

For Lisbeth, with love

Chapter One

THE BLACK RABBIT

“You should know,” said the black rabbit, “that there are two kinds of people at the Castle. The insiders live inside – they’re lovely. They’re well behaved and kind and properly educated and civilized. Insiders are good. And then there are the outsiders. They live outside. They’re horrible. Ugh! Outsiders are disgusting – loud and crude, rough and rude. And green. Do you know what those green people would do to me if they caught me? Do you?”

“No,” said Lorina.

“They’d eat me. That’s what they’d do.”

“How awful!” said Lorina.

“You can say that again,” said the black rabbit.

“How awful!” said Lorina again.

“And that,” said the black rabbit, “is why I never set foot outside the forest. I’ll show you the way, but don’t expect me to take you there.”

He stomped through the fallen leaves, and Lorina followed a few paces behind, thinking about the green people. It would be nice to see the Castle and the insiders, but not so nice to bump into the outsiders.

“If the green people would eat you,” said Lorina, “maybe they’d eat me as well.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” said the black rabbit. “They’ll eat anything. And anybody.”

“Have you *never* left the forest?” asked Lorina.

“Never,” said the black rabbit. “Forest born and forest bred. I’ll only leave here when I’m dead.”

“But if you’ve never left the forest,” said Lorina, “how do you know about the insiders and the outsiders?”

“Everyone knows about them,” said the black rabbit. “It’s what’s called ‘common knowledge’.”

“I don’t know about them,” said Lorina.

“Then you’re ignorant,” said the black rabbit.

“I don’t think I’m ignorant,” said Lorina.

“That’s the worst type of ignorance,” said the black rabbit. “When people don’t know they’re ignorant.”

It was quite difficult to talk to the black rabbit – not only because all Lorina could see was his black

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bottom bobbing up and down, but also because he seemed to know so much. When Lorina had met him in the forest, he'd known straight away who she was and where she was going and why she was going there.

“School project, eh, Lorina?” he'd said. “And you're looking for the Castle.”

Lorina had to write about “A Special Place”, and the Castle had come into her mind the moment Mr Blair had set the subject. Her sister had talked about it once, when she'd been reading a strange book. Edith was always reading strange books. Lorina had asked her where the Castle was, but all Edith said was: “Oh, somewhere on the other side of the forest.” And she'd never mentioned insiders or outsiders – or black rabbits, for that matter.

The forest was getting thinner now, and Lorina noticed a lot of stumps, although there was no sign of fallen trees.

“That's the green people's doing,” said the black rabbit. “Vandals. They cut 'em down and take 'em away. Soon there'll be no forest left, and then where will I live?”

“How do you know it’s them?” asked Lorina.

“Everybody knows it’s the green people,” said the black rabbit.

“Have you actually seen them?” persisted Lorina, who didn’t like losing arguments.

“Of course I haven’t seen ’em,” snapped the black rabbit. “If I’d seen them, they’d have seen me, and I’d have ended up as a pie.”

“But if you haven’t seen them,” said Lorina, “you can’t even be sure they exist.”

The black rabbit stopped, turned, looked up at Lorina and shook his head in disbelief.

“I sometimes think,” he sniffed, “that ignorance is a disease. Have you ever seen Australia?”

“No,” said Lorina.

“Have you seen the Battle of Hastings, the inside of a cow’s stomach, the other side of the moon or a dinosaur’s poo?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know *they* exist? Or existed?”

Lorina thought for a moment. This needed working out.

“Well, I’ve heard about them,” she said.



“And now you’ve heard about the green people,” said the black rabbit, and marched on.

They had reached the edge of the forest. There were scarcely any trees, and the carpet of leaves had become threadbare, while the air itself smelt faintly of burning. Ahead of them was a steep slope.

“This is as far as I go,” said the black rabbit. “You see that hill?”

“Yes,” said Lorina.

“Of course, it’s only there because you see it,” scoffed the black rabbit. “And if you couldn’t see it, you’d say it wasn’t there... Well, go to the top of it, and you’ll see the Castle. The insiders are inside, but watch out for the outsiders. They’re outside. Good luck. One word of advice: never argue with someone who knows more than you do. You can’t win.”

With that, he was off, bounding through the dead undergrowth as if he’d seen a pastry dish with long ears.

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THE GREEN PEOPLE

From the top of the hill, Lorina could see the Castle. It too stood on a hill, on the other side of a bare, brown valley that was only just visible through a haze of smoke. The smoke itself seemed to be coming down from the Castle, which was surprising because, although it was autumn, the day was quite warm – certainly not cold enough for a fire. Lorina wondered if the insiders had thin skin.

She set off down the hill and across the smoky valley, keeping a sharp lookout for the green outsiders as she walked. She didn't believe the black rabbit, but on the other hand, she didn't disbelieve him either, which gave her a funny feeling of wanting to go on and wanting to turn back. She remembered once hearing about people who ate people. They were called cannonballs.

The closer Lorina came to Castle Hill, the thicker grew the air, and soon she found herself coughing. Suddenly, she became aware of some brown cone shapes jutting out of the brown soil. There were lots of them, and at first she thought they might be sheaves of corn, but then, to her surprise, two tiny figures emerged from one and came running towards her. They were green.

Lorina stopped. The black rabbit had been right, then, and maybe it *was* time to turn back.

“Hello!” cried one of the figures, still some distance away, and the voice was that of a child. “Hello! Hello!”

Soon they were close enough for Lorina to see just how tiny they were – only about as tall as her leg. Their green bodies were quite naked, and they were very thin, running on matchstick legs balanced above by matchstick arms. One was a girl and one was a boy, and the latter was shy and stayed a few paces behind the girl.

“Have you brought us something to eat?” asked the girl, looking up at Lorina with eyes that seemed much too big for her face.

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“No,” said Lorina. “No, I haven’t.”

Two little faces fell.

“I’m sorry,” said Lorina. “Should I have done?”

The girl didn’t answer, but instead ran her hand over Lorina’s dress. The black rabbit had been wrong after all. These little green people would have stroked him, not eaten him.

The girl took Lorina’s hand, and then Lorina took the hand of the boy, and they walked together towards the sheaves, which were actually tents.

“My name’s Tanga. What’s yours?” asked the girl.

“Lorina,” said Lorina.

“That’s a funny name,” said Tanga. “My brother’s Birim.”

At the sound of the voices, more green children emerged from the tents, and then green adults came too, though none of them were taller than Lorina’s shoulder. They were all thin, and most of them walked in slow motion, as if their matchstick arms and legs were too heavy to move.

The children all wanted to touch Lorina’s dress, and kept asking for food, while the adults hung back. Tanga would not let Lorina stop, and so the crowd

accompanied them all the way to the entrance of Tanga's tent. Only when Tanga pulled Lorina inside did the slow movement cease, and the adults and children crouched down on the dry brown earth to wait.

Inside Tanga's tent lay a woman. She coughed, then moved her head and looked at Lorina through half-open eyes.

"Hello," said Lorina.

The woman nodded, and coughed again.

"This is Lorina," said Tanga. "This is my mother. She's very ill. Can you help her?"

"Oh dear," said Lorina, and sat down beside the sick woman. "What's the matter with you?"

The woman shook her head.

"There's nothing the matter with her," said Tanga. "She's just ill."

"But is it measles, mumps, chickenpox, whooping cough?" asked Lorina.

"She's dying," said Birim. They were the first words he'd spoken, and they made Lorina shiver. Dying, she knew, was the worst of all illnesses.

"We're all dying," said a deep voice, and Lorina turned to see a green man standing in the entrance.

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“If we don’t starve, the smoke will kill us. We thought perhaps you’d come to help us.”

“Well, no,” said Lorina. “I’m doing a project for Mr Blair.”

“Is he in the Castle?” asked the man.

“No, he’s my teacher,” answered Lorina. “But I’m on my way to the Castle. Perhaps someone there can help you.”

The green man smiled, and Lorina saw that he had very white, even teeth.

“They can,” he said. “But they won’t.”

He left the tent, and Lorina heard him say something to the people outside. There was a loud sigh.

“I’m ever so sorry,” said Lorina. “I would help if I could.”

The woman had closed her eyes. Lorina put her hand on the woman’s forehead, which was what people usually did when someone was ill, and she found it icy cold.

“Oh dear,” said Lorina. “Maybe she could have a bowl of soup to warm her up.”

But little Tanga said there was no soup. There was no food of any kind.

“Do they have food in the Castle, then?” asked Lorina.

“Of course they do,” said Tanga.

“Then I’ll go and get some,” said Lorina.

She stepped out of the tent. The crowd had dispersed, and only the man with white teeth was standing outside.

“I’m going to the Castle,” said Lorina, “to get some food.”

The man nodded.

“You have a kind heart,” he said. “Tell me – are you young or old?”

“Oh, I’m very young,” said Lorina, surprised.

“Ah,” said the man, “perhaps that’s why.”

“Are you Tanga’s father?” asked Lorina.

“No,” said the man. “Her father is dead. I’m Qasim. I am father to all these people, and can help none.”

“Why do you all stay here in this smoke?” asked Lorina.

“Because there is nowhere else for us to go,” answered Qasim. “The Castle is our home, and elsewhere is the home of others.”

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Lorina would have liked to talk longer with Qasim. Although he was so small, the depth of his voice and the dignity of his bearing made him seem tall. He could be father to all people. She wanted to ask him why there was no food, and why the insiders would not send help, and what they were like, but there was no time for questions. Tanga and Birim's mother needed help now.

And so Lorina hurried away to the foot of the hill, and then began her climb upwards through the thickening smoke towards the Castle.



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