

BLACK AS SNOW

A fun and creepy tale...

Jonathan Munn

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For Kim.

THE FARM

“Stupid lump,” said Juliet as she kicked at the soggy earth of the molehill. The mud stuck to her trainers as, with successive kicks, she demolished the small mound.

“Stupid farm,” she said. And then looked around in case anyone — Mum, Dad, the woman from the Estate Agents — should overhear her. But they were all over at the farmhouse, poking around at the dark smelly rooms.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid...” she chanted as she set to levelling the next molehill in the small meadow alongside the broken lane leading up to the farm house. The buildings lay squat and dark beyond the hedge at the end of the field — like a stinking beetle, Juliet thought. Her parents had been visiting farms and cottages all through the holidays. And some of the weekends too. It was so boring.

“A nice walk in the country,” her Mum would say. Except it wasn’t even that. They drove down dull wet lanes peering through hedges and over gates, before ticking off addresses in newspapers and magazines. Then stopping off at the offices in small brown towns where dull ladies would smile down at her and make wide false smiles. And Dad would tell her off for all the mud she brought into the car. What did he expect? That’s all there was out here. Mud.

“Stupid countryside,” she said as she finished spreading the dirt from another of the bumps that dotted the field.

"It's all so stupid!" she shouted.

The cry ran out over the countryside. A bird fluttered and cawed from the trees behind the farm, and she saw a flash of a white tail from the hedgerow. A rabbit had been scared off by her shouting.

"Stupid rabbit."

The rabbit had been watching the Human. Usually rabbits didn't stray this far. The Warren was far over the way, across the brook, and then inside the woods under a small round hill that peeked through the trees in the distance. But Virgil always covered the nearby farms in his tour of the edges of the World. You never knew what could happen in an empty farm. Foxes could move in, scuffling round the empty buildings looking for field mice or just rubbish as the smell of Humans faded after the mists and rain. Or Humans could come back. They did things like that, Humans. And sometimes they brought dogs with them. Virgil scuttled along the hedgerows, stopping and sniffing from time to time. He paused before dashing across a footpath into the safety of the shadows opposite. He'd have to make sure that the Warren included the farm in regular rounds from now on. Just in case the Humans decided to stay. They did things like that, Humans.

THE WARREN AND THE PROPHECY

"Just mark my words!"

Sitting in his favourite spot in their burrow, deep inside the warren, Lucy's grandfather sounded out irritably and loudly. And as usual, the young rabbits ignored him as they played.

Grandfather loved to give his opinion on everything. However, in his mind everything started and stopped with the subject of the everyday incompetence of all rabbitkind. Put simply: they were incapable of taking on any task that required the intervention of more than one rabbit. And, he noted, for some, incompetence also came into play when they tried to work

alone.

When it was just a matter of speaking, of suggesting a project like: why don't we organise an expedition to bring in some fresh carrots? Or, why don't we build a bridge over the river to avoid getting ourselves soaked each and every time we want to pop over to the Northern regions of the Forest to pick some mushrumps? Or: if we enlarged the galleries where we store the reserves, we could set more supplies aside to last us through the winter, and thus avoid the risk of pneumonia when searching for food when it is both wet and freezing outside. Yes, when it came to suggestions, everyone was game. But when it came down to doing things. To actually getting things done...

Of course, it wasn't entirely the rabbits' fault. When it came to setting a plan into action, or organising something, they behaved quite simply like the rabbits that they were: small, fluffy animals carrying out small, fluffy actions. And, of course, they encountered more than a little difficulty in remembering just what the task to hand was supposed to be.

Lucy's grandfather was not that sort of rabbit.

If he saw something that needed doing, he simply got down and did it, without all the talking about it beforehand. But his capacity to intervene, to repair, or to improve matters was limited. Quite simply, if the task was beyond his individual skills — and however determined he might be, determination rarely replaced brute force, or another pair of paws — it was impossible to seek help from another rabbit. For even if the other rabbit had never, up to that point, given the problem the slightest consideration, if grandfather committed the error of asking for a hand (or a paw), the other always immediately knew more and better than Lucy's grandfather did on the question. This other rabbit would then explain, in excruciating detail, why it was better to do it *this way*, and not *that way*. Then he would disappear to inevitably continue his discussions with all the other rabbits in the Warren. And this other rabbit would question, argue and finish by consulting all the

other rabbits in the Warren — and they would all add their own pinch of salt to the stew. Of course, with all this blathering going on, nothing happened. Nothing ever got done. And we haven't even spoken yet about the rabbits' legendary absent-mindedness.

Take an example: you momentarily trust the other end of a branch to a colleague. The idea is to keep your paws clear to climb up the scaffolding and insert your end of the branch into its place in the bridge you are building. So now you have climbed up there and you call down to the friend at the bottom for him to pass you the branch. Except he is no longer there. He has wandered off to follow a butterfly that just passed by, or he thought it was nearly lunchtime, or someone just asked him for his opinion... (And don't, whatever you do, wonder what he did with that branch!)

Or you would find a corner where it would be a good idea to prepare a trap for those weasels who would sneak into the Warren of a winter, looking for a bite of fresh meat. So you ask another rabbit to start the digging while you go get some supplies. You come back and not only has he dug out a very nice two-up, two-down, but he is also busy helping the family of his second cousin-once-removed take possession of the premises and fit the furniture into the new rooms.

What it all came down to, Lucy's grandfather would say, was that in the end, it was always easier just to shut up and do the work yourself.

"Mark my words," he had said that night, seated comfortably in his usual place with a little something on hand to chew over while his children and grand-children and great-great grandchildren played and argued — with one exception — all around.

The exception was precisely Lucy who was passing through that phase through which most dotes pass and which seems to consist of an increasing exasperation with the ways of her numerous brothers, sisters, and cousins. This exasperation generally manifested itself in long and sonorous sighs. And

disdainful glances. And in the keeping of a journal.

The journal was filled with deep secrets. Indeed, she even now nibbled busily at the end of a small pencil while waiting on these deep and profound thoughts. And one must admit, if there was something Lucy did really well, it was nibbling the end of a pencil while waiting on these deep and profound thoughts.

In order to occupy herself while waiting for her thoughts to arrive, and in order to practise her very best joined-up handwriting she was noting down, more or less, — and the ‘more-or-less’ part is rather important — what her grandfather had been muttering.

“You can quote me on it,” he said, not knowing that this was in fact happening. “If you want to get something done in this Forest, then you shouldn’t wait around expecting the residents to get a special delivery of gumption. That just won’t happen. You might as well wait for some stranger to come along from outside the Forest and the World to do everything for you. Just mark my words.” And he coughed, laughing at himself, or the rabbits, or something else he was thinking about. Or just at the idea of someone coming along and doing the work for the rabbits.

Lucy transcribed all this. She stopped nibbling and got it all down and was quite proud of her achievement. She used her Sunday-best writing: *‘He says that the Warren would wait on the Stranger who will come from beyond the World. That the Stranger will do all that is needed. And when all is said and done: what is said, is said.’*

When the time came to go to bed, she hid her diary in a small wooden box that had once held cigars. Her father had brought it back for her, having found it on the Forest’s edge. At the time it had been filled with fishing lures. She treasured it, not only because it had been a present from her father, but also because it smelt wonderfully of cedar wood. She didn’t know that the wood was cedar. She just knew it was a beautiful

pinky-brown wood that gave off a dreamy perfume and smelt like none of the trees in the Forest; it smelt strong and dry, exotic and dusty, noble and warm, all these at the same time. It pleased her to keep her secret thoughts in there.

Once she had finished, she went off to hide the box in the wall of the burrow, in a place where she could be sure her brothers would not find it. They could behave like perfect pests at times, particularly if they found her secret journal and then started to read it aloud to the delight of all and the embarrassment of Lucy.

Then she did what any normal rabbit would do in exactly the same circumstances: she forgot about the box. She forgot about the box and its contents, so utterly and so completely, that the next time she did think about them, it was too late. And as it was too late, she could no longer do anything about it. Absolutely nothing at all.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's continue with Lucy's story, even if all these events happened, long, long ago.

A few years later — I'm sorry to say — a fox finished off her grandfather. Normally I wouldn't dwell on such an unhappy event, but I feel obliged to relate these details as, following his death (*May the Great White Rabbit who resides in the Great Garden in the Great Beyond, take good care of him, or at least, reserve him a few juicy carrots*), Lucy and her brothers had to move burrows. Quite a few other rabbits did the same, the foxes being particularly voracious that year. They all headed off for deeper, more central locations that — everyone hoped — provided better protection. But in doing so she abandoned, even more completely, her by-now-entirely-forgotten diary.

Years later, when the increase in population incited the Warren to dig new galleries and to rehabilitate old burrows, a rabbit engaged in digging — and whose name was Horace, but as he doesn't play a very important part in this story, you

don't really need to remember that — found a mysterious object.

The time it had spent, buried in the ground, had succeeded in hiding its origin. However, it was still possible to see it was probably a box. And when tapped or scratched, it sounded hollow. It thus possessed the possibility of containing something marvellously mysterious. But the damp earth, the mould and a certain number of particularly industrious insects, had all conspired to remove every distinguishing feature from the box-like object.

As soon as he found it, Horace felt he was onto something interesting. At the very least, something to impress the others when he talked about it during the evening meal. At the best, who knows where this could take him? So he called over the foreman for his tunnel who, in turn, called over his supervisor, and soon the rabbit responsible for all the new diggings was being hurried over to examine the find. Sufficiently impressed, the latter proposed that this be presented to the High Council, to be opened in their presence. In this way, all the rabbits, convened in the clearing above the Great Chamber would be witnesses to the treasures that would undoubtedly be found inside. Because, all were absolutely convinced that such a box could only contain treasure. And each rabbit was more than ready to give an opinion on the matter.

It is probably worthwhile noting — as Lucy's grandfather would have remarked had he been there, that while in the intervening years there appears to have been minor improvements on the organisation and burrow-building front — that the rabbits continue to be fundamentally harebrained. Or, at least, to persist in missing the essential.

When the big evening arrived, the box was positioned before the assembled rabbits on a sort of 'hump' rather prettily decorated with a sort of 'hump'-cover made from strands of straw woven together and then coloured by the application of juice from different berries. The box had been cleaned and stripped until it resembled a sort of smooth, vaguely rectangu-

lar, pinky-brown stone. Discreetly hidden in a basket — itself discreetly hidden behind the ‘hump’ — was a kit containing a variety of sharp and cutting tools, and sometimes both at the same time, should the box necessitate a little encouragement before opening.

The crowd shuddered as they listened to Horace embellish, for the fifteenth time at least, the story of how, not only did he find the object — which he admitted, just about any rabbit could have managed to do — but how he immediately and instinctively knew it was no ordinary find. With the successive versions, Horace’s exaggerations had started to take on a life of their own, with a clear tendency to wander off in six or seven different directions all at the same time. This, in turn, tended to annoy the rabbit acting as Master of Ceremonies who saw that all the time that Horace was taking to exaggerate his story was eating into the time allotted for his own speech.

Horace spoke of the exact moment when he first took the box into his paws, and heard, tickling his ears, that music; soft and harmonious but simultaneously grandiose. And then smelt that strange perfume filling the air; both warm and exotic at the same time.

Lucy twitched.

“*My diar..!*” she started. Then she shoved a paw into her mouth.

All of her friends gave her a long, black look as they found — all of them, without exception — that Horace was a very dishy number, if you were a rabbit, that is. Lucy — and I can only agree with her on this point — had pronounced that she thought him most dull and in love with the sound of his own voice. However, she had just realised that this big dummy of a Horace had, nonetheless, found the box containing her lost, but still secret, diary.

“*Oh no!*”

“*Sssh!*”, “*Shut up Luce!*”, “*Oh, the chatterbox!*” were some of the more polite remarks that her friends hissed in her direc-

tion. Under her fur, Lucy found herself becoming uncomfortably warm and red. Warm verging on the hot, in fact, as, continuing her reflections to their logical end, she decided that the consequences of the current situation were simple: either someone immediately guessed the origin of the object in the box, and in front of the entire assembly of rabbits, Lucy was made to understand that the joke had gone on for long enough (and all her friends, with no exception, would be furious with her for having humiliated that lovely Horace in front of the assembly); or — and she asked herself if this wasn't worse — someone, the Master of Ceremonies, no doubt, would start reading in a loud voice, chosen extracts from her diary before they realised their mistake and, all over again, everything conspired to become the scenario of Lucy's public humiliation. In front of the entire assembly of rabbits. Probably the most complete public humiliation in all the history of the existence of the World, the Forest and the Warren.

She wondered, in passing, if she could manage to hold her breath. And, supposing she did manage to hold her breath, if she could manage to hold it long enough to die before they finished their speeches and opened the box.

While she was still wondering, the Master of Ceremonies opened the box with a loud '*Pop!*' that everyone heard. Everyone except Lucy, that is, as she had just fainted.

The damp, the mould and that certain number of particularly industrious insects had also been active inside the box. All that was left of what-had-been-Lucy's-diary were two small sheets of paper. And even these were speckled with damp and mould. They had been so well worked over by the insects that even these fragments were barely legible. There was thus no practical way to link the box and its contents, by whatever means, to Lucy. But Lucy couldn't know this, nor even suspect it, being unconscious.

Her friends put the seizure down to the excitement of the moment. In the same way, they blamed the strangeness of her behaviour in the subsequent days on her fainting. (And I had

to reconstitute the rest of the ceremony from the official accounts precisely because of Lucy's sudden indisposition.)

Inside the box, only one scrap of paper could be recovered. Proof, the rabbits noted — as if such were needed — of the great age of this find. And thus of the importance of what remained. Or so the rabbits proclaimed to each other. And on this fragment of paper it was possible to read only the following words — but such inspiring words they were: ‘...*the Warren would wait on the Stranger who will come from beyond the World. That the Stranger will do all that is needed. And when all is said and done: what is said, is said...*’

The wisdom of these words, particularly that last sentence, pleased everyone. Or at least, all those who weren't unconscious. From then on, the rabbits never missed the chance to refer to them whenever the occasion presented itself.

And Lucy could not hear it without feeling, more than just a little bit, guilty.

THE END OF SCHOOL

“That’s typical. That’s so typical, it’s disgusting!” Juliet’s mother was a trifle annoyed as she slammed down the newspaper on the breakfast table. “It’s just...”, she glanced at Juliet and caught her breath, “*Damn* annoying!”

And having spoken, she stormed off to call the other grown-ups on the heavy black telephone that squatted on the small table in the hall.

Juliet slipped off her chair to see what had shocked her mother so. She knew that if she spoke like that at home, she would get severely lectured to, and even so, the latest outburst was only about 3 or 4 on Mum’s scale of 11. So at home Juliet was quiet: she just tucked away all the best expressions, saving them up to use on people who were nasty to her in the school playground. And there seemed to be quite a few at the moment... She sighed.

The paper was open on article about the motorway. Again. Because of the proposed changes, a service road would cut across the woodlands behind the farm. This was most regrettable, and everyone — both those who believed in the need for the project, and, of course, those strongly against it —, agreed on this point. But regrettable didn't mean that they weren't going to do it anyway, said the paper.

Her mother had said she thought they should just widen the main road: with a few improvements, and perhaps a better access from the South, there would no longer be a need for a motorway. In her opinion, her proposition represented a compromise: the-best-way-to-reconcile-the-needs-of-the-through-traffic-and-to-respect-the-peace-and-security-of-the-residents. It was printed on all of the tracts.

Juliet herself didn't have a clean-cut opinion, although she'd never admit this to her mother. While she understood that most people don't want a motorway at the end of the back garden, they were practical when you felt sick in the car and just wanted to get somewhere quickly.

For this morning, Juliet could be sure of one thing: her mother would telephone the other members of the local committee; then she would shut herself in her den to write tracts and press releases; then she would jump into the old blue car and drive off to meetings and so forth. Then, next weekend, she would herd Juliet off to a meeting or even a demo. At first it had been fun to go out, hold up a sign and shout. But after a while it became boring. Nothing ever happened and you just got cold.

She finished her cereal and then clambered up the stairs to prepare for school.

When the school bus came to a halt with a vast hissing of brakes, it was that noise, more than the horn — which wouldn't sound for another minute yet — that warned Juliet it was time to leave.

She pulled her backpack up over her anorak and onto her shoulders, thrust her feet into her wellies and ran out through

the backdoor. With giant steps, she splashed from puddle to puddle, bouncing down the path at the back of the farmhouse towards the waiting mouth of the bus.

As this was the last day before the autumn break she was eager, for once, to get off to school and for the day to be over, even if that sentenced her to drifting around the farmhouse for the next two weeks. Anything was better than that dumb school.

So she didn't see the silhouette of her mother behind the kitchen window, gazing after the old bus as it coughed small greasy clouds of diesel fumes all along the lane before heaving itself, and its passengers, over the crest of the hill. The call of *"Bye Mum, bye Dad! See you later!"* that the girl had sung out on leaving still echoed round the cold, lonely house as her mother — her mind already on other things — spoke into the telephone. It was going to be a busy day.

At the end of the afternoon and back from school, Juliet let the satchel — now heavy with holiday homework — slip down next to her green wellies just inside the back door. Then she added her anorak to the pile. She bolted past her mother, off to bury her feet in the folds of the sofa. And to sit there, hugging a cushion and gazing out of the window at the damp countryside outside.

In the kitchen, her mother was about to remind her to put-things-away-before-they-became-a-mess; just like she did every evening after school, she thought to herself and sighed. But instead, she reached over to prepare a hot chocolate. Today, tidying up could wait.

Juliet, looking out of the window, was glad that school was finally out. That she had two weeks of something else — anything else — ahead. It was not that her days at school went that badly, she was just happy when they were over. Better to be ignored. Better to... Drink a big, warm mug of hot chocolate. With a big hug. A big hug where she could cuddle up to the soft perfume of Mum.

The smell of chocolate slipped in from the kitchen, enticing her away from the window. Even before her mother called, she was on her way.

"Mum, when are we going back to the old house?" she asked, setting herself down at the long table.

"But we're not Dear. We've moved. This is home now."

"Yeah. Yeah. But when?"

"Juliet, you're not listening or what? We're not going back!"

"So when are we leaving here then?"

"But we've only just arrived..."

"Well, we left the old house, didn't we? So we can leave this one too."

"Juliet, are you trying to tell me something?"

She set the steaming bowl down in front of her daughter.

"*Muuuum!* I don't like it here. It's boring. All my friends are yonks away. There's nothing to do. School is dead boring and it rains all the time. So when are we moving? If you and Dad really wanted to do something for me, couldn't we have just adopted some family instead of all those animals? I mean, all they do is chew like they've got wonky jaws, look at you with dopey eyes and go 'Moo'. Not forgetting that I never see Dad anymore..." She sipped the drink. "And when I do he stinks."

"Juliet!"

"He does, too!"

"OK. I agree with you on the last point. But think yourself lucky, my girl—"

"Why?"

"It could have been a pig farm!" her Mother said, straight-faced.

RAIN

That night the rain came again, scurrying ahead of the storm like a scrawny-haired terrier ahead of a stampede. It hit the rotten roof of this horrible house with big, messy, noisy drops

and woke Juliet. It fell on the courtyard and the grotty garden too. It beat down on the beastly tiles on the stable; it drummed on the ugly corrugated iron of the outhouses and the barn. It drowned the awful fields and the horrible hedges.

Horrible, horrible, horrible house. Rotten, rotten, rotten rain.

She touched her nose to the cold glass, breathing to make the condensation blur the view, then hide it altogether. She watched the driving lines of rain cross out, scribble over and finally erase the outsides.

Lightning flashed and for an instant she saw her own face with the annoying freckles superimposed on the raindrops dribbling down the window. Then the house reeled under the blow from the thunder.

Creaking and wheezing like an out-of-tune choir the wind came seeping back. Wispy fingers edged their way under the window frame; ceilings and walls cracked. It even tried to pull off the roof.

Horrible house, too full of noise. Even the nights when there are no storms.

Horrible, beastly house. Rotten, rotten farm. Horrible, horrible, horrible everything.

And then, below in the courtyard, frozen by the lightning, caught under the boughs of the tree next to the stable, she thought she saw eyes looking up at her. But it could only be a play of the lightning on the leaves and the shadows. Or the slashes of the rain across the window. Because at the next lightning flash, there was nothing there. Just an ugly fence. And a tree trembling and shaking in the wind. Then, as she closed the curtain to fall back and snuggle up in her bed covers, the image burnt into her eyes by the bright flash of lightning, she saw the horse. More than that, she felt sure it had been moving a hoof, just at the same moment she had seen it.

The next morning, all that remained from the night's sleep was the memory of a drenched horse, looking up at her window. Looking up as it stamped on the ground with impatience.

SHE

And during all that time, during all that long, long time, She slept. She slept deep down in the dark and brown earth. She slept down where the soil was rich and nourishing. She slept, buried in the earth, as She has slept since a time before time, for time immemorial. She has slept there before history came into being. She has slept there since those days before days, before there was an Earth. Since a time when there was nothing but Her. Her sleep and Her thoughts.

THE WARREN UNDER THREAT

“Bandits at three o’clock, Sir! Over!” said the rabbit they called Augustus.

“Kid, they are not *bandits*, they are *Humans*. What do they teach you nowadays?” He sighed. “And I’ll admit that I may be getting on. I am not — not yet — senile. Nor blind. I can see them just as well as you—” Large parts of his left ear were missing. It looked as if someone, or something, had chewed at it like a lettuce leaf before abandoning it. Which had been, more or less, the case. “—And we don’t say, at *three o’clock*, but, *‘on the right’* like normal rabbits. And you don’t need to shout; I’m standing right next to you.”

“Sir, yes Sir! Wilco!” the younger rabbit shouted.

The elder rabbit — whom we have already met, this being Virgil, who had been out surveying Juliet earlier — lifted his eyes while he weighed the ‘fors’ and the ‘againsts’. All the same, he decided, the situation didn’t yet present that — what did the rules say? *‘sufficient and imminent danger’*? Yes, that was it. So, in theory, he didn’t yet have the right to knock the young rabbit senseless; the Humans were clearly not within earshot; nothing was at risk except his patience; he would just have to put up with him for the moment. But still... He was

sorely tempted. After all, it would just be his word against the littl'un's...

The Southern Slope was usually one of the calmest places you could wish for. It faced south, as its name suggested, and thus caught the sun for most of the day. Providing the rabbits on duty here could find shelter from the wind, and the occasional rain shower, it could be quite warm and pleasant. Moreover, for as long as the rabbits could remember, nothing had even happened there. It was considered a cushy job and Headquarters tended to post rabbits who would pose problems elsewhere: nothing too serious... those who were wounded on the field of battle against the weasels or the foxes or the badgers. And also those who... Um — let's just say — those who don't have the required number of carrots in the vegetable plot.

But when you thought about it, it was a good system: those who were experienced stopped the others from making too much trouble; and those who were still a little green and wet behind the ears managed to make enough trouble to stop the others from getting bored.

Except today. Something was happening on the Southern Slope.

"Should we tell HQ, Sir? Over!"

"This your first mission, Kid?" asked the scarred rabbit.

"Roger, Sir! Over!"

"I'd never have guessed..." murmured Virgil. And then with a louder voice. "No Kid. We wait and watch and you... *You shut up!*"

"Roger! Wilco, Si—"

"Kid!" interrupted the other. "Stop that now! And that's an order!" And seeing that the other was still preparing to answer. "Over and Out! And keep radio silence!"

Humans acted strangely. This did not surprise the rabbits; it was a known characteristic of Humans that they acted

strangely. It was in their nature to do so. Had they not acted strangely they might as well have been rather large rabbits. But they were Humans. And there were two of them. And they were acting strangely.

One carried a collection of sticks, stakes and bags, while the other had propped a small tree over his shoulder. It was easy to see that it was a tree as it had long, pale roots at one end, and small branches at the other. In the small branches, it had a mess of yellow-orange leaves and a large silvery fruit.

If you or I were looking at the tree, we would see a theodolite — an instrument that surveyors use to measure distances and heights and angles — because we see things with Human eyes. The rabbits looked with rabbit eyes, and more importantly, a *rabbit* mind. And so, they saw a small tree or bush.

When the Humans arrived at the corner of the woods, the one holding the tree stopped to set it down. The other took one of his stakes and set to driving it into the ground. He used another stick, one that had a sort of large grey head, about as big as a Human's hand, to hit the first stick, knocking it well into the earth. The rabbits decided that this must be a support for the tree that the other Human was holding. And indeed, the Human brought the tree closer. But instead of planting it, he spread out its roots. This allowed them to see that, curiously enough, it only possessed three. In fact, seen like that it didn't look all that much like a tree, thought Virgil. It must have been a Human tree, not the sort that the rabbits have much truck with.

The other Human attached a yellow ribbon to the stake in the ground and still holding one of the ends, wandered off across the field away from the Forest. The Human who stayed behind was busy inspecting the leaves and the fruit at the top of the tree. Perhaps he was checking that it hadn't been harmed while they had been carrying it. Well, Humans should know that leaves and fruit generally grow back. Everyone knows that, even Humans: it is in the nature of fruit and leaves. But perhaps Human trees weren't like the trees in the

Forest. The rabbits watched eagerly. Then they saw another pole with the same yellow and white stripes next to the Human at the other end of the field. Perhaps the Humans had twigs that grew like that..?

“Humans quite often wander around aimlessly. It’s in their nature, you know...” said one of the old rabbits, later, back at HQ. “You can’t do anything about it. They’re just like that, Humans are.”

Murmurs of agreement rippled around them.

“What is said is said, and that was certainly well said,” remarked another rabbit. “Humans! There’s nothing like them for spending hours doing nothing. I mean, I remember one afternoon when we were watching them and...”

The old rabbit who had first spoken called the meeting to order and invited the two rabbits to continue their account of guard duty on the Southern Slope.

The Human who had wandered off with the ribbon came back, while the Human who had stayed behind with the tree now made marks on the leaves he was carrying. Then the Humans picked up the tree and most of the poles and stakes and walked away. They walked towards the undergrowth, under the May bush on the edge of the forest where the two rabbits were hiding. Virgil had to prevent Augustus from leaping out to savage them. He held him back by the scruff of his neck and shook him vigourously. Even so, the young rabbit’s limbs flayed at the air until the two Humans had walked past, out of sight.

The Humans put down other stakes, and continued walking around with the ribbon, moving the tree around from time to time. Then they left. Like Humans do.

At last, Virgil could let Augustus go.

Once the rabbits back at HQ had — politely — listened to Augustus’ suggestions. “Go for them! Let’s show’em who’s

Boss in the Forest. This is our turf, isn't it? We don't want them showing their tails around here. The Great White Rabbit is with us, isn't he? They won't get away with—" They thanked him and suggested — rather forcefully — that after such a trying day, a little rest and recreation was probably in order.

When he had gone, one of the remaining rabbits enquired of Virgil, discreetly, if the kit had been like that all day. He didn't answer, just lifted his eyes to the roof of the chamber. Nonetheless, everyone understood.

"And you didn't want to...?" started one of them.

"Of course!" the rabbit with the chewed ear replied. "But the rules and regulations formally forbid it!"

"You know Virgil, under the circumstances, no one would have blamed you..."

"Thanks," he said. "But you should have told me that this morning!"

Before the discussion could burrow into the uneasy territories of accusations and recriminations, another rabbit — one of the oldest there, a rabbit whose fur was silver like cobwebs and who had been silent up to now — asked to take the floor.

"When the Humans plant their coloured sticks, it's a clear sign that it's not a good sign at all," he pronounced with a mouth in which only one tooth remained. "They did the same thing before the road appeared over the River. Then came the big diggers and they split the earth open. We had to evacuate the burrows then and there, seek shelter for the families. All that side was lost in an afternoon. You, most of you, weren't even born at the time — one or two of you were kits, perhaps — but I remember it like it was yesterday. There where the Humans plant their stakes, the *diggers* will be coming!"

But rabbits being rabbits, most of them quickly forget the warning and wandered off to other duties. From time to time, Humans arrived again at the Southern Slope, getting out from those large containers that Humans use to move themselves around the countryside. Sometimes they walked around with Human trees. Sometimes they walked around with Human

leaves. Sometimes they just walked around.

This continued for a while. The old rabbit kept reminding everyone that that the diggers would be coming soon. And everyone else said, Yes, Yes. Of course we know that, you already told us. Yes.

THE DIGGERS

Then *the diggers* arrived.

From this moment on, the Southern Slope stopped being a soft job. The number of rabbits on duty was doubled. And then doubled again in order to follow all the Human activity.

When autumn came, a conyngr of uncommonly adventurous young rabbits took advantage of a moon-less night to organise a raid to pull up the stakes. Or if the stakes didn't want to be pulled up, they tried to gnaw them down to ground level. But the wood was solidly anchored — the rabbits supposed it had, possibly, even started to take root — and only three stakes were torn up during the incursion. But quite a few rabbits had sore teeth for the next few days.

The Humans — and they're like that, said the old rabbit, and I told you so — took things as expected. Badly. So now a Human and a Dog stayed on site most of the time. For the Human, in a bright orange box that had been dropped from the back of a lorry. For the Dog, in a compound fenced in by high walls made of chicken wire that surrounded the orange box and all the coloured stakes planted in the ground.

It goes without saying that the Dog impressed the rabbits no end. And from that time on they surveyed the Human activity from a good distance. And above all, down wind from the Dog.

A STRANGER AT THE FRONT DOOR

A stranger came knocking at the front door. It was easy to know it was a stranger because only a stranger would do

something like knocking on the front door. Friends just came round the back and popped their heads into the kitchen. At school, Juliet had heard of a family who had a wasps' nest that had grown bigger than the size of a football before they found out it was blocking the doorway. That was how much they used front doors around here.

He had probably tried the bell, but as Dad had never got round to repairing it, she hadn't heard anything. So now he was knocking tentatively at the door.

She drew the bolt and pulled the door ajar.

He couldn't have been expecting a child to answer because, for a moment, he scanned the empty space above her head, wondering how the door had opened itself. Then he lowered his gaze and saw Juliet.

"Hello, little girl—" Juliet always took an instant aversion to people who referred to her as a 'little girl'. "—Is your Mummy there?"

She shook her head and looked at him with bulging angry eyes.

He fished into the inner pockets of his parka to show her a small document the size of a credit card. There was a photo of a man on the card. Looking at his expression you felt that he had just been told off: it was that sort of photo. It was perhaps the photo of the man at the door, but as he was currently hidden by his parka, a ski hat, a scarf and the door shadow, it was hard to tell.

The card said that the photo was of a Detective Inspector Morrison.

There was lots of other stuff written there, but the man took it away before she could finish reading.

"Can I come in and wait for her?" he asked with a markedly false tone that sounded just like one of your least favourite uncles, and all the while trying to advance to where the door half-framed Juliet's head. But she didn't move to let him pass. In fact, she only moved to shake her head.

"Ah..." said the man. "Do you know when she's coming

back?”

Juliet shook her head again, which wasn't entirely truthful. When she had left, her mother had said that she would be back for four, but that wasn't the sort of thing that it is easy to explain by shaking your head or by nodding it. It was easier just to pretend not to know.

“Yes. Yes...” said the man, studying the doorstep and shifting his feet. “Can you tell your Mummy that I came by?”

She thought about it. Yes, it was possible. She could tell Mum that a man bearing a card with a photo of Detective Inspector Morrison on it had come to the front door asking to see her. That didn't run against any instructions whatever.

She nodded.

The man's shoulders appeared to relax.

Then he gave himself away.

“Oh well, we could never accuse you of being a chatterbox, could we?”

She slammed the door shut, drawing the bolt back into place. She had been right to be suspicious. He was only pretending to be a policeman. Because it had been a real one, wearing a uniform, not dressed up all ordinary like he was, who had come to her school to explain that you should never, ever speak with strangers. And if he didn't know that, it was proof that he was just pretending. And she knew what she had to do, because the policeman — the real one — had told them all.

She had to alert the real police straight away.

When her mother arrived, parking the car out the back in front of the stable, she found Juliet in the kitchen with two policeman. Real ones. Juliet had made some tea and was just serving it. With a plate of digestive biscuits.

Juliet knew that these were real policemen because she had used the heavy black telephone in the hall to call down to the village and they had driven up. And they were wearing real uniforms.

And because they had come to the back door like everybody

did.

While Juliet explained her story to her mother, with a few exaggerations, but on the whole, keeping quite close to the truth, they all heard knocking at the front door. The girl ran to look out from behind the bunched-up curtains, before coming back to whisper, most theatrically, "*It's him! He's come back!*"

One of the policeman got up to make his way round the outside of the house, while the other opened the front door. Like that, they caught him from both sides at once. Juliet jumped up and down.

"*We got him! We got him!*" she chanted.

"No. No problem. No damage done," muttered Detective Morrison through clenched teeth. "She only did what she had been told to do in such circumstances..."

Once the excitement was over, and the man had been freed, he had been able to show that he really was a policeman, but from town. One of the real policeman from the village went off to verify the information over the car radio. Detective Morrison said he had been sent over to discreetly sound out Juliet's mother, and various other people in the area, following some vandalism on the survey site for the motorway service road. Someone had broken some of the poles and markers that were part of the preparations there. Nothing really serious. More of a nuisance than anything else, he explained, looking at Juliet. But the company doing the works had insisted the Police go and interview local protesters, just in case...

Juliet's mother was horrified to learn that work had already begun.

"Not at all," the town detective reassured her. "They're doing test diggings and surveys, that's all. All this is part of the preliminary enquiry and it is not a construction site."

And, his mission accomplished, he headed off, back to town. Through the back door.

SHE

And during all that time, during all that long, long time, She slept. She slept deep down in the dark and brown earth. She slept down where the soil was rich and nourishing. She slept, buried in the earth, as She has slept since a time before time, for time immemorial. She has slept there before history came into being. She has slept there since those days before days, before there was an Earth. Since a time when there was nothing but Her. Her sleep and Her thoughts.

She gave birth to the Three. Perhaps it was in a dream: a timeless dream outside of Time and shot through by a thousand fits and starts. Or was it a nightmare? A nightmare as dark as the depths where She slept?

And how to tell the difference anyway?

But what is sure, is that the Three were born from her sleep. And that slowly, through the eternities of time, the Three rose towards the surface of Her dream, like bubbles in a thick, dark liquid. A liquid that is heavy, viscous, and the colour of night.

The Three neared the surface of the Earth. There to be hatched. To hatch and to prepare the way for Her. They would prepare slowly, but at first they would have the time.

They were in Time and out of Time. Time did not flow on them as it flowed on the others.

Slowly the Three would prepare Her awakening.

PRE-ALERT

The World was afraid. The fear smelt of sweat and diesel, of tobacco, of oil and metal. The fear smelt of Humans, and the World was on alert.

Or, as Virgil reminded Augustus for the third time that day: all of the burrows that made up the Warren, underneath the woods that made up the Forest, what the rabbits called 'the

World', was — technically speaking, of course — on *pre-alert*. Technically speaking, of course, Kid.

The steering committee made up of the eldest rabbits in the Warren, had met up to discuss what the Humans were getting up to on the Southern Slope. The elders had also increased the number of rabbits working to set supplies aside for the coming winter. And they had reinforced the guards and the lookouts.

However, they admitted, they lacked information about the Humans. And who could blame them? It wasn't as if the Humans were rabbits, so they couldn't be expected to act in a normal and rational manner. For a rabbit, that is. Being Humans, they would act as Humans. That is, they would act unpredictably and in ways that defied all rational (rabbit) analysis. All those things that a rabbit understands when it is said that, after all, Humans were only Human.

And so the elders had decreed the state of 'pre-alert'.

Hearing this the rabbits had acted in a perfectly logical manner: they had panicked. It was as if they had been electrocuted. They had all ran everywhere, all at once, scared silly, all over the Warren.

There were only two rabbits — possibly three, and that would be only among the very eldest rabbits in the Warren — who had already lived through such an alert.

No, can you imagine it? We're on pre-alert! We've all been warned: the Humans are here.

Presented like that, it was even more dramatic than being on alert. If they were on alert, it was done, it was over; it was finished. It — whatever it was — had arrived. But in a state of pre-alert, everything was in the waiting. Once the alert is here, we know where the danger is, who the enemy is. On pre-alert, one had to be ready for anything and everything. All the rabbits were jumpy, scared of their shadows and avoided hanging around in the galleries at night. And even during the day, when they didn't have to move, they now stayed hidden away in their homes.

But there again, analysis had never been one of the rabbits' strong points.

"But what if the prophecy is not true?" said Lucy, dipping her paws into the edge of the conversation.

"Don't be silly dear," replied Gladys, helping herself to another mouthful of clover. "You were there too."

"I, er... Oh dear." Lucy felt herself badly in need of a change of subject. But no, she knew she must keep on asking, however much it hurt to remember. "Yes, but just suppose."

"It doesn't bear thinking about," Gladys said with frightening finality. "In fact, isn't it about time that this Stranger-from-outside-the-Forest turned up? He's playing things a bit close isn't he, what with the alert and all?" Gladys munched through the remains of the lunch looking to see if there weren't any dandelion flowers she had missed. "I mean, we can't wait around all day for someone to come along and save the World. *Some of us* have lives to be getting on with, families, husbands, children..." This last remark was in Lucy's direction.

"In that case," interrupted Patty, a rather round rabbit who had just finished off, not only the clover, but also the last dandelion while Gladys had been talking. "Why doesn't someone go out and find this Stranger-from-outside-the-World? Perhaps he doesn't know that now's the time, and if he's somewhere hanging around waiting..."

"*What is said is said*," chirped in Tullia, as Lucy flinched. "The prophecy says that he'll come, so he'll come. That's what prophecies are for after all. The sooner we understand that, and then the better we can wait and the quicker the Stranger will come. That's what my Julius says anyway—"

"Oh?" said Patty. "Well I was sure that I overheard that young Augustus saying that he was sure the Stranger-from-outside would only come if we showed ourselves worthy — by attacking the Humans for example."

"And nobody has thought about — I don't know — evacuating the Warren while we've still got time—" Lucy withered

under the gaze of her friends.

“Luce dear,” said Gladys, with the charm applied thickly. “Now you know that it isn’t good for you, all this thinking. Remember what happened on the Night of the Prophecy...” And they all had a knowing laugh. Except Lucy.

But perhaps they were right, she thought. She felt sure that there were logical holes in her friends’ arguments that were big enough to drive a family of rabbits through, but she was unable to put her paws precisely on the flaws.

And as it was night, they all sat around and waited until they felt brave enough to leave Lucy’s burrow and head back to their own.

Ever since the beginning of the crisis — ‘No, *the pre-alert, Kid. The pre-alert...*’ — Augustus and some of the other rabbits had organised themselves into what they called ‘a rapid intervention task force’. In fact, it was the same group who had already distinguished themselves by trying to tear up the surveyor’s stakes and poles but we will remain discrete on that matter. Now, because of the rabbits’ own guards and lookouts, it was a lot harder to slip out unnoticed for another foray into the compound. And there was also the issue of the dogs.

They had given themselves a name: *The Ninjas*. And they were attempting to persuade the elders to let them go out again. Officially.

The elders gave them a name of their own, they called them *Bonkers*. But they agreed to watch their demonstration.

“Tell me,” Virgil pleaded with the old, silver-haired rabbit next to him as they looked down at the rabbits miming fights, parrying blows, twisting and turning. “Sincerely. Have you ever seen anything so... grotesque?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that... I think they have a sort of dashing allure, myself.”

The squad then carried out a demonstration of a rapid, staggered advance. The rabbit at the back moved forwards,

covered and protected by the rabbits in front. Then, the rabbit who had moved forward waited, — on the lookout and ready to attack — while another rabbit overtook him, and also crouched to watch out, claws out and looking from side to side. When the first rabbit found himself at the back again, he moved forward to the head. And so on, until they had covered all the territory. Once they arrived at the wall opposite, they fell back with the same, near-military, precision.

“But look at those, those... Kids.” Virgil protested. “What are they thinking about? That’s not rabbit behaviour that!”

“On that point I agree with you, Virgil. But then again, you and your lot were even more ridiculous with your rubbish about being nice to the flowers, and talking to the butterflies, and going vegetarian...”

“Well on that point, we were right, weren’t we.”

“Yes,” said the old one. “Except that rabbits have always been vegetarian. Anyway, it didn’t last long when you tried to convert the foxes to your *‘peace and love’* thingies, did it?”

“But... but...” Virgil opened and closed his mouth, desperately fumbling for the reply that would dumbfound the other for good. “It wasn’t the same thing,” he mumbled feebly at last. “We... We... We had ideals!”

“Maybe, but them, they’re determined, single-minded...”

“Yes,” sighed Virgil. “That’s the word. They haven’t got a single mind between the eight of them.”

Although the professionalism of their demonstration did no harm, at the end of the day it was their argument that won the elders over to giving them permission. Simply put, they proposed that the rabbits should profit from the presence of the Humans to go on in and find out more. For the moment there were a couple of Humans during the day, but only the dogs at night. The rabbits might not have another chance quite so soon to learn more about the enemy.

And so off they went.

THE DOGS

The works had become a long gash on the landscape. The soil there was exposed, fresh and odoriferous. The rabbits present at the Southern Slope had trouble stopping themselves from pausing to sniff, their nostrils twitching with the enticing smell.

Rabbits never dared spread soil in that way when they dug their burrows. It would be betraying their presence to a predator. And a rabbit had so many predators that they had to band together and hide underground. But Humans were never afraid like rabbits were. They were Humans after all. So they spread out all this rich, dark soil. And in contact with the air so many perfumes and fragrances seeped out and wafted around. Oh, it took a tremendous effort on the rabbits' part to hold them back from diving in and drowning themselves in the aromas.

But on the other side of the gash, there was a track. And between the two was the fencing that penned in the cabin, and the dogs.

A team was sent off with the order to distract the dogs by dancing noisily up-wind, preferably on the safe side of the fence. As soon as the barking sounded, the entire squad of the Ninjas went abseiling down the cuttings into the compound.

Behind the cabin the Humans had set up a lean-to. This served as shelter for several big smelly barrels, a more than adequate number of planks, and a surprisingly large number of stakes, sticks, rods and poles. And a *digger*.

The digger wasn't a huge affair. It wasn't of the type that can maul trees without pausing for thought like those the old rabbit had described. It was a reasonably compact, yellow engine with jaws the size of a small dog, all the same. Please note: I didn't say, jaws the size of those of a small dog, but, jaws the size of a small dog. Put another way, a whole family of rabbits could fit inside the mouth of the digger and there

would still be room in there for a snack and a dessert. So while it was small, it was not as small as all that. Sort of like a very large yellow dog with massive strong jaws. Virgil shivered and thought about his ear. Or what was left of it.

And during that time, down below, the guard dogs yelped, barked and threw themselves against the fences while the rabbits danced on.

Virgil, looking out from behind a tree at the top of the slope, turned his attention to the site to follow the progress of the shadows advancing towards the cabin. They planned to break in to look for information on any plans that the Humans might have. Augustus however, had another reason for wanting to get inside. A reason that he kept largely to himself: he was looking for anything containing pictures of the world-famous master of the martial arts known as Bruce Lee.

It would be useless trying to explain to Augustus that the chances of finding a caretaker on this particular building site who just happened to be a fan of Bruce Lee are to all extents and purposes so negligible to be inexistent. Or about equivalent to the chances of a rather wimpy rabbit coming out alive from a burrow occupied by twenty ravenous weasels. Let us just say, nil.

For Augustus this was of little importance: he had already found one such magazine. A Human who had not realised the consequences of his action on any young and impressionable rabbits who might just come along afterwards, had left it in the clearing. This magazine contained a series of articles on Bruce Lee, and comprised Augustus' fountainhead on all matters dealing with the martial arts. Moreover, he had now managed to convince himself that where there were Humans, there he would find other magazines too.

As you might well understand, the magazine — that he kept hidden away like a precious relic — had rendered him spellbound. And to such an extent that it had, first of all, transformed him from a rather fluffy and timid rabbit, to a rather fluffy and timid rabbit who cajoled, bullied, forced and other-

wise blackmailed his contemporaries into practising all the positions that Bruce Lee displayed in the glossy images of this magazine. It should be rather obvious that this wasn't necessarily the easiest thing to do considering the anatomy of the typical rabbit. But this was not all: he had drilled and exercised his friends — calling them the *Ninjas* — for months on end with the secret objective of, not only attacking the Humans on the building site, but attacking the Humans in order to obtain more magazines. Preferably more magazines containing pictures of Bruce Lee.

The magazine — a sort of comic for small boys — also contained a couple of other articles. One of these, set in War Time, told the story of a young radio operator managing to do his duty under severe fire from the Enemy until the — necessarily tragic — end. All the story had been written in the form of terse radio dialogue. This story of bravura and sacrifice had also influenced Augustus more than he was willing to admit.

But his preference was clearly with the pictures of Bruce Lee in action. Owing to a strange whim of the person who selected the photographs for publication, the vast majority of these pictures showed the martial arts expert suspended in mid-air: swirling, parrying and striking, fists out and feet extended. Augustus was thus convinced that Humans possessed the capacity to fly. Not like birds, he wasn't an idiot — he could see they had no wings to help with that. No, he determined that they did it entirely through concentration and will power.

So without really knowing what they were letting themselves in for, the eight rabbits approaching the cabin in perfect formation were in fact not only there to satisfy Augustus' immoderate passion for Bruce Lee. But they had also trained under a master convinced that they only had to wish for something strong enough for it to happen.

The rabbits had planned to dig under the walls of the cabin and had put themselves in position to do this very, very quickly. And very, very quietly. The dogs were over on the other side, but any out-of-place noise risked capturing their

attention. Any strange noises like — for example — a rabbit scratching and knocking furiously on the metal floor of the cabin.

The rabbits had not expected that.

They had taken the walls for simple fences. And getting underneath a fence had never been a major problem for a rabbit. But as rabbit houses possessed no floors, they had never imagined that Human houses could...

Even the rabbits assembled up on the hill could hear the sound of one of their kind, scratching desperately against the hidden metal barrier under the cabin. So close to their objective, and yet so far. They could hear the sound echoing in the cabin and in the night. And if the rabbits could hear it, the dogs could too. And they arrived, teeth cold and white in the night.

"Get back! Everyone! Back to base!" one of the Ninjas ordered hoarsely. *"Quick! Quick! Quick!"*

Shadows darted across the construction site. Four, five, six... Two rabbits were missing. The dogs snapped and barked at the hole under the cabin.

If you can imagine a rabbit getting ready to launch a Kung Fu attack — perched on his hind legs with his front paws folded to make fists — you have an idea of what the on-looking rabbits saw at that moment. But only an idea, because you must also think about the excitement, the bad visibility, and the fact that few rabbits would recognise the crouching Kung Fu position... Augustus approached the dogs from behind. His front paws, held rigid, with the claws sticking out at an angle, were moving slowly in small circles. Defiant, he beckoned to the dogs and prepared to attack; his ears flattened against his back; his muzzle raised and proud.

"Come on," he hissed. *"You mangy little dogs don't scare me! Come on and make my day..."*

All the rabbits — except one — were hypnotised by this vision. The sight of a rabbit daring to take on not one, but two,

dogs. And with such style.

The two massive hounds, sensing that something was happening just behind them, stopped barking and turned. Heavy jaws dripping saliva opened revealing jagged teeth. Hackles prickled like angry hedgehogs.

And everything was over in a few seconds.

A cry of '*Noooo, Kiiiiid!*' and what appeared to be a streak of lightning flew out of the woods at the top of the cutting, dashing down into the compound. The flash of white grabbed Augustus by the skin of the neck to pull him back. The terrible jaws closed on the air where the rabbit had been just a few seconds before. While everyone's attention was elsewhere, the other rabbit — the one who had been stuck under the cabin — darted over to the fence, away from the slobbering, biting jaws. Virgil twisted round like a whirling dervish, and projected Augustus far up the slope as if from a slingshot. The momentary shock and astonishment that froze the dogs' reaction gave the two rabbits the advance they needed on the claws, the teeth and the jaws that followed. Everyone scrambled up the slope. As they did so, Augustus thought he saw a small white stone, glinting against the fresh brown soil. Almost without thinking, his paws tried to scoop it up. But whatever it was, it slipped away. It bounced ahead, coming to rest in a dip near the top of the cutting.

Breathless, the two rabbits collapsed in the high grass. The night air burnt their throats and lungs. Nausea pulled at their stomachs.

"I think — I think —" gasped Augustus. "I think — that I'd have — managed to neutralise them — in the long run —" He paused and then rasped on. "If you — hadn't stopped me."

"All right, Kid," panted the old rabbit, eyes red and paws hurting. "Next time — I'll leave you to it —"

The sun rose, painting the western sky with vast bloody strokes. Then came the rain that fell on the soil, and washed all the fragrances away.

A few hours later, the Southern Slope had returned to a certain degree of calm and damp tranquillity, the dawn chorus had quietened and a pale blue day was beginning to stretch itself over the countryside. A pair of ears, followed closely by a head, darted up over the undergrowth and turned in the direction of the cutting. The head disappeared to re-appear a few moments later accompanied by another one. Then these two heads disappeared back into the remains of the moist and dying grasses.

Two, three, then four rabbits came into view. They were dragging a branch through the undergrowth and over towards the slope where the damp soil was raw and exposed. As the rabbits pulled their branch, the small twigs at the end raked the ground, getting caught from time to time. This forced the rabbits to push, to pull, and sometimes, to nibble the ends, in order to free the branch. Then they could continue pulling again. From the leaves, burrs, twigs and mud that clogged their damp coats, they had been pulling this branch for a little while now.

Slowly, they were getting closer to the cutting where the rabbits had slid down into the compound the night before. They were getting closer to the open soil. And there they approached the curious white objects that Augustus had glimpsed while clambering up.

The rabbits came to a halt to rest and to catch their breath. The branch now extended from the side, near the top of the cutting, out over the earth, damp and streaked from the morning's shower. They manoeuvred it into place.

While the others hung on with teeth and jaws, digging their legs well into the ground, Augustus started crossing the open earth, using the branch to prevent himself from slipping down into the compound. Slowly he descended gripping the main bough, then the smaller branches, then the twigs. As he arrived near three white spheres caught in a dip, right in the middle of the cutting, he held on with his teeth, all the while extending his paws, trying to seize the objects.

One, then two, then...

A small trickle of earth flowed away from the dip, carrying the third object with it. Augustus twisted and jerked his paws. He shifted, trying to turn his head to follow the last object. Was it still here, or was it, even now, slipping down the slope to the works?

Then a paw met an obstacle. He pulled himself slowly forwards.

It was there, gleaming through the dirt cover.

And three!

"Gall ge yup!" he called out through clenched teeth. Which, even if it wasn't the most understandable of messages, had the desired effect: the other rabbits pulled together bringing the branch — with Augustus hanging from it by his teeth — out of the cutting. And safely back onto firm ground.

FALLING

Augustus took the objects back to his burrow and stared at them. They looked like eggs. Small, white eggs. Most onlookers would stop there: they would say, they're eggs. Three small, white eggs.

But when you started examining them you would notice the white wasn't on the surface as it should be. The white appeared to be just under the surface. And when you looked at the white you saw it wasn't smooth. It was textured. Ever so lightly. It looked like milk in water; like clouds; like smoke.

And if you carried on looking, if you looked inside, at that place just below the surface, then the smoke started boiling, the clouds started foaming. And the milk turned. Shapes appeared, shapes that were yet unformed. Were there tails and scales, limbs and claws, teeth and hooks? Were there creatures that were not yet creatures emerging from just beyond your vision?

And while you stared in, at this moving, shifting world, that pulled itself together to meet your gaze; while you looked

in, at this world of smoke and half-forms; while you stared at this liquid world you felt... You felt you could just take one step, and you would be inside the curling, swirling shapes.

And so you braced yourself against the fall to come, against the parting of the cold wind against your cheeks. Against the queasy sensation in the tummy. Against the ears that would swell and pop. Against that long, slow, giddy fall.

You are waiting on the edge, on the borderline; your body readies for the plunge; waiting for the world to tumble towards you; waiting for the terrible heavy presence of the dark hole in the night sky at the end of the well to plunge towards you.

Yet you didn't fall.

You didn't fall. Or was it already over?

You didn't fall. Or were you falling still?

Then you woke. You found yourself looking at three small, white eggs. And you wondered what you were doing there.

PREPARATIONS

"We shall take the opportunity of reviewing recent events at the Great Assembly." The silver-haired rabbit informed Virgil as they both strolled along the gallery.

Neither of them knew where they were going, it just seemed to be one of those conversations that happened best when going nowhere at a leisurely pace.

"Knowing what happened, don't you think that it would be better to hear the accounts in private?" said Virgil. He limped a little as he walked. Ever since that night, he had felt more and more stiff in his hindquarters.

"And you, do you not think that what happened, happened precisely because decisions were made in private, out of the reach and the control of the Great Assembly?" asked the elder. "And do you not remember what the date will be?"

So then Virgil understood: the Harvest Feast was approaching.

The elders had estimated the need and counted the harvest

home. The decision had been made; the Warren had enough stocks set aside to last the winter. And a 'bit' over. This last 'bit' was most important: the winter could be particularly hard, or the Warren might be called upon to assist rabbits from other Warrens, so there must always be an extra 'bit' in stock. But if the 'bit' were too big, then the rabbits would have to take more risks to bring in the harvest and fill the storage chambers. And this also shifted the date of the Harvest Feast, which wasn't a popular move either. So, if the explanations took place during the Feast, then everything would go quickly. Even if there were to be accusations, or even reprimands, the rabbits in their hurry to stuff themselves and to put down some fat to keep them through the winter, would pay no attention. Or, if they did, it would only be for a very short time.

"So you will have no need to worry yourself for the little one..." said the old rabbit, turning to leave. "All will go well."

Virgil blinked.

"Thank you," he said. And he left.

So he didn't hear the older one muttering. "Accidents and last-minute incidents excepted, of course. And knowing the Warren, that would not surprise me in the slightest. Anyway. As long as no rabbits are permanently harmed..."

THE EGGS SPEAK

"Hello Augustus," said the voice.

The rabbit in question lifted his eyes and looked around, trying to see who was speaking.

"Hello Augustus," another voice said.

The rabbit turned; something in his room was speaking to him. However, apart from him, the room was empty.

"Well, well, well. Augustus-s-s..."

This was yet another voice; a cold, old voice. A voice that wheezed like scales scraping over icy stone.

Augustus turned to the small cardboard box. He had determined that the sound was coming from there. He raised

the lid to look at the three white spheres inside.

Except they were no longer white.

If rabbits played with marbles perhaps Augustus would have been reminded of the shapes, like tears or like spirits, that the coloured glass takes inside these translucent baubles; like cat's eyes, or dragons and snakes, just hovering there. But he had never seen marbles, and so he could only gaze in wonder. He tried to reconcile the moving shadows he could now see with his memory of the white objects as they had been before.

"Augustus-s-s, we would like to go to the ball," said the old whistling voice, with a mocking tone.

The rabbit — who had never heard of Cinderella — didn't understand the reference; the other voiced laughed.

"What ball?" he asked, perplexed.

"The ball. Oh yes, the ball. Augustus, take us to the ball," the others taunted.

"But, there is no ball!" protested Augustus.

"Stop teasing, our poor, our good, friend Augustus-s-s," cut in the old, cold voice. "Augustus-s-s, you have a tas-s-sk. And to accomplish this task, you must take us, my kindred and I, to the Great Assembly of the rabbits. But before you do, I must explain. I must explain most particularly to you. I must explain the great danger that hangs over the World, Augustus-s-s. The danger that flies above like the Falcon, ready to sweep down on the poor s-s-solitary rabbit caught out in the open, far from the burrow and far from protection. Because the Falcon knows. It spies on the rabbit from afar, too far away to be seen, too far away to be smelt, too far away to detect. The rabbit never sees the Falcon until it is too late — does it Augustus? So lis-s-sten to me, listen most carefully. Few among the rabbits will be capable of preparing for the terrible menace that is coming, few will be prepared to take up arms, to combat it. But luck — or should we say — des-s-stiny has caused our paths to cross. We are at present indebted to you Augustus. But we can pay that debt by showing you how you can save the

Warren, the World, the rabbits. Are you ready?"

It was as if Augustus had been waiting to hear these words all his life.

HARVEST HOME

On the evening of the Feast, the Great Chamber under the clearing was — as it should be and as was expected — full. Full of rabbits and full of food.

The rabbits congregated all around the walls staring at the centre where the huge pile of food had been amassed. In fact to call it a pile of food is not to do it sufficient justice. This is the sort of giganormous piling up of the type that would cause rabbits to dream about it for months to come. And between each Harvest-tide Feast, this was usually the case. It was such an accumulation that just the listing of the different produce gathered here would bring water to the parched mouth of any normal rabbit — and quite a few others also. There was lettuce, of course, crisp and covered with dew; there was corn on the cob, crunchy and ready to melt under the teeth of the first rabbit who nibbled on it; there was cress, turnips, parsley, wild sparrowgrass; there were little onions, all white with a green bottom; and radishes, all red with a white bottom; peas — small, green and succulent; celery, beets, potatoes and, oh, I don't know... Ah yes! Carrots. Because a feast for rabbits without carrots was like Easter without eggs... Impossible! There were long carrots and there were short ones, there were thin carrots and long ones, there were big carrots and fat ones. Some were split in two, some looked like noses, some had spiky ends, others were rounded... but all were more appetising than any you had ever tasted. And all had a heady fragrance that tickled the nostrils of all the rabbits present — even the elders, wrinkly and creased by the seasons, their fur turned silver — even the elders all grouped together on the raised mound at the end of the Great Chamber, could smell it. As could Virgil positioned at one end of this rostrum, with

Augustus at the other, his small cardboard box between his paws, and the squad of his Ninjas standing behind him for moral support. All had itching noses. Their noses more than itched, they ached with the fragrance of all this food. And during all that time the vegetables whispered. “*Eat me! Eat me!*”

When the eldest, most silver-haired of the old rabbits, moved to speak, the rumour of voices died down.

“My dearest Bucks and Does, Kits and Dotes. We are gathered her tonight to celebrate Harvest-tide. We gather in the presence of all, and welcome those who were not present last year. We pause, united in thought of the Great Garden, where each of us is called when his time comes, when thinking about those who are absent this year. And so, my dear rabbits, welcome. What is said—”

“—*is said!*” completed all the rabbits (except one).

He paused. Noses wriggled. Even if it is not particularly polite to mention it, some of the rabbits started drooling. Others were restless, unable to keep still, fidgeting and wriggling, particularly the younger rabbits who were attending the Feast for the first time.

“But before we commence our festivities, we have business to deal to. Important affairs that affect the future of the Warren—” continued the older rabbit. But his voice had grown feeble after the effort of speaking clearly for the greetings.

The assembly started murmuring:

— *What’s he on about? He’s always rabbiting on about something. Can we eat yet?*

— *I think he was talking about importing hares into the Warren, no?*

— *Well, whatever they do, they’d better lay off our grub. Just let them come within a hare’s width of those carrots, and I’ll let them know if it’s a good idea or not.*

“As you all know, young Augustus here—” he indicated the rabbit with a jerk of his nose, “—and his friends, have recently carried out an incursion into the camp the Humans have established on the Southern Slope. The objective of this raid was to

bring us back essential information concerning their projects.”

— *Rejects? Who is he calling a reject?*

— *You’re not listening. He said that Augustus is making infusions.*

— *Augustus? That’s the one who nearly got himself eaten by the dog, no? Makes me shiver, just to think...*

— *Yes, that’s the one. He’s really nice, isn’t he?*

— *You must be joking? Haven’t you ever noticed that he’s cross-eyed? He’s got an eye that spends all its time looking over his shoulder while he’s talking to you...*

— *Well... yes. But I do think that adds to his charm.*

“So, with no further ado, let us all give Augustus our attention,” the old rabbit shouted at last, before slipping back to join the others on the rostrum. During all this time, Virgil had been distractedly inspecting the ceiling.

Augustus moved forward and started.

“Comrades and companions. At ease!” said the young rabbit. “The news I bring you is not good. Like a Falcon, a bird of prey ready to fall on the Warren—”

— *Foreign? What’s foreign?*

— *No, it’s not that at all. He talked about a bird waiting to play...*

“—the Humans will come, bearing down on the World, bringing danger night and day!”

— *The Humans’ hill fun, wearing down and the herd, singing strangers lighten day?*

— *No, he said; the World, the night and the day. It’s — like — poetical. Why don’t you shut up and listen?*

— *Frankly, I prefer my version. Much more poetical.*

“Today is but the beginning. Soon will come a great motorway—”

— *A totoway? What on earth is that?*

— *—a great path for the Human carts—”*

— *a late bath for the loomin’ tarts? He’s not right in his head, that littl’un. I don’t understand anything he says. Well, I understand the words, just not the way he fits them together.*

— *—that will crush the World underfoot—”*

— *I can’t follow with all your mutterings. Shut up will you!*

— *I should think so too.*

— *No, not him! You!*

“We must go down, there where the diggers cannot reach us. Further down. We must push the digging ahead, further down into the Warren!”

— *Did he say, we should bring bread further down into Warren.*

— *Bread? I tasted that once. Some Humans left it behind. Wasn't bad, but not the sort of thing you'd want to eat everyday though...*

And as the mutterings increased, Augustus' patience snapped.

“*Stop it!* Stop all your prattling. All of you! Listen! This is important!” He shouted, exasperated by the continual jabbering of the crowd of rabbits.

“Young rabbit, you should show some respect for your elders!” a voice quavered from the side.

“But they're just not listening. Not listening at all!” Augustus choked in frustration, close to tears.

“I think you're just starting to understand things, Kid,” said Virgil by way of consolation as he approached and twitched his noise at the old silver-furred rabbit. “Why don't you tell me all this in more detail... over a carrot or two. Shouldn't do us any harm.” He helped him move down towards the pile of vegetables.

“In the name of the Great White Rabbit,” the voice of the old rabbit carried over the hubbub, “Let the Feast begin!”

It is astonishing the amount of noise several hundred rabbits can make when they are busy tearing apart hundreds and hundreds of vegetables each more crisp and crunchy than the next one. And so (nearly) no one noticed three small lizard-like creatures slip out of Augustus' forgotten box. They pushed away the lid with their long, pointy noses. They sniffed at the air, whisking it through their long, forked tongues before scrambling to a slit in the wall of the chamber where they disappeared from sight.

In the weeks that followed (nearly) no one paid attention to three skinny, rather clumsy rabbits who wandered around the

galleries of the Warren like they were lost, and who chewed over the scraps of the Feast with the others. No more than anyone paid any particular attention when all three disappeared one day, leaving behind them no more than a vague memory just as mysterious as the slewed skin that the snake casts off, and just as wispy as smoke before it is blown away by the wind.

NOISES IN THE WIND

Outside, over at the farmhouse, the wind blew. The wind blew and it was going to tear the roof off. The wind blew and it was going to tear the roof off to carry it far, far away. And Juliet with it.

Juliet sunk deeper beneath the bedcovers and tried not to think about the wind. She wished her father would hurry up and repair the shutters. When they had moved in he had taken them down, saying they needed a good freshening up. Since then, they had remained piled up in one of the outhouses, and nothing had happened. And the storm was blowing, blowing. And now the wind was making noises. Sometimes it was like voices. Sometimes it was like neighing. As if there was a horse, there outside, calling.

And if it were true? She slipped her head out from underneath the covers, and hesitated. Then pulling the sheet and blankets around her to keep in the warmth of the bed, she crept up and peeped through the window. The wind whipped the branches of the tree, tearing off the leaves. The shadows flickered. They shrank and grew with the force of the storm.

Juliet hugged the covers even closer around her. Down below, in the courtyard, the mane and the tail shaken by the very same gusts, its ears flattened against the wind, its eyes half closed, its dark coat gleaming — stood the horse. It turned its head in her direction, setting it slightly to the side as if, it too, was waiting on something, on some reaction of hers. Then it shook its head. She felt that it was waiting, that it was searching for her.

She slid back down onto her bed. She buried herself under the tucks and folds of the blankets. She kept her head well under the sheets. While outside the wind screamed she tried to think of lots of nice things to help her sleep.

She tried to think of everything, except a horse waiting, just there, outside.

COLD IN THE NIGHT

Everything was her fault. Absolutely everything. Let it be perfectly clear: everything was Lucy's fault.

Lucy went back to her burrow, slipped her nose between her paws, and screwed up her eyes, very, very tightly. She wanted to weep and cry in sadness and frustration, but she was determined not to.

Then she wiped her tears and thought about the situation. Yes, it was quite simple and there was no getting out of it: everything was the fault of that horrible prophecy. Which meant it was all her fault. And nobody wanted to believe her. Worse than that, there was nobody to help her, and the World was in terrible danger. She had no idea what to do.

So she cried again. And then wiped her tears again.

Everything had started when she had tried to persuade the others.

No.

Everything had started when they had found her diary, but her current problem had started when she tried to persuade people that there was no prophecy to help them, and so that they had act immediately. And when she had tried to convince the others that they had to act immediately because there was no prophecy to help them.

She needed to get out. To breathe. To clear her ideas. To get straight out of this Warren full of rabbits all more stupid than their neighbours. Grandfather had been right on that point.

She needed to get out. To get away from these rabbits that she couldn't stand anymore.

And in fact, it was surprisingly easy to get outside.

That this was the sort of thing that just wasn't done because it was the autumn and because it would be cold and nasty outside, was not the issue. That there was no cover above in the undergrowth, nor in the grass for a rabbit to hide, and that all normal rabbits should stay home, safe and sound in the Warren — all those were excellent reasons not to go outside. That there were guards and lookouts to dissuade passing predators who counted on using the Warren as a pantry and popping in for a quick bite to eat, that too was normal. But the guards hailed her, and tried to discourage her from leaving, but nobody stopped her from doing it. She found herself outside with that icy wind blowing her fur the wrong way, and shaking the last rags of mist from the bushes all around the clearing, with the skeletons of the trees, black against a red sky that flared like the end of the world had come.

Of course, as soon as she was outside, she regretted it. But at least she would no longer have to listen to their stupid remarks.

That the Humans were going to come and dig up the World, that was certain. Everyone agreed on that. The Humans would arrive with their *diggers* to tear the Warren apart, then build their enormous path that flattened everything on its passage. Everyone knew that.

It was in the 'knowing-what-to-do-next' department that things started going wrong.

On one side there were those who proclaimed that it was urgent to wait. That the better they waited, the more quickly the Help would come. The other group did not agree. The prophecy was not an invitation to do nothing quickly, they said. They proclaimed that rabbits should take matters into hand and send out search parties here and there, to find the Stranger and bring him back. But that while they were waiting for the Stranger, there was nothing stopping them from organising things. They could already be digging deeper tunnels, and taking preventive action, like baiting the dogs. And noth-

ing, absolutely nothing, prevented them from looking for where the diggers could be chewed in order to slow and inconvenience them. It should be noted that the points about the dogs and the diggers were minority points of view, even in this group.

While all these debates raged, nothing happened. Because of Lucy. Of course, nobody knew — nobody could possibly know — that it was all her fault. But she did. And that was sufficient for her. *She* would always know...

A sound interrupted her thoughts.

She lifted her head. She had wandered aimlessly along the tracks and rabbit paths that lined the Forest, and stood now in the damp and dying undergrowth on the edge of the clearing. She froze, then craned her attention in the direction where the noise had come from. As long as she didn't move; as long as she kept her tail tucked down; as long as she breathed silently... She would not be in danger, she told herself.

It had been a whisper, a hissing, but amongst all the noises of the woods around, it had been that noise that had caught her attention, that had snapped her to a halt.

First of all she saw nothing. Everything around appeared just as still as it should be. Nothing moved. Then she saw, out of the corner of her eye, a movement. A little cloud of condensation forming in the air. There was a pony, or a small horse, standing, breathing slowly in the middle of the clearing. But it hadn't been the sound of breathing that she had heard. It had been a voice. An old, cold, wheezing voice.

She covered her muzzle with her paws and shifted so she could inspect the horse from a distance. It was standing next to a spreading, grey tree. At first she hadn't paid attention; after all, trees weren't exactly in short supply here in the Forest. But now she thought about it, there had never been a tree like that in the middle of the clearing.

And how did it grow there so quickly?

A movement in the tree caught her attention. A large black bird — like a stain against the bloody sky — was perched on

one of the low branches. It appeared curious to her, but now she saw them, the three of them — the horse, the raven and the tree — they looked like they were all talking together. She could hear no words: it was just in their attitudes that she felt there was a conversation going on.

The raven was big. Bigger than the biggest one she had ever seen before. How it must have been eating, she thought. And then she shivered. It ate carrion. If it had grown big and sleek and fat like that, it was thanks to all the woodland creatures it had found and eaten. Perhaps even rabbits.

Once again, fright froze her to the ground.

“We are coming to nothing with the rabbits-s-s,” said the voice, old and wheezing — the voice that must have interrupted her in the beginning. “We mus-s-st change our plans-s-s.”

She wasn’t sure if it had been the tree or the raven speaking. The sound came from their direction — but trees don’t speak...

“Too stu-u-upid, the Augustus. Too stu-u-upid.” That must be the raven speaking: she saw the head on the side, the beak moving as it spoke.

“It was a ris-s-sk. A ris-s-sk to take.” So that voice was the tree. “If they want a Stranger from outs-s-side the fores-s-st then we mus-s-st find them one, no? Pris-s-sca, my Dear, where are you in your s-s-searching?”

The little horse lifted its nose to the tree and the raven. “I search and I seek,” it replied with a sad tone. “But their dreams are hard to enter. And even then, few are willing to listen. I seek and I search.”

“Then go! Seek further, and search wider. The rabbits must dig and dig and dig down for us-s-s-s — *Halt!* What is that nois-s-se?”

Scared by what she was hearing, Lucy had unconsciously shifted backwards. She must have found the only dry stick left in the undergrowth of these sodden woods. And she had stepped on it.

“Fly! There is-s-s s-s-someone watch-h-hing...”

The raven stretched and great wings the colour of shadow unfolded; then with one swoop it hovered over the poor, frightened Lucy.

“Little rabbit,” it croaked. “All alone.”

It twisted round to spiral down towards the terrified animal. At the same time, a flash of blue sparks flew from the tree and hit the rabbit below. The air bubbled and crackled with electricity.

“Arrrk!” protested the raven, flapping away, black feathers askew. *“I does not like it when you do that!”* it croaked. *“I would catch it alone.”*

“I know,” hissed the tree. *“But you eat so mes-s-s-sily. You leave traces-s-s. We had to act quickly. So go, fly. Go aid poor Pris-s-sca and leave me to think.”*

With two beats of its wings the raven was above the horse. The horse turned and left for the lands beyond the forest. Calm and mist fell again over the woods and the only noise came from the pit-pit-pat of water drops, falling from the sleeping trees to the drenched ground below. In the undergrowth where Lucy had fallen, small drops of water fell on a figure made of straw and twigs.

But if you looked carefully you could see the form of a rabbit. A rabbit that had been very scared.

THE STORM PONY

The next morning, when she woke, Juliet made a decision. She would find out if it was a dream or not. Today, she would tidy up her room so that she could move without tripping and waking everyone. Well she'd try to anyway. Well, at least a passage to allow her to move from the bed to dress and then get to the door without making any noise. Then in the night, she could dress quickly. She would go down the stairs. She would be careful to miss the step that cracks. She would be careful

not to wake the dog. She would leave by the back door. She would take her warm gloves and hat, and scarf and boots. She would cross over to the courtyard by the stable, under the tree.

Then she would know if the horse really existed or not.

Now all she had to do was wait.

So that night she waited to see if the horse was going to be there, or if she had dreamed everything after all.

She pulled her blankets over her shoulders. She switched on the flashlight that she had 'borrowed' from her father's tool kit; just in case the battery had run down in the two minutes since she last verified it. For the third time, she counted the toffees that she had lined up on the windowsill to help her stay awake, and then set herself down, elbows on the ledge and her nose against the cold glass, breathing until the window was covered in condensation. Then she drew on it, rubbing out here sketches with the sleeve of her pyjama. And then started again. And again.

Even though she was determined not to sleep, but to stay awake long enough to see where the horse came from, her fatigue was stronger than her determination and after a while she could no longer keep her eyes open; her eyelids became heavier and heavier. She slipped into sleep but tripped on the threshold when her forehead bumped against the icy window. She sat up again, this time with a crick in her neck from lying in a funny position.

Lifting her eyes, she saw that everything outside had been transformed to silver. It took her a moment to realise that it was just mist. Layers came lapping against the walls below her window, rolling in little eddies around the trees and the out-houses, over the road off to the lane and, in the distance, swelling and gathering in the valley beyond.

As she watched, the mist — all white, grey, and silver — withdrew, leaving only raggedy strands hanging from the trees, the bushes and the hedges. A cloud covered the moon like a curtain being drawn, and a veil of liquid black velvet

flowed over the landscape. Then the drizzle came and chased away the last streaks of mist, blurring landmarks and forms.

Or nearly.

For she could see, quite clearly enough, the shape of a horse under the boughs of the tree at the edge of the yard below. She jumped from her bed. She pulled her jeans over her pyjamas. She wrapped herself into a vast woolly jumper. Her socks slowed her down as her big toe kept getting caught in the heel. But then she was ready, creeping down the stairs and slipping on her anorak.

The torch! She had forgotten it. She darted back up to the bedroom to bring it along.

She was in the kitchen, at the back door, stuffing feet into wellies and grabbing scarf and hat. She looked over at the still sleeping dog, slid the bolt and stepped outside.

The cold stung her cheeks, and quickly found its way under her clothes.

Now that she was next to the horse, she saw that it was bigger than she had imagined, a horse rather than a pony; her head reached his shoulder. The coat and the mane were shiny and wet through from the fine rain. The heavy head was bent downwards and moved slowly. Juliet stretched out a hand and stroked the muzzle, then scratched the horse behind the ears. She fished a toffee out of a pocket, unwrapped it and offered it on the flat of her palm. The tongue swiped her hand sideways. It was raspy, and warm.

She patted the horse and then guided it horse towards the stable, avoiding the mud and puddles.

Once inside, she set the torch down on a bale of straw, shining it against the wall to provide herself with a little light. Then she scooped some bran in a bucket. She also dragged over a big heavy blanket smelling strongly of horses, straw, mould and dung, and spread that over its back. She rubbed the flanks and neck with handfuls of straw, working the water out of the coat. That should warm it up a little, she thought.

She dragged over another pail that she half-filled with wa-

ter from the brass tap in the corner that was freezing to the touch. She left this second bucket next to the other, then took up the torch. She closed the stable doors behind herself, and crept back towards her bedroom.

Before getting into bed — still wearing the woolly jumper against the cold — she rubbed her hair with a bath gown while staring at the night outside, criss-crossed by the falling rain.

Then she fell to sleep, and in her dreams, rode the horse until morning.

So the next morning, she woke and dressed so early that she surprised her mother, more used to seeing her moping around the house in pyjamas — and, of course, with neither dressing gown nor slippers — until late in the morning, sometimes even to lunchtime.

Juliet swept down the staircase, threw herself into her boots, and grabbed her anorak before her mother had time to greet her. In the morning's grey light, she ran across the courtyard to the stable.

It was empty.

No, not empty. The bales of straw, the boxes were there; the harnesses, the tools hanging from their hooks; her mother's old mare, snorting to be let out. Everything was there. Everything that should normally be there, was there. But that was what was so terrible; neither the buckets, nor the blanket seemed to have been moved...

It was only when she left that she saw, in the barrel near the door, the handfuls of damp straw she had thrown in there last night.

If someone was trying to drive her crazy, it just wasn't funny. She went off for her breakfast and then spent the rest of the day sulking around the house.

NOTHING AGAINST GIRLS

Night came. Juliet closed her eyes, falling into sleep almost immediately.

She found herself in the middle of a dream of frightening immediacy. She found herself crouching on the back of a horse, holding onto its neck while the animal itself trotted down the lane that ran in front of the farmhouse. It was night. It was cold. She could see the long, low-lying farmhouse through gaps in the hedges. She clenched her knees and tried to shift herself backwards, wanting to try to sit up just a little but it wasn't easy. With each step the horse took, she was shaken around. Just hanging onto the mane to stop herself slipping and falling off took all her concentration and energies. She had only ever received one or two riding lessons. And never without a saddle. At first, fear of falling meant she gripped with everything — knees and thighs of course, but also calves and heels, elbows and hands. Even her toes. That's how scared she was. To complicate matters — from Juliet's point of view —, the horse walked on the side of the road where overhanging branches could reach her, scrape her, even whiplash back onto her at times.

At no time did she ask herself what she was doing out on the back of a horse, at night, riding down country lanes. After all, this was a dream. And dreams have their own logic.

While they were heading down to the small stone bridge over the stream that bubbled up from the source between the fields, Juliet managed, at last, to move in the same rhythm as the horse and to pull herself reasonably upright on its back.

But that only lasted for a short while.

They left the lane for a track that lead to the small round hillock nearby. Because of its curious appearance — a sort of dome covered with woods — everybody here knew of it. But also, if you climbed it — as the horse seemed to want to do — at the top you arrived in a large round clearing among the trees. As if the hill had a bald patch.

The slope grew steeper and Juliet fell back to hanging on to the mane for dear life, digging in knees and elbows again. The horse sought out its path, zigzagging through the bushes. The brambles whipped and tore at her. She was glad not to be

wearing her pyjamas, she thought. She closed her eyes and tried to bury her face in the horse's hair. She could smell the strong odour of the horse and the damp, and the fragrances that rose from the plants and bushes it crushed underfoot. She could feel the cold of the night air all around. She could feel the whiplash of twigs and branches on her hands and wrists.

Then without warning, it stopped.

But not Juliet.

She carried straight on. She shot from the horse's neck, and flew down.

And *Bam!* And *Ow!*

If the grass softened her fall a little, she remained breathless and woozy for a few minutes, before, at last, opening her eyes.

She found herself in the clearing that she had once visited by day. But by night, things change. Or so she believed, because the silver-grey light transformed the trees and their shadows, shifting forms, places, colours. Beyond the ring of trees the forest disappeared into gloom, for, if the moon lit the ring as if it was daytime — except for that curious quality of moonlight that renders everything as if in black and white — the light didn't penetrate the thick, dark growth all around.

Turning her head, without yet trying to get up, never mind sit up, as the bruising she felt all over calmed down, Juliet saw the horse waiting, its head bent, breathing slowly. At last, looking around on the other side she saw she was at the foot of a solitary tree growing in the middle of the clearing. A smaller, more compact tree than those lining the edges.

"You did *what?*" The rasping voice disappeared into a high-pitched whisper. "You brought us-s-s a *girl?*"

This time, at the end of the sentence, the voice hovered then tottered into a brutal collapse at the end of the question. Then the tree turned towards Juliet. A branch — like some sort of hand — held over the trunk. The tree spoke with a soft

and low voice, the sort of voice you would use to speak to a baby; the way grown-ups speak with someone they knew, in advance, was going to have problems understanding...

"Of cours-s-se, I have absolutely nothing against girls — personally — I even used to be one, myself. I think. But that was a very long time ago. Or perhaps it's tomorrow."

Then turning once again to the horse and using the other voice, the one that hissed and grated like how you imagine snakes sliding through dry leaves.

"And more than that, a *little* girl. *Minute*. *Minuscule* even. What were you thinking of? Can we never trust you? What were you thinking of? Of *what*, I ask myself!" A pause. A short sharp pause. "I ask you, she is... What? So small. What am I supposed to do with that?" The tree swayed and branches beat the air.

"I'm not small," said Juliet, indignantly. She pulled herself up, stretching her toes and pulling in her tummy. "I'm quite tall for my age."

A child, just a child! Can we not *trus-s-st* you in anything at all?"

And the tree shook its long branches with sounds of cracking and scraping, like you would hear if you could shaking a tree. Which was, more or less, the case.

The horse kept its head down, letting its mane hide its eyes.

"So what do I do?" it asked with a sulky tone in the voice. "Take it back? Did you see the time it took to find one and bring it over? We'll never have the time to find a replacement." It shook its head. "Especially if Madame wants things to always turn out her way... *Hiiinn!*"

Juliet turned, amazed, to the horse. "But you can speak!"

"Of course," replied the horse, looking up from under its mane with liquid eyes. "I would point out that you can speak, too."

"Of course. But you're a *horse*..."

"How observant of you. And you, you're a little girl."

"Not as little as all that! But why didn't you speak before?"

"I could ask you the same question, no?"

And then a shadow fell over the girl.

Juliet had seen an eagle once. It had been in a cage in a zoo. It had had a few feathers sticking out at a funny angle and, quite frankly, personified that sad air that all caged animals in zoos possess the world over. At first, she took this dark shadow for an eagle. Not because of any vague idea of sadness, but because of its size. But once she saw its shape and its feathers shining in the cold light of the moon, she saw it was just a crow, or a raven. But a very, very big one.

It stayed, as if suspended in the air, wings outstretched, then swooped around to settle on a low-hanging bough of the tree. Once it perched there, it shifted, rustling and settling its wings from time to time. It set its head to one side, in the manner of birds when they are studying something. She saw the cold light reflect and shine on a black eye. Its gaze gave her shivers.

"*Croaaaaak!*" it cried out, at last. Or it could have said "*What?*" — it was hard to tell.

It settled its wings alongside its massive, blue-black body. Still looking at the girl it cawed, "Is it *vermin*? Something the cat brought in?" At this it jerked its head back and forwards as if laughing at its own words — "*Cro-croa-croaaaaak!*" — before the words ended in a sort of cough. And an explosive sneeze.

During this time, the others — especially Juliet — had not moved, never mind said anything.

"Enough," wheezed the raven at last.

When the tree continued speaking, the feeling of disagreement was tangible. It spoke, pointedly, without paying attention to the bird. It also spoke taking attention to make every syllable perfectly clear.

"Perhaps, my littl—" (Juliet gave it a sideways look) "Perhaps, we should explain to you why we pulled you from your bed, to bring you out here into the middle of this Forest, in the dead of the night... A most comfortable bed, we are sure; and a

most desolate forest, we are certain. Do you not agree?"

The girl nodded. Slowly. "And who you are?" she asked. "And where do you come from?"

"Are you s-s-sure you want to know that?" The tree turned back to her. It bent; it seemed to be examining her. But, of course, trees don't do that.

"Um... I think so," said Juliet.

"Why?" countered the tree.

"Why?"

"Yes-s-s, you heard me. Why? Are you curious-s-s?"

"Yes. Probably."

"Ha!" The tree pulled itself up. "This-s is not a good thing. Curious-s-s kills the cat."

"What? No. Being curious is a good thing. That's how you learn."

"What?"

"Learn what? Well, everything. Without curiosity we wouldn't know — I don't know — that the Earth spins around the Sun, about vaccination and pasteurisation. And there'd be people dying because of antibiotics. And electricity and computers. Everything."

"Ex-x-actly. Poppycock and balderdash. What you call *curiosity* is just meddling in things." The tree spread its branches out. "Messing with things-s-s that are bigger than you, that you do not understand. Whereas we need your help in something that does concern you, otherwise you would not be here."

"But I don't know how I got here."

"You wanted to come here, that should be obvious-s-s, otherwise you should not have come. It is as simple as that." The wind rustled in the leaves of the tree.

"That's saying it," agreed the horse.

"We are in need of your ass-ss-sistance. Simply put, we need the help you can provide us-s-s with. Or rather, others dear to us need your help, even if they do not so know at this moment. We are the manner, the means... — Yes, that is it —

We are the path your assistance must take in order to provide succour to those who are in need.” The tree pulled itself up and looked around. If it could look.

The raven just unfolded its wings, then folded them again, all the while keeping an eye on Juliet.

Accompanied by a cracking in the branches and the roots, the tree bent towards Juliet. “My li—” Seeing Juliet’s face, it stopped abruptly, before continuing, “My *lovely*. You do want to know how to help our friends, do you not?”

This is how Juliet found herself, in the middle of the night, trying to drive a small excavator ‘borrowed’ from the works on the Southern Slope of the hill.

For her defence, it should be said that while it was going on, everything seemed to flow quite normally. It wasn’t until the next day, when she looked back on the night’s events and when she thought about her clothes and shoes, splashed and spotted with earth and mud; about her dirty hair; about the shadows under her eyes; about the collection of leaves and stones in her pockets; not to mention the scratches on her hands, her elbows, her knees and a bruise on her forehead that was starting to throb... It was only then that she said to herself that, perhaps, some really strange, possibly bizarre, things had happened that night. Perhaps it was more strange because she woke up in her bed without being able to remember how she got back there. Perhaps it was more strange also that she was still wearing her dirty clothes. And that she had to change very quickly before her mother noticed anything. And before her mother started asking questions for which Juliet did not possess even the smallest, the most tiny and minuscule, beginnings of an answer.

That was the sort of night that it became.

THE WARREN UNDERNEATH

At the time, learning of the existence of the rabbits living in the Warren under her feet, then learning of the terrible men-

ace that the motorway held over their lives, had upset her so much that tears of frustration had bubbled up in her eyes. Which was strange in itself as she was not one taken to sniffing over little cuddly animals. She sat down and listened as the tree explained why the rabbits must dig their tunnels deeper, further, lower. Down where the terrifying diggers coming for the motorway would never be able to harm them. She listened and marvelled while the tree explained how they — *the Three*, as they referred to themselves — had tried to warn the rabbits of the danger but because of the rabbits' differences over some prophecy, the rabbits were busy — doing nothing. And time was passing. How the Three were resolute in their determination to help the rabbits, going so far as to bring in someone from outside the forest to help the rabbits understand. And how they had chosen Juliet for this mission.

"So now," said the horse, interrupting the tree's explanations. "You must tell the rabbits to dig. To dig deeper, further, lower. To dig away from danger."

"All right," said Juliet. "But how?"

"How?" the Three spoke at the same time, even if it appeared that the raven just said 'Caw!'

"Yes. How? I don't see too many rabbits here. How do I tell them?"

"But you must go down into the Warren, my lovely..." replied the tree, as if the answer was obvious.

"OK. Let's forget for the moment that I don't see a warren here; we'll finish by finding one I'm sure. But then? You might say that I'm small, but I'm not exactly rabbit-sized, am I?"

"You couldn't try? Just to see?" whinnied the horse.

"I can try... But I'm not making any promises." And then for herself, "Who do they take me for? Alice?"

So they set off. The raven silently spread its wings and dived from its place in the tree, before gliding upwards and away. The horse gave Juliet a tap in the small of her back with its muzzle.

"Let's be going." And it trotted off towards the shadows at the edge of the clearing without waiting for her.

When they caught up with the raven it was perched on a small mound on a bramble-covered slope. Picking their way through the thorns they found a shadowy hole, about the size of a football, at the base of the mound.

"And now?" asked Juliet, rather afraid of the answer.

"You go down," the horse asserted. To reinforce its point, it hit the ground with a hoof and scratched at the topsoil.

"*I—go—down.*" She leaned over to look in. Everything was black and smelt — damp. And cold and mulchy — somewhat like mushrooms, she decided. Before she could be scared, her shoulders rubbed against the edges of the hole, and she pulled her head back.

"It's like I thought. I'm not small enough!" she was surprised to hear herself saying.

"*Caw!*" called the raven. They all waited and then the raven flew off again.

"*Caw!*" it said again, or "*Come!*" or even "*Run!*" It was always difficult to tell.

The horse and the girl walked side by side, avoiding catching their feet in the roots, and trying not to get overly scratched by the brambles.

After a while, they arrived on the Southern Slope, on the edge of the woods, high above the diggings. At their feet the ground had been scraped away, creating a sort of muddy cliff-face. Down below, against the fence that ran along the small access road, a bulky rectangular cabin and a lean-to had been installed.

"Right," said Juliet, who thought she was beginning to repeat herself. "What now?"

The raven flew over and set itself down next to the two. To Juliet it appeared almost as big as she was.

"And now," it crowed. "*We go down.*"

Definitely not, thought Juliet, but before she could say it

aloud, the raven had flown away. It swooped in a tight curve and came round to the same place as it had been before, but just a jot higher. As it passed it caught her by the shoulders with its massive claws, as if it was snatching up some mouse or vole. It carried her, gliding down towards the bottom of the cutting. The cold night air whistled in her ears, pinched her cheeks and stung her eyes. It was then she knew she wasn't in her bed; that she wasn't dreaming after all. But it had all happened so quickly she hadn't had the time to protest.

Once safely down below, with her heart beating furiously and her legs a little weak, the raven with its head perched on the side in intense concentration, explained to her how to disconnect the wires of the battery that powered the electric fence. Then it lead her under the lean-to where a small yellow digger was stored away.

It came to rest on the seat.

"Me, use that? No way, you're joking!" she protested strongly. "I'll never manage that..."

The horse padded over to join them; it had been beating at the fence with its hooves until that obstacle had caved in.

"To command the digger, it is there." The raven showed a box or bump on the side of the cabin, under the lean-to, but too high up for Juliet to see it clearly.

"*Out the way!*" called the horse, and they backed off. It reared up and brought hooves drumming down against the box until it fell, smashed, to the ground.

It contained rows of keys. Juliet looked and then understood; it wasn't something to 'command' the machine, but the means to start it.

The raven pecked at the debris; searching and sorting. Then it pulled up a set of keys from the midst and passed them over to the girl.

"I look at the shiny bright Human things with lots, lots of attention," it cawed, proudly.

Quite right, she thought, remembering how it had shown and explained the wires on the battery to her. Something that

she'd never known about until recently.

It was too late to back out now. She clambered up onto the platform of the small machine and pulled the driver's seat as close as she could to the steering wheel. With her bottom squishing against the very edge of the seat, she just managed to tread on the pedals below, to turn the wheel and to look out ahead; all at the same time.

The raven came to perch above the small dashboard, where there was a panel with levers and buttons. Impatiently it pecked at the slot for the ignition key.

"OK, OK!" Juliet snapped, heated. She scanned the switches, the levers, the buttons with symbols printed on them, the warnings on yellow backgrounds with a thick black border... Then inserted the key. She held her breath as she turned it.

A bright yellow light immediately flooded the area, beaming out from the front of the vehicle. The motor coughed — shaking both Juliet and the bird — before hiccupping and then stopping. As the machine jerked and rocked, and Juliet stayed gripped to the wheel, the raven fell forwards. It flapped its wings and then swooped to the side, gliding off in a circle before coming to rest, perched on a smelly barrel over to the side.

Just in front of her face, Juliet saw a small silver cloud explode into the air. It was her breath, condensing in cold, night air. She must have forgotten to breathe while she had been clenching her teeth and turning the key.

This marked the end of the first attempt.

She lifted her foot from the pedal and turned the key for the second time. There came a loud but curiously muffled explosion and the air filled with the choking smell of exhaust fumes. Again, the yellow light burst out and stayed vibrating in the space around the lean-to, washing out the visible world; there were no more shapes, no more outlines, no more paths, just blinding light.

Juliet heaved the wheel in the direction she wanted the

digger to move, and started pressing down on the pedal. It was like slipping on a cake of soap in the bath; at first there was nothing, then a slight, slow movement that became inevitable and then unstoppable... Followed by a brutal shock. To her great surprise the small yellow digger set off backwards with a sharp lurch. It jerked through one of the beams holding up the roof of the lean-to before burying itself in the wall of the cabin behind. The impact threw Juliet aside. As the girl was no longer pressing the pedal, the excavator stopped moving. The motor stalled. Everything went black.

There was a dark silence. It was impossible to say if this silence lasted two seconds, two minutes or two hours as time seemed to have disappeared with all the rest. And then the lean-to started falling down around her. As long as the noise and the collapsing lasted, she kept herself in the space under the seat and the steering where she had fallen. When, at last, nothing more had fallen down for a little while, she poked her head out and pushed a path through the dust and the debris. She was trembling as she walked, lost and shocked, in the moonlight.

She didn't see the raven fly over to catch her up in a long swooping motion, to grip on her shoulders and drag her back up the hillside, away from the compound and the destruction there. Up and over the trees.

The massive bird set her down in the clearing, by the roots of the tree. The horse, its head bent, panting slightly, was already waiting there. Juliet slipped to her knees, cold, tired and distressed.

A HUMAN IN THE GREAT CHAMBER

It didn't work, Juliet wanted to say. We failed. It couldn't work, even though we tried. That was what she wanted to say. But instead she waited. She waited with the Three. The raven perched on a branch, the horse with its head bowed. And the tree, just waiting. Just waiting.

A vast sigh erupted. It was the sound that great boughs and branches would make being shaken by storm winds.

"S-s-so be it," said the tree. *"Come!"*

The tree stooped down, pulling branches together. It plucked Juliet from the ground. What happened next so surprised her that she didn't think to protest. The tree advanced on the surface of the clearing like a great sailboat on the surface of a glassy sea — the same grace, calm and quiet sense of power. Moving almost without movement, and almost without traces, it carried her. Yes, it felt unbelievable but... The tree was really moving across the land.

"Here it is-s-s. Here we are," it said. And set Juliet down among its roots as they untwined and set themselves back to delving deep down into the ground. "Below is-s-s the Great Chamber of the rabbits-s-s. Here, under the clearing." Of course, Juliet could see nothing. And she didn't understand very much either... "It s-s-shall be more than big enough for you."

She looked around and was aware that she could see the gnarled trunk next to her with terrifying precision. She saw the moss and lichens in detail: small, burgeoning yet stringy growths. She saw small fragments of the bark, fraying like pieces of dried-up cork. She saw cracks and scratches. She saw a tiny spider lumbering across the vast, vast grey territory of the trunk. She went to turn, wanting to see if everything around possessed this same terrible clarity. As if she was seeing things through a magnifying glass, or a dew drop...

But she could no longer move her feet.

She looked down and, with a shiver that licked up her spine like a wave breaking on the beach, she saw that her feet had sunk into the ground past her heels, as if she was standing on quicksand. She had felt nothing. She tried pulling them up and out, but her panicky movements only succeeded in pushing her in deeper. Now she was stuck in the soil up to her calves, nearly up to her knees.

She stared down, horrified, as the earth appeared to boil. It shifted and moved to such a degree that she saw insects, large

and small, moving out, fleeing, crawling, squirming away. She saw earthworms wiggling to get out of there. Out of that impossible soil, as quickly as possible.

The ground was now above her knees.

She thought to grab hold of the tree to pull herself back up; but it had slipped too far away.

"Help me..." she implored.

She threw herself towards the tree, trying, desperately, to reach it. To catch it and to hold onto something, anything. But this just made her fall, and...

Now all her right side, up to under the arms, had sunk into the ground.

"Help me!"

The earth churned, moving, slowly turning. But it certainly wasn't wet, and it wasn't like quicksand. It was as if the earth were parting to let her through. The beetles and the spiders and the worms were all busy doing their most to get away. They didn't like this earth either. They too were scared by it.

"Help me! Someone, he-e-elp me, please!" she cried, tears blurring her eyes.

Her right arm was completely buried. The earth on that side approached her ear, even as she twisted her head to get away. She tried to keep the other arm out flat, across the surface of the ground, as if she would swim to safety. And then — at the very tip of her fingers — she felt something; the touch of a branch or a root. She moved her hand, trying to stretch, to extend her arm. Grab it. Hold on. Again. And again. Pull. Pull herself up from the morass that was closing in on her. But with a last shudder it — whatever it was — broke off in her grip. Came away in her hand.

She sank deeper.

She wanted to scream, but was scared. Scared to open her mouth. Terrified that the soil would flow in. Would flow in her mouth and her ears and her eyes and her nose. She kept her mouth shut. Tight. Screwed up her eyes. Hoped with all her

might that her ears and nose would hold back the earth. She held her breath. And felt the earth close over her head.

Inside the earth she felt as if she had no form, no weight, no existence. Only thought. No feeling, no illness, no pain. No noise, no smell, no taste. Like in her strangest dream.

And... Time passed.

Then she could feel her feet again. Her toes could move. Just after that she felt a weight on her legs, a tugging at her knees and her thighs. Then her tummy. She felt air on her stomach — her T-shirt must have come untucked from her jeans. She realised that, somewhere underneath, her legs were emerging from the earth.

She could still see nothing, but somewhere down below, her feet met a solid surface. Thinking she would fall, she tried to get a grip with her fingers but the earth slipped away.

Her head flowed out of the ground, from a sort of ceiling, and then her hair flopped down. She hung there, legs folded, her arms still imprisoned above. At last, the ground slipped over her wrists; then her palms; then her fingers. The earth let her go. She collapsed. She found herself huddled against the wall of a cave or an underground cavern.

She was cold and scared. She tried to bury her hands deep into the pockets of her anorak, but she felt things there, as if the earth had left things for her to find. Remembering the insects and the creepy-crawlies she had seen squirming on the surface before it had sucked her down, she pulled her hands out quickly.

Her nose itched. There was a strong musky smell. At first, that was all she noticed: the smell. It smelt a little like dogs. Then she realised it wasn't dogs... It was rabbits! She was inside the Warren. The feeble, faint grey light down here only let her see things that were really, really close. She saw the wall behind her, carved into the earth and smoothed by time. The walls, the floor and the ceiling stretched away into the gloom. Reaching up, she felt she could almost stand upright, but she preferred to huddle against the wall where she had arrived. As she remembered how she had arrived there, she shivered. Yet,

this memory brought her comfort. She remembered why she was there. She was there to warn the rabbits.

“Hep! Hello! Is there anyone there..?” she tried.

The months that make up autumn and winter are the worst moments to visit a Warren. During all that time, the rabbits have a perfectly natural tendency to prefer sleeping over other activities, particularly at night. More than that, the guards — who, for their part, should be awake — tend to be concentrated around the entrances. And not in the Great Chamber in the middle of the Warren.

Which meant that not many heard her shouts and calls. And even less of those who did hear that distant calling actually woke from sleep long enough to wander off and see what it could be. The idea of a Human arriving in the Great Chamber in the middle of the night not being an occurrence that comes naturally to even a wide-awake rabbit.

One of the neighbours finally twitched himself out of autumnal dreams. He wandered down the halls to the Chamber, grumbling and his eyes still full of dreams. Like a sleep-walker, he entered the room to find what all this noise and shouting was about. And froze.

Suddenly he was awake. Suddenly he was very awake. And scared. It was the middle of the night, practically the middle of the winter, and here in the middle of the Warren was...

“A Human,” he muttered.

Then darting back, he ran off, calling out with a voice still husky from sleeping.

“A Human! A Human in the Great Chamber! Alarm! Alarm! A Human in the Great Chamber!”

CHASING CARROTS

Augustus was sleeping. While he slept, he dreamt.

His dreams were rich with carrots; otherwise they wouldn't be rabbit dreams. Fresh, succulent, crunchy carrots that would

make any rabbit's mouth water. But as this was Augustus' dream, the carrots ran and jumped instead of letting themselves be eaten without a struggle. And as this was Augustus' dream, he was busy hunting them down.

But he knew how to do that. After all, he was at the head of an elite force of rabbits who — even now — dashed through the airs pursuing the fleeing vegetables. His squad of Ninjas would capture them all with no problems. *Take that, you fiercest and most treacherous of vegetables.*

And while he slept, his paws and legs twitched. It was hard work running and jumping, even if it was in a dream.

They had cornered the carrots in a field, near the woods. His team was preparing the final clean-up operation. Augustus called on his troops to do their best, to give all they had — the carrots wouldn't be coming off tops this time; it was their tops that would be coming off.

Aha! They were cornered. The manoeuvre had been perfectly executed. He had every reason to be proud of his team. His faithful lieutenant, Tish, called him over to inspect the ditch where the last carrots were hiding out.

He leaned over the edge... But didn't see the carrots. Just three white balls. Round white balls like eggs that were curiously familiar...

"Hello Augustus-s-s," said that old, cold familiar voice.

"Hello Augustus", "Augustus"

Other voices also echoed around his head.

"Augustus-s-s, we have news for you—"

Still this voice sounding like something dry and flaking, scratching across a cold stone surface.

"—the Stranger from beyond the World..."

"We have brought the Stranger," called the other voices in chorus, behind and at the same time as the first voice.

"—and s-s-she is here. In the Warren. In the World—"

"Be careful. She is a Human."

"—now it is s-s-s up to you too, to help the rabbits-s-s—"

“You must succeed,” chanted the other voices together.
“—the rabbits-s-s mus-s-st dig to s-s-save themselves-s-s—”
“Deeper, further, lower.”
“—before it is too late.”

Augustus awoke to hear the shouting, warning of the Human in the Great Chamber.

There can be no doubt, he thought as he hurried to get there, if a Human can get into the Warren, into the Great Chamber even, it’s all the proof we need that the Warren isn’t deep enough. We really will have to dig deeper, further and lower down.

WHAT IS SAID, IS SAID

Down in the Chamber, Juliet had been feeling for a little while now that something was happening. However, she was not able to exactly determine what that something was. It all started with a sort of mumbling in the distance. And she could smell that musky odour getting stronger and stronger. The room had been getting warmer too. But she could still see nothing through the gloom.

The rabbits, on the other hand, could see her quite clearly. Rabbit vision is naturally better than that of Humans — and not because they eat lots of carrots, unlike what your parents would have you believe.

The rabbits could also see her quite clearly as they were there in the Chamber. The news of the Human’s arrival had been spreading round the Warren like a swarm of wild bees; before you knew where it was coming from, the news was everywhere at the same time; mumbling, bumbling and rustling. The rabbits had been arriving in ones and twos, sometimes all the family together.

When Augustus arrived, his fur dishevelled, his eyes a little wild — and not only because of his slight cross-eyedness —, he didn’t stay at the back, staring and whispering with the other rabbits. He marched up to the platform where Juliet,

hugging her knees for comfort and support, was huddled. The night had been filled with long and exhausting events; tears welled at the corners of her eyes. And, she knew that something had been going on around her, without being able to see exactly what it was.

What? She had started to ask herself; what is out there?

Well, it's rabbits, of course! That's generally what you find in a warren, don't you? That's what you or I would say. But remember, she could see nothing. She had been alone in the dark for what felt like hours. She was tired, and starting to be very, very scared. And lots of strange things — well, strange in her opinion — had been happening to her. So when, without warning, Augustus appeared right next to her — because of the darkness, she hadn't seen him approaching — she did what any reasonable person would have done in her place: she screamed as hard as she possibly could.

Augustus leapt back. And fell against his squad of Ninjas. They had slipped into place behind him, ready to back him up against the Intruder in the Great Chamber. Juliet's reaction surprised them all, perhaps even more so because they were so close. The rabbits fell aside like skittles.

By this time, Juliet had realised that she wasn't seeing some terrifying figure from her imagination: just a rabbit. It was a rather ordinary one, with thick grey fur, and a slightly frightened air about it. It had another little something too... As if his two eyes didn't look entirely in the same direction, or as if they were, just a little, out of focus. But she put that — mistakenly — down to the emotion of the moment. Her own heart thudded hard in her chest, but now, after that initial shock, she felt bad about the fright she had given everyone. (If she had known that, at the same time, she had terrified more than a hundred other rabbits who were also present and looking at her, she would have felt even more unhappy; so it was certainly better, at that point, that she couldn't see them.)

"I'm sorry," she said at last. Her voice was low, almost a whisper, "I do hope I didn't hurt you..."

“The Three told me that you were here... So I came along immediately—” said Augustus, pulling himself up, and turning in her direction.

“The Three! Oh! So you know them too?”

Even if the three creatures did appear strange, in a way that she couldn’t quite put her finger on, she was relieved to find something in common to ease her explanations. She described for him their fears (and hers) about the motorway, and the urgency of the rabbit’s situation. And about the ‘deeper, further, lower’. During all this time he nodded his head, mumbling agreement.

However, the rabbits in the Chamber saw something entirely different. They saw the-Stranger-coming-from-outside-the-World — being a Human, this part was perfectly clear — and this Stranger that had been prophesied as coming was giving Augustus the mission to dig tunnels deeper, further, lower in the earth, out of the way of the terrible ‘totoway’ and the terrifying diggers that the Humans would soon be sending against the Warren. And it was the Human telling them all of this. And they couldn’t stop themselves from saying: *What is said, is said!*

Once Juliet had delivered her message, she collapsed, totally exhausted by the adventures of this long and strange night.

All became black.

She remembered nothing more. Nothing. Nothing.

A STRANGER RETURNS

This time he came to the back door. He knocked, and entered when they invited him to do so.

He found them both in the pleasant warmth of the kitchen, hands and aprons dusty with flour.

He greeted them, wondering which of the two he should treat with the most precautions. Finally he decided that — according to past experience — the most dangerous of the two was in fact the

smaller. He took a damp packet of toffees from a damp pocket. He smiled at the girl, all the time keeping her mother under anxious surveillance. He offered toffees all round.

Removing his dripping hat, he asked, in a tone that he intended as being cordial, "Is it really necessary to redo presentations?"

Immediately, the mother, who had up to that point been prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt, surged forward.

"Of course!" she said. "For all I know, the County Police Force may have — *finally* — come to their senses and drummed you out. To prevent you from further harassing innocent citizens carrying out their democratic right to peaceful protestation. And now you have come here to take revenge..." She held out her hand.

He gave her the same small rectangle of plastic, but this time, instead of simply looking at it as Juliet had, her mother took it, turned it over, studied it with attention, and even murmured the occasional word as she read.

Detective Inspector Morrison stayed on the doormat, dripping slowly.

"You can guess why I'm here?" he asked when she returned the card.

"Yes!" exclaimed the mother, with a defiant look.

"No!" called the girl in a high voice that surprised both the policeman and her mother: they both turned to stare at her.

"I just wanted to say 'No, I don't know', that's all..." she said in a smaller, embarrassed voice.

The policeman looked at her mother as she started to speak.

"You're here because some tearaway has done something stupid. So you're paying a little visit to the usual suspects. That's it?"

"Ma'am, I can tell no lie," he countered, stretching a large smile across his face.

"And so you'll be visiting the rabbits next?" Juliet's mother said. The smile faded.

"*The rabbits?!*" squeaked Juliet. Again, both of them looked at her.

"I just wanted to say, 'The rabbits?', that's all," she said, looking down at the table with determination.

"Yes, Dear," her mother said, after a short pause. "What our friendly neighbourhood policeman here did not say, is that the diggings, the so-called damaged material and so-on, were all examined by 'objective' and 'unbiased' investigators a little after his visit here... And it was found that all the vandalised poles and things, that they all had tooth-marks on them. A good close look showed they had all been chewed at by rabbits. And not at all by residents protesting the motorway."

Detective Inspector Morrison gave confirmation by way of a rather awkward grimace that did its best to pass itself off as a smile.

Juliet's mother punched out half-a-dozen biscuit with the cookie-cutter she was holding, then set the pieces down on the floured plate. She gathered the remains, crushed them into a ball, floured it and started rolling. "And this time?" she asked.

"I believe I can assure you, without fear of contradiction, that this time, it is not rabbits at work," the detective answered.

"Not rabbits?" said Juliet in a hush.

"Yes, that's what he said, Juliet," said her mother, punching out a new round of biscuits.

"I couldn't..." said the detective stretching out his arms, all the better to show his drenched clothes.

"Oh, yes. What was I thinking?" replied the mother. "Juliet, Dear, help him to undress, I'm all..." Her voice died off as she looked for the word. "Mucky, messy..."

"Covered with flour?" proposed the detective.

"That's the idea." She gave him a fleeting smile while Juliet set the heavy parka, made heavier by the rain it had absorbed, over the back of a chair near the stove.

"Shall I make some tea, Mum?" she said.

The woman raised her eyebrows in the direction of the policeman.

"Oh, I'd love a cup!" he said.

"You were saying..?" the mother said.

"Ah yes," he continued, pulling up a chair, "No, I don't think we are dealing with rabbits this time. But believe me, I'd prefer that."

"Yes?"

"Oh yes! Let's just say that when the boss says we must go and see the protesters, little subaltern officers don't have much choice but to do it. But that doesn't mean they have to believe what their boss tells them. Personally, I think this is just a local kid who got bored or something."

Juliet dropped her teaspoon and had to start her count for the tea all over again.

"For example, last night someone tried to take a mini excavator from the works off for a joyride. He didn't get far. But the strangest thing was not the boot marks all over the place — must have been someone young or inexperienced, as they didn't even try to hide or rub out their tracks — no, the strange thing was that he had a horse with him. And a horse that had never been shod. I'm told that's pretty rare. What you do you think?"

Juliet missed the teapot completely and splashed hot water on the table.

"*Juliet!*" shouted her mother. "What are you playing at?"

Again, both of them looked at her.

"It might be the flour," said the detective, "but she looks pale to me."

"Go and rest yourself five minutes, Dear. I think he's right, you do look pale."

Juliet rolled up her apron, leaving it on the chair, and disappeared behind the kitchen door where she stayed long enough to listen to her mother saying: 'No, I can assure you that everyone was at home and fast asleep last night. That's sure and certain.'

And then Juliet scampered silently up to her bedroom. To hide her head in the pillow and wonder what sort of mess she

had got herself into.

Her mother came up later to find her in bed reading. She put her hand to the girl's forehead.

"You do feel a little feverish. Stay in bed a little. I'll bring you up something to nibble later on."

The smell of the biscuits cooking floated around the house.

"Is he gone, Mum?" she murmured.

"The funny policeman, Dear? Yes, don't worry." Then, "You know he even stopped to question your father... They met on the drive. He told me when he arrived. Dad was all happy, he says the cement for the driveway will be arriving — at last — at the end of next week. They called him to give him the dates. You know how long he's been waiting to finish that drive..."

She picked up a pair of jeans while she was speaking.

"Have you got any other dirty clothes hidden about the place? I think I'll do a big wash... I do wish you'd put your stuff in the basket..."

She saw the mud on the anorak and took that also. She stopped at the door. Emptying the pockets automatically, she had found something. She set the small figure down on the shelf above Juliet's bed. It was the sort of small corn dolly they make in the villages around here at harvest festival time. It looked like a small hare. Or a rabbit.

The following night Juliet waited, but nothing happened. The next night also. The long nights stayed empty and calm.

No more storms, no wind, no rain, no horse.

Each night her mother found her asleep, with her head and elbows on the window sill. And every night, her mother slipped her back under her covers in the bed.

The days weren't any better. Juliet moped around the house, always under her mother's feet. Juliet didn't dare go out, in case she met the policeman. As soon as a visitor arrived, she disappeared.

The fourth night she no longer watched at the window. She went to bed, cuddling her old bear. And cried.

She knew, deep inside, that it was useless to hope. She

would never see the rabbits again. She would never see that strange tree in the clearing. She would never see the raven again, but perhaps that wasn't a bad thing after all... He was a little worrying. And the horse. She wouldn't see the horse again either.

Late that night, her mother came into the bedroom, expecting to see her daughter asleep by the window as usual, only to find her deep under the sheets and covers. She tucked her in, and kissed her, like all mothers do. Then she pulled aside the curtain to gaze out on the moonlit countryside outside.

She looked out for a long moment wondering what her daughter had been watching for all those nights. It was beautiful. It was calm. But nothing particular caught her attention. Turning to leave she saw a ray of moonlight playing across the sleeping girl in the bed.

She left, silently closing the door behind herself.

LUCY

Juliet was woken by a hail of toys and figures falling down on her head and onto her bed.

"Hey! What's going on?" she muttered, feeling for her bedside light.

A large white rabbit with rather pleasant brown and grey patches was turning round and round on the shelf above her bed. More figurines and then a book fell directly down on the girl below.

"No! What's—" she started.

"Don't you dare come near!" squealed the rabbit. *"I bite!"*

"That's exactly what I needed," Juliet replied, more than a bit annoyed. *"A rabbit wrecking my room. And menacing me into the bargain!"*

"Juliet?" The landing light came on. Her mother's voice continued, *"Juliet, Dear? Is that you?"*

"Yes Mum," she called out, quickly switching her lamp off.

"I had a bad dream Mum. It's all right now. — And you, shut up!" she hissed in the direction of the rabbit. "You've already created enough problems for me, don't you dare go adding to them!"

She caught up Lucy and swept the rabbit under the bed. As her mother opened the door, she rolled herself into the blankets and lifted half-opened eyes to the light.

"It's OK Mum, no need to worry."

Her mother looked at the girl. She was surrounded by books, post cards, plastic figures as well as a snow-shaker bubble containing a line of penguins parading along the crest of a palm-tree lined desert island. The girl followed her mother's gaze.

"I think I must have shaken things up a bit, Mum. But... I'll clear it up in the morning, OK?" She yawned theatrically. "I feel sort of tired now."

Her mother stared at her, seemed about to say something, then turned and left. She shut the door.

Juliet watched the thin strip of light disappear from under the door then waited a good ten minutes before switching her bedside lamp on again. Leaning down under the bed she peered into the darkness.

"I think you owe me an explanation," she said to Lucy.

So Lucy told her everything. She even started all the way back with the story of her diary. Finally she felt relieved that — at last — someone else knew all of this.

Admittedly, she did muddle things up at times, she was only a rabbit, after all. So Juliet had to interrupt to ask questions. At one point Lucy remembered she was hungry, not having eaten for days; Juliet slipped down to the kitchen and came back with a handful of carrots and a bowl of water.

Grown-ups just don't understand that sometimes there are things more important than blindly respecting the rules. Should she really go off, wake her mother and explain that she had a large, hungry, talking rabbit in her bedroom and would she really mind if Juliet popped down to raid the larder for

carrots and tomatoes, and perhaps some lettuce or cabbage? Juliet was sure that if she did that — knowing quite well it was the right thing to do — she would then waste half the night with explanations and reassurances for her parents. Anyway, if her mother did find carrot scraps in the wastepaper basket she would just think it was some sort of strange midnight craving and would probably be happy to see her daughter eating her vegetables for once.

And besides, Juliet felt that, considering her recent track record, getting caught for taking the carrots wouldn't really change things much one way or another.

When Lucy described the strange events that she had overheard in the clearing, Juliet felt something strange in her tummy; not just the sort of nasty feeling you get when you do something completely stupid, but the sort of something completely stupid you do and then a grown-up turns up just at that exact moment. Or even worse, your worst enemy arrives and then runs off to tell everybody else. That sort of bad feeling in your tummy.

It couldn't be a coincidence. There couldn't be another tree, another bird and another horse wandering around the countryside here. It could only be the same ones.

So then it was up to Juliet to tell her story. This time with the assistance of a glass of milk and a small pile of digestive biscuits. In turn, Juliet's story got Lucy quite worked up. She was now more than a little convinced that those Three weren't out to be nice to the Warren. But apart from the fact it isn't especially polite, nor very welcoming, to transfix visitors — even if they did think she was eavesdropping, and even that was an accident — Lucy couldn't say exactly what it was that was disturbing her...

Juliet admitted she had found them more than a little strange, but not that disturbing. Except that now, talking about it all, there were perhaps some unusual points.

For a start, strange things happened when you were around them, but at the time you didn't see them as curious. Then,

that they had changed Lucy into something else because she had heard them speaking was unusual, possibly serious even. It was a pity Lucy couldn't remember what they had been saying. On the other hand, they had been honest in explaining everything to Juliet: the rabbits were stubborn, not too bright and not particularly well organised. And this was all true. And they really hadn't wanted to do anything to save themselves until someone from outside the Forest turned up and told them what they had to do.

Yet Juliet had also seen how they could behave. Now she thought about it, they did seem to possess some sort of power. Why can't they just move the rabbits off elsewhere, to where they would be safe... It wasn't as if patches of forest were hard to come by in the area. And what was so special about that funny little round hill with the clearing on the top?

Anyway, if you were building a motorway why would you make it go there, over the only real bump that exists in the area? But the policeman, the detective, hadn't he said that the motorway wasn't even being made anymore? In the *liminary* phase, he had said, or something like that. And that it wasn't sure at all.

Then, why the hurry to get the rabbits to dig? Perhaps there was, in fact, something else going on.

"Lucy. We've got to be sure. We're going to go back to your Warren to see. But before that, wait for me here for two minutes."

Her slippers went flip-flap across the hallway, along to her parents' room. The light from the landing lit two bumps in the bed when she slipped the door open. She eased round to her mother's side.

"Mum, Mu-u-um! The motorway, are they going to make it or not?"

Instinctively her mother sheltered her eyes from the light and murmured with a voice heavy from sleep, "What is it, Juliet Dear? Another dream?"

"Mummy. Is the motorway really going to come?"

"Don't worry, Dear. No. No, it isn't. Go back to sleep now. We'll talk about it tomorrow if you want... OK?"

"Yes, Mum. Night-night, Mum. Sleep tight."

Her mother was already sliding back down the slope to sleep.

Back in her bedroom, Juliet reported to Lucy what her mother had said...

"No motorway. That's what she said. And she knows things like that. So there is something strange in all this."

She dressed in warm clothes and a bobble-hat, then wrapped a woolly jumper around Lucy before slipping her into a backpack.

Once outside, they were greeted by frost sparkling in the moonlight. It transformed the countryside into some frozen, crunchy-crystal fairy-tale land. Juliet hitched up the backpack on her chest, pulled on her gloves, and set off to look for the woods and the Warren.

A LONG, HARD, HEADACHY DAY

Next morning, as soon as he arrived at work, Detective Inspector Morrison got a phone call from Juliet's rather worried mother.

Summed up, the phone call covered the following points: everything was his fault for persecuting her family with his obsessions about the motorway, and so her daughter has been having nightmares because of his visits, and this very morning, her daughter had run away: it was clearly all his fault.

Inspector Morrison emptied his coffee into the washbasin in the Police Station toilets. He sought out and then swallowed two aspirins with a large glass of water. This was a precaution. He felt, from that moment on, that this was going to be a long, hard, headachy day.

He set off for the farm to meet with Juliet's parents.

IN THE SNOW

It is one thing to set out to find a small, round, wood-capped hill in the still, crisp, pearl-grey light before dawn. It is another thing altogether to be able to remember where this hill really is. And then to walk there. Carrying a rabbit. That last part is important.

The problems started when they reached the lane that ran along in front of the farm. The drive had been all bumpy with rubble boxed in by planks and just waiting, as it had been for weeks now, for the cement to come along and turn it into a real path. The tracks along the side had been slippery gullies where everyone had been walking along and muddying them up for the last few weeks of rain. These had become slippery and treacherous, crunching underfoot, in the frost. But that part was now over.

So where exactly was the small hill?

Juliet had already visited it, but that was some time ago. Besides it had been in the car with her parents. Admittedly, she had been there more recently, except it had been at night, and on horseback. She was loath to trust her memory of that night. For the life of her, she still couldn't remember how she actually arrived on the horse, and out in the cold night like that. However, by thinking about that journey, and pulling together what she knew about the surrounding countryside, she decided on a direction, turned left, and they set off. After a while, Lucy started to get a bit heavy, and she realised it too. So she chatted with Juliet, thanking her, but also telling her stories about the Warren and rabbit life.

More than a little while later, following a footpath through a small copse alongside one of the fields, it occurred to Juliet that she should have left tracks along the way; a means of finding the way back. Like stones. Or breadcrumbs. Just in case. All these paths finished up looking like each other, it would be useful to be sure they weren't just wandering around in circles.

As night turned to a grey dawn, the countryside around was unexpectedly quiet. The dawn chorus, usually a raucous

row that lasted for at least an hour and moved along in waves and crescendos of song and greetings beating at the shore of the new day, was totally absent. In fact, it was a curious day that was creeping over the hills and the tops of the trees and the bushes. Ever since they had left the warmth and the comfort of the house, the sky, the weather and the land around had lightened to this hazy grey colour with a touch of mist licking at the distance. It was that sort of very early morning. They could see reasonably clearly, but nothing had a real shadow. And if the sun was rising somewhere behind the low clouds — well, they couldn't see that either.

Then it started snowing.

Juliet surprised a large fluffy snowflake swirling down before it landed at her feet. She tried to catch the next one on her tongue as is the tradition for the first snowflakes, but failed. At the last minute the puffy mass wheeled to the side, away from her mouth. These first flakes were soon joined by other white splashes. Then they started arriving by the handful, sticking to the cold earth, to the dead leaves, to the trunks and the branches.

Juliet hugged the rabbit to her, and zipped up the anorak.

The path they were following passed through a high hedge. And disappeared. On the other side was just a field. By the time they got there the snow had already started to stick together in small lumps. It looked like it had been dabbed by a large brush, getting ready to whitewash out the landscape. Juliet stopped to get her bearings, her breath sketching misty swirls in the air. She could see a dark mass over the other side of the field that could possibly be a small wood of the same shape and size as the one where the rabbits' Warren was situated. The woods looked smaller seen from here, but it could be the distance, or the time of day, or perhaps an effect of the light. Or the snow. In any case, there was no other candidate for the woods to hand.

She set off to walk round the field to get there.

The snow was falling even more heavily now. Juliet won-

dered if she would be able to advance at all without the shelter the hedgerow provided. The falling snow was so thick she had the distinct impression there was someone on the other side of the hedge, busy shovelling it over and onto her. She could barely see two paces ahead. During some of the gusts, she couldn't even see her hands at the ends of her arms.

The ground was becoming more and more slippery. Worse than that, the snow was beginning to seep into her trainers — she hadn't thought to wear her boots on leaving. It was also dripping down the collar of her anorak, as well as in the front where it was open for Lucy.

"I do hope it is your wood," she said to the rabbit, but kept to herself the thought that if it wasn't, they were going to be in real trouble.

THE WORKS

There was someone else travelling across the countryside that morning. He had left the Police Station as soon as he had got the phone call from Juliet's mother.

Detective Inspector Morrison gripped the steering wheel of the car, keeping it under control and well in the middle of the road, as he did his best not to lose himself in the fog that had swallowed him up on leaving town. As the country road was slippery — and because of the fog there was next to no visibility — he hadn't driven faster than about five miles an hour since leaving town.

He had pushed the heating up to full, but the windows refused to stay unfrozen. Even wearing gloves, padded boots, a woolly hat, a parka and more than one scarf, he still felt horribly cold. Especially in those places impossible to warm up; like knees, or the tip of his nose. But he had been warned. When he had arrived at the Police Station his colleagues had informed him that, around here, either you are soaking wet, or you're freezing cold. Or, by way of a change, you're both at the same time. Even so, he thought to himself,

I should think myself lucky, it could be worse.

At least it wasn't snowing.

Less than two minutes later, the first snowflakes pasted themselves to his windscreen.

This is going to be my day, he thought bitterly. I'd have done better to break a leg getting out of bed this morning.

A few minutes later, he let the car slow to a stop, pulled the hand brake tight and got out with the motor still running. On the crisp snow his boots made a noise like crunching polystyrene. He estimated he was not far from the turning off to the test diggings for the proposed motorway service road. The one that had been cancelled. He wandered around until he came upon the temporary 'Danger Lorries Turning' sign stuck into the roadside and wiped it free from snow to be sure. If this girl — now what was her name? — was really obsessed by these roadworks, this would be her destination. Jill? Julie? Something like that...

He cupped his gloved hands to his mouth.

"He-e-e-ello? Anyone there?" he called out to the hedgerows dusted in white powder. But the mist and the falling snow swallowed up his voice.

He tried again. *"Hello Kid! Are-you-the-e-e-er-r-r-re-e-e?"*

This was followed by a resounding '*Damn!*' as he heard the motor start faltering and missing beats.

Shivering, he clambered back into the car and pressed the accelerator. If anything, it felt colder in the car than out. He slid the car back into gear, let the hand brake go, and drove off for the farm.

High up on the hill, peeping through the curtains of snow: the woods watched him leave.

UP THE HILL

Juliet felt herself slipping. She didn't know if it would be agreeable to fall or not. Perhaps it would be all soft, like falling

on to a feather quilt. She suspected not however; she suspected it would be cold and wet, and even hard in places. All the same, she would have liked it to be all soft and warm around her. She caught herself at the last minute and remained upright, but she was tired.

She had stumbled, she realised now, because the ground had changed inclination, suddenly, with no warning. It had taken her by surprise. The walking had lulled her into a rhythm. For how long had she been plodding along mechanically, without thinking? With just her head pulled down between her shoulders to protect herself from the cold, peering out for obstacles through half-closed eyes; and just putting one foot in front of the other.

They moved on. She hugged Lucy to her, as much to comfort and reassure the rabbit, as to warm herself up. She looked up. The snow looked as if it was falling less strongly here, as if the mound in front created some sort of barrier.

"Do you recognise anything?" she asked, pulling on the straps of her anorak to let the rabbit see.

"I'm—not sure," the other murmured, a little disappointed. "Everything is, was—Well, it was less white when I left. Perhaps you should try and find a burrow..."

"Oh yes," she started to answer ironically. "If you have any other suggestions about how to proceee—"

Juliet found herself sitting in a snowdrift, windied by her fall.

"You're right," said Lucy, jumping down and out into the snow. "It's for rabbits to find rabbits. What was I thinking, asking you? Go find yourself some shelter while I search..."

The rabbit scratched at the snow, shivered and then continued digging until she got through to the earth. Then she stopped to sniff noisily.

"I won't be long," she said, and hopped away.

Find yourself some shelter, thought the girl whose jeans were feeling cold and damp; easier said than done.

She waited until the rabbit had disappeared from sight

then started clambering up the hill, advancing in the snow on all fours at times, pulling herself up on bushes and roots. She wanted to be sure.

A WORD OF WARNING

She knew it was the right place when she passed the crest of the hill — which seemed higher than she expected — and worked her way through the woods to arrive at the clearing. Over on the other side she could just make out the forms of the Three. Of course, she couldn't swear that it was the same clearing because of the changes in the light and the weather. She couldn't have sworn that they were exactly the same three creatures, either. They seemed far away, small and motionless. Then the snow set to falling again, obscuring not only her view but also the contours of everything all around her. She moved closer, across the clearing.

Her first reaction was that they weren't nearly so impressive when half-seen like this, by day, through the mist and snow. They looked more like an abandoned jumble of old branches, roots and all sorts of bumps and growths. The sort of mess you imagine a flood would leave stranded on the banks of a river, or in a field.

Except the tree. A tree, even when it's frosty white, still looks like a tree. She neared them, moving with precaution, wading through the snow.

The raven was in tatters. It looked as it had been losing feathers by the handful. It looked like the skin underneath had become deformed with bumps and growths. It had also grown bigger still since she had last seen it, but it looked — somehow — like sickly growth. And the snow dusting the black mass perched on the tree gave it an air of being half-finished.

The horse just stood there, in front of the tree, with its head bowed. It had also grown, but misshapen, twisted. It was certainly bigger but had lost its proportions. The head was too big, too heavy and monstrous, a seething mass of dark flesh,

of angles and lumps, hanging flaps and bulges.

The wind calmed, or the snowfall lost its intensity, or both at the same time, but at last she saw them more clearly. She moved closer still.

She became aware of the scale of the horse. The snow had prevented her from seeing it clearly before, but now, with the gusts of snow calming she saw that it too, had become enormous.

And to think I travelled on its back, she thought.

"Why can't you leave us-s-s alone?"

The voice, she realised was not outside. It jostled into sound and hearing from the inside of her head. It wasn't pleasant, not at all. It was like someone forcing you to open your mouth to take medicine when you didn't want to take. Instinctively she blocked her ears with her hands.

"Go. Let us-s-s alone."

She turned to return to the woods, to find her path back and to look for Lucy. But then stopped. After all, she had managed to get back here, she had a right to an explanation. She turned to face the tree again.

"What do you want with the rabbits? What are you doing to them?"

"That is our affair. That does not concern you."

"Yes, it is my business!" she shouted. Her ears were sore and burning where she had touched them.

"The s-s-snow was-s-s a warning. But you would not understand. Or you do not wish to. Why can you not leave us alone?" said the voice in her head.

She lowered her hands.

"Go. Let us-s-s alone. And be gone..."

She turned away and ran, as far as she could, through the snow falling more strongly now. Tears of frustration burned her eyes.

LOOKING FOR A PATH

A few miles to the south-west, Detective Inspector Morrisson was beginning to feel comfortably installed. The warmth of the kitchen had started to thaw his arms, legs and nose from the blocks of ice that had been holding them prisoner.

And miracle of miracles, he sighed, I can feel... my feet again. And my toes, my fingers, my ears... In fact, a mug of warm tea, on the wooden table top in front of him, was even now bringing feeling back to his fingers and hands. And the warm, sweet liquid warmed him deliciously inside.

While he thawed, he explained patiently how it was not possible, — No, not at all! — to find a runaway girl whose tracks would already have been covered by several inches of snow. And why, because of the cold and the damp, even the most talented of bloodhounds (and providing that it didn't catch pneumonia out there) would be unable to sniff out the slightest trace.

Then he looked at the parents and sighed. What he had said had completely demolished them. They were thinking of all that could happen to their daughter out there and they were scared. And they expected him to help them. He sighed again and drained his tea. He pulled his clothes back tightly around himself, and left.

He took with him a pole and a spade and started scratching around. Looking for the path that Juliet must have taken.

DOWN IN THE BURROW

The beetle flopped down from the roof of the gallery. Still on his side, he rolled round once, twice, three times... Feet thrashed the floor until he met a rough patch and forced himself upright, slowly and with the utmost precaution. Once restored to his normal plane he set to the most important task to hand: counting his legs. Four, five, six... *Oof!* That's all right,

they're all there. Other beetles, a moth or two, a spinney of cockroaches and even some spiders were seeping out of the walls and ceiling. All had come to answer the same call. Over on the other side, against the wall, a small congress of fleas was gathering. And some lice. Strange to see everyone up and wandering around in the middle of the winter.

Bam! A small fruit fly buzzed into him, knocking him over before zipping away, bouncing haphazardly from ceiling to wall, from wall to floor. Not only did he not say Sorry, but he didn't even check I wasn't harmed. I mean, it's so easy to lose a leg nowadays. Imagine how he'd feel if he lost a wing or two... Wouldn't do, wouldn't do. Must be careful. Two, four, six! *Right!* No harm done! But that doesn't excuse matters. Everyone's still there. I mean, losing a leg, or even two. Just wouldn't do. Can you imagine four-legged beetles? Just doesn't bear thinking about...

He shivered and shook out the last specks of sleep that were cluttering his tiny mind, rubbed his jaws together enthusiastically, then set off to follow the others, further in and further down the Warren. To where the voice was calling them all.

WHAT HUMANS LOOK LIKE CLOSE UP

Virgil pointed his muzzle towards the white nothingness outside.

"You *sure* that you're *sure*, Kid?" he said, a mite suspicious.

Lucy barked back at him.

"Yes, of course. It's the same Human. And stop calling me, Kid. We were both born the same spring-tide, you and I."

Virgil scanned the bleak countryside outside.

"I can't see anything, you know..."

"Well, I did tell her to stay put, but, from what I know, Humans have never been disposed to taking orders from rabbits... Oh Virgil, you're trying my patience. Either you're com-

ing in, or you're going out, but stop blocking the pathway like that."

The two rabbits hopped out into the snow, quickly followed by half a dozen others. Virgil positioned lookouts; he reckoned that the snow made the rabbits into targets both too visible and too tempting. He gave orders to warn everyone at the slightest hint of danger.

"And when I say 'slightest', I mean: even if the shadows start looking suspicious, or a passing sparrow gives you a nasty look. You don't get to my age without—"

"Yes, Grandpa, we know the story..." interrupted one of the appointed lookouts. "Just trust us a little, will you?"

For a few moments, Virgil remained unmoving, with his mouth wide open in astonishment. Then he set off to follow Lucy. This didn't prevent him from glancing back from time to time giving dark, glowering looks at the rabbits posted at the burrow entrance.

In no time at all, under the direction of a still indisposed Virgil, the rabbits had criss-crossed the area and found Juliet where she had collapsed against a tree-trunk.

"Well, well, well," remarked Virgil. "I'd never noticed before that Humans were blue. When you saw them from close up, that is."

VOICES

Gasping for breath, Juliet woke abruptly from a confusing dream where she was buried in the ground, suffocating. She shivered.

She found herself in a sort of rounded hollow, dug into the snow, with high walls curving overhead. It was a sort of igloo with the top missing. She was buried under the soft and fluffy warmth of a covey of rabbits.

At first, when Lucy and Virgil had found Juliet, she had looked so bad, they had believed her to be dead. Lucy insisted they couldn't just leave her like that. She chivvied the other rab-

bits until there were enough volunteers available to dig and build the shelter around where the girl had fallen, while Lucy tried to warm her. They she called for more volunteers to help rub up against the girl and friction her back to warmth and life.

Then Lucy sat down next to her to wait through the long hours.

"All right everyone. Thank you. Move back. Let her breathe!" she cried out when the girl first shuddered and opened her eyes.

Juliet felt as if an iron vice gripped her forehead, and a thousand small coals were prickling and burning all over her body. The rabbits slipped away, making room for her. She tried moving her stiff and painful limbs.

At last, deciding that as each position was just as painful as the others, she took a deep breath, ignored the pins-and-needles that were itching all over, and tried to sit up. Preferably, without crushing a rabbit in the process. On the third try she managed to control her limbs long enough to pull herself to a sitting position.

Lucy came over.

"Drink," she said, offering a small wooden cup filled with water.

The water was cold but refreshing. Before drinking, Juliet hadn't realised how thirsty she was. She drank the contents of three more cups before finding the strength to say '*Thanks*' in a hoarse voice.

The rabbits who formed a dense furry mass around the shelter, and who were staring at her with their bobble eyes, shifted to let pass a procession of porters bearing food on cabbage leaves. Juliet left the raw potatoes aside, but chewed hungrily on the carrots and the apples.

"I'll admit I was a mite worried when we found you," said Lucy when Juliet had finished eating. "I thought you'd been left in the snow for too long."

"—Tell her frankly that we were ready to leave her for dead!" interrupted Virgil, nosing his way next to Lucy.

“And so you decided to finish me off by suffocating me under a pile of rabbits — Is that it?” She laughed at herself, at her attempts to cover her fear. “Don’t worry, it’s too strange an adventure for me to leave before it’s over...”

She looked at the rabbit with the ragged ear.

“You must be Virgil. Where are the others? What’s going on now? And where’s Augustus?”

“The... erm, Kid, and...” he started, but stopped when he saw the young rabbits — most of whom held Augustus in near worshipful esteem — staring at him. “The-erm-Kid, Kid...”

“The Kid? The *Kid* Kid?” asked Juliet, more than a little lost.

“The Kid... He, um. The He-who-is-directing-the-works at the moment...” mumbled the old buck. “He’s busy. Directing the digging. The Kid.”

The other rabbits were staring at her without speaking. They still saw in Juliet the ‘Stranger’ of the prophecy. Even if they hadn’t all been present, in person, in the chamber when Juliet had come to speak with Augustus, they all knew of the event. For the Warren, it was a moment that was rapidly acquiring the trappings and the varnish of myth. Particularly in relation to the way the Stranger had appeared. And then disappeared. It could also be considered the founding moment for Augustus for, ever since that time, he had been taking on responsibility not only for the works below — and considering the importance and the influence of the diggings on the daily life of the rabbits — but also the effective management of the Warren.

As soon as she felt well enough — and notwithstanding the authority of Augustus — but wanting to confirm what Lucy had been telling him, Virgil questioned Juliet as to the Three, the motorway, and the imminence — or not — of danger.

A doe rabbit with sleek black fur was present during this question and answer session. To Juliet’s surprise, the others referred to her as a *Ninja*. Juliet wondered how this word had found its way into the rabbits’ vocabulary. She didn’t learn why,

but they did tell her that Augustus, being so busy with the works down below, had delegated his second, Tish — as that was her name —, to report back to him concerning Juliet.

As the rather pretty black doe waited there, listening to Juliet's accounts and explanations, Tish would suddenly freeze, bolt upright and then scratch herself violently. Juliet was afraid to appear impolite by asking about this. She supposed the others considered it normal, as Tish wasn't the only way scratching herself in this manner. Perhaps they've got fleas, or ticks, she wondered. A hypothesis that Lucy confirmed.

"There is so much strangeness going round, nowadays. There's like an invasion of insects — all sorts — effectively cutting the Warren in two. If the rabbits stay down below, or stay up here, there isn't too much of a problem, but those who have to move from one level to another. Well, they have to go through them. Bah! It must be horrible!"

Then, when at last they were alone together, Lucy turned and asked, worried, with an expression that made wrinkles all along her nose, "Did you go back to see *them*? The Three?"

When Juliet nodded, and admitted she had gone looking for them when Lucy had left her for the Warren, the doe continued, still anxious, "And they did nothing to you?"

"If you mean, did they turn me into a doll? No. At least, I don't think so. I think when you found me it was just being tired and the cold."

She described the transformations she had seen on the Three.

"That's not nice," said Lucy. "But another thing... I knew you'd seen them. I heard them in my head—"

"You too?" Juliet burst in, surprised.

"Why?"

"Because I did, too!" cried the girl. "I didn't hear them, not with my ears, not normally. Their voices forced themselves into my head... It was so... *horrible*."

"Yes..." the doe rabbit agreed, casting her thoughts back to

that moment too, “Those voices! Ugh! I’m not going to forget them easily...”

They both stayed silent. Together.

WAITING

There were two or three lone snowflakes falling down when Lucy left to join the others. There were discussions and negotiations in preparation in the Warren and Lucy wanted to be there. She promised to send someone back with some drinking water. Juliet sucked, slowly and thoughtfully, on a soft toffee that she had found in the bottom of her anorak pocket. She looked up at the grey sky through the gaps in the branches that criss-crossed over the hole in the roof.

And waited.

THE CALL

They were scurrying along the tunnel in one direction when the call came to change, sending them running in a completely new direction as fast as their small and bumbling legs could manage.

From time to time those big mammals, those Fourleggers. *Berk! Berk!* Even if they were big, they were still only big, hairy Fourleggers. Walking pantries: that’s what the fleas and ticks called them. Pantries. Ha! *Berk! Berk!* Where was I? Yes, sometimes those big furry mammals came rushing through without as much as a word, and sent everyone tumbling all over the place. When that happened, it was each to his own. Everyone must look after his own legs, that’s what I say. Four, five, six. So far, so good.

And still that call. Each of us heard something different in that voice. For some it was fat and juicy roots, or mushrumps, or a dish of tasty moulds. For others it was flesh, fresh or rotten. For yet others, it was tender grubs, or scrunchy little

flies... It promised a feast for each and everyone who heard it.

So the insects, and the others, continued to wander round in circles in the galleries of the Warren.

THE THREE

When she heard the news, Juliet was appalled.

"But why, Lucy? Are you just playing dumb or what? It's *dan-ger-ous!* They're not nice. They *already* tried to kill you!"

"But I need to be absolutely sure!" Lucy replied, determined. If you can imagine a rabbit crossing her forearms and scowling, you'll have the portrait of Lucy at that moment.

"But why? We know they're up to no good. We know they want to hurt the rabbits... You don't have to just go and throw yourself into the fox's jaws just to prove he's bad or something?"

All the rabbits present had been following, like hypnotised, the argument between the girl and the doe rabbit, heads turning as if they were the public at a tennis match. But this last remark had sent an audible shudder through the crowd. For Juliet it had just been words, but for the rabbits it was a little too close to reality for comfort.

"Sorry," she said. "I got carried away."

Lucy continued, more calmly now.

"Listen Juliet, if they don't answer me, that will at least confirm that their intentions aren't good concerning the rabbits and the Warren. And that's what matters to me. Nobody's forcing you to come along, you can go home when you want."

"Stop it! You know this concerns me just as much as it does you. And I saw them too. I think they're dangerous. Worse: unpredictable!"

The girl and the doe had their noses touching. Almost. Lucy turned away.

"If Augustus would only arrive. With his team... Then I'd feel more reassured."

"Yeah. It's not fair," the girl said.

"Because we keep telling you he's busy with the diggings,"

Tish interrupted them.

“Because we keep telling you the diggings are *the cause* of our troubles,” shouted Lucy, furious. “And they must be stopped.”

“Hold on, Ki-i-i— Slow down,” Virgil broke in. “The Warren doesn’t see things like that. From their point of view, the diggings are destined to save them. Even I have problems believing you at times, a dote and a Human. What is said— Oh! *Radishes!*”

“You see!” Lucy turned to the girl. “That’s why we’ve got to go back. Deep inside themselves, they don’t believe us.”

Their arguments were coming to an end, and after a few more half-hearted discussions, they reached an agreement: Tish was sent to invite Augustus to join the party. But, with or without him, they were going.

While they were waiting for an answer they set their differences aside: Lucy rested, Juliet stretched her legs and relaxed. She still felt cold and her head hurt but, on the whole, better than when she had woken up.

Everyone was just starting to get impatient when Tish came back with news of Augustus. She spoke, but at first everyone was distracted by her violent fits of scratching. Her ears were raw and bleeding in places. I hope he didn’t send her away with a flea in her ear... mused Juliet.

“He promises to join us,” she said, “but for the moment he has too much on his paws.”

Not with the diggings, they were pretty much at a stop because of the problems below. His current problems were, precisely, with the insect invasion.

So, everyone wanted to know what was happening with the insects.

“No one knows. They came out of nowhere. In the beginning, provided we stayed on one side or the other — up above, or down in the diggings — it was fine. It was hard at times for rabbits who had to move about a lot, but there were still a few

‘safe’ paths between the two places. But now all the insects have moved down. Some think it’s because of the cold, but anyway, they have also become much more aggressive. They’re biting a lot.” She scratched herself with a back paw. “Those who are still down there are trying to trap them. They draw them into galleries and then block them in: the time to get all the digging teams out and safely back up here.” She scratched herself again, on the other side. “So Augustus said that as the digging wasn’t going to advance in the immediate, he might as well catch you all up in the clearing as soon as he can get out.”

Juliet looked at Lucy.

“These bugs are strange, no?”

“Yes. It looks like someone wanted to force the rabbits to stay on at the diggings, but things went a little wrong...”

“Looks like the work of...” Juliet’s voice faded off into silence.

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest!” said the other.

THE SNOW RABBIT

Juliet crouched and scrambled out of the shelter following the rabbits through the entrance. Arriving outside, a white rabbit greeted her, paw lifted in salute, nose to the wind. She returned its greeting as she passed. The rabbits, pausing to wait for her, burst out laughing.

“It’s not a real one. It’s a snow rabbit!” They explained, in between their laughs.

“What?” asked Juliet, still not understanding.

“The rabbit you just said ‘Hello’ to, is not a rabbit at all. It’s made of snow.”

“*No way!* That’s pretty amazing!”

She turned to look more closely. This time she saw the rabbit had a stony fixed stare, but she had already seen rabbits standing as still as that, particularly when they heard a sudden noise. She could also see the snow crystals, and a few scratches from the claws, but it was an amazingly life-like

piece of work.

"The litt'uns do it," said the Ninja. From the tone of her voice you understood that she wasn't too convinced of the usefulness of the activity.

"They must be really talented then," Juliet whistled with admiration.

"Oh well..." came the reply. "At least when they're doing that, they're not getting into any real trouble."

Tish turned to leave, still twitching and scratching.

DROPPING LIKE FLIES

This is the end.

They're dropping like flies. Of course, for some of them, that's only natural — they being flies and all. Stop. No time to laugh. Don't know if it's the cold, or the hunger, or the exhaustion from walking round and round and round in circles in here. But this feels like the end.

Oh that call! That sweet irresistible call. That voice that woke us up into these desolate galleries. Lies, all lies. Now my brothers and sisters are falling by the thousand.

The Eightleggers are the only ones who aren't suffering. But that's probably normal, they're mostly carrion eaters anyway. Bloodsuckers! Vultures! Vampires! But the cold will get to them too, in the end. Like it is getting to us all.

Oh that call! That sweet irresistible call. Lies, all lies.

I die.

I die, but I die proud. For I still possess... Two, four — *Yes!* — six legs.

Good-night, sweet call, good-night. Good-night.

THE TRAIL UP

The day was drawing to an end. There was no sunset, just the fading of the pearl-grey light. In all directions, the fog froze out the distance, and pulled the clouds in close. Even the

branches and the treetops overhead disappeared, melting into the mist.

Then before their eyes the fog curdled and solidified, cracking itself apart, breaking into thousands and thousands of small white flakes that fell as snow.

There was no wind, only snow. There was no noise, only snow. There was no light, only snow.

So they set off, the fresh fall making small squishing noises as it was crushed beneath foot and paw. But this was a quiet muffled sound that didn't carry further than three paces before it was swallowed by the silence. Each walked in the tracks of the one before, on a path that zigzagged up the slope of the rounded hill. Juliet followed, closing the column, scrambling under the boughs and taking showers of snow there where the rabbits passed with no obstacles; she scraped her legs and froze her knees on walls where the rabbits had but to hop.

Then it was over: Lucy, Virgil, Tish, the three other rabbits — including two Kids, as Virgil called them — and trailing at the end, Juliet, all arrived, hearts beating and out of breath, at the edge of the clearing.

The snow formed a glittering curtain; a slow-motion waterfall. No wind disturbed the trajectory of the snow flakes; they all fell straight down, lining up untiringly one on top of another, forming a vast flat, smooth surface, with no rough zones, no bumps. It was very flat, and very unreal.

For the moment, the Three were not visible. Lucy and Juliet proposed that, normally, they would be round the other side, near the Southern Slope.

"Shall we wait for Augustus?" Juliet wanted to know. "He is coming with us, isn't he?"

"He said he'd come as soon as he could," cut in the Ninja. "He promised. But it would be stupid to compromise everything by waiting too long for him. Let's go. We can make use of the cover to get in close."

Juliet wanted to say that perhaps the Three had other

means to sense their coming, but as she wasn't sure, she decided to say nothing.

"The quickest and the most direct way would be to cut cross the clearing," proposed Virgil. "But the edges offer the most cover."

"And the snow is shallower there," said one of the smaller rabbits who had ventured out into the clearing and was now in snow deeper than his ears.

"We stick to the edges then," decided Virgil.

Moving around the edge wasn't the shortest route; nor the easiest, either. The snow cover was less heavy here and it was only in between trees than it reached the rabbits' shoulders, but Juliet had to be very careful. The snow was still there, only not on the ground; it was in the trees. More than once, she inadvertently brushed against a branch precipitating a dense, heavy, cold and white downfall that buried the travellers.

Juliet felt the cold seeping through her clothes again. Of course, the brisk march kept her warm but then she felt too hot and sweaty. Then, at other moments she found herself shivering, and it continued for a minute or two, and she didn't know why. Worse, occasionally she was shaken by violent tremblings. She wondered if this was normal fatigue, or possibly the after-effects of her stay in the cold. In any case, she kept her worries to herself.

"We're here!" sang out the leading rabbit in a hoarse whisper. Everyone crowded around him to peer through the shimmering gloom ahead. Once their vision grew accustomed to the snow falling like fast moving water before their eyes, it became possible to distinguish, out there in the clearing, a darker, unmoving mass.

Juliet felt something stirring at her feet and looked down in sudden panic. It was Lucy, clutching and scratching at the girl's leg for support. She was scared. She might have decided to go, but that didn't stop every cell in her body from being terrified. And her body was probably correct in its reaction as

she had her own particular reasons to be frightened by those creatures ahead, having already met them in such unfortunate circumstances.

The rabbit clawed herself upright.

Juliet bent down and slipped an arm around the distressed animal, reassuring her. She stroked the damp fur softly, then, on an impulse, lifted Lucy up into her arms. The doe rabbit buried her head in the folds of the anorak, flattening herself against the girl. After a moment the rabbit lifted her head and laid it against Juliet's neck, snuggling against her. Curiously enough, with the rabbit in her arms, Juliet felt better too.

Together, they were ready to tackle the Three. The group — five rabbits on foot, and Juliet carrying Lucy — set off across the snow in the clearing, towards the waiting shadows they had seen there.

NO ONE HOME

The tree was the first to come into view.

Then what was, — or what had been — the horse, appeared. At least they thought it was. They could see a large, snow-covered mass next to the tree. The crow-raven-bird-thing, or whatever it was, couldn't be seen. Virgil posted lookouts to keep an eye open, as far as possible, both behind and above the party.

"Why can't you leave us-s-s alone?" The old voice that smelt of rock and cold centuries pushed its way into their heads as they approached.

Juliet stepped forward and called defiantly, "This time I'm not leaving until you tell me what you want with the rabbits!"

"Leave us-s-s alone. That's our business," hissed the reply.

"One moment..." Juliet said, moving an arm back as if to hold the rabbits off. "That's exactly what they said to me last time. And pretty much in the same way..." Concentration played across her forehead. "It's like... It's like... If they weren't there and they'd left a message on the answering machine..."

"A message on what?" asked Lucy.

"Don't worry about it," Juliet replied. "It's a thing Humans do to say they're not at home."

They all looked at the creatures.

"Uha... I see," came a small voice from near Juliet's feet, even if the hesitations in the voice implied the opposite. But Juliet really didn't think it was the time and the place to start explaining telephones, and answering machines and such to the rabbits, so she left it at that.

"Let's see if there's anyone at home..." murmured Tish. She left the shelter of Juliet's ankles, leapt forward and sent a snowball through the air. It landed squarely on the trunk with a loud, satisfying *Thud!* It was followed by another round of three or four in quick succession.

Standing upright, her head and ears reaching over the surrounding snow, gathering together ammunition with her front paws, she jeered, "*Yoo-hoo! Anyone at home!*"

The party realised that it has stopped snowing a while before. Of course, there were the last dallying flakes still gliding down, but the fact they could count them was a sure sign there had been a lull.

Slowly — oh, so slowly — the trunk shimmered and flexed, like someone stretching after waking from a deep sleep. Snow slid and fell from where it had stuck to the bark. Then the tree shivered; drowning its surroundings in a sudden and violent crush of snow from its branches. The powdery snow at the edges licked up into the air like so many white flames, before floating back, smoke-like, and coming to rest.

Now the horse-creature rose up and shook itself. Snow cascaded from its back and from the mass of raw, swollen flesh at the place of its head. In the branches above, the bird-creature cawed.

"I am starting to loose my patienc-c-ce..."

The voice was fingernails scratching a slate, it was a sharp knife being pulled across a window, it was a dentist's drill; it

was all those noises that set the hair on the back of your neck on end, like you're waiting for something bad to happen, and you're just waiting for the pain to come.

The tree pulled branches together and started to rub them; crackling, bubbling, blue sparks played along the ends and the edges. Then the lightning streak flashed through the air in the direction of the black-furred Ninja dancing in front of the group still taunting the Three.

"Look out!" shouted Lucy, leaping out of Juliet's arms. *"Get out the way!"*

Without thinking, Juliet darted forward to push Tish out of the way. From over on his side, Virgil attempted to do the same. Younger and quicker, the girl arrived first. She pushed the rabbit, and they both rolled to the side in the snow. Virgil, older and a little slower, arrived just after. He found himself in Tish's place when the blue bolt struck. It hit him on the thigh; he screamed. A horrible, sharp cry. He fell stiff into the snow.

Juliet pulled herself together. She jumped up, brushed down the matted snow clinging to her clothes. Before she could act, another round of snowballs — but also sticks and stones this time — bounced off the tree trunk. The three look-outs had abandoned their positions to dig through the snow for heavier munitions. They kept up a steady barrage on the trunk. In turn, the tree started rubbing boughs together again, and a new ball, electric-blue and sparkling, started forming at the end of the branches.

"Get out the way!" Juliet screamed. *"Get out of here!"*

With her teeth clenched — so much so her jaw muscles cried out in pain — she saw the blue light hit one of the rabbits full on. She saw the small creature silhouetted against the bright flash as it was thrown aside.

"Back to the woods!" she called out as she strode towards the Three. *"Get the injured back into the woods. And make it quick!"*

She was now standing just in front of the tree. It wouldn't even need to hit her with its strange lightning. It only had to bend down and its branches could seize her; it could surely tear her apart if it wanted to.

"*Come on!*" Juliet hollered in fury. "What are you waiting for? Go ahead and destroy them all. *Go on!* And if you do that, who's gonna dig for you then, eh? Have you thought about that, eh? Stupid fools!"

"*Pah!*"

Into her head came the voice of what had been the horse.

"Soon we won't need them. Soon we'll be strong enough to move the earth all by ourselves. And then we'll dig deeper, further, lower for ourselves. Then we won't have to mix with all those gnawers and scratchers, those chatterers and arguers. Those nasty little creatures with thoughts so moth-eaten it hurts to listen—"

"*S-s-soon—*" hissed a voice that sounded like stone splitting under the winter cold; a voice that chilled you to the marrow as it forced its way through your head. "Soon we will have a new use for those... *vermin...*"

Juliet shivered. Not only because of what she heard — all those voices that left her feeling sick and nauseous inside — but also because of the way they were speaking now. It was sure: they were scared of no one and nothing here.

The bird-creature moved its head. A long tongue, red like a flame licking from an old and sinister fire, darted along the edge of what had been a beak but was now an elongated muzzle, pockmarked with scales and rags of flesh. As it opened its mouth, Juliet couldn't help seeing, squatting in the shadow of the opening, a sickly growth, like an infection in the mouth; row upon row of small, uneven, spiky teeth. The meaning was obvious. The creature was only waiting for the moment when it could set to devouring the rabbits.

If the others can hear you, she realised — trying not to show her jubilation in this terrible moment —, you've just lost

your last supporters in the Warren.

She turned her back on them and, doing her best to appear upright and fearless, she staggered across the snow-capped clearing towards the tree cover where the others were waiting. Or so she hoped. Such a journey is extremely difficult to do when you feel terrified. And when you know that what is behind your back can just reach out and in less time than it takes to even think about such a horrible end, can grab you, and tear you apart, you have to be very, very brave. Or feel very worried about your friends.

SNOW LIKE A THICK BLANKET

Back outside the farm, where the search parties were returning empty-handed and disheartened by the lack of progress, the landscape confirmed Detective Inspector Morrison's suspicions. The snowfalls were centred on the works; the closer he got, the deeper were the snow drifts; the further away they got, the more the weather calmed down, and the more the snow faded. Here, the ground was barely white.

He decided not to mention this to anyone. He was not sure how to explain it. And he was not sure that if he did, if people would believe him. He radioed in to the Police Station to ask if they had received any particular weather forecasts, or warnings, for the area for tomorrow.

The forecast from the Weather Office mentioned a sharp cold spell — frost and black ice, with freezing fog at times. This was all the news that the Police Station could give him. But no snow, they told him. There weren't the right clouds for that.

All right, he had replied, I don't want to insist, but it's snowing here. There is more than two feet of snow in places. I don't mind if there aren't the right clouds for it, we can't see them here anyway with all the freezing fog we have, but even the farmer standing next to me here can confirm that it is, in fact, snowing.

On his insistence, the Station called up the local Meteorological Office and then radioed back to Morrison to inform him that he might be seeing a slight precipitation from the freezing fog, that would be normal. But that isn't normally called snow. They detected no snow clouds on the radar or the satellite pictures; so it couldn't be snowing.

Inspector Morrison thanked the Radio Operator on the other end for his trouble and ended the conversation with the traditional phrase '*Roger, over and out*', before peering out at the tracks and fields all around, all dusted with the white substance. He looked over in the direction of the works where he had promised to return tomorrow to try a fresh search. There the snow lay like a thick blanket, smothering the landscape.

All right, he said to himself, it's not snow. It can't be snow.

AUGUSTUS

When Augustus caught up with them, he appeared just as frantic as Tish had been the first time Juliet had met her. But in his case, it wasn't just the fleas and ticks that were driving him to distraction.

"The eggs, the spheres; they speak to me, you see. But with two voices. They say to me I must save the rabbits, that we must dig down, deeper, further, lower. They sent me the Human. And all is said. But now they're saying they don't want us anymore. That we're vermin, that we're aren't nice any more." He cried as he shook his head. "All the Warren comes to me and they say we must stop, but the voices say, *Don't listen to them, Augustus. You must save the rabbits. Only you can save the rabbits. Go on. Don't stop or it'll be too late. Dig down, deep, further. There the rabbits will be safe.* So I listen to nobody, except the voices. But what should I do when they say such horrible things about us? When they want to harm the rabbits? That's all I wanted. The good of the Warren. The good of the World."

He shook his head. Again and again.

The small group of rabbits and Juliet were sheltering themselves on the northern slope, taking the time to review matters before heading back to the burrows. Taking the time to rest and lick their wounds.

It was here that Augustus had caught up with them.

Virgil's right thigh was stiff: it was probably paralysed, but he wouldn't say. He said it was bearable, but everyone saw him clenching his teeth and grimacing while Tish — who had come to no harm, thanks be to the Whiskers of the Great White Rabbit —, and one of the smaller rabbits helped him along.

The other rabbit was still out cold. Juliet had carried him back. She was reassured to see he had no visible cuts or wounds, and that his heart was beating normally. He was simply unconscious with his limbs spread-eagled and rigid. His eyes were open but showed only the whites. Lucy and Tish were rubbing his limbs to see if they could get him to loosen up and even wake up.

To Juliet, Augustus looked not only dazed, but appeared close to exhaustion. She noticed that in the few days — Was it really just a few days? It already seemed so long ago. Forever... — since she first met him in the rabbit's chamber, he had become worryingly thin, his skin was hanging from his bones. From a rabbit a little on the podgy side, he had become haggard, exhausted: a bag of bones. But he still had that wild gaze, as if, at times, he saw more than you or I did.

She took him in her arms, hugged him and caressed the base of his ears until he calmed down and stopped jerking and trembling. She thought she risked catching a flea or two — if she hadn't caught them from someone else already — but she decided, it wasn't really the most important matter to hand. So she started talking, telling him all that Lucy and she knew, or had found out, or had guessed at, these last few days.

From time to time she thought he was about to start convulsing again — and such big shivers for such a small, frail body — so she just rocked him gently back and forth, waiting for him to calm down before continuing her story.

When she finished, and without her asking anything, Augustus told his tale: his hopes, his dreams, his nightmares. All that the Three had told him. He said they appeared as three small, white eggs. The eggs he had recovered from the diggings. Then he listed the lies they had thought to tell him, to persuade — and then to oblige — him to carry out their wishes.

Night fell. It was a black night with no moon, and no stars. The temperature fell, and in the forest around they could hear the snow freezing, making startling cracking noises as it did so.

Juliet continued to hug Augustus, and to rock him so gently. She thought of home, and she thought of her bed. She thought of her parents, and she thought of tomorrow. She thought she was scared, horribly scared.

THE TIRED AND THE FORLORN

The next morning found Juliet in the shelter, feeling pleasantly warm. She was watching the members of the rabbits' war council arrive. The meeting had been called to discuss the tactics and the strategies to follow in order to protect the Warren and the surrounding Forest — what the rabbits called the World — from the threat of the Three.

She felt reasonably warm and comfortable because the rabbits had taken the time to finish the shelter, adding a passable roof of branches, and lining the inside with fur. Or, more accurately, with tufts of fur they had pulled off their tummies. Lucy assured Juliet that it wasn't painful at all, that doe rabbits did it all the time to make cosy warm beds for the kits and dotes. And, at least half a dozen rabbits had slept with her in the den, making for a warm bed, even if her cover did have a tendency to snore, scuffle and twitch paws in the middle of the night. But it hadn't been unpleasant at all; Juliet had slept well and now felt much better.

She had also slept in all confidence as she knew that Augustus' crew had been posted around them all, to watch

over everyone during the night. While, to her mind, most of the Ninjas had wandered a little too far up the garden path, she was sure of their seriousness and devotion to Augustus. Even if it was hard at times not to laugh when they all started their frenzied scratching.

She also felt warmer as she had been able to undress and dry out her clothes. This didn't mean they were clean, but at least she no longer had to make do with cold and damp socks and underwear.

After a breakfast of dried berries, nuts and freshwater, everyone — Lucy, Virgil, some of the Ninjas, some of the veterans... — started arriving. Augustus was already present, having spent the night snuggled up against her.

Between their twitches and their wounds, they made up a pretty forsaken bunch: Virgil was still partially paralysed, and you only had to look at Augustus to see he wasn't at all well; Lucy was pleasant but more than a trifle scatty; the old rabbits were fraying at the edges and showing their age, muttering and arguing; and most of the Ninjas dropped everything mid-sentence to scratch themselves vigorously.

And they had opposite them not one, but three, creatures of unknown, but extremely worrying, powers and incredible strength. Moreover, at least two of the three could chew off at least half of this committee in one fell swoop. And still have room left over for the dessert.

The fight that was looming was disproportionate, hopeless and inevitable. From now on, it was clear the stakes were higher than the simple survival of the Warren. If the Three won this round, nobody could be sure of the future, what their next plans would be. So the rabbits were slowly preparing the Warren for a battle that hadn't yet said its name: putting aside supplies; moving away kits and dotes to safe places; talking and preparing. Juliet looked around at the motley band of rather forlorn cripples gathered around her. And the pride she felt made her feel warm inside.

MAKING PLANS

Virgil spoke first. “I don’t think we can defeat them,” he said. “Or, at least, not in any conventional manner. But all is not hopeless; I do have a certain number of intuitions. And a rabbit doesn’t get to my age without having paid good attention to his intuitions from time to time.”

The others sighed a little at this introduction, and chivvied him along.

“First of all, they’re growing. They’re getting stronger. But something that takes on power and weight as they are, must lose it too. Perhaps, what the rabbits were doing by digging also brings them some sort of power. I think they have been using the rabbits until they were strong enough themselves. So these powers must, somewhere or somehow, have a price for them. So if this particular intuition is right, we shall see them change their growth at some point. What were we digging for? That’s another question and we don’t have any information to deal with it yet, except that it wasn’t to our advantage, and so, could only have been to theirs...

“My second point is that their power appears to be at its strongest during the darkest hours of the night, and that their power ebbs during the day. All the events that Juliet, the Kid — and our own experiences —, all we have seen, all agree on that point: during the day, we see them silent as statues in the clearing. My intuition says that is when we should attack them.”

A clamour broke out. Virgil waited for the rabbits to calm. “That we should attack them — yes, indeed — as we move from night into day. In that way as the day progresses, they will be increasingly at a disadvantage.

“Last of all: they may be strong, but sometimes their spirits are as slow as a Warren that has to decide if it wants to picnic in the fields to the North, or in those to the South. On this front, my intuition tells me they have orders, or a certain number of tasks to accomplish. But that once the choices go

beyond their abilities, they are a little lost. Strategy doesn't look like their strong point, perhaps they count on solving all their other problems with brute strength.

"Which doesn't mean brute strength should be ignored. They could easily take on quite a few Warrens of the size of this one and still win.

"These are my intuitions then. Over to you, Kid: what are your plans?"

A FOX IN WINTER

Not far from there, on a bed of dead leaves and the dry bones of small animals, a fox woke in his burrow. He rubbed his eyes and smoothed his bushy tail. His tail he used as a cover to pull over himself and keep warm; but tonight things were not as usual. In vain, he tried to clutch at his dream, pull it back to him; but it left, frittering itself away in contact with the cold air, leaving him with a feeling of emptiness. An emptiness that he also felt in his tummy. An emptiness that growled and mumbled, reminding him of his hunger.

Then the wind wafted back that oh-so-tempting-and-familiar smell, and he knew, at once, what he had been dreaming about. And also, what had caused him to wake up in the middle of this freezing and inhospitable weather: rabbits.

He slipped outside, in pursuit of his dinner.

DRIVING IN THE SNOW

Inspector Morrison let the car come to a halt then climbed out. He marched, slid and slided round the massive 4-wheel-drive vehicle he had borrowed. He arrived at the boot, took out the snow chains, then set to fit them around the tyres. When he had finished, he stepped aside to inspect his work, brushing his knees clean, then rubbing his gloves together to clean off the last of the snow.

Over the other side of the lane, a crow squinted at him from

the top of a telegraph pole before flying off in a long lazy glide. The bird was a splash of ink against the white page of the landscape. It flapped its wings with a series of sharp claps, then croaked before disappearing from view behind the icy hedgerows.

Further away, a long line of frosted trees marked the edge of a field, their branches weighed down by the heavy white mass. The wind swooped by and lashed out at his cheeks making them sore and red, and making his eyes sting. Then it lost interest and drifted away to worry a few stray snowflakes, making them dance in the air.

But, of course, he saw nothing of all that. Because there was no snow, was there?

Back in the car, he advanced with caution, hardly daring to turn the wheel. He let the vehicle follow, seemingly by itself, the contours of the lane indicated by the raised white hedges buried beneath the snow and ice. Not forgetting the telegraph poles supporting dripping white masses on their heads as if the snow had transformed them to white, half-melted candles. Or dripping ice-lollies, melted and frozen again before being tied one to another with strings of white candyfloss. All of this on a surface buried in icing sugar. Had it not been so cold, you could imagine all that in place of the snow. Because, of course, there was no snow, was there?

They had agreed to meet in front of the gates.

The workmen rarely needed to go over to the diggings any more: the project having been cancelled. But, after hearing him explain, they had agreed to meet him up there. Unfortunately, their small town car hadn't been able to get through the snow-crusts lanes. He had had to pick up the keys at the farm where they had left them for him. And then to drive over here alone. But if there was a chance, even a feeble chance that the girl had been back here, it would all be worthwhile.

So he had borrowed the car, and he had gone.

The sky was darkening. He slowed to look. It was going to snow.

Again.

THE SLIDE

They had split up into three groups.

Juliet found herself heading to the compound, not having much choice in the matter. For a start, the rabbits had no idea how to get her into the burrows: this effectively stopped her from helping out down there. Augustus thought she was too noticeable to help those who were to work up around the clearing, so that ruled that option out too. Which left the compound group... Virgil and Lucy were back down helping out in the Warren, but Augustus was still with her.

She had been surprised to see the rabbits sorting out a vast number of plastic bags. There were big ones, small ones, multi-coloured ones; there were fragile - go - ahead - and - break - as - soon - as - you - look - at - them ones, and heavy-duty ones with reinforced seams and handles. The latter, especially in medium size, were in strong demand. Seeing them so busy, Juliet wondered if they were planning a raid, or preparing to do the sales.

At this point, she was only half-surprised when they presented her with a half-dozen white bags. Well, once she turned them inside out to hide the printed outsides as the rabbits showed her how to do it, they were white. Then they helped her pull them over her clothes and tie them on so that, not only did they provide an additional layer against the cold and damp, but also acted as a form of camouflage over her red anorak and blue jeans.

To finish, she knotted a sack over her head, hiding her hat and her hair. She had no idea what she looked like, but she felt like some sort of roly-poly packet, all made up of lumps and bumps. She felt sure that the rabbits would burst out laughing when they looked her; but at least they had the grace to do so behind her back.

On leaving the shelter she noticed more of the rabbits sculpted in snow. They were looking out, resting, or just waiting. Or at least, she thought they were snow rabbits because not only did they not move, but they weren't carrying bags like

the others.

All her group headed off for the Southern Slope. They worked their way around on the sloping edge staying out of site of the clearing. The snow on the sides was sufficiently deep to hide the rabbits from view as they advanced in line. However, as it wasn't snowing at that moment, and there wasn't any mist that morning, the rabbits kept a close eye on Juliet. They had her move from hiding place to hiding place, with lookouts all around checking the sky and the land ahead of and behind the party. Tish covered the convoy's tail. She was wearing her sack like a cape, knotted around her neck, for all the world like a Superhero from a strip cartoon. Juliet wondered if she had done it on purpose — but where on earth would rabbits be reading comic books?

When a crow flew by, everybody instantly froze. But it was only an ordinary bird who croaked, laughing at them and their efforts to stay hidden.

Once they arrived at the top of the works, Juliet found out why the rabbits were carrying the bags. They used them like sledges to slide down the cuttings. From the obvious pleasure they had in hurtling down the steep slope, she wondered if it was absolutely necessary, or some sort of bonus.

Nonetheless, once they reached the bottom, each rabbit darted off in a different direction, and appeared to know what it was supposed to be doing in the overall plan.

The Ninja posted guards at the top, ordering them to keep their eyes peeled. Then she and Juliet shot down the slope together following the path that had been worn smooth and slippery by the rabbits before them. The cold air stung Juliet's eyes, and whipped her cheeks. They arrived at the bottom out of breath. But she was quite prepared to climb back up and come down again, so gloriously full of life did she feel.

LAYING IN WAIT

The fox sniffed. The fresh tracks showed that a large number

of rabbits had passed by here quite recently. He lifted his nose to savour the air. Aha! He pulled his muzzle down sharply.

They were still here. And upwind.

Here, on the edge of the woods was the perfect place to wait for them, to pounce on them on their way back. If he ventured out further, he would be exposed against the snow. But here no one could see nor, more importantly, smell him.

Now, all he had to do was to be patient, and to wait for his dinner to arrive.

AT THE YARD

As soon as they heard the sound of the motor approaching, all the rabbits froze in their tracks. Juliet tried to do it too, but she was no way as good as the rabbits; they really looked like statues, like the snow sculptures. An order was called; someone thumped the compacted snow. The rabbits jumped left and right, each one to a hiding place. Juliet was left standing in the open, still holding a plank.

"Psst! Hide!"

Heart beating, she moved towards the lean-to, hoping to find a place there among the odds and ends.

"No! Over here!" came the voice again.

She turned and saw the black-furred rabbit perched behind a large snowdrift. She ran over.

"Put yourself there. Like that."

Tish showed her the hole behind the drift. While Juliet fit herself in, other rabbits came running out to brush away and hide her tracks. If a Human was coming, it was Juliet's footprints that would attract the most attention.

The girl and the rabbit waited as the noise drew closer.

"False alarm..." they both wished aloud at the same time, before bursting into muffled laughter as other rabbits called out *'Sssh!'* at them. Juliet clenched her fists and hissed, "It's not coming here. It'll drive right past, you see..."

They were holding their breath.
The noise grew louder.
And stopped.

Inspector Morrison tried to look out at the yard.

In the time that he had taken to stop the car, the windows were already freezing up, the windscreen too. Ice flowers were growing out from the edges. He pulled the flaps of his hat further over his ears, wound another turn of his scarf around his neck. And opened the door.

Now he could see more clearly inside the compound, he was sure the snow there wasn't smooth and untroubled as one would expect. He could see quite clearly that it had been trampled and disturbed, that it bore tracks.

So let's see who, or what, has left those tracks, he wondered.

He set his feet on the surface of the snow, leaned forward and started to leave the car. For a moment he thought that the surface, frozen and crusty like a meringue, was going to hold him. Then his boots sank deep below the surface, taking him by surprise. He lurched back and forth, waving his hands desperately in his attempt to grab the car and to keep himself straight. And more importantly, upright.

He saw right away that he was confronted by a series of problems. These problems were variable in nature and each brought more problems along to keep the others company. There was the mobility question: each time he tried to lift a foot, either he pushed the other one down further into the snow, or he risked leaving his boot in place. There was also the question of how to open the gate. Never mind that it was just chicken-wire. Never mind that he had the key to the padlock stowed away in his pocket. The facts were that the padlock was frozen solid inside a mass of ice and snow. And there was much too much snow on the ground, blocking all possible movements of the gate. And there was the minor issue of getting there from here.

He shifted his way around the car, hanging on to window edges, to bumpers and to lights so as not to fall, nor to sink too far, into the snow. Once at the back he pulled out a long pole and a spade. The pole gave him something to lean on, and to pull himself up. And the spade... Once he arrived in front of the gate, he set to digging a trench in the snow, clearing the way for the gate to open.

During this time, out of sight, the rabbits were conferring. A messenger came to Juliet.

"Augustus wants you to be ready to move when you get the signal."

"*What signal?*" said the girl. "And move, how? Where?"

"How should I know?" whined the rabbit. "I'm just the messenger. I don't know any more than you. Just be ready, that's the message. That's all."

CHOFFEES

As soon as the Human felt he had cleared enough snow from in front of the gate, he started pulling at it, trying to force it open wide enough for him to slip between the jaws of the iron frame and the chicken-wire.

When, at last, he managed to pull the two parts sufficiently apart that he could consider scraping through... One, two, then dozens of rabbits piled through the passage he was holding open and managed, notwithstanding a momentary bottleneck or two, to slip through the opening in a brief, furry torrent. They disappeared in all directions in the surrounding countryside. (In fact, once out of view, they all turned round and hid themselves on the other side of the car, but the Human couldn't see, know or even suspect that.) He was dazed. It was as if each of the rabbits that had passed had given him a sharp slap on the face as it had hopped by. All he could do was mutter to himself, "Rabbits? Rabbits?"

The messenger came back. "*Are you ready? Follow me. And keep your ears down!*"

He darted behind the shed, on the side opposite to the Human who was even now inspecting the tracks in the snow where the rabbits had pushed past him. Following in the messenger's footsteps Juliet crouched through the gate to rejoin Augustus behind the car. As she had advanced, rabbits had relayed each other to hide her footprints by jumping, rolling, scratching and digging in the snow, before disappearing from sight again.

"*Can you open it?*" hissed Augustus, pointing to the door handle.

"Augustus! You are not going to steal this car! I *forbid* you! You can't drive, and I haven't got an idea how to, either!"

"Oh no. Don't worry." In fact the idea of stealing the car had never entered his mind, but now she had mentioned it, he didn't think it too unreasonable — how would that work, a car...? "No, later," he muttered, in a rather guilty manner. "No, what I mean is, It's just if we find what we're looking for in there, it's easier to get into than the cabin!"

"You wanted me to get you into the cabin?" she hissed like a kettle ready to explode. "*Augustus!* Sometimes you're not right in the head."

Juliet wondered if all those who said that Augustus was a bit bats in the burrow weren't right after all. He had brought them all over here to carry out a burglary. She shook her head.

She opened the door on the passenger side — it wasn't locked — and helped the rabbits slip inside. They were now busy rummaging all over the place in the car and in the boot. Their noses were buzzing like bumblebees in a garden of spring flowers. There were also muffled scratching and digging noises.

"Rope?" cried out one of them.

"Grab it! Always useful that," Augustus called back.

"Elastics with hooks on the ends?" came another voice.

"Big or little?"

"Well... quite big..."

"OK. Bring those too."

A noise indicated that the one who had been trying to open the glove compartment had succeeded at last.

"What's in there?" Augustus wanted to know.

"Paper. Lots of paper. Hold on..." The rabbit pulled at the papers with his teeth and strew them down on the rabbits sniffing around under the seats, "Keys. Torch. Lighter!"

"Lighter and torch? Good. Report back."

The rabbit who had been emptying the glove compartment hopped down. Try as they may, they couldn't get the flashlight to work. The lighter sparked into life on the third try.

"Wonderful!" said Augustus. "Slip it all into the bags and let's get moving. Anything else?"

"*Choffees, Chir,*" said a muffled voice.

When Juliet saw the bag of toffees she knew, at once, who the Human in the car was.

"*Oh Crumbs!*" she murmured.

Juliet didn't need go back through the compound. Augustus explained that she could move along behind the hedgerows and then catch them up later, back at the top of the slope. She must however, hide behind the hedgerow until the car left so that there was no danger of the Human seeing her while she climbed the hillock. He ordered a dozen rabbits to follow her, to protect her, and to hide her tracks.

"And don't forget," he insisted. "At least two of you should be scanning the sky at all times. We can never be too sure."

A hoarse whistling burst through the air, coming from the compound.

"*The Human's coming!*" came the message.

"Stay here!" Augustus said.

Then to the rabbits he had assigned to her, "Wait for the signal, then take her quickly to a safe spot. The rest of you,

follow me!”

They left, bounding through the snow, while the others pressed down in the snow, with the girl, all hiding behind the car.

A muffled scratching came from inside the car. Then they saw, scratching at the window above, a pair of rabbit paws. Juliet, still crouching, tapped the window, motioning to the rabbit to move back. Then she opened the door. A small brown rabbit slid out onto the snow to join them.

“What do you think you were doing?” One of the bigger rabbits barked at the latecomer.

“*Gi gound ga goffee gat gyou gorgot,*” said the rabbit with sticky difficulty.

The older rabbit shook his head, then set his attention back to the rabbits on the other side.

Once they had arrived at the gate they had paused, waiting for the Human to come back. And then he appeared. He plodded round the cabin, heading back to the gate and to the car.

Rabbits arrived from all over, weaving their way round the Human’s legs and feet. He was doing his best not to tread on them, all the while hanging on to his stick. Seeing this, a rather large rabbit threw itself against the rod, making it to slide across the snow just as the Human was putting his weight down on it.

The Human fell backwards with the grace and majesty of a tree that has just been chopped down. One of his feet, wearing only a sock, lifted itself as if trying to balance out the fall. His arms flapped at the air as if he hoped, as a last resort, to fly away...

Lucky for him, the snow softened his landing.

The rabbits jumped on him.

At this point, Juliet and the others had to stop watching. They ran for the hedgerow. Behind them, the others were hurriedly disguising their tracks. Crouching behind the snow-covered hedge, they all waited until the other rabbits dispersed. At last the Human dusted himself down, climbed into

the car and drove backwards down the track, wondering about those rabbits that had been acting, well... sort of funny peculiar...

THE PATH BACK

They grouped up again on the side of the hill. Those who had pillaged the compound were dragging their spoils behind them. It was, in Juliet's eyes, strange plunder, being mostly sticks that they dragged in the snow, leaving trails like railway tracks, and oily rags, smelly with fuel and petrol, stuffed into the plastic bags.

As there weren't enough toffees for everyone, Augustus passed the packet to Juliet, saying, "Toffees aren't really that good for rabbits, are they?"

"Gi gon't gagree!" said a small voice before his comrades shut him up.

"Thanks," said Juliet, who didn't dare chew them in front of the others. Even if, now as she slipped them into a pocket, she felt her mouth watering.

They all set off, in single file, on the path back.

AMBUSHED

The fox crouched and flexed his muscles in preparation for the leap. He smelt the rabbits coming closer and closer, the smell tickled his nose, pumping up the adrenaline and making his heart hammer against his ribs. He sank further into the snow and waited. He trembled. He was afraid his muscles would betray him. Wait. Just a little bit longer. Wait.

Hop! He pounced out at the lead rabbit.

Augustus sensed the russet-coloured blur against the snow more than he saw anything. He darted out of the way. So fast for a rabbit so tired. The jaws came down on the fur of his shoulder. But not on flesh as the fox had expected.

Hop! With his front claws, Augustus hit back at the other animal. Wham! He hit both sides of the muzzle at the same time. The fox jumped back. He had never yet met a dinner that had hit back. He dodged and tried to get away.

Augustus dashed forward to catch the white tip of the tail in his front teeth. He clamped down hard. And dragged the fox back.

By now the other rabbits had encircled the fox, blocking him from running away. Wherever he looked there were claws and jaws waiting. The fox turned back to Augustus, to force him to drop the tail, and as a last ditch attempt, lunged over to bite at him. But Augustus had been waiting for that very movement. He leapt into the air, twirling and sending his strong back paws slashing across his opponent's shoulder and ear as it moved towards him. The fox yelped in pain, but he still couldn't leave.

He bunched himself up, as if to get ready to spring, but Augustus had already caught hold of his whiskers. Augustus pulled on them and brought the animal's pointed nose down towards his face. Their two noses were touching.

"You leave my rabbits alone," hissed the rabbit. *"You understand?"*

The fox's darting eyes clearly betrayed his surprise and fear at the turn of events.

"Understand?" The rabbit gave another sharp tug to the whiskers.

The fox yelped once, sharp and painful. Augustus released the head. The fox jumped back and the other rabbits moved away to let it pass. It quickly disappeared into the snow.

Augustus shook his head. Juliet and the rabbits picked up their bags again, and all the other things they had been carrying since the compound. And set off back on their path.

Back in his lair, the fox panted while he examined the painful tooth-marks in his tail. Hunger and fatigue gnawed at him. He still felt them. He still wondered about the rabbits. For a

short moment he listened to the murmurs. Then he felt the pain all over again and forgot about the voices in his head.

And if we sought out mice, no? Tasty little field mice? No, perhaps they could fight back... Or eggs? Nobody has even been attacked by a chicken egg. That's a good idea, that one. Or roots. They're usually not very aggressive...

WORK STILL TO DO

The rabbits paused behind bushes encrusted with packed snow. Sounds rose from the fields down below. They looked out. Convoys of vehicles — lorries, jeeps — passed, stopped to drop off and pick up small, muffled figures. These figures, in turn, carried sticks and spades. Other figures were accompanied by dogs as they sounded hedges, and poled the edges of fields and snowdrifts. Seen from up there it appeared just as mysterious, and just as fascinating, as watching ants scouting over the forest floor.

Then she understood.

"They're looking for me!" Crouching down, she clamped her hand over her wide-open mouth. "Oh *Crumbs!*"

For the first time she realised that her parents must be waiting anxiously back at home. They would be paralysed by worry, desperate even. She understood the presence of the policeman at the compound.

The rabbits all looked at her, waiting for her to continue.

"All the Humans. And the Human at the site. They're all looking for me. I think that my parents must be a bit worried."

The rabbits nodded, but kept on looking, waiting...

"And so you're going to leave?" Augustus spoke with a small voice.

At that very moment, seeing all those people scouring the countryside looking for her, she was tempted, sorely tempted, to say 'Yes'. To walk down the hill and take the first path that she came on until she met someone, and that person would put her in a car and take her back to the farm. To her parents.

And it wouldn't matter if they told her off, or shut her up in her bedroom for the next ten years, or worse even. Or if she never had another dessert, or an outing, or an I-don't-know-what. But it wouldn't matter because she would be back home again, in the warm and with here parents...

She got up to go.

"Come on Augustus," she said. "We've still got work to do."

COLD COMFORT

Even though the log fire was blazing in the large hearth inside the farmhouse, the atmosphere was glacial: desperate cold thoughts crept along the wooden beams, over the shiny stone floor, behind the straggling pot plants lined up on the window sill, finally circling around Juliet's mother where she sat bunched up on the sofa, staring into the flames, staring at nothing.

Then he came in, tired from lugging bales of hay and blocks of salt around the fields, in need of the warmth of the house.

"For Chrissakes, John. You just don't know what it's like."

In the stress it's always the small things that break the camel's back. Things lighter than a straw even. Things like the thought that Juliet still hadn't be found. She looked up at him and shouted.

"When is that horrible path going to be finished? You can't imagine how it's annoying, ten, twenty times a day, driving up and down, getting shaken all over the place. Just do something about it, will you?"

She shouted, all cross and angry. And not so much against the path, but against herself, because Juliet was still not there. And there was no news. Even if a little voice always said '*No news is good news*', it isn't. It never is. Not when you're waiting, imagining the worst. There is just no news, that's all. No news is no news, and no knowing. So it's better and easier to be angry

against a stupid path than to let that hurt out again. And it's true. It's annoying to have to drive up and down that path full of old bricks every time you need to come and go around the farm.

"They're delivering the cement one of these days," her husband said.

He went off to the office to hunt down the papers with the exact date, to give himself something to do, to occupy himself and to stop from him thinking. He too needed to invent these tasks to stop his worry about Juliet from crippling him.

And then he was back again, before he had had time to leave.

"Tomorrow. They're coming tomorrow afternoon. I'll have to call for help, I can't do all that alone." He was content to have something else to think and to worry about. Something other than worrying over Juliet. He was glad of the occasion to chase out those thoughts, even for a few minutes. But only for a very short while, because just like a cold wind, those ugly thoughts manage to slip round all the barriers you can put up to block them out. They flow round the obstacles and blow all the way up to you and freeze your heart right in your chest.

"Oh, not tomorrow, it can't be tomorrow. We're right in the middle of all this searching. We've got police and dogs and volunteers... You can't put down cement in the middle of all that. You'll have to cancel. Tell them it isn't the moment. They can understand that, can't they?"

"Yes, Dear, don't worry. You're right. I'll call them up. It's not the moment."

He hugged her to comfort her. They felt a little less cold, a little less lonely. But they couldn't but help wondering where Juliet could be.

And they were still frightened and worried.

THE MESSENGER

The convoy had covered about half the distance round the slope on the path back to base camp when they met the mes-

senger, a small grey and white rabbit who was bouncing along, muttering to himself, following the trail the party had left on the way out. Having been hopping back from the site of the diggings at a brisk pace, the raiding party felt more than a little cold and hungry. They seized the occasion to pause and catch their breath. Some even set to scratching themselves with vigour, and pleasure. Augustus was about to call them to order — they shouldn't forget to post lookouts, to remain alert at all times — when he froze rigid.

"Augustus, my little..." The voice was weak and smooth, like something hissing, like a branch or a rock tearing. But the voice was recognisable. *"Why, did you abandon us?"*

The other voices joined the first, *"Oh why Augustus? That was not very nice, was it?"*

The vision of the three egg-like spheres stamped itself over his view, darkening the stark stretches of snow around them.

"Leave me alone. It's finished!" he shouted to the surprise of the rest of the rabbits.

"Augustus, what's happening?" Juliet wanted to know, seeing his eyes agitated and rolling.

"No, no, leave me! Go away!"

He hopped from one paw to another, appearing to be terrified. He was speaking with someone or something, that clearly horrified him. And, of course, while Augustus could see whatever it was, just in front of him, the others were unable to see, never mind imagine, nor understand it.

All — except for Juliet — had shifted away.

"Augustus, my little friend, you promised—"

"I promised nothing at all!"

"You must help us—"

"You're lying! All this has nothing to do with the rabbits, with the World. There isn't any danger. You're liars!"

Laughter pealed in his ears.

"But there is danger... And you *refuse* to help other poor

creatures—”

“You’re not from the Wood. No one ever saw you here before!”

“There you are wrong. We were here long before the rabbits, long before the Wood even became the Wood. But not in this form. That I do grant you. So you see, Augustus, you cannot just abandon us like this—”

“Oh yes I can!” he screamed. “And I’ve done it. *Go away!*”

He shook his poor skinny head, as if to shake off something clinging to his eyes. Juliet was frightened he was going to start hitting his head against something to free himself from whatever it was, but then he stopped as abruptly as he had started. He panted. She crouched down to console him.

“Augustus?” She hesitated. “Are you OK?” She spoke quietly.

He nodded, then shivered, his fur prickly where the perspiration had twisted it to tousled tufts and spurs.

“Now I am. Thanks. Thanks for staying with me.”

They heard a cough from the small rabbit.

“Sorry to interrupt, *taa-ti-tupt* and all, but I have an important message from Mister Virgil and my Mummy won’t be happy if I don’t get back quickly. It’s for Mister Augustus. *Taa-ti-us*. The message, I mean.”

Augustus shook his head, then held it to one side before speaking slowly.

“OK, spit it out Kid.”

Then he stopped. He had always hated it when Virgil called him ‘Kid’ all the time, but the little rabbit didn’t seem to have noticed. Augustus made a long deep sigh.

“Sorry,” he started over. “What’s your name, son?”

“But—” the rabbit was taken aback. “By the Great White Rabbit’s Whiskers, people call me ‘Kid’, Mister Augustus.” He paused, “I thought you knew.”

“Oh... Yes, of course. Of course. And this message then, Kid!” came back Augustus.

“Yes, Sir! Permission to speak, Sir!” piped up the rabbit, bubbling with pride.

“Permission granted,” sighed Augustus, wondering if it had been a good thing to instigate all these rules and usages.

“*Taa-ti-tum*. Mister Virgil informs you that the preparations in the Warren are nearly finished (*Taa-ti-tished*). Furthermore, he advises (*Taa-ti-tiz*) Mister Augustus not to wait (*Taa-ti-tate*). He proposes that if the rabbits let the night go by (*Taa-ti-tie*), the Three will certainly be able to take the advantage and defeat (*Taa-ti-teat*) our plans (*Taa-ti-tans*).”

Everyone remained silent and waiting, not only because of the message, but also the curious delivery.

“And how is he?” Augustus asked at last. “Better?”

“Mister Virgil? No Sir. He says he feels well, and even manages to keep pretending for a while, but we all see he’s still suffering,” said the small mottled rabbit, his head bowed.

“And Leonard, any news there?” Juliet supposed this was the other rabbit, the one who had been paralysed. Which the answer confirmed.

“Oh yes. He’s woken from his sleep, but he has a lot of trouble moving, even breathing is difficult at times...”

Augustus didn’t move, lost in his thoughts.

“Thanks Kid...”

Then, as if bitten, he jerked his head up, “It’s not the moment to let things slip. A bit of punch! Come on, come on, who’s on the watch? This is the heart of enemy territory here, and we shouldn’t forget it!”

Returning his attention to the young rabbit, he said, “Kid, here’s a reply for you.”

“For Mister Virgil, Sir?”

“Yes. Tell him the raid was completed successfully—”

“*Taa-ti-tilly*.”

“—that there was a Human—”

“*Taa-ti-tan*.”

“—but no dogs—”

“*Taa-ti-togs.*”

“—we got all the supplies we were seeking—”

“*Taa-ti-ting.*”

“Kid. Do tell me why you interrupt me with all this *Taa-taa-thingy* all the time? It’s really annoying you know?”

“Sorry, Sir. It’s a technique my Mummy taught me to help me remember things. It works pretty well. I never forget the messages I have to carry. Mummy calls it *mnemotechnology*, Sir. ‘*Mnemo*’ means memory and—”

“Thanks, Kid. Let’s finish this thing today shall we? Where was I?”

“*Taa-ti-tilly. Taa-ti-tan. Taa-ti-togs. Taa-ti-ting...* You got all the supplies you were seeking, Sir.” The rabbit replied to Augustus’ surprise.

“We’ll set up camp here, to wait for catering (*Taa-ti-ting*) to come over from the Warren (*Taa-ti-ten*). I think I’ll be needing a small team of diggers (*Taa-ti-tiggers*). Once they arrive, we’ll move on up (*Taa-ti-tup*). Is that clear?”

The rabbit nodded with enthusiasm “Yes Sir. Do you want me to repeat the message, Sir?”

“No. Just be quick, that’s all. Fall out, Kid”

The little rabbit hopped off into the snow back along the path he arrived on.

‘THEY’RE LOOKING FOR US!’

Augustus sent out scouts to find somewhere where they could camp. Quickly they found a small hollow that suited their needs. The rabbits set to work knocking it into shape. They dug down and raised the walls. They left an entrance big enough for Juliet to crawl through and surrounded it with lookout posts where rabbits could shelter and still have a good

view of the surrounding area. There was no roof, but the walls of compacted snow would protect them from all but the wildest snowstorms. And it wasn't finished a moment too early either. Juliet, even with the bags to protect her from the damp, was cold and hungry. The rabbits, too.

New handfuls of snow started spiralling down as girl and rabbits fitted themselves into the shelter. More than ever, everyone wanted to rest, but Augustus insisted they would have time for that later. Later, he told them, they would probably have to wait and then everyone could relax, but for the moment it was important to finish the preparations. He had them empty the material they had brought back from the compound (and the car) into the centre of their assembly.

They were engaged in sorting everything when Augustus cried out “*Juliet!*”

He started scratching at his eyes. Then he turned and buried his muzzle in the wall. His body was shaking in spasms.

“Augustus, what's up? What's happening?” Straight away Juliet was next to him. Her voice betrayed her worry.

“Juliet,” he started. “They see with my eyes...”

What he said was just beginning to sink in when one of the lookouts hissed, “*Something's coming. Radio silence!*”

But Augustus couldn't have heard as he moaned and started scratching at his eyes again.

“*Sssh* Augustus! Hold on! It's dangerous,” said Juliet. She held the rabbit to her, hoping to calm him, or to still his seizures. “What's coming?” she hissed back at the look-out.

“There was a movement at the edge of the Forest,” came the reply in a whisper. “But with the snow it's difficult to see exactly what.”

“A rabbit?” she asked, willing him to say ‘Yes’.

“No, bigger. Much bigger than that!”

Augustus was still twitching and trembling.

“It's me. They're looking for us. They can see by my eyes. They're going to find us!”

"Augustus, calm down. *'They'*? Do you mean the Three? You never mentioned that before... How come?" She spoke with hushed tones, still trying to distract and calm him.

"I don't know. I didn't know they could. Perhaps they couldn't. Perhaps Virgil's right when he says they're getting stronger, or perhaps they've gone and changed again. I don't know."

He shook and scratched at his face as he spoke. He kept pulling himself free of the girl's hold.

"It's when they asked me what we were doing, and what were those sticks, that I realised."

"Stop worrying yourself, Augustus. It's not your fault. It's perhaps just that we're so close to them here... It could be lots of things..."

She leaned over and pulled out one of the cleaner rags they had brought back. She nicked the edge with her teeth and then tore off a large strip. Then she blindfolded the rabbit. She couldn't help seeing the blood: red and black droplets clogging his fur, sticking to the scratches around his eyes, his cheeks, his brow.

"Do you want me to wrap your claws too?" she asked in his ear, still bent over him. "Just in case..."

"No," he answered in a low voice. "I prefer to have them free... I'd... I'd kill myself if needs be, rather than betray the rabbits."

She shuddered as a wave of cold forced its way along her spine.

"Do you think they can hear you?" she whispered to his ear.

"I haven't the faintest..."

They both waited in silence.

STICKS AND STONES

"All clear!" called the lookout. "There's no more movement, and I can't see anything else. All clear."

The rabbits were playing with the bungee cords. That was what Juliet called the stretch cords with a hook at each end that they had found in the car. She explained that these were used to fix packets on the back of a bicycle, or to steady a delicate object in the back of a car. The rabbits were busy imagining other uses. They proposed to use them as catapults. More than that, as a means of catapulting rabbits.

"If we fix the ends solidly to something, I dunno, a tree stump or something, and then we pull it back," one was proposing. "I'm pretty sure we could get a rabbit into the air..."

"Just think if we did it from the top of a hill then... Then we'd really go sailing..." said another, taking the idea further still.

"You don't think you need — I don't know — at least, a helmet or something to protect you?" Juliet was alarmed by the damage they might inflict on themselves.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..." they answered. But she couldn't be sure they were conscious of the danger.

Two rabbits grabbed the hooked ends of the cable and ran off in opposite directions. At once the elastic slammed them back into each other. Breathless and laughing they were about to try again when Augustus started speaking.

"We should be getting ready," he said with a grave voice that commanded everyone to stop what they were doing to listen. "Give the 'lighter' to Juliet, she knows best how to use it. It's made for Human hands anyway. Take the rags, start with the ones that smell the strongest. Wind a rag round one end of the sticks and tie it tight. The sticks should be about as long as your ear. You should be able to hold them in your paws or your mouth when the rags are on fire, and not burn yourself. If the rags are too big, or too long then tear them into strips. Use your teeth or ask Juliet for help. Above all, keep everything dry, else it'll never light up. When you're done, put all your sticks together in a bag. Each of you should have a bag. Remember, keep everything dry.

"Once we get there, Juliet will light you a stick. Don't throw

it until the wood starts burning, else it'll just go out too quickly.

"Aim for the tree. I think she'll be the one who'll be the most afraid of the fire. But if you see an opportunity to hit the bird or the other one, the horsey-thing, don't hesitate. If you want to use what Juliet calls the 'bungee cords' to throw things a long way then go outside and practise. Use sticks and stones, dead branches, snow balls. You need to be sure of hitting something about twenty to thirty hops away. If you don't manage to use it accurately, it isn't too important. But if you're not sure of succeeding, then don't do it. You risk dropping things onto the heads of other rabbits and hurting or crippling your own side, or worse.

"When the others — the diggers — arrive, you'll have to explain all this to them too. They should supply you with munitions: stones, rocks. I want a continual bombardment of all this on the Three. And most important. No one is to go closer than ten hops. If you don't take care, you're going to start throwing things on each other's heads. If you see the blue flames, then jump back as fast as you can. And if you hear me, or Tish, calling you to fall back, then everyone will leave immediately. No exceptions. We'll all meet up on the north side of the clearing, and there you'll take your orders from Virgil.

"One final point. Our goal isn't to beat the Three. If we manage to do that now, that's fine, but it's not what we're counting on. Our goal is quite simple. We must create a distraction for as long as possible to give the others the time to finish their preparations. Then we get out of there with everyone alive.

"Now, if some food could only arrive... It looks like a great day for a picnic."

FOR THE WARREN AND FOR THE WORLD

The team of diggers was already in place. They had orders to prepare piles of stones and small rocks. They dug long

trenches down through the cloying white mass: long black scars that the falling snow was even now licking at, trying to heal and close.

The others, the team from the compound, arrived after they had eaten and refreshed themselves. Juliet carried Augustus across her shoulders; he couldn't really walk in his current state. Where he had clawed at his eyes, two large spots, dark and red, now marked the rag around his head.

The snow was still falling; big fluffy flakes, heavy with menace. But this was not entirely a bad thing. Even if it was cold and sticky, and destined to slow and bog them down, the cover it provided meant they didn't have to be so careful in hiding Juliet.

They emerged from the swirling whiteness into the relative calm near the Three, and then spread themselves out along the edges of the clearing. Juliet, near the middle of the line, waited for someone to give a signal. She looked up and saw that all eyes were on her. They were waiting for her to give it.

When they had arrived in view of the Three, or at least of the two that were easily visible, Juliet had found them smaller than she remembered. Looking more closely, she decided it wasn't that they were smaller but more as if they had become more compact. As if they were reducing to something more dense, more solid. So, she thought, what about Virgil's suppositions? Was this a real change, or just memory and imagination playing tricks? Or was it wishful thinking, picking the smallest and most minor changes before dashing their chances to the ground, leaving their hopes as cold and dead as dust? Or was it just that itchy feeling of horror in their presence that had built them up in her mind's eye, making them larger, and more disturbing... Or even, was she starting to see them from the rabbits' point of view?

Yet, when it came to the crunch, were any of these partial impressions really important? What was certain was that it didn't matter if they were, or they appeared, a little larger or smaller, they were still formidable, terrifying and enormous.

And the rabbits and Juliet were no more substantial than insects next to those Three.

"I think it's time," she said in a low voice.

"It'll never be time," murmured Augustus from her shoulders. "We'll just pretend it is."

His voice made her cold. Then she thought about the other battles, probably even now taking place within him. They were just a stone's throw away — if ever there was a time she could say that, it was now — from the enemy.

"If I get too heavy, or worse, if I start... doing things... You shouldn't feel obliged to stay around... You know that the other Humans are looking for you. It's not your fight, you know."

"Augustus, stop it right now. I'm going to put you down because if I don't you'll fall the first time I bend over to do anything, but that's got nothing to do with it."

Juliet felt hurt and angry, then she realised Augustus needed to feel angry too, to help him fight his own particular battles.

"We've already had this conversation. You forget that they used me too. And when should I stay, 'Stop, that's enough'? Now, or when they get strong enough to attack the farm? Or the town? Because, you know, the farm, I don't really care much about it. I'd rather be back home, back in town where I belong, where my friends are and all. No, that's not what I meant. It's my fight, too. Stop your silly stories, and come on and fight with me, not against me."

"In that case, take care of my rabbits."

"Oh, take care of them yourself! We're both in this mess together." She set Augustus down. Then she lit a stick. She lifted it and held it over her head. The bag she had tied over her hair had long fallen onto her shoulders. Her hair stuck out, damp and dirty, from under her wooly hat. She raised her voice and hoped they couldn't hear her trembling...

"Those who are near, come and get the fire, and then pass it on to the others. Those behind, wait to get the fire before starting to throw. And those with the bungee cords, stop play-

ing swings with them. You'll break them and then they'll be good for nothing. You at the back, watch those stones you're swinging around on those ropes or you'll brain the rabbits in the front. Augustus said there should be nothing for ten or twenty hops in front of you, so play attention. Now, all together with me — *for the Warren and for the World!*"

BLACK AS SNOW

The first wave of sticks, stones and pebbles hit the trunk and the spreading branches of the tree in the clearing. It shook as if a storm had hit it. It shook as if it only just realised what was happening. It shook and woke. And as it shook the snow fell away from the branches, falling like erupting smoke. And through the smoke, the massive shadow of the bird loomed in the branches before flying off like a black sheet being torn away by the wind.

"Stay in the shelter of the trees. And don't play at being heroes!" came the clear voice of one of the rabbits; Juliet stopped thinking that she should have said that, and just contented herself with the idea that someone had.

The flaming sticks bore down on the tree, sketching out fiery arcs in the air, scattering sparks, before bouncing away and hissing in the snow. The tree shook away all those that managed to land in the branches. Nonetheless, Juliet aimed and threw the one she had been holding before it burnt her, then thought to check that the rabbits were keeping both fire and the sticks under control. She had just noticed that Augustus was shaking violently in the snow where she had left him when a call rang out: "*Bird overhead!*"

Juliet looked up and saw it floating, coming closer and closer; its wings stretched wide like a dark rip in the air. She saw that they had changed; they had grown not only larger but broader too. There were other, more disturbing, differences. At first it was hard to pin down; it seemed like, in place of the

feathers that had been a sharp, shining, blue-black, — if such a colour existed — everything was now velvety, but still black. Like the wings of a bat, she couldn't help thinking.

And if there had only been that...

Wheeling round, its path brought it closer; she could see details more clearly. Its outline had thinned out, become scaggier, but unequally so, the neck, and the tail were both much longer than before. Claws, with long, pointed nails, hung down at the back, scraping the branches and then the ridges of snow. The head was bigger and heavier too, with jagged uneven teeth bristling along the scar that had once been a beak. Feathers appeared to have become shorter, harder, as if fused into scales. It was if it was some sort of dark reptile flying, circling slowly over their heads.

When a slow, lazy, spurt of flame came licking at the last leaves hanging from the trees above, she understood at last: it had turned into a dragon.

She felt, rather than heard, the *Twang!* of the elastics behind her and threw herself to the ground without thinking. Another wave of projectiles — stones, rocks, branches, flaming sticks, sparks and cinders — had burst through the cover in the direction of the bird. And then came a great rustling noise, like a heavy tissue beating and then ripping at the same time as there came another *Twang!* The elastics made the ground vibrate.

Then came the scream.

It didn't come from the direction of the rabbits. It came from the clearing. She lifted her head in time to see the bird spiralling downwards, hanging from one shredded — but still beating — wing. It fell amidst noise and dust. It fell in smoke and steam. Flames leapt skywards, licking at the low clouds.

They heard the scream again. It was a shrill explosion, a vast rustling, and a tearing in their heads before it vanished. All that was left was a milky cloud of smoke, drifting away in slow, vapourous twists towards the low grey sky.

A large *Hurray!* rose like a tidal wave from the rabbits' hiding places, shouts of joy bursting into hundreds of cheers and exclamations, laughs and sighs before ebbing into silence.

Juliet leaned forward to tell Augustus. And found he was no longer there. Trying hard not to panic, she raised her head and darted looks in all directions, trying to spot him; the snow was now speckled and holed, it was difficult to make forms out clearly...

The tree! It was no longer there. There was only a vast hole, rough and broken. And massed beside it, the snow-spattered form that was, or had been, the horse. Up to now, it hadn't given any signs of life or movement.

Her heart beating, she spied the tree at the very edge of the clearing. *Oh Damn! Damn! Damn!* She had forgotten to warn the rabbits that it could move! *Blam!* The blue sparks hit simultaneously in different areas of the woods. The air crackled and smelt of ozone.

At first she thought this was an effect of the flashing lights, but no, she saw her fears were coming true: the tree was still moving forwards. It advanced its branches to pull out small trees, to rip out bushes, shrubs and thorns. It crushed these, tore them apart, cast them aside. And still the blue flames leapt out and flared up to the right and to the left. She stared, terrified, but unable to shift her gaze. She saw the roots carrying the tree forwards, she saw them drilling into the earth, ploughing into the dirt, the snow and the ice; she saw them twining around twigs, trunks, branches, and pulling the tree ever forward. And all the while tendrils flickered out forwards and sideways, seeking to seize the rabbits.

"Fall back!" Juliet shouted, her voice hoarse, dry and full of smoke. *"Get back! Retreat! Fall back! Get away, quick!"* She croaked, bent in half with a hacking cough, before turning to hunt down Augustus and pull him out of there, too.

Because she was searching for Augustus she didn't see the

groups of rabbits move forward from the cover of the trees, swinging the stones on short ropes as they advanced; the stones and pebbles hissed, swishing in the air. Then the rabbits launching them in the direction of the mound of the waiting horse. The first weight swung around the animal, sending snow flying and it entwined and the horse shuddered. It started to rise. Another rope caught at the legs. Then another. Then another. The ropes wove together, pulling, knotting, entwining. Quickly it was ensnared in a mesh as the rabbits darted around it, slipping, sliding and jumping away from the hooves and the fire and the blue sparks as they pulled their net tighter and tighter about the horse-creature.

Then there was another scream: it was a muffled braying, a strangled whinnying. It was so painful that Juliet, instinctively, clasped her hands to her ears as she turned to look.

She saw the horse, rearing up, beating the air with its front legs as it attempted to break the ties. Yet however much it struggled, the woven trap held tight, and the more it flexed, the tighter it pulled the ropes around itself. But this was not what caught her attention. She saw, at last, the form, or the half-form, that the poor pony had been trying to take. The old horsey head was now just a gross swelling thrown aside like an old and empty saddlebag; something else had been growing in its place. This something else unfolded as a swelling, a growth that even now tried to move unformed, soft pink arms, still sticky with fibrous flesh and dripping a thick, dark liquid against the circling cords. At the end of these members, there were small child's hands, chubby and terrible to see; blind hands scratching at the air, striving for life. The worst was yet to come: the worst was the new head. It was misshapen, raw like burnt skin. And the scream emerged from a slit that was not yet a mouth, that was still but a gaping hole in the glistening flesh.

It had been trying to change itself into a centaur. She could see that now. It was... so obvious.

Then the horse — the near-centaur — collapsed; first onto its knees, before falling over into the ice and the desolation be-

low. And Juliet could, at last, tear her eyes away from the vision.

She felt as if she had awoken from an absence to find herself standing in the clearing; with cold, clammy snow up to her knees. She backed away. And nearly fell over Augustus.

He was shaking. His body jerked in fits and stabs like a toy with a broken spring that repeats — over and over and over — the same pointless movements. She turned to carry him, but in his frenzy he just scratched and bit at her. As she couldn't bring herself to abandon him, she caught his back legs, and, with all her force, pulled him after her as she staggered backwards through the snow. All that time, the rabbit's head hit the ice and snow with frightening regularity.

Back under the cover of the trees, she wanted to scan the clearing looking for the other rabbits, but Augustus was shaking and shivering too much. She tore off one of the sacks from around her chest to tie his back legs together; then did the same for the front. Now, at least, he wouldn't get far under his own steam. And she would get fewer scratches as she dragged him along.

She was now free to examine the situation. Only the tree was still visible. It had suffered, but not that much. It had torn branches — one was still hanging down, even now — but that was probably the result of skirmishes against other trees. Sooty smudges and smoke stains marked the trunk, but there was no real damage.

The other two weren't visible, but they could very well be hidden in the snow somewhere. Or busy growing themselves back. She shivered as she remembered the incomplete transformation of the horse. From this side of the clearing it was difficult to make much out; the ground was covered with tracks and traces and paths, not counting the stones, the still smouldering sticks, the rocks and the ropes stretched out here and there. Not forgetting the gaping hole.

She realised that the hole must have been part of Virgil's plan as it didn't appear to be where the tree had been originally. And anyway, the tree didn't leave holes behind it. The

rabbits must have dug the hole hoping to get the Three to fall into it. They had nearly succeeded, she thought. But then again, it would probably have come to nothing. The tree could probably have just moved out of the way. It may have blocked them for a short time, but it wasn't enough.

Pulling Augustus behind her, she skirted the trees and headed for the north, obeying, at last, the last order she had given to everyone. Herself included. Fall back.

“It would be easier if you carried him, you know...”

Juliet lifted a pair of tired, expressionless eyes towards the familiar voice.

“Instead of pulling. If you carried him...” The black furred rabbit — Tish — clarified.

“Yes...” Juliet said blankly. All the while continuing to pull Augustus backwards.

“Juliet, hold on...”

The rabbit came closer and helped the girl to lift Augustus. His head flopped to the side, his eyes were closed, and the fur around them was dark and matted. The rag Juliet had bandaged his eyes with was long gone and the face was smeared with dark blood. Tish listened to his chest; he was still breathing, albeit shal-lowly. She had been worried when she first saw the girl dragging the motionless rabbit, thinking that she was just pulling him along, even if he was stiff and dead, just because it was Augustus. In fact, she was right: Juliet had just wanted to get him back with the other rabbits — she had no idea of how well he might, or might not, be at the moment. She just needed to get him away from... From those *creatures*, as quickly as possible.

Tish guided Juliet to where the Virgil had assembled the rabbits.

‘AUGUSTUS, HELP ME!’

“Juliet. Juliet? Are you still with us?”

Carefully, softly, Lucy shook the girl's arm. As soon as they

had arrived here, Juliet had collapsed into a corner hugging Augustus to her chest and hadn't moved since. She just sat there, staring out at nothing.

Lucy shook the free arm again until the girl turned her head.

"Drink!" she ordered. And she encouraged the string of rabbits holding small cups, jars and bowls of water to approach. At long last, Juliet stopped looking into the empty distance, drank, and started paying attention to her surroundings.

She was sitting, her back against a wall of packed snow, in a hollow just inside the woods, somewhere on the north edge of the clearing. There were a large number of rabbits here. Gathered before her she recognised Lucy and Virgil, Tish and some other Ninjas. But she couldn't see Augustus anywhere. She looked all around, desperately seeking him out. She had completely forgotten she was holding him.

"How was it?" she asked Virgil, with a small, quite voice. "The diversion, I mean..."

"Better than we could have hoped," said the old rabbit scowling and twitching his nose. "Two of the Three have disappeared from the battle field. We can just hope they don't come back too soon."

"The hole. Was that you?" She remembered the tree forcing its way across the ground, across the snow, the roots, the other trees.

"We didn't expect it to come to much..." Did he shiver as he spoke? She couldn't be sure.

"Did anyone get hurt?" She nodded towards the assembled rabbits, chattering, scratching, napping.

At first he didn't say anything. A pause. And then. "A few got paralysed. No more than five, mind you. We're missing three others, but there are patrols out searching for them. Down below, a few rabbits got buried, but they're alive and we're expecting to pull them out any moment now."

"And that's good news?" Juliet wanted to know, horrified to know that rabbits had been hurt.

"Yes. I was expecting as much. Quite frankly, worse even."

Juliet coughed. And she could feel the bile in her throat, making her want to cough again. She sipped at the water. Once calmed, she asked, "And now?"

"Now, we pull our forces together for the last battle. The Kid — Augustus —" he jerked his nose in his direction, "— showed us that rabbits could fight those *things* out there, so that's what we're going to do..."

"But you've seen what they can do, haven't you? If you do that, you're all going to get killed!"

She shook the inanimate rabbit in her arms.

"Augustus, you tell them. They'll get massacred! It's crazy!"

She felt stinging tears well up — tears of frustration and of fear at the same time. She wiped her eyes with her forearm; then wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

"It's not fair!" She shook the rabbit again. "Augustus, help me!"

Virgil looked at her. He waited. The other rabbits were waiting, too.

At last, she spoke.

"Can you give me a few minutes, please?"

He hesitated.

"You want time to do what..?"

"I don't know yet. Let me think. Not much. Just let me think." She screwed up her face. "*Please.*"

"Be quick then. It's getting on and night will eventually come."

Juliet heaved a sigh and pulled Augustus against herself more tightly.

"Help me," she whispered. As much to herself as to him.

WAITING

"Now, if I still have that lighter..." she spoke under her breath.

She found it in a pocket even though she couldn't remem-

ber putting it there. More importantly, the cheap plastic and metal contraption still functioned: she flicked it into life. She shook it and looked at the fuel in reserve. It must still be about half full. That would do.

She thought about fuel.

She called over Tish and explained what she wanted.

“Can you do it?” she wanted to know. “And how quickly?”

The rabbit thought about it.

“I think we can...”

Juliet saw that her fur, which had been so beautiful and sleek, was now tangled and dirty. Scorch marks scarred her flanks leaving grey powder curling at the end of the hairs in the black fur. Yet she held her head high, and gave the impression that she still had a good reserve of energy.

The rabbit looked over at Virgil, as if seeking permission. They all waited.

Then he nodded, and the Ninja leapt into action, bounding across the snow, followed by three others.

All they could do now was wait.

THE LAST BATTLE

The waiting was interrupted by the arrival of one of the rescue parties bringing back a wounded rabbit. He had pulled a muscle in a hind leg. He had then got knocked out while trying to get away. His leg hurt and he winced a little as they moved him. But at least he hadn't been paralysed. Juliet could see that Virgil was still in pain, even if he tried not to show it.

“Are you sure you want to go ahead, Kid?” he asked, using the interruption as an excuse to approach and talk.

“You've got nothing to lose to let me try, have you?” She had answered aggressively, which was silly: it wasn't him she was angry at.

“Sorry Virgil,” she said, more calmly this time. “It was Augustus who kept on at me that it wasn't my problem.” She was still hugging the other rabbit in her arms. “You said your-

self that it probably isn't brute force that'll get us anywhere. And you can no longer count on taking them by surprise... So, just let me try."

Half a dozen small rabbits came tumbling in on them at that moment, all overexcited, and cutting off all conversation.

"It's done. We've finished them. We've done all we can — hundreds and hundreds. We're ready when you are..." They yapped like frisky and playful puppies as they fell over each other, as if all this was some jape, not something that all of their lives depended on. This was the group that sculpted the snow rabbits. Juliet had sent them off to prepare things earlier. "And we've got some real funny ones in there... No, you'll just have to wait to see their faces—"

"We even put some of you in there..." they giggled.

"I should never have listened to you..." Virgil was muttering, back in his corner.

"Are they as good as the others?" Juliet wanted to know.

"Pretty as your own kits," called out one.

"The best we've ever done," chanted another.

"We're getting better. You can't tell?" laughed a third.

"Just wait to see them," they shouted all together, with pride in their voices.

When no one could stand the wait anymore, the four Ninjas arrived back, carrying the petrol can that they had stolen from the building site for her. It had taken all four of them to carry it over.

They rested a moment.

"All right everyone, we're ready," Juliet rallied them. "Let's repeat what each of you must do, one last time, and then off we all go."

They had all expected the tree to have gone looking for the two others. They had even left lookouts there with orders to let them know as soon as the tree moved. But the tree had stayed at the edge of the clearing without attempting to move.

The ground between the tree and the girl had been heavily

ploughed over during the earlier skirmishes. At the foot of the tree, the soil was bare. The earth was wet, muddy even in places. Elsewhere the snow had been lashed during the combats, exposing the dirt, streaking the contours with mud, ashes, and other colours that Juliet had no wish to examine more closely.

Even though it could only be early afternoon, the air was dark and heavy as if night had already taken possession of the land. Fog crushed the small hillock in a suffocating grip.

At least it wasn't snowing.

Juliet approached the tree, stepping over the gashes, cracks and gullies. She carried the still unconscious Augustus with her. His paws were wedged over her left arm, his long back legs swinging free in the air.

With her right hand, she gripped the petrol can. She could hear the liquid splashing inside; the fumes stung her eyes and nose. She had mislaid the screw-top but that wasn't important. Like that she wouldn't waste time unscrewing it.

As she neared the tree, it shivered, stretching itself. It drew branches together and started to unwind its roots. The bark rippled in places.

She guessed it was just waiting for her to get close enough: so she stopped.

She splashed petrol in a wide puddle on the ground in front of her, then stepped back to set the can down — with precaution — away to the side. Pulling a rag from her anorak pocket she lit it with the lighter, taking care to hold it in the opposite corner so as not to burn herself. She stepped back and dropped it. The rag floated down and then with a *Whoosh!*, flames leapt up in a ball of fire before disappearing into a puff of smoke.

She called out to the tree.

"That was just a demonstration in case you're thinking of sending me one of your blue balls things. Try and get me and the explosion should do you a lot more harm than those little matchsticks you saw earlier. OK?"

She had picked up the petrol can again and, as she spoke, she moved forward. She moved through the trails of smoke hanging over the smelly puddle in front of her, with all the calm she could muster. The closer she could get to the tree, the more dangerous she would be to it.

Don't worry Kid, she thought, we'll get it.

And then a flurry of small noises dashed themselves into her head, echoing round and round and round. If the tree was talking again, it wasn't the same as before. It was all chopped up, in pieces. As if it was saying a thousand different things to a thousand different people, all at the same time. It was violent, like fifteen television channels all shouting and trying to interrupt each other and drown the others out.

She wanted to block her ears but she couldn't drop the rabbit nor the can. She staggered, then walked on.

"You know that you've lost your powers. Everything's gone." Her voice was hoarse. She hoped that what she was saying was true, or that by saying it, she was making it true. "It's all over. And you're gonna leave the rabbits alone! You're gonna leave us all alone!"

The voices in her head came together, all speaking at the same time. It was like a projector beam that suddenly came into focus.

"Whhhhy?"

It was sharp and painful. There was sadness and despair in that voice. And because the words spoke directly in her head, she felt that sadness as if it were hers. She understood that the tree was sad for the others. And she readied herself to answer... Then stopped.

"Sorry? Are you talking to me? You trying to say something? Is that you mumbling?" *Don't give in.* "I told you your powers aren't working, so speak up. Come on. Don't be shy. Say something to me. It's not like we don't know each other."

"They not here.... Leave us-s-s alone, we-e-e..." The tree spoke aloud. Dozens of others voices came rushing through

this voice, rustling like wind in autumn leaves, rasping like angry wasps and hornets and dry, dry insects.

As it spoke, it shifted its roots forward, like tendrils, ever so slowly in the direction of Juliet. And with that dry, crying voice it called out. "*Whhy? Whhhhy?*"

"*Watch out!*" She sloshed petrol down onto the roots crawling around her feet. "That's close enough. Stay where you are, or you're gonna get burnt."

The thin, sniffing coils of the root ends had pulled back as soon as they felt the cold splash of the petrol.

"So like that you remember how to speak, do you?" she shouted.

"*S-s-speak?*" Again the tired and dry wheezing.

"Yes. But for the moment, you're listening. And I'm telling you how it's finished. How you're going to leave me alone. And leave the rabbits alone. It's finished and you don't control anything anymore."

She lifted the unconscious, floppy rabbit in her hand.

"You still control him perhaps?"

She didn't leave time for an answer. Didn't give all those burbling voices in her head time to think and organise themselves.

"We've arranged a little demonstration for you. The rabbits and me. So that you understand. That you're finished. That you can't even twitch the moustache of one of these rabbits anymore."

She called out and looked briefly over her shoulder.

A spark appeared, hesitating in the depths of the clearing. Then it jumped from place to place. Ten, twenty, fifty flaming torches appeared, being held at arm's length by the snow rabbits waiting at the other end of the great clearing. Then there were hundreds. Rows upon rows of rabbits each holding a stick with flames licking at the sky. The army of snow rabbits stretched out in front of the tree with Juliet at its head.

"Can you see my rabbits? Go on, don't worry about me. Go

ahead and do your worst...”

The tree slid backwards. It couldn't not fear the fire. And it had seen what the contents of the can in the girl's hand could do in contact with fire. Mixing the three — the girl, the fire and the tree — was not a good thing.

Juliet felt a change of tone in the voices. Not that they had stopped, just that they had become more distant.

“You know what? I bet you can't get even one of those rabbits to put out one of those torches, and you're so washed up you can't speak to the rabbits anymore. And I won't even mention your blue flames.”

Keep up the pressure. Don't give it the time to think. Don't even think yourself. Just speak. Speak.

“And even if you manage to hit one, what about the others. How are you going to fight them off? Because now you know, they're angry. Very angry. And they're just thinking about one thing... You hit one. Just one. And you'll have all the forest against you. All of them will be pleased to come and tell you how much they're angry with you. You could say they're burning to tell you.”

The tree was still sliding backwards, with moss and leaves flaking and falling away, with bark peeling and falling.

Juliet thought she saw it getting ready to rub the branches like when it sent off that blue lightning.

“If you're thinking of hitting them, think twice. Because you've got to hit them all at the same time. You might hurt one, two... ten perhaps... But all the others will be all the more ready to let you know how angry they are.”

Flames darted around the border of the clearing. Like beads in a necklace, the flaming torches appeared between the trees all round the edge, enclosing and encircling the clearing.

The tree understood it was surrounded. That, not only had it made an enemy of the rabbits, but that the enemy was ready to close in on it from almost all directions.

“You called me here because of the rabbits' prophecy, but there was a problem. You. You never believed in it. For you it

was just a way of getting the rabbits to do what you wanted. To get them digging for you. But you forgot something. Because the prophecy belongs to the rabbits, not to you. It talks about a danger to the rabbits. And it's *you* the danger. When you called me to warn them about the danger, I came. I came from outside the Forest to help the rabbits. That was the power of the prophecy. Because you know now that it does have a power. You can laugh at the rabbits, you can laugh at me, but you can't laugh at the power of the prophecy anymore. Because now it's all over for you. You started the prophecy, but now it's going to finish you off."

During all the time Juliet spoke, she spoke not knowing what she was really saying, without even knowing if what she said made sense. She spoke as a way to attack the tree, not to let it think, not to give it time to reply. As she spoke she heard the shouts and cheers of the rabbits hidden in and under the bushes all around. As she spoke, she so believed what she was saying that in the distance the snow rabbits seemed to take on a life of their own as they stood there pretending to listen to her. A life more real than the one that the flickering flames on their torches appeared to give them. She spoke, and as she spoke, she needed to believe. She spoke, and as she spoke, she did believe.

During all the time Juliet spoke, she clutched Augustus hard against her. For it was for him, for her small and broken friends that she was here risking everything to end it all, and she cried because, at last, she could let herself go. And she didn't know if she was crying from rage, from frustration, from anger, or whether she was crying because of what could happen to her friends.

And during all the time Juliet spoke, the tree backed off, shrinking. It lost its last leaves, then the small branches started falling. Its roots twined around its base as if even the ground was rejecting it. As if even the Forest on which it stood wanted to see it leave.

Slowly at first, and then faster, the tree pulled its boughs

together, stretching them and twisting them together, melting them one into another. The bark started falling. At first in small flakes as the hundreds of insects who had been hiding and nesting in the cracks and ridges edged out and away, writhing, crawling, flying away, in a crackling, rustling, buzzing swarm. Then the bark started peeling and dropping away in strips that were as large as leaves; long shreds and crust-like scabs that are pulled away from a scar leaving sickly pale flesh underneath. White and sinewy, moist and glistening. And this pulp moved, flexing and pulsing like a fat grub making its first movements. Twigs, debris, stubs of branches; all continued to fall, and the earth around the foot of the tree boiled as it absorbed and digested all that fell.

With a violent ripping, tearing noise the pulp burst open. A wide tear, taller than Juliet, split the pale bare trunk from top to bottom. Thick oily fluids splattered the ground at the base of the tree, seeping and slopping out of the crack.

Juliet cried out in surprise. Just once. Just one cry before she regained control over herself, and gripped the petrol can more firmly. And advanced.

Already the slit in the trunk was widening, coiling back, fibrous strips peeling away from the edges, falling to dust, revealing a muffled form pushing from behind the opening.

A small foot forced its way through the fibrous membranes of the opening; white toes with perfectly formed white toenails glistened. The foot advanced followed by the ankle and the shin. The foot set itself down on the ground hesitantly. A hand appeared, pushed out, sliding through the pulp and fibres. A second hand appeared, fingers squirming. It was also followed by the arm. Now the head pushed through. At first it was just an unformed mass bearing only a vague resemblance to any face, but as the strands of hair dried and fell away, as the glistening liquid dripped away, as the fibres clinging to the edges and to the inside of the tree dropped aside, it revealed all the features of a face; eyes, ears, nose; eyebrows, lips, cheeks; all perfectly sculpted in white. The eyelids fluttered open, revealing blind white eyes.

The torso lurched forward and the form stepped out of the cloying insides of the tree as they shrank back. It stood alone, swaying slightly. It stood as white as the snow statues. The creature found its balance and attempted to make another step forwards. It was a girl, about the same height and build as Juliet, she noticed. She put down the can on the dirty ground and made a tentative step in the direction of the girl faltering before the tree. The girl opposite pulled away the last tendrils attaching itself to the husk, and made another shaky step forwards. As the connection with the tree broke, she seemed to flicker to life. She gasped, pulling air into her lungs with a plaintive creaking moan. Her eyes flickered as if the blind globes were trying to see. And colour started to infuse and tint her skin. Her ragged shoulder-length hair started to darken; her eyebrows also took form. She swayed as if dizzy and about to faint. Juliet made another move forward, as if to catch her, and then froze. As the other girl lifted her chin upwards towards Juliet in clumsy jerks, her glistening hair falling to the side, Juliet had a vision of herself in the mirror. In the girl now standing in front of her.

Freckles started to appear, spreading along the other girl's nose and then across her cheeks. The white eyes started to cloud over and take shape, separating the cloudy greys into whites and a pupil slowly forming as a darker stain with, in the centre, a black pinprick that gradually opened like a dark flower...

The tree, or whatever it was, or had been... was trying to become her. To become Juliet.

"I..." the girl that was not a girl said. The word floated hesitantly in the air between them. Bare arms, dripping with that dirty yellow liquid, extended towards her model.

Juliet pulled back sharply. She crouched down and with her right hand started to pat the ground alongside and behind her, feeling desperately for the petrol can while unable to take her eyes from the girl.

"I do not under..." it said, as her eyes took on the colour of slate, and as the skin warmed, and as the eyes looked towards Juliet, imploring. The skin dried quickly, tightening around the naked form. And then it tightened further becoming as knotted as muscles, but long and stringy and terribly dry. Then the skin started flaking and peeling. Falling.

"Why?" She took another step. And fell. She fell to her knees. They exploded to dust under the weight. The hand she advanced to catch herself hit the ground too and shattered; breaking to pieces before disappearing like spores from an overripe puffball. The elbow folded. Hair flew away, caught like cobwebs on the wind. Her thighs, hips and torso smashed down, spraying slivers and splinters in all directions before these too hit the ground and fell to dust. To dust that settled and mixed with the mud and the last traces of snow.

"Is-it-ov-er—?" came the voice before fading away. And once it disappeared it was hard to imagine it had ever been there.

The white head bounced to the side before cracking and splitting and falling open. The white, blind eyes gazed unseeing, as the white skull fell away around them.

Then there was but one small white ball continuing to fall. And rolling on, to come to rest in a small dip where two identical balls waited already. Just at Juliet's feet.

"It's over. Finished," she said.

She put down the can, scooped up the three small white spheres, turned and left.

In the distance the flaming torches started to splutter and die. They had exhausted their fuel. Or the gathering wind blew them out. One of the torches fell on its 'rabbit', smashing it, scattering the white crystals all around.

Juliet left the clearing and started off downhill through the forest. She hugged Augustus' limp body to her, and stared straight ahead. She moved unseeing, like a sleepwalker. She walked mechanically, automatically, like a toy that could break

at any moment.

Lucy left her hiding place and leapt over to the clearing, chasing after Juliet. Three of the Ninjas followed her.

The battle was over.

DRIVING HOME

She stepped out of the hedgerow and waited on the side of the road, staring out into the distance. Either she was absolutely certain the car was looking for her, and sure to stop, or else she didn't care. Whatever the case, it was impossible to tell the difference.

The car slowed, coming to a halt. He reached over and pushed the door on the passenger side open. She stood there framed by the shape of the door. In the background behind, at the end of the fields, was that curious round hill that had remained clouded in mist these last few days. The snow, the mist, the low clouds covered everything; the hill, the fields, the hedges, the paths. Everything had been reduced to shades of grey.

He noticed she was swaddled in white bands, torn and dirty, splashed with mud and streaks of soot. Her clothes underneath appeared to be just as filthy. The face under the bonnet, and the hair, dark and sticky from the damp, looked pretty grubby too. Lighter streaks drew furrows across her cheeks, and he supposed she had been crying.

She just stood there, staring at nothing. The snow came up to her knees. He felt cold just looking at her, never mind with the door wide open. She looked tired and drawn and shocked: he wondered what she had been up to...

In her left hand she gripped a plastic bag from a local supermarket. With her right hand she clasped some sort of furry toy to her. It was as soaking, dirty and ragged as the girl herself. And wrapped in bandages too.

She clambered up on to the seat, bringing a shiver of cold,

damp air, heavy with the smells of the woods, and with the lingering, cloying odour of petrol. She sat back, clutching the two objects to her lap. Then he noticed it was not a toy but a real live rabbit. A real rabbit, but a horribly thin one.

"You were—" he started, trying to sound friendly.

"Ask me no questions, and I won't have to tell you no lies. *Okay?*" The girl said in a hoarse voice.

"No questions..." he mumbled, a trifle taken aback by this opening gambit. He had been expecting something more... More what, exactly? A bit more gratitude, a bit of relief. Not this prickly mix of aggressivity and fatalism.

"You understand quickly," the girl murmured, still staring straight ahead at the windscreen, as it slowly clouded with condensation. "For a grown-up."

"By any chance, would the lies you don't want to have to tell me concern some rabbits?" Morrison said. "I ask the question purely from a personal motive. And nobody other than me need ever know—"

"No questions," repeated the girl.

At that moment the rabbit moaned and jerked against her arm. She reacted as if she only just realised it was there. She lifted it and examined it, holding it up to her face. "Augustus! You're back. Are you feeling better?"

Then, turning to the driver. "Are we waiting for someone else?"

"Oh sorry," he said, feeling that the situation had now totally slipped out of his control. He restarted the car and backed it along the path slowly and carefully.

During that time the girl unwrapped the rabbit, starting with the neck and head. Then she rocked it, hugging it tightly against her.

"Softly does it, Kid," came a dusky and broken voice. "I feel like someone's been jumping up and down on my head."

No questions, thought Morrison as he guessed where the voice was coming from. Yes, it's certainly better like that.

A TOFFEE

The rabbit on her knees was recovering. Now it could sit up by itself and look out of the side window. Juliet was still just sitting there, her vision lost in the middle distance.

"There!"

There was something out there. A nearly recognisable blur under the hedgerow.

"Stop the car!" She started getting fidgety.

The policeman glanced over at her.

"I had a heck of a time finding you. I don't intend losing you again."

"Well, I won't try and run away, but if you're having trouble looking after a little girl, I can understand..." She didn't look at him as she spoke.

"A little girl perhaps. But I'm no match for a little girl *and* a rabbit."

"Well, exactly. He's the one who wants to get out."

He slowed the car to a halt again.

Outside the thaw had started in earnest, leaving the sodden fields dotted with soggy piles of snow and ice patches with lacy edges. Even the road appeared squelchy and boggy.

"Anyway, I've got to take the chains off," he said. "And I'd prefer to find you still in the car when I've finished."

Juliet carried Augustus down to the snow-coated verge. Water splashed down from the black branches above. Lucy and the Ninjas slipped through the roots and trunks below the hedgerow to join the girl. They gasped, quite out of breath, creating little powder puffs of condensation in the shadowy air. Their fur was streaked dark and damp from following the car across the desolate countryside.

"Sorry," said the girl as she crouched with them. "I don't know what I was thinking. If I thought I was taking him with me, or what. I don't even know if I was thinking at all..." And then to the rabbit as she put him down. "Augustus, are you

feeling better? Can you walk? It's over, you know. Do you remember? The Three? It's over. They'll leave you alone now. They'll leave you all alone, now. You can go back home..."

The rabbit looked around, as if waking from a dream. And even if it was bitterly cold, with the wind and the snow melting; even if the greyness still gripped the slopes and the trees; even if winter was still to come, and even if the other rabbits trembled, he appeared to Juliet to be more calm now, as if he was looking out at a world both fresh and new. He lifted his head.

"We'll see each other again. You'll see," she spoke softly. Then turning to the others. "Make sure you all get back home safely. And take good care of him."

The rabbits turned and bobbed back under the hedgerow. Then Lucy reappeared. She slipped a rectangular object on the sagging snowdrift. It appeared to be a box about the size of a largish book, in a reddish-brown wood. It looked quite delicate, even if it was covered in traces of wet paw marks.

"Get rid of this for me, will you?" she pushed the box with her nose. "I managed to persuade Virgil to give it back." She disappeared with a last flick of the tail leaving a last phrase hanging in the air. "And take care of yourself, too."

Juliet climbed back up into the car seat, pulled the door shut and clipped the seat belt on. Holding her bag to her lap she waited for the policeman to finish removing the snow chains, and tidy them, more or less, into the boot. She inspected the box, noticing a thin crack where it must open. So she opened it.

Inside she found two damp scraps of paper, and on the largest one could just be made out '*...the Warren would wait on the Stranger who will come from beyond the World. That the Stranger will do all that is needed. And when all is said and done: what is said, is said...*' Lucy had given her the rabbits' prophecy. The cause, according to Lucy, of all their problems. It was up to Juliet to get rid of it.

After thinking about it, she took the three white spheres out of the bag on her lap. They felt heavy, like stones, but also somewhat soft and sort of jellyish to the touch. She shuddered and quickly slipped them into the box with the paper, then closed it and wrapped everything up in the plastic bag.

"We going then?" she called out impatiently to the policeman.

"Alright, alright," he said as he pulled down the hatchback. "But I think I preferred it when you didn't speak. You were more... *Polite*, I think the word is."

The car started. It skated a little at first on the packed ice, but rapidly the ice gave way to slush. Then that thinned, or had even melted away completely, and the tyres gripped the road normally again. The window next to Juliet had steamed up, so she wiped it with her sleeve and stared at the dripping landscape outside. At one point she even believed she saw a patch of blue sky peeking through between the grey clouds.

"I'd offer you a toffee," he said. "But I seem to have mislaid them. Curious, no?"

The toffees. Augustus had given them to her, but with everything else she had forgotten them completely. She tapped herself down until she found them in the left pocket of her anorak. She wrenched at the plastic bags still wrapping her, and pulled out the rather mauled packet to set it down on the little raised platform between the two chairs.

"It's not what you think," she said hastily.

"And just *what* do I think?" he replied, keeping his eye on the road.

"It wasn't *me* who took them," said the girl, defensively. "It was the rabbits."

"I know," he said, matter-of-factly. "They left paw marks all over the car."

He took a toffee and started to unwrap it.

"Just so that's clear. *I'm* not a thief."

"Right. So I don't need to ask you about an electric torch,

some cables, a lighter, some rope, and I don't know what else?"

"No," she said, as definitively as she could muster. All the while thinking the rabbits had perhaps exaggerated a little, after all.

"Because... you know, I just wondered how the rabbits managed to open the door."

Juliet suddenly found the dashboard in front of her fascinating.

He slipped the toffee into his mouth and chewed, still keeping his eyes on the road.

THE THAW

"Stop here," she called out. Then after a moment's hesitation, "Please."

"You know, I'm not a taxi," said her driver, nonetheless slowing down and pulling over.

"I know, I know," Juliet replied, irritated. "I just want to continue on foot. Please."

She shot him a defiant look from underneath the dirt and the layers of plastic bags.

"In that case, we both continue on foot."

He palmed the keys.

"As you like..."

Each of them studied the low afternoon sky beyond the windscreen.

"And what are we waiting for?" the policeman said after they'd been waiting for a while.

"I need to get out on your side. On this side there's a ditch and it's full of dirty water."

"Sounds reasonable," he said.

He got out and held the door as she slid across the vast territory of the front seats, all the while clutching her bag.

"You haven't got a radio?" she blurted out midway.

"Quite the Girl Scout, aren't we? But you're right. I haven't.

And before you ask, this isn't a police car. I borrowed it. Because of the snow."

They both looked around at the landscape, now draped in black and green and grey, dripping away under this low, grey watercolour sky.

"Yes," murmured the girl. "The snow. I was forgetting."

She jumped down to the road, made slushy and muddy by the passage of other cars. He waved a small box and the car gave out a beep and flashed its lights.

"OK. Let's go," he said.

MAKING PATHS

They walked up the lane accompanied by the sound of the drips falling from the trees and hedges around. Their shoes made strange sucking noises as they pulled them away from the cloying surface of the road. From time to time the fields around them burbled as they tried, but didn't quite succeed, to absorb the runoff from the sudden thaw.

She headed left, taking a path that started out from two dark, slippery planks spanning the ditch and the cold, black water. Then they followed the path as it made its way around a field. They zigzagged round the puddles, the remains of snow and ice, and vast mud lakes.

At the end of their path they climbed a stile and set off along the edges of another field. This one was rugged and bushy, and still dusted with white. At last, they turned into the lane to the farm and came across the source of the noise that had been building up for a while: the regular churning of a motor, and the occasional distant shout.

They could now see the large cement lorry with its revolving cylinder, mixing and dribbling the lumpy grey substance that a trio of men in boots, helmets and blue wind-sheeters was engaged in directing between the twin rows of planks staking out a path between the farmhouse and the road. Manoeuvring spades and wheelbarrows, and even a sort of long

pole for one of the men, they headed off the overflow and mulched the fresh concrete across the path. Two others, further up, smoothed the surface by scraping it with the edge of a plank.

"You see," she said to the policeman, raising her voice over the noise of the cement lorry. "If we'd have continued, we couldn't have got through anyway."

"And did you know about this?" he asked, intrigued.

"Um..." And after a pause, she said, "No."

"So it was, just like that?"

"Yep. Just like that. I prefer the other way, that's all."

The cement slopped greedily from the pipes and tubes behind the lorry, falling on the stones and crushed bricks that made up the foundations of the path, the filler her father had patiently laid out and flattened with the tractor... Months ago: well, it felt like that, but it must have been a little over a fortnight ago, just before the holidays.

The noise coming from the cement lorry changed as it emptied. The man keeping an eye on the sort of slurry tube that pivoted out of the back, pushed it over and chained it back into place. The lorry, now empty, drove off.

The workmen unbent themselves and looked around. They slipped over to the side to rest and drink hot tea from thermos flasks. They had completed about two thirds of the path.

Juliet stepped over the boards and onto the pathway, advancing on the uneven surface of the rubble. When she arrived near the middle she stopped and kicked at the ground with her heel, knocking the debris out of the way. She worked until she had made a small hole. She then wiggled her foot to widen it.

Once the hole seemed to satisfy her, she crouched down and set her plastic bag on the ground while she brushed away the last scraps. Then she rolled the bag tightly around the contents and placed it at the bottom of the hole. She raked the fragments back over the packet, then got up and stamped the broken surface down until she had levelled everything off to her satisfaction.

She walked back to the side, to wait. The policeman came to join her.

Stamping their feet from time to time, the two of them stood in the mud until the next cement lorry arrived and the men set back to work, slopping the concrete into place, and spreading it out.

Not until the concrete covered the area where she had buried the bag did she relax.

“And what was it?” said the policeman, profiting from the thaw.

“The cause of all that, of everything. It’s all over now.” She shifted. “Shall we go?”

She slipped her hand into his and they walked up towards the farmhouse alongside the path where the concrete set.

In the distance a bird started singing. Its song rang out like a badly oiled wheel squeaking as it turned. To the west the setting sun finally broke through the low grey clouds. Long, orange rays sketched themselves across the sky before the yellow disk was hidden by the hills and all that was left was the light playing on the bottom of the grey clouds, now edged with gold.

SHE

SHE

And during all that time, during all that long, long time, She slept. She slept deep down in the dark and brown earth. She slept down where the soil was rich and nourishing. She slept, buried in the earth, as She has slept since a time before time, for time immemorial. She has slept there before history came into being. She has slept there since those days before days. She slept before there was an Earth. She has been sleeping since a time when there was nothing but Her. Her sleep and Her thoughts.

Some thought that She could be at the origin of all this. The motorway and all the rest. Not directly, of course, never directly. Just that her thoughts may whisper in the dreams of

men and there prepare these follies. Not that She has any use for motorways, but it is just a means that the Three may be discovered. And then, so that they may, in their turn, prepare the World for Her awaking. For the end of a long, long sleep, clouded by ten thousand dreams.

Others believe that this is coincidence. Or perhaps that She slipped between the cracks of someone else's plans, the better to advance Her own. For, it is true that Humans are perfectly capable of assembling their paltry projects without outside interference and assistance.

But there again, for as long as I know that She is still there, and that She is still sleeping, I shall have my doubts.

TINY LIVES

She hiked along the track, ducked the branches and wove her way between the brambles.

At first glance the land was still sleeping and winter dull. That was before she noticed the primroses huddling below the hedgerows. Once you saw them, they stuck out like little yellow splashes against the brown earth and the mouldy leaves. And then it was easy to see other small shoots and buds, hidden in the shadows where, now you knew where to look, they shone out as splashes of bright green against the dim, dank growth. There they were, buried in the ferns rolled up like Catherine Wheels, just waiting for the moment to break out, to explode over the landscape in multicoloured spring tints.

When she arrived on the crest of the hill, she sat down on her backpack in a flat area of spiky grass, just on the edge of the woods. Just in front of her, at the other end of the meadow, three trees — tall, straight and protecting — stood apart from the others, their branches heavy with buds, readying themselves for the spring flowering to come.

She examined the grass where she was sitting and saw the ants scurrying along their paths. Then she gazed down at the valley where she saw ant cars, ant tractors and people the size

of ants, all moving around too. Over there, tucked away in the bend of the road, far over on the left was the farm. Her parents would be working there, and not expecting her back until lunchtime. Then she looked back over the route she had taken to get here until finally she gazed back across the field at the three trees.

Up above, the sun was drying out the morning mist. A blackbird was singing a song that sounded to Juliet for all the earth as if someone was engaged in hitting a small metal box while blowing down a recorder at irregular intervals. In the distance cows lowed and called to their neighbours, happy to be outside again after the long dark winter.

Juliet waited, listening to all these tiny lives all around her.

THREE TREES

She felt a presence more than she heard anyone arrive. She shifted her arm and Augustus slipped in to cuddle against her. Then he pulled back and settled down next to her, gazing out over the valley.

“Lucy says Hello,” he said. “She couldn’t come; she’s so busy. It’s spring and there are lots of kits and dotes to look after.”

“And Virgil?” she asked after a pause, still gazing out at the landscape in fear of the answer.

“I don’t think he ever got over being paralysed...” Augustus started, his voice husky. “He died during the winter. He suffered, but while everything was happening, he wouldn’t speak about it. Then, as soon as he was sure it was all over... *Pfff!* He just went.”

“I think I’d’ve liked to see him again. To say ‘Goodbye’, sort of. But, that was then...” Juliet blinked, holding back tears. “What happened to him?”

“He’s over there. Under that tree—” Augustus lifted his nose to point to the leftmost of the three trees. “He never really liked the Southern Slope, and after what happened...

And then we thought that from here... Well, that he could keep an eye on you, Kid — sort of — keep you out of more trouble.”

They looked at the tree, saying nothing.

“How was it for you?” Augustus wanted to know, sitting up on hind legs all the better to study the girl. “Your parents didn’t shut you in your bedroom for ten years then, like you were afraid of?”

She smiled as she remembered.

“No. No, they took it all very well. Of course, I couldn’t tell them everything — nobody would have believed me for a start — so I just said I went out for a walk early in the morning to think things through. And then, seeing the snow wasn’t going to stop, and not wanting to lose my way, I waited. When it started to get too much, I dug myself a hole — like I’d seen them do on the telly. And tried to make a fire. And then I slept. I waited until things calmed down... And then I started my way back to the Farm. That’s about it. They were so happy to see me back that they didn’t even tell me off. I thought for a moment that the policeman — the one who was at the diggings — I thought he was going to say something. In fact, he probably had a good reason to be cross with you because of what you — what we — did to his car. But in the end he didn’t let on. So Mum gave me a watch, and a compass. And a big book about how to survive in the wild — what plants can you eat, how to find your way, how to build a shelter... All that sort of thing.”

She took the compass out of her pocket, turning it in her hands. The weak sunshine glinted from the brass and the plastic. Augustus found it fascinating, even if he wasn’t quite sure what it was for.

“It was a bit hard in the beginning,” the girl continued. “Going to sleep. Dreams... Getting up. All a bit strange. And going back to school as if nothing had happened. But anyway, at school they’ve already decided I’m a weirdo, so a bit more or less...” She paused. “And then, my parents wanted to get me a horse, just a small one, but I had to say ‘Thanks, thanks a lot.

But, no'. It was stronger than me. I don't think I can trust one again right away—"

"Daddy!"

The call caught them unawares. Juliet turned to where the sound had come from, and saw a variety of small fluffy rabbits.

"Juliet, let me introduce you to my wife, Marjoram," Augustus said solemnly, pointing out a pretty russet-coloured doe chivvying along the younger rabbits. "And here we also have: Augustus, Bruce and Virgil, my kits. And here are my dotes: Anemone — her mother insists that it is some sort of family tradition, these flower names... — and Juliet."

As its name was mentioned, each rabbit had twitched a little, and looked up with big liquid, baby-bulging eyes. Juliet stared at the delightful little red-haired rabbit who shared her name. They didn't resemble each other in the least, but it was pleasing all the same.

"What a lovely family you have," she said, freeing the children to scamper off to play in the shadows at the edge of the wood. She turned back to their father.

"Augustus," she smiled. "I'm so happy for you."

She studied him. He was still very thin, and he looked old before his time. He had kept the marks around his ears and eyes, but not longer looked as cross-eyed as he had before. His fur was still a distinctive grey, and she could see it becoming more silvery as time passed. A colour that he would grow into quite nicely. She felt she wanted to hug him again, to hold him tight and to scratch the base of his ears where his fur was all soft, but she felt unsure if that was the way to behave with a respectable buck rabbit, and head of a family. It was so difficult growing up, things never got more simple, and no one thought to give you the rules.

"Oh! I was going to forget. I bought you a present."

She slipped the packet from her backpack and passed it to him. He tore away the paper to find a picture book, the size of a small paperback, all about Bruce Lee and the Martial Arts.

"You see," she teased. "I didn't forget."

"You don't think that... I'm a little old for this sort of thing now?"

"No, I don't," she protested. "And anyway — what's their names? Augustus, Bruce and Virgil? — You don't think they'd like it?"

"Or even Juliet," suggested Augustus.

Neither spoke.

"I promised that I wouldn't get back too late so I'd better get going back again," Juliet said, looking at her watch. "S'funny.. if you think about it, all adventures could be called '*There and Back Again*'. When you've got somewhere to go back to, I mean."

Augustus thought about it.

"No," he said. "Only those adventures where they get back safely to tell the story."

They both looked out at the countryside below, and the three trees.

The End

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

'Black as Snow' is a story that I wrote a couple of years back, principally for my youngest daughter, Kim, who was about 8 years old at the time. It took me about a year and a half. I don't mean that I was writing continually for that time — this is not blockbuster length, far from it — this is just the time that it took me from the first notes to, what I considered, the finished draft.

I had already decided that if, after a year of trying, I hadn't found a publisher, I would make the manuscript freely available on line. So that time has come. In actual fact, I didn't spend all the year trying: and work, and all the small ordinary but necessary things that make up everyday life, prevented me from spamming systematically each and every UK publisher and agent, but I did manage to get a submission sent off to about 10 different publishers and agents. And in most cases, I received polite refusals.

Scouting around web sites and various fora I often see rather bitter remarks from would-be authors about stupid publishers who are incapable of appreciating their work. While that maybe the case in some rare occasions, I appreciate that most publishers are working within specific economic constraints, and that they know their public: this is what makes them successful, and what helps them survive. They can take a risk if they really believe in a book, but they also need a steady stream of decent selling books to allow them to do so. A manuscript from an unknown author must be very strong to break through. And while I believe that *'Black as Snow'* merits its own little place in the world, it is definately not bestseller material.

So, in deciding to make this story available under a [Creative Commons licence](#), I am hoping that it will provide a little pleasure to one or two readers here and there, perhaps more. And perhaps — you never know — promoting it in this way will spark the interest of a publisher or agent who might be willing to take the chance and take it a little further. Particularly if readers appreciate the story, and the initiative. So if you do follow the story, if you do read it and it pleases you, do let me know. If you read it to your children, or print it out for them — I'd advise you to read it through first — and they like it [or not], I'd

also like to know.

But why do I have such little faith in my book? Well, to tell the truth, it is quite the opposite. I do think that it is quite a fun romp, but I also appreciate that it is not mainstream. I'm also not entirely happy with the first pieces about the rabbits, until they get into their stride later in the story.

It is — and I appreciate this — quirky. The first vision that provided the doorway into the story was that of a pony waiting under a tree during a thunderstorm. The pony was waiting to take the protagonist — and I knew even then that she was a little girl — into the forest in the middle of the night. And the pony was probably a dream. In fact, for a long time, the working title was '*The Storm Pony*'. Events slowly slipped into place around this central point. People and characters started claiming their places in the story. And gradually Juliet became a little girl quite separate from Kim. When the story starts, we meet her on the farm that her parents are about to buy. And where she is unhappy, missing town life, and friends, and her old school.

As an aside: I grew up on the south coast of England between Brighton and Worthing. We had the beach at one end of the street and the South Downs at the other. With the other kids from the street, holidays and weekends were spent like a litter of puppies tumbling over each other into each others houses, up to the hills, and down to the beach. But at the same time I was always reading. The woods around could just as easily be the *Hundred Acre Wood* as *Narnia*. In fact, had I stumbled on a flurry of rather oversized anthropomorphic rabbits, like Juliet does, I wouldn't have been in the least bit surprised either.

If you do decide to read '*Black as Snow*' you might be surprised by the mix of comedy and the more creepy parts. I did question this myself at times, but I do believe that each has its place. When the rabbits came suddenly bouncing and stumbling into the story, they arrived as themselves: ineffective, stupid, bumbling. And they were funny. At times I couldn't stop myself from laughing at the stupid things they got up to: it was so very much in their nature.

But at the heart of the story is something darker. And as we move into this, the rabbits are forced to act and in doing so, to change. Which they do in their way, still bumbling and stumbling, still comic at times, as this is their nature even so.

The comedy also serves to offset the horror. To undermine possibly traumatic situations with a joke. I'll not say any more, just hoping that I have whetted your appetite. Anyway, what have you got to lose? A couple of hours reading time...

Finally, I do have another motivation in making the story available in this manner: what I am missing most from publication is not financial gain, but reactions and feedback.

I like writing. I always have. I have another couple of manuscripts on the boil, and when I get some free time, I come back and try to continue them. But this is a solitary, isolated task.

Like for most other activities, you get better at writing by getting down and just doing it. Also by reading, and then — mentally — comparing notes and ideas with other books. But what is missing is that interaction with others: those who can point out glitches and errors, of course; those who can correct spelling [or grammar] mistakes that may have got past the correction phases. But more importantly, those who can pinpoint weak sections, bad ideas, or who could propose improvements. Even those who disagree with the story, with the characters. So I do hope some readers will be motivated to react.

I initially published this as daily episodes from January to May 2007. I then proposed to make it available in different formats as a download. This is that part of the project. I am initially making it available as an HTML file and a PDF. I may make other formats available.

If you want to prepare your own version, to add illustrations, links, or translate it — I'd love to see a version in French —, the plain text versions may be easier.

I may produce a audiobook version. Why not? Some people prefer that format. And I'd rather like to propose my reading.

As all of this will be under Creative Commons license — Attribution / Non-commercial / Share-Alike — you are free to take the texts, to mix, add, adapt or invent from there. Your work will of course be covered by the same Creative Commons licence. If you want me to host your work, then why not, I think I can do that, and it would also be fun to have everything about '*Black as Snow*' available in the same place.

I retain all commercial rights to my work. So if a publisher is interested one day, I can negotiate those rights. But I can't go back on my word. There will always be a copy of the work available as a free download, and you will always be able to play around with that.

Jonathan Munn, Montreuil, France, July 2008

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