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This time it's no joke. The Ghost Forest has indeed experienced a severe catastrophe — so severe that it now looks like a desert. It seems that even the intervention of Anne-Firecurl can hardly change anything.

But is it really so? Or will the little heroine's courage once again overcome all the obstacles the magical forest greets her with?

Without much hesitation (as always), Anne and her most faithful friend, Backpack, embark on breakneck adventures to uncover yet another secret of the magical world.

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FIRECURL
in the
GHOST DESERT

Zlatko
Enev



FIRECURL

in the
GHOST DESERT

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Illustrated by Diana Naneva

DINO PARK



VOLCANO

GHOST MANSION

"Mississippi"

FIDO'S HOME

GHOST Desert

Zlatko Enev

FIRECURL in the GHOST DESERT

Illustrated by Diana Naneva



Extaz
2024

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Zlatko Enev

FIRECURL in the GHOST DESERT



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Illustrated by Diana Naneva

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Chapter one:
Deadlock again

Rain clouds, dark and puffy as turkeys, had been threatening to pour their wrath on the gloomy town all day, but so far had only stayed with the threat, as if to anger the people even more. Anne-Firecurl, herself gloomier than even the rainiest cloud, had been searching for hours for someone to quarrel with, but had no luck, despite her best efforts.

Ever since she'd celebrated her tenth birthday — and that was only a few months ago, shortly after she'd returned from the Ghost Forest for the second time — her life had imperceptibly turned into something like a dreary autumn day — and almost as interesting. The magical land where she'd had such amazing adventures had vanished without a trace, leaving her without even the tiniest trifle to show off to her friends.

The days dragged by sluggishly, at first full of summer heat and dust, later cloudy and with autumn rain, until finally, inevitably, the school year began again. She was fed up with everything, but already so fed up! On top of that, Mum, who for some reason had it in her head that a girl of ten was much older than a girl of nine, plagued her incessantly with new tasks. Always smiling, but as stubborn as a donkey when it came to any discussion.

'No excuses, please,' was the inevitable response to Anne's perfectly reasonable questions. So the bed had to be made every day, even though everyone knew it would be rumped again only a few hours later. Vegetables and fruit had to be bought every day and only in small quantities. Just try to buy tomatoes for a week in advance and you'll have a fight until the shreds fly. And finally, the most unpleasant of all chores — every

week Anne had to tidy her room! Although Mum herself only tidied her own room every two or three weeks. A blatant injustice, the whole world was devilishly unfair!

She gritted her teeth and considered rebuilding the tepee in the garden again, but gave it up — she had done it so many times that she knew it inside out by now. Besides, she knew all too well that no matter how hard she tried, her tepee would not remotely resemble the magical structures in the forest. She had tried often enough. She didn't even think of the great palaces in Heinoland Park, how could she! She had only tried to imitate far simpler buildings: Grandpa Hedgehog's little water mill, Maggie the Magpie's house, the eagle's nest... Without any success, that was self-evident.

The only thing she had achieved was to attract the ridicule of all the local brats. That is, their even more unbearable ridicule. They were already looking for any opportunity to tease and insult her anyway, especially since she had tried to tell them some of her adventures. 'The Fantasist,' the insulting nickname that pesky Emil had attached to her — followed her everywhere as if she had just made up everything she told! Yes, wall-clocks do fly in the Ghost Forest — or at least one of them, Mr. Quirk, her good friend. Yes, you could meet talking animals and plants there — if words like 'animals' or 'plants' weren't too offensive to creatures like Madame Owl, Buzz the Fly, or the great prima donna Justa Diva, who was actually a potted flower. Not to mention the four flying elves and the ghosts themselves. Ah, why had she started? If only she'd known how much trouble she was going to get herself into! She would never have opened her mouth! Never, never! But now it was too late — she couldn't take a step at school without hearing from somewhere: 'The Fantasist is coming!'

'Weirdo', 'muddle-head', 'bubble-brain', 'braggard' — the children literally competed to give her newer and more irritating names, just to please Emil, that pompous poof. Who, of course, was simply begging for a good thrashing, even if he was a boy! If it weren't for his gang, that bunch of toadies who follow him everywhere, he'd have had it long ago! But it doesn't work like that, no matter how much her hands itch. Alone against ten? Ah, nonsense...

She swallowed a sigh as bitter as medicine, slung Backpack over her shoulder, and headed for the yard. At least there she could talk to her friend in peace.

Backpack! Her best friend, her companion on so many incredible and dangerous adventures. The dear, sensible and infinitely resourceful Backpack, a faithful friend even in the direst trouble. For everyone else, of course, little Backpack was just a fluffy teddy bear, and one with tattered and torn fur to boot. No one could guess what lies behind the humble surface, after all Backpack only comes to life in the Ghost Forest. And here at home it becomes again the most ordinary object, as if it had never been so alive and interesting.

Anne often wondered if Nerod Laptsev, the old wizard whose visit had started it all, was watching her from somewhere. Just to see if she could crack the next puzzle, of course. Head teacher Laptsev. At times like this, try as she might, she couldn't suppress the irritation rising in her chest. No doubt to him it was child's play, the simplest thing in the world. Wave the magic wand once, mutter a spell — and that's that. And she herself? What only she didn't have to come up with to fight Heino the Beaver, the greatest villain in the Ghost Forest, with nothing more than cunning and trickery. And what was she left with? A plucked, voiceless Backpack — and the nickname 'The Fantasist'. If that was any sort of justice!

She searched around the room, found the glass sphere that Mr. Laptsev had left her, lifted it carefully in front of her eyes and tried to look through it for the umpteenth time. In vain, of course — the magic ball had become completely cloudy, almost black. To see anything through it was now impossible — unlike the last time, when she could talk to Backpack, using the sphere. Talking only with signs, that is — because she could see the gestures, but not hear her friend's words. Which would be enough even now, if only the damned sphere wasn't broken! A complete standoff, wherever you looked.

Firecurl was about to throw the sphere away (she had already done it a hundred times, because she knew it wouldn't break), but then she thought about it and carefully put it on the floor. Of course, Backpack saw and heard everything. It was better not to irritate her with unnecessary nervousness, otherwise she would grumble again, that's how she

was, and keep rubbing her nose in how pointless such childishness was. It's easy for her...

She glanced at the hopeless mess in her room and thought for a moment about starting to tidy up today. Then she decided that would be too great a sacrifice and dragged her feet outside. But a little fast, for it was going to rain soon. Nothing more unpleasant than rainy weather.

At the door, she was met by Mum, with two large bags of groceries onto her bike.

'Where to?' she asked shortly. 'Finished with your homework?'

'Uh-huh,' replied Anne, and tried to get out before Mum caught her helping.

'You're dressed too lightly again. Just look at the weather, and you still have a cold.'

'Oh, leave me alone! T-shirt, shirt and jacket — what else should I wear? If I put anything else on, I'll start melting.'

'Yes, yes, I know that talk. And then when you get seriously ill, you'll start whining. Wait a minute, I need to talk to you. You're not in a hurry, are you?'

Anne pricked up her ears. 'I need to talk to you' usually meant 'you're in trouble'. This time, however, there seemed to be no threat in Mum's tone. She shrugged, and was about to spit through her teeth (something she had recently learned to do), but caught herself in time and, instead of trying the new trick, started whistling. With Mum, you had to be careful if you wanted to stay out of trouble.

'Sit down, sit down for a minute and stop fidgeting,' Mum said nervously, 'I'll be ready in a minute.'

She put the full shopping bags on the kitchen table, quickly washed her hands and sat down next to Anne, the kitchen towel over her shoulder.

'How are things at school? You haven't told me anything for a long time.'

Firecurl looked at her suspiciously. What did that mean? Mum knew very well that everything was fine at school. At least as far as the grades were concerned. She could handle the rest on her own.

'All right, I won't beat around the bush,' Mum added when she noticed her daughter's confusion. 'I just met Mrs Schlemihl, Peter's mother. She is quite concerned.'

Anne gave her a surprised look. Peter! That toady who was always lurking around Emil? What had he been up to?

'I hear he's been having trouble with maths lately,' Mum continued.

Anne nodded.

'So, Mrs. Schlemihl asked me for a favour. The thing is, he needs help. I promised to talk to you. Of course, if you don't mind. Only once a week, not more.'

Firecurl was so surprised that she didn't even manage to object at first. Peter? Here at home? No, that was out of the question! No, no and no again!

Mum, who obviously had no illusions, quickly continued talking.

'By the way, I spoke to your father on the phone these days.'

Anne suddenly became quiet. When her father was mentioned, it became serious. She had seen him for the last time about a year ago.

'I told him you wanted a new computer. You keep complaining that your games don't run on the old one, don't you? If everything goes normal, we'll buy you a new, more powerful one for Christmas.'

'What's the matter, aren't you happy?' asked Mum, who was obviously getting fed up with Anne's silence. 'Come on, don't be so stubborn! After all, it's just a little thing. Oh, before I forget — this letter came for you today. I don't know who it's from, the sender is missing.'

Firecurl was just bursting with rage, but now it was too late. That she had let herself be tricked so easily! The moment she heard about the new computer, she forgot everything and quickly agreed. Now she was convinced that she had made the biggest mistake of her life. How was she supposed to get along with Peter, especially if he started pestering her? Ah, he wasn't going to get away with it this time! He should just dare, just one pointed remark and... Well, of course, he was long overdue for a lesson.

Her eyes fell on the envelope lying untouched on the table. Who could have thought of her? She turned it curiously back and forth. The old yellowed envelope was dirty and crumpled, there was no stamp and the crawly letters on it looked like bird tracks. Anne wrinkled her nose and opened it. Inside was just a scrap of paper that had obviously been torn

out in haste... from where, actually? She had never seen such strange paper, it had sinews and calluses like the skin of a sick person. Slightly disgusted, she picked up the scrap with two fingers and began to read...

'What nonsense!' she exclaimed angrily after making sure there was nothing else in the envelope. 'You kidding me?'

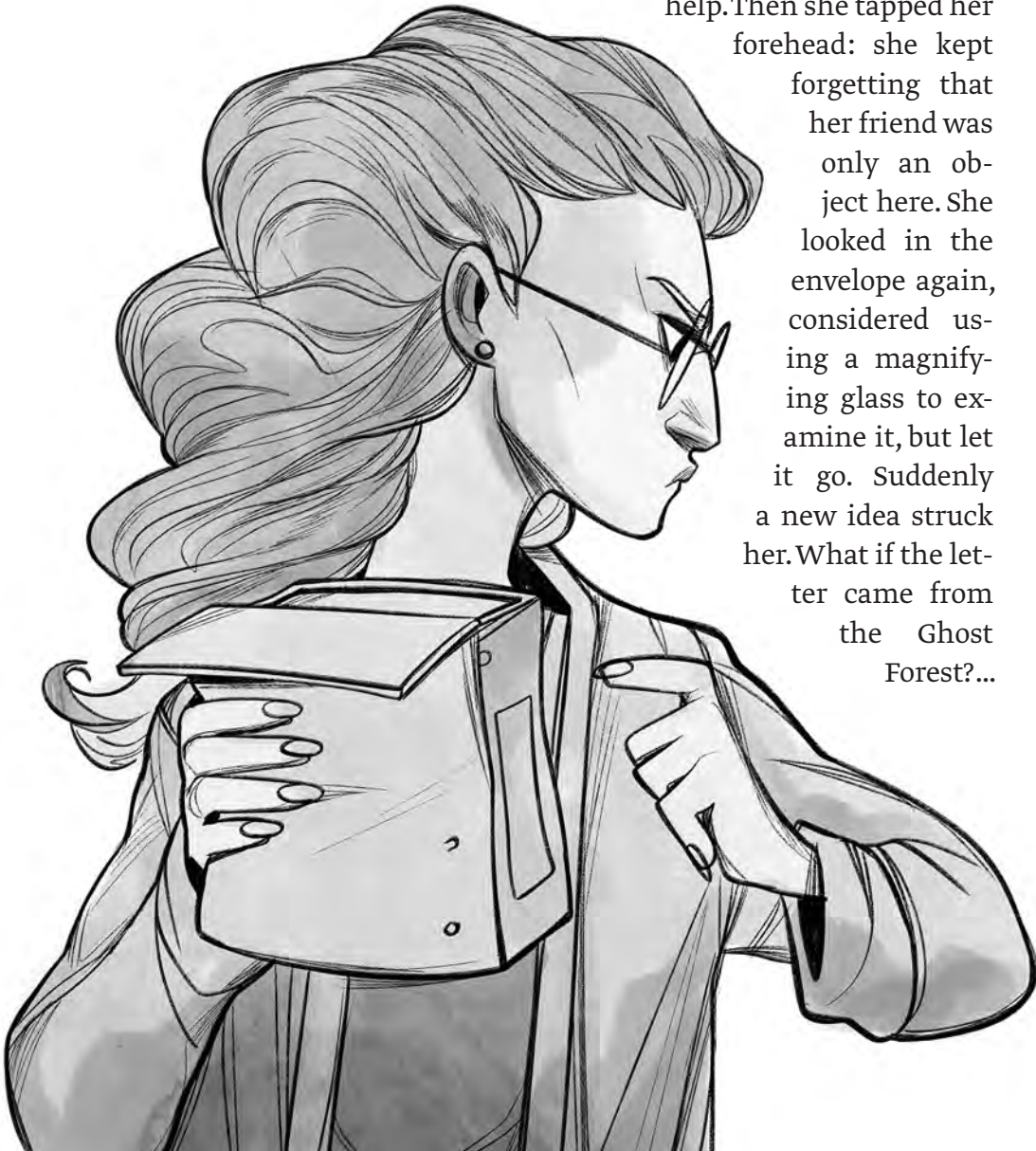
She read the short message again, this time aloud.

'Beware... of the black... light.'

Complete nonsense! There was no such thing as black light, every child knew that!

Out of old habit, she looked over at Backpack in the hope of getting help. Then she tapped her

forehead: she kept forgetting that her friend was only an object here. She looked in the envelope again, considered using a magnifying glass to examine it, but let it go. Suddenly a new idea struck her. What if the letter came from the Ghost Forest?...



Oh, nonsense! But why not? The last time she heard this voice out of nowhere, she didn't want to believe it either. And then it all turned around like that... Suddenly she was no longer bored. She looked around tensely and began to search for some hidden clue...

But miracles, of course, never happen when we expect them... Anne waited for a minute or two, then sighed bitterly and made her way out again. Suddenly, Mum's voice made her flinch.

'Anne, come here right away, please!'

This time there was no doubt — behind the polite invitation there was a blatant threat. She hurried downstairs so as not to make matters worse.

Mum was waiting for her in the kitchen, the porcelain sugar bowl in her hand.

'What does that mean?' she asked threateningly. 'You haven't started any experiments, have you? Where is the sugar?'

Only two days ago the sugar bowl was half full.'

Anne looked at her uncomprehendingly. What sugar, what experiments?

'I don't understand,' she replied curtly. 'I haven't even touched the sugar, I'm not a baby.'

'O-o-o, stop acting, I beg you!' roared Mum. 'No one lives in this house but you and me. Then who ate all the sugar?'

'I don't know, I'm telling you!' replied Anne, no less annoyed. 'If you don't believe me, here you go: my word of honour!'

She raised her hand solemnly, but Mum, for whatever reason, refused to be impressed by the dramatic gesture, although her tone softened a little.



‘Hm-m-m, we’ll see about that later,’ she nagged, still a little irritated. ‘Well, go play, and don’t let it get too late, it’s school tomorrow. But from now on, the sugar stays locked. I want to make sure there are no ghosts wandering and rooting around here, understand?’

Anne guffawed in offence and hurried out into the garden. Ghosts, how so easy to say! If only Mum knew what she was talking about!

Peter, blond, thin and long as a beanpole, had his hands in the pockets of his wide trousers and was looking out of the window. He paced nervously and resolutely avoided Anne’s gaze.

‘What now? Are we just supposed to stare at each other?’

She pushed a stack of books to the floor and moved the vacated chair over to Peter.

‘You can sit down too if you want. Relax, I don’t bite.’

He puffed, but sat down, which apparently exhausted his supply of good will. In any case, he frowned and puffed even louder. Obviously, he had decided that this was the best way to show his displeasure.

‘Look, I didn’t push myself to invite you here,’ Anne said rather nervously, ‘It wasn’t my idea.’

When she saw that she would get no answer, she silently took out notebooks and school books from her bag.

‘Come on, let’s get it over with.’

Peter looked even more dejected, but at least he opened his school bag and took out a few exercise books, his expression that of a humble person who had learned to accept blows of fate.

The two began to work separately from each other, each bent over his own notebook. Anne tried not to watch him, but soon noticed that he hadn’t even begun to write. She waited a little longer, then turned to him and looked at him point blank.

‘If you think that’s too easy, we can try the other exercise book. It’s a little more interesting.’

‘That’s dumb,’ he replied, resolutely slamming the notebook shut. ‘I hate maths.’

‘Yeah, you think I eat maths for breakfast?’ said Anne through clenched teeth. ‘We all hate maths. But you can’t do without it, at least not at school.’

‘Don’t you have anything more interesting here?’ he said, looking her in the eye for the first time. ‘What games do you have on the computer?’

‘Well... it’s a bit old,’ stammered Anne. ‘But Mum has already promised me a new, stronger one. Then I can finally play ‘The Hobbit’.’

‘The Hobbit’ is a bore,’ Peter remarked curtly. ‘Only the graphics are good. Otherwise it’s an insult to the brain cells. Games like that were on Nintendo ten years ago.’

‘And how do you know that?’ Anne eyed him ironically.

‘My cousin told me,’ he admitted reluctantly.

‘Anyway, the book is great,’ she replied dryly, irritated by his confident tone. ‘If the game resembles it even a little, it’s worth trying.’

‘Okay, okay, it doesn’t matter that your computer is old,’ he said, continuing to avoid her gaze. ‘So tell me, what games do you have?’

‘Well... it doesn’t have a 3D card,’ Anne mumbled. ‘And the processor is pretty weak. Actually, it’s Mum’s old computer. Apart from ‘The Worms’, nothing runs on it.’

‘Oh, ‘The Worms’ is a classic.’ Peter suddenly became animated. ‘An evergreen, if you know what I mean. Go on, turn it on. Let’s play a few rounds. I’m a grandmaster of the bazooka.’

‘Hey, hey, wait a minute,’ Anne resisted, though not very forcefully. ‘We have to show we’ve done something, don’t we? Otherwise, our mothers will get mad.’

‘Well, work is not going to run away,’ he interrupted her. ‘Come on, relax. If you agree, maybe one day I’ll even show you what I’ve got on my computer.’

He narrowed his eyes and looked at her slyly.

‘Nvidia GeForce Extreme, last generation, and the processor can actually do everything — except fly. ‘The Lord of the Rings’ runs like in the cinema, I have all the versions. Not to mention the various strategic games that bore you to death. I’ve been through all the eras and empires.’

Anne bit her lip.

‘And do you have ‘Harry Potter’ too?’ she asked timidly.

“Harry Potter?” asked Peter with a laugh. “What century are you living in, girl? It’s even sillier than ‘The Hobbit’! All the time you’re running around empty halls collecting whatever crap you can make magic out of. Well, Quidditch is a bit of fun, but only the first two or three times, then it gets dead boring.”

“It can’t be!” objected Anne, almost crying. “The books are so great!”

“Books, books!”, Peter puffed disdainfully. “And then you’re surprised when everyone says you’re a weirdo...”

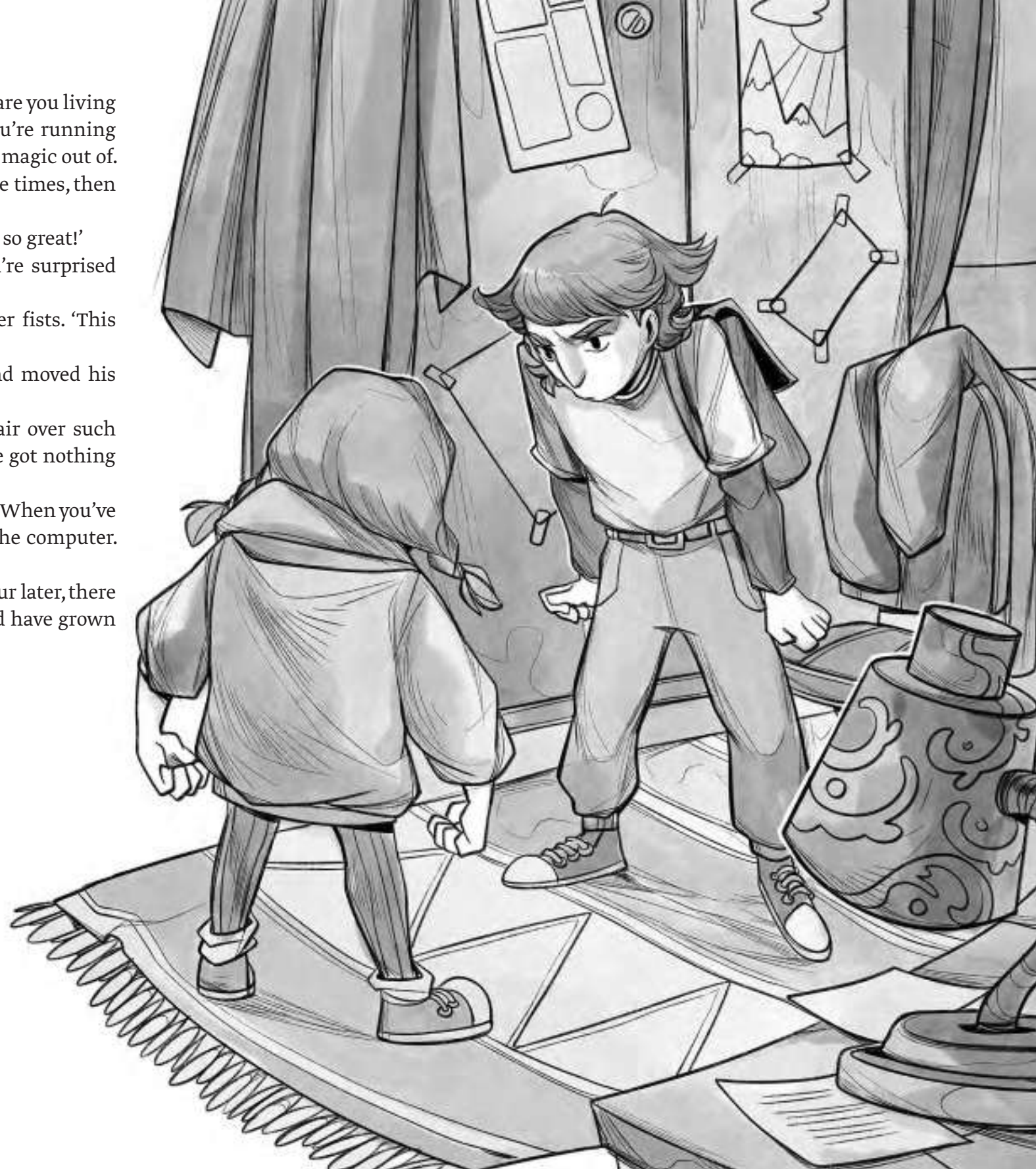
“Hey, watch your mouth!” replied Firecurl, clenching her fists. “This isn’t school, so make sure you don’t get hurt!”

Peter gave her a surprised look, thought better of it and moved his chair back.

“It’s all right, we don’t want to get into each other’s hair over such nonsense,” he snorted. “Go on, fire up ‘The Worms’. If you’ve got nothing else...”

“Out of the question!” Anne interrupted him, still furious. “When you’ve learned how much two and two is, maybe I’ll let you use the computer. Before that, you need to do some chores, buddy!”

When Mum served fresh biscuits and orange juice an hour later, there was such a frosty silence in the room that ice flowers could have grown on the windows.





Chapter two:
The Visitors

‘Listen, I’ve told you a hundred times to turn off your computer at night! It was on again yesterday morning, this’s already annoying me. And hurry up a little, if you please, you’re going to be late for school.’

Mum stood on the threshold and, out of old habit, rapped her knuckles on the doorframe. Anne, dishevelled and puffy from sleep, slipped out of bed and shuffled towards the bathroom.

‘But I turned it off,’ she contradicted, not sounding very convinced. ‘I’m sure I turned it off last night. How else, after yesterday’s shouting. You’d have thought I’d forgotten to turn off the iron.’

‘Stop being witty, please! You know I can’t stand sloppiness. This is not just about the electricity, you just have to keep your own things in order. I’ve been repeating that for at least five years now.’

‘And I’ve been repeating for at least five minutes that I’ve turned it off,’ growled Anne, who had become fully awake by now. ‘I don’t know what’s wrong with this box, it’s gone completely nuts. When I got home yesterday, it was already switched on again and the screen was full of incomprehensible signs. I wonder if it’s caught a virus.’

‘I’m sorry, what?’

Mum walked towards the computer, eyed it from a safe distance and thought hard.

‘Have you perhaps exchanged any sticks with your friends?’

Anne shrugged her shoulders.

‘Why should I exchange, it won’t run a decent game anyway. The old box is only good for the rubbish.’

‘That’s enough, that’s enough... Have you perhaps received any emails? From unknown people, I mean. Try to remember, I beg you! You know how important my work is. If a virus creeps into my computer...’

‘Oh, mails, how boring! I haven’t touched the mail programme for a month, there’s nothing interesting there anyway.’

‘You get what you wrote for,’ Mum remarked coolly. Meanwhile, she was already hastily leafing through her notebook. ‘Okay, your breakfast is downstairs in the kitchen and the school box — in the fridge. And don’t forget the gym bag, you have swimming today. Sorry, I’m not seeing you off. This computer thing seems too important to me. I have to make a call right away...’

She turned around and disappeared into her room. Anne looked after her for a long time, scratched her head and repeated:

‘I’m sure I switched it off, though. I’m sure of it.’

‘Strange.’ The technician took a sip of coffee and bent over the computer again. ‘This is the first time I’ve seen anything like this.’

‘What exactly, is it that serious?’ asked Mum, startled. ‘A virus, isn’t it? I knew it.’

‘No, no, the machine is actually quite alright. Only the keyboard...’

He remained silent, put on the special glasses with the small, cylindrical magnifying lenses again and concentrated on examining the keyboard of the computer.

‘There, look at this. That’s the strangest thing I’ve ever seen. The rubber coating is... like it’s been eaten away. As if someone had poured acid over it.’

‘Anne!’ said Mum gruffly. ‘How many times have I told you not to drink Coke when playing computer games!’

Anne pulled up.

‘No, the little one certainly hasn’t done anything,’ the technician said. ‘Look at this, the small holes are distributed exclusively over the cone-like rubber pads through which contact is made with the die. It’s as if someone did it on purpose. And absolutely precisely. This is definitely not the work of a child. And yet I don’t understand who would do such a thing.’

Mum looked at him anxiously and nodded her head.

'So what now, do we have to buy a new keyboard?', Anne interjected into the conversation. 'I've got a bit saved up if it's necessary...'

The technician smiled a little.

'No, that will hardly be necessary. Actually, the keyboard works perfectly well, it just needs to be cleaned thoroughly. And the small holes hardly bother you, unless dust collects in them. In that case, I would really recommend buying a new keyboard. But for now, the old one will do.'

'So the computer is fine?' asked Anne. 'Then what was all the fuss about? Anne this, Anne that... No matter what happens, it's always my fault!'

Snorting, she left the room. The technician smiled once more and packed up his tools.

However, when she found the computer switched on again a few days later, Anne was not at all annoyed. She had no time for that, because the screen was shining in big letters:

'Don't touch the keyboard!'

Although her heart was beating wildly, she was not frightened. 'Goliath, this is the work of Goliath the Invincible!' it flashed through her

mind. Immediately, images of

the exciting chess duel she had

played to a draw against Goli-

ath the Invincible, the most

powerful computer in the

Ghost Forest, ran before

her mind's eye. Not

without help, but still

she had managed it.

Man oh man, what

a huge surprise! At

last! Finally, news

from the forest!

'Goliath, is

that you?' she

asked cautiously,

taking a few steps



back for safety's sake. 'If you think you scared me, you're wrong. That kind of thing doesn't work on me, you should know that, shouldn't you?'

The computer was obviously unimpressed by these callous words. The screen went dark for a moment, then a new message appeared:

'I don't know who Goliath is. I'm Dan, a fourth-degree engineer.'

'Anne, are you finally coming or should I start without you?' she heard Mum's impatient voice from the kitchen. 'Turn off the computer already, you've played enough for today.'

'Wait a bit, Dan, or whoever you are,' Anne whispered excitedly and switched off the computer. 'Later we'll talk in peace.'

This, however, turned out to be not so easy. When she returned half an hour later, trembling with impatience, the computer remained silent, no matter how hard she tried. This annoyed her terribly, but all attempts to make it see reason, for good or ill, were in vain. Nothing helped. Maybe that's why, when she finally went to bed without having learned anything, her eyes filled with the bitter and hot tears of anger.

The night, which had begun so unpleasantly, dragged on just as miserably. Finally she managed to fall asleep, but only to be tormented by nightmares teeming with all kinds of monsters. Finally, she was awakened by an unbearable itch, as if she had rolled in nettles. She jumped up, threw the rumpled blanket off her, flicked on the bedside lamp and began scratching madly and searching the bed, but found nothing suspicious. She was about to snuggle in again when she suddenly opened her eyes wide — the computer screen lit up dully and sentences appeared in the same bold font as before:

'Enough lazing around! Time to work!'

Firecurl straightened up in bed and looked around cautiously before getting up and slowly approaching the work table, ready to bolt at the slightest sign of danger. Only the chirping of crickets in the garden and the low hum of the computer disturbed the nightly silence. She cleared her throat, bent to the screen and whispered:

'Well, if you insist. I have nothing against work, it just mustn't be boring. But first you have to tell me who you are. And how you managed to crawl into my computer.'

The monitor lit up, the words disappeared and a new message appeared:

‘All right, I’m coming out. Turn on the light and make sure you don’t trample me.’

‘Oh, so you’re really not Goliath,’ Anne exclaimed, disappointed. ‘I thought he was... Hey, wait a minute! Why... not trample you? Are you...’

She didn’t finish the sentence because in the meantime something tiny crawled onto the edge of the keyboard. An ant, of course — just as she had suspected. A most ordinary ant like the thousand others Anne had met in the forest.

Firecurl almost jumped for joy. Her friends, the ants! How could they have ended up here? She recalled her last encounter with them... Yes, exactly! Back then, Backpack had put some ants into one of her many little pockets, but they had shaken them out carefully and assumed that all the ants had fallen out again. Apparently that had not been the case. Well, well, well! So it was possible to bring something back from the enchanted forest after all.

‘What’s the matter, did you fall asleep?’ the computer Dan buzzed in a strangely tinny voice. ‘We agreed we would work, didn’t we?’

‘What, you can speak too?’ Anne couldn’t close her mouth in astonishment. ‘I knew you were smart, but this smart? Tell me, how do you do it?’

‘Right now we’re using the computer’s language module,’ the metallic voice replied. ‘Quite normal thing, standard part of the operating system.’

‘Ugh.’ Anne scratched her head. ‘I think I’ll start to understand soon.’ Then she perked up again. ‘Tell me, was it you who ate all the sugar? Mum read me the riot act because of you!’

‘That’s exactly why we have to talk,’ said the metallic voice. ‘We can’t stay here any longer, there’s not enough food. If we don’t go home soon, we’ll all be lost.’

‘You poor ones,’ Anne said anxiously. ‘Are you so hungry? If you want, I can make you a slice with butter.’

‘The local food doesn’t agree with us,’ was the answer. ‘Even the sugar is different here. We have to hurry back, we are running out of time.’

‘Fine, but how do you do that?’ asked Anne. ‘We used to be able to use the glass sphere. You might know that if you try to break it, there appears

this magical whirlwind that then carries you into the forest. But that only worked as long as the sphere was transparent. I don’t know what happened to it, but it’s completely black now. It’s no good any more, see for yourself.’

She quickly searched the room and soon discovered the black sphere rolled between two boxes of old magazines. She returned with it and placed it next to the keyboard.

‘You see, completely black. And the whirlwind doesn’t work either, I’ve tried everything. Oh, if only I could help you! But with this broken sphere? We won’t get far with that.’

‘We need to fix it,’ Dan said. ‘Do you have any technical reference books here?’

‘Technical reference books?’ Anne’s eyes snapped open. ‘No, I don’t have a single one. However... Wait a minute, I thought of something. We can look it up on the internet. But sure, I’ll do a quick search.’

She pulled up the chair and was about to start typing on the keys when the computer buzzed warningly.

‘Don’t touch the keyboard!’ the metallic voice said gruffly. ‘There are ants under each key that take care of our communication. If you press a key, you’ll crush it.’

‘So that’s what the tiny holes are for.’ Anne slapped her hands together over her head. ‘Dan, did you make that up? So that’s how you control the computer, is it? You must be a genius!’

‘Necessity is the mother of invention,’ said the computer Dan modestly. ‘And now back to the important things. First — the crystal sphere...’

‘Oh yes,’ Anne sighed. ‘I’ve already told you everything, I can’t think of anything else. Ever since I came back from the forest last time, it’s been black all the time. I don’t know what to do. If only Backpack was alive...’

‘What’s wrong with her?’ asked the computer Dan, curious for the first time. ‘Your friend is as fit as a fiddle, isn’t she?’

‘Well, I know,’ Anne replied. ‘That’s how it was the last time, but back then I could talk to her through the sphere. Here in our world, she can’t move or talk, you see. Back then I looked through the sphere and saw her moving — and that’s how we could communicate, through gestures. But now it doesn’t work, the damn sphere makes it impossible!’

‘One moment, please,’ Dan replied. About a minute passed, which seemed like an hour to Anne, then the metallic voice spoke again, so impassive that it sounded almost funny:

‘Anne, you silly! I love you terribly!’

‘Dan, if you’re planning on pulling my leg...’

‘Right now I’m broadcasting what Backpack says,’ Dan replied. ‘By the way, she’s been repeating this for at least five minutes. It’s getting really annoying.’

‘Backpack! My beloved Backpack!’ Anne grabbed her friend and threw her high into the air. ‘I’ll eat you up right now!’

‘She says if you don’t put her to the floor right now, she’ll never speak a word to you again,’ Dan interjected. ‘You should know that she doesn’t like that kind of joking.’

‘It’s okay, it’s okay,’ Anne relented, still dazed with joy, and carefully put Backpack back on the table. ‘Oh, I just can’t stay still.’

‘Then put on a tutu and dance ballet!’ replied Backpack with the help of the computer. ‘Jeez, what a brat, when are you going to come to your senses?’

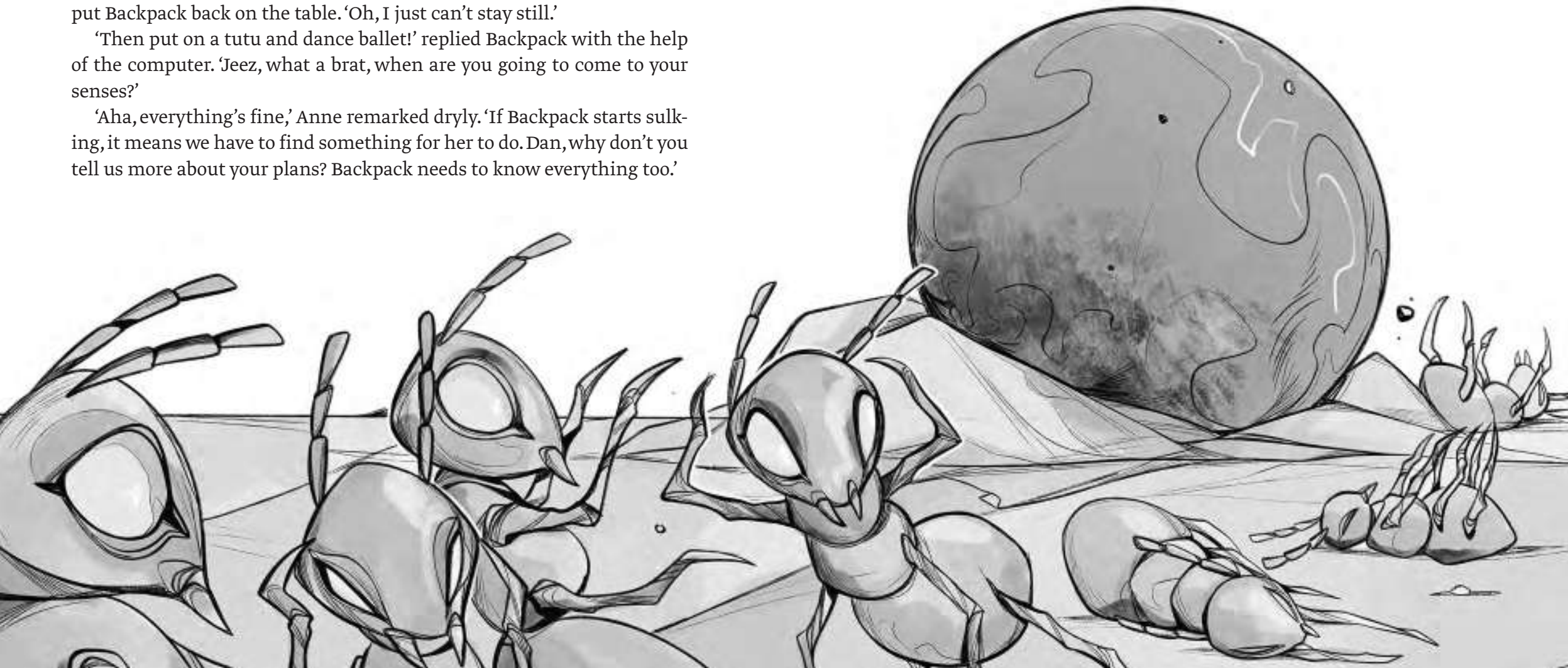
‘Aha, everything’s fine,’ Anne remarked dryly. ‘If Backpack starts sulking, it means we have to find something for her to do. Dan, why don’t you tell us more about your plans? Backpack needs to know everything too.’

‘At the moment I have no plans,’ the ant engineer replied. ‘One thing is clear, we have to find our way back home. As I said, the food doesn’t agree with us here, and it’s already getting too cold.’

‘That won’t be so easy,’ Anne said worriedly. ‘I want to look through the black of the sphere too, but I can’t. By the way, this sphere usually shows what’s happening in the Ghost Forest. That’s just for your information, Dan.’

‘Wait a minute, wait a minute,’ she continued without waiting for the answer, which took an agonisingly slow time. ‘The orb always shows what’s happening in the forest, doesn’t it? Last time we found out about Heinoland Park that way.’

A dull question mark appeared on the screen.



‘So what I’m saying is that there must be something wrong with the forest if the sphere stays black. There must be something like... an eclipse there, you know?’

‘Before I answer that, I need to analyse it thoroughly,’ the ant engineer replied. ‘Attention please, my comrades are now taking care of this operation.’

‘Good, but watch out,’ Anne replied. ‘I forgot to tell you that the sphere sometimes gets very hot. You’d think there was a fire burning inside it.’

‘We’ll know in a minute,’ Dan said. ‘Now please don’t move!’

At the same moment, as if they had been shaken out of a sack, hundreds, if not thousands, of ants suddenly crawled onto the table. Anne had no time to wonder, already a living, dull flickering wave was spreading over the sphere. Firecurl waited patiently, but the ants obviously didn’t think of stopping any time soon. All this took so long that her patience was soon exhausted.

‘Listen, Dan,’ she spoke up. ‘Will you finally tell us what’s going on? Have you discovered something?’

No answer.

‘All right, I take it that means ‘no’,’ she answered her own question. ‘By the way, I forgot to ask if I could come back with you as soon as you know how. You won’t leave me here alone, will you?’

Her words were interrupted by a sudden stir among the ants, which, though noiseless, seemed quite panicky. The dense, metallic flickering veil that covered the sphere developed cracks and finally holes, after which the ants started falling down onto the table like a black rain. Some of them ran wildly back and forth, others remained lying down, and only a few made an effort to restore order among their fellows. Gradually the chaos subsided and soon the wave of tiny creatures was lost among the clutter lying on the table. Before Anne knew it, they had disappeared, just as silently and unexpectedly as they had come.

‘Hello, Dan, what happened here?’ she cried, startled. ‘Did something bad happen? Why did you all run apart?’

‘Da-a-an, please don’t keep me in suspense,’ she begged after waiting in vain for a tense minute. ‘Just tell me what happened, I’m dying of fear!’

‘One moment please,’ came the emotionless reply. ‘At the moment I am analysing the situation.’

‘Fine, analyse all you want, but at least tell me if it was dangerous.’

‘It was fatal for thirty-two of our comrades,’ Dan hummed. ‘Heatstroke. This sphere seems to be more dangerous than we thought.’

‘Fatal?’ Anne slapped both hands over her mouth. ‘But why...’

She stared at the sphere in shock and almost cried out: it had changed colour. Instead of black, it was now a dirty grey.

‘Dan, did you see what happened?’ she whispered hoarsely. ‘The sphere is no longer black. What does that mean?’

‘I don’t know,’ the ant replied. ‘In any case, I don’t like this sphere. I definitely don’t like it, absolutely not.’



Chapter Three: The Research Programme

The following weeks passed as if in a dream. Anne got up every morning without complaining, stoically endured the long hours at school, and then immediately ran home, where she rushed straight to her room to continue exploring the mysterious sphere. By now, she had taken over everything herself — the ants refrained from direct contact with the sphere and now relied solely on her. Of course, this didn't go without stress and anxiety. The accident at the first attempt had shocked her as much as the ants. Now she tried to avoid any unnecessary contact with the sphere and only touched it with gloves. She also wore sunglasses and the thickest coat she could find in Mum's wardrobe. This strange, heavy disguise did not go unnoticed, of course, as she ended up being surprised by Mum during a particularly difficult experiment. Anne was just trying to work the sphere with a well-heated mixture of three-quarters vinegar and one-quarter oil, as well as a large amount of soda ash, plus all sorts of spices that she had successfully pilfered from the kitchen cupboard.

'What, you're experimenting again?' Mum asked as she inspected from a safe distance Anne's work table, which by now resembled a small chemistry lab after a medium explosion. 'I won't be able to wear this coat for years, I'm sure. Oh well, I couldn't stand it anyway. Hey, open the window once in a while, you hear? One could faint from the stench.'

She held her nose and hurried out of the room with watery eyes. Anne threw off the protective gown and began to write down the results of the experiment in her research diary.



‘No change again. Strange, I don’t understand it. The sphere just doesn’t want to become transparent. Backpack, do you have any ideas?’

‘I’m sure there’s something very specific behind this play of colours,’ Backpack replied with the help of the computer. ‘Why don’t you read me the more important results again?’

‘Again? I’m sure we’re reading it for the hundredth time,’ Anne tried to shirk, but then read aloud:

‘Thursday, 30 September

Horrible! Mum is threatening to stop supporting my research programme. And all because of a saucepan! As if the cooking pot were more important than a scientific discovery. Today I tried to rinse the sphere with a solution of rice pudding...And when it stank everywhere of burnt food, it was already too late. Mum was just raging. It was her newest cooking pot. Thank God she gave me one last chance, but only if I would clean everything myself. By the time I had scraped out the pot, my arms almost fell off. However, the old cooking pot will do just as well.’

‘Feel free to skip the details,’ Backpack interrupted her, ‘and stick to the facts. Personal comments are not allowed in scientific texts.’

‘Facts, facts, I’m sick and tired of facts,’ Anne replied, exasperated. ‘I have to write about something else too, otherwise my teeth will fall out from boredom.’

She continued to nag for a while, but got no answer and had to read on willy-nilly.

‘Saturday, 2 October

The sphere is completely black again. Dan claims that my experiments are pure nonsense, but refuses to make a proposal of his own. So the new experiment is put to the vote. Result: five thousand (the ants) against, one (me) for and one abstention (Backpack). The ants’ votes count as one and Backpack is not against — so the experiment is accepted.

The sphere is being immersed for two hours in a mixture of water, washing powder and perfume, in the ratio of seventy, twenty and ten percent. Light conditions — normal. Temperature of the mixture — about twenty degrees. Result — inconspicuous.

Sunday, 3 October

Experiment repeated, this time in the dark. Result — again inconspicuous.

Monday, 4 October

Experiment carried out for the third time, this time in mixed light conditions. Result — Mum made a terrible racket because I had used up all her perfume. It had been expensive, very expensive, and a gift on top of that. O holy simplicity!’

‘When are you going to read me something important?’ the computer grumbled again. ‘I told you, we’re only interested in facts.’

Anne moomed something unintelligible, pressed her lips together and read mechanically:

‘Wednesday, 6 October

Investigation of possible reaction to special light conditions. Left the sphere at the window all day. No visible result.

Thursday, 7 October

Investigating of possible reaction in the absence of light. The sphere hidden in a large box under the bed. No visible result.

Friday, 8 October

Flushed the sphere with a mixture of castor oil, rivanol and hydrogen peroxide. No visible result.’

‘Jump straight to the first result, please,’ whirred the computer Dan.

‘If you insist,’ Anne replied with icy politeness, flipped a few more pages and read aloud:

‘Friday, 15 October

The sphere has changed colour! This morning it was dull and dirty grey again like the night the ants examined it. By the way, they claim to have noticed reflections of yellow and red in it.’

‘Stop!’ the computer Dan spoke up. ‘If the change happened in the morning, we need to check what we did the day before. Somewhere there lies the answer.’

‘Do you think I wouldn’t have thought of that?’ replied Anne bitingly. ‘The thing is — we didn’t do an experiment the day before. On Thursday I had to help Mum.’

Something like a disappointed hiss sounded from the computer.

‘Shall I continue reading or tell you outright what happened from then on?’ asked Firecurl. ‘I know this diary by heart anyway. The sphere became clear and transparent two more times, on two different days. So far we haven’t been able to determine why. There is no connection between the two days.’

‘Read everything in order,’ came the reply. ‘But only the facts!’

‘Oh, you can wait a long time for that!’ Anne was really angry now. ‘Every time you pester me with your facts! I’m fed up! This reading out is useless, better we talk about what we remember. So far, the sphere changed colour four times, the first time the ants examined it, and three times during my, ugh, our research programme.’

‘In any case, we need to establish what is common between these cases,’ replied the computer Dan. ‘If we find the answer to this question, the problem is solved. Then we just have to treat the sphere in the same way until it is completely transparent. Then the magic whirlwind will work again.’

‘If we don’t set fire to the house in the meantime,’ Anne remarked sceptically. ‘All right, all right, agreed. Everything is exactly as you say. But how can we discover this common ground? We have already read through the diary a hundred times. There is no commonality between the four days. On two of them we did completely different experiments, and on the third — nothing at all. If we add the case with the ants, the chaos is complete. It looks like the sphere did whatever it thought of.’

‘Only discipline and scientific conscientiousness will help here,’ said the computer Dan. ‘The colour change cannot be random. We just have to look at the events from a different, unusual perspective.’

‘Unusual perspective, blah-blah!’, Anne got annoyed again. ‘I know what that means, I have to read the research diary again.’

‘What else are we left with?’

‘If you want, I can recite it to you,’ she suggested, looking outside. Then she quickly added: ‘All right, fine by me. There you have your facts:’

Thursday, 21 October

Experiment conducted on processing the sphere with music. Result — a complaint from the neighbours.’

‘And why are you reading this out now?’ the computer asked almost angrily.

‘Because the sphere changed colour the next morning, that’s why,’ Anne hissed. ‘However, wait a minute... But yes it did — on Monday the 25th, it changed colour again — and again in the morning. What do you think, was that a coincidence? Aha! Look, how simple, but no one has thought of it until now. There’s your unexpected perspective. What do you say to that, uh?’

‘You mean the colour change is related to the darkness?’ the computer asked.

‘I don’t think so, we’ve already tried that,’ Anne replied, so happy about her unexpected idea that she even lost the desire to bicker. ‘But after all, it can hardly be a coincidence. Three times the colour has changed — and always early in the morning.’

‘Apart from the case with the ants,’ the computer quickly interjected.

‘Right, I forgot about that. But we’ll think about that later. Now let’s concentrate. Please pay complete attention, I’m reading out again. And this time I don’t want to hear about any facts. I’ll read everything, even if it makes you sick.’

Friday, 22 October

Today I almost burnt myself on the damn sphere. Good thing I work with gloves. When I took it out of the pot early this morning, I thought it was going to start smoking. Its colour is different again, this time lighter than last time, you can almost see something in her now, a red glow is visible under the grey. In the afternoon we did various experiments with different materials. So far no result. I’m afraid I’ll have a fight with Mum, the kitchen cupboard is almost empty.

Saturday, 23 October

The sphere is black again. It's really exasperating! The experiments don't work at all. I could cry with rage!

Monday, 25 October

When I took the sphere out, I accidentally knocked over the cooking pot, it fell to the floor and woke Mum up. It was half past five in the morning. She got terribly angry and threatened to forbid me all experiments. She only calmed down when I told her that Edison had tried over a thousand substances for the filament in the light bulb. By the way, the sphere changed colour again, but this time less than before.'

'You see?' asked Anne, her eyes shining. 'Always in the morning. That can't be a coincidence.'

'So the colour change has some connection with the night,' said the computer Dan.

'Listen, this sphere has been here hundreds of nights,' Anne replied, not very politely. 'Yet it has only become transparent four times. It's not that simple, you'll have to think of something else.'

'Wait a minute, Backpack wants to say something,' the voice interrupted her.

'Then let her, what is she waiting for? We're not in a meeting here.'

'But you have to promise her first that you won't laugh at her.'

'Why so shy? All right, I promise. Now come on out with your enlightenment, Backpack.'

'It's... about the cooking pot,' the computer Dan mumbled. 'This cooking pot...'

Anne wanted to laugh, but remembered her promise just in time and suppressed her laughter, albeit with difficulty.

'What about the cooking pot? Since I burnt it, there's nothing special there.'

'Well, I just noticed that every time the sphere becomes transparent, the cooking pot is mentioned. I just wanted to say that, nothing else.'

'Aha, understood. By the way, if I had just read you your 'facts' you would never have noticed. But now back to the important things.'

'Don't be so hasty, please,' the computer buzzed again. 'I don't think Backpack's idea is so bad either. Your diary really does mention these two facts together every time. Maybe that's not a coincidence.'

'Oh nonsense,' Anne interrupted him angrily. 'Then how do you explain what happened to the ants? The cooking pot didn't play a role and it wasn't dark either.'

'If I could explain, I wouldn't be sitting here putting up with your bad mood,' Backpack replied with the help of the computer. 'Just say it if you want to finish without me, I would need a rest anyway.'

'It's all right. Then we'll just think about this stupid cooking pot,' Anne agreed, albeit without much enthusiasm. 'Why don't we start with this: *every morning* I take the sphere out of the cooking pot, in case you haven't noticed. We agreed that we'd rather not leave it out anywhere, okay? Well then, why does the sphere change colour only on certain days?'

She waited a while, and when she got no answer, she added emphatically:

'And now, as I said, back to the important things.'

The following days passed in strenuous work, which, however, yielded nothing. Time passed, the secret of the sphere remained in the dark despite all efforts. Anne became more and more irritable, talking to her was a real torture. She interrupted everyone, argued about every little thing and fought about all. This inevitably led to the next argument between her and Backpack. Unlike before, Firecurl didn't grumble this time, but just said tiredly:

'Damn it, I'm sick of it too! Listen, I want to confess something to you...'

'What?' it buzzed impatiently from the computer. 'Did you do something behind our backs?'

'Well, not quite. Uh-uh... Whew, it's not so easy. It's about... it's about this stupid cooking pot.'

She was silent, wrinkled her nose and squinted her eyes as if the sun were shining in her face.

'Now don't beat about the bush. What about the cooking pot?'

'I didn't tell you at the time... I thought it was a terribly stupid idea at first.'

'Nothing new so far.'

'Yes, but then... then I remembered something else.'

'What? Tell me!'

'So... when this mishap happened with the rice pudding... Mum forbade me to use her new saucepan. The old one would do.'

'We don't understand anything.'

'Yes, but once or twice the old pot was used and then I took the new one again.'

'So what?'

'Now I come to the important part. You can believe me or not, but I am quite sure that the sphere became clear exactly after the nights I used the new pot.'

'And you didn't tell us that until now? Man, I could kill you!'

'I already told you, I'm really embarrassed...'

'That's why you're so angry... Sure, that's typical for you. You'd rather bite your tongue than admit a mistake.'

'Oh, leave me alone!'

'Aha, here we go again. But let's leave that. Go on, go downstairs and grab the new cooking pot. What are you waiting for?'

The next morning, when the sphere returned to its familiar dirty grey hue, Anne said with her lips pressed together:

'Watch out, Heino, we've got you now!'

'Listen, I'm sick and tired of these exercises! Why don't we take a short break? Come on, turn on the computer for a minute, a bit of rest won't hurt us.'

Peter sat hunched over his assigned corner at the work table, nervously chewing the end of his pencil.

'Nope, it's broken,' Anne said absently, glancing at her watch for the tenth time. Half an hour to go! How time dragged on...

'Broken? My foot! Not only does it work, it's even switched on. I can see the lamp of the keyboard is glowing. If you want to fool me, you'll have to think of something cleverer.'

He hesitantly reached out his hand and wanted to press a button.

'Stop!' roared Anne, jumping up and giving him a good slap on the wrist. 'Just you dare...'

She did not finish speaking, but her clenched fists spoke volumes. Peter ducked his head, then stood up and gathered his things.

'That's it! You're lucky I'm against violence, otherwise I would have shown you. And now enough of that. I'm leaving. Man, what a wildcat, she can kill you over a computer. Like I'd break it if I touched it.'

He stood up and kicked angrily at the pile of clothes lying on the floor not far from the work table. There was a loud clatter and Peter began to dance around on one leg, groaning painfully.

'Ouch! What was that again! What were you hiding under those clothes? I sprained my big toe.'

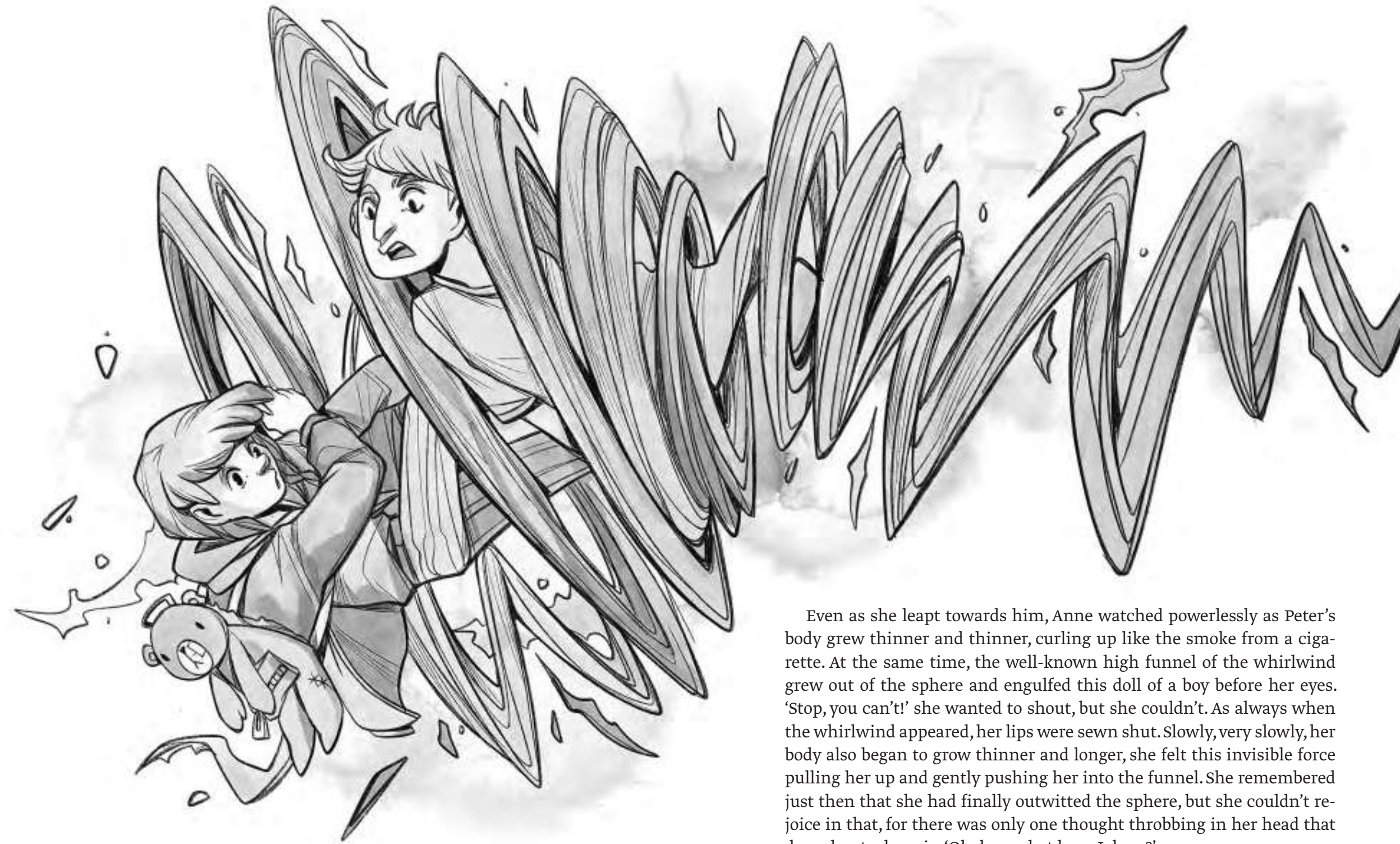
He rummaged through the clothes, found the cooking pot hidden under them and stared at it in disbelief.

'Wha... what is that? Man, that's gross! Where did you dig that up?'

The sight was so amazing that even Anne was at a loss for words. Now the glass sphere was completely transparent and pulsated in the cooking pot like a small beating heart, its colours, now blood red, then bright yellow, then again smoky blue, alternating with the languid exquisiteness of a dangerous small animal that knew no one would dare touch it, because...

'No! Don't touch it!' shouted Anne.

But it was too late. Peter did not listen to Anne's warning, but reached out and took the sphere out of the pot, lifted it up and looked at it closely. For a moment Anne saw his eyes widen with curiosity and amazement. They looked fantastically large behind the glass of the sphere, which was incessantly emitting fireworks in all the colours of the rainbow. But the very next moment Peter's eyes filled with pain and horror, he yelled something incomprehensible, the sphere fell crashing to the floor and... time stopped.



Even as she leapt towards him, Anne watched powerlessly as Peter's body grew thinner and thinner, curling up like the smoke from a cigarette. At the same time, the well-known high funnel of the whirlwind grew out of the sphere and engulfed this doll of a boy before her eyes. 'Stop, you can't!' she wanted to shout, but she couldn't. As always when the whirlwind appeared, her lips were sewn shut. Slowly, very slowly, her body also began to grow thinner and longer, she felt this invisible force pulling her up and gently pushing her into the funnel. She remembered just then that she had finally outwitted the sphere, but she couldn't rejoice in that, for there was only one thought throbbing in her head that drove her to despair: 'Oh dear, what have I done?'