." Said Rusty.

"You're always bored." Commented Peacock, rather crass. The fact was, he was bored too, but he couldn't afford to lose face and admit to it, not in front of Bells.

The beach stretched from one end of the park to another, maybe a couple miles, dull, grey, and speckled with geese poop. The geese themselves were currently occupied with harassing a homeless man who tried to sleep on the bench by the beach's entrance. Apart from him and couple tired mothers trying to convince their shrieking toddlers to succumb to sunblock being liberally applied on their plump pink, there wasn't anyone there. Or anything, for that matter. There was a pier. They could go on the pier and stare at the water, but that was also boring. Besides, some old guy in tattered overalls already occupied the very tip of it, with a plastic bucket and a fishing pole shaking in his trembling hands.

It smelled of stale water and dry grass. Insolent seagulls cried overhead, riding the wind and curiously circling over the old man's bucket.

"Look!" Cried Bells suddenly.

"What? What?" Rusty dropped to his knees.

"Find a new ant species or something?" Threw Peacock with an air of disinterest, but he craned his neck to see what the deal was.

Bells cleared off the sand, exposing an edge of a thick metal sheet. It lied flat on the ground. Nothing interesting, really. Just a sheet of metal with an edge that ran deep down into dirt.

"Probably some construction workers forgot to remove it." Said Grand sadly. Everything he said was sad and miserable.

Bells didn't answer. She hastened to clear off the rest of the edge, her heart beating so loud, she thought the entire beach could hear. Nobody paid them any attention, however. Both mothers busy pulling fighting toddlers apart, one having dumped a bucket of sand on top of another, their wailing cries echoing those of the impatient seagulls and geese that were done harassing the homeless man and were now screaming at a passing old lady with a fat dachshund.

"Help me." Said Bells, her fingers black from digging.

"Wait. Why would anyone leave a metal sheet here, in the middle of the beach?" Said Peacock. He was wary of soiling his new pants, and, obviously, he didn't want to mar his hands either.

"It's has a number, look!" Bells excitedly cleared off the sand from the corner of the metal sheet.

"348," was stamped on it in faded black numbers.

Bells found the corner, slipped her fingers under it and attempted to lift it. It budged a little, and when it did, a

gush of freezing wind breathed on her knees. Her skin erupted in goose flesh.

She looked up, wide-eyed, and, not seeing anyone in particular, and not talking to anyone in particular, said, "There is a hole. It's covering a hole."

"A what?" Peacock forgot all about his pants and scrambled next to her.

"Help me lift it."

"Grand, come on!"

"Guys, guys, let me."

"Get out of the way, Rusty."

Two pairs of hands on one side of the corner, two on the other, they succeeded in peeling it off the ground to a black gaping space underneath. It smelled of nothing, it had no sound, and it stretched deep down underground, an endless abyss. How they all knew it, they didn't know, but they knew it immediately, and, at a loss of words, stared at each other, suddenly exhilarated and terrified of their discovery.

Bells was first to decide. She was always first.

"Let's go in."

"Go where in?" Peacock's hazel eyes turned scared green.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Can I see? Can I see?"

"Stop fidgeting and hold it, will you?" Snapped Bells.
"You're all sissies, I tell you that." Sissies, along with bullshit, were perhaps her father's two favorite words. "Last I heard, you were complaining of being bored. Well, here is a perfect opportunity for you to get un-bored." She gave her load to silent Grand and lowered her legs inside.

"It's cold!" She shivered, and for a brief moment a terrible doubt gnawed on her stomach, giving her an uneasy feeling of danger waiting ahead. She quickly dismissed it. She'd gone too far now to turn back. Beside, the blackness underneath the metal sheet pulled on her like a magnet.

"But what is it? What is it? Is it a dungeon? A grave? A...a..." Rusty was looking for suitable word and couldn't find it. Then he gasped and let go of the sheet. It began lifting. Grit and dirt and loose twigs rained off it. The gap widened and slowly opened to a large rectangular blackness without any feeling of depth, a blank space without dimension. Bells' legs disappeared in it, as if cut off. Her eyes grew round and with a weak yelp she slid in, her pony tail and all.

"Bells!" Cried horrified Peacock. "She's gone!" A moment's hesitation, which included a passing of hand through the hair, and Peacock jumped after her.

Grand looked at Rusty. Rusty looked at Grand. Their faces, grey in the shadow of the gigantic metal sheet now standing at a

ninety degree angle in the middle of the beach, twitched in indecision, but before they could utter a word, the blackness sucked them in and in another second the sheet thumped down on the ground.

Chapter 2. The Frozen Lake

It was white. Everything was white. White and cold and flat and endless. Bells rubbed her face, then her hands, which burned like fire, red and frozen, then her arms, trying to warm up. Her hoodie barely gave her any protection from a cutting breeze that blew snowflakes—that's what the white stuff was, she saw it now—wisps and curls and whole clouds of fluff. She stood up and promptly fell back on her butt. The ground underneath was ice covered in a thin sheet of flurries. She tried again, using hands for support. By the time she straightened, her teeth chattered in a mad dance and she couldn't feel her fingers.

"Peacock?" She called. Her voice didn't sound like hers, weak and croaky.

"Peacock? Rusty? Grand?" She looked around. "What is this place?" There was nothing to see, really. Just an unending landscape of nothing. White nothing above and white nothing below.

"It's a lake." She whispered. "A frozen lake." She felt her thoughts begin to freeze.

"Guys! Where are you?"

She shielded her face from the falling snow and waded forward, calling out names, and then promptly fell over a mass of something large and warm and breathing.

"Grand!" Bells nearly jumped with joy. "Get up! Where is Peacock and Rusty?"

Grand didn't say anything, naturally. It was hard to shake up his pessimistic outlook on life. He'd calmly tell them stories about visiting the funeral home to watch his mother beautify the cadavers, explaining it with his interest in the meaning of life in general and how he concluded it didn't have much meaning aside from looking pretty in the coffin when you're dead, because how could it have meaning when his dad died and nobody else's dad died, as far as he knew? How could that have any meaning?

"Come on!" Bells tugged on his shirt.

Grand didn't shiver. In fact, he didn't appear cold at all, but rather, well, grand. With pink cheeks and a sullen expression of someone who was rudely awakened from a nap. "This is bad." He said, and shook the snow out of his hair.

"Thanks for your astute observation." Said Bells through dancing teeth.

"My mom says to never—"

"Jesus, Grand, not right now, please!" Bells hopped from one foot to another, envious of his physique.

An echo of a voice trailed on the wind.

Bells gripped Grand's arm. "Did you...hear that?" She managed, stuttering.

"Guys?" A weak call came from the direction, of, well, more nothing. White snowdrifts and slick ice.

"It's Rusty!" Bells grabbed Grand's unresisting hand and they half-hopped, half-skidded and slid in the direction of the noise, soon joined by another.

A short while later they collapsed into Peacock and Rusty, both walking forward blindly. They didn't even see each other until it was too late. There were a couple sharp cries of fear, then a couple sharp calls of names, then a couple of sharp exclamations of no particular interest to recount here, as they contained nothing much but an agitated bewilderment over where they were, how they got here, and how were they supposed to get out.

When that died down, Bells, by now blue from cold, announced, "We need to get out of here."

"Do we?" Peacock rolled his eyes, as much as they would roll, because it felt like to him that they have frozen solid in their sockets. "I rather like it here." His tongue would barely move. "Nice and warm and sunny."

Bells gave him the look, although it lacked the typical cutting quality due to her being completely frozen.

Suddenly Rusty gave a start. "Guys! Guys! What's that?"

"What's what?" Bells squinted at the distance, if you could call it distance.

"There, see?"

"It's something bad. It will only make things worse." Grand sniffled.

"I can't see!" Bells pressed both hands to her face and then she spotted something. A shape.

Somewhere far ahead, where it was so white that it turned periwinkle bluish and hinted at a semblance of a horizon, a dark dot sat on the flat surface of the ice. It was definitely a lake, thought Bells, noting dark masses of snow-covered woods circling around it.

"I dunno. Want to go look?" Peacock offered her a hand, and she reluctantly let go of Grand, who radiated heat like a furnace, and if Bells could only get over herself, she'd press her back to his to warm up.

"I saw it first! I saw it first! What do you guys think this place is?" Rusty rattled off, skipping and hopping and waving his arms about. "I thought at first, I thought, that's it! I thought we were all going to die! And then Peacock fell on me, right on me, and I thought, wow, it's cold! And then—"

"Gee, Rusty, do you have to recount every detail? Right now? I mean, we're in the middle of bloody nowhere, and you're

excited like a five-year-old. What if we'll never get out of here?" Peacock attempted to brush his hair, but his hand, frozen into a claw, didn't listen to him.

"I should've have skipped school." Grumbled Grand. "This was your idea." He threw a cautious glance at Bells. "It was a bad idea."

"Then why did you come, if it was a bad idea?" She was near tears, from cold and frustration and fear, but she didn't dare to show it and acted brave and annoyed.

"Because..." Grand trailed off.

"Because why?"

He gaped. Apparently he saw something Bells didn't, and she turned around, her pony tail limp and wet from the snow.

They all stopped.

A few paces ahead of them, right in the middle of the lake, stood a throne. An ice throne. Right by it sat a little boy. He might've only looked little because the throne was so huge, looming over him, but he must've been their age. He played with something, what looked like broken sheets of ice, then he noticed them and raised his head.

"Who are you?" He said. His eyes were colorless, almost like two pieces of ice. His blond hair was covered with snowflakes that didn't melt and sat on it in a sparkling layer

as if stuck. His skin was translucent, as if also made of ice, and his voice had an indifferent metallic ring to it.

"Um." Said Bells, dumbfounded.

"Err." Added Peacock.

"I'm Rusty!" Rusty took a step and offered his hand.

The boy recoiled with revulsion written all over his face.

Unperturbed, Rusty continued to introduce his friends.

"This is Bells, Peacock, and Grand."

"What are you doing here?" Asked the boy, now standing, his whole body somehow hostile.

"This is bad." Whispered Grand. "Everything will end up bad."

"Shhh!" Hissed Bells at him, because she really couldn't say anything else. Her lips wouldn't move, and her tongue was permanently stuck to her teeth.

"Go away!" Shouted the boy at them.

They started.

"She will freeze you to death! Go!" He took one of the ice shards in his hand and flung it at them. Bells only had enough time to dodge it. He began throwing them one after another.

Rusty first, then Grand, then Peacock and Bells took off and, slipping and sliding, ran away as fast as they could into more undefined whiteness until miraculously they stumbled to the

very edge of the lake and found themselves on hard frigid ground.

Running warmed them up and they stood, puffing out great plumes of warm air, until there was no warm air to puff out anymore and their thoughts turned sour.

This is where we will die, thought Grand, looking down at his sneakers, dusted over with white.

I wish I could have my grandma's hot chocolate right now! Thought Rusty, hacking up gobs of snot and watching it land in the snow, drilling small burrows in the wake of their passage.

My dads will kill me, thought Peacock, and my hair is ruined.

Why was there a number? Thought Bells. It said, 348.

"It said, 348." She said out loud.

"What?" Peacock took on doing his signature jive, making warming up look cool.

"It said 348 on the sheet." Sputtered Bells. She wasn't sure how her tongue still moved, she only knew that it did and she was determined to keep talking—she came to all of her scientific conclusions while talking it out with herself or with her friends—until she figured it out.

"What sheet?"

"The one we lifted, dummy!"

"Ah. There was a number on it?"

"Yes!"

"What number?"

"I just told you!"

"No need to get pissy, all right? You're not the only one cold here, you know."

"Who is pissy? *I* am pissy?"

"Yes, you are!"

"Look at yourself!"

"We will freeze to death." Stated Grand solemnly.

They lapsed into an uneasy silence. Even Rusty didn't say anything, and he had ran out of snot, so there was nothing he could entertain himself with.

The snow stopped falling, and it was just possible to make out the sky laden with clouds. It sat low over their heads, and the woods surrounding the lake stood out sharply and menacingly, now that they were no longer obscured by the snowfall. The trees, gigantic pines, grew so close to each other, they formed an impenetrable wall, as if no living thing has ever trespassed under their canopy. It was silent and it felt like the forest watched them, breathing cold air through the teeth of its trunks, and Bells together with the boys instinctively retreated to the ice where it was at least light and flat and firm.

They found a log frozen solid into the lake and sat on it, huddling close to each other, none daring to speak first. As

usual, Bells felt it was her responsibility to say something. She was the one who has gotten them into this mess, she was the one who needed to find the way out. But she couldn't come up with anything smart to say. Besides, her head felt heavy and stupid, and she could no longer determine whether or not she had a face. It seemed to have numbed out of existence.

"I hate myself." She managed.

"I hate you more." Promptly responded Peacock.

This gave Bells desired energy. She twisted around and glared at him. "How can you tell if you hate me more than I do?"

"How do you know how much you hate yourself?"

"I don't."

"Then you can't reasonably argue with me whether or not I hate you more than you hate yourself."

Bells couldn't find in her sluggish mind anything witty to retort with.

They sat like this for a while.

"But how did it lift, guys?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did it do it? By itself? It lifted by itself, after you jumped in. Right, Grand? You saw it, Grand, didn't you?"

He shrugged. When staying silent wouldn't do and when his friends wouldn't leave him alone, he shrugged. He has meanwhile

resigned himself to the fate of being frozen alive and so didn't move around, sitting immobile on the log.

"It lifted?" Said Bells. "How?"

"Like a...I don't know, like it lifted on its own. Right Grand?" Rusty elbowed him.

Grand didn't budge.

"What did it lift like? You saw it, didn't you? It just kind of stood like that, like a...like a..." Rusty tried to snap his fingers to help himself think, but they wouldn't move.

"Like a page of a book." Said Grand tonelessly, gaping into nothing with sad glazed-over eyes.

"Page of a book?" Bells jumped up from where she was sitting, suddenly agitated. "What makes you say that?"

Grand didn't move, appearing like he hasn't heard.

She exchanged a glance with Peacock.

"Did it, really?" Bells insisted, happy to stand up and move around and do something.

"It bent like paper." Added Grand. "It curled a bit at the corner." The moment he said it, his eyes lit up and focused on Bells. "It did. It curled at the corner."

"Like a page of a book?" Confirmed Bells. "Are you sure? I mean, it looked like a heavy sheet of metal to me when we were lifting it."

"But it looked like one!" Grand became unusually animated. His pink round face positively began glowing with an understanding of something important.

"You said, we should read." Said Peacock to Bells.

"I did?"

"Yes, and then Rusty said that we didn't bring any books and—"

"Who was that boy, anyway? What do you guys think?" Rusty pointed at the dot in the distance. "He looked weird, like he wasn't cold."

"That's right." Said Bells dreamily. "He didn't, did he?" Her brain began working on something. She couldn't tell what it was working out, but she knew that eventually it would drift to the surface.

"His clothes looked odd." Said Grand. "Like, old-fashioned odd. My mom was making up this dude one time—"

"And he spoke in a weird way too, didn't he, guys?" Rusty energetically shook off the snow from his jacket and jeans and nearly jumped up and down from excitement.

Peacock said nothing, his eyebrows furrowed. He looked at Bells, who looked at nothing, her eyes round, her mouth opened—not that she registered any of it. She tried to grasp the ends of disconnected thoughts and bring them all together, but something was missing, and she couldn't figure out what.

Finally, he nudged her. "Grand is right, we will freeze to death, if we won't start moving or find a place where we can warm up or something."

"Let's go ask that boy, guys!"

They were all leaning toward this, when a fierce wind picked up the snow from the ground and almost knocked them off their feet. Someone was moving, from the far end of the lake to its center, spuming up snowdrifts and raining it on them. That someone galloped past them and obscured everything in a dreadful storm that followed it.

Bells fell to the ground, painfully jabbing her knees and elbows on the ice, Peacock landed next to her. They cowered and covered their heads, hoping not to be blown off the surface of the lake completely. After an eternity, or a thousand eternities, because that's what it felt like to all of them, the snowstorm passed, and they found themselves surrounded with dusk and knolls of white powder. Real fear has stolen into their guts, and without a word they began digging themselves out, their movement sluggish and uncoordinated.

When Bells reached the dark surface of the ice, she cried out.

"What?" Said Peacock, but it came out as a grunt, because he could barely speak.

Bells could only point, because by now she stopped feeling both her hands and feet, and to move her arms or legs seemed like an insurmountable effort.

When they all scrambled to the place she was pointing at, they could only gasp and ponder and gasp some more and ponder some more. Only maybe they didn't need to ponder for much longer, because what they were looking at was this.

A crisp line, as if from a sleigh, was scratched deep into the frozen surface of the lake, like a scrape on a dark mirror. It ended abruptly and turned ninety degrees, forming a corner. And right in the middle of it, maybe a step or two away from each edge, they saw a number, notched in the same manner as the lines.

"Twenty nine." Whispered Bells.

They all stood motionless for a moment, processing this information, and then, without speaking, reached for the groove, sticking their fingers in it.

Sure enough, it lifted. As soon as it lifted, ice-cold water splattered their sneakers, and Bells cried out from pain. Her toes were positively going to fall off in the course of this adventure.

"Do we..." stuttered Peacock, "...have to?"

Bells gulped, closed her eyes really tight, and stuck her foot into the water. In a flash, the water trickled up her jeans

in wet tentacles and yanked her down without so much as a splash. The sheet of ice creaked and groaned and broke open, riding perpendicularly to the lake.

"Like a page of a book." Was the last thing that Grand uttered, before he, too, was swallowed by the lake, together with Peacock and Rusty.

Needless to say, as soon as they vanished, the ice sheet fell down with a satisfied bang.

Chapter 3. The Scorching Desert

This time it was Peacock who has come to his senses first. He sat up and started spitting. Hot grit filled his mouth. Next to him Grand and Rusty were spitting too, but there was no sign of Bells. Upon a second look it was plain that they landed in the desert.

"Glorious asters. Bells?" Said Peacock. "Bells!" His nose itched and burned. He sneezed a couple times. His eyes watered and he sneezed again and again.

"Here!" Came a voice from above, and a moment later Bells slid down the dune in a shower of yellow dust until she landed right on Peacock. They both yelped, rolled another couple feet and stopped, pleasantly surprised by the warmth of the sand and the sun and the bright blue sky that was too blue to look at.

For a while neither of them spoke. All they did was sit back and feel their hands and feet tingle and their minds thaw and their bodies relax and feel happy, but then it became too much. They started sweating. Bells shook her head, trying to get rid of the sand that drilled itself into every pore of her body. Her jeans were soggy and stuck to her skin like smeared with glue, and she felt like napping.

Something glistened in the sun. Something—

“Is that a fox?”

“Where? Where?” Said Rusty.

“There.” Bells pointed.

It was. At the crest of the dune stood a fox, orange like only a fox can be, and gazed down at them with solemn intelligence.

“It’s not a fox.” Said Peacock, frowning. “It’s a little boy with red hair.”

“A fox can’t wear clothes and stand upright.” Observed Grand, huffing and puffing and pulling closer to his friends, which looked like a locomotive trying to burrow through sand that streamed around it in rivulets of quartz.

“You remember wrong.” Said Peacock, looking at Bells.

“What?”

Peacock blinked. “What did I say?”

“You said I remember wrong. Why did you just say that?”

“Did I?” He scratched his head, puzzled.

The fox in the meantime didn’t move. It continued studying them silently. An idea struck Bells, and she asked.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a fox.” Said the fox.

Peacock shook his head hard. “This is like déjà vu. It reminds me of something, but I can’t tell what.”

"It talks! It talks! The fox talks!" Rusty tried to jump and instead dug himself deeper into sand.

Grand only shook his head, red from the heat already. He unzipped his jacket and was debating weather or not to take off his t-shirt. "It's a fox in pants and shirt, and it can't be right. Nothing it right. I want to go home." He mumbled under his breath, so nobody heard him.

The fox turned its head to the side.

Bells blinked. It wasn't a fox anymore. It was a little boy, like Peacock said, with flaming red hair. And it wore a cape, and boots, and his face was thoughtful, not at all like the face of a boy should be, a boy who got stuck in the middle of the desert. What was he doing in the middle of the desert anyway?

"Who are you?" Asked Bells again.

The boy took a careful step forward. "Who are you?" He asked.

"I'm Bells." Said Bells automatically. "I mean, that's my nickname. My read name is Belladonna Monterey." Somehow the boy's inquisitive gaze made her feel uneasy and bare, like he could read her thoughts, could sense her pretense.

She turned and looked expectantly at her friends. One by one they obliged.

"Peacock." Peacock cleared his throat. "That is, Peter Sutton. Very pleased to meet you." He attempted a bow and dropped in the pile of dust.

"George Palmeater. I do not eat palms." Said Grand with sadness. This is how he used to present himself, until Bells' idea relieved him of that.

"Russell Jagoda. You say it with a "Ya", not with a "Ja". Please say it right, or my grandma will...she will..." Rusty was looking for the right word again, snapping his fingers, that snapped very well in the heat.

The boy took a step toward them and stopped. Behind him the air simmered with heat, rising in runnels of mirage.

"What are you doing here?" Asked the boy. He didn't say it in a mean and nasty way like the boy on the frozen lake said. He said it with a question in his voice, a curiosity that was just that. Curiosity. He didn't seem to be surprised at all. He seemed to be wanting to find out how to relate to these strangers he came across on his stroll through the desert. Because that's how he looked, like he was taking a casual stroll across the desert.

"This is weird." Mumbled Grand.

Bells heard him. "What is weird?"

"All of it."

"Hey!" Rusty called, excited. "What are you doing here?"

"You didn't answer my question." Said the boy.

"But..." Rusty stalled.

"I asked you first. I would really like to know, please."

He waited. He looked like he could wait for twenty eternities. Or maybe thirty. It didn't really matter for how many eternities he could wait, because even just one eternity was a very very long time.

Bells looked around. They were sitting in a groove between dunes, their faces crusted with sand, their hair standing up, their clothes dark from sweat, speckled with sand. Their eyes uncomprehending and yet alive, as alive as she had ever seen her friends.

What are we doing here? She thought.

Why did I tell Bells she remembered wrong? Thought Peacock.

Where did this boy come from? I'm sure he was a fox first, I'm sure of it, thought Rusty.

He wore clothes before, I could swear he did. I don't like this and I'm hot and my mom is probably very worried, thought Grand.

"I think," Bells started slowly, "we somehow managed to..." She glanced at Peacock for support.

"Lift a sheet, a—"

"Page of a book." Said Grand, his face clearing. "We lifted a page of a book."

"We did! We did! Grand, you rock! This is it! We lifted a page of a book and then the book swallowed us! It just sucked us in, like a vacuum! I thought my heart would jump out of my chest! I did, I did!" Rusty talked so excitedly that he inhaled sand and now bent down, coughing it out. His eyes watered, and when a trickle of brown saliva fell out of his mouth, he sucked it back in, before spitting it out, a wide grin on his face at this new entertainment.

"I guess we fell into a book?" Said Bells uncertainly.

"That is very interesting." Said the boy, and took one step closer. "I didn't know you could fall into a book."

"I'd say, the book sucked us in, that's what happened." Corrected him Peacock, his hand in his hair, shuffling it and parting out strands. He was very much in need of a mirror.

"You jumped after me, didn't you?" Said Bells with shining eyes.

"Oh, I thought, what the hell."

"He did, he did, I saw it!"

Peacock wanted to tell Rusty to shut up, but the boy's presence stopped him for some reason. Something about his eyes, or maybe it was his face, or maybe his cape, flapping in the hot breeze just so.

"And then what happened? How did you guys follow me?" Bells took off her hairband, made a new pony tail and smoothed her

hair. She felt more or less herself again, this morning pedaling on the bikes now seeming to her as far away as her eleventh birthday when her dad and her mom took her to the bookstore where she could pick out as many books as she could carry, and there was this one book that has caught her attention with its cover, and on that cover—

“I wish I didn’t.” Grand pouted.

Bells whipped her head around. Her thought was gone, and now she couldn’t remember what just flashed through her mind. She wanted to snap at Grand, when the boy spoke again.

“Excuse me if I’m interrupting you, but I’d very much like to know how one can fall into a book? It sounds very interesting, and I think I’d like to try it too.” Said the boy. He stood close to them now, and they saw that he was smaller and thinner and more fragile than he seemed when standing on the edge of the dune.

“Well, we’re not sure ourselves.” Said Bells. “You see, what happened is, I have been watching ants carry a caterpillar—you know how ants can carry five thousand times their own weight?—anyway, they were trotting in this zigzaggy line along the beach, the lake beach, and then I saw a line, like a crack, and I brushed the dirt off and saw an edge of a metal sheet. It kept going and going and then I—”

“Rusty, no!” Peacock yelled, terrified.

Bells jumped.

Grand grunted.

They had enough time to see Rusty pull at something under the sand, his exhilarated little face glistening from sweat, and then a vast shape of what looked like a gigantic cardboard page flew up on its own accord, teetered perpendicularly to the ground, and Rusty fell into the opening with a tide of sand, after which the page promptly flopped down with what sounded like a sigh of mischief.

"Rusty!" The boy forgotten, they all rushed to the spot where he was a second ago.

"One hundred and four." Bells' voice shook. "One hundred and four! It's a number of a page!" He hands shook too. She has swept enough sand off the cardboard for all of them to see it printed in black ink at the very corner. The numbers were tastefully decorated with a couple squiggles, as if that is something a reader absorbed in the story would notice. She tired sticking her fingers under the edge. Before she could find it, it dissolved into the sand.

"It disappeared!" Cried Bells, furiously digging around.

They all did, then stopped after a while. It was useless.

"Corners." Said Bells, her eyes glazed. "We find corners with numbers. They're book pages." She lifted her head.

"We shouldn't have come here." Said Grunt. He lower lip stuck out. "Now we've lost Rusty."

"Nobody asked you to jump after me!" She exploded.

"And what if—"

"You could've just stayed where you were. Why did you follow me?" Guilt tore her apart, and Bells tried really hard to hide it. Unfortunately, it didn't work very well, and she lashed out at Peacock and Grand instead.

"Freaks!" She shouted, tears prickling her eyes.

"Who?" Asked Peacock.

"You! Both of you!" She wiped her eyes angrily.

"Why?" This the boys said together.

"Because!" All words deserted her, and she was simply angry and this anger needed to come out somewhere.

"That's very self-explanatory." Commented Peacock icily. He hoped it would come across as pure ice, but then again, they were in the desert, and the merciless sun made it all sound insignificant and sluggish.

"What?" Said Bells.

"Nothing."

"I said this was a bad idea. My mom says some people—"

"Shut up!" As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

Grand's red face shimmied in what would soon be a wall of tears. He turned away to hide it. His mom always berated him for

crying. The last time he cried openly was at his dad's funeral. Since then he was ashamed. He cried easily. Any little thing could make him cry. He was so sensitive, he felt everything, every little prick, and he hated it. He hated it with his whole heart.

"Grand?" Bells touched his shoulder.

He shook her hand off.

"Grand, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did." He sniffled.

"The boy." Called Peacock. "The boy is gone."

They turned around. The boy was nowhere to be seen. He evaporated. There was no sign of anyone or anything around them, no boy, no fox, not even a cactus or a mirage. Only sand. Spills and spills of sand in every direction, and white-hot sun, and dazzlingly blue sky, so blue, it was painful to look at it.

Bells glanced at Peacock, and they saw fear reflect in each other's eyes. They were lost. They didn't know how they got here, why, and how they could get out. And now they have lost one of their best friends too, without a clue about where he went. On top of it, they were hungry and thirsty, and there surely was no water anywhere close. Now they longed to be back on the frozen lake. At least there they could stuff their mouths full of snow.

"I'm hot and tired." Said Grand.

"Whiner." Bells didn't mean it. It came out automatically. Her head was pounding, she couldn't think straight anymore or feel sorry. She felt nothing except the gritting scratching sensation in her mouth that told her she needed a drink of water. Bad.

"What, you're not tired?" Peacock came to Grand's defense.

"Nope." Lied Bells.

"Not at all?" He tried to mock her.

"Not one bit."

"Liar."

Bells looked hurt. "Why are we talking about me all of a sudden?"

"And why not?"

"Guys, stop." Said Grand quietly. He licked his lips. Sweat rolled off his forehead and dripped from the tip of his nose.

"Why should we?" Bells said it with intended bitterness. It didn't sound bitter at all. It sounded tired.

"Why do we always have to stop arguing after you ask us to? Why can't we stop arguing after I ask us to?"

"Since when are you the boss of us?" Added Peacock.

"Yeah." Grand almost smiled. He couldn't remember the last time Peacock took his side.

"Yeah." Echoed Peacock.

"Because that's what girls do, they boss boys around. Now, if you'll excuse me—" But she didn't finish. She burst into tears and sobbed into her hands, embarrassed and hot and scared.

"Hey." A couple awkward hands patted her on the shoulder.

"It's my fault." Mumbled Bells into her hands. "It was my idea. It was stupid. Stupid."

"Listen, doesn't matter now whose fault it is. We gotta find Rusty."

"Peacock says the truth, Bells. No good sitting around and crying. My mom says..." Grand paused cautiously, waiting for someone to shush him. No one did, and he continued. "She says it's no good talking about doing something. She says don't talk, do. She says, there are people who only talk about doing things, and those who really do things have no time to talk. She says that's why she loves her job. She doesn't have to talk to dead people, and they don't talk to her either. They just accept her gift. She makes them beautiful, she really does, I saw it. It's the last thing she can do for them, to make them lie all pretty in the coffin..." Grand caught piercing stares from both Bells and Peacock and stopped. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay." Said Bells.

"Really, we don't mind."

Grand smiles sheepishly. "I just...she loves her job and..." Everyone would always tease him at school. Everyone

except his friends. They wouldn't tease him, but after the thousandth morbid story involving corpses, makeup, and giant refrigerators, they started interrupting him to make him shut up.

"Let's find Rusty." Said Grand.

"Let's."

"What are we looking for?"

"I think we're looking for a corner of a page." Bells wiped the sand off her face. Her lips were cracked. She tied her hoodie around her waist. "We have to look for a corner. A corner of the page he lifted. What number was it, do you remember?"

"One hundred something?" Offered Peacock.

"It slipped my mind." Bells punched sand in frustration.

"I don't think the number matters that much." Grand appeared thoughtful, forgetting to even swipe the sweat out of his eyes.

"We have to look for a corner." Bells retreated into her head already. "We have to find it. It must be there. It can't just disappear into nothing, can it?"

"I don't think—"

"Listen." Peacock tugged on her hand. "Listen what Grand is saying. I think it makes sense."

"What?"

They stared Grand down.

Unaccustomed to all this attention, he tried to shrink into the sand, which, naturally, was a futile effort, with his girth and weight and overwhelming presence. For an eleven-year-old he could pass for a bear cub. "Um." He tried gathering his thoughts. They scattered, stinking traitors. Grand grunted. It helped him concentrate sometimes. "I think," he licked his lips again, "I think we need to find out what book he fell into. That's what I think."

"And how are we going to do that?" Bells frowned.

"Wait." Peacock perked up. "Wait a second. Bells? Why did you see a fox when I saw a boy with red hair?"

"What book was he from?" Bells said to no one in particular. She jumped to her feet, slipping and sliding in the sand. "I got it!" She shouted.

"What?"

"What book are we in now? We have to figure out what book we're in!"

"That's a great idea. It would be great if we found this out before we all die of thirst and heat." Said Grand gloomily.

"We can get out of here." Asserted him Bells. "All we need to do is find another page corner." As she said it, her heart sank. All around them spread the endless empty desert. They could search for days, digging fruitlessly in the sand, and find

nothing. Who was to say there were other pages hiding here? What if the one Rusty opened was the only one? She said this aloud.

"What if Rusty opened the only one?"

"The only one what?"

"The only page?"

Peacock said nothing. He long abandoned worrying about how his hair looks and sat on a hillock, his hands in his hair, grimy and sweaty, thinking.

"What if we look in the same place, maybe it will appear again." Bells dragged herself up and plopped in the spot where she thought Rusty disappeared, but after a short while her hands hurt from dry heat and her muscles seemed to have decided that it's best not to move. They plain refused to listen to her brain's commands. Her brain didn't appear to be in a very good shape either. At last she gave up, looking up to the boy for help.

Peacock still sat as before, thinking.

Grand, however, brightly stared into distance. He either saw something there or had a new idea.

"What is it?" Asked Bells.

"What were you thinking about?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you were looking at ants."

"Nothing. I thought how they had an adventure, carrying that caterpillar, and how great it would be for us to have an adventure..." She trailed off.

"And what book did you think about when you told us we need to read?" Peacock woke up from his slumber.

"Uh, I don't know." Bells furrowed her brows. She had a hard time thinking, not to mention remembering.

"Did you think of some book?"

"I guess I did?" It was a statement shaped as a question.

"Maybe we have to think of a book, for a page to appear?" Peacock was thinking out loud now.

Just as he said it, far on the horizon a dark line appeared. It grew and floated near them. Soon they it was not a line at all, it was a-

"Tornado!" Peacock got up to his feet.

"The Wizard of Oz!" Cried Bells.

"What do we do now?"

"Did one of you think about The Wizard of Oz?"

"I didn't." Said Grand. "It's going to get us. We will all die."

The wind rose and whistled in their ears. Blue sky turned black with dust and clouds.

"I know!" Shouted Bells, shielding her face from the grit and sand and struggling against the pull of the air. It threatened to lift her and toss her about like some twig.

"What?" Peacock reached out to Bells.

In this moment it was upon them. A great force swirled up their tiny bodies and threw them into a spiraling frenzy high in the air. Bells screamed and couldn't hear herself scream. The uproar deafened her. She has lost all orientation, no longer knowing up from down and left from right. Her hoodie untied and flipped into the sky like a dead bird. She has lost sight of both her friends. Then she saw something.

In the thickness of grey around her a ray of light traces a line. Right next to it traced another line. A corner appeared, drawn directly at the edge of the tornado, it's upper edge, it's very tip. It didn't look like a circle, it became a square, then a rectangle, then a number appeared in the right bottom corner.

"Thirteen." Read Bells.

The next moment she saw Grand and Peacock swirl up to her. She reached for the corner. It touched her hand with the softness of a fog and, pliable under her fingers, peeled off the darkened sky.

Chapter 4. The Green Grass

Rusty found himself lying in the grass. It smelled fresh and moist, like grass smells after the rain. He propped himself on both elbows, dizzy, then started licking it. The grass. Or, rather licking the dew off the grass. Then he simply grabbed handfuls of it and stuffed it in his mouth and chewed. It took him a moment to remember what happened this morning. In fact, it took him several moments to remember anything at all.

"Rusty." He said, testing his voice. "Is that my name? I think it is. Is it?" He absentmindedly rubbed the grass on his face. It felt cool and it smelled of summer and earth. "No, I don't think it's my name. I think my name is Russell. Is it?" He tried eating more grass, but suddenly it didn't taste so good anymore. He spit it out and clambered to all fours.

He was in a green field, by three small pools of water. Puddles, really. He dragged himself to one of them, dunked his face in the water and drunk until a giant belch made him stop.

He looked up. The green field continued in place of sky. There really was no sky to speak of. It was a thick green canopy of leaves. So thick, you couldn't see thought it at all. Green

on the bottom, green on the top, Rusty rubbed his eyes and blinked. No, it didn't help. Everything stayed the same.

"Where is everyone." He said. His words sounded strange. They disappeared into velvety silence. There was no echo. It was pleasantly warm, and Rusty's eyelids began to droop. He expertly pulled them apart, suddenly remembering.

"Guys!" He rose and stumbled around a little. "Guys? Where are you?"

"I lifted it, didn't I?" He tried to snort, but no snot would come out. "I turned a page, like Grand said—it was a page, right—and then it lifted and then, I mean, now, now I'm here. What the hell. What the hell is going on?" Terror stole into his guts and he squatted, afraid that something might fall on his head, or something might jump on his head. Or bite off his toes. Or something of the sort. But more than anything, he was afraid that he has lost his friends forever. It didn't occur to him to worry about how he was going to get back, he worried how in the world he was going to ever see them again.

"Guys?" He tried again. "Guys, stop it! It's not funny!" They would often play trick on him, him being so small and excitable and gullible. "Hey, that's enough!" He staggered about the trees, peering behind each trunk. "Come out already, I know you're hiding!"

It took him a while to stop and sit and sigh and understand that he was all alone in this strange place that made him very drowsy. There was no wind, no sound. Not a single leaf moved, not a rustle reached his ears. It was eerie and bizarre and it reminded him of something. He couldn't quite remember what and decided to lie down and think about it. It was more comfortable to lie down. The grass was so soft, and the air was so warm, and thinking was so hard. It was much easier not to think at all and close your eyes and-

Rusty jumped up like someone scalded him with boiling water. His grandmother used to read to him every night, starting with the night when she told him that his mama and papa had to stay on their trip a little longer. And then a little longer. And a little longer.

He was too small to understand. He was only six. He liked it that mama and papa didn't come for a long time, because his grandmother Agnieszka started reading books to him every night. She has never done this before, and now for some reason she couldn't stop. And she always sobbed a little, before she started, into an ironed cotton kerchief that she pulled out of the endless folds of her skirt, and blew her large reddish nose into it, and then stashed it back. Her eyes were always red for some reason, but Rusty didn't mind. He liked the extra attention

and lay quietly and listened to the stories. And the one he remember the most was the story about—

“Narnia!” He cried, fully awake.

Then he thought he peed himself a little. It happened to him whenever he got over-excited.

“Am I in Narnia? I mean, in that place between places, whatever it was called? Guys, guys! Guess what!” He was dying to share it with his friends and he simply couldn’t believe they were not here to hear it. It was impossible that they were lost. He refused to believe it.

“Guys, this is so unfair that you didn’t follow me like you followed Bells! But it’s okay, I’ll find you!”

He bravely stomped to the pools of water and painfully tried to remember what they did. “I think they lead to other worlds. To places where stuff happens, because nothing happened here, right?” He talked to himself often, because, quite frankly often he couldn’t shut up and got on his grandmother’s nerves, and his big sister Helen was away in college, studying to become a doctor. An emergency doctor, because she said she will be saving people who have accidents.

“So what will happened if I—” He lifted his leg, gazing into the still surface of the pool—puddle, really—like into a mirror, and saw his peaked face and spiked dirty hair and thought better of it and put his foot down. “Wait, if they go

after me, and I go somewhere else, how will they find me? They won't, right? So I better say put." He walked away and was tempted to lie down again.

"And if I stay put, I will fall asleep forever. Will I? Ah, I should've read the book, like grandma said. I can't remember!" He pounded on his forehead with both fists. It sometimes helped him think better. Most of the time, however, it simply left bruises and didn't give him any more smart thoughts.

"Will it work, though?" He walked up to the pool again. "Will it take me somewhere?" Adventure fever seized him and he nudged the water with the tip of his shoe.

Nothing happened.

He nudged again.

Nothing happened again.

"Well, that's a bummer. I think I need something else to travel." He rubbed his head, trying to remember. After a moment's thought, or without any thought whatsoever, he ran a ways off, turned around, and went straight for one of the pools. At the edge of it he jumped, landed in the middle, and, wet all over, stared around. He stood in the puddle, filthy from the sand and now wet woo.

"Bummer."

He walked out, shaking off the water.

"What am I going to do now?" The strange green light filtering through the leaves fascinated them. Then he got it.

"Trees!" His face lit up and his arms and legs jittered from anticipation. "I will climb trees!"

He ran up to the tree nearest him, a thick solid oak with knobs and knots protruding all over its trunk so it was easy for him to hook his fingers and toes and in no time make it up and sit on the bough and swing his legs and feel thrilled. Nobody told him to get down. Nobody told him that climbing trees was a dumb idea. Nobody chased him down with a broom, like his grandmother often did when she spied him sitting in their apple tree, eating green apples that later gave him a fantastic diarrhea and the most spectacular farts the next day at school, making all boys envious.

There was nothing to eat on this tree, however, and no matter how high Rusty climbed, he didn't seem to be able to reach the very top and part the leaves and look over the forest.

He slid down and proceeded to climb a few more trees, until he got bored. He satisfied his climbing hunger and realized that it was no fun climbing without being shouted at, without the thrill of being discovered. He even missed his grandmother's wrinkly face, when she would purse her lips just so and drop a bad Polish word here or there, thinking that Rusty didn't understand what they meant. He has long since then looked up

their meanings and astounded the boys in school with his rather international swearing vocabulary. They begged him to teach them, and he made them pay him with candy and lollipops or anything else he deemed they possessed of value.

It all faded now, faded into the green haze. Soon fog. Soon sleepiness again.

Rusty couldn't think straight, and he drank a lot, but he didn't eat anything since breakfast, and his stomach rumbled with hunger. It was the only sound he heard for a long time before his head became so heavy, he couldn't hold it upright any longer and despite himself nodded off, curled up into a ball at the foot of that large oak he climbed first, and fell fast asleep.

He dreamed.

He dreamed of a figure in red. He couldn't see its face, couldn't tell if it was a woman or a man or a child. The figure was draped in a cape with a hood that obscured everything. It moved silently across the flat expanse of the green grass, and the red stood out so starkly against the green that it made Rusty's heart beat very fast.

It was walking, no, gliding, toward him, and something about its movement unnerved him. He couldn't move. His arms and legs felt heavy, like they always do in dreams, and his head

wouldn't lift. He wanted to crawl away, to hide, and couldn't, as if chained to the ground.

The figure drew closer. He could hear its shallow breath, he could even discern the gentle rustle of the fabric over the blades of grass. It whispered something, words, warnings.

Then he saw his friends. Yes, it was them. They were behind the figure, following it. They looked excited.

Rusty wanted to cry out, wanted to tell them about the danger. What danger? He didn't know himself, he only knew that the figure's path lay across the spot where he lay, and he couldn't get away before it would reach him, and once it would reach him, bad thing will happen. Rusty was afraid to think what bad things those were, but he knew they were about—

It covered him with the redness of its shadow and passed over. Nothing happened. Except one thing. Rusty's guts chilled, and he heard the ticking of a clock. It's like it ticked off minutes of his life, and then he knew that if he didn't find a way to wake up on his own, he would sleep until he died.

Chapter 5. The Figure in Red

A red hooded cloak was the first thing they saw, all three of them. Because all three of them, Bells and Grand and Peacock, landed painfully on the packed dirt in the middle of some woods. Birds chirped above their heads, and the mushrooms peaked at them from under the carpet of leaves, and squirrels or hares or some other small forest animals scurried about, curious yet scared to show themselves.

The streak of red blinked between the birches a few steps ahead and disappeared, only to reappear again along the trodden path that cut through the thicket of the underbrush, bushes of wild blackberries and huckleberries and hazelnuts.

"The Little Prince." Uttered Bells. Her head spun and she held it for a brief moment, to steady herself after the wild ride in the tornado.

They all looked at the red flashing between trees, too stumped to say anything about it, still processing everything that has happened before and, frankly, quite shaken up by it.

"The what?" Croaked Peacock. He squinted, trying to make out what it was he saw.

Bells was Bells, no matter where she happened to be or how battered she was, and this careless response on Peacock's part both aggravated her sense of rightness and gave her immediate strength to get up and fight.

"Are you dumb or only pretending to be dumb?" She fumed, feeling rather pleased with herself for guessing the place where they just came from.

"What? Speak for yourself." Peacock felt offended, and couldn't quite understand what called for his friend's wrath.

"You never heard of The Little Prince?"

Grand thoughtfully stayed quiet. He rather enjoyed the cool air in the forest and the smell of leafy things and earthy things and pollen and bark and pine needles and sap.

"What is it?" Peacock coked his head inquisitively.

"A book, idiot. You never read The Little Prince?"

"No." Peacock didn't blush easily, and for some reason he blushed now. Hot blood spurred up his cheeks, and he despised himself to giving in to it. "Just because I didn't read some book—"

"Some book? *Some* book??" Bells puffed out her cheeks and tossed back her pony tail. It was a sign of utter dissatisfaction and disappointment.

"Who do you think it is?" Tried Grand quietly, meaning the figure in red still lurking ahead. They didn't hear him.

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Obviously." Peacock grew more and more irritated, as did Bells. "Miss bookworm here has read everything and now thinks that we all should do the same."

"Yes, I do. Reading widens your horizons, did you know that?" She heard the expression somewhere and thought it sounded very smart. "Did you know that reading slows memory loss, heightens concentration, reduces stress, and enriches one's vocabulary?"

"Says who?"

"Says I."

"Look, I could care less about reading right now. We're in the middle of nowhere, without the slightest clue about how to get out of here, and you're talking about the benefits of reading?"

"We need to figure out where we are, um, I mean, in what book, maybe then we can figure out where Rusty went, and, well..." Grand trailed off. His voice of reason wasn't heard. Again.

"What do you read, anyway?" Bells continued her attack.

"Comics. What's it to you?" Peacock shrugged, for some reason embarrassed.

"I just read The Chronicles of Narnia." Said Grand, not even hoping to be heard anymore. He sighed miserably and peeled leaves off the nearby mushroom.

"I can't believe this. What is wrong with you?" Threw Bells, her arms propped on her hips. "You've never heard of The Little Prince? You must read it."

"Why?" Peacock tied his suave tactic, appearing like whatever Bells said, didn't bother him, and parrying her lashes with questions and feigned indifference.

"Because." Bells choked on the simplicity of the question and desperately tried to come up with a worthy answer. "Because it's beautiful."

"Oh yeah? And why is that?"

Throughout their endless banter, and it was endless, Grand first resigned to silence, then he puffed up at the thought of their friend Rusty possibly suffering some horrendous torture, because since Rusty liked to read The Goosebumps series, he for sure has landed in some horror story, and, funny or not, they were probably roasting him on a spit right now over an open fire and here they were, arguing about books, when they really should be concentrating on solving the puzzle of how this corner turning thing worked so they could work out how to get united again. At one moment Grand's sense of being right exploded and he barked, not recognizing his voice.

"Enough!"

Both Bells and Peacock drew in air, abruptly silent.

"We need to find Rusty and not argue! My mom says," he hesitated, but only for a brief moment, "my mom says your friends are all you have. She says friends are like family. And it's not fair that I don't have a dad and you have two dads! It's unfair!" Why he blurted it out, Grand couldn't say, but he also couldn't stop. "I cherished my dad, and you don't cherish your dads at all, so why is it that you have two? Why?" he felt the oncoming rush of water in his eyes and stomped off, without any direction.

He broke through a patch of giant burdocks and skirted a growth of birch trees and crested a hillock and barged into a small ravine overgrown with ferns that whipped at his ankles and knees. After a while he heard calls behind him and a patter of two pairs of feet and stopped, out of breath. His bulk didn't let him move as fast as he liked, and after each failure he consoled himself with a donut or a cupcake, but there were no donuts or cupcakes here in the woods, and he was painfully hungry and upset and ashamed at his outburst.

When Bells and Peacock made it to him, they didn't know what to say. And so they stood silent, listening to the life in the woods. A burst of a woodpecker somewhere up on a pine. A

trilling call of a thrush. A barking of a squirrel. And the wind, the wind rustling through the trees.

"Sorry." Said Peacock at last.

"Yeah, sorry, Grand, you were right. We need to figure out where we are and look for Rusty. I'm scared to think of what happened to him."

"It's okay." Grand sniffled.

"What if we don't look for a corner, though?" Said Bells, encouraged. "I mean, what do you think, guys? What if we do nothing? We can stay here. Find some nuts and berries to eat. You know, it's not as bad as in the desert or the frozen lake." As soon as she said it, she frowned.

"No, we can't do that." Peacock shook his head.

"Maybe then it will turn it of for us?"

"What will?"

"Whatever it is that got us here in the first place."

"What was the first book?"

"The first we got in?" Bells asked. "What, you haven't figured it out yet?"

"Stop." Said Grand, looking at both of them with reproach. "Please."

Bells sighed. It was not easy for her to let go of being the smartest of them four, always knowing more.

They heard footsteps and stiffened. The woods fell silent in the wake of this noise, and the red robe they saw earlier flitted by the ravine, on the edge of it, seemingly in a hurry. They could see the flow of the red fabric, the heavy folds of the hood, but not the face or the hands or the feet. They stood close enough to see it moving, but far enough to not being able to tell who it was.

"It's not who we think it is." Said Bells under her breath.

"And who do we think it is?" Said Grand.

"Little Red Riding hood?" Said Peacock, anticipating an appreciative reaction out of his friends, but they both beetled their brows, as if they knew something he didn't.

"I don't think it's little red riding hood at all. I think it's something worse, something very awful. I just have this feeling..." Bells feverishly tried to remember all the books she has read recently and if any of them mentioned anyone in read.

"Let's make a list." Grand said.

"Let's find a corner." Said Peacock.

"Let's follow it." Said Bells, and mischievous light danced in her eyes. "I think it wants us to follow it, whatever it, don't you think?"

They agreed on that. Following this person, whoever it was, gave them something to do. And that made them think less of how hungry and tired and scared they were. And, they agreed as they

stole between the trees after the red cloak, they could, just *possibly* could stumble onto another corner by accident, and who knew, maybe, if they turned it, it would bring them to Rusty.

They trailed behind, trying not to make any noise, which was impossible for Grand who kept stepping on twigs and cracking them and grunting when a bush slapped him in the face. No amount of shushing from Bells or Peacock did any good. For some reason, the figure in red didn't hear them. Or maybe it pretended like it didn't hear them, but it didn't turn once to look, hurrying out of the woods and across a field of bloody red poppies and to a huge castle behind iron gates.

The figure slipped inside and hurried up the path to the steps of a magnificent portico and cracked a heavy door open and vanished.

"We really shouldn't go there." Said bells breathlessly, her face pressed between iron bars. The view wowed her. The trimmed hedges. The stone basin fountains. The ornate benches and vases and dresses and masks of sauntering guests.

"Why not?" Peacock could hardly contain his eagerness. This was his thing. This was fancy people dressed in fancy outfits with fancy hair and shoes and manners. Peacock very much wanted to get in and look around and soak it all in, forgetting completely about his lost friend—who was peacefully napping at the moment, by the way—and dying to be part of this.

"It looks like a masked ball." He breathed.

"A masquerade." Corrected him Bells. "And I don't like it."

In the end it was someone else who decided for them. A pair of buffoons in motley hats finished with annoyingly jiggling bells crept up behind them and yelled.

"Boo!"

Bells jumped. Peacock gasped. Grand squealed, and they were pushed through the gate and up the steps and into a grand foyer packed with musicians and magicians and ballet dancers and masked women and men in silk and gauze and feather boas. The sound of music mixed with that of chatter and laughter and loud toasts and other pompous proclamations to the health of a certain Prince.

Crouching next to the wall, passing under gilded portraits and knight armor, our friends scurried along a hallway, peeking into endless rooms lavishly decorated with tapestries and flowers and stained-glass windows until they ended up in a special suite. It simply felt special, they couldn't tell why or how, but it did. And it looked like a beginning of a labyrinth of some sort, not the typical row of rooms opening one into another, but a passage with all kinds of turns and dead ends and surprises. Here they slowed down for the first time, breathing hard, hiding behind a gigantic statue of some duke with an angry beard and an even angrier sword.

Bells pressed herself to the wall, her face chalk-white.

"What is it?" Asked Peacock.

Grand was so tired from running, he could only wheeze.

"First The Snow Queen, now this." Puffed Bells, staring into the darkness behind the open double doors.

"What?"

A couple, holding hands, passed them, giggling, drinks in hands, and disappeared into blue glow. It was blue, the room behind the doors, everything in it was blue, that much Bells could see. The curtains, the bedding, the rugs on the floor. Her stomach shrunk a little, and cold stole all over her.

"What is it?" Peacock now shook her. Any moment they risked to be discovered, but the ball guests seemed to be preoccupied with their merriment and paid them no heed. Then a heavy sound struck so loud, Bells jumped. It rung a hollow creepy noise along the suite twelve times and stopped.

"The clock." Whispered Bells, shivering. "That's right, it has the clock."

The noise died. Music stopped. Voices hushed. An uneasy and somber silence hung in the air, and only heartbeats were heard. Bells' and Peacock's and Grand's. From their hiding spot they saw the figure in red again, and its face was a mask.

"That is not...little red riding hood." Mumbled Grand.

"Shhh!" Peacock was too agitated to talk.

Now an elegant man in velvet and satin and gold was screaming insults at the figure in red, apparently enraged at the costume for some reason, demanding the person to unmask. Nobody moved. The red cloak darted into the blue room and the crowd surged after it. Despite herself, Bells followed, Peacock and Grand in step with her, all drawn forward by some unexplainable force, from one room to another. They were all a different color. After the blue one they entered a purple one, then a green one, then orange and white and violet. Terror seized them as they came to the last room, black with bloody red stained-glass windows and curtains and glow.

Bells couldn't talk, she grabbed both Peacock's and Grand's sleeves, pulling on them to get out. Her legs wouldn't move, and when the Prince took out a knife, she exhaled the words that were sitting on her tongue.

"It's the Red Death."

"The what?" Both boys rounded their eyes on her.

"Poe. It's a Poe story."

"A who?"

"It's a disease. It will kill us."

Sure enough, as she said it, the elegant Prince cried out and tumbled to the floor, his pale face marred with splotches of red, and the masked figure turned on them. It stood by the giant clock, its arms rising. With a shriek of terror, friends rushed

out of the room and collided with the tide of screaming guests who were just filing inside.

They didn't see where they were going, they were running, from one room to another, until in the blue room Bells foot caught on the edge of the rug and she flew face-first to the floor, colliding painfully with the edge of an elaborately decorated mahogany dresser.

"What is Red Death?" Peacock breathed in her face.

"Whatever it is, it's no use for us to know about it. We will die anyway." Said Grand and plopped down next to Bells.

Back from where they came from echoes and heartrending cries chilled their blood. Those were cries of death.

"What the hell are you reading, Bells?"

"My dad," Bells massaged her head, tried to stand up and collapsed down, dizzy. "He told me not to read it. His book. It's a collection of short stories by Edgar Allan Poe."

"Is that where we're in right now? Grand, help me!" Peacock heaved her under her shoulders, but it was no good. He was as exhausted as her, and they didn't make it anywhere before a breath of cold wind reached them, as if a precursor of something moving in their direction, together with a terrible absence. An absence of sound. The castle seemed to be devoid of life.

Instinctively, Bells scooted back into a corner.

"Corner!" She cried, forgetting for a moment everything and peering at the wallpaper. Which was exquisite, one must say. It was brocaded silk with irises stamped in it, their petal veins gilded by hand, it seemed, not one of them alike.

The rush of dust from the green room now reached the purple room and moved the curtains in the blue room with hungry anticipation.

"It's coming, whatever the hell it is!" Peacock exclaimed, studying the wallpaper next to Bells for any sign of a number. "Do you see anything?"

"I'm trying, I'm trying!" Bells started shaking uncontrollably. This wasn't fun anymore. If they felt the cold and the heat in the two previous books, who was to say they couldn't die from a disease in this one?

"Here." Said Grand. He was pointing right into the dusty corner of the window alcove.

"Where?"

"Did you find it?"

A breath of Red Death passed through the doors and just as it was about to envelop the blue room, Grand and Bells reached for the corner at the same time and peeled it open.

The adjoining corners opened up like a middle of a book. Peacock pulled on Grand's hand just as Grand tipped his head in and in the next moment they were tumbling in, when Bells opened

the next page and slid into a blue rectangle of a hole that looked suspiciously just like the room she has left a second ago, blue and menacing and cold and when she sat up, she realized two very unsettling things.

One, she was sitting in some old-fashioned castle room the likes she saw in pictures in medieval books and the likes the Prince in the Red Death story had, so it could mean maybe she landed in the same story only a few pages before? She didn't know if it was possible or not. She didn't know anything anymore.

Two, she was alone. Somehow Grand and Peacock went either to a different book or to the same book but to a different page. She couldn't tell. She could only tell that wherever it is she has landed didn't appear welcoming, and the color blue only added to the illusion of hostility. It wasn't the warm beautiful blue of the summer sky. It was the blue of dead skin and glazed over corpse eyes and beetles, those beetles that like to burrow into flesh of the deceased and—

Bells shook her head. "Stop it!"

She stood up and took a moment to study her surroundings. She was in an empty bedroom with wooden floors and heavy mid-century chests and coffered lining the wall and even a wooden barrel that looked oddly reminiscent of a bathtub and a wooden

block next to it. It was gloomy, with hardly any light coming in through a small iron-barred window high by the vaulted ceiling.

It smelled strange, of decay and something spoiled. Whatever it was, Bells decided not to think about it, so as not to get scared out of her mind. She saw an outline of what looked like a formidable door with a golden ring. She took a step and felt something cold and sticky under her foot, like she stepped into a puddle of some viscous coagulated liquid. Before she had time to become horrified at the thought of what it might be, she heard footsteps behind the door and froze.

A moment later a key turned in the lock and Bells was desperately looking for corners in the room, any corner, anything with a number on it, while her heart did mad somersaults and her knees threatened to give out and fold. Because she wished she didn't see what she saw in the bluish glow from the tiny window high up by the ceiling.

Chapter 6. The Blue Chateau

Pressed to the cold stone floor with the weight of Grand, Peacock stirred and after a while rolled his friend off him and pulled himself upright. It was hard to see in the dark. Some light trickled in from the end of the tunnel—it felt like they were in a stone tunnel—and at last Peacock made out that they were at the end of some long twisted corridor with no windows or doors.

“Hey, you okay?” He shook Grand gently.

Grand moaned and sat up in time to witness a scrawny figure, presumably that of a woman, steal past them, walking carefully on her toes so as not to be heard. She held a candle that threw dancing shadows on her organza veiled face and constantly looked around, turning her head this way and that. Her dress skirt swished over polished cobbles and the cone-shaped hat that adorned her head shifted from left to right like a long pointy finger.

“Where is Bells?” Whispered Peacock.

“Don’t know.” Shrugged Grand.

“Where did you get us?”

“Me?”

"Yes, you, fatso! What did you think about? What book?"

"Why should I answer you?" Grand took offense at "fatso," though Peacock often called him that in the heat of important discussions or deliberations on where to bike today or in an effort to make him stop sharing his morbid funeral home stories.

"I didn't think of anything. Well, maybe..."

"Maybe what?" Peacock was ready to tear out his hair. If only he held Bells' hand, they could've been together. Now what started like an innocent mischief of skipping school was rapidly turning into some sick life or death game, and he didn't like it at all.

He wished he could've asked his dad Eric for advice on what to do next. Eric was always calm, especially when he arranged the flowers in his flower shop, singing some opera tune—he was very fond of opera—and replacing certain verses with his own, like "glorious tulips" or "majestic hyacinths" or "peonies of my heart." That is where Peacock picked up his favorite expressions and love for colored hair. His witticisms and mannerisms and the suave way—he thought it was suave—of expressing himself he got from his father Dorian, "my darling Afro-Asian", as Eric called him. He also called him "fab" and "gorg" and, depending on the mood of the day, a name of a flower he deemed the most beautiful.

Peacock sighed. That life seemed so far away now, with them enclosed in castle walls with no electricity, no torches to light the way, and a strange woman lurking around for who knows what reason. Could she be a murderer of some sort? Everything medieval unnerved Peacock. He preferred comics and stories about super human heroes and exploding cars and aliens invading planets. Anything that involved any kinds of centuries-old places full of ghosts and shadows and ancient blood spilled in the cracks of the stones gave him the willies.

His feet got cold.

"We're doomed." Breathed Grand in his ear.

Peacock swallowed, happy that in the dark Grand couldn't see him turn grey. "Anything else is new? Like, can you tell me what book we're in, for example? Because that would be useful." His voice shook in a loud whisper.

Grand opened his mouth and closed it.

The woman stopped by a door not two steps away from them, produced a large intricate key that glinted yellow in the candle light and stuck it in the door, twisting once. Her face lit up with some kind of morbid curiosity. As she opened the door, boys saw her face fall, then her candle, then the key, then she shrieked and an identical shriek echoed hers from behind the door. Two screams reverberated along the barren walls for what

seemed like forever, or maybe two forevers, since it was two screams.

At first the boys got frightened, but then something in the screams alerted them. The other voice was unmistakably female. In fact, it was a girl's voice. In fact, it was Bells' voice. They would recognize it anywhere, castle or no castle, real world or book world. It sounded the same everywhere, shrill and bossy somehow. Like it demanded to know why it was disturbed. Like it demanded them to do something.

Without thinking, forgetting themselves, they ran up to the woman and pushed her aside. The woman hardly resisted them. She stopped screaming and promptly collapsed on the cobbles, her head hitting the floor with a resounding crack. Now Bells staggered out, screaming her head off, unable to stop. She walked straight into Grand and clutched his shirt and shook him and finally quieted down, gasping into his shoulder and shaking like a leaf.

Peacock, led by an uncontrollable force of needing to find out the source of the fright, stepped into the room. What he saw he wished he didn't. He thought that this couldn't belong to any book, let alone to a fairy tale, because behind him the only person who wasn't scared of dead bodies, their only friend who not only wasn't scared of them, but was also rather fond of

beautifying them, calmly said. "We're in the Bluebeard folktale. And these are his murdered wives."

Peacock wanted to move and couldn't.

On the wall opposite the one with the door, lined neatly one after another, hung bodies of dead women, impaled on hooks, their heads hanging down with hair obscuring their faces, their bodies cloaked in white gowns, their feet turned down and looking unnaturally stiff.

"We need to get out of here before Bluebeard comes back and decides to ax us too." Said Grand tonelessly, like he was talking about a friend coming back to school the next day or something.

Peacock produced a noise that maybe sounded like an agreement, or maybe it sounded like a contradiction, one couldn't tell. He made another one of these sounds before forcing himself out of the room, to the rough stone wall of the corridor, where he planted his forehead for a moment, then doubled down and threw up.

"There is nothing to be afraid of." Said Grand calmly. "They're just dead bodies. It's sad, really. They won't bite you or anything, so I don't know why you guys are so worked up." Grand shrugged his shoulders. "Besides, this is not real, I mean..."

"Not real? And what is this?" Bells pointed to her sneakers stained with blood. She coughed in her sleeve. It stunk. She knew why it stunk now, and it made her stomach do flip-flops.

Peacock wiped his mouth and waved to this friends. "Can one of you...think of something...something nice, for a change?"

"Sorry." Said Grand. "I was hoping maybe we could find Rusty here. He likes this kind of stuff."

"Rusty reads fairy tales?" Asked Bells incredulously.

"He asked me not to tell anyone, so please don't tell him I told you, okay?" Begged Grand. "This is a special occasion, so I thought it would be okay."

The woman on the floor stirred. She blinked, staring at the kids, and opened her mouth to utter another scream.

"No, please, it's okay!" Said Bells.

"We don't mean any harm."

"We're sorry we have badged into your story uninvited." Added Grand. "We will be going now. Sorry about your discovery, too. Just so you know, your husband is coming back in the morning, so it's best if you left now. Would you like any help?" Grand offered her his pudgy hand.

The woman shook her head, staring it him with big round eyes, then she looked inside the room and started screaming again at the sight of dead bodies.

"Can't we do something?" Inquired Bells.

Both Grand and Peacock, in the spirit of unspoken solidarity, dragged her away, up the corridor, to where the light was.

"You mean, can we somehow alter the flow of the story?" Grand asked thoughtfully, his face and tone of voice as somber as ever, if not more miserable.

"That's a brilliant idea!" Bells glanced back. "Guys, listen, we can't just leave her like that." She struggled against their hold.

"Are you out of your mind?" Shrieked Peacock. He was holding himself together and felt like soon he won't be able to hold himself together anymore.

"I'm hungry." Said Grand calmly. "I bet there is some food here. Bluebeard is not supposed to come till the morning. Let's go find some food and—"

"Jesus!" Peacock was near to tearing out his hair. "How can you talk about food when we just saw butchered bodies? How can you even...don't you care at all? Doesn't it make you feel queasy?"

"I have lunch with my mom all the time."

"In the fridge with the corpses?" Peacock felt another wave of nausea rise in him and gagged.

"Please, let's go help her. She must be terrified. At least we can help her get out of here, and then maybe she will show us where the food is, so you can stuff yourself stupid, Grand."

"I'm not going back there." Peacock folded his hands and leaned on the wall, and scrambled away. The cold touch of the stone unnerved him.

"Piss it, Peacock, you bloody sissy." Said Bells with feeling. "I thought you have it in you, and you're scared like a little kid." Bells pushed him away, turned on her heel and bravely marched back into the darkness. Although as soon as she made a few steps and got separated from the boys, her heart dropped to her stomach and she was only able to keep walking on the assumption that her friends will follow her.

They did.

They had no choice.

When Bells decided something and called them sissies, they had to follow. It was the unspoken agreement between them. They did. But after they came to the dreaded open door, there was no sign of the woman, and their hearts thumped so loud, they couldn't hear anything else and didn't dare to step into the line of faint bluish light falling through the crack in the door.

Above them something dropped and rolled and stopped with a crash, and in the room they thought they heard a sigh. Hairs

stood up on the napes of their necks and now, without talking or arguments, they sprinted away from the room, up the corridor, to where the light was, and in the next few minutes burst through the door and ended up in a hall surrounded with standing knights in full armor and swords and shields hanging on the walls and a pendant candle chandelier casting an orange glow on everything.

They caught their breath, stumped, unable to decide where to run next.

Tall narrow windows seeped in early morning light, one on each side of the black double doors that looked so large like they could pass a giant. Outside rain whipped the glass with streaks of wet grey. Distant horse whinnying reached them together with the calls from a driver and at the same time from behind a hanging tapestry that covered a doorway a lackey walked out and drew to an abrupt halt at the sight of them.

"I think it's time we get out." Said Bells slowly.

Peacock's eyes widened. "It's the Bluebeard guy coming home, isn't it?" He asked no one in particular.

"I believe so." Said Grand. "I told you we were going to die. Could've at least eaten something first."

A woman's cry diverted the lackey's attention. It floated to them from above, and he stood, perplexed, torn between the opening of the doors and the need to run upstairs to his mistress.

And that is when Peacock lost it.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!" He thrust his fingers at the window where a silhouette of a horse-drawn carriage could be seen in the court and a large shape of a tall man with a bushy beard was stepping down.

"He will kill us! He will kill us!" He started dancing on the same spot for some reason, biting on his fingers and tugging at his hair. His panic infected Bells and even Grand, who has lost his usually miserable calm and started breathing hard, his face growing pink then red then purple.

Bells came to her senses first. "If we run past him, he won't have time to know what hit him!"

She grabbed both boys by the hands and bolted for the double doors that were trembling under heavy fists.

"Open up!" Bellowed a low voice.

Bells tugged on the ring and the doors groaned and creaked and yielded to a draft of moist air and a massive figure of a man in a travel coat, boots, and hat. But the most horrifying aspect of his appearance was his ugly overgrown beard. It was blue. Blue like cold ice. Blue like the depths of a lake that likes to drown people in its waters. Blue like the blue that doesn't belong to a face. Unnatural and coarse and grim.

Bluebeard riveted his large blood-shot eyes at the children, and in that second of indecision and confusion, Bells

squeezed her fingers tight around Grand's and Peacock's wrists and pulled on them with all her might.

They crashed past Bluebeard, who turned around and opened his mouth and yelled for the driver to intercept them. The driver, a squat old man in a heap of black ill-fitted clothes and a crumpled top hat was unreining the horses, when Bells, her feet squelching in the wet mud, her face streaked with rain, dashed past him, wheezing Grand and hysterical Peacock in her wake.

They ran through the open gate and then away from the castle to the edge of the wood, where they stopped, gulping for air, eyeing the looming chateau in the distance. But there was no pursuit. No dark figures crested the hill and ran in their direction. It was empty and quiet.

"I can't...go on...like this...anymore." Gaspd Peacock.

Grand gave him a look of understanding.

"And I can?" Bells wiped her face clean.

They stood under a large elm, partially shielded from the squall of water falling from the steel unfriendly sky.

"Can you think of something nice and get us out of here?" Said Peacock. "I think I'm done with this. It was great...and we had fun...and now let's get back."

"Really? And what about Rusty?" Said Bells.

Grand breathed hard through an open mouth, staring up at the tree for some reason. "Rusty." He said.

"Where?" Bells and Peacock followed his gaze.

Grand's face cleared. He looked at them with laughing eyes. "I think I know where Rusty went."

They looked him up and down. "Will you say it already?"

But Grand didn't like talking in hypothetical truths. He needed to make sure. He couldn't fall flat on his face in front of his friends. His idea was that—

He walked up to the tree and touched it.

On the bark someone has scratched some initials and numbers. One of the numbers was 104.

Grand picked at it with his nail and two lines appeared cut into the bark. They quickly grew, forming a corner.

Grand turned triumphantly and said, "He went to climb trees. Rusty. I'm sure of it. I bet he thought about climbing trees when we were in the desert. He told me his grandma reads to him to calm him down. She reads to him about—"

"Grand?" Warned Bells. "Grand, take your hand away. Grand—"

"Narnia—" He didn't get a chance to finish. The elm bark peeled off and in the next moment he was gone, swallowed in.

"Grand!" Bells slapped on the tree a moment too late, but she managed to see the page number before it disappeared. "One hundred and four. Peacock! He is gone!"

Peacock sat on the ground, indifferent to getting wet and muddy, mumbling something.

"Peacock! Did you hear me?" She shook him, yelling in his face. "Get up! Let's think of Narnia and go after Grand! That's where Rusty is! Can you hear me?"

"I'm not going anywhere." Said Peacock blankly. His teeth chattered. "I'm staying here."

"What do you mean, you're staying here? Weren't you the one who wanted to get out?" Bells said incredulously.

"Not anymore." Peacock started rocking back and forth, arms wrapped around his knees, humming something, his look having that far away quality that Bells came to recognize as a sign of a complete meltdown which only happened a couple times before, when a bunch of kids from the sixth grade beat him into pulp, calling him names, most notably "gay." No matter how many times Peacock explained to them that just because his dads were gay, it didn't mean he was gay too, that he really liked girls, for the record, Bells in particular, they still beat him up, especially after he would show up at school with a new hair color.

"Peacock, what's wrong?"

He didn't answer.

Bells became frightened. "What's the matter? Answer me!"

He didn't. He only drew his knees closer together and rocked harder.

"Oh God. Not now. Not now, please." Bells held her face. There wasn't a school nurse to call on. There wasn't Grand to rely on to pull Peacock to his feet, no Rusty to disgust Peacock with his snorting routine to the point that he snapped and started talking. Nobody. Except her. And Bluebeard potentially coming for them in the not so distant future.

Bells took hold of Peacock's hand—it seemed that holding on to each other landed them together in the same book—closed eyes and concentrated on Narnia. What did she remember? When was it that she read it? Last year? She thought of a wardrobe, then thought of the pages. One hundred and four is close to the beginning, but of which book? How many are there? And which one had trees? They all had trees. Bells stomped her foot in frustration. She couldn't remember any trees apart from the apple one, the one that had life apples or something. She wasn't sure if that was it or not.

She opened her eyes.

Peacock sat in the same position as before, soaked wet from the rain, shivering and mumbling under his breath.

Bells studied the trunk of the tree. It appeared untouched. No initials, no numbers on it, nothing. "Bullshit." She swore

under her breath. "It was here a moment ago. Come on, show me a corner."

The tree didn't answer, like it gloated at her helplessness. Bells tried kicking it a couple times, but that didn't produce a result of any kind except a sharp pain in her right toe.

She narrowed her eyes, seeking out places that could have corners. There was nothing rectangular around, simply nothing. No marks on the tree, no leaves the shape of a square, no edges of any sheets on the ground.

Distant hooting and the gallop of horses trailed on the wind, and Bells cried out in fear despite herself, furiously circling the tree, squinting at the lines in the bark, willing for a corner to appear. The sounds drew closer. Freaking out, Bells nearly stumbled on rocking Peacock on yet another round of skipping around the tree and gasped.

Peacock wore a checkered shirt. How did she not think of it before? Bells fell down next to him. "Peacock! Peacock, look at me!" He shielded himself from her, as if not recognizing her. And Bells wondered where this corner on his shirt might take them. She kept looking for a number and at last found it, embroidered on a breast pocket. "Peacock, hold on!" She grasped his hand and tugged at the corner, concentrating on Narnia, trees, and number one hundred and four. But just then—don't you

hate it how it always happened in stories, just then?—a bird called from above, Bells thought of a bird, and the next second she was falling somewhere, dragging her friend behind her.

Chapter 7. The Empty Forest

Grand rolled down the grass and stopped and struggled up and saw that he is in some kind of a forest. The most remarkable part of it was not the fact that it was green all around. No. The most interesting part to him was a pair of wet dirty sneakers. They stood silently on the grass, next to an indent made as if by a sleeping body. The other most interesting detail of this was that Grand immediately recognized these sneakers, and his heart both soared and dropped.

"Rusty?" He called.

No answer.

The forest around him swallowed his voice and greedily waited for more.

"Rusty, are you here?" This was a dumb question, and Grand regretted it as soon as he has said it and turned beet-red. Thankfully, there was nobody around to see his humiliation, and after a tense moment he relaxed. However, three things bothered him greatly. He was hungry. He was alone. He didn't know where Rusty went, if anywhere, nor how to get back to the Bluebeard story, nor, for that matter, if he did accomplish somehow to get back, if Bells and Peacock were still there or if they have

decided to jump into some other book in the meantime. Which was likely. He forgot to warn them that they had nothing to fear. Two brother's of Bluebeard's last wife would come to her rescue and kill him. They could've stayed in that castle and find something to eat, because there was definitely nothing to eat here.

But where did Rusty go?

"Rusty?"

Then cries shushed him. He hid behind a tree.

There were several shallow pools of water and one of them suddenly burst up with a couple kids, two men, a tall angry looking woman with a thick iron rod in her hand, and a horse. There was shouting and cursing and mostly one shrill voice, no doubt belonging to the woman, that overpowered them all. Then, to his surprise, Grand saw Rusty run up to them from behind a tree, evidently having been hiding there, waving his arms excitedly and shouting something incoherent that Grand couldn't discern, but knowing Rusty, he knew those must be greetings and perhaps offers to do some stuff together or requests to go places together or something of the sort.

There was a stunned silence, and a moment later they all vanished in another pool, and when Rusty jumped into it and stood in the middle of it with a stupid face, Grand couldn't hold it and began chuckling.

Rusty, startled, whirled around for the source of the noise that died in this forest as soon as it left Grand's mouth.

"Who is there?" He shouted.

Grand stepped out from behind the tree, Rusty's wet sneakers in his hand. "It's me." He raised the sneakers like a token of appreciation.

"Grand! Finally! You found me! Where is Bells and Peacock?"

"In Bluebeard."

"In what?"

"It's a folktale about this guy who marries women and kills them in his castle. And he has a blue beard."

Rusty's reaction was predictable. "That is so cool! Can we go there?"

Grand shrugged. "We can try, I suppose."

"Did you guys figure out how this thing works?"

"What, getting in and out of stories?"

"Yeah! Like you said, remember, opening them like pages of a book. Isn't that what you said?"

"I don't remember what I said. Hey, weren't you supposed to be asleep?" Grand yawned. The atmosphere of the place began to take its toll.

"I did, and then all these people started jumping in and out of those." He motioned to the pools. "I mean, you know, they found the witch—remember?—they woke her up and then they dragged

her here and she screamed bloody murder and she woke me up! I couldn't sleep, I swear, after that! My heart was going a million times a minute. Boy, she was nasty. Ugly, too. When grandma read me the book, I never thought she'd be so ugly. Huge, too, and strong like an ox." Rusty talked so excitedly that he finally choked on his own saliva.

Grand was the only one of the four friends who had enough patience not to interrupt him, and when Bells and Peacock failed to make it to their biking outings, him and Rusty talked murders and crimes and corpses and more morbid things like that, things they couldn't quite indulge in under Bells' vicious stare.

"So how do we find them now?" Asked Rusty. He long finished his gushing account on everything he has seen and was eager to rejoin his friends.

"I dunno." Grand shrugged. "You want to go to the Bluebeard? We've seen the Red Death too. Bells said Poe wrote it. I want to read it now. It was pretty scary." Grand grinned. Anything he called scary must've been really scary, because not many things scared him as much as the lack of food. He now desperately thought of a book where there were plenty of feasts described with donuts and cakes and muffins and candy. Of course, as it usually is, nothing came to mind.

"The Red death? What's that?" Rusty seemed interested.

"A plague of some sort, I think. This guy in red showed up at a masked ball and everyone probably thought he was a guest but he ended up that plague. Or something."

"I saw it!" Cried Rusty. "I saw it in a dream! I knew it was dangerous, I just knew it! Did you escape?"

"We did." Said Grand absentmindedly. He lapsed into silence, willing to think of a book with lots of food and sun and calm slow things like lounging on the boat and doing nothing. He has had his share of exercise and was not looking forward to more running.

"How do we do it, then?" Rusty raised his dripping face from the pool.

"Huh?"

"How does it work?"

"I think we have to find a corner somewhere, anywhere, and then there will be a number on it, and then we have to think—or the person who will turn the corner has to think—of the book you want to go to, and then you turn the corner and the page opens and you get sucked in and, well, you're in and that's that."

"Ah." Rusty scratched his head. "That sounds easy."

"I told them you went to Narnia."

"Did you? How did you know?"

"Well, you rattled my ears off about it yesterday, and then you wanted to climb trees, and Peacock said it was dumb, and—"

"That's clever! That's so clever!" Rusty started jumping up and down. "You're really smart, Grand! Wow!"

"No, I'm not." Grand hung his head, embarrassed.

"Shut up! Shut up! You are! You found me! You found me!" He suddenly stopped. "What happened to the boy?"

"What boy?"

"The boy in the desert?"

"Oh. He went somewhere. We didn't see him leave."

"So we're jumping into books, is that it?" Rusty started jumping again.

"Yeah, looks like it."

"So what book was that?"

"Something about a Prince?"

"Dude." Rusty's eyes widened. "I know where I want to go."

Grand understood at once. "No." He said.

"Yes."

"No. Come on. Let's find Bells and Peacock."

"Come on, Grand. This is our chance! We can go explore it!"

Grand's hot face froze. He had no problem with dead bodies, but he didn't like creepy dolls of any kind. Moreover, the idea of a talking doll, ventriloquist or not, made him want to run to his mom and hold on to her and pretend like there are no creepy dolls in the world, because he knew precisely where Rusty wanted to go. Into the Goosebumps books, to meet Slappy the Dummy.

Because Grand appeared so solid and trustworthy, he developed a knack for lying quite convincingly, and because there was no other way to quiet down Rusty's excitement but to go along, he devised a quick plan.

Rusty in the meantime sat down, yawning. This place had its spell, and if they didn't get out soon, they would probably fall asleep. Grand subdued a yawn and tried to think, which was very hard to do on an empty stomach. As he thought of the food, he saw the grass hiding something. Something round. He leaned to it and lifted it and saw a mushroom, a brown mushroom that looked edible. Now, his mother told him to never eat anything he had found outside, and he dutifully obliged, but now he was so hungry, that a mushroom seemed like a good idea.

"What did you find?" Yawned Rusty and crawled to the spot Grand was looking at. "Oh, a mushroom? Can you eat it?"

They reached for it at the same time and—

And, of course, the mushroom had a number scratched on it. And, of course, a corner was scratched around the number. And, of course, as soon as Grand and Rusty touched it, the thin brown membrane that covered the cap peeled, and quietly, without a wind or a scream or any other drama, Grand and Rusty fell into a warm earthy hole.

Chapter 8. The Giant Bird

The first thing Bells heard was the whistle of wind in her ears. The second thing she heard was the elaborate and rather sophisticated cursing behind her. And the third thing she heard was two cries. One sharp and loud, another pitiful and low and trumpeting somehow, like someone blew into a tuba not quite knowing how to play it properly.

Bells wanted to cover her ears and couldn't. She opened her eyes at the same moment. The view astounded her at first, then it stole her breath, then it drove panic all through her body and whatever leathery thing she was holding on to, she held on to harder. It—the thing she held on to—produced another trumpeting noise that she couldn't quite place. For a moment. The next moment she could.

She was sitting astride an elephant, clutching edges of its ears, and behind her sat Peacock, clutching her so as not to slide off. The air rushed past them, threatening to push them off the wrinkly hide. And that was not all. Upon glancing up, Bells saw that the elephant was flying. Well. It wasn't flying on its own, it was being clasped by sharp crooked claws of a gigantic bird that occasionally screeched.

Bells swallowed and peeked down.

They were flying over an ocean. White foam rolled down huge waves. Then the ocean became a rocky island, barren and desolate, with no human life visible. The bird careened and began slowing down, descending to a gigantic nest filled with broken eggshells and open beaks of chicks the size of dragons. Only they weren't dragons. They were birds, normal birds. Just very large ones.

Now Bells could discern the swearing behind her, which consisted of various flower names she didn't know existed and other words she knew existed but preferred to think that her friends never used them. Peacock, especially. She was mistaken, however. Peacock used the entire swear word arsenal she thought she has ever heard in her life.

"Holy lilacs!" He tumbled off the elephant into a crudely constructed nest while the elephant itself with a sad cry disappeared down the throat of one of the chick that gulped it in no time and proceeded chirping for more. There were three of them, and their legs could easily pass for tree trunks. Bells clambered to Peacock and together they craned their necks up to see the wingspan of a gigantic bird cover the sky like a dark cloud.

"It's a Roc." Said Bells.

"A rock?" Peacock stared at her.

The chicks shifted. Peacock slipped and fell on a soft pile of enormous feathers. Bells rolled up to him. They scooted back towards the edge of the nest, away from the scaly legs and claws and beaks and eyes. Three pairs of eyes inquisitively gazing in their direction. Three scruffy looking heads tilting in unison to one side, then to another, deciding whether or not those two squirming things were tasty bugs.

"Don't breathe and sit still." Whispered Bells.

"I'm not breathing." Said Peacock.

"Yes, you are, I can hear you breathing."

"Gee, Bells. What do you want me, to die or something? I can't not breathe at all! And what are the rock things you said?"

"Not 'rock,' you dummy, 'Roc,' it's a bird."

"Is it?" Peacock raised a brow. "I thought perhaps it's a mountain with wings, cause it looks like one."

Bells gave him the look. "Not right now, smarty pants."

"Will you tell me already what it is? Before its babies eat us?"

The chicks shifted their heads and one of them peeped. The sound nearly broke Bells eardrums.

"Roc is a mythological bird."

"That is not very helpful, you know? Where are we?"

"We're in The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor."

"The Sailor. What kind of book is that?"

"It's in the One Thousand and One Nights."

"That sounds familiar."

"Seriously. You astound me."

"What?" Peacock made the mistake of raising his arm. The chick closest to them, the one with the inquisitive stare, suddenly pecked at the spot right next to him, urging the others to do the same with its squeaking cries.

"Sit still." Hissed Bells.

"I am, I am." Peacock has gone grey with fright.

The chicks ogled them for another minute, then lost interest, because the mama Roc has returned with a protesting rhinoceros in its talons and within seconds it was torn in two halves.

"Poor rhino." Whispered Bells.

"Poor us!" Peacock has gotten most of his energy back, and now he more than ever wanted to figure out how to get out of this nest on top of the mountain and not be eaten or break a neck in the process. "Whatever the one thousand story book is, why in the turquoise asters did you bring us here?"

"Stop acting spoiled. In case you were wondering, I have saved you from imminent death at the axe of Bluebeard." She waited a moment, watching Peacock's expression turn sour.

"You're welcome."

"Thanks." He threw impatiently. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You didn't answer my question. I thought we were supposed to go to a Narnia book to look for Rusty."

"Unfortunately, you were catatonic, so I had to find a corner, and I did and—" She gasped, looking at this shirt.

"What?"

"Of course." Bells pursed her lips. "It's gone."

"What is gone?"

"The number on your shirt. I have found a corner with a number on your shirt."

"Are you suggesting we are here because of me?"

"No! And stop being so crass. I thought about Narnia, okay? I even tried to concentrate really hard on the number 104 page, but then this bird chirped, and I thought of a bird, and, well..."

"And here we are."

"And here we are."

They sat gloomily for a thousand hours, or maybe it only felt like a thousand, because there was nothing to do except to watch the chicks devour gigantic chunks of meat, then settle their huge heads under their weak wings and snooze.

"Let's look for a corner." Said Bells resolutely.

"To go where?"

"To Narnia this time for sure."

"And what if Rusty went somewhere else? What if Grand never got there? How in the world are we going to find them?"

"Do you propose we sit here and starve to death?"

"No."

"Then let's look for a corner."

Bells carefully crawled away from their warm feathery spot, and, grasping bent twigs for support, made her way around, peeking in gaps and shadows and even daring to stick her hand under the foot of a sleeping Roc chick. "Look at this!" She cried, forgetting herself.

"What is this?" Said Peacock at the same time.

They lifted their findings. Bells had something that looked like a part of a ship, a wooden plank with a number stumped on it, 89. And Peacock, Peacock stretched to her his hand and opened it with glee.

"Ah, yes, that's right." She stated without much interest.

Peacock was disappointed. "It's diamonds!"

"Yes, I know." Said Bells with pleasure. "It's in the book. This nest is in the mountain that stands by the valley of diamonds. They just lie around like that for anyone to take. Except there are all kinds of serpents living in the valley so people are afraid to come here. Instead they drop pieces of meat for the diamonds to stick to them, then wait for Roc birds to

grab the meat and feed their offspring. They must spit out the diamonds or something, because then people collect the diamonds from the nests."

"How do you know all this?" Asked Peacock.

"I read books, you dolt."

"Okay." Said Peacock, obviously miffed. "If you're so smart, why don't you figure out how to find Rusty and Grand and how we can get out of here?"

This hit a sore point. Bells fell quiet, which was a good thing, because they heard shouts and metallic clanging and clanging like someone—several people, by the sound of it—tried to produce enough noise to scare the birds away. They stirred and screeched in panic.

"They're coming to collect the diamonds! We need to get out of here." Bells grabbed Peacock's hand.

"Can you make sure you get us to Rusty this time?"

"I will—"

One of the chicks stomped close to them and almost on them.

"So they won't eat us like worms?"

Bells was in the process of peeling open the corner off the plank, digging her fingers into wooden splinters, when Peacock said that. In that instant the picture of trees in her mind switched to a worm, or something resembling a worm, and at the same time scared chicks half-crawled, half-flew out of the nest,

and their enraged and frightened mother, deciding that the two wiggling things in her nest must have scared off her precious children, grabbed for Bells when she was head into the opening under the plank.

Chapter 9. The Smoking Caterpillar

They were being carried over a thick growth of burdock and bellflowers and mushrooms. The rocky landscape got replaced with a green lush field stretching from horizon to horizon with bright patches of red and pink and gold and periwinkle. It smelled of sweet summer, and Bells inhaled deep, feeling almost happy, if not for the sharp talons painfully digging into her armpits. And that is when Bells felt her feet grow cold.

"Peacock?"

Something like a grumbled greeting reached her ears.

"Peacock!"

"I heard you the first time." Trailed to her.

She twisted her head around, trying to see. She didn't need to twist it too far. To her left, clutched in the same manner as she, Peacock dangled from a pair of talons holding him like parachute straps, one over each shoulder. Wind blew his lavender faux hawk off his face, and Bells saw his round eyes questioning her.

"We took the bird with us!"

"You're the master—"

"The what?"

"The master at overstating the obvious!"

It was hard to hear through the gusts of wind.

Bells had an uneasy feeling in her stomach, from the height and the sense that somehow this was not the place she meant to come to, although it did look rather peaceful. "I think we're in Narnia!" She shouted to her left.

"I don't think so!" Shouted Peacock.

The Roc above them screeched in and circled down, as if aiming for prey.

Bells could see nothing except grass stalks, bellflowers and daisies and violets and tulips, and a crop of brown mushrooms, so immense, she thought they could sit on them. Except that somebody already sat on one. A worm. No, a caterpillar. It didn't just sit on a mushroom, it puffed out rings of smoke, and before Bells could shout it, Peacock beat her.

"We're in Wonderland! In Alice in Wonderland!"

"Great." Bells said under her breath.

The Roc bird opened its claws, dropped Bells and Peacock on top of a gigantic burdock and with a cry swooped down on the caterpillar.

"Shoo!"

"Go away!"

Two gigantic boys waved two gigantic sticks at the bird. Startled, it screamed at them, passed over like a dark shadow and flapped away into the cloudless sky the color of ultramarine.

Bells and Peacock crawled from under the burdock, shaking off dirt and twigs.

"Oh my God." Said Peacock, pointing.

"Don't you lose it on me, Peacock. Once a day is enough, thank you." As she said it, Bells trembled. Those above them, above the mushroom with the smoking caterpillar perched on it, were Grand and Rusty, the size of two big pines. They laughed at the bird and at each other and a moment later greeted a girl in a light-blue dress who stomped to them, waving.

Bells felt a twinge of jealousy. Mind you, it was just a twinge, but after Peacock said with admiration, "It's Alice!", that twinge grew into a full-blown envy.

Bells was always the only girl whom her three friends respected for her bossiness, her fierceness, and her lack of fear. She wasn't afraid of spiders or insects, and she was always the first one to state the things as they were, without shame telling them that she needed to pee and they needed to stand guard. No other girl possessed any of these admirable skills, and now she witnessed first hand two silly grins of Rusty and Grand.

"No, three." She mumbled, looking over Peacock who stared up with his wide hazel eyes, waving arms and screaming to get Alice's attention.

Meanwhile, Alice gave each boy a piece of the mushroom, they said their goodbyes, took bites and started rapidly shrinking until they got to the present size of Bells and Peacock, who stood by the mushroom where the caterpillar smoked calmly like nothing happened.

"Bells! Peacock!"

"Rusty! Grand!"

"We found you!"

"No, we found you!"

While they were deciding who found whom and how, the caterpillar observed them through ringlets of smoke. At last, it took the hookah out of its mouth and said, "There are four of you."

"Four of who?" Said Bells without thinking, then she tried to remember what was it exactly Alice said to the caterpillar and how the caterpillar responded.

"No, there is one of each of us, but there are four of us together." Said Peacock with a grin. Bells frowned. He winked at her.

The caterpillar appeared confused. "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean, I say, and I'm not mean, but what I do *mean*, I mean, I don't mean anything, what I do *say* is there are four of us, but when you say "you", you address all of us, but you can't do that because each of us is one." He finished with a triumphant bow.

Grand looked at Rusty who shrugged his shoulders. They both stared at Bells who shook her head, hoping it would help her understand what Peacock said.

"The one is only you," said the caterpillar to Peacock, "but you are not alone. There are four of you."

"There are four of *us*," stressed Peacock, "but there is only one of *me*."

"I'm not talking about me," replied the caterpillar, "I'm talking about you."

Now Peacock looked confused.

"That is so cool!" Rusty jumped and clapped his hands. "Peacock, you're so smart! I knew you're smart! I knew it, I knew it!"

"What is that *it* you're talking about?" Inquired the caterpillar.

"Uh..." Rusty snapped his fingers, trying to come up with an answer. He even tried snorting. Nothing helped. He blankly stared around.

Grand shifted uneasily from foot to foot. "I'm hungry."

"Dude, do you always have to spoil the fun?" Peacock passed a hand through his hair, feeling quite like himself again, away from the frozen lake and scorching desert and Red Death and Bluebeard and elephant-eating birds. This place was fun. They could maybe meet the Cheshire cat, and maybe have tea with the Mad Hatter. At this thought his stomach rumbled.

"You're hungry too." Stated Grand.

"Me too! Me too!" Rusty jumped.

"Shut up."

"How rude!" The caterpillar scoffed, took the hookah out of its mouth, slid into the grass and crawled away.

"Boys." Said Bells, having nothing else to retort with. She was hungry too, and there was no denying it that if they wouldn't eat something soon, they would all get cranky and pettish, and that would be no good for their adventures.

"My mom says," started Grand timidly, and when no one interrupted him, continued, "that it's no good thinking on an empty stomach."

"Well, if you're so smart, why don't you get somewhere where there is food and no magic mushrooms?" Snapped Peacock. He began loosing it again.

"Why can't we eat the mushroom?" Said Rusty, poking at its white fleshy stem. "Looks edible to me. Make you grow, too. It's fun! And we got to see Alice!"

"Shut up, will you?"

"Stop it, all of you." Bells rounded on them, her face stern. "Grand is right. We need to eat something. How did you get over here, anyway?"

"We were in that forest place between worlds in Narnia and then I saw a mushroom and it had a number on it and—"

"Wait," said Bells, "I thought of Narnia too, trying to get us here, but then at the last second I heard a bird and...wait, then it happened again! I thought of Narnia, but then I thought of a worm, and it got us here, so this means—"

"Whatever book you think about when you open the page, that's where it gets you." Added Peacock, fascinated with their discovery.

"Not the book even, the character or a thing from a book." Added Bells.

"And if we hold on to each other..." said Grand.

"Then we all fall in there together! I mean, we all fall into that book!" Rusty's mouth was full. He was chewing something.

"What are you eating?" Bells said sharply, in that bossy manner of hers.

"The mushroom." Said Rusty apologetically.

"Stop! It will make you grow or shrink!"

"Nah, it won't." Rusty hiccupped. I take a piece from each side, and they cancel each other out."

"That's clever."

"I vote we go to some book where we can eat something, and then we can come back here, if we want."

"Ha!" Peacock smirked. "As if it were that easy. We seem to be landing in places by accident. And then there are corners to find. What if we won't find one? What then? We'll get stuck there forever. Right, Bells?"

Bells didn't hear him. She watched Rusty who, bored out his mind and stuffed with the mushroom to the point where he couldn't eat any more, was doodling something in the dirt.

"Bells?" Peacock traced her gaze, and his face lit up. "We could draw one."

Bells looked up. "I was just thinking the same thing." She wasn't. She was close. Peacock usually got the best ideas, and it was always irritated her. She compensated by making sure those ideas were executed, bossing the boys around.

"We could draw a corner and a number!" Picked up Rusty, excited that he was the one who found the answer to their troubles. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"Where?" Peacock drew himself upright. The prospect of getting something tasty in his stomach made him happy.

"Anywhere!"

"Anywhere where there is food." Grand sniffled.

"And no dead bodies, please." Peacock said, a little embarrassed.

"Why?" Rusty was astonished. "Dead bodies are cool!"

"I was thinking and thinking and I couldn't think of a book where there would be a lot of—"

"I know." Said Bells slowly.

"This is not going to be a desert or the middle of winter again, is it?" Asked Peacock cautiously.

"Nope." Bells smiled. "I think you'll like it."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Give me that." She snatched the stick out of Rusty's hand and drew a corner with the page number 15 on it, for no reason. She couldn't remember what happened on that particular page. "Hold on to me."

They did.

Bells thought of the book her mother Catarina used to read to her when she was little, and now to Maria, the colorful pictures in it, and in a flash they were diving into fragrant darkness smelling of a fresh produce market.

Chapter 10. The Talking Onion

The streets of the city they landed in were filled with strange creatures. They looked like fruit and vegetables that grew arms and legs and had faces stamped on their sides. Real faces with real eyes and noses and mouths. They wore clothes like people, talked like people, bustled around like people, only they didn't smell like people, they smelled like, well, like fruits and vegetables.

"What the hell is this place." Peacock sneezed. He didn't like strong smells, and this street definitely smelled very strong and not very pleasant.

"Is that a lemon?" Shouted Rusty, pointing.

"What did you call me?" The lemon, a yellow barrel-like body with a citrusy whiff about it marched up to them, its face stern. It was dressed like a policeman, waving about a policeman's baton, and it acted like a policemen as well. He didn't get to scold them any further. A little boy with a flat round head and green stalks protruding from it in place of hair sprinted along the street, a herd—could you call it a herd?—of lemon policemen on his heels.

The lemon that talked to Rusty took out his whistle, blew it, and, shouting, joined them.

"Thief! Thief! Criminal!" Voices followed the little boy. "Catch him! Get him to prison!" The shouting crowd consisted of potatoes and zucchini and tomatoes and cucumbers.

"Cipollino!" Cried Bells. "That's Cipollino!"

"Who?" Peacock sneezed again.

"It's Cipollino, the onion boy."

"The onion boy! That is so great! Can we eat him?"

"Rusty." Grand rarely rebuked anyone. Somehow this idea of eating a boy was a little bit over the top for him. "You said there was going to be food?" He looked at Bells. His usual good-naturedness was slowly evaporating. When Grand got cranky, he turned into a stubborn whiny bull that was hard to reckon with.

"It's the Royal Cherry Kingdom, populated with berries and fruits and vegetables of all kinds. That was Lemon General talking to us, and that," she pointed to a round red gentleman passing by, "is the tax collector Master Tomato. I think he's going to take away Uncle's Pumpkin's house."

The boys looked at her, displeased.

Rusty creased his brow. "We could make a stew of them?"

There was an awkward silence, punctuated by the calls from the street and occasional curious glances from passing eggplants and pears and radishes.

"Okay, sorry, that was a joke."

"A joke?" Peacock fumed.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"Bells!"

"Look, I wanted to see it really bad, okay? I remember imagining it when my mom read it and I wanted to see—"

"What is this story called again?" Asked Grand politely, trying to diffuse the ripening conflict. A couple grape girls ran past them, pointing and giggling. They wore identical green caps and green skirts.

Rusty was the only one who waved them back.

"Tale of Cipollino by Gianni Rodari."

"I have never heard of it."

"My mom read to me in when I was little." Bells said proudly.

"Where do you dig up these books anyway?" Peacock sneezed again.

"In the library, you idiot." Bells fumed.

"No, I mean, they're just weird! What was that frozen lake book about?"

"That was The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Andersen, and you should read Andersen, if you have never heard of him."

"They're all kids stories." Parried Peacock.

"Excuse me? And we're not kids? What's wrong with kids stories anyway? Don't you start me on your comics."

"What's wrong with reading comics?"

"It's not reading, it's looking at pictures."

"Blaze my tulips. That is absolute nonsense. Just because you don't read comics, it doesn't mean they're bad. They're good. They're excellent."

"Guys! Guys!" Rusty yanked on their sleeves. In the distance a row of lemon policemen were dragging the little onion along the street. "Where are they taking him?"

"To prison." Said Bells.

"To prison? They have prisons here? That is funny."

"Okay, I'm sorry. This one will be real." Bells stepped closer to the window of a house they stood nearby and began tracing a number in the corner.

"Are you sure?" Peacock wasn't convinced.

"I swear."

"Halt!" Cried General Lemon. The procession halted. Cipollino eyed the friends with curiosity. "Intruders!" Yelled the General and pointed his baton at them.

"Looks like if we won't get out of here right now," observed Grand dismally, "we might land in a vegetable prison and there we will rot together with other pumpkin and carrot and onion criminals."

"Hold on to me!" Called Bells and peeled off the corner of the window. A sweet smell of bubbling jam and sugar and berries filled their noses, and they their stomachs churned so loud, they didn't hear themselves flop and flip and roll and stop.

Chapter 11. The White Hippos

A strange looking house rose on a patch of grass. It was tall and round and cerulean blue with a crimson conical roof and many white-framed windows. It looked toy-like and homey and inviting. A round chimney pipe coughed up delicious fumes into the cloudless sky and around the house in the garden full of blooming flowers strange white round hippos played ether hopscotch or some other game that involving hopping around and laughing and saddling something equally white and fluffy and riding it up high in the air.

The boys stared at this spectacle with their mouths open.

Bells was delighted. She was more than delighted. She thought today was the best, the *bestest* day in her life. By some stroke of luck she found a way to fall into a book, into any book, and she was mentally making up a list of all the books she wanted to visit, whatever it took, trying not to think about the passage of time and whether or not her parents were worried and what her little sister Maria would say when she found out what Bells got to see and she, Maria, didn't.

"These are moomintrolls." Said Bells.

"Trolls?" Peacock lost a bit of color.

"No, no, not like trolls in The Lord of The Rings, these are friendly trolls."

"Is there such a thing as a friendly troll?"

"Lord of the Rings! That's where we need to go!" Picked up Rusty.

"Forget it." Peacock shook his head. "We will get killed or eaten there in no time."

Grand stared at him. It was usually his place to drown his friends in pessimistic news.

"What do you suggest?" Threw Bells at Peacock.

"Yeah." Picked up Rusty, suddenly feisty.

"Yeah." Added Grand.

"You're so unhappy about our choices. Why don't you send us somewhere for a change?" Said Bells.

"Me?"

"No, your dads." Said Grand and smiled. He rarely scored a joke. Bells grinned at him, which made him red to the tips of his ears. "What are they doing?" He mumbled, hiding his embarrassment.

"Riding clouds." Said Bells with an air of knowledge that only she possessed. It made her feel superior, just like her female grace. She read the most books among the four of them and it gave her immense satisfaction.

"Riding clouds? You can ride clouds? That's so cool!" Rusty was eager to join them, his eyes shining.

"Wait up. Let me tell you who is who. This is Moomin," Bells pointed to one of the creatures, "this is Snork Maiden, Moomin's girlfriend, and this is Sniff and Snufkin, and that big one over there is Moominpappa. And Moominmamma cooks the best jam there is. Strawberry and rhubarb and I can't remember what else. With pancakes. Sounds good?"

"So we will just saunter up and ask for pancakes with jam, and this mama or whoever will just feed us?" Said Peacock. "Just like that?"

Bells didn't think of that. "Well, I don't know," she said, "I suppose we'll tell them who we are and ask them politely? What's wrong, Peacock?"

"Nothing is wrong." He looked away.

Moomin and Snufkin, both squealing in delight, their soft round paws clapping, soared above them on fluffy clouds like on inflatable mattresses that can magically lift you up.

"I want to go riding with them!" Rusty threw his head up, impatient to get going.

"Peacock has a point." Said Grand. "We'd be better off if we got somewhere where we didn't have to ask and could eat something for sure, on our own."

"That would be stealing." Bells narrowed her eyes.

"How about Gingerbread man?" Said Rusty. "Or, what was it called, the Gingerbread house fairy tale?"

"We could go into one of Harry Potter books and go to that feast they have at the beginning of each school year." Offered Grand.

"And have Snape lock us up in the dungeon or something? How will we blend in? We have no school robes!" Bells flipped her pony tail in indignation.

"That's right. I forgot."

Peacock was watching the house and its surroundings. "Where do you dig up these books?"

"What?" Bells was thinking about something.

"I said, where do you dig them up? I've never heard of any moomins before"

"In the library, you idiot."

"Well, they're all weird! They're all kids stories."

"Excuse me? And we're not kids? What's wrong with kids' stories anyway? Don't you start me on your comics."

"What's wrong with reading comics?"

"It's not reading, it's looking at pictures."

"Blaze my tulips. That is absolute nonsense. Just because you don't read comics, it doesn't mean they're bad. They're good. They're excellent."

Bells was about to retort, when Moominmamma walked down the porch into the garden with a steaming plate of pancakes in one paw and a pitcher of lemonade in the other.

Kids were the safe distance away so as not to get noticed, but they were bound to get noticed soon if they didn't do something.

Bells began to lose her patience. "If you guys don't want to stay here, I know another place. Full of homemade sausage and ham and—"

"Ham! I love ham!" Rusty clapped.

"I want pancakes." Said Grand. "I love pancakes. My mom always makes me pancakes for breakfast."

Peacock tried to hide his irritation. He was ashamed of meting down earlier, and angry at himself for being ashamed, and now he was getting more and more upset at having to hide his anger and hunger, and everything vexed him. Every word, every glance, every gesture.

Bells sensed his mood. "Where do you want to go?" She asked. "Is there somewhere you'd rather go?"

A wicked thought passed Peacock's head. Since they could get in and out of any book without apparent difficulty, he decided to try something.

"There is a place, I mean, a book."

"Does it have food in it?" Asked Grand, his voice low with anticipation. The whiff of coffee and pastries and jam reached his nostrils and the scraping of forks and knives on the plates made him ravenous.

"Hold on to me." Said Peacock.

"Is that," said Bells with a troubled look in her eyes, "a safe place to go to?"

"Trust me." Said Peacock, hiding a grin. "Rusty, give me that." He snatched a stick out of Rusty's hand and drew a corner in the dirt, then thought a bit and added a number 311 to it. He couldn't quite remember the exact page, he only remembered that place he wanted to go to was at the very end of the book.

The edges of the lines curled and lifted. Peacock nudged his hand underneath, Bells held on to his shirt, Rusty grabbed her one arm, Grand another, and the next minute they were flying through space and time and darkness.

Chapter 12. The Breathing Planet

At first none of them could understand what has happened or where they were. The sky and the surface around them blended into one color, the color of ink, with rare reddish or pinkish splashes of what could be sun flares or reflections on water. Water. It appeared they landed on an island composed of porous membranes and honeycombs and silt and all around it—the island was small, less than a mile long—the ocean licked the shore. It did lick it. It was that thick. Each wave stretched out and tried to touch them like a tongue.

Bells shrieked and scooted back, away from the waterline.

Peacock didn't move, mesmerized. "It's just like I thought."

His friends looked on with horror at one wave that dared to inch closer, rolling yellow and grey foam at its very tip forming something like a finger and hovering a hair-width above Peacock's sneakers. It looked like it wanted to touch him. It was afraid. It retracted, heaved, and returned with a new eagerness, this time bubbling around both of Peacock's feet to his cry of exaltation. He stretched out his hand.

"Don't touch it!" Cried Bells, her eyes two round saucers. It was hard to breathe. She gulped for air, unable to satisfy her lungs. "Peacock!"

"Huh?" He turned his head, dazed.

"Where are we?"

"On Solaris." He turned back, stretching out his hand to pet the animal, or the wave, or the living being that the ocean around them was. It behaved like an organism with a certain level of intelligence, and it both unnerved and fascinated Bells, who looked back at Grand and Rusty for support.

Grand pressed himself to a wet slimy outcrop, looking straight ahead of him and wheezing in terror.

Rusty squatted directly on the shore, evidently having already made friends with the ocean that bulged and shrunk under his hand, behaving like an animal that was scratched behind its ears, if it had any ears. "It likes me!" Rusty told astounded Bells and got back to stroking the gluey substance.

"Why did you get us here?" Asked Bells Peacock in her shrill bossy voice.

"It was my turn to do a joke." Grinned Peacock, pleased with himself. In another moment, he frowned. They all did.

The island shifted. It tilted slowly to one side, careened to another, and the inky ocean around it crept closer, making it smaller, making it sink.

"Well, good job, you pissant." Said Bells crossly. "We can't stay here. It looks like it's about to swallow us."

"I can't breathe." Croaked Grand. He pulled at the edge of his t-shirt in an attempt to free his throat from a tentacle that circled around him like a snake.

"Grand!" Bells jumped to her feet. "Guys, help!"

She ran up to him and started whacking at the tentacle, which oozed into another shape and enveloped Bells into a cocoon. Her face turned green. She fought for air, pounding with fists on the inside of the liquid that pulsed around her in an excited bubble.

"Bells!" Rusty grabbed handfuls of the molten film and succeeded only in making it stick and stretch in long strands that began spooling around his feet.

Peacock unfroze. "Please, let go of my friends." He said to the ocean. The ocean, or the living breathing thing that was the planet Solaris, one big gooey mind, regarded him with the moving wrinkles of its thoughts and retreated a bit. Perhaps to see what would happen. Perhaps to play. After all, it was in no hurry.

Grand gasped for air. Bells was crying. Rusty coughed, and scared Peacock frantically poked around the island's sticky surface to find anything to draw with. There was nothing.

Solaris rose in one pettish wave and crashed on the ground, shaking it and driving it deeper into the liquid.

"Why did you bring us here!" Bells shouted through tears. "This is not funny anymore! Get us out!"

"We will die. I think it will eat us." Said Grand gloomily.

"Here! Look!" Rusty pointed to a clean smooth outcrop projecting two steps away from them. Next he hawked up a gob of mucus in his left hand, dipped his right forefinger in it and asked, "Where to?"

"Anywhere but here!" Declared Bells, crawling up to him, her feet held by a couple of curious feelers. Her face was deathly pale in the pink glow that came from a strange red sun breaking through even stranger clouds. It blinked. It did. It was an eye, the eye of Solaris, or so Bells thought.

"Okay!" Said Rusty and smeared his snot on the stone.

Bells reached him just in time, seizing his ankle. Grand was already on him, holding him in a panicked bear hug. Peacock reluctantly waved his goodbye to Solaris and when he touched Bells sneaker, they we all whisked away from this inquisitive planet and dropped into the book of Rusty's choosing.

Chapter 13. The Man On A Cannonball

The deafening racket of shooting and explosions made them cover their ears and crouch. The smell of ash and gunpowder made them sneeze. The trembling earth under their feet made them think that maybe they were still on Solaris. It took a while for them to reorient their senses and realize that they were most certainly on Earth and most likely in the middle of a battle.

They shielded their faces and looked around and saw bursts of orange fire and black smoke and stampedes of horses mounted by warriors dressed in navy arming coats and beaver hats. They galloped past them, sabres aloft, hooting and shouting. Opposite them an army of men in kaftans, some walking, others riding steeds, charged forward with cries of war. They were dark-skinned, their heads were wrapped in turbans, and in front of them an important looking bearded man rode an elephant decked out in velvet and brocade and golden tassels.

"Yes! Get them! Get them!" Shouted Rusty, up on his feet, his sweatshirt in his hands waving like a flag of victory.

"Get down, you idiot! You'll get your head blown off!" Screamed Bells, clasping her head. All around them cannon balls and bullets thundered and crashed and exploded.

"We will die here! We all will die here!" Wailed Grand.

"What the hell is this place? Rusty, where did you get us, you moron?"

Rusty, oblivious to Peacock's insult, grinning like a lunatic, pointed to a figure that emerged in front of the navy coats. "It's Baron Munchausen! Right there! Look!"

A man in a red topcoat and a black triangular hat, his face one big curly mustache, charged the sultan—as he did look like a sultan of some sort, the general on top of the elephant—and with one blow of his sable whacked him off the animal, dismounted his horse, and rained lashes on the man left and right.

"What kind of a book is this, Rusty? Couldn't you pick out something more peaceful?" Bells crawled up to him and shouted in his ear, because it was impossible to hear anything in this deafening hullabaloo.

"It's The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen! My grandma gave it to me. It has pictures! Watch! Watch what he's going to do!"

For a moment his enthusiasm infected them all and they turned to witness the Baron to catch cannon balls with bare hands and fling them back at the enemy's fortress, destroying its turrets one after another. While resting from this impossible task, he continued to fight the sultan who lost his

sable and was now shooting at the Baron from a pistol. At which the Baron cast him a swift blow and neatly sliced off his head.

Bells cried out.

Rusty grinned.

Grand shook his head dejectedly.

And Peacock screamed, "I thought we agreed on no more dead bodies?"

"Watch! Watch!" Rusty was so agitated, saliva spit from his mouth as he talked.

Sure enough, as they watched, Baron Munchausen caught one other cannon ball in his hands mid-flight, mounted it and flew off. Rusty pointed to the sky, shouting for his friends to hear, "Did you see that? Did you see what he did? Guess what, guess what? He also pulls himself out of a bog by his own hair! And he shot a deer with cherry pits and then a cherry tree grew from the deer's head the next morning! And...and..." Rusty gasped for air. "And he shot ducks in the air so that when they fell they were already roasted and ready for dinner! And he turned a wolf inside out! And—"

"Rusty!" Bells yanked on his arm and pulled him behind a broken carriage loaded with crates of ammunition, abandoned in the haste of the battle. "Guys."

They gathered around her, shocked, their faces smeared with soot.

"This won't do." Said Bells, almost screaming, trying to overpower the racket. "We can't just blindingly jump in and out of books like anymore."

"Agreed." Said Peacock.

"There is no food here.'" Said Grand.

"But it's Baron Munchausen." Stared Rusty, disappointment written all over his face. "He goes on so many adventures. He flies to the moon—I want to fly to the moon too. And he—"

"Shut up, will you?" Peacock snapped.

"Why do you always shush me?" Rusty's little face turned red. "I didn't shush you on your stupid octopus planet, did I?"

"It was not on octopus. It's called Solaris."

"Whatever. I could've shushed you too."

"I shush you because you're dumb."

"Why is it that I'm always dumb? That was dumb what you did, got us on that island. We nearly drowned!" Rusty wouldn't take the abuse. He curled his tiny hands into fists and was brandishing them in Peacock's face.

"Boys!" Bells blew the hair out of her face, pushing herself between them. "We can't argue now. We need to agree on something. All of us."

"That will never happen." Said Grand sadly. "We will never get out of here and we'll never find anything to eat and we'll never get back."

That statement made them all pause.

None of them wanted to speak first, to discuss the possibility of the utter impossibility of making it to the lake in the park and to their abandoned bikes.

"Don't say that." Said Bells.

"Why not? It's the truth. My mom says, someone has always say the truth."

It made them think. It made them very afraid. It made them forget there were sitting in the middle of a battlefield at the risk of being blown up any moment.

"If we can't agree on something, how about we all explore books we want to explore and then come back?" Offered Peacock.

"Come back where?" Snapped Bells. She wanted to be the one to come up with this brilliant idea. Why didn't she think about it before? Peacock was always first.

"I don't know. Let's agree on a book and a page?"

A shell fell close and showered them with dirt. They cowered and after an eternity of waiting, when nothing else blew up, finally dared to look out. The battle was nearing end, but groups of soldier still fought here and there, although it was clear they lacked the energy and the drive to do so.

"Let's pick something, quick." Said Bells.

"How about a fairy tale?" Suggested Grand.

Bells shuddered at the memory. "Enough of your fairy tales. The last one we landed in had murdered women in the cellar, I'm not dying to end up in another one like that."

"I don't see what's so scary about dead bodies." Said Grand quietly. Nobody listened to him and hung his head.

"Something nice. Peaceful." Peacock was talking outloud.

"Does this mean I can stay here?" Inquired Rusty, his eyes still shining with the fever of discovery.

"I suppose you can stay here all you want. Well?" Said Bells. The boys looked at each other, dumbfounded. None of them wanted to venture with any ideas that would cause Bells' wrath on their heads. All of them were tired and their heads and stomachs were empty, which made thinking difficult.

"You guys are pathetic. If you have no ideas, I will choose for you. Before we get killed." A cannon ball landed not too far from them in the midst of horses whose whinnying and panicked gallop made them silent, to wait and talk when the noise died down.

"We will meet in Winnie The Pooh." Stated Bells in a voice that made it clear there was no opportunity for any kinds of arguments. This was final.

"Another kids book. Why Winnie The Pooh?" Peacock said, and both Rusty and Grand glared at him.

"Because I said so." Bells pursed her lips. "Now, I know where I will go, so while you're making up your minds, if you'll excuse me..." She drew a corner with her finger in the dust, then the number 9, then she was turning the dusty page and falling face forward into the abyss of the next story.

Chapter 14. The Dark Cellar

The air was humid and fragrant. It smelled of cured pork and bacon and blood sausage and cheese. Bells swallowed a lot of saliva that suddenly formed in her mouth. She felt her way forward, pleased with herself that she picked the right page. She touched the shelf to her right and felt for a coil of homemade bangers, snatched it and sunk her teeth into one, tearing off a good chunk and chewing fast, afraid to be discovered. She just took another bite, when a hand brushed hers and her hair stood on end. She gasped and jumped around, her heart going a million times per second.

White teeth faced her in the hazy darkness.

"This is good sausage." Said Rusty. "What book are we in?"

"Rusty!" Said Bells in a loud whisper. "What are you doing here?"

Rusty looked down at the round of cheese he held in his other hand, bit off a chunk, and, chewing, mumbled, "I'm eating."

"I can see that." Bells lost her appetite. She was looking forward to exploring this book on her own and didn't want any

company with her, particularly that of Rusty. "How did you get here?"

"I was scared Grand and Peacock would leave me alone..."

"They were supposed to leave you alone, you dummy. We were supposed to each go to a book we wanted to go."

"I know." Rusty snorted and bit off another sizeable piece of cheese. "But I don't want to go alone again."

"Why?" Asked Bells, surprised. "I thought you wanted to stay in that Baron Munchausen story."

"Well, yeah, I wanted to. At first." His voice grew somber.

"At first?" Bells set her sausage aside, suddenly worried.

"I don't want any accidents to happen to me." He bit into cheese again and sighed. "My sister made me promise that. She..." He hesitated. "She hates accidents."

They were silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry." Said Bells.

"But she doesn't have to worry now, does she?" Asked Rusty brightly. "There are no accidents here, are there?"

"Well..." Bells trailed off.

Above them a patter of feet stopped, a key turned in a lock, and soon someone swiftly descended down the cellar.

"It's Emil." Bells pulled Rusty under one of the butcher's tables. "Quick."

"Who's Emil?"

"Shhh!"

They sat quietly, not daring to breathe.

A pair of bare feet slapped along the wooden floor, stopped right in front of them, and the next thing they heard was vigorous chewing and swallowing and, after a while, loud belching. Then the feet smacked on the floor to the stairs, up and up and disappeared behind the door above.

"What? What is it?" Rusty shook Bells' shoulder.

Bells convulsed in silent laughter. "He was stealing sausage just like us!" She sniggered into her fists.

"Who?"

"Emil. Emil of Lönneberga."

"Who is that?"

"It's a book by Astrid Lindgren about this boy who always does pranks on everyone. He gets into all kinds of mischief."

Rusty got suddenly very interested. "What kinds of mischief?"

"Let's eat first, then I will tell you." Bells crawled from under the table, got her fill of cured meats, crawled back under, and her and Rusty has a feast, after which, despite their efforts to stay awake, they both dozed off, to be awakened by loud shouting from outside.

"What is going on?" Rusty was first on his feet.

"Let's go and see." It was Bells turn to be excited. She has read all the books about Emil. She couldn't remember which one was which and was only guessing where exactly they have landed.

They crept up the creaking stairs, opened the door into the kitchen, and, upon seeing no one, tiptoed to the front door of the house that stood ajar. What they saw made Bells giggle and Rusty speechless.

Across the house, on the roof of a barn, stood a woman in a peasant dress. Her mouth was open, and a thin thread trailed from it to the roof.

Rusty nudged Bells. "What are they doing?"

"That's Lina, their maid." Said Bells, getting control of herself. "She has a bad tooth. They're trying to get it out."

"But why is she standing on the roof?"

Bells didn't answer, she simply pointed.

A man next to a pile of hay encouraged Lina to jump, which she did with a cry. Dry stalks of grass flew everywhere. Lina clambered down, her hand pressed to her cheek, the thread trailing behind her.

"Did they get it out?"

"No." Said Bells, breathing deep to control her laughter.

"Oh, she will be mad at Emil now. The things he does."

"What things?"

"Well—" Before she could continue, they were spooked. Both the man, whose name was Alfred, and Lina saw them.

Bells pulled Rusty inside. "I want to know more!" He protested.

"You can read more in a book. There is one more place I want to go." And before Rusty could object, just as the door opened and flushed Lina entered, and just as from the opposite side a blond boy about eight years old with sly blue eyes and a wicked grin spotted them, coming out of the kitchen, Bells grabbed Rusty by the hand, fell to her knees by the corner of the room, drew a number in the dust, and in a flash they were standing on a sunny street lined with neat tidy houses and a girl was galloping at them on top of a horse. That was a very peculiar looking girl. Rusty could see it as she got near them.

She had fire-orange hair carelessly braided into two tight braids that stuck out on either side of her head, big splotchy freckles all over her face, and an even bigger smile. Her blue dress was patched with spots of red. She wore two different color stockings on her legs, one brown and one black, and huge oversized shoes. The most curious thing about this girl was what Rusty saw on her shoulder.

"Look! A monkey!" He pointed.

The girl slowed down and dismantled next to them.

"That's Mr. Nilsson." Said Bells under her breath. "Hello."
She said to the girl.

"Hello!" Said the girl brightly. "I'm Pippi Longstocking.
She offered Bells a hand, shook it, then took Rusty's
unresisting hand and shook it too. "Did you have your breakfast
already?"

"Breakfast?" Bells couldn't recall what day it was, or what
time of day, or what day. Everything mixed up in her head.

"No, we didn't have any breakfast yet!" Said Rusty
excitedly.

"Well, then come to my house, we will have breakfast
together. I will bake a million cookies and we will eat them
all." She took the horse by the reins and began walking in the
direction she has come.

"What book is this?" Asked Rusty as quietly as he could.

"That's Pippi Longstocking, also by Astrid Lindgren." Said
Bells. "She wrote many books I like. There is another one I want
to go to, about a man with a propeller on his back. He lives on
the roof and his name is Karlsson. And another one called Mio,
My Mio about this boy Bosse who find a genie in a bottle, and
then that genie takes him to a far away kingdom where he has to
battle the evil knight Kato, and then there is one called The
Bothers Lionheart about..."

They walked behind Pippi, and Bells told Rusty all about the books she liked, and Rusty listened, enraptured, until they reached an odd looking house sitting in the back an in overgrown garden and walked through the gate and disappeared inside.

Chapter 15. The Tripod Machines

Peacock's heart thumped in his ears. He didn't know why he decided to go here. He only knew that he finally got here and was intending to witness as much as he dared, before fleeing into the safety of the Winnie-the-Pooh forest. At present he crouched behind a brick wall of a house somewhere in the middle of the street. It was night. White shafts of light pierced the darkness around him, searching and sliding and illuminating packs of running people.

He took a breath, another, then stuck his head out from the behind the corner and looked up. The breath froze in his throat and he whispered to himself, perhaps to believe that the things marching at him were true.

"The Martians."

He rubbed his face, hid behind the wall, then peeked out again. "I'm in London and these are the Martians."

The lights converged on the fleeing crowd and thin pinging noises assaulted Peacock's ears. Guns answered them. A nearby tree blew up. Screams converged with the sound of shooting. Hot rays shot from above and charred everything they hit, leaving black skeletons. Peacock found himself buried in what smelled

like burned meat. Gagging, he crawled from under whatever it was that landed on him and ran into the street, mixing with the throng of screaming panicked people. All sense left him. He forgot he is in a book. He forgot who he was or what he had to do to get out of here. He ran for his life, twisting his head back occasionally to glimpse the jellyfish-like machines advancing across the ruined city on three long legs, their heads gazing about like empty hoods, greenish flashe of fire striking every few seconds everything living and moving and not moving. They were at least thirty stories high, these things, and they were alien. They were from Mars. They came to destroy the Earth, to exterminate life on it.

Thought flew through Peacock's head with the speed of lightning. A couple times he stumbled, fell, picked himself up and continued sprinting along the streets and alleys and narrow ways, terrified out of his mind, until at last it came to him that he was in a book. This was a story, a story called The War of the Worlds by H.G. Well, and he could find a corner, turn it, and get out.

Peacock dropped behind a trash bin in a dark corner at the end of a lane, and suddenly started laughing. "Martians! I've seen the Martians! Real ones. Who would believe that?" He licked his lips, thirsty, his hunger forgotten. "I can come back any time I want to." He soothed himself. "I can go take a break and

come back to another page." He felt so sure of himself that when a long metallic arm reached for him and lifted him out of his hiding spot, he didn't understand what was happening until it was too late.

Chapter 16. The Lack Of A Head

Grand was fascinated with morbid things since he could remember himself. He especially liked to ponder all kinds of things that involved the cutting of limbs and beheadings and gutting of corpses, which he imagined strictly in the medical sense or in the sense of preservation of a cadaver for a burial. He often thought that when he could decide for himself, he would sign up to donate all of his organs after his death and imagined his own body cleared of intestines and washed and chilled and sewn up and dressed in a nice suit and his face made up and looking beautiful, just like his mom made dead people look beautiful.

He was used to kids calling him odd and teasing him for his stories. Even his friends made him shut up whenever he ventured into telling them something new he found out about death. The truth was, he did this on purpose, because he was scared of dying ever since his dad died. He thought that by finding out as much as he could about dying, maybe he would be scared of it less, and by forcing himself to read about morbid things, he would get used to the idea somehow.

This book he landed in was one of those things he forced himself to read, even though his mom told him not to.

It was midnight.

The silver moon shone in the sky like a wide open eye.

Grand sat in the prairie, listening to the rustle of the grasses and the chirring and scratching of nocturnal rodents and watched the grazing stag a few steps away from him, fully aware of what was going to happen next. Because he wrote number one in the dirt, in the corner, in the battlefield he just left.

He prepared himself, huffing and puffing and mumbling on repeat. "This is a book. This is just a book. It's just a dead body. A dead body is not scary. I'm not scared of dead bodies. I'm not—" He thought he was ready to see this. He was wrong. He wasn't. His legs went soft, his face went cold, his stomach flipped and he promptly sat back, hard, on the chilled compacted ground. For ahead of him, preceded by the sound of the hooves on the packed dirt, appeared a horse.

Grand's mouth slowly opened.

The horse had a man on it. It would be nothing strange, to see a man on a horse, if not for one missing detail. The man had no head. He did have it, but not on his shoulders, where one would expect it. He held it in between his hands, and Grand thought that it was a good idea to come here on an empty stomach, because his stomach shrunk to the size of a nut, and there was anything there, it would've surely escaped through his mouth.

The deer stopped grazing, his widened eyes fastened to the man atop a horse. In the next moment it dashed away, parting the tall whispering grass and plunging through the waters of a shallow stream.

The horse flicked its ears, sniffed the air, and trotted straight to the place where Grand sat in the grass.

Grand couldn't move. His throat has gone dry and he seized to feel his body. His eyes were riveted to the spot where the man's head should've been and as the horse passed him a mere step away, despite retraining himself from doing so, Grand stole a glance at the dead head between the man's dead hands, saw its dead unmoving eyes, fell back and lost consciousness.

Chapter 17. The Yellow Bear

Bells and Rusty were stuffing themselves with cookies and Bells was recounting hers and Peacock's adventures to Pippi and her friends Tommy and Annika when Rusty started thinking hard. He furrowed his brows and stuck out his lower lip and began picking his nose absentmindedly. There was no snot left there, not after the warmth of Pippi's house, and he resorted to doing what he always did when he needed to concentrate.

"Rusty." Bells elbowed him. She was in the middle of explaining to the how her and Peacock escaped into the next book together with the giant Roc bird and how sad she was that she didn't think to take any of the diamonds scattered about the nest.

"They will die now!" Said Rusty.

"What? Who will die?" Asked Pippi, eating another cookie.

"The Roc chicks. They are left without a mother to feed them."

"Oh no!" Bells clasped her face, embarrassed. She didn't think about this. She didn't think about this at all. She got comfortable and quite enjoyed their present company. "We need to get back." She eyed Rusty.

He nodded.

"No, don't go!" Cried Annika. "Not yet. Please, tell us more."

"We need to." Said Bells firmly. "I don't think it's a good idea to stay here any longer. I don't even think it's a good idea we were talking to you. What if we somehow broke the story?" She stared at Rusty, frightened by this idea.

"What story?" Asked Pippi.

"The story you're in."

"We're not in any story." Said Pippi, frowning. "We're in my house having breakfast."

"I'm sorry." Bells stood up so fast, the chair fell from under her. She put it back in place. "Really really sorry, but we have to go." She nodded to Rusty. "Thank you very much for your hospitality, for breakfast, and for your company."

It took Rusty a moment. "Yes, thanks! It was great! Everything was great!"

Before he could say anything else, Bells seized his arm and pulled him out of the kitchen and out of the house and into the garden filled with tangles of bushes, wild weeds, and dandelions. She found a spot of earth, quickly traced a corner and stopped. "Wait."

She looked at Rusty, who meanwhile has been ripping some green and fuzzy berries off a bush and popping them in his mouth. "Rusty! What if they're poisonous?"

"Oh." He dropped the ones he was about to eat. "They don't taste poisonous, they taste like they could give me a spectacular diarrhea."

"Oh God." Bells slapped her forehead. "We can't go to Wonderland."

"Bells! Rusty! Where are you?" Came voices from the porch.

Bells ducked lower, hoping they wouldn't be seen behind all this growth. "We can't go back, because how are we going to catch the Roc bird? Number one, it's huge and it's flying and we can't fly. Number two, even if we find it sleeping or something, there is no guarantee it won't wake up and eat us alive. We need bait. And we need Peacock's and Grand's help."

"You're right. You're so smart, Bells! You really are!" Rusty exclaimed.

"Shhh! They will hear us."

It was too late. Pairs of feet paddled in their direction.

"Quick!" Bells scratched out the number they agreed on, stuck fingers into the dirt and lifted the page just in time to see Pippi and her friends peek through the bushes.

A moment later they were sitting up next to a large thick tree in a peaceful looking forest, thinking all was well, when

Rusty gave a cry of surprise. "Hey, little fella. How did you get here?"

"Who?" Bells startled.

A monkey in blue pants and yellow shirt sat on Rusty's shoulder. It twisted his ear with great interest, making energetic monkey noises.

"Mr. Nilsson! How did he get here?"

"That's what I said." Rusty grinned and giggled. The monkey tickled his neck, then climbed on his head and began searching for something in his hair.

"Oh, this is bad. This is bad." Exclaimed Bells. "We have to get him back to Pippi!"

"Why? He looks like he's having fun. Hey, that's ticklish. Hey, stop!" Rusty cringed under the monkey's fast fingers, smiling and enjoying this attention.

"Because we're breaking the books! Or something like that. We got the Roc bird into Alice in Wonderland, and now we got Pippi's monkey into Winnie The Pooh. Don't you see?"

"See what?" Rusty was showing Mr. Nilsson monkey faces, to Mr. Nilsson's astonishment.

"Hello."

They startled.

In front of them stood a bear. It was small and dandelion yellow in color and soft and plushy like a toy.

"Hello." Said Bells and Rusty together, breaking into identical grins and stealing a glance at each other, their troubles forgotten. They got to meet Winnie The Pooh!

"Do you have some honey?" Said Pooh.

"Some honey?" Repeated Bells.

"Yes, I was just walking and I thought, I would like to eat some honey. It seemed like the perfect time. Then I saw you and I thought, maybe they have some honey? And I decided to ask you. Do you have some honey?"

"I'm afraid we don't." Said Bells, and added. "Pooh."

"Oh." Pooh sighed sadly. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"That is too bad." He turned to leave.

"We have a monkey!" Rusty tapped on his shoulder, and Mr. Nilsson slid off to the ground.

"Oh!" Said Pooh. "I've never met a monkey before. Hello, monkey."

Mr. Nilsson chattered something in response and bent so low, his head hit the ground.

"What a funny fellow! Tigger would like him. What is your name, monkey?"

"His name is Mr. Nilsson." Said Rusty proudly, as if the monkey belonged to him now. "He can't talk."

"Can't talk?" Said Pooh. "Why can't he talk?"

Rusty shrugged. "I dunno. He just can't?" He looked to Bells for help, but Bells was staring into the distance, her face spreading in a rather silly grin. "Look who it is."

"Tigger!" Said Pooh. "I was just wondering where you were."

From behind a tree a stripy shape bounced and bounced and bounced and finally stopped in front of them and sat on its hunches and curled its stripy tail and said, "Hello, Pooh."

"Hello, Tigger."

"Hello." Said Tigger to the monkey and to Bells and to Rusty.

"Hello." They answered. Well, only Bells and Rusty answered, and Mr. Nilsson gibbered something and made another bow. It seemed he was fond of them.

Quick steps preceded him, and in another moment a boy in a checkered shirt and shorts and rain boots and with a blond shock of hair over his inquisitive face walked up to them.

"Hello, new friends." He said. "I'm Christopher Robin." He shook their hands and then he shook Mr. Nilsson's tiny little hand, and Bells was so mesmerized by this that she noticed a little too late how the fair skin on Christopher Robin's hand started to turn brown and how Mr. Nilsson started making noises that sounded loud and growling, and he wouldn't let go of Christopher Robin's hand.

"Bells! Look, look! Look what Mr. Nilsson is doing!" Rusty jumped up and down, excited at the change.

Bells feet got cold. "Rusty?"

"What? What?"

"I don't think this is a good thing, I think this is a very very bad thing."

"It is?" Said Rusty, and after a brief pause, "Bells?" He couldn't say anything else or jump for that matter. His mouth fell open and he could only point.

Right in front of their eyes the forest and its inhabitants began changing. The pines and oaks and elms grew taller and thicker and sprouted soft emerald moss around their trunks and branches. Their leaves flopped and expanded and the dry pleasant smell of the forest got bitter and sweet and so pungent, Bells covered her nose. If only this was the worst of it. It wasn't.

Christopher Robin's blond hair turned black and shiny and long. His jacket and shorts and rain boots, no longer fitting, fell off him, leaving his bronze, almost chocolate skin bare, save for a tattered cloth circling his thighs. Winnie the Pooh bent and hunched and stood up into a huge dark-furred beast with a patch of white under his muzzle that opened to reveal sharp yellow teeth. And Tigger...Tigger changed into a fierce looking tiger with a large head and powerful body. It looked at the bear and the boy and roared up into the sky. The ground shook and a

few bright green leaves and lianas dropped on the carpet of moist ankle-deep grass. Or moss. Bells couldn't tell what it was that tickled her feet, plants of some sort that seemed to breathe.

"What is happening..." She whispered, taking a step back.

"I dunno." Rusty shrugged. "The book has gone crazy?"

"What book?"

"The one we're in?"

Bells glanced at Mr. Nilsson who became a large ape with a mean look, hooting and leaping and dragging the boy up the nearby tree, from which a pack of identical monkeys looked on, their tails curled and swinging in the air, their mouths wide open to reveal long red tongues and big cutters.

"That is so cool! I think we're in the jungle!" Rusty said.

"Not cool at all." Said Bells, her back pressed to the tree, because there was nowhere else to retreat.

The boy roared back at the tiger, together with the bear. Their voices penetrated the shimmering air with bitter spite. The air was suddenly humid. A trickle of sweat rolled down Bells' nose.

The tiger lashed out at the boy with one of its huge paws, sharp claws extended, and Rusty almost peed himself from fright. It struck him that these were wild animals and they were real

and if they wanted to, they could hurt you really bad. "Where is Pooh?" He asked dumbly.

"I think I know where we are." Said Bells.

Rusty could only stare. All around them incredible flowers bloomed in gold and purple and scarlet and pink.

"Pooh is gone. This is Baloo."

Baloo lunged at the tiger. They crashed through a growth of bushes and rolled on the ground, growling and swiping at each other and baring their teeth. The boy fought off the monkey, climbed up a tree, swung down on a liana and dropped on top of the animals, shouting and yapping like a wolf.

"Where did Christopher Robin go? Who is that crazy kid?"

"It's Mowgli. From The Jungle Book." Said Bells, moving her tongue with difficulty. Everything inside her mouth has gone dry. "We're in The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling."

"How do you know?"

"I read, you idiot." Bells had to admit that Rusty's stupid questions helped her get unstuck when she was frightened out of her wits. Which was right now. "We broke something, Rusty."

"Broke something?"

"We changed the book. I think bringing Mr. Nilsson here did it. Look at him now. Did you see what happened to him?"

They looked up. Overhead in the thick canopy of the rainforest the rustle and the screeching and the hooting

indicated the passage of a group of monkeys that circled the fight scene and occasionally shrieked to encourage the fight.

"What do we do now?" Asked Rusty quietly. He was afraid to move. Down the trunk of a baobab—because of course it was a baobab, it was that thick—slid a shiny python, its green eyes unblinking, its forked tongue flicking in and out.

"Don't move." Whispered Bells. She froze.

They stared at the python that made its way down into the grass and crawled toward Baloo and the tiger. Bells had no doubt the tiger was Shere Khan, and the python was Kaa.

Rusty found Bells hand, and they held on to each other, too stunned to talk, too terrified to move, too shocked to think about anything.

They didn't need to stand long. From far off a strange metallic sound startled the entire jungle. Baloo and Shere Khan stopped fighting. Mowgli jumped off their backs and howled. Kaa wove his way up a tree, and the monkeys fell quiet, listening hard. The sound repeated itself. Then something heavy thundered and crashed through the woods, making the foliage shed leaves and petals and green fuzz in its wake. It went on the count of three, like a gigantic insect, first probing, then stepping, then making its way through whatever obstacles it encountered.

Above them the greenery shook.

Bells covered her face, her heart pounding.

A sharp cry floated to them, and on its heels a familiar face showed itself through two thick stalks of some fragrant plant.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Peacock shouted. "It was the only way for me to escape it!"

Bells unfroze. "Peacock!"

"Escape what?" Asked Rusty nervously.

The answer to his question covered them with a shadow. A giant insect-like robot consisting of a hooded head sitting on top of three legs, a jellyfish tripod, stopped right above them.

"What is that?" Asked Bells.

"It's a Martian." Cried Peacock, out of breath. "I thought we were going to meet in Winnie the Pooh?"

"It is Winnie the Pooh!" Said Rusty.

"It doesn't look like it. Where is Grand?" Peacock glanced around.

"He hasn't shown up yet. Peacock? What do you intend to do with this Martian of yours? You need to get it back to where it belongs."

Peacock looked up. "Scorching poppies."

The tripod machine sent out a long metallic tentacle, probing around. All jungle life cried and fled, all, except Shere Khan who stood erect, facing the thing.

"What book did you go to?" Said Rusty excitedly.

"The War of the Worlds."

"I thought you said you read only comics?" Bells voice dripped with sarcasm.

"It is a comic."

"No, it's a novel, you moron. It was written by H.G. Wells."

"Whatever."

"Not whatever. Get your facts straight. And you need to get this thing out of here before it destroys the jungle, us including."

"Don't worry about that one, boss." Said Peacock with a smirk. "I know just the thing. Hey, you dumbo!" He waved his arms for the Martian to notice.

The hood on top of the tripod tilted. The probing tentacle shot out at Peacock who was kneeling on the ground, scraping out the corner and the number with the tip of a twig.

"Wait!" Bells felt alarmed. "Where do you intend to go?"

"Where do you think?"

The tentacle reached Peacock, he grabbed with one hand, with another he lifted the page and they vanished.

Bells wanted to comment and Rusty wanted to cry his excitement, but neither of them found the strength. Shere Khan the tiger looked them directly in the eye, his maw open wide, a

low growl rolling out of it. He beat his tail on the grass and his ears flattened. Bells saw his muscles twitch.

"Bells?" Said Rusty.

"I see it."

A howl broke through thick silence and Mowgli swung on top of the tiger, knocking it down. The tiger roared and spring back, aiming at the boy. A hand patted on Bells shoulder. She flinched.

"I'm back. I got rid of that monstrosity." Peacock was triumphantly grinning from ear to ear.

"Where?" Said Bells.

"At Solaris, where. Let's see how it likes that sticky ocean."

Bells eyes widened in horror. "You can't do that."

"Can't do what?"

"You'll break the book." Supplied Rusty importantly. "Right Bells? This is what we did. Winnie the Pooh is The Jungle Book now because we brought Mr. Nilsson with us."

"You brought Mr. Nilsson." Bells cut him off.

"Who is Mr. Nilsson?"

Shere Khan overpowered Mowgli and pinned him to the ground, his hungry yellow eyes on the kids.

"We need to get out of here and stay in some place where nothing happens and where we can think." Said Bells.

"What about Grand?" Said Rusty.

"We'll come back. We have no choice."

"And that place would be?" Peacock cocked his head.

"Shut up. Hold on to me." Bells scraped a corner in the dirt and stopped. She heard a crashing noise. Rusty perked up, as did Shere Khan. He started growling.

Red and sweaty, Grand broke through the tangle of lianas. "Sorry, I fell asleep." He eyed the tiger. "What did you guys do to Winnie the Pooh?"

"Grand!" They all exhaled in relief.

"I'm so happy you're back. We almost left without you. Get here, quick." Bells beckoned him.

The tiger growled. Grand edged around the tree to join his friends, his palms wet and his breath wheezing.

"We better go there soon," said Peacock, "because—"

Shere Khan crouched and sprung at them with a roar.

"Hold on!" Cried Bells, and they tumbled into a cold snowy evening.

Chapter 18. The Chicken People

They dropped on the floor of a dark room. Ahead of them, a child in a sleeping gown walked after a black chicken. Its eyes shone like two little candles, showing the way. Bells first, Peacock after her, then Rusty and Grand, followed them down the corridor and into a room where two old ladies slept in two white beds and next to them sat a parrot in a cage and a grey cat. They heard the boy—it was most definitely a boy about nine or ten—ask the cat for its paw and the cat screeched and the parrot cried, “You fool!” and the boy and the chicken rushed out of the room and down the steps into a labyrinth of twisted narrow corridors.

“You woke them up, Alyosha!” Berated the chicken the boy.

The boy answered something.

“The chicken can talk?” Said Rusty.

“Shhh.” Bells put a finger to her lips. “Yes. It can talk. Be quiet or they’ll hear us.”

“Cool.” Rusty couldn’t help himself.

The black chicken stopped and peered back.

Bells pressed to the wall. The boys did the same.

The chicken and the boy continued walking.

"Where exactly did you take us this time?" Whispered Peacock.

"To Saint Petersburg." Said Bells. "Can you shut up now? I will explain later."

"Gee." Scoffed Peacock, but not in a mean way, more out of habit. "Bossy today."

"When isn't she?" Offered Grand, and Peacock smiled.

Bells waved at them to stop talking.

They stopped in a round hall lit with candle chandeliers. The chicken and the boy reached the door guarded by two knights in armor who suddenly sprung off the walls and charged at the chicken. The chicken grew huge and flapped its wings and clucked and clacked and pecked at them, ripping their armor apart.

The boy threw his hands to cover his face, whimpered, and dropped to the floor, most likely unconscious.

The chicken defeated the knights, picked up the boy and vanished with him as if it sunk through the floor.

"Now." Said Bells.

She marched up to the door, opened it and beckoned for everyone to get inside. They stepped into another hall, long and opulent, with a ceiling so low, it almost touched their heads. Countless candles stuck in golden candelabras threw a golden glow on the checkered marble floor. At the head of the hall, under a green velvet canopy, stood a throne that was fit for a

king. A toy king, perhaps, or a doll king, because everything here was doll-size.

Bells, looking entirely comfortable and nonplussed, dropped to the floor and crossed her legs, sighing. "Whew. Finally, a safe spot. We can stay here till tomorrow and nobody will bother us."

"Quite peculiar, this place." Said Peacock, lowering himself next to Bells. Grand and Rusty sat down too and together they formed a circle in the middle of the hall.

"Did you see how it whacked the knights? Bam! And they just dropped. Just like that." It didn't take much to get Rusty excited.

"Is there any food here?" Said Grand sadly, sensing that the answer to that was going to be negative. He still hasn't eaten anything since morning, contrary to Bells and Rusty who stuffed themselves with sausage and cheese and cookies and were full. Peacock hasn't eaten anything either. He was high on adrenaline from his encounter with the Martians and hardly felt any hunger.

"So, miss bookworm." He addressed Bells. "What book are we in and why did you bring us here?"

"This is The Little Black Hen, for those of you uninformed," she said through teeth. " I suspect none of you

have heard of it. I also suspect you don't know who the author is."

"Why don't you enlighten us, poor dolts?" Parried Peacock.

"For those who do not know," said Bells, measuring Peacock with what she hoped was an icy stare, "The Little Black Hen was written by Antony Pogorelsky, a Russian author, and we are currently in Saint Petersburg of the nineteenth century. It's the middle of winter, and this hall," she spread her arms, "is deep underground."

The boys stared, taking it all in.

"We are in the throne room of the King of the underground people. They will all come here tomorrow, him, his suite, Alyosha—the boy you saw—and the black chicken who is—"

"Wait, we're where again?" Rusty scratched his nose.

"In Saint Petersburg."

"Where is that?"

Bells rolled her eyes. "I can't believe it. It's in Russia. Don't you ever look at the map, Rusty?"

Peacock and Grand wisely stayed quiet.

"Why Russia?" Peacock ventured cautiously.

"Because I thought of a story as far away as possible from where we were, and, well—"

"We could've gone to another planet, like Mars or something!" Said Rusty.

"No!" Peacock's voice broke. "No, no Mars, please, thanks."
He was embarrassed at his outburst.

"Speaking of which," Bells pressed both hands on her hips, "do you care to elaborate on where you dropped off that thing, that thing on three legs?"

"I told you, on Solaris."

Bells drew herself up. "I know. I just wanted to hear it again to make a point."

"What point?" He looked at her, puzzled, as did Grand.

"You broke it, that's what!" Said Rusty.

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"Stop it!" Bells stood up, towering over them. "That's enough! If we keep arguing like this, we'll never figure this out."

"Figure what out?"

"How to fix the books."

"What books?"

"The books that you broke!" Bells fumed.

"I didn't break anything." Said Peacock.

"Yes, you did! You dropped that Martian machine on Solaris, didn't you?"

"So what? So what?"

Bells tried to catch her breath and looked around. Rusty, as expected, was edging away towards the throne to expect it closer.

"Rusty!" Called Bells. "Tell him!"

"Huh?" Rusty turned around, evidently having not listened to their conversation at all.

"What you're saying is," Grand said solemnly, "if we bring things from one book to another, we break it?"

"Something like that." Bells sat down again.

"Is that why Winnie the Pooh looked like a jungle?" Continued Grand, in an attempt to cover the gurgling of his stomach which by now gurgled pretty loud for everyone to hear.

"Precisely." Said Bells, glaring at Peacock for some reason, as if he was the cause of it all. "And somebody has screwed up it even more."

Peacock blushed, then turned pale. "Well, I'm not the only one. You brought that giant bird into Wonderland."

"Oh! That's it!" Rusty jumped up. "This is what it was reminding of! This looks like that hall with the doors and the crystal table in Alice in Wonderland, doesn't it? Like everything is small like for small people. Even the door, look!"

"Will you be quiet?" Snapped Peacock.

"Why does he have to be quiet?" Said Grand suddenly, turning to Peacock. "Why do you always tell him to be quiet?"

"Whoa, whoa, okay. Quit it. What are you guys, ganging up on me or something?" Peacock's panicked face gave away his fear, and he flushed even harder. "What did I do to deserve it? It was Bells idea in the first place, wasn't it? I mean, how we got here? She was the one who opened the first page!"

"Oh, I see how you are." Bells narrowed her eyes. "Blame your friend for everything, why don't you." Her voice broke at the last word and she blinked away tears that threatened to spill.

They lapsed into an uneasy silence. There was not a sound in the hall, not a movement behind any of the doors or anything above them.

Bells sighed. "We need to fix this. What we did."

"Do we?" Said Peacock.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because." Bells couldn't come up with a legitimate reason. She felt like they needed to straighten out the stories but she didn't know why she felt like that.

"Can't we just go home and forget all this?" Peacock threw at everyone, looking at them all, triumphant at the brilliance and simplicity of his suggestion.

"And how will we do that?" Said Bells.

"Easy!" Said Rusty. "Just turn the page and—"

They looked at each other, horrified.

"This is awful." Grand was the first to say something.

Bells didn't even bother to contain herself anymore. "You know what? It's awful enough without you saying that everything is awful, so can you please quit being so pessimistic? I'm tired of it. What took you so long to get back to us, anyway?"

"The Headless Horseman." Stated Grand tonelessly.

He suddenly had their interest.

"What kind of a book is that? A scary one?" Asked Rusty.

"Yeah, it is." Said Grand. "It scared me so much, it made me faint."

"Grand, I always wanted to ask..." began Bells.

"Go ahead."

"Why do you like these horrible stories with dead people and...and...body parts and blood and, I don't know. Couldn't you read something lighter?"

Grand stated answering.

Peacock smirked.

"What?" Said Bells.

"Says the girl who brought us into the story about Red Death."

"That was by Edgar Allan Poe!" She said indignantly.

"Doesn't make it less bloody."

Bells wanted to retort with something sarcastic and caught herself at the last second. Grand gave her a silent look of reproach and shook his head a little. He was debating whether to tell them all the real reason he liked stories about death and decided against it. It was always the wrong moment to share, somehow. Nobody listened to him, so what was the point in trying?

Bells sighed. If she started another riot, they would never agree on anything, and the time was ticking. She saw out of the corner of her eye how Grand has yawned and Rusty and Peacock picked it up, rubbing their eyes. They could sleep here, of course, they were safe until the next day, but who was to say what could happen in the meantime to all those stories they have changed? Would they get worse?

She stared into nothing and after a while found herself staring into Peacock's wide open hazel eyes. He was thinking, she could tell. He blinked.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't really mean..."

"I know. No harm done." Said Bells. "We're just scared is all."

"I'm not!" Said Rusty brightly.

"Yeah, like I believe that."

"Okay, okay, I am. But only a little!"

"We need to find a way to fix the books and to get back home." Said Bells resolutely. "Let's plan out the first part of it and then we can return to the second part. Let's start with the Roc bird. What do you say?"

The boys raised their eyes at her without much enthusiasm. She could tell they were tired. She was tired herself.

"We need to find a chunk of meat somewhere, or an elephant, or a rhino, and bring it to Wonderland, to lure it, and then when it comes out, we'll grab onto it and go to The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor."

"Now the easy part." Said Peacock, fixing his hair and looking around no doubt in search of a mirror. "Where will we get an elephant? And won't bringing an elephant to Wonderland break it too?"

"You're right." Said Bells and fell quiet.

"Unless it's already broken."

"What? What? What's broken?" Rusty has been looking through the key holes in every door and got back to it right after asking his question.

"The book. Alice in Wonderland." Said Peacock.

"Then let's go there and fix it!" Exclaimed Rusty.

"If you're—" Peacock was going to continue with, 'so smart, maybe you can tell us how?' and stopped himself. "If you have an idea, can you tell us what it is?"

Bells smiled, as did Grand.

"Oh!" Rusty sat back from surprise. "Me? You're asking me for my idea?"

"Yes." Said Peacock, grinning.

"Oh! Oh! I know, I know!" He began clapping. "We go there and we see what happened to the story, and then we will figure it out!" His face fell as soon as he said it.

Everyone sighed.

"Sorry." Said Rusty. "I thought I had it."

"That's okay." Said Bells.

Peacock tapped on the floor to get everyone's attention. "How about we decide who does what? Like, who does what best, then decide what we need to do, and you, Bells, boss us around so we actually do it?"

"Really?" Bells raised her brows. "You guys okay with me doing it? I thought you hated it."

"No, we love it." Grinned Peacock. "We might look like we hate it, but we really love it. Right, guys?"

"Yeah." Added Grand.

"Yeah!" Rusty felt happy again.

"Okay." Said Bells, unnerved. "Okay. Then how about Peacock, you come up with ideas. Rusty, you will be our scout, to go into places first and find out if they are safe or not or

whatever. And you, Grand," she rubbed her nose, "you stay and hold the fort, so to say."

"What fort?" Grand was taken aback.

"Well, we will decide on a place to stay. So we can venture into different books from there, but we will come back, and you stay there for us to come back to."

"What? I don't want to sit all alone waiting for you guys when you have all the fun."

"But I thought you were the one who wanted to go home since you're always complaining about things, I thought..." She trailed off.

"All right. I'll stay. I suppose you can do things faster without the fat kid anyway."

"Don't say that." Started Bells.

"Why? I am fat. Come on, you all think that."

Peacock began to object.

"Yes, you do, all of you. I was fat my whole life. My dad died from being fat and I will die from being fat and that will be the end of me, so I might as well get used to it." He crossed his arms in defiance.

"No, we don't! Really!" Rusty objected. He was about to say something else, when Bells touched his arm and shook her head. This maneuver usually didn't work. Nothing could silence Rusty once he got an idea in his head. It did work now.

Rusty looked at Grand and fell silent.

Grand's face shook as if it was about to burst forth a cascade of tears. He bravely held it back. His face was hot pink. His ears were glowing, and he was burning from shame, looking down at himself, at his rolls of girdle with the t-shirt stretched over them. At his plump fists and thick calves and big feet. He thought another minute of this and the skin on his face will melt off. He wanted to hide it and didn't at the same time. If he hid it, he'd admit to being embarrassed, and he didn't want to admit to that. Instead, he yawned.

They all yawned.

"Why don't we sleep and talk about everything tomorrow?" Said Peacock, stifling his own yawning and not doing a very good job at it.

"Sounds like a good idea." Added Bells, wiping moisture from her eyes and blinking.

"Sleep where? Here? Cool! I'm calling the king's place!" Rusty crawled to the throne, ripped off the canopy and proceeded at making himself comfortable on the floor in front of it.

"Hey, what are you doing? Put it back!" Commanded Bells.

"What? I have to cover myself with something, don't I?"

"It's not yours, is it? Besides, we're not supposed to touch anything or disrupt anything. We've done enough damage already."

"It's just a blanket." Rusty reluctantly pulled the green velvet spread off himself.

"It's not a blanket, it's a canopy. And the king will be back here tomorrow and wonder what happened to it."

"So what? Let him."

"You're a selfish brat!" Snapped Bells, yanked the canopy out of his hands and draped it back over the throne, smoothing the folds and straightening the tassels.

Rusty rolled his eyes at Grand. "Girls."

"What did you say?" Bells rounded on him.

"Nothing, nothing."

"You better not lie." She narrowed her eyes at all of them.

Peacock raised his hands in surrender. Rusty shrugged. Grand didn't react. He raised his reddened eyes at her and Bells immediately deflated. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged.

"I don't know about you," she professed to the boys while they were trying to find a comfortable position to curl up on the shiny marble floor with no pillows and nothing to cover themselves, "but I need to have some beginnings of a plan so I can plug in my head and think about it while I'm sleeping."

"You can think when you're sleeping?" Rusty asked, his usual excitement dull and tired.

"What's there to think about? It's easy." Said Peacock through another yawn. "We go some place where there are elephants, fetch one, drop it off in Wonderland, fetch the bird, drop it off in the valley place or whatever, then go to Winnie-the-Pooh and fetch the monkey and drop it off with that girl you said it belonged, then go to Solaris, fetch the Martian, go to The War of the Worlds, drop it off there, and then we will figure out how to get home." He suddenly stopped, looking at their friends.

They gaped. This sounded like a whole lot of things to do.

"I hope nobody has stolen my bike." Said Grand. "My mom will kill me."

"My dads will kill me more." Said Peacock. "They just got it for me for eleventh birthday."

"So we can go back to Baron Munchausen? There was an elephant there! There are lots of dead bodies too!" Said Rusty. "We could gather them up and—"

"Rusty, please!" Bells made a face.

"Just trying to help." He turned away.

Gradually, they quieted down, nodded off and, one by one, fell asleep.

Chapter 19. The Whale Island

Grand didn't sleep well. He kept dozing off and jerking awake and finally sat up and pulled himself against the wall, watching his friends snoozing peacefully. Rusty snored with amazing regularity. Peacock lay still, his arm over his face. Bells twitched, her eyeballs jerked. She was watching a dream. Grand shifted and Bells woke with a start. Her heart pounded. Her palms were sweaty. She gazed around, blinking, trying to remember what she was doing in a doll-like royal hall instead of in her bunk bed on the second level, above her sister Maria who slept below.

"Grand?" She said sleepily.

"Hey." He whispered. "Can't sleep."

"Something the matter?" She scooted to him, her eyebrows creased.

"Nothing." He dropped his head.

"Something is. I can tell. What is it?" She rubbed her eyes, carefully stretched out her legs and arms—there wasn't much room—and regarded Grand. The thing with Bells was, if she put it in her head that something was wrong with one of her friends, she was determined to excavate every possible reason,

and if none of them couldn't come up with one, she'd come up with one of her own. The boys resorted to making things up so she wouldn't get even more worried. "Like mother hen," they used to joke behind her back.

Grand considered lying.

Bells saw struggle in his face. "What is it, Grand? What's wrong?"

"Am I fat?" He blurted, his eyes full of pain and anticipation.

Bells sucked in air. They used to joke about it with him, in a friendly way. Even Peacock calling him fatso was, amongst the four of them, considered a sign of friendship and affection. But Bells could tell this was a different kind of question that needed a different kind of answer.

In the span of a few seconds she considered lying, then avoiding the question somehow, then blaming it on Peacock, then she discarded it all in favor of being honest.

"You are overweight." She said quietly. "That doesn't mean you're fat *fat*, as in, you know, fat. There are fatter people than you are. It means you have more weight on you than a healthy eleven-year-old should have, according to some stupid standards devised by some stupid doctors. In my personal opinion you're cuddly like a bear cub and I like it." She scooped him into a hug.

Grand held her back, awkwardly, and hated himself for tears that cascaded down his face.

"My mom says I'm fat." He mumbled in her ear. "My mom says...if I won't stop eating sweets, I'll die like my dad."

"Bullshit." Said Bells. "Your mom doesn't know that, does she? How can she?"

"But I am fat, aren't I? Look." He grasped a fold on his stomach and shook it with disgust.

"So what? If you feel healthy, that's all that matters. Who says you need to be thin? You look cute like that. I like your cheeks. They're so round." She smiled.

"Are they?" Grand looked at Bells and noticed for the first time that her eyes were a beautiful steel color, the color of a thunderous sky when it's about to erupt with a torrent of rain. Which, essentially, what Bells was. A constant threat of eruption.

Grand smiled despite himself and felt his cheeks, hot and wet from tears. "Do you really think so?"

"I really think so." Said Bells. "They're so cute—your cheeks, I mean—I want to grab them and squeeze them, like Rusty's grandma always does to me."

"It's okay." Said Grand, encouraged. "You can, if you want to." And he closed his eyes and offered his face.

Bells didn't expect him to do it, so she quickly touched both his cheeks and tore her hands away. They were hot like hot griddle. Hot and smooth.

At the same moment she felt the skin on her back crawl and sensed that they were not alone. She whipped her head around.

Standing in one of the golden doorways was a little man, no higher than a foot, dressed in all black—black tights, black puffy shorts, black jacket with an enormous round collar—and in a peculiar red hat on his head. It had a wavy ridge along its length and it sat cocked a bit to the side.

"The black chicken." Whispered Bells.

The man walked up to them, sized them all up, and seeing Bells staring at him, addressed her.

"Are you Alyosha's friends?"

"Peacock! Wake up! Wake up!" Rusty startled himself and all of them, including the little man in black who jumped from fright.

"Rusty! Shhhh." Bells shook her head at him. "We're not Alyosha's friends, but we know Alyosha." She thought this was true, at least she knew about Alyosha from reading the book.

"Well, you will need to vacate the king's hall because the king will come here any minute."

"Sure." Said Bells. "We're sorry we took the liberty to sleep here. We'll leave right away."

Rusty shook grumpy Peacock awake and they scrambled out of the hall through a different door that led them to a tunnel with cages on either side, where behind bars sat all kinds of underground rodents, rats, moles, and mice, like animals in the zoo.

"What is this place?" Said Rusty.

"Not now." Bells pulled on his arm.

They got lost in the labyrinth and sat down at the end of one corridor to catch their breath.

"What now?" Asked Rusty.

"Breakfast would be good." Said Grand.

"Agreed." Echoed Peacock. "I don't think I ate anything since yesterday morning, or whatever morning that was, I forgot."

Bells and Rusty stole a guilty glance at each other. They were the only ones who got to eat something.

"I vote we go get that elephant." Peacock raised his arm.

"Which one? The one the sultan rode? In the Baron Munchausen story?" Rusty would jump with joy, if he could. His head scraped the ceiling, however, so he stayed put.

"No, we will go back to Sindbad's Travels book." Said Bells with finality that didn't invite arguments.

"Why there? Why can't we go where I want to?" Rusty started to whine.

"Because you appointed me the boss."

"Like you weren't one before?" Smirked Peacock.

Bells burned him with her stare. "Do you want to get out of here or not?"

"I'm not sure now." Lied Peacock. "I actually quite like it. No school. No stinking Ms. Carbuncle. I can go into any story I want—"

"Don't you miss your dads?" Asked Grand anxiously.

Peacock closed his mouth. He couldn't say anything nasty to Grand, not after yesterday, and he sensed that if he did, Bells would definitely strangle him. She had this air about her, so he kept quiet, then said. "Yes, I do. I miss them."

"I miss my mom and my brothers." Said Grand.

"I miss grandma." Said Rusty.

"Okay, that's enough smearing snot all over your faces! Are you men or not?" Bells scolded them, her eyes shooting daggers. "Let's get to work, before something else happens and we stay here forever."

"Is that possible?" Asked Rusty, scared.

"I don't know and I don't want to find out. Here." Bells offered them a hand and turned around. "There is nothing to draw with. Everyone, look for a corner with a number on it."

The boys scattered along the corridor, peering at the black and white marble squares on the floor and studying wall and every dark dusty corner they could find.

"I got it! I got it!" Rusty waved them to him. He pointed to the spot where the low ceiling met the wall, and there was a number written in old white paint, peeling, but still visible.

"It's not the number we need." Whispered Bells. "We were at the different page in Sindbad's Travels the last time."

"Do we have a choice?" Said Peacock.

"I think it's mad at us, whatever it is, the thing that is doing it. Mad at us for breaking it. It will throw us in a horrible bloody story and kill us off and I will never see my brothers or my mom and will never eat her pancakes for breakfast." Grand sniffled.

"Thank you for this elaboration." Said Bells. "May I humbly request you to be more optimistic today? For your friends? We really need it."

"Yes, Grand. Please?" Pleaded Rusty.

"I add my voice to this request." Peacock nodded.

"Okay, okay, sorry. So where are we going again?"

"To Sindbad's Travels. There are already elephants and chunks of meat that merchants throw in the valley of diamonds to attract the Roc birds, so I thought we could just take one really quickly. You all agree?"

The boys nodded.

"All right. Hang on tight. Here we go." Bells reached up and pried the corner open and they whirled through the opening in the page and flew through a cloudy sky and landed on an island covered with thick brush and moss that made it look like a green meadow in the middle of an ocean.

They got to their feet, looking around.

It was a gloomy cloudy day. Dark blue waters lapped around the island, hardly a mile long, and the earth under their feet was definitely moving, as if the island was somehow afloat.

"What is this?" Bells threw a suspicious look at Peacock.

"What?" He said innocently.

"Did you think of Solaris?"

"No."

"Then what is this place? It looks like Solaris to me."

"I really don't know what you're talking about." Peacock shook out twigs from his hair.

"It's not Solaris! It's real water!" They heard Rusty shouting. He was already on the beach, sticking his foot in and considering going for a swim. None of them have brushed their teeth or took a shower since they got here and Rusty felt positively stinky. His grandmother scolded him into taking a shower every day. He loathed it, and at the same time missed it

now. It was a habit. Besides, swimming in an ocean looked like fun. He started taking off his shoes.

"Rusty, no!" Bells yelled from above.

He looked back at his friends. They appeared frightened. The island under his feet began moving, swinging left and right, then it rose. Rusty watched with mounting horror how the beach line turned into something slimy, and where there was sand before, he now saw thick slippery skin of a giant fish. In another moment it snorted out a fountain of water in the sky and plunged into waters together with Rusty and Bells and Grand and Peacock.

After the waves have swallowed the giant fish—quite possibly a whale—and the after the foam settled down, four heads bobbed to the surface, spitting out water and cursing and screaming names.

"Rusty!"

"I'm here! Bells, Bells!"

"I'm okay! Peacock? Grand?"

"Fine! We're fine!"

It took them a good ten thousand hours or more to paddle to each other and grab each other's arms and, gasping for air, begin to assess their situation.

"The water isn't too cold, that's to our advantage." Said Bells in between gulps for air. "It's not very warm either, so

if we won't find a way to get out here soon, then I don't know." She refused to think what that might look like.

"Then we will drown from being tired or drown from being cold or drown from being eaten by the sharks. In all of these cases, we will drown and land at the bottom of the sea and fish will eat out our eyes and..." Grand hesitated to continue.

"What?"

His friends stared at him silently. Even Rusty kept his mouth shut. He gulped so much salt water, it burned his throat and his eyes watered and he didn't feel like speaking at all.

Peacock regarded their situation. For some reason after everyone was done staring at Grand, they all turned and started staring at Peacock.

"What?"

"You're the idea guy. Come on. What do we do now?" Said Grand.

"Yeah." Added Rusty.

"Yeah." Nodded Bells.

While Peacock was thinking, paddling hard to stay afloat, Grand smiled and said. "I'm glad I'm fat."

"What? Why?" Said Bells.

"I can't swim, but my fat is keeping me afloat."

"That is ridiculous nonsense."

"No, it isn't! He is right! He is! And I lost my shoes."

Said Rusty.

The ocean around them was relatively calm, and the lazy waves shook them, making them bob up and down in the blue green space full of water, with nothing else to be seen from one end to another. No piece of land, not even sun, just water and cloudy sky.

"I got it." Said Peacock slowly. "I think. But first I need to know where we are."

"I think." Said Bells, spitting out water. "I think we are in Sindbad's Travels, but not in the second chapter, where he finds the valley of diamonds, but in the first one, where he finds an island and it turns out to be a gigantic fish."

"And you were telling me I sent us to Solaris!" Peacock fumed.

"I didn't know it back then!" Bells pursed her lips. "I just now have figured it out."

"Fine. I believe you." Peacock creased his brow and rubbed his face. Then he passed his hand through his wet hair, clearing it off his face.

"What is it? Stop keeping us guessing." Said Bells.

"I think because we took the Roc bird out of this book, it shrunk."

"Shrunk? Like a sweater?" Rusty got excited by the idea.

"Sort of." Said Peacock thoughtfully. "Like, it has one less character, so it got shorter and we landed into an earlier chapter because of it. But then when a character or a thing or whatever interacts with another thing in another book, it changes it into a different story, a different book altogether."

They were listening intently to his thoughts, floating in the water to the best of their abilities. Bells flung her arms back and forth and pedaled with her feet underwater. Grand lazily slammed his arms up and down. And Rusty beat in the water faster and faster, until they noticed that his face has turned grey and his eyes became round.

"Rusty, you okay?" Said Peacock. He wasn't worried about drowning, used to the idea that at any moment, once they decided, they could go into any book they wanted.

Rusty was staring at Grand. "We're in an accident, aren't we?" He whispered, hoarse.

"Yeah." Said Grand uncertainly. "Sort of."

Rusty gasped for air and screamed hysterically. "We in an accident! We're in an accident! We're going to die! We're going to die in an accident!" He twisted and bobbed and for a moment lost his buoyancy and disappeared under water.

"Rusty!" They cried.

Peacock dove, found Rusty and pulled him up. "Dude, you scared me! Don't do this, okay? We'll get out of here any moment."

"We're in an accident." He kept repeating, pale and dazed. "We're in an accident."

"We need to get out of here before he gets worse." Professed Bells. "Where?"

Peacock wasn't ready to answer this. He hasn't thought this far.

"I think," began Grand, and when they turned to him, continued, "I think there is no point in trying to get an elephant somewhere since we don't know what that bird looks like now. It probably changed like that monkey changed, into something else, or into some other bird."

"Good point." Said Peacock.

Rusty clung to him, mumbling "accident, accident" on repeat.

"Okay, let's go to Wonderland." Declared Bells.

They looked at her, and she looked around, puzzled as to where she could find a corner in the middle of an ocean or how she could draw one.

"There are no corners here!" She said, exasperated and suddenly scared. Her arms and feet were getting tired, and dusk

has began to set in, making the gloomy sky a violet and menacing and heavy with potential rain.

The boys looked at her.

Then Peacock grinned. "Your hair."

"What? What about my hair?"

"Hey, Rusty, do you mind holding on to Grand for a bit?"

Rusty nodded, his teeth chattering from terror.

Peacock swam to Bells, pulled strands of her long hair stuck to her face and arranged them into a corner and some semblance of a number one hundred, the only one that did look like a number.

"You're a genius." Said Bells with shinning eyes.

"I try." Peacock shrugged with a sly smile.

"Oh, shut up. You're so full of yourself. Let's go."

They held hands, Peacock thought really hard about Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the smoking caterpillar in particular, and peeled off the page right on Bells face.

Chapter 20. The Goose Ride

They dropped on the ground like wet sacks of potatoes. On the first glance it looked like they landed exactly where they intended to. Tall grasses around them formed a thick forest, and wild flowers here and there nodded with their colorful heads. Now all they needed was to find the mushroom to orient themselves and start looking for the Roc bird or whatever kind of bird it turned into.

"Look! There it is!" Cried Rusty, happy that they were out of the accident and that he was the one who has spotted what they were looking for. It seemed too easy.

Ahead of them, where the grass abruptly ended, a gigantic bird waddled back and forth, but instead of being brown it was white. Its legs looked like two carrots with flippers at the end and it had a stunted orange bill. It pecked at the ground and quacked.

"We're not in Wonderland, are we?" Peacock confirmed Bells' fears. He stood next to her, shivering in his wet clothes.

"It changed." She whispered, wringing out her pony tail.

"I know what it is!" Shouted Rusty. "It's a goose!"

"It's a giant goose that will eat us. I like roasted goose." Said Grand sadly. "Roasted goose tastes really good. Sometimes instead of a turkey my mom roasts a goose for Thanksgiving and—"

"You're not the only one hungry, you—" Before Peacock could say "fatso", Bells pressed her hand on his mouth and whispered ardently into his ear. "Please don't call Grand fatso anymore."

"Why?" He shook off her hand.

"Because." She didn't have time to elaborate.

The goose has started honking and more geese shuffled up to it, making noises that sounded like words.

"Guys! Guys! Listen. They're talking!" Rusty pointed at the geese that assembled in a pack around the back porch. They stepped out of the strip of dirt by the fence and stopped. They were in a backyard of a huge farmer's house. It wasn't huge to begin with, it was normal size, it's just that to Bells and the boys it seemed huge because they were tiny, no more than three inches tall.

The geese appeared to be laughing at what they saw now as a tiny boy in a red pointy hat, a boy like themselves, maybe a little older, about thirteen or fourteen years old. A boy who seemed to have shrunk.

"What book is this?" Whispered Peacock.

"Oh, you have faith in my knowledge now?" Scoffed Bells.

"Come on, Bells, where are we?" Picked up Rusty.

"Yeah, Bells, please." Said Grand.

"Be quiet, all of you. Let me think."

She ran up to the overturned wooden tub and crouched behind it, watching the unfolding scene.

"You got what you deserved!" Hooted the geese, joined by the chickens and a rooster and a house cat and even the cows from the fenced paddock across the yard.

"I didn't mean to! I swear!" The boy apologized to them for throwing rocks and promised the cat that he won't ever pull its tail if it would only tell him where the elf went.

"The elf...I think I know what this is." Whispered Bells under her breath. "Yes, I think I do." Despite herself, she was thrilled. She had forgotten about this book. It was one of her favorites when she was little, to listen to her mother read and to fantasize about it.

Demanding quacks emanated from the sky. She lifted her head. A pack of wild geese was passing over, and they honked down at the domestic geese, "Come join us! Come! Come!"

"We're good here. We're good." Answered the white geese.

Then one of them, a young goose by the look of it, spread his wings and attempted to fly.

Bells, her heart beating hard, rushed to her friends. "We need to get on this goose!"

"Why?" They looked at her, bewildered.

"I think it's what the Roc bird turned into!"

"Where are we?" Asked Peacock on the run.

They were chasing the bird together with the boy in the red hat who snatched the goose's neck. They grabbed its back feathers and the goose slowly bore them up, burdened by the weight.

"Where are we?" Screamed Peacock against the wind.

"In Sweden!" Screamed Bells back.

"In Sweden?"

"We'll fall and break our necks and die." Grand stared down at the shrinking village with horror.

"This is so cool!" Rusty had the time of his life.

The wind beat at them and the goose trembled with effort and the boy in the red cap clung to it, half-conscious from fear.

"We're in The Wonderful Adventures of Nils by Selma Lagerlöf!" proclaimed Bells triumphantly.

Upon hearing his name, Nils turned back and looked at them.

"Who are you?"

"And this is not Nils." Continued Bells. "This is Alice, she just looks like Nils now that her book has changed. We need to get this goose to Sindbad's Adventures!"

"But then we'll take Alice with us!" Peacock shook his head. "This won't work."

"I'm sliding. I'm sliding!" Grand's face turned purple. He clutched at the feathers, but his weight pulled him down. Everything swayed, his ears buzzed. He closed his eyes and resigned to his fate.

"I can't." Honked the goose. "I can't do this anymore." His wings rose and fell slower and slower.

"Hold on!" One of the wild geese floated under him. "Jump!" He addressed Grand.

Grand moaned. His fingers slipped and he fell directly on the grey goose below.

"You too!" Shouted another one at Rusty, who didn't need to be asked twice. And so with their help our friends rode a goose each. They couldn't tell for how long and after some time they got used to the swaying and the rushing of the wind. They clung to the geese for life, shivering, their wet clothes cold and clammy. Peacock sneezed several times so loud, the goose that was carrying him almost dropped him.

The day grew late and cold. The white goose with Nils on its back started to fall back and sink lower and lower. He looked exhausted, and the wild geese shouted to their leader, Akka, a proud goose more than one hundred years old, to stop. She grew irritated and continued to race ahead. It was another

hour—or a freezing eternity, because that's how it felt—before they finally landed by a lake crusted over with ice.

Bells slid off her goose, and Peacock was so weak, he couldn't stand up. Even Rusty collapsed on the ground. Only Grand appeared cheerful and in good spirits, his cheeks bright pink from the cold.

"Morten, Morten. Are you okay?" Nils shook the white goose that stretched out flat, neck long and lifeless, eyes closed, both wings spread wide apart.

Peacock sneezed violently, snot hung from his nose and he wiped it. "Are you sure it's the Roc bird?" He asked Bells.

She rubbed her arms and danced about a little, trying to warm up. "I'm not sure, I just have this gut feeling."

Rusty amused himself by snorting a line of green slime in and out of his nose.

"What if it isn't?" Asked Grand. "What if—"

"Who are you?" Said Nils, his red cap askew.

"What are you?" Picked up the wild geese, surrounding them.

"I'm Rusty and these are my friends Grand, Peacock, and Bells!" Said Rusty brightly.

"Are you elves?" Asked Akka. She indeed looked very old, her feathers silver with patches of grey, her feet callused and knotted, but her eyes inquisitive and sharp and lemon yellow.

"Rusty, wait!" Cried Bells, but it was too late.

"No, we're not elves, we're humans!"

The geese hissed and honked at them. Half of them fled, another half attacked them, pecking at them with their bills and beating them with their wings.

"See what you did!" Bells cowered from the blows.

"What? What did I say?" Rusty fought back clumsily, parrying the blows with his thin hands.

Grand took on the goose attacking him with fierce fist whacks. And Peacock fell to the ground. He was so hungry and tired and cold, that he didn't care anymore if a goose pecked him to death or not.

"We need to grab Morten and get out of here!" Bells pushed the goose away, skipped to the prostrate body of the white goose and grabbed his neck.

"What do you want with Morten? Let go of him!" The Nils boy kicked Bells. She waved her arms and sat back down. There wasn't much strength left in her body, and her teeth chattered like crazy. "Peacock. Peacock?"

She crawled over to him. "Guys! Come here." The geese retreated, and Grand and Rusty rushed to Peacock who lay on the ground, sneezing and mumbling something incoherent. "I think he is getting sick." Said Bells and her stomach dropped to her feet at the thought of what they would do if all of them got sick.

"Let's get out of here where there is food, where it's warm, and where we can decide what to do next."

"Didn't we already try to do that in the chicken story? It's no use, we will fail again and fall down with fever and...okay, I'm sorry." Said Grand.

"Where should we go?" Asked Bells, looking back over her shoulder. The geese were swimming in the lake conversing over something and throwing them impatient glances. Nils was dragging Morten to the lake to make him drink to revive him. So far everything went according to the story. Good, thought Bells, at least I know what happens next.

"How about some book where nothing much happens?" Croaked Peacock. "No dead bodies, no monsters, where it's quiet and where is food and where it's warm." He sneezed again.

"Okay, I think I know the place." Said Bells. "The Secret Garden."

"I never read that one." Said Grand. "What it's about?"

"It's about a girl and two boys discovering a secret garden and growing flowers there and eating crumpets and oatcakes and muffins with raspberry jam and marmalade and drinking pails of milk." Bells smiled.

"Crumpets? Raspberry jam?" Grand's whole face shone. "That sounds great. I'm in. When can we go?"

"I know that! I read it!" Said Rusty.

The geese got out of the lake and shook off their feathers and now waddled up to them. Their angry eyes were yellow and Bells felt like they didn't mean well and it was time to scat.

"Awesome. Then can you draw a corner and, I don't know, page two hundred or something, closer to the end, and I will ward off the geese?" She told Rusty.

"Yes, boss." He scraped with his fingers across the frozen ground.

"We can't have humans in our midst." Said Akka, eyeing suspiciously Bells and her friends. "We are wild geese of the most noble pedigree."

"I have no doubt about that." Said Bells. "We won't inconvenience you much longer with our presence. In another moment we will be gone. I promise you. Rusty?"

"Done!" He stood next to the drawn page, sticking his fingers in the groove he drew.

"Peacock, come on. Grand, help me." Together they lifted him, and propping him up on both sides, walked up to Rusty and got hold of him. Rusty, proud of being the page turner this time, opened the page just when a hungry howl reached them from the woods that surrounded the lake. Rusty's insides froze, an image of a pack of wolves with red ominous eyes rushed through his mind, and another moment they were falling into darkness.

Chapter 21. The Stone Castle

The air smelled stale as if it hasn't been aired out for centuries, with a distinct odor of earth. Not the warm soil for planting flowers, but the cold dirt where corpses were buried and left to rot. That was Bells' first impression when she took a breath and looked around, trying to get their bearings. They sat on the stone floor in a long hall with countless doors on either side. It stretched into darkness that didn't look promising. It looked menacing, to say the least.

"This must be one of those rarely used ends of the Misselthwaite Manor." She said and sneezed. Peacock sneezed too. The boys scrambled to their feet, looking at Bells, waiting for explanations and instruction.

"I don't know why I haven't thought of this before." She said, encouraged a little. She glimpsed portraits in heavy gilded frames on the walls, and, remembering the description of the manor from the book, decided that this matched it. "We're in the manor of this rich guy, Mr. Craven. It's about six hundred years old, if I remember correctly, and it has over one hundred rooms and several wings. I think we're in the one that's not being used often, so all we have to do is find our way down to

the kitchen. They're always cooking food there. Or make friends with Dickon."

"Who is Dickon?" Asked Rusty, busy inspecting one of the portraits, reading the inscription underneath.

Bells, happy that they were in the right place, at last, without any danger or anything bad that could happen to them, felt great and infected both Peacock and Grand with her enthusiasm. "Dickon is this boy from the village who befriends Mary who is Mr. Craven's niece." She smoothed her hair back and started walking forward, motioning the boys to follow her. "She lived in India with her parents. They died of cholera and she had to move to her only relative who was this rich uncle. We're in his house right now. He has a son too, Colin, they're all about our age. This will be great!"

She tried a door, out of curiosity. Of course, it was locked. "Of course." She mumbled. It all matched. And yet, and yet...for some reason an unexplained fear began growing in her gut. She turned to look at the boys.

Peacock was feverish. His eyes shone and his face burned. He bravely sauntered on, trying not to show it. Grand was ablaze with joy. He expected a huge breakfast and lunch and dinner all at once. He kept swallowing saliva that formed in his mouth and walked faster than usual. And Rusty...Rusty looked pail. His usual exuberance was gone and he avoided Bells eyes.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing, nothing! Just tired." He lied.

Bells stared at him for a moment longer, before continuing down the corridor and down a circular flight of stairs and into another corridor and then it abruptly ended in two ornate doors that opened into a lavishly decorated dining room with heavy draperies over the windows and heavy oak chairs and a huge table in the middle set with breakfast.

"Food!" Cried Grand and was the first to run and plop down on the chair. He began filling his plate with toast and buns and butter and jam and cheese, without looking, grabbing everything he could reach and stuff it in his mouth.

"Scones!" Rusty was beside himself, seizing hold of the plate with delicious looking pastries and biting first one, then another, then the third, his eyes scattered over the table to see what else he should eat.

Peacock, weak a moment ago, sprung to the boys and joined the bacchanalia.

Bells hesitated for a moment. Something didn't seem right. This should've been Mary's dining room. This should be. It all seemed to fit. Then why did she have an odd feeling that it didn't?

The boys, munching, called to her. "Bells! Come on! Eat!"

Her hunger overpowered her and she joined them, forgetting everything. Her worries, her doubts, her sense of something being wrong. She took the toast, buttered, slathered it with marmalade, bit into it and nearly cried with relief. It tasted wonderful. It was warm and sweet and crunchy. In one word, it was perfect.

For the next several minutes only sounds of chewing and gulping and swallowing could be heard. Hands reached for food. Forks scraped on plates. It was not until everything that's been on table was gone and Grand belched and Rusty belched and they had a belching contest that Bells felt her face grow warm, her stomach get happy, and her thoughts turn sluggish. She didn't want to do anything anymore, no more running or jumping in and out of books. She realized she badly wanted to get home to her mother with her ridiculous cucumber masks when she walked around the house with green slices of it plastered to her forehead and cheeks, to her father with this smell of smoke and machine oil. She even missed her little sister Maria, as annoying as she was.

She glanced at Peacock. His eyes said the same.

"Do you miss home?" She asked.

"Yeah." He said and sneezed. "Do you think they have any medicine over here?"

"They must. It's nineteenth century, so they're only home remedies, no pain killers, but natural stuff is better for you anyway."

"Let's just find a way to get out of here." Said Peacock tiredly.

Rusty was chasing Grand around the table. He tripped and Rusty fell on him and pounded on his stomach, laughing his head off.

"I'm surprised nobody has shown up yet." Said Bells. "Guys! Guys! Stop it."

Grand huffed and puffed and pulled himself off the floor, and Rusty's smile fell as soon as he met Bells eyes.

"Let's go into the garden, see if anyone is there." She said, and at this Rusty shrunk and took a step back.

Bells didn't notice. She was determined to take a look out, remembering that it was supposed to look gorgeous, the garden, from the window from which, she hoped, she could see the secret garden too, with its overgrown roses and irises and all the other flowers the names of which she couldn't describe.

She reached for the tapestry.

"Bells, no!" Rusty yanked on her sleeve.

"Why?"

He couldn't answer. His mouth opened and closed and he looked terrified.

Bells didn't need to do anything. It was Peacock who jerked the curtains open and gasped. "Wow!"

They pressed their noses to the glass, sizing up the view.

It was magnificent, breathtaking, and scary. They were high up, perhaps miles away from the ground. It wasn't the garden that spread beyond the blue haze of the sky, it was the green carpet of tree tops that stretched all the way to horizon, with silver ribbons of rivers cutting through it here and there. Beyond that were mountains, and beyond that—

"We're not in The Secret Garden, are we?" Asked Peacock carefully.

Bells couldn't move. She looked at Rusty who shrunk in size and very much wanted to disappear.

"Where are we, Rusty?" She demanded. "Where did you bring us?"

"It wasn't me, I swear." He stammered. "I was thinking about The Secret Garden very hard, but then..." He wiped the snot off his nose.

"Then what?" Prompted him Bells and felt the cold breath of wind on her skin. Her whole body erupted in goose bumps. The boys froze, sensing the oncoming presence of something otherworldly, something evil, something dead. A pack of wolves howled behind the glass, and the next moment they heard heavy footsteps. Measured, unhurried, and strong.

A tall man appeared in the doorway. One moment in was dark, another her was standing there. He was dressed in black, impeccably and with grand style of someone very wealthy. His face had no color and sported a groomed white moustache. His eyes were two specks of ice that seemed to glint red one moment, another grow dull like empty holes.

He smiled, revealing shiny white teeth. "Welcome, my friends." He said in a deep velvety voice. "Welcome to my castle. I take it you enjoyed your breakfast?"

His words relaxed them and put them at ease, but as soon as he stopped talking, Bells felt her stomach fill with horror again. "Mr. Archibald Craven?" She heard herself ask and immediately knew that he wasn't.

Rusty squeaked and crawled under the table, trembling there and holding on to the thick legs of the oak chairs.

"No need to be afraid." Said the man to him.

Beyond the window the howling of the wolves erupted again. It soared on the wind and died. The man smiled wider. "Ah, what a wonderful music." He said, and shifted his gaze to the kids. "You must be tired from your journey. You must want to take a rest. Let me show you to your rooms."

A suspicion grew in Bells mind. She looked at Peacock who, stifling a sneeze, looked at Grand, who stared at them with eyes

as large as saucers. His chin shook and in another moment, with agility that his friends were not used to seeing from him, he snatched two knives from the table, crossed them and stuck out his hands. "Leave us alone! We will depart from your castle, if you just leave us alone!" Grand frantically looked around in search of a number on a corner. There was nothing, nothing he could see. Plenty of corners and no numbers.

"Count Dracula." Whispered Bells and leaned on the window. She couldn't stand upright. Her legs wouldn't hold her.

"Nice one, Rusty." Threw Peacock at him.

"I swear, I swear, I didn't do it on purpose!" Mumbled Rusty from under the table.

"Put that down, my young friend." Said Count Dracula to Grand. "I do not intend to do you any harm. You are my guests. You have entered of your own free will. You may stay here for as long as you like." And he smiled another menacing smile that meant the opposite.

Rusty clambered from under the table and in a mad attempt to escape bolted for the doors. The Count caught him and lifted him lightly, as if he was a toy, and put him down on his feet. "I insist." He said. "I insist you stay." And his eyes riveted on Bells who stood motionless, thinking about the book by Bram Stoker and sorting through the pages in her mind, thinking that of all of them, she had the least chance of escape as count was

fond of young maidens, perhaps for their looks, perhaps for their blood. It must've tasted sweeter to him. So of anything, while her arms and legs felt numb, she desperately tried to come up with a plan of escape.

"Can you handle him?" Whispered Peacock.

"You've read my mind." Whispered Bells back.

"For how long?"

"I don't know. Do you think—do you think if he bites me, I will turn into a vampire? This is not real, it's a book after all."

"You guys are mad." Said Grand, who managed to eavesdrop.

Count Dracula has heard every word. His hearing was excellent. Holding Rusty's arm in his steel grip, he walked up to them and glanced down at Bells.

"I hear you wish to outwit me, young girl? That is admirable, to say the least. I would be more than happy to take on the challenge."

Rusty felt awful. Without wanting to do so, he has thrown himself and his friends into the worst book possible. And it was all that wolf's fault, the one that howled in the woods by the lake. It made him scared and it made him think of Castle Dracula, and here they were now. "Great." He said under his breath. "I have to fix this."

He threw a glance at Bells, who exchanged stares with all three of them and nodded imperceptibly. At least she hoped it wouldn't be noticed by Dracula, who, of course, noticed everything and was rather amused by the audacity of these young people who dropped on his head so unexpectedly and who smelled so deliciously sweet, particularly the girl.

"Let me show you to your rooms. I will give you, my young friends, a room separate from your lovey miss. It will not behoove for a maiden to lounge in the same room with you. Come."

His word was like a command. They obeyed without a question.

Dracula let go of Rusty and seized Bells by the wrist. His fingers were so cold, her skin burned and she thought he would break her bones. He led them down the stone steps into frigid air of the floor below and here, in an identical corridor, he flung open the doors into a guest room, ushered the boys inside and all they heard was the slam of the bolt being fixed on the door.

They were trapped.

"He took Bells with him!" Said Rusty, shaking the handle of the door that wouldn't move.

"Thanks to you, moron." Hissed Peacock and kicked at the door and cried out in pain.

"We're doomed." Said Grand dejectedly.

"We will be," snapped Peacock, "if you won't shut up."

"Why don't you shut up yourself."

"What are we going to do now?" Whined Rusty.

Peacock rounded on him. "I know what. I know exactly what. You brought us here, so you go ahead and figure out how to fix it."

"How will I do that?"

"I don't know. Figure it out."

"We could bring some kind of a monster or a beast from another book and have them destroy Dracula." Said Grand.

"Yes! Yes! I know, I know!" Picked up Rusty, happy to be busy doing something, anything to rid him of guilt that was tearing him apart.

"You can't just destroy him. You need to drive a stake through his heart or—"

"Shoot him with a silver bullet." Finished Grand and Rusty at the same time and shared a grin.

"If you know what it takes to kill him, why are you talking about monsters?" Asked Peacock, irritated that he thought himself smarter than his friends and proving the opposite.

"How do you propose we get our way out of here?" Grand shook the doors, or tried to shake them, because they wouldn't budge. They wouldn't move an inch.

"That's a good point." Said Peacock.

"We need someone large and strong and someone we can control." Continued Grand.

"I know exactly what we need!" Rusty was beyond himself with relief, jumping up and down. The book he had in mind would serve the purpose perfectly.

"Okay, out with it." Said Peacock.

"Golem!" Cried Rusty.

"That is a great idea." Said Grand.

"Gollum? From The Hobbit?"

"No, no! Go-lem!"

"Who is Go-lem?" Said Peacock, embarrassed. He thought he might have heard it somewhere, but he couldn't remember where and he couldn't remember what the name meant.

"My grandma gave it to me to read. The book. It's called The Golem! It's about this giant clay man."

"Clay man?" Said Peacock suspiciously.

"It's inert until you activate it. Kind of like a robot." Supplied Grand. He saw Rusty's eyes grow dull and added. "You finish. You know it better than me."

Rusty lit up again. "Anyway, this Golem, he comes alive every thirty three years, in Prague, in this house where there is this room without a door. To make him move you put a piece of paper in his mouth—"

"In his mouth?" Peacock's face distorted at the thought.

"Yeah. You write a magical formula on it and put it in his mouth and it brings him to life, and then you can control it. It's dumb. You just tell it what to do, and it does it."

"What's the magical formula?" Asked Peacock.

"Err..." Rusty glanced at Grand.

"There is another way to do it." Said Grand. "You just write the word "truth" on its forehead, and then when you don't need it anymore, you erase "truth" and write "death."

"And it will just let us do that? We can walk up to it and ask it to lease lower its head and write on it?" Peacock said.

"Well, I figure, by the time it comes to this, we will be out of this book."

"So the consensus is that we're not fixing books anymore? I think I like this new direction."

"We need to get Bells out of Dracula's castle, out of this book, and then let's simply figure out a way to get home. I'm tired of this." Said Grand.

"Me too." Said Rusty.

"Okay, okay. I'm game. Sorry if I'm a little—"

"Pessimistic?" Said Grand and the corners of his lips lifted up into a shy smile.

"Yeah, pessimistic. You, Rusty. You're our optimist."

Rusty wasn't used to compliments, especially to compliments from Peacock. "I am?" He said. "For real?"

"For real. Lead us. We trust you. Right, Grand?"

"That's right, Rusty. We do."

Rusty beamed and together they started looking for a corner that presented itself rather quickly, as if it was waiting to be discovered. The edge of one of the paintings hanging on the wall had a number on it that should've been a year, and maybe it was, only for a year it was very old. It was sixty five.

Rusty peeled the corner of the frame and after dropping though a whirlwind of fallen leaves and city grit and dust they scrambled up on a cobblestone street of medieval Prague.

Chapter 22. The Clay Dummy

Annoying drizzle stuck to their faces. Grey unsightly buildings blackened with soot towered above them. It wasn't a street, really, it was an alleyway in ghetto Prague, so narrow, only four people in a row could pass it without bumping into walls. It was a chilly autumn evening, maybe September, maybe October. Iron-and-glass lanterns protruded from the walls. Their feeble glow made the boys' faces look yellow. At the end of the alley people shouted and a horse galloped on the stones, pulling a creaking carriage behind it.

"This is creepy." Said Peacock.

"This is my kind of story." Grand grinned and rubbed his hands. There was no Bells to glare at him or to tell him to stop being so morbid and disgusting. There was his friend Rusty who shared his love for bizarre and disturbing, and that made him feel elated.

"It's Prague. Seventeenth century. It's pretty cool, nothing to be afraid of!" Rusty boldly marched ahead, fascinated and thrilled, gazing from side to side at the barred windows, lines hung with washed clothes stretching from wall to wall like

a tapestry above their heads, and over it all the indigo sky. He smelled smoke and fish and mold and couldn't wait to see more.

They walked the length of the alley and emerged on a wider street that was passed occasionally by merchants and horse carriages. A few street sellers were wrapping up their wares on the account of it being night soon. They passed a small crowd that was watching a blacksmith hammer out coins, then a chair that stood by the wall and in which a fat man sat with an open mouth and another one was wrenching something out of it with a pair of rusty pliers. They both moaned and groaned, and it was hard to tell who did it out of pain and who did it out of extreme effort.

"What the hell is he doing?" Asked Peacock.

"Pulling out his rotten tooth." Said Grand proudly. "It was a public affair in the medieval ages, same as executions of all kinds, like quartering—that's when they tied your arms and legs to four horses and tore you in four pieces—or beheading, or—"

"That's enough, Grand, I got it." Said Peacock.

"I hope we can see one." Said Grand.

"You're crazy. Why would you want to see something like that?"

Grand didn't get a chance to answer. "Is that the house?" He asked Rusty, motioning to dilapidated three-story apartment block at the end of the street that looked lifeless and barren,

with boarded up windows and the door standing ajar. Or, rather, it was barely hanging off the hinges, tattered and broken and falling apart.

"I think it is." Rusty licked his lips, agitated.

"What house?" Said Peacock irritably. "What exactly are we looking for? That room without the door, is that it?"

"Yeah." Said Rusty.

"Yeah." Echoed Grand.

There were screams that came from around the corner. They were cries of fright and soon added to that were voices shouting, "Golem! Golem!"

A man in tattered rags, stumbled forth on unsteady feet, as if he was drunk. His face was strangely soft and smooth looking, without a single wrinkle, unnaturally yellow in the lantern light. His eyes, narrow and slanted upward, shot a dull look at the boy and suddenly enraged, the man charged at them.

"Ahhh!" The boys cried and dashed away without looking where they ran, only wanting to run away as far from this mad creature as possible. Golem blundered after them, wrecking havoc in his wake, smashing windows with his fists and banging on the doors and hollering in a horrible voice. He didn't seem to have any kind of sense of direction and soon turned into a different alley from the one where Grand and Peacock and Rusty hid behind a heap of rubble.

As soon as Golem vanished, people stomped after them, yelling at each other, "Did you see him? Did you see him?" Soon they vanished too.

"Well, that didn't go so good." Said Peacock when he found his voice.

Rusty had no face on him. He failed twice in a row and was presently picking his nose at nothing else to do or say.

"Anyone has any ideas?" Said Peacock.

"You're the idea man, you come up with one." Blurted Rusty.

"How about a knight with a noble heart and a spear? The knight who likes to save dames in distress?" Offered Grand.

"Who would that be?" Said Peacock.

"Don Quixote."

"Isn't he a madman that chases windmills or something?"

"He's not a madman. He is a gentleman who defends the helpless and murders the wicked." Said Grand petulantly. "I'm sure if we explain our situation, he would agree to help. He would break through the door and drive his spear through Dracula like through butter."

"And why would he do that? Why would he care?" Said Peacock.

"He is always up for an adventure." Grand thought a little. "We could tell him that Bells is really Dulcinea, that Dulcinea

was enchanted to look like Bells. Dulcinea is the love of his life." He answered Peacock's inquisitive glance.

"And he'd believe that?"

"He'd believe anything."

"Guys, guys!" Erupted Rusty suddenly. "We can't sit here and talk about this! What if Dracula has bitten Bells while we sit here? What then? What if he'll turn her into a vampire?"

The thought chilled them.

"Rusty is right." Said Grand. "Why are you so silent all of a sudden?" He looked Peacock in the eye. "Where would you want to go?"

Peacock thought uneasily about the ideas he had and how and why he discarded every single one, not seeing how he could convince Batman or Spiderman or Godzilla or any other super strong beings he knew from the books he read to come help them. "Nothing." He said. "It's nothing. Let's go."

They did.

Grand spit with gusto on one of the cobbles—this caused Rusty to make an astonished face—then drew a corner with his finger, a number, and they fell into hot Spanish air of the arid plain by the name of La Mancha.

Chapter 23. The Pompous Knight

Sky as blue as aquamarine arched over the boys' heads. Not a cloud. Not a bird. Only gusts of hot dry wind. The rocky ground sprouted meager patches of brown grass here and there. And on this ground, right in front of them, stood about thirty windmills, whitewashed cylindrical towers capped with black conical roofs. On the side of each four crisscrossed blades rotated lazily to the tune of the breeze. Not a person was in sight anywhere, not an animal. The mills creaked as if they talked, looking out at the road with tiny black windows.

"We're in Spain, are we?" Said Peacock. The hot air felt good, and he hoped his clothes would dry in the sun. No hope for his sneakers, though. Those squelched at every step like wet galoshes.

"Yes, we are. I've always wanted to see this." Said Grand, mesmerized. Not a trace of doom in his voice. He grinned, eyeing the windmills at work, for a second forgetting why they got here in the first place.

"Guys! Look!" Rusty flung his arm at two dots on the road. Rusty was always the first one to see what was happening and where, which sometimes caused him a headache.

"Is that...him?" Asked Peacock.

"That is Don Quixote himself, I believe." Stated Grand grandly.

"Who is the other guy? Right there, see? What is he riding, a donkey?" Rusty sniggered in his fist.

Grand rolled his eyes. "You know, Rusty, you're my dear friend, but sometimes your immaturity gets on my nerves. No offense, please. But, please. Let me explain. There is nothing funny here. This little fat guy on the donkey is Sancho Panza, his squire."

The boys watched as the dots grew into dark silhouettes and gradually morphed into two riders. One, tall and lanky, with a beaten up knight's armor, a carefully trimmed white mustache and beard covering most of his face, shouted impatiently and shook his spear at the windmills.

"Behold the giants, Sancho! They have a thousand arms, each at least a mile long! It will be a great battle!"

"What giants, sire?" Asked Sancho dumbly, peering into distance. He was a simple farmer, plump and jolly, with a bald spot on top of his head, patting his donkey with one hand and scratching his nose with another.

"I will battle them with my sword!" Cried Don Quixote, dismantled his white steed, pulled out the sword and marched on the road until he glimpsed three puzzled boys staring at him.

"I am the renowned knight Don Quixote of La Mancha! Who are you? Answer!" He stopped in front of them, stamping down with his spear and rousing a cloud of dust in the process.

Rusty coughed, trying to get the dust out of his eyes.

Grand opened his mouth in awe. He eyed the knight, then his squire Sancho, then the knight again, then the windmills, pinching himself. He has read the book, and now he was in it. In it! Don Quixote was one of his favorite characters. There he stood in front of him, that was his chance, and Grand couldn't say a single word.

Peacock saved them all.

Later, he couldn't tell what it was—the abundant breakfast earlier or the hot sun that finally started to dry his clothes and clear his sinuses—but for some reason he had a sudden train of thought dash through his mind. No, two trains, to be specific. He was back to generating ideas. He seized upon them, beyond himself on how he could possibly have not thought of it before, and shouted, "Oh, esteemed knight Don Quixote so well known for his famous deeds of chivalry and courage!" He bowed, and Don Quixote did something of a smile with his mustache, which was of course hard to see behind all the hair. He straightened his chest and looked a bit taller and spoke to Peacock from above.

"You've heard of my deeds, have you?"

"Oh yes, beloved knight." Peacock lied, bowing his head even lower. Out of the corner of his eye he winked at Grand who stood dumbstruck by both the presence of Don Quixote and Peacock's irrational enthusiasm. Where did it come from? He exchanged a glance with Rusty, who shrugged his shoulders.

"I have heard of your adventures," continued Peacock. "Allow me to venture to tell you something of which your excellency might not be aware, yet I have a deep belief might rejoice at once and rush to her aid immediately, as she is in grave danger at the moment."

"She?" Don Quixote frowned. "Who is this "she" you are talking about, stranger? Tell me your name, before I stab you in your ignorant chest and pin you to the ground for the crows to feast on your eyes!"

"Prince Peter Sutton, at your service." Peacock was really digging it, and had a hard time not to grin and keep his face straight.

"Prince? Humph. I do humbly apologize. I was not aware of your high pedigree. Your garb, humph, is rather strange."

"We have been robbed, oh dearest knight!" Peacock folded his hands in plea. "We have been handed these peasant rags to wear, oh dear knight, avenge us!"

"Who? Who have robbed you? Show me the scoundrels! Tell me their names!" Don Quixote picked up his sword and waved it about.

"Sire, sire..." Sancho dismounted his donkey and attempted to calm down his boss.

"Prepare my steed, Sancho! We are going to help this poor prince!"

Grand was positively glowing now, witnessing the scene unfold, while Rusty wandered off and was staring up at the nearest windmill, calculating if it was worth the risk to catch one of the blades and ride it all the way up.

"That is not all, oh sage wondrous knight! Your Lady Dulcinea!" He turned his head and whispered loudly to Grand, "did I get that right?"

Grand unfroze and nodded. He still couldn't speak, he was having a great time watching it, though.

"Oh Lord! Dulcinea! My princess Dulcinea! What happened to her? What do you know about it, tell me, I implore you, Prince Peter!"

"She was captured by an evil count and he is holding her locked up in his castle." Peacock mimed to Grand to start the page, and Grand obediently traced it in the dusty road, waving for Rusty to come back. Rusty has decided to try his luck,

grabbed a blade and with a cry of glee rode it all the way up, where the blade stopped at the lack of strong wind.

"Rusty, you idiot!" Grand was beyond himself. "Get down! We're leaving any moment!"

"I can't!" Shouted Rusty, clinging to the trestle of the blade for dear life.

"Think about Bells!"

Rusty looked down at the ground, far below, then at his friends and shook his head.

"We'll get him later." Said Peacock.

"We'll get you later! Stay where you are!"

"The giants! The giants got your friend!" Don Quixote was enraged and ready to attack the windmills.

"It's okay, oh chivalrous Don Quixote. Our friend will manage. We must save Dulcinea! He has bewitched her! He has changed her looks! Oh, you must help her! You must help her!" Peacock motioned to Grand. Grand took the knight's hand, lifted the patch of the road that turned into a page of the book and as they were falling in, several cries could be heard.

Grand cried, "Why did you get excited all of a sudden?"

Peacock cried, "One, we didn't have to break the door, we could just jump in the same book a page earlier or a page later! Two, we only needed to bring someone in from another story and

then the Dracula story would change into something else and I bet he'd turn into a bat and we could rescue Bells easily!"

Sancho cried, "Sire! Oh, sire! Where are you going? Why are you leaving me, your faithful squire? What have I done?"

Peacock cried, "Traitors! You could've waited for me, you know!" And then he added under his breath. "Great." He was sitting on a blade on top of a windmill and his only solace was that it was hot and he might as well enjoy it while it lasted.

Chapter 24. The Poor Student

Don Quixote crashed loudly on the stone pavement of the court in front of Castle Dracula. After him Peacock and Grand dropped on their behinds and yowled. It was midnight. The massive oak doors appeared locked, a pack of wolves howled hungrily not too far away from the gates, and a chilly wind cut through their clothes, whispering something. Above them, from one of the windows high up on the castle, so high, it almost touched the starry sky, a figure in black with a flapping cape behind it was crawling down the wall like a lizard, grew wings and took off to the moon as a giant bat.

"There he goes on a hunt." Said Grand with his usual calm. "He will hunt innocents all night and drink their blood and return in the morning."

"Let's hope he didn't feed on Bells already." Said Peacock.

Don Quixote in the meantime was strangely quiet. He did something bizarre. He took off his helmet, bent his head low and made a strange movement with his right leg, sticking it out back then falling to one knee.

"Oh, beautiful maidens!" He dropped the helmet altogether and now stretched out his arms to three figures that appeared

out of thin air. "How fair is your skin! How precious your faces, your lips so red, they put sunset to shame. Oh, let me behold you with my tired eyes and feast on your beauty. I am your humble servant, the revered knight Don Quixote of La Mancha."

"Oh no." Grand has gone cold.

"Who are they?" Asked Peacock. He didn't have a good feeling about this.

"The Brides of Dracula." Whispered Grand, his face and lips blue from terror. "They feed on children and infants."

"I suppose I'm glad I'm not a baby anymore? What page did you get us on, Grand?" Peacock couldn't say anything else. He fell under their spell like Grand and Don Quixote.

What was a mere apparition materialized into three dark-haired women in white bride's dresses, their skin translucent, almost bluish, their lips red with blood, their eyes shining with evil hunger. Moonlight gave their features a sharp sinister look, and there was no shadow on the ground where they stood.

"You can take that one." Pointed one of them at Grand. "He is young and juicy. Kiss him."

"I shall." Said her sister and took a step to Grand.

Grand obediently rose to his feet and trotted to her, stretching out his neck.

Peacock wanted to yell, "No! Don't!" His lips wouldn't move. The other sister stared at him with her cold eyes and he wanted nothing more but to let her kiss him.

The third one strolled to Don Quixote whose shocks of hair stood out on his elderly scalp in the moonlight like tufts of white fluff. His face servile, he offered her his neck, and she fell on him, hissing and gurgling in the ecstasy of feeding.

The boys would've fallen victim to the other Brides too, if not for Bells.

"Peacock! Grand! Get out of here, you idiots!" She shouted from the window. "Do I always have to save you? Couldn't you think of the worst page to land on? Who's the genius?"

"Grand." Said Peacock automatically.

"Grand, you dolt!" She shouted as loud as she could, a good three stories above them. "Look at me!"

"Huh?" He woke from his slumber. The two sisters who weren't feeding yet threw up their heads and hissed at Bells.

"Where is Rusty?"

"In Don Quixote."

"I see you brought the poor knight here instead of Rusty? Is that your idea of rescuing me? Smart. Go get him and come back!"

"Huh?" Grand's head reeled. The sister's charm took hold of him again. Peacock shook it off, jumped to him and tugged on his arm.

"If you're worried whether or not I'm a vampire yet, quit it. I'm not, but I will suck out your blood just the same if you won't get out of here now!"

The sisters converged on the boys, their sweet cloying breath muddling their heads.

"There!" Screamed Bells. "On the ground right next to you! Peel it! Go! I'm okay! I will wait! You must do what I say, or I will call you both cowardly pissants very loud every time I see you at school! I have no qualms about that!"

No boy wants to be called a cowardly pissant in front of his friends. That simply wouldn't do.

Grand pushed the sisters away, leaned to the ground and lifted the page just as Peacock stumbled into the hole and in a moment they found themselves on the scorching plain of La Mancha again staring at Rusty clambering down the windmill blade and Sancho pleading with him to take him as a squire.

"There you are!" Called Rusty, shaking off the dust from his jeans. "I thought you left me for good."

"How could we?" Said Peacock, basking in the sunlight, still in shock at narrowly escaping the vicious vampire sisters and blinking at the bright sun. Night, day, day, night. Times and

days mixed up in his head and he no longer knew what month it was and could hardly remember how this whole adventure started.

"We need to get back, to get Bells." He said.

"Obviously." Said Rusty. "Although I rather like it here. It's warm, for once. No crazy chases or anything and my clothes are almost fully dry." He sniffled.

"Oh, dearest prince!" Sancho fell to Rusty's knees and hugged his legs, making Rusty quite embarrassed and red in the face. "Please do not leave your faithful squire. Please take me with you. What will an old man like me do, without a knight to serve?"

"Oh God." Said Rusty. "I've been dealing with him since you guys left. Help me now. Where is Don Quixote?"

"Um." Said Peacock, stealing a glance at Grand.

"I think Don Quixote is not a Don Quixote anymore. He might be more appropriately called Count Quixote or something."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he got bitten by a vampire bride." Said Peacock uneasily.

"What?" Comprehension downed on his face and he jumped, startling Sancho. "Are you saying I'm not the only one screwing up things? Yes! Yes!" He punched the sky several times until the silence around him made him stop. "Okay. Okay. I'm done. I'm done, okay? What now?"

"We go back and retrieve Bells and get out of here." Said Peacock.

"No! I want to stay! This is great! Why do we need to get back?"

"I miss my mom. And my brothers." Said Grand.

"Well, you can go. I will stay!"

"What is that on your face?" Asked Peacock suddenly.

"What?" Rusty felt it. And there, above his boyish lip, was a smattering of grey hair, and feeble mustache breaking through.

"What the—" He looked at his friends with frightened eyes.

"I think you're changing." Said Peacock. "I think maybe the book is changing you, because you stayed in place of Don Quixote, so maybe it is changing you into—"

"No! I don't want that! No! No! Let's go home! Let's go! I'm game!" He became very agitated and tried to rub off the mustache from his face. It wouldn't disappear.

"I think it's time we went." Ventured Grand. "I think Bells is waiting." He cautiously felt his face and looked over himself, as did Peacock. Wordlessly they looked at each other, wondering the same thing.

If they stayed here any longer, who would they become?

"Let's go to the same page we went the first time. Do you remember it, Rusty?" Said Peacock.

"Don't leave me! Don't leave me!" Sancho stood on his knees, wailing.

"I'm sorry, Sancho, I really am." Sighed Rusty, scratched a corner and a number and as he lifted the page, they all tumbled in, leaving Sancho alone.

When they stood up and looked around, expecting to see the long dark corridor of Castle Dracula with heavy gilded paintings hanging on the walls, they instead found themselves standing on a quiet city street gilded with evening sun, by the elder-tree under which sat a young man, a college student judging by his tattered looks, and three yellow-green snakes slithered around his shoulders, shaking their tiny heads at him and whispering.

"Anselmus. Anselmus. Look in our eyes, Anselmus." Their eyes were dark-blue and pretty and so unlike the eyes of snakes. Those were the eyes of three sisters.

"Looks like the story has changed while we were gone." Said Peacock.

"Who are these?" Asked Rusty.

"They were the Brides of Dracula the last time we were here." Said Grand. "Now they seem to have become snakes and poor Don Quixote looks younger and not himself at all."

Anselmus' eyes full of sadness strolled up and down the elder tree where in the greenery of the leaves the green snakes disappeared. He hugged the trunk and kept repeating, "Oh

beautiful shine! Oh pretty glitter! Talk to me again! I will die, if you won't. I will die!"

A small crowd started forming in the street, watching these antics. They looked like peasants and merchants and bakers dressed in the typical nineteenth century clothes. One of them, a stout middle-aged woman with a no-nonsense attitude, walked off to her stand, came back with a bucket of water and dumped it on Anselmus.

Startled, he jumped and ran off along the street, the boys after him, gasping to each other on the run.

"Where are we running?" Asked Rusty.

"I don't know. Looking for Bells?" Said Peacock.

"We'll never find her here." Wheezed Grand. "This is a different book now. She must have turned into something else. Maybe she is now an old ugly witch. We will never recognize her. She must have grown a long nose with ten warts on it and—"

"Will you stop?" Said Peacock.

Anselmus jumped into a gondola on the river. There already sat a respectfully dressed family consisting of a man, a woman, and their young beautiful daughter. The gondolier pushed the boat off the bank.

"Well, this is interesting. What do we do now?" Said Peacock.

"What are we in?" Asked Rusty.

"I have no idea." Said Grand. "Bells would've known."

Disappointed, they got back to street and back to the elder-tree, under which they sat, contemplating what to do next, when the gold-green snakes began singing in their crystal voices from above.

"Did you hear that? Listen! Listen!" Rusty pressed a finger to his lips, and they listened.

"Come after us." Sang the snakes. "We will show you the way."

The boys, encouraged, got to their feet and followed the snakes slithering through the grass along the road until they stood in front of a neat looking house with a big porch and a long calling cord hanging by the door.

Rusty bravely reached for it. The cord coiled and snapped at him. It became a serpent, and the knocker on the door blinked at them with the face of an ugly old woman. "Into the crystal you will all go! Into the crystal!" She screeched.

Rusty jerked his hand back with a cry.

The door opened and there stood an old studious man, a professor by the look of him, crooked and dressed in collegiate robes.

"Can I help you?" He asked.

"We're looking for Bells." Said Rusty, before either Grand or Peacock could stop him.

"For whom?" He repeated. His eyes glistened, and Peacock had a feeling that he knew exactly whom they were talking about.

"It's Dracula!" He shouted. Pushed the feeble man aside so that he collapsed on the porch and rushed in, Rusty and Grand on his heels.

"How do you know?" Rusty was running behind him.

"I don't know, I felt it. Bells is here somewhere. This is Castle Dracula, or what became of it."

They raced through the entry hall and barged through the doors into what looked like a greenhouse, a vast hall with every surface on the wall sprouting and growing and whispering and rustling, wild plants and flowers the names of which they didn't know. Even the ceiling was green, overgrown with some vine. Here and there stood giant palms with thick emerald leaves hanging over them, and the odor was overly sweet and pungent, hitting the boys' noses. Birds of all kinds twittered and chattered and started mocking them.

"Run, run, friends!"

"You won't want to be late!"

"She'll get in the crystal, she will!"

For a moment Peacock's heart dropped. They kept running, but the hall didn't even think about ending. It expanded into alleyways and paths and with every turn some new wondrous plant was in their way or some bird attempted to peck at their heads,

screeching. They crashed through a tangle of lilies and behind them found Bells sitting by a golden pot.

"Finally." She scoffed. "I thought you'd never show up." She hopped off the chair and gave them each a hug. "Thanks for bringing that poor knight here, he changed Dracula into The Golden Pot, and it was easier for me to battle off the old Archivarius than that stuck up count. So stingy. He wouldn't let me get out of the room."

"You're alive!" Rusty was the first to unfreeze.

"He didn't turn you into a vampire, did he?" Asked Peacock cautiously.

"Does it look like it? I can bite you, if you want. I don't need to be a vampire for that."

"What is The Golden Pot?" Asked Grand.

"I'll tell you on our way. I've been thinking about this a lot, on where we should go next and what we should do."

"Bells?" Said Peacock uneasily.

"What?"

"What happened to your eyes?"

"What happened to them?"

"They're yellow! Your eyes are yellow!" Rusty said excitedly. "Do vampires have yellow eyes?"

"What?" Bells touched her face, horrified.

Just then there was some sort of a commotion heard and a moment later a giant flaming salamander—it really was aflame, licked by tongues of blue and green fire—burst through the greenery and charged at them with a terrible cry.

The kids screamed and bolted through the greenhouse without a sense of direction, bumping into palms, overturning pots of flowers, brushing off chattering birds and one big grey parrot that kept screeching insults at them, until they by some miracle have found the door out, burst through it, and continued to race down the street until they stumbled into a quiet corner between two houses in a dead end and dropped to the ground, panting.

“What was that?” Said Rusty.

“That was the Archivarius.” Bells kept touching her face. She still couldn’t quite understand why or how her eyes have turned yellow.

“The what?” Said Peacock, eyeing the street with suspicion. Nobody followed them. A few raggedy boys played with sticks and stones in the dirt. Respectably dressed couples meandered about for an evening stroll. Calls of gondoliers echoed from the river. All was peaceful.

“The Archivarius. It’s this guy in The Golden Pot—the book we’re in—written by E.T.A. Hoffmann. It’s about student Anselmus who falls in love with Serpentina, one of his daughters, a snake. He, Archivarius, is her father, but he is really a

flaming salamander. And their mother is a snake that was born inside the fire-lily and he had to fight off a black Dragon to marry her. Or something. I can't remember exactly." She was rattling all of this with incredible speed, trying to fill up her mind with the story instead of with the thoughts of her eyes being yellow.

"That sounds cool. I want to read that!"

"What's that on your face?" Bells exclaimed. And her fear solidified itself into a stone that dropped in her stomach.

"What's what?" Asked Rusty, fingering his lip.

"He might be turning into Don Quixote." Said Peacock. "That is my theory, anyway. Do I look okay? Do you guys see anything new on my face or..." He trailed off, nervous.

"Nothing." Said Grand, red from running. "I think that Rusty is not turning into Don Quixote though."

"What is he turning into?"

"I think he is turning into a monkey."

"What?" Rusty jumped up. "Monkey? What monkey? Why monkey? I don't want to be a monkey!"

Bells looked at his back, then looked at Peacock, who looked at Grand who heaved a deep sigh. At the back of Rusty's pants a long monkey's tail began to sprout. And the mustache on his face started looking like fur and crawled up his cheeks and to his forehead.

Bells felt her throat spasm. "Wait. Does this mean..."

"Those characters, the characters we dragged from book to book..." Said Peacock.

"The longer we stay here..." Said Grand.

They finished each other's thoughts without saying them aloud.

"I don't want to be a monkey!" Rusty danced on the spot, hysterical. "I don't want to be a monkey!" His cries started drawing attention. Then the ground under his feet lifted and he rolled off the bulging spot, shrieking from surprise.

Now all of them stood and watched with horrified fascination how it peeled up like a page of a book and from under it clambered out Pippi Longstalking, her face smeared with hot chocolate and looking upset. She pulled herself up, brushed off her stockings, and glared at Bells, then at Rusty.

"Hey, you!" She stabbed finger at him. "Where is Mr. Nilsson? Where is my monkey? You took him with you, didn't you?" She marched up to Rusty and peered at his face and suddenly started laughing. "What's that on your forehead? Fur?" She laughed more, holding on to her stomach.

"This is not good." Mumbled Grand. "Not good at all. What if all of them decide to show up?"

"So it's not just us who can turn the pages, the characters in the books can turn the pages too?" Asked Bells nobody in particular.

"Seems like it." Said Peacock.

"Are my eyes yellow?" She asked them.

"Yeah." Said Peacock.

"Yeah." Echoed Grand.

"Why?" Bells kneaded her cheeks, touched her ears, in case anything else was out of order.

"I think I know..." Said Grand slowly.

"What is it?"

"Well, if Rusty took the monkey from Pippi's book and is now turning into a monkey because that monkey turned into something else, and he is replacing it, then that means..."

"You're turning into a bird. That giant bird, Roc."

Finished Peacock for him.

"What?" Bells gasped. "No! We need to fix this!"

"And we need to get home!" Yelled Rusty, who was now evading Pippi. She chased him in circles, threatening to tickle him until he gives her Mr. Nilsson back.

"Okay, it's decided then. Let's go." Said Bells. She began looking around for a suitable corner when another patch of the road lifted and our scrambled a gigantic chick, pecking with his giant beak at the road and shifting his round yellow eyes

around, until it spotted Bells. With a screech of triumph it nodded to the other two Roc chicks making their way out and launched itself at Bells.

All four of them sprinted away, trying to hold together, watching with horror parts of the road curling back like pages of the book and characters pulling themselves out of the holes.

"She almost took Morten with her! My goose!" Screamed Nils, the little boy not more than a foot tall.

"Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" Brayed a grey donkey. "Sire! Sire! They took my sire!" Cried Sancho riding on the donkey's back.

Then came the worst of it. A huge slab of the city rose and fell with a thundering crash. From the gaping crater of it sprung up several metallic machines, hooded heads on three long legs, and aimed their laser eyes at the running kids.

"The Martians! They will blast us!" Cried Peacock. They hurtled themselves forward.

"I can't—" Wheezed Grand. "I can't run anymore." And he collapsed. He looked thinner and taller somehow, and the top part of his head was beginning to lose hair. He was turning into Don Quixote.

Peacock looked up at the machines converging at them, looked down at his fallen friend and Bells and Rusty trying to get him up, then looked at his arms. They were covered with silver, as if the skin became metallic. He felt incredible

strength surge through him and in the matter of seconds cut with his fingers hard as steel a corner, drew a number, scooped up his friends and slid through the hole into yet another book, the book he didn't know he knew about. The last thing he saw was the grey sky erupting into rain and a strolling couple opening up an umbrella over their heads.

"Umbrella," mumbled Peacock and felt air blow under his feet.

Chapter 25. The Flying Umbrella

What it was Peacock was holding on, he couldn't quite understand at first. It felt like someone's ankle, and it felt like that ankle wasn't happy about it, trying to shake him off. The curious part of this was, somebody else was holding on to his ankle in turn, and when he looked down, he saw it was Grand, soaring through the air above a foggy town. Rusty held on to Grand's ankle, and Bells held on to Rusty's. In this odd chain they flew through the haze of clouds. Peacock craned his neck. Above him were numerous skirts, and above that a stern face of a woman looking at him, and over her an open black umbrella.

"Mary Poppins." Peacock smiled despite himself. He forgot about this book. It must've been the umbrella that reminded him.

Mary Poppins smirked disapprovingly and, seeing that it was no use trying to shake off Peacock whose clutch was as strong as steel, flew on, carried by the wind into London, over tile roofs and into Cherry-tree lane.

"Peacock!" Came a cry from below.

Peacock looked down.

"Peacock! I can't hold on anymore! I will fall any moment!" Grand, despite his looking thinner, was also suddenly older,

like a grown man who is rapidly aging. His clutch was weak, and from below him Peacock could hear the cries of Rusty and Bells.

"Hold on!" He yelled and, to his astonishment, extended his right arm down all the way to Bells and pulled them all up to his level with no effort at all. He circled them with his arm and held them close and they said, "Wow!" all at once and couldn't say anything else, staring at his transformation.

Mary Poppins looked them over, made another scoffing noise and began descending until she landed in front of a small house at the end of the Lane and watched Peacock, Grad, Rusty and Bells plop to the ground and roll and get up, straightening themselves. They stood glaring at each other, a row of ruffled kids and a very haughty nanny. She folded her umbrella and proceeded to scold them.

"Oh, I see. You came to tarnish my book."

The wind rustled and whined through the naked tree branches as if saying goodbye, and Bells could see a couple kids peering down from the second floor window.

"Mary Poppins? Is this really you?" Said Bells.

"Mary Poppins! Mary Poppins! Wow!" Rusty jumped up and down like a monkey. This thought struck him. He felt his face, stopped, and hid behind Grand who now resembled a young Don Quixote without the armor.

"What do you mean, we came to tarnish your book?" Asked Peacock.

Her stare made him want to explain himself.

"We needed to get out of that other story because the characters came after us and—"

"And whose fault is that?" Said Mary Poppins sternly.

"I suppose it is ours."

"Quite." Said Mary Poppins.

"But how do you know this?" Asked Bells, suspicious of something. Mary Poppins confirmed her suspicions.

"The geese told me."

"The geese from The Wonderful Adventures of Nils?"

"Precisely. I was flying on the North wind, minding my own business, and here they come squawking at me. You know how unsettling it is to try to hold on to an umbrella high up in the sky and talk to upset geese that are ready to snip at you, they're so angry?"

"No, I guess I don't." Said Bells.

The boys shook their heads.

"Well, I won't have it." Said Mary Poppins and glanced at the door. Any moment Mr. Banks would get out to go to work and both him and Mrs. Banks would see her standing there talking to four disobedient children. That is not something Mary Poppins

wanted them to see, especially not on her first workday, as she intended to accept the position.

"Kindly get out of this book and don't come back. I don't want you to cause all kinds of havoc."

"But Mary Poppins, we only just got here. We'd like to sit down and rest and—"

Mary Poppins measured Bells with such a look of disdain that Bells didn't dare to contradict. Here she was facing an opponent worthy of her own temper. No, an opponent much stronger than her. There was no use arguing or trying to win her over. That much she knew. She glanced at her friends. They shared a moment of disappointment. Here was a quiet London lane with a quaint little house where they could make friends with Michael and Jane, and now they had to disappear again. Where? Where else could they go? How much longer before they lost themselves and turned into a pet monkey, a Roc bird, Don Quixote and a Martian? How could they get back home that seemed millions of years and miles away?

They slumped at these thoughts and noticed Mary Poppins holding up a slide of turf, neatly cut off the ground in the shape of a corner.

"Now." She said with such conviction, that the children trotted into the hole and fell forward head-first until they found themselves in a meadow of red flowers.

Chapter 26. The Murderous Meadow

The boys looked around dazedly. None of them made a motion to stand up, only Bells jumped to her feet, alarmed. She leaned over the flower nearest her, gasped, and pinched her nose. The flower innocently nodded its scarlet head and looked at her with its black fuzzy eye. She thought it blinked, fully aware of the mischief it was going to cause them. It smelled spicy and sharp. Bells turned around, staring at the boys with her yellow eyes.

"She played a joke on us." She said. It sounded funny, with her nose pinched.

"Who?" Asked Peacock, yawning.

"Mary Poppins!"

Grand and Rusty didn't ask anything at all, both curled up in the midst of the flowers. Rusty's head that looked more and more like a monkey's rested on Grand's stomach that wasn't flabby anymore. They could pass for a traveling wrangler and his pet taking a peaceful nap.

"Peacock! Are you listening?"

"Huh?"

"Poppins! Get it?" Said Bells fiercely, fighting her own yawn. "Poppins? Poppies?" She pointed to the flowers, a red sea

around them with not a break in sight. Only far away, where the sun was glowing, could she see faint green glow.

"Where are we?" Mumbled Peacock and closed his eyes.

"I think we're in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, right in the middle of a deadly poppy field." Bells' eyes watered from holding her nose pinched. She let it go, took a deep breath, slumped and let her head fall into the soft tangle of poppy petals that stroked her cheeks like sheets. Silky sheets of a comfortable bed. Smooth and warm and welcoming. Bells tried to think of something to keep herself awake, tried to pinch herself, but her arms wouldn't move and her head felt so heavy that whatever remained of her thoughts drifted off into a sleepy haze.

Someone grabbed her ankles with cold metal hands. Someone else pulled her up by the arms, and with creaking and screeching she felt herself being carried somewhere. Her eyelids glued together and she couldn't pry them open to see who was carrying her and where. Soon she felt being put on the ground again, not tossed like a wet sack of potatoes, but placed gently. Cold breeze reached her nostrils, a bit stale smelling and a bit sludgy and slimy. What it was, Bells couldn't tell. She breathed and breathed and noticed the absence of the sharp poppy scent and opened her eyes.

Footsteps trotted right next to her, and she saw a tall man build entirely of tin and a short round fellow with a sack-head stuffed with straw and dressed in an old faded blue suit placing Peacock on the ground next to Grand and Rusty who were stirring, rubbing their faces and gazing around.

"Tin Woodman!" Cried Bells. "Scarecrow!"

They jumped from surprise and turned to look at her and Scarecrow winked and did a quick bow and said, "Good day to you."

"Good day," echoed Bells. She stared past Scarecrow at her friends who figured out where they were and what happened to them, pulling themselves upright. They were on the shore of a slow lazy river, a few steps away from the edge of the poppy field that stretched to horizon.

"Who are you?" Said the Scarecrow.

"I'm Bells," said Bells, "and these are my friends Peacock, Grand and Rusty."

"Oh, how delightful." Dorothy walked up to them. Behind her ambled a huge lion that for a second gave Bells and the boys the scare of their lives. "Toto, look, we have new friends."

Toto ran up to Bells barking, then he started sniffing her palms and finally licked them.

"Where are you going?" Asked Dorothy.

Bells looked at the boys. Where were they going? They had no idea.

"Home." Said Bells.

"Where is that?" Asked Dorothy.

"It's...far away from here."

"My home is far away too." Said Dorothy sadly. "Perhaps you would like to join us and go the City of Emeralds? There lives a great Wizard. I'm sure you can ask him for anything and he will help."

"I'm sure he will," said Bells, catching Peacock's anxious look over her shoulder. She twisted around and saw the most curious sight.

The poppy field was lifting. It stood up in a scarlet page, blocking the sky, and from underneath it they could hear the rumble of machines. They didn't need to see to know what they were, and Peacock knew it better than any of them. Grand was hugging Rusty who trembled, watching with horror how the green glow got overpowered with an acid light seeping from under the page. The laser beams searching for them, together with the other book characters looking for their misplaced friends.

"It was so great to meet you, Dorothy, and you, Lion. And you, Woodman, and Scarecrow, and Toto, but I'm afraid we must go." Bells' heart shrunk at the thought of what the Martians

would do to the land of Oz and if they would mistake Dorothy and her friends for Bells and her friends from this far away.

"Your hair." Whispered Peacock.

"What's wrong with my hair?" Bells touched her head and froze. In place of her pony tail she felt feathers. And her back itched, making her think that soon she'd grow wings.

"Guys?" Rusty pointed up.

"Oh my." Proclaimed Dorothy. Toto barked and the Lion bristled and roared, curling his tail in fear.

The poppy field thundered down and from the cloud of dust emerged three gigantic tripods, their heads swiveling around in search of their target. They saw Peacock and paused. Peacock's whole skin has turned metallic and he could extend his arms or legs like telescopes, which he presently did, scooping up his friends and sprinting off along the river, out of sight of these terrible machines.

"Wow, Peacock! You're strong!" Cried Rusty. "I wish I was the one to think to bring the Martian into Winnie-the-Pooh!"

"No, you don't." Panted Peacock.

"Yeah, you so lucky." Whined Grand. "Look at me, I'm turning into an old man. Why couldn't I be a cool alien? I always get the worst—"

"Hey, that's not what we need to talk about now! We need to decide where to go!" Bells bobbed up and down in Peacock's left arm.

"I don't know!" He said. "I can't think of a book that doesn't have some danger in it. Grand?"

"You guys don't like the books I like, so why are you asking me?" Grand felt awkward in Peacock's tight hold, pressed together with Rusty.

"Rusty?"

"What, me? Me again? You want to hear my ideas?" Rusty grinned and swung his curly monkey tail back and forth. He quite enjoyed this ride. "I know a place where they won't find us."

"What is it?" Peacock ran faster. The machines were gaining on them, their metal feet clacking on the yellow road.

"It doesn't matter where we go!" Screamed Bells. "If we don't go now, they'll destroy Oz and us with it!"

"Okay, fine! Rusty!" Peacock dropped them, scraped out the page in the dirt. "Can you think of something where they can't chase us easily?"

Rusty's face lit up. "I know! I know! Twenty--"

The air behind them boomed. The earth shook. Shouting in the rain of dirt and grit, Peacock rushed Rusty to scribble a page number, any page number, and as Rusty pulled it open, they were drowning into something cold and salty and wet.

Chapter 27. The Giant Squid

Liquid darkness enveloped them. It pressed on their ears and their heads and their bodies. Peacock tried to draw a breath and did it with great difficulty. His lips were wrapped around some tube, and his head was enclosed in a glass bowl, or it felt like glass bowl. He looked down at himself. His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he saw that he was wearing a space suit. No, an ancient diving suit looking like a space suit. Then a gloved fist knocked on his helmet window.

"What?" Said Peacock, and could barely hear himself.

Bells slowly waved her arms about, half-standing, half-floating in front of him in an identical suit, bubbles issuing from her helmet. Grand and Rusty floated up to them. Peacock could only tell them apart by their size. Grand's face appeared grim behind the glass. Rusty, on the other side, was exuberant. He slapped Peacock's shoulder and swung his arms around and almost jumped, very much like a monkey.

"We're here, we're here!" He said. "We're in the Twenty Thousand leagues under the Sea!"

None of his friends shared his enthusiasm. They couldn't hear him. They were perplexed by this place, frightened that

something might happen and they might die from lack of oxygen, and gazing around awkwardly to see if anyone was following them here. There wasn't a sign of anything, and they relaxed enough to notice they were in an underwater forest floating full of all kinds of algae and water plants. Small fish bustled in and out of shadows, and beyond that large shapes inflated and deflated in a series of unsettling undulating movements.

None of them could talk to each other, so they only stared, miming what they saw.

Above them floated a dozen of enormous squid. Their tube-like bodies inhaled water and pushed it out. This straightened their tentacles and propelled them forward. It was fascinating to watch. If not for the water, they could be strange pale birds inflating and deflating in the sky.

As Bells and the boys were contemplating what to do next, an elongated fish appeared from the murk somewhere far off. It drew closer, and they saw that it wasn't a fish at all but a submarine with a huge propeller and round windows and powerful search lights that sent beams of yellow glare right at the squid.

The squid panicked, squirted clouds of black ink and one of them, opening its tentacles wide, snatched the propeller and got stuck to it. It tried to rotate with a straightened mechanical whine that the kids could hear even through their helmets, and

finally stopped. The submarine began to sink, together with the squid.

What they perceived as large upon closer inspection turned out to be bigger than the biggest whale any of them saw. The squid was monstrous, and it could easily crush the submarine, squeezing it like a ripe banana.

Peacock pulled on Bells and Grand and Rusty, awkwardly moving about in his diving suit, its thick gloves making him uncoordinated and clumsy. He could use none of his newly acquired Martian strength here.

There was a loud thump and the submarine landed on the sea floor. A hatch opened in its belly and several men in identical diving suits waded out, wielding axes at the squid. It was terrible watching them trying to fight it off, almost without any noise, with fluid movements that appeared to be like a movie in slow motion. The squid fought back. It trembled, jerked under the blows, caught one of the men and crushed it into pulp, letting the dead shape float off.

Bells covered her face.

Rusty pointed excitedly.

Grand stood, watching it, spellbound. He has witnessed a death, right here, in front of him, and it didn't make him fear it less, like he thought it would, it made him fear it more. It made him feel disgusted. And it made him feel pity and shame,

pity for the man who just died, and shame for his own morbid desire to watch an execution.

He took an uncertain step back and bumped into Peacock who was shouting something behind his helmet window, thrusting his arm away from the squid fight, into the opposite direction of the underwater forest.

They all turned to look, and there, in the feeble light of the submarine, they saw a very peculiar looking procession of a donkey in a diving suit, Sancho on top of him, in a diving suit, Pippi in the diving suit, Nils in a miniature diving suit, next to him Morten the goose in a specially designed diving suit, and behind them the three Roc chicks, in the diving suits, and, of course, the Martians. Without the diving suits.

The procession neared them with a slow but steady determination, and our friends looked at each other, horrified, thinking the same thing.

They found us, was written in their faces.

They will find us no matter where we go, was spelled in their eyes.

The only way we can escape them is if we find a way to get somewhere where they can't get, they mouthed soundlessly.

This was when the most important idea of this journey has struck Peacock. In fact, an idea even more important than this one has already struck him before, something he didn't realize

and will come back to later. So we can say this was the second important idea. And that idea was this.

"The page number!" Was screaming Peacock inside his helmet, his heart racing.

"What?" Said Bells.

"What?" Said Grand and Rusty.

Peacock made a few grunting noises that were supposed to indicate his distress. "We can pick out any page number, right? Any page number we want?"

"What?" Said his friends.

"If we pick a page to go to—the page before the page where we pulled someone out of the book, we would go to a place where everything is as it was before, right?"

"What?" They said.

The giant squid continued fighting the men in the diving suits, and the submarine continued illuminating the slow progress of the strange delegation of the characters pushed forward by the Martian machines that had no problem moving underwater with the same speed they moved above it, which meant that they only moved slow out of solidarity with other enraged parties.

"Well," Peacock took a deep breath. His face grew hot. There wasn't much oxygen left and every breath hurt. But he had to talk through it, he had to, to see if it made sense before

they tried it. "If we can go to any page and it would put us in any place of the story, then doesn't this mean we could go between pages too?"

The idea seemed ludicrous to him as soon as he said it.

Unfortunately, his friends couldn't give him their usual feedback, so, once again, they said, "What?"

Peacock waved his arm, floated to the sand on the ocean floor and with care drew a corner and a number, which started disintegrating as soon as he drew them.

"Cantankerous carnations!" He swore and swirled around in search of something that would hold the drawing. There was a stone overgrown with some green slime. Peacock beckoned to his friends and together they saw him draw a corner—which wasn't strange at all in this part of the story—but the next thing he drew was very strange indeed. He drew a half number.

Not ninety five.

Not ninety six.

No.

He drew ninety five and a half.

They had barely enough time to escape their pursuers, and, crawling slowly one by one into the darkness beyond, they were pleasantly surprised that it was light there, where they landed, and warm and soft, and, the strangest part of all, it wasn't like anything they saw before. It was nothing. It looked and

felt and smelled like nothing. Nothing at all. Well, maybe it did smell like something. It faintly smelled of ink and paper.

Chapter 28. Between The Pages

A thin membrane though which Bells and the boys could see like though a slightly foggy window stood on one side of a narrow space. On the other side an identical membrane offered them a different view. Both of them were so startling, that at first none of them could speak, feeling for their heads to make sure that the diving suits were gone and they could really breathe. They stood and stared at each other, neither able to say anything.

Rusty was the first to break the silence. "Peacock?" He said. "You're a genius." He waved his monkey tail for emphasis.

"Yeah, Peacock." Said Grand in his adult voice. "Rusty is right."

"So simple." Said Bells. "How did I not think of that?"

"You don't have to think about everything all the time, you know?" Said Peacock. "That's what friends are for."

"How did you come up with this?" She asked.

"Guys, guys! Look!"

Rusty was pointing into the membrane on their left. Beyond it, slightly fuzzy but still visible, lay a bizarre land the color of purple and orange-brown and pink. A small boy, perhaps

like one of them, was running along the plain, hopping from rock to rock, and behind him, whistling to him like to a dog, walked a blue giant with red round eyes. He had no hair on his head and he wore no clothes. Or he did wear clothes, but they were blue, so blue that that they blended with his skin.

"What is this? Where are we?" Asked Bells, and before Peacock could say anything, blurted, "We're between pages, aren't we?"

"I think we're inside a page." Said Grand.

"Yes, that's what I think too." Said Peacock. "And that," he answered his friends' stares, "is Fantastic Planet by Stefan Wul."

"Fantastic Planet?" Bells stroked her feathers. "I've never heard of this book before."

"It's not just you who reads rare books." Said Peacock with a sly smile.

"I thought you only read comics?"

A shrill cry interrupted them. The blue man kneeled and played with the boy like with a toy. He picked him up and tossed him about and laughed at him when the boy tried to stand up.

"Why is he blue? Is he an alien? That's so cool!" Rusty pressed his monkey nose to the membrane, trying to see better.

"Not cool at all. Look what he's doing." Cried Bells. "Why is he doing this?" She asked Peacock.

"He is one of the traags, the race that lives on this planet. They transported the remaining humans from our planet to theirs and are using them as pets. I mean, that's in the future, of course, when we blew up Earth and almost everyone died."

"Cool!" Said Rusty.

Bells gave him the stare. "That's disgusting." She said. "And awful. And sad." She expected support from Grand, but he was glued to the other membrane, watching breathlessly what was happening there.

In the vast desert the dunes of sand moved and erupted and out slithered enormous worms, round and grisly and so long, they could be trains. It looked like they dove in and out of sand like out was water. The most peculiar part of it was that their heads opened into triangular mouths like flowers with three teeth-crowned petals, and Bells could see inside their cavernous throats. On top of them small people dressed in brown leather rode them like—

"They're riding them like horses? Giant worms?"

"That's Dune, another planet from another book also called Dune." Said Peacock, feeling rather proud of himself.

"I thought you read only comics?"

"This is a comic. I thought you thought comics are stupid?"

Bells didn't find anything to say, and Grand and Rusty and Peacock high fived each other, gleeful that at least for once their love for bizarre has won out.

Soon the novelty of the stories unfolding to either side of their strange in-between-the-pages space wore off. Nothing new was happening. Those were pages ninety five and ninety six in those books, and that is all they saw.

They sat down on the floor that felt like compacted paper and gazed from one end of the tunnel to the other, which Rusty has already explored. He ran all the way to the end where the membranes got closer to each other, to the point where the passage became so narrow, it was impassable. Rusty squeezed through as far as he could and stared ahead. All he saw was how the membranes merged into one. They were sitting inside the page as if it was hollow. Rusty ran to the other end, bypassing his friends.

"Same." He whispered and came back to them. "We're inside the page!" He announced.

"We kind of figured that out already." Said Peacock. His face was delighted. It appeared that in this in between place he stopped changing.

"My back doesn't itch anymore." Declared Bells, confirming his thoughts. "I think while we're here, we're like—"

"Frozen?" Offered Grand. He was overjoyed at his rather muscular body and yet burdened by the thought that he was a grown Spanish man who will start rapidly aging once they dropped into another book.

"Something like that. Rusty is right, you're a genius." Said Bells, looking at Peacock with admiration.

Peacock could blush all he wanted, because nobody saw his face glow red. It was silver and it stayed silver. His eyes shone bright green, and Bells got used to it, just like the boys got used to her piercing yellow stare and feathers instead of hair.

"All right." She said and folded her hands. "Let's plan this out."

The boys studied her. She had said it like their boss who demands attention.

"We can't stay here forever. We need to eat something, or we will die from hunger and thirst."

"We can go fetch food from other books!" Shouted Rusty. They all glared at him.

"Whatever. I'm just trying to help, that's all."

"I suppose we could do that," said Bells, "but think about it. Either all of us have to go and do that, and we face the risk of being pulverized by the Martians, or one or two of us go do that, but then they could get lost and we will get separated.

Then how are we going to find each other?" She looked them in the eyes. Nobody contradicted her.

"Besides, we need to figure out how to get home. I don't know about you, but I'm growing tired of these adventures and I don't like the idea of turning into a Roc bird permanently. I don't even know if when I do get home—if I'll ever get home—" she swallowed oncoming tears, "—if I'll stay this half-girl half-bird monstrosity forever."

"You're not a monstrosity!" Exclaimed Rusty, trying to smooth over his previous blunder. "I kind of like your yellow eyes. They fit your personality."

Bells glowered at him and then at the other boys. They worked really hard at suppressing their sniggers.

"Whatever." She stated, arms crossed. "If you don't want me to be the boss, you're welcome to appoint another boss. I think I would like it, for a change, to see how one of you does it, because trying to plan anything with you three is impossible."

She turned away and this time couldn't control the tears. They gushed and gushed and gushed, and she stood up and ran off into the narrow part of the cavern, sobbing over the image in her head of how she looked. Hideous, probably, with round yellow eyes and a sharp bird's nose and feathers! Feathers instead of hair! Bells never cared for looking pretty. And yet looking like a Roc bird caused her tremendous misery and torment. She knew

that her little sister Maria will laugh at her every day and that her mother would shake her head and be very disappointed, because now she wouldn't be able to make Bells into an actress or a singer. Who would want an actress that looks like this?

She sniffled, thinking these horrible depressing thoughts, when a hand patted her on the shoulder.

"Go away." She said, without looking. To the left of her several blue giants amused themselves by tossing around the little boy, and to the right wild-looking men in leather rode gigantic worms through the ocean of sand, so Bells looked at her feet. She didn't want to see either view. It didn't excite her anymore. She just wanted to be home, in her bed, with a pillow over her head so she could cry it out and feel better.

The hand persisted.

"Bells?" Said Peacock's voice.

"Leave me alone." She shrugged him off.

She heard conspiratorial whispers and swung around, mad.

"What? What do you want from me?"

"Hug?" Said Grand with such a stupid face, that she smiled and started laughing. They all started laughing. He looked ridiculous in this grown body of a man. Rusty looked ridiculous with half of his face covered with fur and a monkey's tail hanging over his jeans, and Peacock looked ridiculous with his

silver skin like someone dipped him in the bucket of metallic paint.

They pointed at each other and laughed and laughed and laughed until they had no air to breathe and collapsed on the ground and wiped their tears and sat up, breathing hard. It was a good break. It lifted their moods. And the ugly reality weighed heavily on them, intensified by the pitiful cries of the boy pet from the left and the horrible rustle of the worms on the right.

They were tired. They were thirsty. They were hungry. And they had absolutely no idea what to do next.

"We could go from page to page like this." Said Peacock, flexing his arms to see if they still telescoped. They did. He realized he would miss it.

"You mean, from the space between pages to another space between pages?" Said Bells.

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"If we stay here we will first become very weak from hunger, then we will become delirious from thirst, and then we will lose consciousness and..." Grand fell quiet, silenced by the usual stares. "I'm only stating the facts. Someone has to say it."

"I think we all know what will happen if we won't get out of here in time, thank you very much."

"Okay, what do you propose?"

"I don't know." Sighed Bells. "I would've already said something if I had the slightest idea."

They all turned to Peacock.

"What?" He moaned. "I'm out of ideas, okay."

"You saved us all from death, you know that?" Said Bells. "Thanks to your arms and legs and your strength. So thank you."

"Yeah." Said Grand. "Thank you."

"Yeah!" Picked up Rusty. "Thanks!"

"So what?" Bristled Peacock, embarrassed. "It's not helping us get out of here now, does it?"

"But you helped us escape the Martians!" Said Rusty.

"Aha." Peacock looked down. "And I was the one who brought them on our heads."

"But you didn't know, Peacock. None of us knew. Don't feel bad." Said Bells. "I brought in the Roc bird."

"I brought the monkey. Mr. Nilsson. Remember?"

"I brought it Don Quixote."

"All right. I get your point." Peacock silenced them. "What do we do now?"

"Look! Look!" Rusty yanked on Grand's sleeve.

They looked.

The blue giants with red eyes were in an uproar over why all of a sudden a stream of strangers invaded their planet. One of the Martians appeared to be communicating with them, while the others, together with Pippi and Sancho on top of his donkey and the three Roc chicks ran around in search of their lost companions.

Bells watched breathlessly as the Martians came so close to the membrane, their green glowing eyes seemed to be penetrating it, as if they saw everything that was happening behind it.

Bells stole a quick glance at the boys. They froze, mortified, watching the machines scour the surface of the membrane a breath away. After a while, they retreated, and after another disappeared from view behind a cluster of purple boulders.

Our friends didn't have enough time to catch their breath, when the same party appeared on the other side, in the desert, turning up every corner, spilling dust and sand everywhere. It was not until they were gone and Bells has found her voice that something strange occurred to her.

"Guys?" She called. "Why did you think the machines didn't kill off anyone? I mean, they didn't touch the blue giants, but they also didn't kill Pippi or Sancho or the birds. Isn't that strange?"

"It is strange." Peacock massaged his face.

"Maybe they don't want to kill us at all? What do you guys think?" Rusty was all excited again.

"I think," said Grand, waiting for attention to turn to him, "I think maybe they simply want us to return what we took without causing us any harm."

"Without causing us any harm?" Exploded Peacock. "You should've seen what they did to thousands of people in London! They fried them. It smelled like burned meat in the streets. I thought I was going to get sick, I thought I was going to be burned alive!"

"You never told us what happened." Interjected Bells. "What happened to you when you were there?"

"They captured me, that's what!"

"And what did they do to you?"

"Nothing!"

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"That's exactly what I mean, nothing." It only now dawned on Peacock that indeed none of the machines did anything to him. Everything that happened he did himself. They lifted him and were looking at him, puzzled. He didn't belong to the story. Terrified out of his mind, he freaked out. He thrashed and screamed and wriggled until they lowered him down and then he ran. They walked after him, so, without thinking much, he lifted a page to go to Winnie-the-Pooh and kicked the machine just

before he left, which prompted it to fall into the book after him. All this raced through Peacock's mind as his friends looked at him questioningly.

"My mom says, don't judge what others do until you know their motivations." Said Grand into silence. "What if they didn't mean us any harm? None of us? What if they simply want to talk? Couldn't we just talk to them?"

This was so simple and so profound, they all stared at Grand as if he was an apparition from another planet himself. Indeed, what if all they wanted was to talk?

They looked at each other.

"Is it worth the risk, you think?" Asked Bells Grand.

"What do we have to lose?" He shrugged. "If I had to choose between dying here and dying by being fried by a Martian, I think I'd rather be fried by a Martian."

"We would go up in flames, bam!" Rusty punched the air.

"So, you're suggesting we just get out there, wait for them to find us and then sit and see what will happen?"

"Something like that. We could, of course, offer them muffins or cupcakes or doughnuts, only we don't have any." Grand sniffled. He was hungry again.

And so it was decided. They huddled together, discussing what book they should drop into, where it would be comfortable

to meet with their adversaries who might not be adversaries at all.

Chapter 29. The Round Homes

They have decided that if they had to jump into one last book where they could die, it'd be *The Hobbit*. Every one of them wanted to see the round holes dug out in the grassy hillocks and fashioned into comfortable homes, to talk to hobbits and maybe even score a nice hobbit meal before their fate was decided. If they got lucky and remembered the right page number, they'd land there right after Bilbo left for his adventure with Gandalf and the band of dwarves, so they could sneak into his home and look around.

Peacock, Grand and Rusty lined up behind Bells who took it upon herself to guess the number and to scratch a corner in the paper-ground they were sitting on for the last couple hours.

"Ready?" She twisted around.

"Ready." Answered the boys in chorus, and in another moment they were dropping into lush summer and smells of sweet pollen and sounds of hobbits greeting each other and leisurely ambling about.

"We're here." Gasp'd Bells. "We're really here!" She talked in a loud whisper for some reason, perhaps because she felt like a burglar. After all, she and her friends were about to break

into Bilbo's house without his permission. At the same time, Bilbo was a burglar himself, so she was sure he'd understand. She looked around.

They couldn't have picked a better moment to get here. It was warm. It was sunny. It was a perfect summer morning—as perfect as any summer morning can get—a bit late for breakfast but early for lunch, judging by the shadows. Far off on the winding path between the knolls and along the round doors of the hobbit-holes a stout figure with a sack on its back hurried off and over the large hill and out of sight.

"That was Bilbo." Whispered Bells.

"That was! That was!" Rusty had a hard time containing his excitement.

"I am fully prepared to be quartered or beheaded or stabbed by giant bird chicks or fried alive by the Martians for the chance to see this." Said Grand, his face flushed, his eyes shining.

"I can't believe we're here. I can't believe it. We should've gotten here first and sat here the whole time." Added Peacock.

They stood in front of Bilbo's green round door, gazing around at the most peculiar village one has ever seen. There wasn't a straight line present. All of it circled and wove in and out and around and undulated and curved and drilled into

earth in the shape of long tunnels. One such tunnel was behind them. Afraid they'd attract unduly attention, Bells grasped the brass knob and, to her amazement, it opened. It wasn't locked.

Like thieves, shaking from apprehension and delight, peering around as if expecting someone to jump out and scold them and snub them, they trotted in, quickly shut the door behind them and all took one long collective breath.

It was as they expected it to be. A lovely homey polished place where a hobbit lived, with lots and lots of pegs in the concave walls for clothes and hats and further on chairs and benches along the walls, and round doors that led, they knew, to all kinds of rooms, of which they were mostly interested in two. A kitchen and a pantry. Although they knew the pantry must've been raided clean by the dwarves the night before, the hobbit must have had another pantry room somewhere. A self-respecting hobbit always had a secret stash of food.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Said Bells.

This time it was Grand who ventured first along the corridor, opening door after door until with a cry of triumph he called them all into a dark pantry with no windows but lots of rounds of cheese and hocks of ham and bread rolls and butter pots. They didn't need to ask themselves twice, nor did they talk. They fell on the food and stopped only when they couldn't fit anymore in their stomachs.

Rusty belched loudly. Grand joined him. And even Peacock, who usually considered it below his cultural upbringing to participate in such primitive games, uttered a belch so loud, they all cracked up, including Bells. The food was great, they felt good and safe and fuzzy, and it seemed like their problems were far away, if not for their slightly altered appearances. Those, however, they got used to and it didn't bother them much to look at each other.

Just as they stumbled out of the pantry, full and content, and were peaking through doors to try and decide where they should crash for a nice long nap, there was a rap on the door.

Bells' stomach lurched. She has forgotten completely that the party they were eluding most likely has figured out their location and has finally arrived.

She grabbed Peacock's hand. "Did you hear that?"

Peacock was looking through knickknacks on the shelves. "Hear what?"

"I heard it! I heard it! It's them!" Rusty's eyes were about to pop out of his sockets and his monkey tail twitched.

"We should prepare for death." Said Grand with a sad low voice. "We can ask them to make it quick and less painful. At least we ate a good lunch, so there is that. I'd rather die on a full stomach than—" He didn't get a chance to finish.

The door burst open and there stood Pippi Longstalking, her carrot-colored braids sticking out like twigs, her hands on her hips, her freckled face contorted like she was ready to lambast them.

"There they are!" She said and looked behind her. "I told you they'd be here."

"Oh, dearest princess, you know best, you always do." Sancho, sweaty and tired-looking, squeezed in beside her. Between his legs dashed a boy no higher than a foot, in his ever-present red cap. It was Nils. "Aha! We got you! We finally got you!"

The boys looked around and at Bells. There was nowhere to run and looking for another page was tempting. They saw it in each other's eyes. They also saw their promise to try and talk to them and they stayed put. The next thing they saw was the goose Morten and the donkey pushing their way in and making loud noises. Then a large yellow blinking eye covered the doorway and next to it another appeared, bright green and shining like a fluorescent bulb.

Bells swallowed, reached for Peacock's hand, he reached for Grand's who reached for Rusty's.

"Hello." Said Peacock. "So good to see you all. We're not going to run, don't worry. We've actually been waiting for you." He looked for more words.

Bells got hold of her voice at last and said, "We want to talk to you."

"And we want to talk to you!" Said Pippi and skipped in, looking around in wonder. "This is a very curious house. I still like mine better. You can't bring in a horse here, and there is no porch. What house doesn't have a porch?" She shrugged and hopped down the corridor, looking into rooms. "Here!" She pointed and disappeared.

Bells looked at the boys. Peacock was fine, and Rusty didn't appear to be too frightened, but Grand hardly stood upright. The green eye in the doorway blinked. It was the Martian machine and it couldn't fit through, so it reached in its tentacle and felt about, while Grand stared at it in horror, frozen solid.

"Come!" Called Pippi, beckoning them into one of the dining rooms, perhaps the one where the night before the dwarves were feasting and singing songs.

They all piled in and sat around the table as if about to hold an important counsel.

A moment of awkward silence filled the room, broken by Morten's squawking and the donkey's occasional hee-haws.

Bells sat between Peacock and Rusty. Grand perched on the stool a bit to the side, next to Sancho who looked up at him admiringly, seeing Don Quixote in him, no doubt. Then it was

Pippi, then the animals. Nils was so small, he sat on the table. A green eye looked through one round window, a yellow one through another. Muffled chirping could be heard, and the yellow eye kept shifting to another yellow eye and another. Evidently, all three Roc chicks wanted to take turns to see what was happening inside.

"Well?" Said Bells.

"This is awkward." Mumbled Grand.

"Nothing awkward about it. So." Pippi slammed the table and stood up and leaned over. "You have to help me get Mr. Nilsson back. I miss him. And I know he misses me. I didn't ask you to take him, you did on your own!" She poked Rusty. He jumped.

A giant beak knocked on the window until Sancho got up and opened it.

"So, like, we miss our mom, you know?" Said a perfectly teenage voice of a teenage boy, only it was the Roc chick talking. It was, most likely, a boy chick.

Another chick pushed this one out of the way. "We, like, really like it that you took her away. No kidding." It said, clearly aiming its words at Bells whose mouth dropped open.

"You can *talk*?" She said.

"Like, yeah!" Said the chick, offended. Then the other chick pushed this one out of the way. "Mom is cool. I mean, she feeds us, she cares for us. But she kind of gets annoying

sometimes, you know? It's all this 'don't fall out of the nest', and 'it's too early for you to learn to fly', and all that over-protective stuff. I mean, seriously, like I'm totally ready to fly."

The first chick pushed this one aside. "Yeah, me too. I almost did the other day, but she told me I'd break my neck. This was awesome, by the way, that you took her away. We got a break from 'don't do this, don't do that routine', but now we want her back. Deal?"

"Yeah, deal?"

Bells closed her mouth and a silly smile started spreading on her face, because next to talk was one of the Martians, making strange metallic sounding noises that somehow formed words.

"It's bloody hard to keep shooting all those poor people every day, over and over again." The Martian confessed. "We don't necessarily want to, it's our job. H.G. Wells wrote us that way. On our page we have to blast half a London. In the evening we always feel bad about it. Then you come and take our best shooter away." The green eye peered at Peacock who grinned so hard, his face hurt.

"What?" He said. "You mean, you're not going to blast us?"

"Christ, no, mate. Why would we? You're not in our story. Just help us get our other mate back, and we'll go back to our

book. No hard feelings." It made a noise that could only be described as sniffing.

A wave of relief washed over Peacock. He exchanged glances with his friends, who stared at him and at the Martian and back at him in a kind of a delirious glee.

"So all you want," said Grand to Sancho, "is get your master back into your book?"

"Oh, that would be most noble of you!" Cried Sancho, wiping his sweaty forehead with a sleeve. "You see, his white steed misses him. I miss him. And the windmill giants have been asking me about his health. They would've come too, but they're rooted in and are not supposed to." He leaned to Grand and whispered in his ear, "They're afraid to upset Miguel de Cervantes's ghost. Afraid he'd turn in his grave if he found out that they have left his story. He was very fond them, the author was." Sancho winked. Grand looked at him, puzzled.

"Guys! Guys!" Rusty, beyond himself with pleasure that nobody was going to fry him alive—nor his friends—jumped on the table and shouted. "I got it! I got it! We go find the characters we misplaced, then go to the books where we took them from, and, bam!" He smacked his open palm with a fist.

"Bam what?" Said Bells.

"Bam done! Right?" He added uncertainly. "Hey, uh, Pippi and the gang, will we look ourselves again after we return your,

uh, friends and relatives to your stories? I mean, no offense, and I love monkeys, I truly do," he told Pippi was shooting sparks at him with her eyes, "but I like being a boy too. More than a monkey. I'd lose this tail in a heartbeat."

Pippi did a cartwheel around the table, startling them all, stopped, and, standing on one arm, proceeded to answer Rusty's question. "If you must know, all little boys who jump into books and steal monkeys in the end will be eaten by my papa the cannibal king. That will teach them not to steal monkeys. Won't that be great?" She flopped back to her feet.

Rusty's face has lost color. "But...but..." He stammered. "But you said you came to talk. You said..." He realized, she didn't say she wouldn't do him any harm. The Martians did, they said they won't shoot him. He gazed around and heard suppressed giggles. "What? What? Is this a joke?"

"Yes, it's a joke!" Said Pippi, flustered. "I make bad jokes sometimes. How could I make good jokes? There was nobody to teach me jokes. I make them up on my own. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. And to tell you the truth, on Mars they always tell bad jokes and then laugh anyway. That's what they do."

"Bullshit." Exclaimed Bells, forgetting herself and flinging her hand over her mouth.

"My father, if you want to know," said Pippi, "used words much worse than that. In fact, he could use such a word that would make his enemy twist and shrink right under it, it was heavy and wicked like that."

"We do good jokes too." Said the Martian in a slightly upset voice.

"Okay, okay, I get this. I think." Said Peacock. "Let me repeat everything, and you tell me if I got this right. You're saying, all of you, I mean, that you're sitting on the pages of the book where you were written and you do what the author told you to do?"

"Not all the time." Confessed Pippi. "Sometimes I wink when the reader is not looking. It's fun to do it. I'm very good sneaking in winks. Haven't been caught once." She sounded very proud of herself. "The problem is, now that Mr. Nilsson is gone from that page where we met, the readers get confused. The story is lopsided without him."

"And the windmills are very upset!" Said Sancho, huffing and agitated. "They have to act and rotate their blades and there is nobody to attack them and battle with them. They told me they feel very stupid standing like that, acting for the reader. One of them told me she has to make herself look whitewashed because she is very tempted to turn red from shame."

"So that is why Count Dracula didn't turn me into a vampire." Said Bells, her eyes going round. She regarded her friends. "That is why Kai—remember the boy on the frozen lake, in The Snow Queen, the first book we got it—that is why he was so hostile, asking us to get away!"

"It makes sense, I suppose," said Grand slowly.

"It does, it does! Of course it does!" Rusty was jumping up and down. "Come on, guys! Let's to find them and return them where they belong! So we can be ourselves again and go home."

"It's not like you have a choice." Said Nils suddenly. Everyone forgot about him. He was so small and sat so quietly on the table, nobody paid him any attention. "If you won't do it, you will replace those you took away and take their jobs on their pages. You're already half-way there."

"Oh." They collectively took in air, digesting the information.

"I am rather grateful to you for this mini-vacation. I got to get off my page and go travel a bit, but I do want to get home. I'm only helping out my friends here." He waved at the assembly.

"Okay. We need to return those characters back, I understand. We understand." Said Bells, eyeing the boys. "Where do we start? I mean, does it matter what book we start with? And how much time do we have?"

Pippi looked at Sancho who sighed and glanced at Nils and the donkey and Morten the goose, then exchanged a silent stare with the chicks and the Martians, or, rather, their eyes, green and yellow. Then he turned back, and, chewing on his words, mumbled, "We don't know. This never happened before. No reader has ever taken anything out of a book. They have fallen in—"

"They did?" Asked Bells. "For real?"

"Oh yes," nodded Pippi, "happens all the time, I have to help them from page to page sometimes, they get so stuck on one or the other because they like it so much. And sometimes they run through pages so fast, I can hardly keep up, but they always exit. Most of the time at the end of the book."

"Sometimes in the middle, though. Bloody disrespectful." Said one of the Martians. "I'm always tempted to shoot them. Well, just a little, nothing major." He added, looking at startled faces of Bells and the boys. "I never say it right. See, we have to get the best shooter back. He talks the best too."

"But where to we begin?" Said Bells, impatient. The idea of turning into a Roc bird and living in the book, tending to Roc chicks like their mother as her daily job didn't much appeal to her.

"I suppose you begin at the beginning?" Said a new voice. "At least that's what the King has told me."

"Alice!" Bells was beyond herself. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, I can't simply stay in the place that Wonderland has become." Alice walked in, twisting the bottom of her dress-skirt. "It is rather unsettling and very confusing. I don't recognize it at all."

"What happened to it?" Asked Bells.

"Well, a large bird flew in and changed into a black dragon. A very large dragon."

"A dragon?" Bells sucked in air. The prospect of catching a dragon didn't excite her. "What kind of a dragon?"

"The large kind, of course." Said Alice. "I truly wish I could tell you more."

"Can you show us where that dragon is?"

"I'm afraid I can't." Alice shook her head. "We're not supposed to help you."

"Yes, we're not." Picked up the others sadly.

"We will wait for you in Uncle Remus stories." Said Pippi. "I've been meaning to visit him for a while."

"And you don't have much time left." Said Nils.

"Yes, yes, you don't." Blinked yellow eyes behind the windows.

"Those are the bloody rules." Sighed the Martian.

And so it was decided that Bells and the boys would start repairing the books one by one, in the order they changed them, and the characters from those pages would wait for them on Uncle Remus's porch, listening to his tall tales about Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox and watching him smoke his pipe and rock back and forth in his whicker chair.

Chapter 30. The Black Dragon

And so Bells has found a sheet of paper and ink and a feather and stuck it in the glass and, just like Bilbo will do later, carefully wrote the page number they landed on when going to Alice in Wonderland. They silently studied each other, mentally preparing for the journey, also like Bilbo did when he was leaving this morning. They hugged each other, nodded, and Bells turned the corner.

They stood in the same spot where they landed the last time, only everything was different. Instead of the wild grasses and a path between wild flowers they were in an imperious looking palace. Where the giant mushroom grew now stood a gilded gem-encrusted throne. On it, in place of the caterpillar, sat an old man with an enormously long white beard that cascaded down his knees and lay in ringlets at his feet on the rich tufted carpet. While they watched, speechless, each struggling to guess what book Alice's Adventures in Wonderland has turned into, it was not the Roc bird that flew in with loud squawking and hissing, it was, just as Alice had said, a black scaly dragon.

It flew so slow, it's belly nearly touched the heads of our friends. Its hot breath seared their faces. It circled once,

twice—so vast was the throne hall, there was enough room for it—and landed at last at the old man's feet.

Bells pondered him. He didn't look like a king. He was too wily and shrewd for that. Who was he? The answer presented itself from the mouth of the dragon.

"This is me, Naina." Spoke the dragon. "Do you recognize me, oh powerful sorcerer Chernomor?"

"Naina? Chernomor?" Bells whispered. "Guys, do you have any idea what this book is?"

"Why does it matter?" Whispered Peacock. "Let's snatch the dragon and get out of here."

They were hiding behind one of the large pillars supporting the vaulted ceiling that was so high, it seemed that the top of the palace touched the clouds.

"Like it's so easy to snatch her." Scoffed Bells. "Wait, let me see if I get what you're suggesting here. You're saying I should just walk up to it, and grab it by that scaly throat or, I don't know, grab its tail—provided it lies still and doesn't kill me with a single whack—and all this time one of you will be drawing a corner on this marble floor with something, I don't know what, or looking for a number and will time it exactly to my capturing of her so we can all tumble into The Seven Voyages of Sindbad? Doesn't this sound a little impossible?"

"If you won't do it," Grand offered his usual glum, "we will all stay here forever. I will turn into an old madman thinking that windmills are giants and spearing their blades and getting hit on the head by them, thinking they clouted me or something."

"Yeah, Bells, this is not just about you alone, you know?" Said Peacock.

"I'm not saying it's about me. Did I say that? Did I?" She glared at them.

The floor shook, and they stopped arguing. The dragon fell to the feet of the sorcerer and was apparently pledging something to him, or he was pledging something to her.

"Now we missed what they were talking about." Hissed Bells.

"And that is, obviously, entirely our fault." Said Peacock.

"Girls, right?" Offered Rusty.

"Stop it!" Bells shushed them.

Curious struggling noises reached them from behind. The corner of the marble floor lifted and out clambered two boys, struggling. It was hard to tell who was fighting who, until Bells marched up to them, upset that her focus was diverted.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" She demanded in the loud whisper. They were hidden from the main throne hall by the forest of pillars and the wall of the alcove.

The little Prince raised his head full of red-flaming hair and shook off the frozen looking boy who clung to him and said fiercely into his ear, "We're not supposed to help."

"Not supposed to help? That is funny. But I want to help. I like helping."

"But you're not supposed to." Said Kai.

"And what about Alice?" Said the little Prince.

"What about her?"

"It is a question of friendship. Would you want to help Gerda?"

"Of course!" Said Kai, a little too loud, and covered his mouth.

"Why?" Asked him the little Prince.

"Because..." Kai stumbled, "because she is my friend."

"And Alice is my friend. She comes to visit my little planet sometimes. And they are my friends too. They talked to me in the desert when I was very lonely."

The hall became quiet and they all could hear the slithering of the scaly skin on the stone and the steps of an old man nearing them.

"This book is called Ruslan and Ludmila," said the little Prince, "and the dragon is an old witch. Just wait until she is an old crone again, and that is when you can catch her." With

these words he took Kai's hand and together they peeled off the page and dropped out of sight.

They pressed themselves behind the pillar and watched the sorcerer leave, then they ran out of their hiding space and sprinted after the black dragon that unfolded its wings and took off.

"Great." Bells stomped her foot, looking into the sky at the dragon that grew smaller and smaller into a black dot and finally disappeared completely. Around them the sorcerer's lackeys busied themselves with their chores, but slowly, one by one, they gave them odd glances, and finally a small crowd formed.

"If we won't find a way to get out of here, they might think we're planning to kill off the sorcerer." Said Grand gloomily.

"I think I know what we can do." Said Peacock. All eyes were on him. "The story continues, right? This means the dragon has left this page, she must be on the next page now. If we go several pages ahead of her, we can catch her."

"Peacock, you're so smart!" Exclaimed Rusty.

"Yes, yes, you are a genius." Said Bells. "Let's do it." She didn't like being stared at by all these people. And she didn't like the fact that her back started itching again and soon, she felt, she would grow wings. Although it could help her

chase the dragon in the air, but it would force her to do it alone, without her friends, and she didn't want to do that.

Peacock drew a corner and a number about thirty pages ahead, just guessing, and they tumbled into a chilly misty evening somewhere in the middle of a charred field.

They were looking around, trying to make out where they were, wincing at the cries of the crows overhead, when Rusty pointed at something.

"What is that?" He said.

"It is, I think, a battlefield after the battle." Said Grand.

It was. Upon closer inspection they saw that the white things they took for maybe bleached wood were, in fact, human boned and skulls in abundance. Some were old and stripped bare by the animals and greenish from the moss that has started growing on them. Some were fresh, still tainted with blood. And in between them lie bodies of slain warriors and horses with various body parts missing, the crows alighting in them and feasting and flying up again, to squawk in delight.

"Oh, how lovely." Said Bells, gagging from the smell. "I'm sure you feel at home right now, Grand. What kind of a horror story is this?"

They heard strange sounds and saw a large hill right in the middle of the field and a warrior riding up to it on a snow-

white steed. They appeared to have a conversation, the warrior and—

“It’s a head!” Cried Rusty. “Look! It’s a giant head! It’s cut off and it’s just sitting on the ground and it talks, too!”

He yelled so loudly, both the warrior and the head noticed them, so they had to scramble, quickly drawing a corner in the dirt and dashing a few dozen pages ahead.

This time they found themselves on top of a mountain with fierce wind threatening to blow them off and in the sky over their heads they saw that same sorcerer flying and that same warrior holding on to his long beard with one hand, and with another hacking off pieces of it with a sword.

“This is the wrong page!” Shouted Peacock over the wind.

“What?” Said Bells.

“The wrong page!”

“I know!”

And they turned another page, and another, and another, always missing the dragon, until they found themselves in yet another file and Bells said, “Look. I don’t care that she’s the dragon anymore, that old crone. All I need it to touch her and I will do it. Let’s go back to the original page again.”

“But we’ve been almost through the whole book!” Said Peacock.

“Yeah.” Said Grand.

"Yeah!" Added Rusty. "We can't give up now!"

"This is a royal waste of time anyway." Complained Bells.

"Why are we doing this all together?"

"Because that's what friends to, that's what my grandma told me." Said Rusty, blushing.

"But it would be so much faster if we worked in pairs!"

"You're tired and cranky," said Peacock, "let's try one more time and then, if we fail again, we will go back to that other page.

They jumped and came upon a warrior sitting at the edge of a dusty road, resting by his horse, and, not believing their eyes, saw an old crone dressed in black shuffle up to him.

"There! That's her!" Said Rusty, and they rushed at her, seized her robes, and while she covered them with a volley of curses, Rusty drew a page and they were falling into The Seven Voyages of Sindbad the Sailor, into the gigantic nest where the three Roc chicks sat, waiting for them.

"That was, like, fast!" Said one.

"I told you she'd do it, like, fast, right?" Said the other.

Bells was too stunned to speak. She watched the old crone grow and grow and spread its wings and cover the sky with its shadow and open its beak, and the chicks turn to them and screech, "Go!"

They did, and at the last moment heard the Roc bird scold her offspring, "Did you get out of the nest again, you scoundrels?"

They presently found themselves in the jungle. While Bells was busy fretting, and Peacock was busy helping her not to fret, and Rusty was busy spying things and spotting things and shouting about it, Grand remained silent. He was thinking. And he was thinking ahead, which was important. He knew they would have to escape the nest quickly, and none of them thought where to go. He remembered the order of the books they visited, and it was time to go fetch Mr. Nilsson who was now a big ape in the Jungle Book.

"Who is the genius who got us here?" Where the first words out of Bells' mouth.

"I thought," Grand began, scared he did something wrong, "I thought this was the next book we broke, didn't we?"

"The monkey! The monkey! We get to—" Rusty stopped abruptly. "Bells?"

They all ogled her.

"What? What?" She felt her hair and yelped in joy. "My hair! My hair! It's back! Oh, I was never so happy to touch my own hair!"

The boys sniggered. Rusty couldn't wait to lose his monkey tail, and Grand started growing grey hair and the mustache and

the beard really annoyed him. He constantly scratched his chin. Only Peacock was a little sad. He quite liked his new strength and the arms and the legs that could stretch forever, quietly fantasizing how he could demonstrate these skills to his dads and have them laugh in delight. His dads. No, he needed to bring the Martian back to The War of the Worlds and then they had to figure out how to get back home. If they ever would.

None of them spoke about it, but they thought about it and feared the moment when they would have to decide how to actually do it.

Loud noises over their heads startled them. The green canopy interwoven with lianas and wild flowers shook. A herd of apes passed over the branches and got out of sight as fast as they appeared.

"There!" Pointed Rusty. "There they are! Come on!" And they crashed through the thick growth of the jungle after the noises, hoping that they will somehow recognize one of them as Mr. Nilsson and return him to Pippi.

Chapter 31. The Monkey City

It was, however, the jungle they were running in, so naturally, after a few minutes they got tired. The moving was slow. There were no paths. Twigs and branches lashed at their faces and snatched at their clothes. Flowers emitted a nauseating odor. Insects buzzed. Birds shrieked. The ground was covered with soft moss that at times got so wet, it became a sludge in which they sunk ankle-deep. It felt like it could suck them in all the way and trap them until they died.

"We'll never catch up to them at this pace." Grumbled Bells, pulling out one foot and taking a careful step with another into the squelching mud.

"I could carry you all." Offered Peacock. He started growing and was a head higher than everyone now, looking more and more like a machine.

"Thanks, that really makes me feel like an old man." Grumbled Grand. He was turning older by the minute, it must be noted, and occasionally had to suppress the urge to attack either the tress thinking they were giants or lianas thinking they were snakes. This unsettled him.

"No. I can go alone." Said Rusty. "I can climb trees like a monkey!" By now he resembled a squirrel monkey almost completely, if not for his clothes, for his ability to talk. And he shrunk, he shrunk about a third his normal size, which terrified him greatly.

"And what if something happened to you?" Rounded Bells. She was the only one who was back to herself, and it made her feel both responsible for the boys and uneasy that they were measuring her with envious eyes, and guilty that she got to change back first.

"What could happen to me?" Said Rusty.

The jungle grew strangely still.

"I don't know." Said Bells. "You always manage to get into trouble, and this jungle is full of surprises. You never know when—"

"Ahhh!" Shrieked Rusty.

Quiet like mice, dozens of arms descended out of the green canopy, snatched Rusty under his arms, and, hooting and shrieking and ululating, a band of wild monkeys—large grey langurs, loud and obnoxious beasts that inhabited The Jungle Book—took off, swinging and jumping and crashing through the branches and boughs of the trees. Their fur flashed between the leaves and was gone.

"Rusty!" Cried Bells and Grand and Peacock together.

"Let's get him!" Peacock spread his arms around and telescoped them out. "Get on!"

A new voice startled them.

"Oh no! I'm late again. I can never remember when it's the right time to show up."

Beside them emerged an almost naked boy, save for a cloth around his thighs, his skin bronze, his hair black. His face was not necessarily fierce looking, as it should have been, but rather sad and puzzled.

"Mowgli?" Gasp'd Bells.

"Yes, I am Mowgli, but I'm really Christopher Robin inside. You see, because your friend had brought in Pippi's Mr. Nilsson into the forest I had to change into Mowgli but it's rather difficult to be the perfect Mowgli without much practice. I end up coming to this page too early or too late. Baloo and Bagheera should've been with me, but they told me until I get the timing right, they're on vacation."

Bells shook her head.

"Gee, guys. Get on already, we will lose him, and then what? How are ever going to find him again?" Said Peacock.

"You look very strange." Said Mowgli. "Why are you silver all over?"

"I'm sorry, I have no time to explain just now. Later, okay? We'll have tea with honey or whatever. Bells! What are you

looking at? Get on?" Grand firmly grasped in one arm, Bells in another, Peacock shot up on his legs, growing taller and taller, watching them extend with fascination.

"I'll wait for you here then!" Came from below.

"We will fix the Winnie-the-Pooh book, we promise!" Yelled Bells, and in another moment their heads pierced the blanket of leaves and they were being carried by nearly Martian Peacock on his long spindly legs over the sea of tree tops that shifted and rippled like emerald water, with splashes of color suddenly erupting in their wake when they startled a flock of fantastical birds with rose or purple or orange plumage. They squawked in indignation, rousing more calls from deep within the jungle.

"Where are they?" Said Peacock.

"I think over there, where it looks like waves..." Grand pointed ahead where the cover of the jungle rustled and shifted as if it was disturbed from below. It looked like something swam beneath the canopy of trees, causing swells and ripples. It moved in a steady direction forward, and soon Peacock caught up with it, his long tubular legs probing the ground in enormously large strides, a metallic insect with the body of a boy and two of his friends clasped firmly in his arms on either side. The warm wind washed over them, and despite their fear for their friend and for their time running out, they all enjoyed this

journey that abruptly ended in the ruins of an ancient Indian city.

The monkeys saw them and while a small mob of them carried Rusty into one of the broken domes and dropped with him through the hole inside, the rest of them shrieked and hissed and bared their teeth at Peacock who now shrunk his legs and arms and let Bells and Grand stand on their own.

The jungle has ended behind a tall crumbling stone wall and they stood at a plaza broken up and covered with creepers, staring at the remains of what must have been a magnificent palace one day. Tall columns stuck out like forlorn fingers, with no roof to support. The marble plates of the floor were cracked, and paved streets were no longer paved but torn apart by grass and trees, vanishing into the labyrinth of roofless abandoned homes with empty window holes looking at them with their black rectangular holes. They went all the way down the hill where the jungle picked up again with waves of deep green.

"Monkey city." Breathed Bells.

"Is that the name of this place?" Asked Grand.

"Do you know absolutely everything?" Said Peacock.

Bells didn't pay attention to his sarcasm. She was too awed to get engaged in the battle of wits. "It's called Cold Lairs, and a king used to live here, in this palace, and on this plaza he kept his elephants."

"And then the Roc bird came and snatched them all off."

Said Peacock.

"I'm sorry you're so irritated." Snapped Bells. "However, you can tuck your irritation in your pocket, because it won't help us find Rusty."

They stared at the monkeys that were everywhere, jumping and hopping and shouting and coming closer and closer to them to inspect them. "We are strong and clever and smart!" They cried and took another step. There was curiosity in their black leathery faces and brown eyes, and mischief. And threat. If they decided that Bells and Grand and Rusty were their enemies, they would overpower them in no time.

"It's their song." Explained Bells. "And they should've caught Mowgli, not Rusty, according to the book. We simply happened in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Hasn't it been our curse throughout this whole adventure?" Said Peacock with a nasty undertone. He shrunk closer to his friends, shielding them. The monkeys surrounded them with an impenetrable wall.

"Listen, stop this, okay? You're not helping." Said Bells nervously.

"I think they intend to fight us." Said Grand. "I think the odds are, in about a few minutes of this we'll be dead."

"You're both very encouraging, you know that? I couldn't have picked out better companions, I must tell you. Very optimistic, cheerful, and full of tact."

"Fine. What do you suggest we do?" Said Peacock.

"Talk to them." Said Bells.

"Talk to them? You're a big believer in diplomacy, aren't you?" Peacock forced a laugh.

"And you're not?" Bells looked scary.

"They're only doing what they were written to do," reasoned Grand. "I wonder what they were in Winnie-the-Pooh." He stood a bit taller. "Hello, monkey people. How are you?"

"We are clever and free and great!" They screeched and ambled closer still, in a row of fifty monkeys deep.

"It's no use," Peacock shook his head. "I'm just going to get him. Rusty!" He put hands around his mouth. "Rusty, where are you?"

"Here!" Came a feeble cry from the broken dome. "I'm here, guys! I'm okay! This is fun here! I'd get out but the monkeys won't let me!" The saw his head bob to the surface and two monkeys sitting on the edge of the broken dome whack him on the head and push him back in.

"Hey!" Shouted Peacock.

"Don't hurt them." Said Bells, alarmed by Peacock's face.

"Why not? They're hurting him."

"That's no way to react. If everyone did this, we'd all hurt each other."

"Do you want Rusty to turn into a monkey forever?"

"No."

"Then let's go." He scooped them up and prodded with his elongated legs the spots between monkeys. They didn't waste any time. Scores of them started climbing his long legs like tree trunks and Peacock had to set his friends on the ground and smack the monkeys off himself. They flew under his blows and shrieked and attacked him in an overflowing mass, and one of them bit Grand, and a couple more grabbed Bells hair and started tugging at it left and right so that tears broke out in her eyes.

"You stupid apes!" Peacock would brush off ten monkeys, and twenty more would climb on top of him. "Hold on!" He yelled to Bells and Grand, "I'll grab him and we'll go!"

"Wait!" Screamed Bells, punching one monkey in the face so it flew off, and tearing another off her head with a handful of her hair. "Mr. Nilsson!"

"Oh God! I forgot." Peacock fought his way down to the dome and was in the process of pulling out Rusty. They both looked at each other, then at the crowd of enraged monkeys in front of them. There were a hundred, if not more, all identical. How could they possibly find Mr. Nilsson here?

"Shoo! Go away! Leave my friends alone!" Peacock cleared a circle around them.

Monkeys contemplated what to do next with these strange jungle creatures who were strong, particularly the silver one.

"Rusty!" Bells hugged her friend and even kissed his furry cheeks. Rusty blushed underneath and mumbled back something incoherent. "Oh, I was so worried about you! So worried!" Bells couldn't see how the boys rolled their eyes behind her back. "Where is Mr. Nilsson, do you have any idea?"

"They wouldn't tell me." Mumbled Rusty, still flustered at the kisses and having a hard time to think.

"Mr. Nilsson?" Called Bells. "Mr. Nilsson! We came to bring you back to Pippi Longstocking."

No answer, only stares.

"Mr. Nilsson! Mr. Nilsson!" They took turns calling him.

Then from the middle of dumb looking faces one rose and weakly waved its arms. It looked sad, like it was about to cry.

Bells heart shrunk a little. She thought that the poor chap must have missed his story. "Mr. Nilsson!" She said. "Come here. We'll take you back to Pippi. We're so sorry we took you away by accident." She elbowed Rusty.

"Yeah, we're very sorry. I mean, I'm very sorry."

The monkeys parted, and the waving monkey took one step, then paused, then shook its head and sat back down. The monkey

around it closed into a mass of identical bodies and noses and eyes.

Bells instantly lost Mr. Nilsson among them.

"Mr. Nilsson?" She said. "Where did you go?"

"I dunno." Said Rusty. "Mr. Nilsson? Come on, man, let's get you home."

Suddenly another monkey stood up, in the different spot, and just as it waded its way through to Bells, it did the same thing, a grimace, a shake of a head, then it sat down and vanished in the crowd. This game kept going on for a while, until Peacock yanked on Bells sleeve and whispered, "I think they're playing us."

"What?" Bells narrowed her eyes. "Are they?" She looked them over. "Are you?"

Some of the monkeys had a hard time suppressing their giggles.

"You pissants!" Bells glared at them, hands on her hips. "How dare you?"

The monkeys started laughing. It sounded strange, in a monkey kind of way, like gurgling and screeching and shrieking noises mixed together. Some of them fell over on their backs and rocked back and forth, holding on to their stomachs.

"This is not funny." Said Peacock.

Strangely, Grand and Rusty were both hiding a smile.

"What are you smiling at?" Snapped Peacock.

"We tricked you! We tricked you!" Voices called from all sides and then more laughter.

"That's just great guys, simply great." Bells told Rusty and Grand. "I suppose we shouldn't even have been looking for you?" She turned away. "Is there Mr. Nilsson here or not? I want you to answer me right this second and no more of this stupid giggling." Her voice sounded so commanding, they stopped laughing and one of them, the largest and the furriest, strutted up and said, "We played monkeys pretty good, eh? Didn't we? Didn't we?" He looked for approval, and as hard as Peacock tried to be on Bells' side, he couldn't help but to give him a high five together with Grand and Rusty.

"This is all amusement to you," scoffed them Bells, "but we need to bring Mr. Nilsson back into his book so that Rusty here doesn't turn into a monkey for the rest of his life!" As soon as she said it, she regretted it.

The langur's face, already black, has got blacker. His merry demeanor got replaced with a nasty mien. "What's wrong with being a monkey, huh?" He bellowed. "Huh?"

Other monkeys shouted their agreement with him.

"Nothing. Nothing. I'm sorry. It didn't come out right." Bells tried to backtrack, but it was too late. Scores of langurs stood and backed up the large one.

"We have to be monkeys all our lives, you know?" Said the langur. "Monkey this, monkey that. You know how annoying it is to repeat every day, 'We're smart and wonderful and free?' over and over and over again? It makes me want to bite off my tail and tie it around my neck and hang myself."

"Wow." Said Grand. "That is great imagination."

"Will you actually suffocate for real?" Asked Rusty. "I mean, the tail is soft but it has bones, right, so it wouldn't really curl all that well—"

"Shut up, all of you!" Bells stomped, swirled around and stormed off along the wall until she found a quiet spot and here burst into tears, letting it all out.

"Bells. Bells." Came voices behind her.

"That's enough, okay? Enough!" She sniffled. "If you want to stay here, go ahead, but I want to go home. I want to see mom. I want to see dad. I even want to see Maria." She hid her face, embarrassed.

The boys patted her awkwardly on the back, none of them expert at what you do with girls when they break down. Bells was special. They liked Bells because she didn't break down often. It took a lot to make her cry, but if she cried, it was serious business.

They looked at each other, then at her.

"Hey." Said Grand. "Hey, remember when you talked to me in that chicken king underground place?"

"When was that? When was that?" Said Rusty.

"Shh." Peacock pulled him aside.

"Bells?" Grand nudged her.

"What." She wiped her face before looking at his, which was very strange, it was like looking at a middle-aged man with tufts of greying hair and young eyes, because it was only the eyes that remained of Grand in Don Quixote.

"What's wrong?" Said Grand.

"Nothing."

"Something is. Something is bothering you."

Bells contemplated whether she should tell him or not, then she saw quiet eyes of Peacock and Rusty looking at her, and she saw in them what she felt.

"I'm scared." She whispered.

"Me too." Said Grand. "I'm scared too."

"What if..." Bells looked up again, trying to hold herself together. "What if we'll never get out? What then? What if we'll be stuck here forever?"

"I don't think so. I think we will figure something out. My mom always says, trust your gut. She says, think less and feel more. And I feel it, I feel it in my gut that we will figure out it out."

"Am I too bossy?" Said Bells so quietly, Grand didn't quite hear her with his old man's ears.

"What was that?"

"Am I too bossy." Said Bells, and her face turned beet red. She felt it and wanted to fall through the ground.

"Well..." Grand hesitated.

"I am, aren't I?"

"It's okay. We like it. You make us do things. And you're not mean bossy, you're just—"

"Bossy bossy." Said Peacock, coming up. "You know, the good bossy."

"Do you want me to stop?" Bells looked miserable. "Am I too much?"

"No-no-no!" They shook their heads together.

"You're fine, you're fine."

"Really."

"You can't fall apart now." Said Peacock. "Who will tell us what to do? We're so close to getting done with this book fixing thing."

"You will tell us." Sniffled Bells. "You're good at ideas. Everyone always hates my ideas."

"Who is everyone?"

"Maria."

"That doesn't count."

"How does that not count?"

"She is your little sister." Said Grand. "She's supposed to hate everything you do. My brothers tell me the same thing. The other day Willy—"

"I miss her!" Wailed Bells, and even the monkeys crowded around them and were saying they were sorry for tricking them, then one of them stepped out.

"I'm Mr. Nilsson." It said. "I would like you take me to back home to Pippi."

And so they went, finding a corner in the cobbles of the plaza with just the right number, and sliding into darkness with hopes to land in the right book. Because nothing could possibly go wrong now, could it?

Chapter 32. The Duck Pond

Something did go wrong, however. Fully expecting to step onto a neat rural Swedish street stacked with neat little houses, Bells heard the ground crunch under her feet and when she raised her eyes to contemplate her surroundings, she first saw the puzzled faces of Grand and Peacock and Rusty, then the puzzled face of the langur that was soon supposed to turn into the squirrel monkey by the name of Mr. Nilsson, then the ice around them. It was a street alright, but encased in ice, as if someone dipped it in water and froze it.

"Oh no!" They all moaned, looking around.

Cutting wind blew into Bells' face and her teeth chattered. She hugged herself. "Rusty? What did you think about this time?"

"I didn't think about anything!" Said Rusty, his voice shaking. "I swear I didn't!" Plumes of warm air escaped his mouth.

"What do you mean, you didn't think about anything? You were supposed to think about Pippi Longstocking book!"

"I did think about it!"

"Then why are you telling me you didn't think about anything?"

"Because you scare the bejesus out of me when you talk to me like that with these eyes of yours!"

"I do? Really?" Bells looked at her friends.

"You do." Confirmed Grand.

"Really." Said Peacock.

They hopped from foot to foot.

The langur was jumping up and down too, producing unintelligible noises and suddenly took off along the icy street toward something white in the distance.

"If everything went as it was supposed to, where the hell are we?" Said Peacock.

"Guys? Guys?" Grand nudged them. "Look at that."

Rusty was already staring.

Soft snow began falling from the evening sky. The flurry of snowflakes became thicker and thicker. Some of them grew so large, they resembled white bees. They flopped down and converged and grew into a figure in white, who on closer inspection turned out to be a tall woman in a white fur coat, a cap and a muffler. Every breath she exhaled frosted over everything around her with sparkling circles and spirals and stars. When she got closer, they could see her clear bluish face, as if made of ice, her shiny eyes, and her coat and cap that weren't made of fur at all. They were made of snow. White fluffy snow.

They were spellbound, all of them.

Rusty unfroze first, "Is this The White Witch?"

That made Bells find her voice again, "No, you idiot. Don't you ever read books properly? Was The White Witch dressed in snow? No, she wasn't. This is The Snow Queen, and if she kisses you, your heart will turn into a lump of ice."

"Oh." Muttered Peacock. "Lovely."

"Mr. Nilsson, no!" Screamed Rusty and rushed at The Snow Queen. The grey langur hobbled up to her and sprung into her arms. She bent and kissed him on the head.

"No!" Rusty ran after them.

The Snow Queen made her way up the street and walked into the last house on the lane, Rusty ran after her.

Bells looked at Grand who looked at Peacock, and, confused and frightened, they took off after them, Peacock politely running very slow to keep the same pace with his friends.

They stumbled up icy steps, nearly falling over, and when they stepped into the house, it was Pippi's house alright, and it didn't look icy at all. Pippi was bustling around the kitchen, setting up tea and cookies, and The Snow Queen was sitting in one of the chairs, petting Mr. Nilsson who was now looking back to normal, a small squirrel monkey in a yellow jacket and blue pants.

"Pippi?" Asked Bells, confused.

"Well, finally you are here! I was waiting and waiting and waiting."

"Pippi, what is The Snow Queen doing here?" Whispered Bells.

"Oh, she is visiting. It gets lonely at the frozen lake, so we visit each other once in a while."

"Where is your horse?" Asked Rusty, shaking the snow off his sneakers.

"Kai is riding him. Bluebeard is teaching him how to—"

"Bluebeard?" Gaspd Grand.

"It gets rather boring sitting on your own cold page all the time." Said The Snow Queen, taking off her hat and putting it on the plate on the table where it quickly started melting. Her coat has already melted off and her icy dress looked like it was leaking water. Helpful Pippi threw a towel to the queen's feet.

"Sit down, don't just stand there and look. The Snow Queen can't stay long, she'll have to go soon, before she melts."

They did. They all sat down and had cookies and tea and discussed what they could possibly do to get out of here.

Pippi made a face, left for her room, and came back with a tarnished looking journal and a pencil that looked like it's been gnawed on and used very well. It wasn't even a pencil

anymore, more like a stub. She put them both on the table and winked.

"We're not supposed to help you figure things out." She said. "But someone..." She looked at the queen.

"Someone very naughty has helped you already. I will have a talk with him about that."

"Why aren't you supposed to help us? Says who?" Blurted Rusty.

Pippi and the queen exchanged meaningful glances and shrugged their shoulders. Pippi pushed the journal to Bells so hard, it almost slid off the edge of the table and fell in her lap. She picked it up and opened it. It was blank. The paper was old and crinkly and yellowing, and it had a faint smell of dust and mold to it, but otherwise it looked fine. She closed it. It was bound in fine creamy leather.

"That's human skin." Said Pippi.

"What?" Bells shrieked and dropped the journal on the floor.

"I am joking, of course." Said Pippi. "My father gave it to me. He is the cannibal king, but he'd never waste anything like human skin on making a journal."

Bells looked at the journal with distrust.

Grand was the one who picked it up and handed to her.

"You don't have much time left." Said The Snow Queen suddenly, mopping her melting face with a towel. Her voice was cold and cutting, and they all looked at her, waiting for more.

She didn't say anything else, swiftly stood up, said her goodbyes and left. They watched through the ornate frosted window how the snowflakes clung to her until they formed a new coat and cap, and in a moment she was gone, floating away, one of them.

"What did she mean, we don't have much time left?" Said Peacock.

"You will soon turn into a Martian forever." Said Pippi quietly. "And you will stay as Don Quixote forever slated to attack the windmills." She shoved a whole cookie in her mouth and suddenly jumped up and, singing a strange song, started cleaning up the kitchen which looked more like she was making a mess. After a few minutes of this she turned around and feigned a surprised look on her face.

"Why are you still here? Go, go! I'm expecting guests any minute. Tommy and Annika are coming. We will be making omelets."

When they stepped out into the street, it was summer evening. Every trace of the winter was gone together with The Snow Queen.

While Bells and Grand admired Rusty who was back to himself again, no monkey tale, no monkey face, Peacock hardly heard

their cries of joy. He was deep in thought. Something was nagging in his mind, but what he couldn't quiet remember. He kept thinking back to the lake, the frozen lake, then the lake in the park where their adventure started. Something he thought back then was important and now it slipped his mind.

Someone pulled on his sleeve.

"Peacock?" Bells looked at him, happy. "Two done, two more to go. Come on. Let's do it fast." She didn't say what she wanted to say, which was, 'Let's figure out how to get home.'

They all were frightened and by displaying this loud exuberance hoped to make themselves feel better. It didn't matter that Bells and Rusty were looking normal. It didn't help them to find out what they could do.

"I need to think." Said Peacock.

"Think about what?" Bells glared at him. "There is nothing to think about. We need to go to Solaris right this moment, unless you want to become of those machines forever. You're already two heads taller than me. And Grand is aging by the minute and, well..."

She drifted off. Grand had found a large stick and, using it like a spear, was attacking the white fence of Pippi's house.

"See?"

"I need to think." Insisted Peacock. "I have an idea. I mean, I almost have it, and I need quiet time to think about it, where I'm not worried about anything."

"I got it! I got it!" Exclaimed Rusty. "Let's go between the pages again! We can go between the pages of Solaris and see what happened to it and prepare to go in too."

"Rusty, you're so smart, I have no words." Peacock gave him a brief hug.

"Me? Really?" Rusty looked at his friends.

They pulled Grand off the fence, scraped with a stone on the asphalt road a corner and a number and a moment later were sitting between two semi-transparent paper sheets, watching with fascination all kinds of creatures float by. It appeared as the very bottom of the ocean, and before long they saw the beams of yellow light and the familiar elongated shape and the characteristic chugging of a motor.

"Solaris turned into Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea." Bells whispered. "But we've been here already and we didn't know that we could fix it all then." She measured Peacock with shining eyes, and told everyone. "The Martian is now the submarine, I'm sure of it. And Solaris ocean is simply an ocean on Earth, so all we have to do it get the submarine back into War of the Worlds. Right, Peacock? Peacock?"

Peacock stared at the journal in her hands. He took it, opened it, and gazed at them in silence for a good minute.

"What is it? What is it?" Rusty said.

"We can write our own story." Said Peacock slowly.

"What?" They all said.

"We can write our own story. Anything we want. We can write our own book and turn any page and be there anyone we want." His face lit up at this thought.

"Wow." Breathed Rusty. "Wow."

"Amazing." Said Bells.

"You are our idea man." Said Grand with a smile.

Peacock smiled too, thinking. "We could..." He swallowed. "We could write our life, I mean, we could write it the way we want it to be and go there."

"Wait." Bells sat on the floor. Around them, on both sides, giant squid pumped ocean water. They hardly paid them any heed.

"If we write our own story, what will it do?"

"Listen!" Peacock became agitated. "Just listen to this. We could write about the perfect school and the perfect parents and everything and then go there!"

"I think, I think it's not such a good idea." Said Grand.

"Why not?"

"Because we'd know it's not real."

"So what? Who cares?"

"I do."

"Fine." Peacock stood and flung the journal on the ground. "Figure it out on your own." He stalked off like Bells did the last time they were in between the pages. Only he didn't cry, he fumed. The idea seemed so brilliant, so good, it sure could be put to good use, but after what Grand said it didn't make it exciting anymore, because he was right. They'd always know the world they lived in was fake, and that would spoil absolutely everything.

He heard footsteps.

"Hey." Said Bells' voice.

He swirled around, startling her. "Then why did Pippi give us the journal? It's supposed to be a clue, isn't it?"

Grand and Rusty looked at them both from a safe distance, knowing that when Peacock got like this, Bells was the only one who could deal with him. She was also the only one who could pull him out a panic attack. As if reading their thoughts, Peacock stared breathing hard.

"Whoa, hold on there. Stop. Stop it right now." Said Bells. "You will get yourself all worked up. Please. Peacock? Peacock!"

Peacock stopped listening to her. The water all around him pressed on him. He felt like he was suffocating in an aquarium, and that another minute we would have no oxygen to breathe. He began to hyperventilate.

"Peacock, no! Not here, not right now!" Bells shook him.

He slumped to the ground and became very pale. Rusty and Grand run up to him. They all told him to slow down and to breathe, but he could no longer hear them. White noise assaulted his ears, white spots danced in front of his eyes, and the next thing he knew, everything grew blurry and dark.

When he opened his eyes, he had a hard time remembering what has happened. He sat up, feeling a soft carpet of leaves under his hands.

"Peacock! Are you feeling better?" It was Bells, kneeling next to him, smiling, a loaf of bread in her hand.

"What happened?"

"You passed out, so..."

"Bells wrote a story!" Shouted Rusty. "Look! Look!"

Peacock looked.

They were by a small pond surrounded with old oaks and maples and willows. Their leaves were a medley of yellow and orange and red. It smelled like fall and like fresh water. The air was crisp, but not nipping. Just warm enough, like it gets on sunny September days. In the pond swam the ducks. Some of them sat on the shore where Grand was feeding them bits of bread, taking huge bites in between.

Peacock blinked. "What is this place?"

"It's a duck pond." Said Bells proudly.

"A duck pond? What duck pond?"

"I wrote a quick story about ducks living in a pond feeding on bread, just one page, then we turned the corner of page one, and now we're here." She smiled. "Isn't it pretty?"

"But why ducks?" Peacock was confused.

"Because our lake doesn't have any. I always wanted to sit in a park and feed ducks, like we used to at the old house with mom and dad. When I was little. Before Maria was born." She sighed.

Peacock looked at his legs and arms in alarm. "We can't stay here. We need to get to Solaris!"

"Actually, we can." Said Grand, coming over. "It looks like we don't change here. I dunno why. Maybe because it's our own story?"

"We still need to get there."

"Don't worry, we will." Said Bells. "But first we can take a break from running around and just sit here and rest. What do you say?"

Peacock swallowed. "Do you have any more bread?"

They had a lot of bread, and cheese, and jam, and juice, the only things Bells could think about and quickly throw into the story, afraid for Peacock.

Perhaps because the pond appeared very similar to the lake they would bike to often, or because it was fall, and that is

when they dropped into the first book, they all felt homesick so much that it hurt, and after spending several leisurely hours feeding the ducks and napping in the September sun, they took a deep breath, watched Peacock draw a corner and a page number in the sand and another moment were dressed in heavy diving suits, standing in the underwater forest.

Chapter 33. The Elusive Submarine

It wasn't easy to find a submarine on the vast ocean floor. If not for Peacock's ability to take large powerful strides with his friends firmly grasped in his arms, it could've taken them forever to scour every page of the book. Instead, it took several hours and a couple trips back to the duck pond—the little story that became their refuge—to rest and eat and drink and think and prepare to get back into the cold liquid darkness. They've been there three times already and have decided this is the fourth and final time today.

Peacock set foot on the sandy floor, rousing rivulets of sand suspended in the water like in midair. He looked at his friends, they nodded back. They were in his hands, they couldn't talk, they could only trust him. He seemed to have a keen sense for spotting what he needed, going on the trail of the submarine like a dog, perhaps he was connected to it somehow because he was the one who brought the Martian to Solaris after all. It was his fault it changed into *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. It was his job to fix it.

The day was over and night made the water look and feel like ink. It was hard to see. Peacock pushed himself off the

ocean floor and propelled forward, Bells and Rusty in his left arm, Grand in his right. They swept their arms sideward and treaded water with their feet.

Suddenly ahead of them the murk lit up with faint reddish glow. It would come in bursts every few minutes or so. Peacock slowed down and they approached it cautiously. The glow grew stronger. The water became populated with all kinds of ocean life. Phosphorescent jellyfish lazily floated about. Crabs scurried back and forth on bent crooked legs. There were schools of fish that broke apart like silver sparkles when Peacock came close. And the glow changed from red to orange.

The ocean floor rose and the sand got replaced with rocks that were covered in slime of algae. Peacock's feet slipped on it and their progress up the mountain slowed down. Because it was a mountain, an underwater mountain with something shining on its peak.

The kids were so mesmerized by this, they forgot why they were here. They only wanted to get up and see what it was, this source of the light. It took them another eternity—or maybe even several eternities—to come high enough to understand that what lay ahead was not a mountain at all.

It was a volcano.

And the glow coming from it were fountains of lava spurting forth like the volcano was spitting it out of its crater. It

wasn't orange anymore either, nor yellow, it was hot blazing white. It lit up the valley below the mountain and at once Bells knew what it was. She was the only one who read the book.

Wow, she thought, it can't be.

Whoa, thought Peacock. What is that?

Holy cow! Thought Rusty. This is so cool!

Awesome, thought Grand. Just awesome.

It was, undoubtedly, a city. It was, undoubtedly, at one point in its life above the water, with streets and houses and palaces and temples and trees and an aqueduct and even a wharf to receive ships with goods and engage in a lively trade.

It was, undoubtedly, Atlantis.

They all looked at each other, their eyes glowing. Was it really what they thought it was? Could it be possible they were looking at the ruins of the ancient city of Atlantis?

Overexcited, Bells knocked on their helmets, miming the letters in the water. The boys nodded and proceeded forward, pulled by the glow of lava like by a magnetic force. It took Grand to seize their arms one by one and make faces at them and point back. Him and Peacock were the only ones in danger of changing forever, and Grand became more and more frightened. As much as he loved Don Quixote, he didn't want to skip being a teenager and everything in life that came with growing up. Don Quixote was an old man and crazy, too. Grand very much wanted to

escape the fate of having to sit in a book and enact the same mad adventures for readers over and over again.

"We need to look for the submarine!" He shouted in his helmet. Sweat trickled down his nose. He couldn't wipe it and it tickled and made him irritated. "Get back! Get back!"

Peacock yanked his arm out of Grand's hold. His eyes lit up with discovery fever. He could quickly float about the whole city, using his newly acquired Martian strength. He could really do it in no time! His friends could wait. It would only take him a few minutes. It really would.

Alarmed, Bells joined Grand in an effort to stop Peacock. Rusty fell on his legs to help them. Peacock shook him off and stubbornly mimed back at them that he would be quick as a flash. With that he took off, gliding down, his friends staring at his diminishing figure, at a loss of what to do.

They exchanged helpless glances and traced Peacock's movements down below, a dark figure that slimmed down into the dot and disappeared out of sight completely.

That is when they heard a rumble of an engine.

They hid behind a boulder and witness the submarine pass by, land a good distance away, and two diving suits emerge from its belly and make their way toward the volcano, moving slowly in the beam of the light projected from the submarine.

"Peacock!" They all shouted inside their helmets on repeat, as if he could somehow hear them. There was nothing they could do but wait and see what would happen. The two men approached the volcano, climbed up its steep slope not too far away from them, spent some time gazing down at it and retreated. When they stepped down on the rocky ocean floor, Peacock finally appeared, waving to everyone, as if saying, "Glorious daisies! Guys, you wouldn't believe the stuff I've seen!"

They grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him so he could see what they saw. Two men climbed onboard the submarine and it started its propeller. It idled slowly, warming up.

Peacock's heart was jumping out of his chest. He scooped up Bells and the boys and drifted downward, just in time to see the submarine take off.

Peacock swam after it, but he was no match for the powerful motor. Another few minutes, and they would lose it. He thought and thought and, since there wasn't much time to think at all, mimed to Bells that he was going after it on its own. Despite their silent protests and swinging arms and shaking heads and even Grand's fist blow to his helmet, Peacock dropped them and in another moment rushed forward into the stream of turbulent water, grabbed hold of one of the blades and wrapped himself around it.

The blade beat him around and around.

Peacock closed his eyes and concentrated on crushing it and that's when the image of the squid wrapping itself over the propeller sprung up in his mind. He thought he could extend his arms and legs in the same manner, if only he wasn't in the diving suit. He'd have to pierce it. He thought about the Martians moving about freely underwater. They were machines, they didn't need oxygen to breathe. He was almost a machine himself. Could he risk breaking through the suit and letting freezing ocean water consume him? How long would he last? Long enough to pull the submarine to the ocean floor, draw a corner and a page number and fall into the War of the Worlds, into London, where he could breathe?

He managed to slow the propeller down.

The submarine looked like a fish with a pointed steel nose, four serrated spine-ridges along its length going along the top, the bottom, the left and the right sides, and propeller encased on the tailfin upon which Peacock hung at the moment, preventing the it from moving.

It struggled. Mechanical screeches assaulted his ears even through the helmet. He shifted, lost his grip for just a second, and the propeller spun into action with new ferocity, ripping a hole in Peacock's diving suit. Cold water gushed through the tear and Peacock had barely time to inhale whatever remained of the air before he was submerged.

For one horrible second he thought he was going to die. He was paralyzed with terror and felt the oncoming surge of panic. This second seemed to stretch into minutes. Somehow he glimpsed his friends standing on the ocean floor underneath, waving.

What the hell, thought Peacock. I've got nothing to lose now have I? And he set to work.

His arms and legs broke through the suit, elongated, and wrapped around the tail part of the submarine, crushing the propeller completely and sinking the whole thing down. Sand particles rose in a cloud. The water pressure hammered on his eyes and eardrums and every inch of his skin as if liquid cement has been dumped on him from a passing truck. He moved quickly, holding his breath, feeling more and more lightheaded.

He didn't see Bells and Rusty and Grand hovering above him, frightened out of their minds.

He traced a corner, then the number, then reached for the submarine when someone rudely pushed away his arm.

A fierce-looking man in a diving suit stood above him, a harpoon in his hand. It was Captain Nemo. Bells and the boys flew on him, pulling the harpoon aside, thinking he was going to attack Peacock. Peacock peeled the corner of the page and in another moment sent the submarine tumbling down into London, but before he could follow it, to see it safely to the Martians and say his sorrys and thanks and goodbyes, the human part in him

cried out for air, his lungs protested, he opened his mouth and took a gulp of water.

"Peacock!" Bells screamed inside her helmet. "Peacock, no!" She shook him. Her heart pounded in her ears. Her hands shook and her legs didn't listen to her.

She raised her eyes at Grand and Rusty who were on their knees, each in their own way trying to revive their friend.

Peacock's eyes were closed. His face was expressionless. His periwinkle hair shimmied like strands of colorful algae. His skin looked almost blue, reflecting the body of water around, and they saw how the silver in it began to face.

Furiously, Bells began tracing in the sand the corner. Her gloved hands wouldn't move fast enough, and she silently screamed and slammed on Grand's feet until he crouched down to help her. Rusty finally joined them. Together they lifted the slippery page and slid inside their new favorite spot where nothing much happened, except the ducks quacking and demanding more bread and yellow leaves falling off the maples and floating on the surface of the pond.

"Peacock! Peacock! Can you hear me?" Bells shook him and yelled so close to his ear, she was sure if he did hear her, he'd probably be deaf by now. She tried to remember the first aid motions, and, without really knowing what she was doing, pressed on his heart and blew air in his mouth, to no avail. She

didn't mind, she didn't give up. Some kind of a force kept her going.

Grand, no face on him, bent over and nearly fainted, and Rusty danced around like on a hot frying pan, shrieking something that sounded like, "Help! Help!" or maybe it was, "Yelp! Yelp!" He was incoherent.

After what felt like a thousand forevers Bells stopped and fell flat on the ground, staring at the sky above and sobbing loudly. It wasn't fun anymore. They have lost a friend. They have lost Peacock. And it was her fault.

"He died! He died! Oh my God! Oh my God! Peacock died! What are we going to do!" Rusty was beyond himself, hopping and running around and tripping on a root and falling to the ground, pounding it with fists and crying into dirt.

Grand stood sullenly over his friend, quiet tears rolling down his cheeks, when he noticed something peculiar. Peacock's skin color shifted imperceptibly. It kept losing its metallic shine and looked more and more normal. Pallid and clammy, but normal nonetheless.

"Bells." He touched her shoulder.

"Don't touch me." She croaked.

"Bells, please."

"Leave me alone, Grand, leave me alone." She rolled to her side and curled up like a baby. A couple curious ducks waddled

up to her and studied her with their shiny beady eyes, waiting for bread. She didn't have the strength to wave them off.

"Bells!" Said Grand louder. "I need you to look at this."

Bells sat up. "What?"

Grand ambled to Rusty, pulled him up, wiped his face, peered him in the eyes, and said, "Come. Look at this."

They gathered around Peacock who lied flat on the ground by the pond so close, one of his hands slipped between two round lily leaves that cluttered the shore. His face wasn't silver anymore. And yet when Bells put her hand to his nose and on his chest to check, she couldn't detect breathing or any trace of a heartbeat.

She looked at Grand. "What does this mean?" A glimmer of hope began growing in her chest and she wanted to squash it before it got too big.

"I don't think," Grand swallowed, "I don't think he is dead."

"He isn't?" Gaspd Rusty. "How can you tell?"

"He keeps changing, isn't he?" Said Grand, more encouraged by their hopeful stares than by his own conclusions. "If he was dead, he wouldn't change at all. Corpses don't change for the better, they only rot and then worms eat out their soft parts—like, first they go for the eyes, then—"

Bells touched his hand. "Are you saying, when he changes back to himself, he will come alive?"

"I hope. I do, I hope very much." Said Grand, and suddenly he sprung up and thrust his fist into the sky as if it held a sword and shouted, "I will avenge my fallen friend! I will go back to that abominable place and I will seek that evil villain who dared to raise his hand on the beloved Prince Peter and I will cut off his limbs one by one, and then I will slice off his head and pin his body to the ocean floor and leave him for the fish to strip his bones clean!"

Bells and Rusty exchanged a worried glance.

Grand sounded so much like Don Quixote and looked so much like him now, it was hard to see their friend inside him, and at once it struck them that they might lose him any moment, the Snow Queen's voice ringing in their heads, 'You don't have much time left.'

How much did they have? Was Peacock alive or not? What were they to do now, how could they revive him? Could they revive him? Should one of them stay with him and another accompany Grand on his journey to The Golden Pot to find the student Anselmus and drag him back to Spain to La Mancha and the windmills? Thoughts raced through Bells mind.

"Should we split?" She asked Rusty.

"Split? How?" Rusty grabbed on to her words, sensing hope.

"I stay with Peacock and you go help Grand find Anselmus."

"I was just thinking that." Said Rusty, and he was. He couldn't stand the sight of Grand saying mad things, and he has decided to overcome his fear and tell Bells his idea, but she was first, so now he felt a flood of relief. He didn't have to face her wrath.

Grand was back to himself, for a moment. He met Rusty's eyes. "I was gone." He said. "I was almost gone. I'm scared." His chin shook. "I don't want this. I want to stay myself. I want..."

"Shut up!" Rusty held him by the shoulders. "You will. I know you will. Just hold on, hold on, okay? We will go there and I will help you. Right, Bells? We can do it, right?" He looked to her for confirmation.

"Yes, you can. Because I believe in you. I will stay here and try to help Peacock. I'm the boss, remember?" She held back tears at the thought that Peacock was their idea man, and now she had to come up with ideas on her own. "I command you to go and take care of yourself and I will take care of Peacock. Rusty, you're the scout. Your job is to scout Anselmus. Look for him in the Archivarius' house. And don't come back until you find him and return him to Don Quixote book, deal?"

"Deal." Said Rusty.

"Deal." Said Grand. "Are you going to be okay here? What about Peacock."

"I will figure something out. Now go. Go!"

They went.

Bells lowered her face in her hands and for a few moments didn't dare to look at Peacock. Then she did. His skin returned to normal and still, he wasn't breathing.

"Please don't be dead, please don't be dead."

She agonized over several decisions, and finally settled on one, the scariest and the most logical. She drew a corner and a number, lifted it and cried into it, "Little Prince! Are you there?"

When he clambered out, she explained to him her idea, he nodded and took a vigil by Peacock while she slid into the story that gave her the fright of her life.

Chapter 34. The Dead Counsel

The richly decorated rooms opened up for her one after another, from blue to purple to green, then orange, white, and violet, and, finally, black. It looked the same as when they left it the last time. Bloody red stained-glass windows, scarlet curtains, reddish glow. The giant clock ticking off minutes. The dead Prince prostrate on the floor with a dagger in his hand. And above him, the Red Death cloaked in a red hood, staring at Bells from behind its terrible white mask. Bells had moments before the crowd surged in and took over the scene.

"When you have to figure out death, the best thing to do is to talk to Death itself, right? Right." The words gave her courage. She knew this wasn't real. She knew the Red Death must've been yet another nice fellow just doing his job in an Edgar Allan Poe's book, but thinking this didn't make her less afraid.

"Hello, uh, Red Death?" She said and took a step forward.

The Red Death didn't move.

"Hi, my name is Bells. I hate to be so forward, and I know you're not supposed to, but I really need your help. You see—"

The crowd of guests halted in the doorway, surveying their dead host and the Red Death standing above him and a strange looking girl in jeans and a hoodie talking to what was supposed to be the plague itself.

"Err—" Bells looked them over. "I'm so sorry to interrupt the flow of the story on your page, but do you mind waiting a bit behind the doors while I have a word with the Red Death here?"

They stared at her, then at the Red Death, then at her again.

"Okay, this completely unacceptable." The dead Prince rose from the floor, the dagger still in his hand, and glared at Bells. "What do you think you're doing, young lady, barging into our book uninvited? Do you know how much distress you and your friends have caused us last time? It took us hours to recover, hours!"

The crowd murmured their agreement.

The Red Death stood still.

"We were in a very bad shape afterwards, and we had to perform for the readers. We don't get a break here, you know?"

"I understand that." Said Bells. "I'm sorry about that. Sounds like you need a vacation?"

"Ah!" The Prince theatrically dipped his head back and slapped his forehead. "I can't deal with this right now. I can't! I can't!" And he stormed out of the room.

"Dear Red Death. I need you to come with me to another story. If you wouldn't mind? I need you to look at something and give me advice."

The Red Death flipped back the hood and took off the mask. Underneath it a pale young man with a curled up nose and freckled face stammered, "I...I...I'm not going anywhere. No-no. The...the...the last time I went, they...they...beat me up. And for what, I'm asking?" He stood straight, looking very offended. "What did I do? I'm not doing nothing. I'm doing my job. Do you think it's pleasant kill...kill...killing people off like flies? Not at all. I get nightmares from this."

"Oh God." Bells sighed. "I promise it won't be anything like that. I don't know what books you went to before, but this is a story I wrote, and it's very simple, really. There is just this pond, some trees around the pond, and ducks, and we feed them bread." She reached out for Red Death's hand, and he jumped away from her like she was made of liquid fire.

Bells started getting angry. "My friend is dying, okay? Don't you get it? I need help! I don't care about your stupid rules, I need you to tell me how to bring him back to life!"

"Oh, that's n...n...not me." The Red death shook his head.
"That's not my department. I don't raise the dead, I—"

"He is not dead!" Shouted Bells. "And your cowardice is frankly getting on my nerves." She glared at the crowd of guests who peered at her uneasily from behind their masks.

"I can't believe this. This is bullshit." She said it with gusto and it made her feel better. "Whatever. I will go ask someone else."

One lady from the throng of onlookers tore off her mask, flung it at the floor, and marched to the Red Death. "You coward. The little lady needs help, didn't you hear? Don't you even think about coming over for tea to me now." She swished her skirts in indignation, grabbed Bells by the elbow and walked her to the window.

"Don't mind him. He is a lost cause. I know whom you can ask. Let's go, I'll show you."

Before Bells could protest, the lady peeled off the corner of the window and in another moment they stood in a shadowy stone hall with a feeble candlelight flickering in the distance.

"Oh God, no," whispered Bells. "Not here again. I will be sick."

"Boulotte!" Called the lady. "Boulotte! Come here a minute." She pulled Bells behind her, obviously familiar with the place.

Bells chased the images out of her head, forcing herself not to guess where they were going and why and failing miserably.

They have intercepted Boulotte as she was sticking the key into the door and cracking it open, getting ready for the cry and the faint and the drama that was supposed to go with it. She flinched and flung her veil off her face and looked the lady over with an exasperated look of annoyance.

"Marge, what do you want again? If it's one of those parties, I'm not going. You know this page always leaves me exhausted. And who is this?" She peered down at Bells who couldn't help herself and peaked into the open door, to see exactly what she expected to see.

There, neatly impaled on the hooks, hung bodies of five dead Bluebeard's wives. As soon as they heard the talking, they raised their heads and Bells thought she would faint right there and then and couldn't figure out how she didn't.

"Ladies? My humble apologies for the interruption. You said you were rather tired of your hanging routine lately, so I thought this must be the perfect opportunity for you. This girl needs help. I know how much you love to break the rules, all of you." She winked at them.

"Oh, we get to get out? Oh, how lovely!" One of the dead wives clapped in joy, her deathly looking face stretching into a grimace of pleasure and anticipation.

"Don't get too excited." Said the other one. "Why would we help her? To get caught? No, thanks. I'd rather stay here."

"Oh, please, Eleonore, don't be such a bore," said the third one, hopped off the hook and helping the rest of them to safely drop to the floor. Marring their shoes and the bottoms of their white gowns in the spilled blood, they plodded over and surrounded Bells who could hardly breathe. She tried to say something and all she heard was some sort of a gurgle.

The dead wives smiled.

"Don't be alarmed. We would be happy to help." Said the one who clapped. "What is it that you need?"

"My..." Bells cleared her throat, "my friend...is sort of dead and sort of not. He is sort of in between." She tried to think what to say next.

"Is he one of those naughty boys who called us 'just dead bodies'? Imagine that," she turned to the others, "he said there was nothing to be afraid of and that we're 'just dead bodies'!" Eleonore scoffed.

"Oh, Eleonore, no need to get all worked up like that. I personally think that you look very scary. Horrific, as a matter of fact. You're much more than just a dead body."

"You think so?" Eleonore lifted a corner of her dead mouth which looked almost like a smile.

This banter brought Bells to her senses. She rolled her eyes. "Dear ladies, I'm sorry, but I need to interrupt you. You either *can* help me and can come with me, or you can't help we and cannot come with me. If you can't come with me, then perhaps you can tell me who can help. As soon as you do, I'll be out of your hair so you can continue being awesomely dead for your readers on those hooks over there." She nodded at them.

The dead wives looked hurt.

"Of course we can."

"We can help."

"Show us where to go."

"All right, let's do it." Bells took the candle from Boulotte and drew a corner and the number one with dripping wax.

"Well, you're in good hands. I'll be going then." Said the lady from the Masque of the Red Death and peeled the corner off the wall and stepped inside.

Bells lifted the page and accompanied with five dead women and one living one emerged next to the Little Prince sitting by the pond, feeding ducks.

"How is he?" She asked, looking into Peacock's face. Nothing changed. He lay where she left him.

"I have told your friend lots of stories. I imagine it is rather boring laying on the ground and not being able to move," said the Little Prince and rose to his feet. His cape was wet from sitting on the grass. "I have to go. I need to water my rose."

"Okay, go. Thank you very much." Said Bells.

The Little Prince flung up the edge of the pond and was gone.

The dead ladies in nightgowns circled Peacock, oohing and aahing, as did Boulotte, and after a good minute of this Bells grew impatient. "Any ideas?" She said.

"What happened to the poor lad?" Asked Boulotte.

"Well, we have disrupted a few books by dragging a few characters from one book to another and—"

There was a collective gasp of horror.

"And," continued Bells pointedly, "when we were fixing it, Peacock was catching this submarine from the Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea—he was already changing into a Martian, you see, from The War of the Worlds, I mean, that's where he got the Martian in the first place. By accident, of course."

Five dead wives and one living one blinked at her, puzzled.

"Anyway, I have no time to explain it all now," said Bells.

"We were in the ocean, under water, and Peacock got the

submarine and he sent it to the right book and then gulped water and, well..." She trailed off.

"Oh, poor child," said Boulotte.

Bells bristled. "Look, I don't really need your sympathy right now, I need help. Do you know how to help? What can I do to make him alive again? We want to go home, you know. We would very much like to." And as she said it, her heart sunk. What if she didn't succeed in reviving Peacock? What if they never found their way back?

The women conversed quietly, then looked at Bells. One of them spoke, the dead one. "We never had a reader die in a book before, we do apologize for not knowing what to do."

"Why did you come here, then?" Shouted Bells.

"Oh, we couldn't resist. It's very uncomfortable hanging on the hooks, and it's not every day that children fall into our books for so long a time."

"Are you kidding me?" Bells sat down on the ground, shaking her head.

"We want to help you, dear maiden. We do!"

She didn't pay them any more attention.

Feeling incredibly guilty, the dead wives left Boulotte to watch over Bells and sprung into action. One by one they visited the books where our friends have been and one by one they dragged everyone they could think of to the one page story about

the ducks and the pond and the yellow trees, to see if anyone could come up with an idea.

Bells watched this frenzy in some kind of a hazy stupor.

First came the headless horseman from The Headless Horseman book, of course, but without his horse. He gently placed his severed head on the ground, leaned over Peacock, contemplated, shrugged his shoulders, picked up his head and took off.

Next were Moomintrolls with the magic hat. They tried fitting Peacock in it. Instead, one of the ducks flew in and fluttered out as a white swan, startling all the other ducks but being rather very pleased with itself, admiring its reflection in the pond.

Then came Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet. Winnie-the-Pooh thanked Bells for fixing their story and then tried sticking a little bit of honey into Peacock's mouth. It didn't work, and they left, very sad and asking everyone to please tell them the good news as soon as something good happened.

There was Golem who under the pressure of shouting dead wives succumbed in taking out the piece of paper with the magic formula written in his mouth and putting it between Peacock's lips, and Mary Poppins with her magical umbrella, and the caterpillar who blew smoke into Peacock's face. Dracula wondered if letting blood would help and was promptly chased out of the pond story.

Finally, it was Pippi and Sancho and three Roc chicks that suggested someone should go fetch the Martians. It was their book after all that was disturbed. They would know what to do. They should've.

While the chicks huddled over the trees, frightened by the ducks that quacked at them angrily, thinking their came to eat all their bread, Sancho saddled his donkey, turned a page, and after a painful hour brought back first a tentacle, then another, then the whole Martian scrambled out, looking very apologetic for his enormous size.

"Oh, bloody hell." He said. "What are you all doing here?"

"Where have you been?" Rounded Bells on him. "We've been waiting for you for an eternity!"

"Sorry, sorry. We were busy blasting down half a London, you know, very tedious job. I apologize. What's wrong with Peacock?"

Bells told him.

They all waited for the Martian to say something.

He looked confused. "Why, he never did it properly, did he? He never came into the book, did he?"

"What?" Said Bells.

"Well, it's simple, really. You jump in the book and you take someone out, so you have to jump in the book to put someone back in, ain't it? Simple logic, no? Did I say something wrong?"

Bells was frying him with her stare. Without a word she drew a corner, a number, grabbed Peacock and dropped with him into London streets under laser fire, smack in the middle of the fleeing crowd. As soon as they touched the ground, Peacock opened his eyes, took a breath, saw what was happening, saw Bells, and yelled, "Are you insane? Let's get out of here!"

Bells couldn't even be mad at him for her joy. She hugged him and together they scrambled into a back alley, found a corner, and were just scrambling to the pond, when a sheet turf lifted and out climbed Rusty.

"Rusty! Rusty!" Bells shouted, but then she saw his face.

"Grand! Grand is gone." Rusty was beyond himself with distress.

"What do you mean, gone? Gone where?"

He ran up to Bells and to Peacock and shook their hands, screaming his head off. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I tried my best, I swear!"

"What happened?" Said Bells, her feet going numb.

"He changed. He'd Don Quixote forever now."

Chapter 35. The True Friends

Rusty explained to them how they got in The Golden Pot, found Archivarius and asked him if Anselmus was there. For some reason Archivarius wanted to slam the door in their faces, so Grand started fighting him, thinking he was an evil giant, then Archivarius turned into a salamander and stuck Grand inside a glass bottle. And this whole time Rusty tried to get him out, then he finally calmed Archivarius down and told him everything. Archivarius freed Grand, but Grand wasn't himself anymore.

"He wouldn't recognize me. He sent me back to you—he called you Princes and Princesses—to give you his farewells or something, then he turned around and peeled a corner and left." Sniffed Rusty.

"Oh no!" Bells clasped her face. She didn't know what else to say and looked at Peacock, terrified.

"Yeah. I saw Sancho greet him. I peeked under, until the page closed, and then—" Now it was Rusty's turn to notice the change. "Peacock!" He cried. "Bells, you did it! Peacock! You're alive!"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Peacock was suddenly puzzled.

"Dude, we thought you died!"

"What?"

"You don't remember?" Asked Bells.

"I don't remember what?"

"After you got the submarine? Don't you remember what happened?"

"I dunno. We got here and I took a nap?" Peacock scratched his head.

"You didn't breathe!" Exclaimed Rusty. "Your heart wasn't beating! We all freaked out!"

"You freaked out." Said Bells crossly. "I gave him first aid, contrary to some who were jumping up and down in hysterics."

"No way. You cried too. You did, you did. I saw it."

Bells turned beet red. "Leave it to Rusty to embarrass a friend." She swirled around to stalk off.

"Hey, I'm sorry." Rusty caught her arm. "I didn't mean it."

"Yes, you did."

"You cried for me? For real?" Peacock was very much interested in this detail.

"And you wouldn't?" Snapped Bells. "I thought you died!"

"Gee, Bells. That is awesome." He grinned. "That makes me feel special. Hey, did I really look dead?" He asked Rusty.

"You did. You were blue in the face, I swear."

"Tantalizing tulips." Said Peacock. "I wish I could see that."

"You wouldn't move either. Like, your arms and legs were limp, and when Bells tried to give you this breathing thing, you know, the first aid thing when you breathe into the other person's mouth—"

"You *kissed* me?" Asked Peacock.

Now Bells positively wanted to vanish. "It was not a kiss, okay? It was first aid, you idiot. I would..." She wanted to say, 'I would never kiss you,' but that wasn't true, because of course she would kiss Peacock. She rather liked his smashing looks, his colorful hair, and his smirk. She didn't exactly think about kissing him, but the idea crossed her mind when him and Rusty and even Grand made smooching noises at her, after she freshly scolded them for something. They knew it was the only way to get her off their case and embarrass her to no end so that she'd finally leave them in peace. Before emptying a volley of choice curse words on their heads, she'd see Peacock's stretched out lips and fleetingly wonder what it would feel like to kiss them, then would flee, enraged at the boys for taunting her and at herself for thinking it. She should be thinking of other things, scientific things, like saving near-extinct insects, for example. Or books, reading books.

She thought of Grand and losing him forever into a book and her heart sunk. She forgot her own petty worries.

Rusty was urgently whispering something into Peacock's ear whose face changed from derisive to wondrous.

"Did you really save my life?" Asked Peacock Bells.

"I didn't do anything." She said. "It was the Martians."

"The Martians?"

"How did you come up with that?" Asked Rusty.

"I just went to ask them all, one by one." Said Bells. "I was hoping one of them could help."

"I con...con...confirm that statement." The Red Death clambered out of a corner by the pond and strolled to them.

"The Red Death!" Said Bells. "So you care after all?"

"Ah!" Peacock grabbed Rusty, Rusty grabbed Peacock. They stared at the nearing figure in horror.

"Hello, dear Bells. No...no...nothing to be afraid of." Said the Red Death to the boys. He felt very guilty for not helping Bells, and back in his book everyone gave him a good scolding for it. "I just ca...ca...came to see how you're getting on. Looks like you're well."

"Who, me?" Peacock unfroze.

"Well then, I'll be off." The Red Death backed off under Bells furious stare.

"I must say, it's very nice of you to come by." She said.

"I'll be off, then." The Red Death mumbled and flipped a corner and sunk into the ground back to his book.

"What the hell was that?" Asked Peacock.

"Ah, it's nothing. He was one of them."

"One of whom?"

"I went to see different characters, I told you."

"And?"

"None of them knew anything, so then they all came here one by one looking at you. Then the Martians came. They, well, one of them, said I should drag you into the War of the World to complete the process. Because when you snatched the submarine and tossed it into the book, but then you gulped water and, well..."

"And you turned blue, man!" Said Rusty. "Like, blue like a corpse! We thought you died!"

"Okay, okay, I heard that already. So, wait. How did you bring me back to, I don't know, back to normal?"

But before Bells could answer, he got it.

"Oh, is that why we were in London?"

"Yes."

"I get it now."

It seemed to Bells that the boys forgot about Grand, and it made her furious. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to get Grand back."

"Wait, what do you mean, what about us?" Peacock was hurt.

"Are we not friends?"

"Yeah!" Said Rusty.

"What, you want to come with me?"

"Is that even a question?"

"That's what friends do!"

Bells appeared thoughtful for a moment. "I could live in Spain." She said quietly.

"What?" Peacock frowned.

"I said, I could live in Spain. My mom is from Spain." She looked up to them, her eyes a little misty.

The boys stood silent. They looked at each other, then at Bells.

"Hey, Spain has a nice climate. It's always hot there, isn't it?" Asked Peacock Rusty.

"I dunno." Rusty swallowed. "Does it have trees?"

"Of course it does! Gee, Rusty, you astound me sometimes."

"Sorry."

They stood awkwardly, each thinking their own thoughts, thinking back school, their houses, and moms and dads and even annoying siblings. Their bikes left alone by the lake. Their streets, their city. And each of them shrunk a little at the thought of never seeing it again. Not once.

"Who is with me?" Said Bells and extended her hand.

"I am." Said Peacock, and put his on hers.

"Me too." Said Rusty, and joined them.

They stood for a minute, without saying anything. Then Bells said, "Okay. That's it. Enough moping. Let's go."

She drew a corner and off they went into the arid winds and sands and creaking windmills of seventeenth century La Mancha.

Chapter 36. The Fruitless Quest

The windmills stood against the azure sky just like they stood before. Whitewashed giants with blades wheeled around by the wind. Bells was sure this was the page they got on before, which meant that in another minute or so Don Quixote and Sancho would surface at the end of the road and come upon the hill. She stood facing in that direction, her pony tail whipped by the torrid wind, hot grit flying in her face.

"What's the plan?" Said Peacock.

"I have no plan. Do you have a plan?" Said Bells.

"Nope. No plan. That's a bad thing, right? We need a plan."

"Who needs a plan? We'll figure something out!" Cried Rusty, eyeing the windmills with familiar interest.

"Oh no, you're not." Said Bells. "Don't even think about it."

"What? Who says I'm thinking about anything? I'm not, I swear." Lied Rusty. He unsuccessfully tried to hawk up a gob on snot to play around with it, but his throat and nose were so dry, nothing came out. He glanced at the windmills with obvious longing, then glanced at Bells and decided against it.

They stood in silence first for one forever, then for two forevers, then for three forevers. Finally they sat at the edge of the road. Still nothing. The hot air simmered in the distance. Cicadas chirped inside the brown patches of grass. Dust flew up at the wind twirled the windmill blades. No other life was present.

"Wasn't he supposed to show up by now?" Asked Peacock.

"I'm thirsty." Whined Rusty.

"Shut up, okay? You're not alone."

"Both of you shut up, right now." Said Bells. "I can't stand this pointless bickering. Just because you will get upset about the lack of water, it won't magically drop on your head, so stop. Besides, it sounds childish. Like, I can't believe I'm friends with you two." She crossed her arms.

"Girls." Whispered Rusty.

"I know." Echoed Peacock.

Rusty grinned. It wasn't every day that Peacock was on his side and, furthermore, even got his joke.

They sat quietly for another few minutes, their lips dry from the heat, all of them restless and wanting to get up and do something.

"There! There!" Rusty jumped up.

"Where?" Bells scrambled to standing.

"I don't see him!" Said Peacock.

"I'm kidding." Said Rusty.

"You...you..." Bells was looking for an appropriate word.

"Listen, we're not getting anywhere by sitting here, okay?"
Said Rusty. "I propose we go across the book and look for him."

"And what if we miss him? What if he's just over that
hill?" Countered Bells.

"I can go alone." Offered Rusty.

"No, no going alone anywhere anymore." Said Bells. "We
should've stuck together, then nothing of this would've
happened." She looked at the boys. "Okay, idea man, what do you
propose?"

"Actually," said Peacock, "I think that's a great idea,
Rusty."

Rusty beamed.

"Let's go look for him. Might as well enjoy some parts of
the story. I never read it, did you?"

"Nope." They shook their heads.

Encouraged, Rusty drew a corner in the sand. "Any
particular page?"

"I dunno, just pick something far away, like add a hundred
or two or something?"

Rusty did. He turned the page and they plopped down on the
polished stone floor of some mansion clearly belonging to
someone very rich, with colonnades and stone vases and gilded

furniture. Voices trailed off from a large room at the end of the hall. They treaded quietly and peeked inside.

A lavishly dressed man and woman sat in two thrones.

"That's the duke and the duchess." Whispered Rusty.

Bells raised her brows. "How do you know?"

"Grand told me."

"She looks kind of square, like the duchess in Wonderland."

"Totally." Said Peacock.

The duke and the duchess were observing a scene of a veiled woman telling a story to two men sitting in chairs opposite her and with their backs to the doorway.

"That's them!" Said Rusty.

The man to the left nodded at something and stroked his mustache. For a moment they could see his profile.

"Don Quixote!" Whispered Rusty rather loudly.

"Shhh!" Bells put a finger to her lips.

To his right sat Sancho Panza. And around them in a row of chairs reclined about a dozen women in long flowing dresses and every one of them with a veiled face. Then the woman who was telling the story lifted her veil, as if to make a point to what she just said.

Our friends gasped.

The woman had a beard. A real flowing beard, quite long and lustrous. Obviously she was taking good care of it. Aside from

that, she was rather beautiful. She motioned to the other women, called them 'duennas,' and one by one they stood and lifted their veils to astounded shrieks of both Don Quixote and Sancho.

"Bearded women." Said Bells. "Okay."

"Dude, that's cool!"

"No, thanks." Said Bells. "I don't think I would like to grow one. I very much like my face without a beard. And this is obviously not a good page to talk to Grand."

"Is that what we want to do, talk to him?" Said Peacock. "Why not just snatch him and bring him to the duck pond and figure it out from there?"

"That won't do any good. You will only traumatize him."

"Traumatize him? Please."

"Yes! He's more comfortable in his own environment."

"So you do have a plan?"

"I don't. I just have a feeling."

"Guys, guys. Grand said that his mom said—"

Bells and Peacock rolled their eyes.

"No, listen. She said, trust your gut. We should trust our guts. Look." He pointed to the wall behind him where a clear corner stood out with a number on it, as if scratched in the marble by a disobedient child. "Let's go to some earlier page in the book. This looks like one."

They agreed and stepped through and found themselves in front of a house in the court covered by packed dirt and a man and a woman throwing books into a fire where a bunch more were already scorched and burned down to their spines.

"What are you doing?" Cried Bells and run up to them and started kicking the books out of the pile. She forgot she is in a book. She forgot this must've been something Miguel de Cervantes has written in his book and the characters merely did what they were supposed to. She pushed them away when they tried to stop her and kicked at the fire until her sneakers started smoldering.

"How can you!" She said.

"Listen, we're just doing our job." Said the plump looking man.

"I don't care if it's your job or not, you can't burn books!"

"Bells, Bells." Peacock tapped on her shoulder.

"Get away from me." She waved him off. "Why are you doing this?" She demanded.

"I'll tell you why." Said the woman, arms akimbo, her face annoyed. "These books made our master mad!"

"That's utter bullshit!" Said Bells. "Books can't make anyone mad!"

"Oh, yes, they can. These books are about chivalry and they have put all these chivalrous ideas into the mind of our beloved Alonso, and look what happened to him! He went on ridiculous quests! Fighting windmills! If here were my son and I was his mother, I'd give him a good dose of beating." And with this, she threw in another tome that took on fire at once.

"Bells." Both Peacock and Rusty pulled her away.

"I can't look at this." She said. "Where is Grand?"

"He is sleeping. Over there." Rusty pointed to one of the windows. "I just checked."

"This is awful. Just awful." Said Bells. "Okay, let's keep searching."

They did. They turned page after page, chasing Don Quixote, sometimes coming close, other times completely missing him. It felt like either he didn't want to be found, or the book didn't want them to take him away, or something else, but they always got on the wrong page at the wrong time.

Exhausted and dispirited, they were sitting in some meadow by the road, waiting for him to show up. The sun beat upon their faces and they considered abandoning their quest in favor of spending the night by the pond and starting their search tomorrow. Time wasn't an issue anymore, or so they hoped, when Peacock had a sudden idea.

"What if..." He said and trailed off.

Bells perked up. "What if what?"

"Tell us! Tell us!" Rusty was all ears.

"What if..." Said Peacock slowly, thinking out loud. "What if we could make him somehow remember who he really is?"

"And how would we do that?"

"Bells, why did you write that story about the ducks?"

"I," she contemplated, "I thought about the things I missed, and this was one of them."

"Well then," said Peacock, getting more and more agitated, "what if we could make him miss things?"

"What do you mean?" Bells looked at him with hope.

"Bikes!" Cried Rusty.

"Bikes?" They looked at him.

"Yes, bikes! He loves riding bikes!"

"I'm getting it, I'm getting it. Rusty, you're a genius!"

Bells scooped him into a hug. Rusty blinked at Peacock, who shrugged his shoulders, which could only mean, 'Girls.', a statement that had a million meanings in it instantly recognizable by any boy.

"That's it, that's it." Said Bells. "Let's go!"

"Let's go where?" Said Peacock.

"To the duck pond! That journal Pippi gave me, it's there. I will write a new story. About bikes." Her face lit up at this idea, and the boys trailed after her, until they emerged by the

yellowing maple, sat on the warm grass and watched Bells open the journal, chew on the pencil, and then starting to jot down words at lightning speed, turning page after page, until a couple hours later she breathlessly proclaimed, "Done!"

"Only took you forever." Said Peacock.

Bells gave him the look. "Here, read it. Give me your opinion." She thrust the journal into their hands and turned away. "Don't tell me anything until you're done."

"Okay." Said Rusty.

"Okay." Said Peacock.

They bent their heads over the story and began to read.

Chapter 37. The Bike Story

"The world had corners. All kinds of corners. Dark creepy corners, dusty corners, corners full of spider webs—not that Bells was afraid of spiders, she wasn't, but we'll come back to that later. What was it again? Ah, corners. We were talking about corners. Secret forgotten corners (ohh, are you scared yet?). Hidden corners. Corners to be discovered, like pages of a book that hasn't been read. Hasn't even been written. Waiting to be opened and fallen inside. If you knew where to look, of course. Bells knew. And didn't. She didn't know she knew, she was about to find out.

'Piss it!' She yelled at Peacock."

"Wait!" Said Peacock, shutting the journal and looking at Bells.

"Hey, I'm still reading!" Said Rusty.

"Hang on, Rusty. Bells?"

"What?" She said.

"You're just describing the day we skipped school!"

"Of course I am. It's the story that brought us here, right? It will make Grand remember."

"But I thought you were going to write a story about us on bikes?"

"I have written about us on bikes. Just keep reading. You'll see."

"Wicked." Said Rusty with a grin.

They settled to read some more.

"Bells furiously pedaled past, head high, dark pony tail whipping in the wind.

'Girls.' Scoffed Peacock.

'I know, right?' Came from Rusty.

'Shut up.'"

Peacock looked uneasily at Rusty. "Do I always sound like this?"

"Yeah, you do."

"Gee. I'm sorry."

"No problem, dude. We love you anyway." Rusty grinned.

Peacock flushed at the next words.

"Rusty only shrugged. He always shrugged when Peacock scolded him. It was better not to argue with Peacock."

"Man, I'm sorry."

"It's okay!" Now Rusty was irritated. "Can we just, you know, get on?"

"Okay, okay."

"His grandmother Agnieszka told him not to. 'Never argue with your friends, Russell. You hear me?' She'd shake her veined manicured finger at him. That is, before pugs Teeny and Weeny would yap to her attention. It was no time to think about grandmothers, however. It was time to enjoy skipping school. The day before last of the fifth grade, to be specific.

Rusty straightened his shoulders. 'Girls. Right?' He tried on Grand."

Both Peacock and Rusty sniggered at this.

"Grand didn't say anything. He pedaled last in the group, his jiggling girdle giving him trouble. His white socks grey from the dust kicked up by tires. His face red, sweaty, concentrated. Nothing ever was easy for Grand. It took him effort, deep thought, and lengthy pessimistic ruminations, mostly picked up from his mother, a funeral home cosmetologist. He was often envious of Peacock and his two dads and their nonchalant style of life, but kept it to himself."

"He is?" Whispered Peacock, shocked.

"Yeah," said Rusty, "he's just afraid to tell you."

"You know this too?" Asked Peacock Bells.

"Obviously. I've written about it, didn't I? What do you think, I have invented it or something?"

Peacock sighed. He was afraid to read further.

"'Here!' Cried Bells, turned into a dirt road, dropped her bike and ran up to the water, picking up stones and skipping them across the lake.

'Nice choice, Bells.' Peacock carefully dismantled his prized multi-speed possession, passed a hand through bright periwinkle faux hawk—it was only periwinkle this week, last week it was turquoise—and sauntered up to her. There were two things on his mind. What color hair he should pick for next week, acid-green or magenta, and if he could beat Bells this time. She always won, always. No matter how hard he tried, how many exquisitely flat and polished pebbles he found, Bells managed to tilt her head just so, lift her arm that special way, squint her right eye, and fling the stone, twisting it perfectly, watching it hop one time, two, five, ten!"

"You know what?" Said Peacock. "You're a great story teller."

"I am?" said Bells.

"Yeah, but you're so full of yourself."

"I am?"

"Dude, it all about you! Where is the stuff about Grand?"

Bells blushed. "It's coming later."

They kept reading. It took them a while. The ducks started quacking hungrily for bread, and the sun turned rose gold, and

the leaves twirled and wheeled in the air and sat on the pond, lazily floating around.

Peacock turned the last page of the story, saw that it's ending, stood up and read the last paragraph aloud.

"Grand looked at Rusty. Rusty looked at Grand. Their faces, grey in the shadow of the gigantic metal sheet now standing at a ninety degree angle in the middle of the beach, twitched in indecision, but before they could utter a word, the blackness sucked them in and in another second the sheet thumped down on the ground."

"Dun-dun-dun!" He said and shut the journal.

"I like it!" Said Rusty exuberantly. "I think it will make Grand remember. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, I think so too." Said Peacock, aware of his every word. He was terrified of being obnoxious like he saw himself in Bells' story. "It's really good, Bells."

"It is?" She tried to act cool, but she was very scared of her friends' opinion. Did they like it? Did they tell her they liked it because they didn't want to hurt her? Did they really mean it? Could it be true? She felt uneasy and flustered, and her heart thumped so loud, she barely heard what they said.

"Now all we need is to get him to read it."

"That will be tricky." Said Bells.

"We'll find a way! I know we will!" Rusty very much wanted to believe it. He was close to Grand and he missed them. "Wait!" His face lit up. He carelessly let the last piece of bread slip out of his hand, and a fat and insolent swan—it was the duck that got into Moomin's magic hat—waddled up and snatched the bread and devoured it in one gulp, hissing for more. Rusty didn't notice it, mesmerized by his own idea.

"What if we bring him into this new story?"

"Why would we do that?" Said Bells.

Peacock frowned and passed his hand through his hair.

"Well, that would change him, wouldn't it?" Explained Rusty.

"We don't know what it will change him into. What if he will change into another you?"

"That would be cool." Rusty deflated under his friends' stares. "For a while, I mean."

"And," said Peacock slowly, "it will also change the person who took him into someone else."

Rusty shook his head. "Not if he goes on his own. Look at all these other characters. They even visit each other to have tea! None of them change, do they?"

"But it will change the story." Said Bells.

"No, it won't. Not if he goes on his own."

"You think he would just go? Just like that?"

"We can invent something?" Offered Rusty. "About some damsel in distress. About that, what's her name, Dulcinea! He's in love with her, he'll go."

"That's lying." Scoffed Bells.

"Whatever it takes to get our friend back, right?" Said Peacock, elbowing Rusty.

Rusty grinned.

"I suppose." Agreed Bells with a sigh. "Hold on, hold on." She looked excited. "If he does come in on his own, he will see himself! He will see Grand! Maybe that will remind him?"

"And we will see ourselves?" Said Peacock. "Wouldn't that freak us out?"

"We could hide?" Said Rusty.

"Okay, that might work." Said Bells.

"So, we have to make him read it." Peacock said thoughtfully.

"He likes reading books! Chivalrous books!" Said Rusty. "Grand told me."

"So all we have to do is sneak the journal in and wait for him to read it?" Said Bells. "What if he never will?"

They debated this for another hour until they ran out of options. The best thing to do seemed to make Don Quixote read the bike story and hope that he would either remember who he really was, or, if that failed, they would trick him into

entering the story in the hopes that he would see himself among his friends and remember. These were all hopes, however, nothing was guaranteed, and at the end of night they felt despondent. They decided to try this first, before seeking help from other book characters.

They ate some bread, fed the ducks, took a deep breath and dove back into Don Quixote to find Grand and to hopefully change him back.

Chapter 38. The Metal Horses

Bells and Peacock and Rusty marched along a dirt street to the house where Don Quixote took a short break from his adventures and was presently reclining and reading books. They knew they'd have to convince him to read their story at any cost. They didn't know that they've been watched. Behind every tree, in every dark corner, huddled all those whom they've met before, whispering between each other.

"Should we tell them?" Said the Little Prince.

"We're not supposed to." Said Kai.

"Quite right, Kai." Said Mary Poppins. "Quite right. Let them figure it out on their own."

"But I want to help." Said the Little Prince.

"You'll ge...ge...get us all in trouble." Said the Red Death.

In another group pretending to be simple Spanish peasants having lunch at the edge of the road, the following was exchanged.

"We must help them." Said Pippi.

"Why? Why should we?" Said Nils. "That girl," he pointed, "she tried to take Morten away from me."

"Oh, pfft. Will you let it go already?"

"I think," the caterpillar puffed out a ringlet of smoke,
"I think Alice should decide."

"Me? Why me?" Said Alice. She was sitting with her legs tucked neatly under her, petting a little puddle of sticky swirly liquid that looked like it licked her fingers. It was a little bit of Solaris. It felt rather lonely lately, after so much excitement happened and then left it, but it was too large to go into this story as a whole planet, so it visited in little parts.

"Why not?" Said the caterpillar.

This stumped Alice. She watched our friends knock on the door. It opened. Don Quixote greeted them and beckoned them in. He looked like he recognized them. "Why not what?"

"Are you asking me a question?" Said the caterpillar.

"I guess I am." Said Alice, confused.

"Then ask."

"But I already did."

"Explain what you mean."

"Oh, please, not right now." Said the Snow Queen. She was melting very fast under the hot Spanish sun. "You are making me weep."

"I wish I was a queen." Said Alice, looking at the Snow Queen.

"Why?"

"Queens seem to make decisions very fast, and it's only one that they have to make."

"Which one is that?" Said Solaris, which sounded like slurping, really, since it didn't really have a mouth.

"Off with her head!" Said Alice.

"I must say, it does make one feel lighter." Said the headless horseman. He quietly ambled up to the party that slowly grew larger and larger. There was Bluebeard there now with his wives, both dead and the one that didn't die yet, and Winnie-the-Pooh with his friends, and moomins, and fruits and vegetables and Cipollino himself, making everyone around him cry with his onion juice.

"All right." Pippi stood up decisively. Mr. Nilsson sat on her right shoulder, as always. "I'll go tell them."

"Oh, no, Pippi, don't!" They said.

But Pippi was never told what to do by anyone, she was used to making decisions on her own. She marched up to the door of the house and knocked on it. Nobody answered. She stepped in.

"Hello? Don Quixote?"

Silence.

Pippi looked through the rooms. The house was empty. There still stood a few empty cups in the kitchen. Four, to be

precise, and there were crumbs on the table. It looked like our friends had tea together and vanished.

"They're gone!" Called Pippi from the doorway.

Instantly all the characters jumped to their feet in an uproar. "Where? Where?"

"Let's go look for them!" Said Pippi. And one by one they lifted the corners of their pages and disappeared first to their own books, then to other books, looking and looking and looking in vain, because of course they couldn't find Bells and the boys. None of them knew about the new bike story Bells wrote, and that is where they were, having convinced Don Quixote that horses were obsolete and that in he should get himself this strange contraption called "bicycle" that will help him ride the roads of Spain faster and in style. The best part that Don Quixote loved about it was that they didn't need to be fed! He couldn't believe his ears and he declared that he had to see that wonder himself.

And so Bells and Peacock and Rusty were hiding behind the large tree on the beach of the lake, that same tree that Rusty wanted to climb so much, watching themselves pedal to the beach and drop their bikes and watch with suspicion a strange middle-aged man, about fifty years old or so, with a triangular trimmed beard and a mustache and dressed in ancient looking clothes, run

up to them, waving his arms, and explaining his desire to try riding one of their bikes.

"You think one of us will give it to him?" Whispered Rusty.

"I dunno. I bet it will be you." Said Peacock.

"Shhh. Just watch." Said Bells. She was fascinated at seeing herself from the side and was annoyed at her habit to look herself over to make sure everything was perfect and to stick out her lip just so and point her finger just so when she was commanding the boys. She resolved to try and be less bossy from now on.

Don Quixote liked Rusty's bike the best. He pleaded with him to give it to him, to which Rusty replied something that indicated that he really didn't want to give him the bike.

Peacock and Bells discussed something, and it was Grand who stood in awe, his mouth open, his big hands hanging. He must have recognized Don Quixote from the illustrations in the book, and he wordlessly offered him his bike. Don Quixote bravely jumped on it and immediately fell down to loud laughter. Everyone laughed, except Grand. Grand tried explaining to them who he thought it was, but none of them would hear it.

"I can't believe we were so stupid." Said Bells. Watching themselves from the side like this made her think that years have passed. They seemed somehow smaller then they were now. Everything looked shrunken. The beach. The lake. They shared

this thought and glanced at one other. Yes, they changed. They changed a lot.

They kept spying on themselves succumbing to Grand's plea and watched him try and teach Don Quixote ride the bike. It was funny. Don Quixote tried to talk to the bike like one would talk to the horse. Of course, it didn't answer, which puzzled the knight greatly.

Then they saw Bells watching the ants in the sand.

"Oh no." Said Bells. "Oh no!"

"What?" Said Peacock.

Rusty already saw. "We will drop in the first story any minute."

"Oh God. What will happen then? What will happen if Don Quixote drops with us?"

"It depends." Said Bells. "If one of us pulls him by the hand, then one of us will change into him later, only..."

"So he will fall into a story inside a story?" Said Rusty.

"I suppose." Bells had a hard time trying to understand how that would work. "I have a feeling we must stop this."

"How will we do that?" Breathed Rusty.

The Bells in the story, in the meantime, has uncovered the edge of the page and the number and was excitedly showing it to the boys and to the knight.

"What if we push the knight in and take Grand with us?"

Said Rusty.

"This is not the real Grand!" Snapped Bells. She grew more and more nervous. "We have to stop this from happening somehow."

By the beach the page was lifting, and Bells was the first to hop in. Peacock cried and jumped in after her. Grand and Rusty and Don Quixote were left, looking at the black hole.

"Now!" Said Bells. She opened the journal and tore out the pages that she wrote. "It's stupid, anyway!"

"Bells! What the hell are you doing?" Cried Peacock. "Give me that!" He reached for the pages.

"No!" Said Bells.

"Bells!" Rusty joined the struggle.

They tugged on the pages and right when Rusty and Grand disappeared and Don Quixote was about to jump after them into the darkness, the pages tore. The sky above them ripped with a thunderous crack. The ground underneath them shook and split in half and another moment they were tumbling back into the story with the ducks and the pond and the yellowing maple.

"This is useless! Useless!" Bells threw the journal away from her and buried her face in her hands. "We'll never get Grand back and we'll never get out of here." A couple ducks waddled up to her. "Go away!" She yelled at them. "I'm sick of you. All of you. Leave me alone."

Without a word Peacock picked up the journal, Rusty gathered up the torn pages, and together they have copied Bells' story until it looked exactly as she had written it.

"This thing you said..." Began Peacock.

"What thing?" Whispered Rusty.

They were both whispering for some reason.

"A story inside a story."

"What? What? Do you have a new idea?"

"I think I do." Said Peacock. "I think I know how to get us back."

"But what about Grand?"

"You'll see." Said Peacock with confidence.

Chapter 39. The Clever Trickery

Fierce wind ruffled Peacock's hair. It came out of nowhere and tore down a squall of maple leaves that slapped his face and landed on the rippling pond. Ducks quacked loudly, huddling into a group with the white swan in the middle, their bead-eyes staring with a sort of human intelligence at the opposite shore. Peacock twisted around and elbowed Rusty. He had no words. Bells raised her tear-stained face and forgot the reason for her crying at once.

Through the whistling and whining of the wind they heard grim silence of those who stood motionless across the pond. They were all here, all of them, all the characters they have met and haven't met yet. Bells glimpsed Scheherazade from One Thousand and One Nights in her bright silks and golden jewelry. The Snow Queen stood next to the White Witch and they almost looked like sisters. She saw Tigger next to Mad Hatter and Wizard of Oz by the Dune people. And blue giants from the Fantastic Planet towered over the rest, and over them stood the Roc chicks and the Martians, motionless. She glanced at Winnie-the-Pooh and Moomins and an icy trickle ran down her spine.

Peacock intercepted her gaze. "Crap." He said.

"Holy cow." Said Rusty.

"Something is very wrong here." Said Bells.

Indeed, it was.

The wind blew stronger, ripping off leaves and making the clothes and the fur and the hair of the silent figures dance and flap and ruffle. None of them made the slightest sign of awareness. It was as if they were carved in stone, staring down our friends. The air grew cold. The colors of the woods around the pond, so warm and honey-yellow and inviting before, were now tawny brown and disintegrating and dead.

A new, stronger gust of gale stripped most maples bare, and out stepped Mary Poppins. She rode the wind in her umbrella across the pond and landed in front of Bells, her face set and grim. A slap of cold fear struck Bells. She could barely look Mary Poppins in the eyes. And this was only the beginning.

As if the first crossing was the signal, the rest of the characters started moving too. Nils rode Morten on the surface, and those who could swim, swam. Bluebeard's dead wives walked straight in until their heads dipped under water and emerged on the other side moments later, dark water dripping from their faces and uncombed hair.

Bells felt behind her and grasped Peacock's and Rusty's hands. They stood in a line, facing Mary Poppins.

"We were going to tell you something very important," she began, her voice empty and dull, "but you have lured and destroyed one of us."

"Lured?" Croaked Bells.

"Do not interrupt me." Said Mary Poppins. "Why, you were very clever about it, too. You picked out the weakest of us all, the one who was mentally challenged and believed every lie you told him."

"We didn't lie!" Protested Rusty.

"Close your mouth." Said Mary Poppins, and Bells and Peacock heard Rusty's teeth click. They grasped their hands tighter.

"You have broken the most important book rule. You have killed a character. You will be punished for this."

"Whoa, whoa, lady." Started Peacock. "We didn't kill anyone, we—"

She only had to look at him, and his lips glued together. He couldn't utter a word and stared at Bells with mute helplessness.

The rest of the characters arrived from the muddy waters and were silently surrounding them, with hardly any noise at all, which gave Bells the creeps of her life. This didn't feel good. In fact, this felt very hostile and murderous. She could

almost feel their intentions on her skin and she didn't like it. Not at all.

"We have forgiven you many things." Continued Mary Poppins, her eyes growing large and black. "We have forgiven you stealing some of us from one book and misplacing us into another. That was repairable, and you have repaired three out of four. We believed you. You have deceived us."

Rusty and Peacock both made an attempt to argue with that statement, but they could only produce something close to "mmm" sounds and both looked in fear at Bells. She still had her mouth intact and functioning.

Bells was thinking quick, trying to weigh their options in this scenario and predict what was coming. Protesting wouldn't do them any good. She had to buy them time to figure out what was going on and how to get them out of this pretzel. She reminded herself that it was her who got them all here in the first place. She resolved to fix it.

"Dear Mary Poppins," she said, "on behalf of my friends I apologize for the harm we have caused you. Please, believe me when I say that it was not our intention to do so."

Mary Poppins was about to object, but Bells was faster.

"I understand our lack of knowledge is not an excuse, I do. We should've known better. I can see it now. I humbly ask you," she passed her eyes over the assembly, "all of you. Is there

anything we can do to repair our mistake?" Her eyes fell on something strange. The crowd of wet monkeys was hiding someone. They were shifting uneasily, trying to stand still. She frowned and briskly looked at Peacock who nodded imperceptibly, as if saying, 'I got it. I know what is going on. Trust me.'

Bells moved her chin down a bare hair-width, hoping Mary Poppins wouldn't notice. Rusty rolled his eyes at both of them, and then did something that he has never done. Instead of bursting up with his guess on what they were planning—not that he could talk, but he could jump and wave his arms—he took a deep breath and nodded too.

"There is no solution for what you have done." Said Mary Poppins. She took a step closer and Bells had to pull all her strength together to not take a step back. Freezing cold emanated from her figure and filled Bells with a sharp sense of terror.

"You have ripped Don Quixote in half." Mary Poppins pulled crumpled pieces of paper from her pocket, smoothed them out and showed them to Bells. It was the bike story she wrote and tore.

"You have destroyed him. He is gone. Gone forever.

And here all characters chanted the same, "Gone forever."

Bells hair stood on end. She felt her heart thud in her ears and thought that it was a miracle she didn't faint.

"For this, one of you will have to replace Don Quixote," said Mary Poppins, staring from Peacock to Rusty, "and the other two will stay forever in this story. It will become one of the books in this collection."

'In what collection?' Wanted to ask Bells, but Peacock's wink stopped her. He darted his eyes at the monkeys, and for a moment she saw a flash of grey hair a robe in their midst. Who was it? She half-listened to Mary Poppins declare the severity of what they have done, half-focused on shifting her eyes left and right and up and down, noting down in her head all the characters from the books. Then it struck her. Someone was missing. She couldn't quite remember who, was she started feeling a thread of hope, not understanding it fully yet, knowing only that there was a way out.

She noticed the sudden silence and came back to Mary Poppins ogling her, waiting for an answer. "Well?"

Bells gathered her thoughts. What was the last thing she said? She had to buy time. "we have to decide this now, do we?"

"Don't try my patience." Said Mary Poppins. "This is the last favor we give you." She boomed. "You did this, you get to pick who goes to La Mancha." It wasn't a favor at all, of course, it was a cruel torture, and at once every character launched into hideous laughter and jeering, fully understanding

that Bells now faced a punishment of sentencing one of her friends to a life as a madman.

Bells stole a look at Peacock.

Peacock was concentrated on the monkeys.

She looked there. The monkeys always took their laughing seriously. They have fallen to the ground and rolled around and around, and in doing so exposed the one whom they were hiding. He was quick to dash behind the large shape of a Roc chick, but not before Bells recognized him, which Peacock evidently has already done.

"Archivarius." She said under her breath.

"Who is that?" Inquired Mary Poppins.

"I said, a minute. May I please have a minute to think this over and consult with my friends?"

Mary Poppins laughed coldly. "Consult you may. Not that they can have any say in the matter."

Bells was happy to turn away from those liquid black eyes. She gripped Peacock's arm. "What? What is it?" Her voice shook, she tried to keep it down and speak as quietly as possible. Rusty looked at Peacock too. Peacock turned his back to the assembly, took Bells' hand and traced three lines on her palm with his finger.

"Okay, okay. Three lines?" Whispered Bells.

He shook his head.

"Three? Number three?"

He shook his head harder. Sweat stood out on his skin. He traced it again, then pointed to the first line and motioned to them three. After pointing to the second line and made a movement with his hand that indicated all the characters standing around them. And at the third line he pointed to the journal stuck under Bells arm.

Bells thought hard. Her heart thumped so loud, she was afraid Mary Poppins would hear it and guess at them planning mischief.

"Thirty seconds." Said Mary Poppins.

The characters drew closer.

"Do it again." Demanded Bells.

Peacock went through the motions, then nodded in the direction of the Roc chick, or, rather, at the one behind it, and traced a line across the first three lines, pausing at each, making his finger jump at each, as if jumping into each.

Rusty caught on. He clasped Bells finger and made it jump across her palm, then did the same with his, then pointed to the space where Grand would stand and did the same for him.

Peacock was showing three fingers.

"Three, three, three levels?" Said Bells.

Peacock nodded, relieved.

"I got it." Said Bells. "The first line, us, reality right? The second, the books we got. The third, the story I wrote?"

The boys nodded, relieved.

"So what is your plan for Archivarius? Why him? What do we need to do to him?"

Peacock traced the lines again, tapped in the second line, blinked once, then showed Bells two fingers and drew a new figure. A triangle. He pointed to the Roc chick, then traced the triangle backwards. Bells wasn't sure she fully understood what he meant, but she felt it. Something clicked in her head. "You mean, Grand got into Don Quixote book," she held her finger at the top point, "then he took Don Quixote knight and sent him to Dracula book," she slipped down to the second point, "which turned into The Golden Pot." She slipped her finger to the third point. "So if we bring Archivarius back..." She didn't finish. She couldn't. It was so simple, so elegant. "We have to get him." Her eyes blazed with fear and excitement. "On my command."

Peacock and Rusty nodded.

"Time is up!" Said Mary Poppins.

Bells faced her. "Well, it was very hard for me to decide, and thank you so much for your patience. This will serve us as punishment. I am overjoyed, however, at joining you all and being a part of this book collection. I get to visit you! You must be so lonely!" She looked around and saw that her statement

stirred some emotion in them. "In fact, I rather like it. No more school, no more parents with their annoying rules," she looked at Pippi who lit up with a smile, "no more annoying siblings either. I think maybe it's a good thing, what happened to us. You get to have new friends, and we get to stay in a story! How exciting is this? Oh, thank you, thank you, Mary Poppins!" She grabbed her hand and shook it.

Mary Poppins was so surprised, she couldn't say anything at first.

"Oh, this is so great! So exciting! We all love you so much!" She spread her arms and threw them up slightly which to the boys looked like a signal to move. They did. Bells fell on the first victim standing closest to her, the Red Death, and hugged him. He coughed in delight. Nobody has hugged him before. In the next minute, while they all tried to decide if she was being sarcastic or serious indeed, she looked at them with such teary eyes, it was impossible to suspect mischief. She moved straight for the monkeys, hugging at least ten of them, then hugging the Roc chick that mumbled something apologetic, then she stepped behind it and exclaimed, "Oh, dear Archivarius! So happy I will get to visit your wonderful greenhouse and learn all about your incredible adventures!"

She fell on him, hugging him hard, and before anyone could understand what was happening, Peacock traced a corner in the

dirt and a number one, Rusty lifted the page, and they fell through to enraged cries of those left behind, all of them suddenly understanding that they were tricked, tricked in the wickedest and rudest manner possible, but before they could follow, the page closed shut, and Bells with the boys and Archivarius were out of the duck pond story.

Chapter 40. The Last Page

The first thing they saw was the bikes. The bikes lay on the shore exactly where they left them. The two mothers with the crying toddlers still tried to calm them down. The lonely man was sitting as he sat before on the tip of the pier, fishing and whistling some merry tune. And they were back to being four friends skipping school on a warm autumn day, except that Grand wasn't Grand. In his place Bells was clutching a bent old man that thrashed and screamed in her embrace and once she wasn't able to hold him anymore and let go, unfolded into a massive salamander engulfed in a column of green and blue fire.

"We're back!" Was the cry from Rusty which he didn't get to finish, stunned by the sight of the salamander that burst into flames the tree which he loved to climb so much, and proceeded causing havoc, wriggling and twisting and throwing jets of flames into the lake.

The mothers picked up their toddler and fled, screaming their heads off. The fisher fainted, his fishing pole sunk into the lake.

"Hold him! Hold him down!" Yelled Peacock.

"No! No!" Cried Rusty. "That's not how you fight him! You fight him with water! He will calm down in the water!" And the boys snatched at the giant salamander's hind legs and pulled and pulled until he collapsed and fell to the ground. He hissed and barfed fire and twisted out of their hold. His skin was so slimy, Peacock had wrap his arms around his tail so as not to slip. The salamander flapped the tail and Peacock with it, who wouldn't let go, holding him with an iron grip.

Rusty jumped in front of the salamander's blunted head. "It's me, Grand, me! Remember? Rusty, your friend!"

The salamander only coughed a blast of fire at Rusty whose eyelashes and brows singed. He cried out and jumped away.

Bells stood in a trance. She couldn't bring herself out of it. She was thinking. "This is why Archivarius fought them." She said quietly. "He thought they have come for him, sensing Grand's inevitable change. He thought we knew exactly how much time we have left—which must have been minutes—and calculated exactly to get him back."

Peacock has succeeded in dragging the salamander half-way into the water.

Rusty was now shouting Grand's real name into his face, "George Palmeater! You're George Palmeater! Palms? I don't eat palms?"

Bells had a strange sense of déjà vu. It was as if she has seen all of this before, and she knew what they did to calm Archivarius down. But how could she? She shook her head and proceeded doing what she knew she had to do.

"He is one of the elements, like fire!" She screamed to Rusty, running up to him. "The Prince of the Spirits extinguished him with earth!" She bent, scooped a handful of dirt and flung it at salamander's eyes. The salamander screeched horribly and stopped throwing flames. Rusty joined Bells, and soon Peacock waddled out of the water. They kept tossing sand at the creature until he was covered with it and looked pitiful, with twigs and sand particles and leaves sticking to his shiny hide and making it appear tarnished and sick.

He stopped moving and now only barfed sparkles.

Pity pierced Bells heart. She fell to her knees and held the salamander by the neck. "Grand, Grand! It's me, Bells. I'm sorry for this. We have to do this, you understand, to bring you back. We have to. Come on, hold him."

The boys did the same as she, Rusty holding the mid section, and Peacock holding the tail. They sat like this stroking the salamander until he stopped trembling and looked back at them with pain and sadness. Then he started shrinking so fast, he slipped out of their hands and instead of an enormous black long body speckled with fire yellow, they saw their

friend, Grand, covered in dirt from head to foot and grinning, grinning the biggest smile they ever so him grin. He wiped off his face, sat up, and the first words out of his mouth were this.

"That was bloody fantastic."

None of them could move for a moment, then they jumped on him, knocked him to the ground, and collapsed in a giggling, crying, shouting, punching mess. They rolled around and none of them could tell up from down or left from right. Sand filled their mouths and got in their eyes and stuck under their nails. They didn't mind. They were happy, so happy. They brought their friend back.

It was Rusty who spoke first. "We got you back! We did it! We did it!"

"Bells did it." Said Peacock with shiny eyes.

Bells blushed. "No way. We all did it together. I wouldn't be able to do it without you figuring out those layers first."

"What layers? Tell me!" Grand was all ears.

"Are you okay?" Asked Bells, worried. "Are you hurting anywhere? Do you want to go home and talk about this tomorrow?"

"No, I feel fine! I feel great! I feel like I'm reborn or something. Come on, don't make me wait. Tell me everything that happened. The last thing I remember was this salamander guy blasting me with fire that crystallized around me into glass or

whatever and then I sat in this bottle, looking around like a total idiot, unable to move. It was awful."

They told him, one by one, interrupting each other, and all the time Bells had a nagging feeling in her stomach that spoiled her good mood. She couldn't tell what it was and finally shoved it in the back of her brain to deal with it later.

"There are three layers," Peacock was explaining. "The first one is reality, that's here. Us, school, our families, our city, you know. Everything. The second one is below it." He traced lines in the mud to illustrate. "So when Bells found the corner, we dropped down into that one. That was the layer of books. All books that have ever been written. We sampled only about thirty of them, but there are tons more. Millions more. They're all connected. Now, the third layer is—"

"I know! I know!" Said Rusty and fell silent with a frightened glance at Peacock.

Peacock turned red. "Go ahead. What is it you wanted to say?"

Rusty beamed. "The third layer is books within books. So characters in the second layer can write books too, right? If they do, those books are the third layer. That's what Bells did. She wrote that story about ducks on the pond. It's like stories within stories, get it?"

"Wow." Said Grand. "You guys figured it out on your own?"

"We totally did." Said Rusty. "Right, Bells? Bells?"

Bells was looking around at the lake and the beach, not understanding what alarmed her so much. And then it hit her. When Grand was blasting his green and blue fire all around in the shape of the salamander, he blackened and scorched everything around him, but now that he has changed into a boy, the place around them changed back as well. It looked normal, like before. She turned around and saw the two mothers calming down their crying toddlers and the fisher at the pier.

A piece of ice slid into her stomach. She looked back at the boys. They has nothing written on their faces except concern about her.

"Are you all right?" Asked Peacock.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing." She thought about it, then said. "Do you guys notice anything strange?"

They looked around. "No. What is it?"

Bells shrugged. Maybe it was supposed to go away, the destruction the salamander caused, because it was fictional. And this was read. It was. She scooped a handful of dirt and sniffed it. It smelled real alright. She rolled it between her fingers, it felt real too.

The boys were too excited to focus on her distress too much, prattling on to Grand about their adventures and him exclaiming "Wow!" or "No way!" or "Holy cow!" to everything they said, much to their delight.

At last, they were done recounting their adventures, and Bells has put all thoughts out of her mind. She got busy gathering flat stones in her hand and was flinging them into the lake. It made her feel calm again, there was something serene about it.

"Hey, mind if I join?" Said Peacock.

"You think you can beat me, you poor pissant?" She said with a crooked smile.

"Want to bet?"

He reached into his pocked and pulled flat round stones polished to perfection. They looked like they were made to flip on the surface of the water, smooth and matte and just the right size, all of them.

Bells eyes widened in envy. She had a collection of dirty misshapen rocks in her hand. "Where did you get those?"

"Where do you think?" He smirked.

"No way."

"Way."

"That's stealing!"

"Nope, only borrowing. There are plenty more on that ocean floor, trust me."

Bells swallowed. "You can't just waste stones from Atlantis on some stupid stone skipping game. That's like a historical crime! Or something."

"Who says?" Said Peacock, cocked his head, aimed, twisted, and flung the perfect throw. The stone whipped into air in a graceful arc and skipped one, two, five, ten...

"Eleven." Whispered Bells. "It jumped eleven times."

Grand and Rusty were deep into some very important conversation, joined them.

"Hey, that is awesome." Said Grand. "Where did you get those?"

"Atlantis." Said Bells derisively.

"Wait! Wait!" Said Rusty with alarm. "We're not supposed to bring anything back with us, aren't we? Isn't it going to change the reality here?"

They all looked at each other, then around them. All seemed perfectly normal.

"I hope not." Said Bells. "It better not."

Nothing changed around them, however. The day was warm, the sun was high. From behind the trees surrounding the lake they could hear the sounds of traffic. People's voices merged into a comfortable drone. A procession of kindergarteners under a

supervision of several teachers marched along the path to the lake shore and were noisily unpacking their lunches and sitting down, taking over the space where our friends likes to spend their time. A couple of the kids climbed the tree, causing Rusty to scowl. In his mind it was his tree and no other kid any right to climb it.

"Let's go some place else." He declared, picked up his bike and stood waiting for his friends.

They were happy to get moving. They loved coming here, but suddenly it seemed to all of them that they might need to find a new favorite spot. This one didn't hold its magic over them anymore. It changed. It felt dangerous and empty at the same time. Like whatever happened here could never be brought back, and would have to remain in their memories so as not to get spoiled. And it felt less of a wonder, somehow. Just some lake with some trees around it, nothing special. It has lost its charm. They all felt it, and they took a good look around and at themselves, sensing the change. It felt like from here on their paths might divide. They have left something behind, something of themselves, a part of their inner child.

Somber and without a word, they mounted their bikes and followed Rusty, each deep in their own head, thinking heavy thoughts.

I get to see my brothers, thought Grand. I will tell them all about this story. I don't know if I should tell mom, what if she won't believe me?

Grandma will lose it! Thought Rusty. She will totally lose it when I tell her I got to see Golem!

My dads will kill me, thought Peacock, but I have to tell them what we did. It's incredible, simply incredible.

And Bells thought, Something doesn't feel right.

They automatically biked up the path they always used to come here and found themselves on the asphalt road that led out of the park. The right side of it was designated to bikers and roller skaters, and the left side to walking pedestrians. It was a nice day, and the road was busy. Bikers flashed by, parents rolled strollers, people walked dogs, and elderly couples sat on the benches, soaking up the sun.

Our friends stood in the midst of it, halted by a collective impulse to talk before they parted.

"I think we should keep it to ourselves," said Bells quietly.

"What? Why?" Said Rusty.

"Gee, Bells, way to spoil the day."

"I don't think anyone would believe us anyway, so what's the hard in telling?" Said Grand.

"I don't know." Said Bells. She really didn't. "I just have this feeling..." But she couldn't explain it, and it made her angry.

"Can we tell just a little bit? Just a tiny little bit?" Pleases Rusty.

Bells flushed. "You don't have to ask my permission. I'm just thinking out loud. I'm not your boss, you know."

"Yes, you are." Said Rusty.

"You are." Picked up Peacock and Grand.

"Look where you got us. You got us into the coolest adventure ever and you got us out!" Said Peacock.

"It could've been worse." Said Bells.

"Oh, come on. Don't be silly. It was awesome."

"Yeah." Said Grand.

"Yeah!" Said Rusty.

"So you're not mad at me?"

"Mad? Why would we be mad?"

They all shook their heads.

"All right." Bells felt a little better. "Shall we pedal back to school? It must be close to getting out now."

"Let's go!" Said Rusty.

They mounted the bikes, joined the biking lane and pedaled fast, enjoying the warm wind and the sun and the rush of speed. There weren't many bikers on the road—it was the middle of the

working day, after all—and they got carried away so much by chasing each other, that they didn't notice that they have somehow missed the turn to school.

"Guys! Guys!" Rusty was the one who noticed.

"We missed it!" Said Bells. "Let's turn around."

Laughing and bantering and making plans for tomorrow, they turned around and rode their bikes back. There was the turn they missed, one of the many, flanked by shrubs, so easy to mistake, they looked so much alike. They swerved their bikes in and a few moments later emerged from the bushes with a collective cry of surprise.

They got back to the lake shore, where the kindergarteners were now gathering up their lunches and marching back to the school bus.

Bells and boys got off the bikes to let them pass and exchanged a puzzled look. "We must have mistaken it." Said Bells cautiously. And uneasy feeling grew in her chest.

They got on the bikes again, and pedaled back out to the road they all knew so well, made their way to the right path turned, and at the end of it gasped. From fear none of them had any strength to scream anymore.

They were back at the lake shore.

They made several more trips, growing more and more nervous each time, until at last panic seized them. They have noticed

that after several laps they have gotten back to the beach the way they encountered it in the morning, with the two mothers only now coming in with their toddlers and the fisherman preparing to sit down, unloading his bucket and unrolling his sitting blanket.

They dropped their bikes, and Bells noticed that they have fallen in the exact same way as the very first time.

"What the hell is going on?" Said Peacock.

"There is a mistake, some kind of a mistake." Mumbled Grand, his face white and his eyes frightened.

"I think I have a theory about this." Said Bells slowly.
"Who wants to test it with me?"

"Me! Me!" Cried Rusty.

"We all want to." Said Peacock for everyone. "Do you want to tell us what it is?"

"No, somebody has to stay here." Said Bells.

"Why?" Asked Grand. He was very eager to prove himself useful after the fiasco of being stuck in the body of Don Quixote for so long. "Why can't we all go?"

"Actually," said Bells, "it's good that there are four of us. We will need to test all four sides."

"Four sides of what?" Said Peacock.

"I don't want to tell you until I test the first one, because, well, I don't want you to think that I'm crazy."

"We don't need to think that, we know that." Said Peacock with a grin.

"Oh, shut up, okay? Watch the bikes and don't move! Rusty, come on." She mounted her bicycle, and, Rusty behind her, pedaled out onto the main road around the lake but instead of riding on it, rode across it and across the meadow all the way to the street busy with traffic.

"Bells!" Shouted Rusty behind her. "Are you insane? Where are you going? You'll get hit!"

Bells didn't pay him attention. She accelerated. The front tire of her bike hopped over the edge of the pavement and suddenly she hit an invisible wall, cartwheeled and was on the ground, gasping from surprise and nursing her hit elbow.

'Oww!" She cried.

"What the—" Rusty didn't finish. He slammed into the invisible membrane and got throw off the bike. "What is that thing?"

"Just as I thought." Said Bells.

Rusty stood up, brushed off the dirt and cautiously walked to the road. He stretched out his hand and jerked it back. It felt the same way as the membrane did when they were hiding in between the pages, only this one was sharp anywhere you touched it.

"What is this?" He exclaimed.

"It's the edge of the page." Said Bells.

'What edge? What page?"

"Come on, I'll explain."

They pedaled back somberly. Bells dropped her bike and proclaimed, "Listen, guys. I have something important to tell you. I don't think we need to test it anymore, only if you want to, after I say what I want to say." She surveyed them.

"Go on." Urged her Peacock.

"You were right about the layers," she said, "but wrong about number."

"What number?"

"It's not three, it's four."

"Four what?" Grand looked confused.

"There are four layers, and we are not in the first one, we are in the second one."

"What?"

"Guys! Guys! Look!" Rusty motioned to the lake.

They all turned around to look.

The surface of the lake darkened, like it wasn't water but ink. Faint circular ripples started from its center and radiated to the shore. Then it started bubbling, from the middle out. Black water rose and bulged and erupted into a thin spire that quickly grew into the top of a turret that became one of the towers of an ancient palace, only it wasn't in ruins this time. It

looked newly built. Giant waves rose and crested and rushed at the shore, crowning the rising city.

"Oh my God." Whispered Bells. "It was a bad idea to bring the stones here, Peacock.

"Tell me about it." He croaked, his feet pinned to the ground.

"What is this?" Asked Rusty.

"Atlantis." Breathed Grand. "The real Atlantis."

"But..." stammered Peacock. "This is impossible! We are in the real world, not in the fictional one."

"That's what I wanted to test." Said Bells. "This is not the real world, Peacock. The reason we can't get away from the lake is because nothing else is written before this page. It's the first page in the book!"

"What book?"

"Guys?" Rusty stood, pointing ahead of him, mortified.

All water was misplaced in the lake and it bulged and rolled toward them, about to smother everything in its wake.

"I think we need to get out of here, like, right now." Said Grand with his usual somber voice.

"But where? Where will we go if we're just on this page? We can't go back down, they'll eat us alive!" Shrieked Rusty. He was starting to panic.

"But how is this possible?" Cried Peacock. He already got it, he simply refused to believe it.

"We are characters in a book, Peacock!" Screamed Bells over the rising noise of the misplaced body of water. "We have to get out of here somehow, do you get it?"

"We are?" He said.

And that is when they ran.

The lake was not a lake anymore. Atlantis rose in all its splendor, with warriors aiming their weapons at them, who knew what for. They were guards on the watch towers. It was probably their job to aim. Would they shoot? Would they not? Will it hurt like in real life or not?

Bells and the boys didn't want to find out the hard way. Bikes forgotten, they dashed through the bushes full pelt, across the road filled with screaming and fleeing people, and to the very edge of their page. Here they halted, panting.

"Now what?" Asked Peacock.

They all looked at Bells, she was their boss, after all, ever since they got a glimpse of each other in the first grade. They knew they would be friends forever.

Bells face wasn't frightened. She was smiling. "We are in a book." She said.

"In a book about us." Added Peacock.

"Are we?" Asked Rusty.

"We are." Confirmed.

"I know where we can go." Said Bells. There was an air of mischief around her that calmed down the boys somewhat, because their chances of escape were very slim.

From where they came from shouts penetrated the greenery and a squadron of fantastically dressed warriors burst onto the Road, looking everywhere, then spotting four children and rushing to them at once, barking commands to surround them.

"Then we better go now." Said Peacock.

Bells looked up. "There." She pointed, reached up and touched the air over her head like she was touching something solid. It lifted a bit. "See this corner?" She said. "That's the way out of the book into the real world."

"Is it?" Said Peacock. He was agog. "Holy hyacinths. You're right."

"Wow." Said Grand. "No way."

"Look!" Said Rusty.

They all looked up and saw you. Yes, you, the reader.

Run!!!

LIST OF MENTIONED BOOKS:

1. The Snow Queen by Hans Christian Andersen
2. The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
3. The Magician's Nephew by C.S. Lewis
4. The Masque of the Red Death by Edgar Allan Poe
5. Bluebeard by Charles Perrault
6. One Thousand and One Nights, The Seven Voyages of
Sindbad the Sailor
7. Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll
8. Tale of Cipollino by Gianni Rodari
9. Tales from Moominvalley by Tove Jansson
10. Solaris by Stanislav Lem
11. The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen by Rudolf
Erich Raspe
12. Emil of Lönneberga by Astrid Lindgren
13. Pippi Longstocking by Astrid Lindgren
14. The War of the Worlds by H. G. Wells
15. The Headless Horseman by Mayne Reid
16. The Complete Tales of Winnie-the-Pooh by A. A. Milne
17. The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling
18. The Little Black Hen by Antony Pogorelsky

19. The Wonderful Adventures of Nils by Selma Lagerlöf
20. Dracula by Bram Stoker
21. The Golem by Gustav Meyrink
22. Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes
23. The Golden Pot by E.T.A. Hoffmann
24. Mary Poppins by P.L. Travers
25. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum
26. Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea by Jules Verne
27. Fantastic Planet by Stefan Wul
28. Dune by Frank Herbert
29. The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien
30. The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus by Joel Chandler

Harris

31. Ruslan and Ludmila by Alexander Pushkin