

The chronicles of Wormsprong

by

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Original title:

‘De kronieken van Wormsprong’

Translated from Duth by the author

Published by
the delicate art of noise pollution
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The egg

Once upon a time there was an egg. It was not an ordinary egg, it was a dragon's egg. Not even an ordinary dragon's egg at that. This egg was laid by the great mother dragon. She, the first of all dragons was called Wormèn and she had been roaming the universe looking for a suitable spot to lay her egg. It wasn't her first egg. In fact she had laid countless eggs.

The eggs laid by Wormèn were larger than the sun and instead of yoke it contained a star. When such an egg broke open an entire solar system was born. The yoke became a star and the egg white broke into millions of pieces. These became the planets, the meteors and comets. As Wormèn had laid countless eggs, there were countless solar systems.

Still Wormèn was not happy. However many solar systems her eggs produced they were lifeless and Wormèn felt very lonely. None of these solar systems contained other dragons or other creatures. They were nothing but fire and rock. Wormèn was a very powerful dragon and she had a lot of magical power. Her greatest wish was that she could create life on one of the planets. Apparently she lacked that last bit of magical power because so far it had not happened.

She had paid extra attention to her latest egg. All her power had gone into it. She was totally exhausted but eagerly awaited what would come out of this egg. She took great care of it and even pampered it. She talked to it, told the egg stories and fairy tales. She was always around to protect the egg. In short: she had never put so much energy into an egg before.

Then the moment came the egg broke. The breaking of a dragon's egg like this is very different from the breaking of a chicken's egg. A

chick slowly and laboriously works its way out of the egg, breaking the shell with its beak. The shell of a dragon's egg breaks very violently. With a very big bang and a lot of fire. With the breaking of this egg there was a blast such as the universe had never experienced before. All the magical power Wormèn had put into the egg burst out with enormous force. The blast was so powerful that it worried Wormèn. After such violence how could there be any life in this new solar system? She waited till the dust had settled which took almost an eternity but finally she could see what had become of this new solar system.

At first she was disappointed. Just another solar system. Just planets that orbit a star. She took another good look. Did that planet look different from the others? The planet was not very big and it had beautiful blue and green colours. Wormèn really strained her powerful dragon's eyes. To her amazement and joy she saw five little dragons walking the planet. They were miniscule but she had done it none the less. She had created life! She cheered with joy.

"It worked, I have created little dragons!" she exclaimed. She was extremely happy.

She called the planet Wormsprong, which means as much as "Source of the dragons". She protected the planet with all her remaining power. Due to the care she took of the planet it prospered. One day when she took a little rest and decided to take a really close look at Wormsprong she saw that apart from the dragons many other creatures were roaming the planet. There were dense forests, in which lived the birds and foxes, bears, badgers and wolves. There were high mountains where eagles soared and mountain goats lived. Rolling oceans dotted with continents and islands were full of fish and other wondrous creatures made up the rest of the planet. Apart from the five dragon brothers there were also dragons in the mountains. They seemed the

most powerful creatures on Wormsprong. There were other creatures one doesn't see every day, like wisps and drinkles.

Wormèn was very happy and she kept taking care of her planet. Instead of one young she now had an entire planet full of animals. Things went very well for Wormsprong for a very long time. Wormèn got older and older and one day she felt she couldn't get much older. She was the primeval dragon and much older than the planets and the stars but even for her there was an end to life. She was content now that she could leave a planet full of living creatures behind. However she was also worried. Who would take care of the planet when she was gone? Who had the magical power to protect it? Wormèn made a decision. She spoke to the five dragon brothers. They were her first born and her heirs. Wormèn put the planet into their care. She told them to protect the planet after her death. To help them they would each receive a fifth of her magical powers. The dragon brothers solemnly promised they would rule over Wormsprong fairly and with care.

Now that Wormèn knew her planet was protected she could die peacefully. After her death the shape of her body was forever visible from Wormsprong. On a clear night you could see her as a long strand of stars that wended its way through the night sky.

The stolen magic

Beyond the edge of the Great Forest lay a vast swamp. It was a damp place and always foggy. All animals in the forest feared the swamp. If you wandered into it you almost certainly got lost and drowned in one of the many bogs. That is why everyone gave the swamp a wide berth.

No matter how inhospitable the swamp was, creatures did live there. Although no one knew whether these creatures could be called living creatures. These were the wisps.

They had come into being the moment that Wormèn had given her magic powers to five dragon brothers just before she died. A little of the magic had leaked away to the swamp and had bewitched patches of fog. These patches of fog had become the wisps. They floated in the swamp like white-grey ghosts without a fixed shape. For many an age they had haunted the swamp. Slowly the wisps started to show signs of life. After all, Wormèn's magic was life giving. But because the wisps lived in such a grey and gloomy place they became miserable creatures, doomed to roam the swamp without ever laughing or having fun. They never had any contact with other creatures because everyone kept away from the swamp. Only the five dragons visited the wisps on occasion. They had promised to take care of all of Wormsprong and that included the wisps.

One day one of the wisps said, "I think it is unfair we live such a miserable life," the voice of the wisp trembled a little bit, like the voices of wisps tend to do. "We have to do something!"

The other wisps mumbled agreement.

"But what can we do?" another wisp asked.

This was a difficult question. The wisps could not leave the swamp as they needed the damp and the cold to exist. They could not build or make anything with their watery, foggy bodies. All they could do was wander the swamp and talk to each other.

There was some mumbling and whispering. It sounded like a ghostly wind that blew over the swamp.

Suddenly one of the wisps called Moerk, raised his voice, "I know!" Moerk cried. "We must steal the magic from the dragons. Then we can give ourselves real bodies and move out of the swamp."

This seemed a good plan but how does one steal magic from a dragon? Does one catch a dragon first? How could a wisp catch a dragon? Again there was much mumbling and whispering and again it was Moerk who came up with an idea. This time however the wisp whispered his idea because he was afraid that someone could be listening at the edge of the swamp. If someone had been standing there listening, they would not have understood much of what the wisps were whispering about, "... dragon ... save ... magic ... drown ..."

All wisps were exuberant and for the first time in their existence they felt happy. Finally, they were to be released from their doom. Moerk was chosen as their leader and the one to execute the plan.

Wurag was the most powerful of the five dragon brothers that had received the magic powers from Wormèn. His reign stretched all the way from the foot of the mountains to far beyond the Great Forest. Even as far as the sea. He was always travelling the lands under his reign and all the creatures knew him. They had much respect for him but no one was afraid of him. Strict but fair, he was a well loved ruler.

It had been a long time since he had visited the Great Forest and he enjoyed the twittering of the birds, the smell of the trees en the moss.

He never travelled alone because there was always an animal that had to talk to him about something and would walk with him a while.

Now he walked together with Fenten, the leader of the wolves. They were engrossed in their discussion of all that had happened in the Great Forest of late. Fenten mentioned the wisps and told Wurag that they seemed unusually active. There was lots of whispering and mumbling in the swamp. His wolves had heard this with their sharp hearing. Wurag had always felt a little sorry for the wisps. He imagined living in the swamp could not be any fun at all. He decided to visit them again and find out what all the whispering and mumbling was about. Fenten took his leave from Wurag because, just like all other animals, he never went near the swamp if he could help it.

It was afternoon when Wurag arrived at the swamp. He waited at the edge until he saw a wisp.

He called out, "Wisp! This is Wurag, lord over the mountains and the forest. King of all creatures between the sea and the desert. Tell me how you have been since I last visited you."

The wisp seemed to start at the dragon's call but he recovered quickly and approached the dragon.

"Hello, Wurag," he said. "It has been a long time since we have seen you and long have we been waiting for you!"

"My empire is big and everyone requires my attention," Wurag answered. "Why have you been waiting for me?"

"A grave disease has struck us, Wurag. An illness we fail to cure. We have placed our last hope in your magic powers," the wisp sounded weak and pathetic.

"What kind of disease is that?" Wurag asked with shock in his voice.

“The disease has no name but almost all wisps suffer from it,” the wisp said. “Please help us, Wurag, or we are doomed to disappear from this planet. We who came into being by the same magic of the great mother dragon that made you. We have as much right to life as any others, isn’t that so?” Wurag nodded. “Please, come with me and see for yourself how badly we are stricken.”

Wurag was moved. He desperately wanted to help the wisps and decided to go with this wisp to see for himself what mysterious illness plagued the wisps. Maybe his magic power could help heal the wisps.

“Lead the way, wisp and I will see what I can do,” he said.

They went on their way. The wisp knew all the paths through the swamp. The dragon followed cautiously and he looked about him constantly. He would hate to get lost. He would love to fly but thought it impolite towards the wisp. They walked for an hour, deeper and deeper into the swamp. It became more and more foggy and much colder. The dragon shivered. He would hate having to live here.

The swamp became more boggy. Suddenly he felt his legs sink away into the mud. Slowly he was sucked down. With uncanny speed he sank to his belly into the mud. He called for help but the wisp was gone. He called out louder but no one came. It was silent as the grave in the swamp. Slowly he sank deeper into the mud. He noticed that if he moved less he sank more slowly. He kept as still as he could. The wisp had trapped him. Even his mighty wings could not lift him out of the sucking mud.

“”Why have they done this to me?” Wurag thought. “I have never hurt the wisps. I have always been fair to them.”

Did he hear whispering and mumbling? As if out of thin air wisps materialised. They hovered in a great circle around the big, mighty but now powerless dragon.

One wisp drifted towards Wurag and started to speak, “Mighty Wurag,” he said. “My name is Moerk and I speak for all wisps. We have trapped you in a trap no creature has ever escaped from. Only we know how to get you out again but we expect something in return.”

“Why have you trapped me?” Wurag asked. “I have never hurt you, have I?”

“Everyone ignores us,” Moerk answered. “We lead a lonely and miserable existence. It is true you have never hurt us but you have never helped us improve our circumstances either.”

Wurag felt he sank deeper. He knew there was no way of escape. His magic powers he could only use to create or improve life on Wormsprong.

“Help me, oh wisps,” he pleaded yet still trying to retain some dignity. “I will help you create a better life for yourselves,” he said, with as much dignity as he could manage.

“We won’t let you off the hook that easily, Wurag,” Moerk said, threat creeping into his voice. “We demand all your magical powers and those of your brothers’ in exchange for your life!”

Wurag slowly started to panic. His belly had sunk into the mud and he felt the mud sucking him down more quickly now. He could see no other solution than to give in to the demands of the wisps. If he died, his part of the magic would die with him. There would not be enough left to maintain life on Wormsprong. He tried to explain this to the wisps but they would not listen. And the more Wurag spoke, the more deeply he sank.

He stopped talking and breathed as deeply as the mud would allow and with a last, desperate effort he emitted an enormously loud, long bellow. The wisps recoiled.

The bellow echoed through the trees in the forest and against the mountains. The sound travelled over meadows and over the great lake. Even across the sea the sound was heard. And so the four brothers heard the anxious call from their brother. They knew what it meant: Wurag was in the greatest peril. They also knew that a mighty dragon like Wurag, the biggest and strongest among them, was not easily threatened. They spread their wings and flew like the wind towards the source of the cry of despair.

There they saw what had happened. The desperate bellow had caused Wurag to sink even deeper. Only his head was still visible. In a little while he would drown. The wisps formed a tight circle around Wurag, who haltingly told his brothers what had happened. Mud and water was starting to enter his mouth as he spoke. The four dragon brothers saw there was no time to lose. They flew in a low circle around their brother and hummed a penetrating melody. The sound grew louder. The foggy air, mud and the water in the swamp started to vibrate. Even the wisps, with their vapourous bodies started to vibrate with the tones of the humming. They felt a strange tingling inside them. Although it only took a couple of minutes it seemed to take hours.

Suddenly all was quiet. The dragons were exhausted and Wurag had sunk even deeper. He just managed to keep the tip of his snout above the mud. The wisps seemed to dissolve in the mud. Within minutes they had all vanished. The dragon brothers saw how their brother slowly started to rise. Like an old shipwreck that was raised to the sur-

face. Mud and water ran from his back. Even out of his ears came little rivulets of water. Around him the mud bubbled and puffs of fog escaped from the bubbles. Every puff turned out to be a wisp.

Finally Wurag was fully back on the surface. With a final effort he spread his wings and flew to the edge of the swamp. There he collapsed, exhausted.

Moerk approached from the fog that hung over the swamp.

“Wurag, we have saved your life in exchange for your magical powers. We will retreat into the swamp and create a better life for ourselves. Go and never return here.”

Wurag rose. He turned around to face the wisp, “This exchange will cost you dearly,” his voice sounded exhausted but the warning was clear. “It is very dangerous to experiment with magic. Even after all the ages we have only learned a little about its possibilities. Even if you ever learn how to master it, it will take you many, many centuries.”

But Moerk said haughtily, “We are now the most powerful creatures on Wormsprong. Leave us and let us make our plans. You shall hear much of the wisps!”

Wurag, supported by his brothers, stumbled into the forest. They moved towards the mountains and there they stayed. Ashamed of the loss of their magic powers they avoided contact with other creatures. They lived in large caves in the mountains and only visited other dragons. When they travelled they flew higher than the eye can see and at night. All dragons carried the shame for the loss of the brothers’ magic and they hid in deep forests and caves. It would be many ages before the dragons were seen again.

Meanwhile, the wisps retreated into their swamp to learn how to use their newly acquired powers. Wormsprong was cast into a long winter.

It was to take four-hundred years before anyone ever heard from the wisps again and summer returned.

The dancing drinkle

In the river that flows from the mountains, through the Great Forest to the sea, there lived a strange creature. These creatures were called drinkles. They were the size of a big pike but they were not fish. They had four short, sturdy, legs. Although their legs were short, the drinkles could move very quickly. They often searched for food on the river's banks. They returned to the water at night because that was where they lived in nests built among the reeds and weeds.

It was a lovely summer's day and a group of drinkles was looking for food on the riverbank. Pier, one of the young drinkles was more interested in playing and getting into mischief than in finding food. This caused him to be left behind. He started to wander away from the river and the group chasing butterflies and exploring the bank looking for hidden treasure. At first Pier was unaware that he had wandered away quite far this time but after a while he noticed he did not hear his fellow drinkles anymore. He called out to his friends and to his mother but no answer came. He suddenly felt afraid. Where had everyone gone? He called again but no one answered.

"When I walk back to the river, I only have to follow that to find the group again," Pier thought.

He started to walk back but as happens with anyone who gets lost he walked in circles. When he saw a bush he had seen twice before he knew he was really lost. Pier bent his head and began to cry.

Then he heard a high pitched laughter quite near him. He looked up and there, right in front of him stood a little bird. The little bird choked with laughter. When the little bird saw that Pier was looking at her she flew up and sat in the bush. She almost lost her balance from laughing.

“What kind of animal are you?” the little bird asked still giggling. “You look very strange, you know!”

Pier did not understand this. All drinkles looked like this, surely? What was strange about that?

“I am a drinkle and I am lost,” Pier said with tears in his eyes.

“A drinkle?” the little bird said. “I have never heard of them. What a funny word ‘drinkle’. Derinkle, drnkle, derinekle.”

“And what are you?” Pier asked a little stung.

“I am a gigglebeak,” the little bird said proudly. “I am Glim the gigglebeak.”

“My name is Pier and I am still lost,” Pier said.

“Where do you want to go then?” asked Glim.

“To the river and the other drinkles,” Pier answered, starting to cry again.

“Come, come, don’t start all that again little drinkle,” Glim said cheerfully. “Or are you a big drinkle? I have no idea about the size of drinkles.”

Glim flew down from her branch in the bush and took a good look at Pier. With her little beak she pecked at Pier’s big toe.

“Ouch! That hurts!” Pier exclaimed and he took a few steps back. “Your beak is very sharp, you know that? and for your information I am quite a big drinkle!”

“Hmpf,” harrumphed Glim while she flew back to her branch in the bush. “The sensitive type. Listen, little big drinkle I can help you find the river but you have to do a dance for me first.”

“A what? A dance? What’s that?” Pier asked in surprise. He had never heard the word before.

“Tchippie! Have you never danced before?” Glim shook her pert little head. “Then I am going to teach you!”

She came down from the bush again and stood in front of the puzzled drinkle. The gigglebeak started to whistle a tune. She beat her wings to the time of the tune while she danced in a circle around Pier. It looked so cheerful that Pier forgot all about being lost. He started stamping his feet on the ground.

“Stick to the beat, young drinkle!” Glim shouted over the stamping.

“What is a beat?” Pier shouted back.

“A beat is a stamp. The amount of times you can stamp to a ditty is a bar,” Glim shouted while she turned around and around, flapping her wings.

“What is a ditty?” Pier asked. He was getting a little dizzy from the little bird dancing around and around.

“But little drinkle, how little you know. You have lots to learn!” said Glim and she started to whistle a new tune. “A ditty is a part of a tune. You can only stamp a couple of times every ditty then the bar is done,” Glim sang.

Pier nodded as if he understood.

Glim stopped dancing and stood in front of Pier.

“Pfew, that was exhausting. I have to take a breather for a moment,” the little bird puffed. “When I have recovered I am going to teach you to dance, little drinkle.”

Pier was not at all certain he could dance on his stumpy, little legs. He had no wings to move to the beat and he did not know how to whistle. He said all this to Glim who laughed.

“Haha, you only have to dance, leave the music to me,” she said.

She turned around so she stood with her back to Pier.

“Now do as I do,” she said and she took two steps to the left. Then she did two paces to the front and two paces to the right. At every pace she beat her wings. Then she whirled around twice and took two paces back... BOOM! She had crashed into Pier who had lost his step half-

way through a turn so when he took two paces back he bumped rather heavily into Glim.

“Ouch!” the little bird cried and she rubbed her head.

“I am so sorry!” Pier exclaimed. “I did not mean to do that, honestly but I had lost the, ehm, beat.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Glim said with a grimace while she still rubbed her head. “It will be all right. Let’s start again.”

And again they went two steps to the left, two to the front, two to the right, two turns and two paces back. This time Glim glanced back before she did the final two steps but all went well. After three times she began to clap faster and the dance became quicker. She also did a whirl after every two steps and Glim tried very hard to follow her. And even faster they went. All went well until Pier suddenly felt very dizzy and fell over. Glim puffed and sat next to him.

“Tchippie, that went fast! You are a good student, you know!”

“It’s great fun,” Pier said excitedly. “But it does make me dizzy.” When he closed his eyes it was as if his head kept turning.

“We’ll do it again,” said Glim. “But this time we’ll do every turn the other way around from the previous one, OK?”

“OK,” Pier said happily. He was beginning to enjoy dancing.

And again they danced and again it went faster and faster. They became less dizzy. After having danced a long time they were both exhausted. Gasping for breath they sat down by the bush.

“I better bring you back to the river now, little drinkle,” Glim said breathing heavily. “Your mother will be wondering where you have gone all this time.”

Pier had forgotten all about getting lost and losing track of the other drinkles. Suddenly he wanted to get back to them very much and tell them about the gigglebeak and dancing. So they went on their way.

After a little while they came to the river. They were not nearly as far from it as Pier had thought. Glim said good-bye to Pier and Pier promised he would practice his dancing. If they ever met again, Glim would teach him a new dance.

“Good-bye, little drinkle,” the gigglebeak called out when she flew up. “Keep dancing, it will make you happy!”

“Good-bye Glim, I hope we’ll meet again!” Pier called after her.

Pretty soon she was only a small dot that seemed to fly towards the sun.

“Thank you very much for teaching me to dance,” Pier whispered while he watched his new friend disappear.

Pier started walking along the river bank and soon heard voices of other drinkles. He ran towards them as fast as his short legs would carry him. They were looking for him because they wanted to return home.

“Where have you been?” his mother asked in a worried tone.

“I have met a gigglebeak and she taught me to dance with beats and ditties and that’s a lot of fun, mum,” he said. “We must all learn to dance, because Glim says it makes you feel happy.” Pier stumbled over his words, he was that excited.

“You have met a what? And learned what? With deats and bitties? And who’s Glim?” Pier’s mother did not understand a word he was saying.

“Beats and ditties, mum!” Pier exclaimed and he had to tell the whole story again. Everyone laughed at the little drinkle. The older drinkles shook their heads. Dancing! Imagine that. That sounded like something a drinkle did not go in for. The group went home and Pier had to promise he would never talk to strangers again. The sooner he forgot all that business about some strange bird with beats and ditties, the better.

However, it seemed Pier had for once not listened to his mother. On the warm summer evenings that followed Pier's adventure, you could hear the stamping of little feet accompanied by very out of tune singing.

The jumblemuch

It was a mess in the little burrow. Very cozy and pleasant but a mess just the same. There were bits and pieces of this and that everywhere. In one corner there was a pile of leaves and feathers which might be a little nest but could be a pile of garden refuse as well. In the middle of the room there lay a piece of bark on half a pine cone. Could this be a table? There was only one creature that could make heads or tails of this clutter: the jumblemuch. It was a small animal that lived mostly underground. Only at night it would come out. It would go scavenging for food and odds and ends. The jumblemuch collected all sorts of stuff: feathers, pine cones, acorns, leaves, little sticks, little rocks. The jumblemuch took it all home. When the little burrow became too full of rubbish, the jumblemuch just moved to a new one and started over again.

One day, Gooth, a young jumblemuch that lived on the edge of the Great Forest, was out gathering junk. He roamed the Great Forest and went farther and farther from his burrow. It was already morning and still he was out collecting, which was rather unusual for a jumblemuch. Suddenly Gooth saw a large rock. It was a beautiful rock. It looked like the rock had dropped from a very great height. There were broken off branches around it and through a hole in the foliage the sun shone on the forest floor and on the stone. It had split down the middle and inside it Gooth saw a beautiful glitter. All the colours seemed to be in there: soft pink, red and blue but also black and white. Such a beautiful rock Gooth had never seen. The little animal wanted to have it for his collection. He thought that even the dragons would not have seen such a beautiful stone. But how was Gooth going to transport such a huge rock to his burrow? The burrow was a long way away and even if

he got it home, would it fit through the entrance? Gooth sat down beside the stone and thought deeply.

The little creature sat like that for hours. Sometimes he got up and walked around the stone and mumbled. Brooding on a plan to get the stone home. Even when the daylight began to fade and the twilight enveloped the forest, the jumblemuch still racked his brains. Then, from sheer exhaustion he fell into a deep sleep. He woke up suddenly. Like lightening, an idea had struck him: rolling!

The stone was much too heavy to drag and because there were two halves, it could not roll by itself. But what if he put round logs under it, maybe then it could be moved.

Gooth went to work. He collected all sorts of logs and sticks. These Gooth lay behind the stone. Then he stuck a large stick into the cleft between the two halves, like a lever. Gooth stood on one half and pulled on the lever with all his might. At first the stone would not budge. Gooth pulled so hard that the stick creaked. Then, almost imperceptibly, one half of the stone started to move. Increasingly it started to rock as Gooth kept pulling and pushing the stick. Finally, with a muffled crunching sound, the half stone tumbled over and fell on the logs Gooth had put there. These logs only barely took the weight of the stone but they held. Gooth wiped the sweat from his forehead, what an effort that had been!

After a short break, Gooth was at it again. With the big stick as lever he tried to move the stone over the log rollers. At first the stone only rocked back and forth a little but after a mighty push from the little creature the whole contraption started moving forward. Slowly at first but after a while and with great effort, Gooth had guided the stone onto firmer ground and the speed picked up. Gooth began the long and

strenuous way home with the largest loot a jumblemuch had ever come across.

After having worked in this fashion for some time Gooth heard a voice ask, "What are you doing?"

Gooth, stopping his work, turned around. He had been toiling so hard that he had not noticed that someone had been watching his efforts for some time. A large owl sat on a branch in a tree. His saucer-like eyes seemed to emit light.

"I am trying to get this stone to my house," Gooth said.

"That looks like quite hard work," the owl said in a tone that suggested he thought Gooth would never manage.

"It certainly is," Gooth answered. "I am working up quite a sweat."

"Good thinking, though, those rollers," the owl remarked approvingly. "I could have thought of that."

"Thank you," Gooth said, who knew very well that owls considered themselves very smart.

"With a little help, things would move quicker though, wouldn't you think?"

"Yes," said Gooth. "But at night not many animals are awake."

"You might be surprised, young one," the owl said, winking one of his saucer eyes. "Wait here!"

The owl flew off with a few mighty but silent beats of his wings and disappeared into the night.

"I was planning on a little rest, anyway," Gooth said to himself and he sat down, leaning against the stone.

After half an hour the owl came back. Even before he arrived at the stone he called out, "Help is on the way! Just a little patience, yet."

Gooth started up, he had nodded off and had not heard the owl coming. Now he saw the large, luminary eyes reflecting the moonlight. The owl landed next to Gooth and looked back in the direction he had come from.

“There they come,” the owl said. “Can you hear them?”

Gooth heard nothing yet. The little jumblemuch strained his ears. Then Gooth heard it as well. A lot of noise in the trees. And the noise grew louder quickly.

“What’s making all that noise in the trees?” Gooth asked the owl.

“You’ll find out,” the owl answered. “Wait and see.”

“Are they big birds?” Gooth asked too curious to wait.

“No, they are not birds,” the owl said a little disdainfully. “They make far too much noise for birds.”

Gooth could not identify the animals by the sounds he heard and decided to wait. The noise grew louder. Gooth could now hear a patter as if many little feet ran in the trees.

There the first creature came into view. Gooth saw a thick, red bushy tail a bright little head and two sharp pinhead-like eyes. They were squirrels. Dozens of them. They came running over branches and dropping through the foliage. Sometimes jumping several yards from tree to tree. Their sharp nails scratching and clawing at the tree bark.

The squirrels gathered around Gooth. They looked admiringly at the beautiful colours they saw reflected in the stone by the light of the moon. The owl nodded his head appreciatively but Gooth had his doubts. How could small creatures like that help him? They were even smaller than Gooth and he had trouble moving the stone.

None the less they went to work. The owl had obviously instructed them because they knew exactly what was to be done. They got a thick stick and put it under the stone as lever. At first they moved in the

wrong direction but after Gooth had excitedly pointed them in the right direction it went faster than Gooth had though possible.

Of course a large group with such a beautiful stone did not go unnoticed. More animals joined the group. A fox joined and a couple of rabbits. A crow called his whole family to join the force and even a sullen but very strong badger came to help. After a while all sorts of forest animals, whether they were nocturnal or awoken from their sleep by the noise, had joined the workforce. It became an enormous parade. Gooth walked in front to point the way. Behind him came the stone, pushed and levered by a team of animals. Some ran from the back of the stone to the front to replace the rollers over which the stone had rolled. Behind the stone walked the ones who had just done the pushing and levering and who were catching their breaths. Everyone took a turn at moving the stone along. In this way the stone travelled all the way to Gooth's burrow.

Having arrived there Gooth saw to his disappointment that the stone would never fit through the entrance to his little burrow. The other animals, so caught up in the job of getting the stone to Gooth's burrow suggested all kinds of ways to get it through. One thought the stone could be smashed up and brought inside in pieces. There they could re-assemble it. The badger suggested the entrance to the burrow should be dug out and made bigger but Gooth was afraid this would make his burrow collapse.

Gooth had an idea. He clambered onto the big stone and cried, "Listen, I have an idea!"

All animals fell quiet and listened to him.

"What if we just leave the stone where it is now and have a big party to celebrate we moved it all this way?" he shouted. "And then we come back every year on this day and celebrate again."

“That is a good idea,” the owl said and he winked with both eyes in succession.

“We’ll get the beechnuts,” the squirrels called out and they vanished into the trees to raid their stockpiles.

That night there was a big party. And every year since that night the party was repeated. When the moon was full during such a party it was an extra fine affair as the stone reflected the moonlight even more beautifully than normal on such nights. Then the stone would glitter so exuberantly that the animals kept nudging each other and saying, “Doesn’t the stone look beautiful tonight?”

Barg

If, coming from the Great Forest, you would manage to cross the swamp without getting lost you would come to the moors. These moors stretched from the foot of the mountains to the sea. On a solitary hill, not far from the swamp there stood a big, old tree. No one knew how old the tree was exactly but it was said that the tree had been secretly planted by the dragons after they had lost their magic powers to the wisps. Why they had planted the tree was a mystery. The tree must have been over four hundred years old and it stood alone on the hill as if guarding the moors. He looked like a mighty tree. A thick, gnarled trunk with strong branches pointing every which way. Some said his roots enveloped Wormsprong and that without this tree the planet would fall apart. The tree was called Barg and everyone treated him with much respect. Whenever you passed Barg you would stop and talk to the tree for a short while. If you were in a hurry you still took the time to greet him politely.

In the time when this story takes place everyone was even more scared of the swamp than they had previously been. Since the dragons had lost their magic, things did not go well for Wormsprong. There was no one to keep the peace and administer justice. The dragons were the wisest creatures on Wormsprong but they had gone into hiding out of shame of losing their magic powers and they were only very rarely seen anymore. Their travelling widely and the spread of their wisdom had ended. Now that the magic was used by the wisps the swamp was an even more dangerous place than it had been.

As a matter of fact the wisps were far from happy with the magic they had stolen from the dragons. Even after four hundred years, Moerk and the other wisps had not learned how to use the magic. They

were still only foggy, watery creatures that had to live in their cold and dreary swamp. To make it even worse the tinkering with magic had made them ill. They could not contain the sheer amount of raw magic power and it never did what they hoped it would do.

Already a couple of wisps had caused an enormous explosion when they had tried as a sort of joke to give themselves the bodies of fire breathing dragons. The joke went horribly wrong. The fire they had created was much too powerful and with a tremendous bang it had exploded from their bodies. Luckily wisps can not really die because they are made from water vapour but it took many years before most of the drops were back to their original owner. Some of the wisps still had not got all their drops back.

There were many malformed wisps. Some had half the body of the animal they wanted to look like but made from fog. Others had tried to become mud because a body of mud had seemed like a good idea in a swamp. These wisps could hardly move anymore because the swamp constantly tried to suck them in to become part of the swamp. Others had become mad after trying to make themselves more intelligent. This had backfired and now they wandered around mumbling things no one could understand.

Moerk was tired of all this. He had realised some time ago that it had been a bad idea to trap the dragons into giving them their magic. Finally he called a meeting of all the wisps.

“Listen to me, wisps!” Moerk said as loudly as he could because some of the wisps had become a little deaf in the dragon-experiment explosion a hundred years ago.

“Four hundred years have we been trying to learn how to use the magic of the dragons and we’re still nowhere!”

“Who’s got nose hair?” one of the half deaf wisps asked.

“We’re still nowhere!” Moerk repeated, almost shouting. He continued loudly, “The magic is making us ill and our foggy bodies can not harness it. The dragons are powerful and strong and they have scale armoured bodies but even they had to divide the magic in fifths to be able to contain it.”

There was much mumbled agreement among the wisps although one asked why they had to drain the swamp. “Contain it! Not drain it,” a wisp whispered curtly, annoyed at the deafness of his neighbour.

“We have to get rid of the magic and have to accept our fate as ordinary wisps and live in the swamp as we were,” Moerk continued.

Now the wisps started talking all at once.

“But we went through all this trouble to obtain the magic powers,” one said.

“I am almost finished with an experiment to contain the magic in a water bubble,” said another.

And another said something very complicated that no one understood.

“Listen to yourselves,” Moerk said. “You have all become addicted to magic but it only causes you harm. The trouble we went through we went through in vain, we’ll just have to accept that. The water bubble you are working on will most probably explode, causing you to have to search for your droplets for centuries,” he said to the one who had the water bubble idea. “And some of you say incomprehensible things. No one will ever understand what you are saying,” he glanced at the wisp that had spoken incomprehensibly.

The wisps fell silent. Moerk looked at them and all wisps looked at the ground.

“What do you suggest we do?” a wisp asked softly.

“I’m not sure yet but I’ll think of something. Next week we’ll meet again and then I will tell you what I have thought of. In the mean time

I propose we stop all experiments before more serious accidents happen.”

With a lot of mumbling the wisps dispersed. Some of them literally as parts of them tried to join other wisps. Some drops were obviously still not back with their original owners.

In the week that followed it was very quiet in the swamp. All animals that lived close to the swamp noticed an air of silent anticipation that hung over the swamp.

Some of the creatures that wandered the moors at night often saw a solitary patch of fog leave the swamp. Once someone saw a patch of fog travel towards the mountains and another time a patch of fog was seen travelling towards the hill where Barg stood. Rising up the hill the fog then would hang among the branches of the big old tree for a while and then drift back to the swamp. Something was going on in the swamp, that much was clear to everyone.

“I have a plan,” Moerk said to the gathered wisps when the week had passed.

The wisps mumbled excitedly.

“I have been to Wurag, the dragon,” Moerk continued.

Again much mumbling, even more excitedly now. A wisp that so much as leaves the swamp is a very brave wisp indeed! Going all the way to the mountains to talk to a dragon was considered almost inconceivably courageous.

“I have spoken to Wurag,” Moerk said.

“Spoken to him!” the wisps cried in unison.

“Yes,” Moerk said. “Wurag is very old and wise. I thought that if anyone could help us find a solution it would be Wurag.”

The wisps now listened quietly. Awed.

“Wurag told me he would listen to me even though we have caused much trouble and fear.”

A shiver seemed to ripple through all wisps.

“So I told him I planned to give the magic back to the dragons.”

The wisps broke the silence and confused mumbling started again.

“However!” cried Moerk over the mumbling, silencing it immediately. “Wurag told me the dragons do not want the magic back. They have lost it once and have failed as guardians of the power of Wormèn. They do not want to run the risk of losing it again.”

The wisps fell silent.

“Wurag insisted the magic should end up with someone that could insure that it would be to the benefit of the whole of Wormsprong. Also it should be given to someone who would not lose it again. Wurag told me Barg, the tree on the hill on the moors is a very special tree. He has roots that envelop the entire planet. If we give the magic to Barg it will flow all around Wormsprong. Wurag told me that Barg is a very strong and wise old tree. He can easily handle all that magic when it is contained within his branches and roots.”

Suddenly a cheering erupted in the swamp. All wisps started talking at once. Everyone thought it a brilliant plan. Finally they would be released from the curse of Wormen’s magic. They would be able to live a normal life again. Normal for a wisp that is.

Moerk was celebrated as the most brave and wisest of all the wisps. This embarrassed Moerk a little. After all, he had been the one that had suggested to steal the magic from the dragons in the first place. And that had not been a very wise plan. Fortunately no one thought of that.

Moerk called for silence, “I have spoken to Barg many times this week. He is willing to accept the magic of Wormèn. This night we will all go to him and bring him the magic contained in us. Do not be

afraid, Barg is a very nice tree and leaving the swamp isn't half as scary as we had always thought."

That night a strange spectacle was to be seen on the moors. A long procession of patches of fog floated to the tree on the hill. The patches drifted up to the foliage in the top of the tree. There they seemed to glow and spark for a brief moment. Then the patch of fog drifted back to the swamp. The glow and sparks could be seen from a great distance. Everyone who saw it knew something very special was happening on the hill.

This spectacle lasted all night. In the morning it was as if spring had suddenly returned to Wormsprong. Everywhere the grass was freshly green. The flowers bloomed exuberantly and all the trees looked somehow stronger and more healthy. It seemed as if Wormsprong had been born again.

All creatures on Wormsprong felt happy. No one could tell why but it felt like the whole planet was more alive than it had been for four hundred years. Only the wisps, the dragons and Barg knew what had happened. Barg grew even taller and his roots started to spread even more. Everywhere his roots dug a little bit of the old, life bringing magic of Wormen flowed.

Flutter Field

It was a warm summer afternoon on Flutter Field. Over the heath, the air shimmered and in the distance, Barg appeared to be waving with his whole trunk. The proud old tree gained a comical appearance because of this, as if he was doing a belly dance.

It was a busy day on and above Flutter Field. In between the heather bushes scurried all kinds of small creatures, looking for food. In the mean time they told each other the latest gossip and jokes. In the sky above the heath flew gigglebeaks and other birds. Very high up soared an eagle. Seemingly without effort he climbed on the rising warm air until he was only a very small dot against the clear blue sky. Then the dot would suddenly grow larger. Like a bullet, the eagle plunged down with his wings retracted. At the last moment, just above the ground he spread his mighty wings and soared gracefully up again.

Some animals quit their daily tasks to look at the spectacle. As did a flutterwing. Flutterwings only lived on Flutter Field, they had even given it its name. This particular flutterwing looked at the eagle with much admiration. She sat on a heather bush where she had been gathering pollen.

“To fly like that one day,” the flutterwing sighed to herself. She slowly moved her wings up and down, her beautiful colours glistening in the sunlight.

With his keen eyes, the eagle from his great height, saw the flutterwing sitting in the sun. She sat just so that the sunlight reflected beautifully off her wings.

“To have such beautifully coloured wings,” the eagle said to himself.

The eagle decided to fly down to the flutterwing and ask how she had come by such beautiful wings. At the same moment the flutter-

wing decided to fly up to the eagle and ask where he had learned to fly so well. And thus it happened that the eagle and the flutterwing met in the sky over Flutter Field.

“How...?” they both began and they started to laugh.

“You first,” the eagle, always gallant and polite, said.

“No, please, you first,” the shy flutterwing said softly.

“No, no,” the eagle insisted in a kind tone of voice. “Please, you ask first.”

“Well, I wondered how you managed to fly so extremely high and then plunge down and soar up again,” the flutterwing asked. “That must be lovely,” she added.

“That’s funny,” the eagle said. “I wanted to ask you where the beautiful colours on your wings came from. I saw them glinting in the sun from a great height.”

The flutterwing and the eagle had descended to the Flutter Field during their talk. The flutterwing sat down on a shrub of heather and the mighty eagle sat down next to her on the ground.

The other animals that saw them sitting there wondered what the diminutive flutterwing and the majestic eagle could have in common to be so engrossed in their talk. They saw the eagle vigorously nodding his head and the flutterwing flutter her wings excitedly. Everyone wondered what the reason for their excitement was.

The next day, the flutterwing was not to be seen collecting pollen as would have been usual. High up in the sky there was the familiar sight of the eagle. He soared up and up until he was only a small dot. Then he plunged down only to soar up again at the last moment. Those who looked a little closer however saw a little colourful spot glittering on the eagle’s back when the sun struck just right. It was the flutterwing

who held on to the feathers of the eagle with all her might. Her beautiful colours sparkled in the sun. They both had the time of their lives.

Roffe the eagle

One day, Glim flew far from her nest near the river. She wanted to see more of Wormsprong than just her stretch of river and patch of forest. She had flown a long way and she decided to rest in a tree for a little while. The tree she chose to rest in stood on a little hill on the heath. She had just flown all the way across the swamp and although it did not look as scary as her mother used to tell her, she still thought the swamp looked dreary from the air. There had been a lot of mist and there where her sharp little eyes had been able to penetrate the mist she had seen only water and mud. Hardly anything grew there. The little vegetation she had seen had been brown or a very dull green in colour.

The tree looked very old. She sat on a thin twig that poked out of the edge of a dense forest of branches that supported lush foliage. Something prevented her from going deeper into the tree's foliage. Not fear, more like a feeling of awe.

"This must be a magic tree," Glim thought aloud.

"That it is, little gigglebeak," a voice behind her said.

If birds could fall from trees, Glim would certainly have fallen. Startled, she jumped involuntarily and fluttered her wings.

"Who spoke there?" she asked in a shuddering voice.

"Do not be afraid, gigglebeak. I am Roffe the eagle," the voice said calmly and from the dense foliage an enormous eagle emerged. He was golden brown with some black patches on his wings. Yellow, penetrating eyes looked at Glim kindly and at the same time inquisitively. His wings lay folded to his side but even so it was clear that these wings were the mightiest wings Glim had ever seen. His beak was as big as Glim was. She moved to the furthest point on the twig that she could reach.

“I will not hurt you,” the eagle said in a friendly voice, seeing that Glim was moving away from him.

“D-do you l-live in this tree?” Glim asked, stammering. “I did not mean to intrude!” she added.

She knew some animals reacted rather fiercely when you entered their territory uninvited.

“Oh, dear no,” the eagle said hastily. “No one lives in Barg but all birds are most welcome to use his branches for a little rest. Well almost all birds. Barg does not like pickers.”

The eagle sighed and said, “Not many birds ever use his branches to rest in though. Most birds are afraid of Barg.”

So this was Barg, Glim thought to herself. She had heard the stories from her mother but had not realised this tree on the heath was the famous tree that had received the magic power from the wisps.

“Is Barg a dangerous tree then?” asked Glim, a little afraid but intrigued at the same time.

“Barg dangerous?” Roffe laughed. “No. Very powerful yes but dangerous, no. He has a very friendly character.”

Glim began to feel more at ease. She even began to enjoy the adventure she was having. She had not had many adventures in her life. She had met a drinkle once. That had been a lot of fun but hardly an adventure. An eagle she had never seen up close. She had heard of them and had always been told to stay away from them. They were not dangerous exactly but rather withdrawn and unreliable, she had been told. However Roffe seemed very kind and not unreliable at all. On the contrary, his eyes looked at Glim with a steady, friendly gaze.

“Do you know the story of the stolen magic?” Roffe asked.

Glim nodded. She had heard the story many times when she was little.

“So you know what happened with the stolen magic after the wisps realised their mistake?” Roffe asked.

Glim nodded again and said, “Yes, they gave it to Barg.”

“Precisely,” Roffe said. “The roots of Barg span all of Wormsprong, bringing magic to all places. Sadly, for us eagles the magic came too late.

“Why?” asked Glim.

“I will tell you,” said Roffe who liked to tell stories to an attentive audience and he could tell Glim loved stories. He was not wrong.

“It all happened a long time ago. Long before you were born, gigglebeak. So you have heard the story how one day after a long, cold winter, spring suddenly arrived on Wormsprong?”

Glim nodded.

The eagle continued, “That was the day the wisps gave the magic to Barg. We eagles lived on an island in those days. It seemed that spring could not find it because winter clung to our island for many years longer.”

“We, the eagles, had lived on that island for as long as there had been eagles I believe. And until the long winter came we had lived a good life. The trees were large and lush and food was plentiful. When the long winter came the trees lost their leaves and food became scarce but at first we thought it normal. Spring would come in a few months we all thought. But spring did not come and many trees died. We could not build our nests, aeries we call them, and it was cold and miserable on the island. Many eagles became ill and died. Only the strongest lived on. It was a harsh life but we kept hoping spring would return.”

“We eagles always fly very high and we do not have much dealings with other animals so we did not know what was happening on

Wormsprong. We had heard rumours about what had happened to the dragons but could not believe it.”

“After a great many years, most of my family decided to leave the island and fly south to search for food and a better place to live. No one believed spring would ever return to our island. I was only a little eagle then and stayed behind with my mother. As did the other eaglets and their mothers and some of the very old eagles.”

Roffe sighed and stared into the distance. After a while he looked at Glim to see if she was still listening to him.

“Please go on,” she said. She sat listening with bated breath. “What happened then?”

“I grew up,” Roffe continued the story. “As difficult as it was in the harsh climate we had to endure. When I had grown into a fully fledged eagle my mother decided to follow her family south. Those that were too old or weak decided to remain on the island and accept it as their last resting place. I was young and filled with a lust for adventure. I decided I would discover more of Wormsprong before I followed my mother south. I flew East, West and North and it struck me that Wormsprong had very different colours than our island had. It did not look at all like the image the stories of the old eagles painted. I decided to fly lower and ask other animals to find out what had changed. I discovered that for many years the seasons had returned and winter was followed by spring again and spring by summer and summer by autumn and so on,” the voice of Roffe sounded as if he made that discovery all over again.

“I flew back to our island as quickly as my wings would carry me. It still looked grey and solemn. I had come too late. There were no eagles left on the island. They had all moved away or died. It looked like a ghost island. There was nothing there for me anymore so I decided to

find out why our island had remained in the grip of winter while the rest of Wormsprong had been released from the eternal cold.”

Glim shook her little head.

“It’s not fair,” she exclaimed indignantly.

A shudder ran through Barg. His great branches trembled.

“Shh,” Roffe said. “You must not say that. Let me explain.”

The trembling of the tree had startled Glim. Was Barg listening as well? She sat quietly looking at Roffe, who continued the story.

“I flew north again because there it seemed the lands had recovered from the long winter the most so it seemed the change had begun there. I talked to many animals, which was not always easy. Some were frightened of me as they had never seen an eagle before or had heard some ridiculous stories about us,” Glim looked at him guiltily.

“Others were easier to talk to but did not know exactly what had happened. I did notice that the stories I heard kept returning to the dragons and the wisps so I decided to look for them. I could not find any dragons. What I heard was that they had withdrawn into the mountains and were never seen anymore. So I went in search of the wisps. I had heard they lived in the swamp and so I flew there. I did see wisps but every time I tried to talk to them they vanished into the mud. It looked as if they were ashamed of something and were afraid to talk to me,” Roffe slowly shook his head.

“Finally I managed to talk to a wisp. It was Moerk himself. Moerk seemed less afraid of other animals than the other wisps and he told me about how he had talked to Wurag and how the wisps had given the magic to Barg. The day after they had returned the magic, spring broke. He did not know how that had happened exactly but he was certain it had to do with Barg and his roots. He told me where I could find Barg and I decided to visit him.”

“For an eagle it was only a very short flight and just like you I landed on one of his outer branches. It is not easy to get close to the trunk of Barg. Something held me back although I can not say what,” here Glim nodded while Roffe continued.

“I talked to Barg but did not receive an answer. I tried to penetrate the foliage, which I had quite a job with. Every effort was frustrated by some branch or a bunch of twigs holding me back. It was as if a mysterious wind blew branches and leaves in my face. But I struggled on. Finally I managed to get close to the trunk. I noticed how the trunk of Barg radiated warmth. Something was pulsing and glowing under the bark. I pressed myself against the warm trunk.”

“Behind me the branches still trembled and swung. I talked softly to Barg trying to soothe him. Finally I heard a soft mumbling. Like a voice that comes from very far and very near at the same time. It came from all directions and asked who I was and why I had come. I assumed this was the voice of Barg and I told him who I was and I told him the story of the island still in the grip of winter. I told him about my journeys and my search for an answer,” Roffe was silent for a moment. Thoughtfully he stared past Glim into the distance.

Then he shook his feathers and continued, “All had gone silent and the branches stopped swinging. Suddenly I could hear a deep rumbling. I felt the trunk of the tree moving, pulsating even stronger. The rumbling sounded far away and it seemed to move off. Barg spoke again. He said I should return to the island and see if spring had come there. All was silent again and I moved out of the foliage. No branches were in my way now.”

Glim sat listening breathlessly.

“I flew high and fast,” Roffe continued. “When I came to the island I hardly dared descend. I could not believe spring would have returned so quickly after the many ages of winter. Slowly I spiralled down and

did not believe my eyes. Although the few trees remaining were still lacking leaves a green shine lay over them. The promise of new foliage. The cold, grey mist had disappeared and grass and moss were of a freshness of green I had never seen before on the island. There were even some small flowers in the grass. I sat in a tree and watched, entranced. The colours and smells returned in all their former glory. The island was born again. I think I have never been as happy as that day,” Roffe looked at Glim and his eyes were smiling.

“Next day I flew back to Barg to thank him for making spring return to the island. This time I had no difficulty entering the foliage. I told Barg about the change and how happy he had made me. Barg mumbled something which sounded like he was glad too. Then I heard him ask whether I would like to help him find other spots on Wormsprong that had escaped his notice. I was so grateful to Barg that I said ‘yes’ immediately. So I started travelling all over Wormsprong to look for parts that still look grey and cold. I have been doing that for many years now.”

“Yet, I begin to long for my family, those that are still alive that is. My task is almost finished. I travelled as far as my wings can carry me and have found many pockets of winter that Barg has now released. My last area of discovery is in the south. That way I can do two things at once. Search for lingering winter and search for my family. Maybe we can even return to our island.”

Glim was happy and excited by the story and said, “And then I will come visit you on your island and I will teach you all how to dance!”

Roffe laughed and said, “You will be very welcome, little gigglebeak. We eagles are not bad animals but we tend to take life a little too seriously sometimes. We could use a merry gigglebeak like you to cheer us up a little.”

Laughing and waving, the mighty eagle returned into the foliage of the tree.

“Good-bye for now,” he called.

Glim heard him chuckle for some time and the branches of Barg gently swayed although there was no wind. She flew up and called out, “Good-bye Barg and Roffe, I will tell everyone the story of the eagle and the tree so that everyone knows who they have to thank for spring returning to Wormsprong.”

The branches of Barg seemed to nod in thanks.

The picker

Barg had a blemish. The old, mighty tree had suffered a wound a long time ago in the days of his youth. The wound had never healed completely and had left a scar. The creature that had given him the wound was the picker. And although Barg had been very unhappy when he had received the blemish on his trunk, it had been a very important occasion for him.

Long before Barg received the magic from the wisps and long before the swamp stretched as far as it did now, the spot where Barg stood was part of a large forest. In those days Barg was just a sapling. Despite his youth, he was already a special tree because he was the only one who stood on top of the only hill in the forest. No other tree could survive on the hill where the water drained easily and the wind had unbridled force. The legend was that he had been planted there by the dragons.

Other trees looked for protection by staying close together but Barg towered over them even though he was still a young, thin sprig of a tree. Stubborn as a mule. He was still supple and bent easily with the wind. His roots dug deeper than those of any other tree. They had to, in order to get at water.

Sometime in those young years of Barg a picker landed on one of his branches.

“This is a beautiful vantage point,” the picker thought. “From here I can scan the entire forest to look for suitable trees to build nesting holes in.”

Pickers are much disliked by trees because they build their nests in holes they peck out in the trunk of a tree. They peck and peck at the tree and burrow deeply into the trunk. This hurts the tree of course but

most of all: trees are vain and hate their trunks being ruined by pickers. When the hole is large enough the picker builds a nice, comfortable nest with moss and feathers. When the moss starts rotting and the nest begins to smell a bit lived in, the picker just abandons it and finds a new tree to begin again.

So Barg was far from happy with the picker landing on one of his branches. Barg was one of the most vain trees in the forest so he trembled at the thought of the picker hacking a hole in his beautiful, young trunk.

Trees can not talk to other creatures. By waving their branches and rustling their leaves they can speak to other trees but no other creature can understand their language. Barg had no way of telling the picker to leave. He thought and thought but could not come up with a way to get rid of the picker.

The picker in the meantime had begun his work. With hammer like blows his sharp beak pecked at Barg's trunk. Soon he had created a good sized hole. The picker was very proud of his work. It was the best hole he had ever made and it would be a good place to build a very nice nest. He went out and gathered the finest moss and feathers. When he was finished it had become the best nest he had ever built.

In the mean time, Barg flinched and suffered inside. A hole in his trunk! What next? He would become the laughing stock of the forest. Especially in winter when he lost all his leaves, the hole would be a glaring blemish on his otherwise perfect trunk. He hung his branches in misery. He thought and he brooded. He used all the force in him to come up with a way to get rid of the picker as quickly as possible so that the hole might heal before winter. The thoughts coursed through him. They moved from the tips of his roots to the ends of his branches.

Faster and faster his thoughts went. His branches started to sway with the effort and still faster his thoughts coursed through his trunk.

Suddenly Barg heard a sound. It was a deep rumbling. Barg wondered where the sound came from. Maybe a far off thunderstorm? But Barg could look a long way in every direction from his hill and nowhere could he see a thundercloud. The sound seemed to come from far away and close by at the same time. It sounded like an echo without its original sound. The noise became clearer. The rumbling began to take shape and Barg heard words. He did not believe it at first but finally he was certain: he heard words. The same words his thoughts had shaped but now they could be heard. With a shock he realised what had happened. His thoughts were becoming sound. He could speak! His voice was very soft and very deep. It sounded far off and yet close by, like the wind in a chimney. Barg could speak. He was so surprised that he shouted in his thoughts. Somewhere close, yet far away a loud boom was heard. His shout.

The picker had heard the sound as well. His whole nest shook.

“Must be a thunderstorm,” the picker told himself and he crept even further back into his cosy nest.

“No, picker, this is not a thunderstorm,” the picker heard rumbling through his nest. Never had the picker had such a shock!

“W-who s-said that?” the picker stammered.

“It is I,” the voice said. “Barg, the tree.”

The picker not only heard the voice, he felt it as well. Barg spoke with his whole body.

“But trees can’t speak,” the picker said, looking quite pale around his beak.

“I can,” answered Barg simply.

“How is that possible?” the picker asked, looking around him wildly to see if someone was playing a joke on him. Pickers were known for their practical jokes.

“I don’t know how it works,” it rumbled in the nest of the picker. The picker crept to the exit of his hole and peeked outside. He saw no one.

“Leave my trunk!” he now heard. “Leave my trunk and never build your nests inside living trees again!” the voice of Barg thundered over the forest. It rolled down the hill and shook the leaves of every tree at the foot of it.

This was too much for the picker. He fled the hole and flew as high as his wings could carry him. Away from the bewitched tree.

He told any picker he met about the tree and how it had scared him. Those that did not believe him went to Barg but even before their beaks could hurt the tree a rumbling was heard and they were seen to leave again looking distinctly pale around the beak.

Since that day, no picker ever made his hole in a living tree again. Only dead wood now serves them for building their nests in.

For Barg the episode with the picker had taught him to speak, which soon made him the most important tree on Wormsprong.

The dragons return

The dragon brothers had lost their magic powers. The wisps had trapped Wurag and only by relinquishing their powers could the brothers save him. After their loss the dragon brothers retreated to the mountains. They had reigned over Wormsprong for many ages. Their failure to protect Wormsprong filled their hearts with shame.

For many years the brothers lived in the mountains. They lived in deep caves and only came out at night, if at all. But even without magic powers dragons tend to live for hundreds of years if no hurt befalls them. And thus they saw how the wisps had to let go of the magic powers they had stolen from the dragons. The wisps could not harness the powerful magic and it was slowly destroying them. Moerk, one of the wisps, even had the courage to ask Wurag's advice in the matter. This was very brave as the wisps had caused the dragons great harm.

The dragons even lived to see Barg free all of Wormsprong from the long winter that had set in when the wisps had stolen the magic. The magic powers once given to the dragon brothers by Wormèn and stolen by the wisps, now flowed through the roots of the mighty tree Barg.

Now however the dragon brothers were old beyond reckoning. As must be with all things, their lives came to an end. One by one they died. They died in the mountains where they had lived now for so long. The last of the brothers still alive was Wurag. Once the mightiest and strongest dragon on Wormsprong. In his veins the blood of Wormèn pulsed the most purely. Yet, he knew that even for him the end was near. He was sad. Not because of the loss of the magic powers. That had all been put right and he even thought Barg was a better guardian of magic than they had been. What made him sad was the fact that the dragons would slowly die out. There were still other drag-

ons on Wormsprong but they all lived isolated lives. The shame of the brothers had reflected on every dragon on Wormsprong. Dragons used to live in groups, only then dragons were happy. Only then new dragons were born and raised. Now that they lived in very small groups or even solitarily, too few dragons were born. Wurag feared that Wormsprong would be without dragons before long. He decided his last act in life would be to prevent this.

On a beautiful spring day a call came from the mountains that Wormsprong had not heard for centuries. It was the call announcing the coming of a dragon. All creatures began talking about it.

“The dragon returns!” some said.

“The ruler of old comes back!” others said.

Those who did not know dragons and Barg even less said, “He returns to retrieve the magic from Barg,”

The dragon did return but neither to rule again nor to retrieve the magic from Barg. Wurag did fly to Barg though. He landed right next to the wise, old tree on the hill and his voice boomed over moor and swamp. He could be heard far and wide. Powerful his voice was, with an added depth which was the result of conquered shame.

“Listen to me if you hear my voice!” the dragon roared. “My brothers are all dead and everywhere on Wormsprong dragons live in isolation. No young dragons are born and dragons are unhappy everywhere. We, the descendants of Wormèn, the one who made this world, have suffered long enough for losing the magic. The wisps have learned their lesson as well. It is time to leave that episode behind and make a fresh start for everyone.”

Wurag raised himself on his hind legs to stifle a crescendo of murmurs that arose from the assembled crowds.

“Every dragon has inherited part of the wisdom of Wormèn,” he continued. “The dragons are still important to Wormsprong. Barg is wise and through his roots now flows the magic that feeds the health of our world. However he can not advise every creature. He can not travel like we can. The dragons are the natural rulers of Wormsprong and we have always been fair and kind.”

Some mumbled agreement even though hardly anyone could remember the days of dragon rule. However the stories from those days were still told and these legends always spoke of dragons being fair and kind.

“The magic powers are now with Barg and will stay his for as long as Wormsprong exists,” Wurag continued. Some foolish listeners who had secretly hoped for a showdown between Barg and the dragon looked a little disappointed.

“We dragons have had to learn we can fail too. That only makes us wiser in our judgement. Maybe the loss of the magic powers was meant to teach us dragons a hard lesson,” his voice had dropped a little when he said this. As if the thought had only just occurred to him.

He raised his voice again, “I want to ask your help,” he paused a moment. Everyone was listening attentively.

“To prevent the extinction of the dragons they need to come out of hiding. They need to live in groups again and feel happy. Only then young dragons can grow up proud of being dragons and become good rulers. My brothers are dead and I feel my own end approaching. I ask you to look out for dragons. Ask around, search places mentioned in legends. And if you find any dragons send word to me. I shall make certain this dragon receives word that the time of living in hiding is over. I will ask them to join me here for a great gathering of dragons,” Wurag paused for breath again.

The crowds looked up at the hill and indeed the mighty tree with the grand old dragon next to it made for a great spectacle. Everyone was touched by what the dragon had said and many nudged their neighbour and nodded.

“Go and tell it to everyone you know,” Wurag said. “Only with your help can the dragons return to rule Wormsprong as Wormèn had intended.”

And with a bow he fell silent. The crowds remained still for a short while. Then a cheering rose and slowly they dispersed. They were filled with the purpose of searching out the dragons and giving them the good news. The symbol of Wormsprong, the dragon, would return.

The days that followed were the busiest of Wurag’s life. It taxed his old body mightily. Together with Roffe and some of the other eagles - the only animals dragons had had some contact with, probably because they loved the mountains and were the only birds that could fly as high as a dragon could - he flew all around Wormsprong checking up on news. This news was provided by the many creatures that searched for dragons. Word had gone around Wormsprong like a bush fire.

The sharp eyes of the eagles were invaluable in the search. Even more so as the eyes of Wurag started to suffer from old age and were not as keen as they used to be.

Whenever they would find a dragon, Wurag or an eagle would tell it about the end of the long age of shame. They were told to assemble at the foot of the hill where Barg stood and a curious migration started. Everywhere on Wormsprong dragons began to appear. They crept out of crevices in rocks or out of the deepest, darkest forests.

Slowly and a little apprehensively they started their trek towards Barg. Some flew as high as they could to avoid contact with other creatures, still not believing the time of shame had come to an end.

Others only travelled at night and crept, as much as a dragon is able to creep, through field and wood towards the moors and the lonely hill.

However, they came. The moors around the hill where Barg stood began to fill up with dragons. After a few weeks hundreds of dragons had arrived.

Wurag stood on the hill next to Barg and he had tears in his eyes. It had been hundreds of years since they had a dragon gathering like this. And Wurag knew he would never see one again.

All dragons looked towards the hill where Wurag stood. Old but still regal in his bearing, there was no doubt he was still the leader of all dragons. He was the first born of Wormèn and his wisdom and power were undisputed. Looking upon him many dragons were beginning to think the days of old might return.

Wurag raised upon his hind legs and said with a mighty voice, “Dragons of Wormsprong, you have probably heard why I have called a gathering after all these centuries. We have come to the end of our suffering. The time of the Great Shame is at an end. The loss of the magic, through my fault, has taught us humility and shown us dragons are not infallible. Even so, we are still the most powerful creatures on Wormsprong with a responsibility given to us by Wormèn our ancestral mother. The magic powers are now safe and harnessed better than dragons could ever hope to achieve. But our wisdom and knowledge of the root of Wormsprong are still mighty tools to reign with. We have an eternal obligation to Wormèn to use those tools to guide all living creatures and even the non-living things on Wormsprong,” Wurag paused and looked upon the sea of dragons at his feet. Many seemed to rise in stature. Some of the pride and feeling of responsibility was returning to the dragons.

Wurag continued, "I am at the end of my life. I will return to the mountains to die. My time is ending, yours is now beginning. By helping to look for you the creatures of Wormsprong have shown their trust in you. Use and cherish this trust and use wisdom and kindness in your rule. Remember that Barg will always aid you with advise and the magic that flows through his roots," some of the branches on Barg seemed to nod in agreement.

"Together you should be able to lead Wormsprong into a new age where new creatures will pose new challenges."

With these somewhat mysterious words he spread his wings. He took one more look around the assembled dragons and with a few mighty beats of his wings, Wurag rose from the hill and flew away towards the mountains. There he would die as the last of the lonely dragons. Yet he was content that as his last act he had released the dragons from their self imposed isolation and had returned them to their rightful status on Wormsprong.

The dragons followed the wise old dragon with their eyes until even their keen eyesight could no longer see him. They thought about what he had said and for days and nights that followed they talked amongst themselves. Some consulted Barg, who with his low rumbling voice responded to every question. There seemed to be no end to his knowledge of Wormsprong.

Eventually groups of dragons started to leave the heath. They began to settle in their old haunts again. The places they had lived in before the Great Shame had driven them out. The families of dragons were welcomed back by the creatures living in their area and the days of old returned.

The dragons that had returned to the mountains now dug up the most beautiful materials. Gold, silver and even diamonds. They made beautiful objects with these materials and displayed them for all to see

to remind everyone of the beauty of Wormsprong. The mountain dragons became the first artists on Wormsprong. The creatures of Wormsprong loved it and were amazed that such beauty existed in their world.

Once Barg remarked to Roffe that all that beauty might turn out to be as dangerous to Wormsprong as the stealing of the magic had been to the wisps. Roffe did not know what Barg meant and it would be a long time before he understood.

Roffe and the zaslam

On his long flights over Wormsprong, looking for places where the roots of Barg had not yet penetrated, Roffe discovered much about Wormsprong. He found islands, volcanos and continents which he did not know existed.

Roffe discovered new creatures some of which lived in groups, others lived a solitary life. Sometimes he was received hospitably but sometimes he was viewed with suspicion or even chased away. Many creatures would never know to whom they owed the end of the long winter. Roffe understood the behaviour that protected their way of life so he never let it cloud his judgement. He continued his search unperurbed.

One day he found a floating island that mysteriously journeyed along a set course in the big ocean that covered a large part of Wormsprong. Roffe did not know how the island was steered but it was obvious it was. Several times he had seen the island, always moving along but never arriving anywhere. It just floated along on its semicircular route.

On this island lived the hûrek. The hûrek were creatures that vaguely resembled chickens only they had arms and hands. They traded with the islands and continents they passed. The regularity of their visits to these places was like the seasons. The island acted as a vast trading vessel on a scheduled route, driven by a mysterious guiding force.

The hûrek were friendly and hospitable and Roffe stayed with them a while to rest his weary wings from a very long journey. Because the hûrek were a travelling species and met with other creatures regularly they were less on their guard with Roffe than other island creatures

often were. Their culture was rich in legends inspired by their traveling existence and the fantastic creatures their ancestors had supposedly seen. They were a race of storytellers. It was here that Roffe first heard tell of the zaslam.

According to the hûrek, the zaslam was an enormous sea snake. She could grow to an astonishing length. She used her massive flat tale to slap the waters and create enormous waves. Her huge head skimmed over the surface of the sea while the eight eyes, positioned on top of her head, scanned for prey. According to the stories the zaslam was a dangerous animal of which even the dragons should be afraid.

Legend had it that, when Wormsprong was young, a long, long time ago, the zaslam was even larger. So large that she could swallow a small island. When she beat the sea with her tail an enormous tidal wave would occur and the noise could be heard many leagues away. Her roaring laugh could blow all the trees off an island. In short she must have been an even more formidable animal than she was now.

Roffe did not believe a word of it but the hûrek kept to their story. They even told Roffe that they occasionally saw the zaslam at the horizon. The slapping of the tail and the wriggling way she moved created waves that shook and rocked the island.

If the zaslam existed, Roffe wanted to see one. He decided to stay on the island and travel along with the hûrek for a while. It was slower than flight but Barg would not begrudge him the chance to see such an incredible creature as the zaslam seemed to be. The hûrek welcomed the chance to hear the many stories Roffe could tell about his travels and they looked forward to long evenings of story telling.

One morning Roffe was rudely awakened by excited talking and shouts. The hûrek came to the tree in which Roffe spent his nights. It

had been a late night and he wished he could have slept for some hours more.

“Roffe, Roffe!” the hûrek called. “Wake up, a zaslam, a zaslam!”

At hearing the word ‘zaslam’ Roffe became wide awake. This legendary beast he had to see! He turned his head left and right to loosen his neck and he shook his feathers before he glided down from the tree.

“Roffe, there is a zaslam at the horizon,” they said excitedly.

“At which side of the island?” Roffe asked.

“There,” they all pointed in a different direction.

“Do you think I have eight eyes like a zaslam?” Roffe asked, laughing a little at so much excitement.

The tribe-elder raised his voice and said, “That way, Roffe,” as he pointed towards the rising sun.

Roffe spread his enormous wings and took off.

“I’m going to take a look,” he called back while he grew smaller rapidly to the watching hûrek.

“Be careful!” he heard, just before the wind took away the rest of their animated cackling.

Roffe flew in the direction the tribe-elder had indicated. Pretty soon he saw something strange some distance away in the water. It looked like a wave that stayed in one place. Or a shiny scar in the sea. Roffe flew a little higher. He circled over the place where the wave or scar was. His sharp eyes saw an enormous sea snake with a flat tail and a large, pointed head with eight eyes on top of it: a zaslam.

“What an animal!” Roffe mumbled to himself.

“With very good ears,” came the answer.

Roffe missed a beat of his wings in surprise.

He asked in a tone of amazement, “Is that you, zaslam?”

“Certainly,” the answer came. “I am the zaslam.”

“What is your name?” asked Roffe, who only half believed it was the zaslam he was talking to all the way down there. “Do you have a name?”

“What is ‘a name’?” the zaslam asked.

Here Roffe had to think a moment, “A name is what others use to call you when you are in a group,” Roffe tried to explain.

“What is a group?” came as answer.

“A group is more than one,” Roffe explained. “It’s when there are more than one zaslam together. It’s called a group of zaslams.”

“But there is only one zaslam,” the zaslam said. “There has always been just one zaslam.”

“What a lonely existence,” Roffe said more to himself than to the zaslam while he began to circle a little lower.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” the zaslam said. “As a result of my good hearing I hear a lot of stories told by all the creatures of the sea. Especially by the hûrek and lately as told by you.”

“That’s amazing!” Roffe said. “So, you can really hear that far away?”

“Yes,” the zaslam answered. “Sound carries a long way in water and the surface of the sea catches many sounds. I had hoped you would come looking for me if I showed myself.”

“Oh?” Roffe said suddenly alert. He flew a little higher. “Why?”

“Maybe you can help me,” the zaslam said. Her voice sounded a little hesitant. “Maybe that Barg you mentioned in your stories can help me. I’ll tell you with what.”

The zaslam began her tale:

A long time ago, when Wormsprong was young and it was a lot warmer, the zaslam had been of an enormous size. Even larger than the

hûrek told in their stories. It had been the largest animal on Wormsprong. When a zaslam grew old and felt the end was near she built a nest of rock and seaweed in which she lay down and waited for death to arrive. After her death her body decomposed quickly, only her heart remained. From this heart a new zaslam grew.

Wormsprong grew colder and with every generation the zaslam shrunk. It appeared that the zaslam needed warmth to grow. This was why the zaslam roaming the seas on Wormsprong now was only a fraction of the size of the original one.

The zaslam told Roffe she was worried that if Wormsprong grew even colder, her heart might not grow into a new zaslam at all when it was her time to die. After hearing the stories Roffe told about the wisps and the dragons and Barg she understood why the sea had grown so cold. The roots of Barg had not yet found the depths of the ocean, where the zaslam would have to build her nest.

Roffe listened to her and knew instantly what both he and Barg had forgotten: the bottoms of the oceans.

“But what is the truth about the zaslam being such a dangerous animal?” Roffe asked.

The zaslam laughed, “There is no truth in that at all,” she said. “The hûrek can tell beautiful stories but with time stories become legends and start to take on a life of their own. Especially with the hûrek who like to exaggerate sometimes.”

The zaslam sighed which caused a big wave to roll towards the island that floated in the distance.

“I will tell you a secret, Roffe,” the zaslam said after she had watched the wave roll away.

“The hûrek, without knowing it, have a lot to thank the zaslam for.”

“Why so?” asked Roffe who had also followed the wave with his sharp eyes and wondered about a mere sigh having such a big effect. What if she sneezed?

“For as long as the hûrek can remember and in fact even before their time, a zaslam has steered their island. Sometimes I use waves, sometimes I blow a little and sometimes even, I use my head to nudge the island along its course when the hûrek are sleeping.”

The zaslam watched how the wave had reached the island and had changed its course a little. With a satisfied grin she continued, “That’s where the legends come from. When the zaslam blows it is a great storm and I admit an occasional tree falls over. When the zaslam nudges the island with its head its an earth quake and when it slaps its tail its a tidal wave. But I swear the zaslam only do this to steer the island.”

“Why must you steer the island?” Roffe asked who began to understand the legends the hûrek had told him.

“Because the hûrek are very important for the coastal creatures of Wormsprong,” the zaslam said patiently. “They not only provide trade but they also provide news, they tell stories about other creatures all over this world and that creates peace and understanding between all who live near the sea.”

“And without you the island would run aground somewhere and the hûrek would stop travelling,” Roffe said, slowly nodding his head. “I understand.”

“That’s why I wondered if you could ask Barg to bring his roots to the ocean floor so that winter can be dispelled there as well. That way the future of zaslam is assured.”

“I’ll return to Barg and ask him immediatly,” Roffe said while he turned to fly back to the island.

“One more thing,” the zaslam called after him. “The hûrek must never know about the connection between zaslam and their island! They need to keep believing in their legends and stories. Otherwise their entire culture falls apart.”

“I will keep your secret,” Roffe called back. “I will tell them you are an enormous and voracious animal and that you scared me so much I want to leave immediately.”

Zaslam laughed, “Don’t make them to scared, Roffe. Or they will follow you and leave the island.”

“Don’t worry zaslam, I have a feeling they will just think me a coward and feel themselves very brave.”

When he came to the island it occurred just as he had predicted. The hûrek were impressed by the description Roffe gave of the zaslam but they thought him a little bit of a coward for wanting to leave the island. After all, they had lived with the zaslam as a close neighbour for many generations. The occasional tree fell over and sometimes part of the island disappeared under a wave but that was no reason to get this scared was it? As a matter of fact that very afternoon a few trees had been uprooted by a wave that had crashed on the eastern shore. But that had been all the effect the wave had had, right? Roffe, they thought, was overreacting.

Still, Roffe took his leave of the hûrek. He thanked them for their hospitality and all the stories and he promised to return one day if he were able to find them again on the oceans they travelled. He spread his wings and soon the island was just a dot down there in the seemingly endless ocean.

On his return to Barg he told him about the zaslam and how the bottom of the sea was still cold. Barg could not believe how remiss they had been not to think of that and he sent his roots that way immedi-

ately. Even in the depths of the oceans, the long winter would soon end.

The expulsion of the gur

On Wormsprong were great forests. They stretched out from the foot of the mountains to the sea. The forests were inhabited by all kinds of creatures. The trees offered food and shelter to birds and small creatures that climbed the trees using their sharp claws. The forest floor also teemed with life both during the day and during the night.

The gur belonged to the forest dwellers. They sought shelter in the trees at night or when danger threatened and they also used the trees when travelling. With their long arms they swung from branch to branch and travelled large distances in a short time. On the ground they walked on two legs but bent over. Some bent over so far that their hands dragged on the forest floor.

The gur were rather lazy creatures and they were easily bored. Out of boredom they teased their fellow forest creatures. They roamed the forest in little groups and played all kinds of pranks on whomever they saw. Wherever they showed up, other creatures beat a hasty retreat.

When the dragons lost their magic powers to the wisps, nothing held the gur back anymore. Their teasing became worse and worse. At first it was all pretty harmless. Walking through the woods an unsuspecting forest creature would stumble over a branch that suddenly appeared out of a bush or fall in a shallow pit that had been hidden by carefully stacked leaves on twigs or a deluge of pine cones would suddenly rain down on the creature's head. By the time the baffled victim had recovered from the surprise the gur had fled, laughing loudly and screeching hysterically. However the pranks became more serious over time. The branch protruding from the bush would sport nasty thorns, the pitfalls became deeper and the pine cones were often replaced by rocks. Fear for the attacks of the gur became part of the daily life for the creatures of the forest.

When the wisps had returned the magic to Barg and Wurag had asked the dragons to once again rule over Wormsprong, the forest creatures decided enough was enough. They appointed a group of representatives to travel to the dragon in charge of their forest to complain about the gur. The representatives were an owl, a wolf, a gigglebeak and a jumblemuch.

The dragon who reigned over the forest was a very old dragon. He was a second generation dragon and could still remember Wormsprong as a very young planet. He was too old to travel much anymore and he only visited parts of the forest very irregularly. That is why the forest creatures decided to send a delegation to him. He lived in a large hole underground. The entrance to the burrow was an old hollowed out oak tree that stood in a clearing in the forest. The owl said she knew the way as she had seen the clearing from the sky many times. The group went on its way.

Three days they travelled. They were often hindered by the gur who tried to stop them visiting the dragon. It was apparent that they knew why the group wanted to visit the old dragon. But the forest creatures had not chosen these representatives casually. These were feisty creatures that did not scare easily and the owl and the wolf managed to keep the gur at a distance most of the time. Both by their strength and by their combined cunning. They also chose little winding paths to try and escape the notice of the gur. The jumblemuch knew all the little paths in the forest. This did slow them down though and a journey that should have taken only two days took them four. Luckily the cheerful gigglebeak kept their spirits up.

At the end of the fourth day they reached the clearing where the hollowed out oak tree stood. This was where Narwag, the dragon lived. Carefully they approached the oak tree.

“Where is the dragon?” the jumblemuch asked.

“I don’t know, in his burrow I suspect,” the owl said. “Shall I knock on the tree?”

The others nodded, glad that the owl was taking the lead in rousing the dragon. Although a dragon was not a bad creature they were mighty rulers who were very powerful and you did not want to disturb one at random.

The owl knocked softly on the gnarly tree trunk. Nothing happened. Even the gur, who had picked up the group just before they had entered the clearing and who had been making as much din as they could to distract the representatives, had retreated into the trees and were silent now.

Again the owl knocked on the tree, a little louder now. They thought they heard something.

But instead of a dragon, a raven flew out of the tree. It looked old and much the worse for wear. Many feathers were missing and one eye was permanently closed.

“What do you want!” the raven croaked. “What’s with the knocking. Stop that immediately!”

“My humble apologies, dear cousin raven,” the owl said. She seemed to gain some courage now that she was talking to a raven instead of a mighty dragon. “My humble apologies,” she repeated. “We would like to speak to Narwag concerning a rather important issue.”

The gur, hiding in the trees began to grumble. The others in the group nodded their approval of the way the owl spoke. She evidently knew how to behave in high places.

“About what!” the raven screeched.

“We would rather discuss that with Narwag himself if it is all the same to you,” the owl said rather loftily.

“Not today!” the raven rasped. “Now, clear off!”

The raven took off and flew back into the tree leaving the forest creatures bewildered.

When she had recovered a little the owl said, “Well, I never! Typical for a raven. The insolence!”

The others nodded and suggested the owl should knock again. The owl agreed and knocked. Rather loudly this time. At the same time she called, “Narwag!”

For a moment nothing happened but then the raven came flying out of the tree screeching loudly but before he could say what he wanted to say and what no doubt would have been very rude, a low rumbling emanated from below the old oak tree.

“Leave these good creatures alone, Borhak!” a deep booming voice said. “They no doubt have a very important reason to travel all this way and disturb an old dragon like me.”

And there, from the hole under the old oak protruded a dragon’s head. Slowly the rest of the dragon squeezed out of the burrow. Fully emerged, the dragon shook his scales and wings into some sort of presentable state. Dust and sand flew to all directions as he did so.

With kind eyes he looked at each of the representatives in turn.

“Well, well. An owl, a wolf, a gigglebeak and a jumblemuch,” the dragon mumbled while he greeted them one by one with a nod of his head. “It has been a long time since I saw any of you. Please do not take offence at my good friend Borhak’s behaviour. He takes my peace and quiet very seriously.”

“Someone has to, if you don’t do so yourself,” Borhak mumbled loudly enough for everyone to hear.

The dragon ignored him.

“What is it I can do for you?” Narwag asked the forest creatures.

The owl took a step forward and started to tell the dragon about the behaviour of the gur. She told about the harmless pranks turning into

quite dangerous traps and how the other forest creatures lived in fear from injury every day. It was risky to leave one's burrow, nest or other place of residence. Life in the forest had become quite unliveable.

"Hmm," the dragon said and he looked around the little group with a look that seemed to penetrate their souls. "This is serious! Have you ever tried talking to the gur about this?"

"We tried but failed," the owl said. "They always run off after one of their pranks and no one we know has any contact with them."

The others shook their heads.

"And now they have made themselves so unpopular that no one wants to even try anymore," the owl added.

A long silence followed in which the dragon closed his eyes and bent his head. He seemed lost in deep thought.

Suddenly he seemed to have come to a conclusion. He raised his enormous head and roared, "Gur! Come here!"

The others jumped at the sudden roar but after the echoes had died down among the trees of the forest, all remained quiet.

"They are scared," the wolf whispered to the owl.

"Sst!" Narwag looked at the trees intently. "Give them a little time."

He had hardly said this or something rustled in the trees. The head of a gur peeked from the foliage. And another. And another.

"Come here!" Narwag ordered. "Do not be afraid, we will not harm you."

The wolf growled but one look of Narwag silenced him.

One by one the gur climbed down from the trees and warily they entered the clearing. They looked as if they would run back to the relative safety of the trees at a moment's notice. But the dragon spoke encouraging words and ever more gur came out of hiding. The clearing became filled with them and still heads peeked out of the foliage.

The clearing had now completely filled up. Not even a mouse could have squeezed in. All the gur on Wormsprong must have been there. Narwag raised to his hind legs and cleared his throat.

“Gur!” he spoke loudly so even the gur remaining in the trees could hear him. “I have received a complaint about you. You are accused of making the lives of other creatures in the forest miserable by constant pestering. What is your answer to these accusations?”

For a moment silence reigned. But then a loud uproar broke out among the gur. They shouted insults and accusations at the small group of representatives and some shook their fists at them.

“One at a time!” the dragon roared and he thumped the ground with his tail with such a force that some of the gur fell from the trees. The gur quieted down. One of their number advanced. He was not very large but broadly built and he had penetrating green eyes. These looked at the dragon with mock reverence.

“I am Tasse, the leader of the gur,” he said with a rasping voice. “We are not bullying the other creatures but we are defending what is ours: the forest. We need space to live in and all the other creatures are taking that space from us!”

He looked at the dragon now with defiance in his eyes.

“The forest belongs to no one and everyone, Tasse,” the dragon said in a tone that brooked no argument. “The other creatures have the same rights to the forest as you have.”

“The forest is too small and we have the oldest rights,” Tasse said defiantly.

“I believe you will find that I and the other dragons have the oldest rights on Wormsprong,” said Narwag and he raised himself even higher. “I descend directly from the first dragons. We were the first living creatures on Wormsprong after the five brothers.”

He raised his tail in the air and again he thumped it down on the forest floor with such force that some more gur fell from the trees.

“Let there be no mistaking our power!” the dragon roared. “I am old but the powers, given by Wormén still flow through my and my fellow dragons’ veins. We allow no conflicts such as these on Wormsprong and we allow injustice even less!”

Suddenly the assembled creatures saw that the thumping on the ground had done more than just shake gur from the trees. From all directions dragons came flying. Faster than the wind. They began circling the clearing, just above the treetops.

“See with what speed the dragons answer a call from a fellow dragon,” Narwag roared. “I have decided what should be done and these dragons will see to it that my decision will be honoured!”

The other dragons roared in unison. The jumblemuch covered his ears, the noise was that loud. The wings of the dragons started to move the treetops. The hair of the gurs still clutching to the trees started to blow as if in a great storm.

“Gur!” Narwag called over the rushing of air. “Over four hundred years have you bullied your fellow forest creatures. Instead of coming to us, the dragons, with your problems you have taken the law into your own hands. The other creatures have tolerated this up till now and instead of fighting back they have come to us for advice. By doing so they have shown themselves more wise and more worthy of the forest than you.”

The owl breathed a sigh of relief.

Narwag continued, “You gur, consider yourself expelled from the forest from now on. You will travel to the plains on the other side of the mountains and there you will settle anew. You will have to rebuild your lives. This will be hard work and it may take you many generations to prosper. Go and keep in mind that the dragons will always be

close by to keep an eye on you. Let us never catch a gur in or even near the forest again or our wrath will be terrible!”

Again the tail of Narwag thumped the ground. As if they were one creature the dragons swooped down on the clearing and the surrounding trees. The gur fled in a panick, driven and chased by the dragons who kept them at a run until they had reached the mountains. Herding them as if they were a flock of sheep.

Narwag turned to the representatives of the forest creatures.

“Go back to your homes in the forest,” the old dragon said. “If the gur ever bother you again let me know immediately. I do not think my little demonstration of power will scare them for long. But soon they will be too busy with building a life on the barren plains on the other side of the mountains. With hard work they will manage to make a living off the land by cultivating it. The real reason for their bad behaviour was boredom and this will be a boon to them. Lets hope working at a new future will occupy them for long enough to forget the easy life they have had in the forest.”

The owl, the gigglebeak, the wolf and the jumblemuch thanked the dragon profusely for his help. The dragon bowed his head to each of them and shuffled back into his burrow. All the way back the representatives spoke about what had happened.

The journey passed quietly and not a gur was seen. The only accident happened when the jumblemuch fell into a pitfall but that turned out to be an old one and it was not very deep.

Preface to “The journey of the great morgel”

This is the story that was the seed of “The chronicles of Wormsprong”. It was the first fairy tale like story I wrote back in the early 1990’s. Strictly speaking it is only loosely connected to the Wormsprong stories but I decided to add it to these chronicles anyway. Chronologically I think the story takes place in a time when the previous stories belonged to the realm of legends. As such, there is a connection.

The journey of the great morgel

Once upon a time there was a great morgel. He was very ugly. Even for a morgel. If you have ever seen a morgel you know what I mean. They are even more ugly than trolls.

This morgel’s name was Gorom, which is a very ordinary name for a morgel. His mother had hit him a lot when he was a child. This is also normal for morgels. Only, his mother used to hit him with her left hand only for the simple reason that she did not have a right hand anymore. This is why Gorom had grown up all lopsided.

Lopsided or not, no one dared tease Gorom because as baby-morgel he had been as strong as a child-morgel and as a child-morgel he heaved the same heavy stones as the adult morgels did. Gorom had never been to school. Even as a child-morgel he helped building caves, the morgels’ chief occupation.

They build enormous passages and caves that are so big they can house three cathedrals. Maybe you have visited a cave like that and maybe you have even seen a morgel without knowing it! During the day, when they are asleep they look just like a piece of rock. They can have all kinds colours: white, grey, almost black and dark red.

Because Gorom had never been to school the other morgels thought him rather stupid. They never talked much to him because what could you talk about with a stupid morgel? That is why Gororm felt rather lonely. After work he went back to his own cave, ate some bat-pâté and went to sleep. What else could he do? He could not read and the stories the other morgels told each other he did not understand. They told about distant countries and strange creatures he could not even imagine.

One day Gorom decided to make a great journey. He wanted to see the world he knew nothing about for himself. He was fed up with every day being the same. Morgel's travel often and quite far. We never see them because they travel underground through their own caves and passages. However, Gorom having never been to school, did not know this.

He took a large stone basket of bat-pâté for provisions and left. Above ground! The other morgels saw him leave but hardly took any notice. "Good riddance," they thought. He was considered rather in the way and ugly to look at as well.

At first Gorom travelled through a large forest. It was night and pitch dark. Not even the moon showed. But morgels are quite used to darkness. It was very quiet in the forest but Gorom did not know any better because in the caves it was very quiet as well.

"Outside is the same as inside," Gorom thought. "Dark and quiet."

Then a wind started to blow and the leaves in the trees started rustling. This was something Gorom had never heard before but morgels are not easily scared.

"It's like a hundred thousand little bats fluttering," Gorom thought. Rain clouds began to gather and it began to rain.

“It’s like there are thousands of dripping stalactites here,” Gorom explained the rain and he walked on.

He travelled like this for four nights. During the day he slept and like all morgels he slept deeply. So he never heard the twittering of the birds and the rustling of the forest animals. He never saw the sunlight shining through the foliage, glinting in the little brooks. He just saw the trees which in the dark resembled stalagmites and the bushes which looked like rocks.

On the fifth night he reached a great mountain range and Gorom started to climb. Ever higher. A morgel that had gone to school would have known that a morgel never climbed a mountain but dug right through or under it. But Gorom did not know this. It became colder and the wind became stronger and more gusty the higher he climbed. Gorom knew from experience that the deeper you dug the warmer it got so it seemed only natural that it would get colder the higher one climbed.

“It’s very draughty here,” Gorom said to himself. “It’s like they constructed two cave openings directly opposite each other. Shabby building!”

He did miss the rustling of all those bats because his basket of pâté began to run empty.

Again four nights he travelled through the mountains. He heard or saw nothing but rocks, rain and wind.

The fifth night he reached a little town at the foot of the mountains. It was very quiet and dark in the town.

“What strange shapes the rocks are,” thought Gorom. “They are square blocks like basalt but with a pointy rock on top.”

It began to dawn on the horizon so Gorom found a nice spot to go to sleep in. This spot was in the middle of the town square but Gorom did not know this.

The first who saw him was the baker.

“Someone has dumped an enormous rock in front of my shop!” the baker called out.

The butcher and the fishmonger came out to look and within half an hour a crowd had assembled. Everyone had an explanation. According to the baker it was an oversized hailstone, according to the butcher it was a meteorite and the fishmonger thought it was a rock that had rolled down the mountain. Finally the mayor came to the strange rock. The mayor was very fat and he had come immediately when he had seen the crowd from his bedroom window. He breathed heavily and puffed from trying to run with his bulky body.

“I have -huff- no idea where -puff- this rock comes -gasp- from but it can not stay here!” he wheezed.

With a handkerchief he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“The crooked thing makes our town square look ugly!” he added when he had caught his breath a little.

It was decided that the strongest men of the village should bring the rock to the mountains because that is where rocks belonged, the mayor felt. The baker, strong from kneading dough, the butcher, strong from hewing bones and the fishmonger, strong from lifting cases of fish-in-ice, would have to transport the rock there.

The whole day the rock was an attraction and there were always people to encourage the hard workers. But no matter how they toiled and tried, at the end of the day they had only managed to move the rock a distance of four metres. They were completely exhausted and they decided to try again the next day. Gorom had noticed nothing

from all the commotion around him. He had slept very deeply, as morgels do.

As soon as it was dark and everyone in the town had gone to bed Gorom awoke.

“I must have moved in my sleep,” Gorom thought. “I am sure I was facing the other way.”

He stretched and went on his way.

In the little town at the foot of the mountains they still talk about the mysterious rock and many people come to look at the spot where the ‘travelling stone’ had stood. The baker sells chocolate hailstones, the butcher sells meteorite meat balls and the fishmonger sells mountain rock salmon. Every year there is a big town feast on the day the rock appeared.

Gorom travelled on for another five nights. He went through fields and past farms. He saw the strangest rocks, many of which were set on thin stalagmites and when the wind blew through them they made a strange mooing sound. Gorom had been travelling for fifteen nights now and to be honest he was bored. He felt hungry because his bat-pâté had run out and although a morgel can go a long time without food they do not especially like going without their bat-pâté.

Gorom also missed working in the caves. The hauling of stone and the hacking at rock walls. He decided to go back.

He had missed hacking and digging so much that he dug a deep hole and travelled home under ground. In five nights he dug under the fields and the town, he dug under the mountains where it still blew and where there were beautiful vistas. He dug under the forest where the birds still echoed between the trees.

When he reached his home everyone was interested in his stories. They had missed him a little after all. Had he seen strange creatures like they told each other in the stories? Had he seen distant countries?

“No,” answered Gorom all the questions. “Outside is just the same as inside. Sometimes a little colder, sometimes a little draughtier. There are bats but they are so high up that you can’t reach them and they are much smaller than the ones we have here. Sometimes you get all wet from all the water that drips from the stalactites and you sleep less easy. But all in all it is much the same as here in the caves.”

He went back to his cave and ate a lot of bat-pâté. It would be a long time before a morgel would travel above ground again. The stories they told each other became fairy tales because that is what stories become when you know they are not true.