

Chapter Two:

The Spider

A long time passed before Anne gathered the courage to look up. In the meanwhile, night had begun to fall, and the hope that it had all just been an old wizard's idea of a joke gradually disappeared. (She no longer had any doubts that Nerod Laptsev was some kind of wizard.) On the other hand, the thought that she would have to spend the night in this sunless place filled her with such horror that she felt close to dissolving into floods of tears. What manner of scary creatures lived in the forest? What was it that could have roared so terrifyingly? And where exactly was she? Maybe if she could find the edge of the box she could climb over and call her mother. Then Mum would convince the wizard to return her to her normal size. Yes, of course, after all she had only *tried* to break the game, and hadn't succeeded anyway. It was so obvious, even grown ups should be able to understand that.

'Ahem,' came a little cough from behind her.

For the hundredth time that day, Anne jumped for fright. She turned around slowly, and then jumped again, only this time for joy.

'My backpack!' she cried, completely forgetting about all the forest monsters. 'You're still here! If only you knew how happy I am to see you! I was beginning to think I'd have to spend the whole night on my own. My dear, sweet little backpack!'

'It must be a miracle,' muttered the backpack sourly. 'Red is acting friendly. Wait, let me make a note of this so we won't forget.'

'Are you still angry with me, then? Come on, please don't be petty. As for the fur-pulling, well, I... I just didn't realise that you're alive. That's why I did it.'

'Yeah, well now you know. So what?'

'What do you mean, "so what"? Why do you find it so hard to understand something so simple? It changes everything.'

'Like what?' The backpack looked at Anne as if she had just claimed she was the Queen of England.

‘For example... er...’ Anne tried in vain to think of something. ‘Ok, you tell me.’

‘A simple “I’m sorry” wouldn’t be a bad start.’

‘Ah...Hmm...Mmmm.’

‘It starts with “I”,’ offered the backpack obligingly.

‘Ok, ok, if you insist. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do it.’

‘Excellent,’ exclaimed the backpack triumphantly. ‘I’ve waited for this moment for such a long time. I’ve even prepared a reply. Would you like to hear it?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘I reject your apology!’ said the backpack through clenched teeth, and then proceeded to pick its nose with great concentration.

Anne was so offended that her eyes filled with tears.

‘But why?’ she asked, bewildered. ‘Do you really hate me so much?’

The backpack carried on picking its nose.

‘Can’t we be friends?’ asked Anne tearfully.

‘That’s childish,’ retorted the backpack. ‘Bashing someone around and then saying sorry. I mean, look at me.’

‘But I meant it.’

‘Whether you meant it or not, I’m not interested! I’ve had enough and won’t put up with it any more!’

Anne suddenly couldn’t take it any longer. She slumped to the ground and burst into tears, each teardrop forming a tiny rivulet as it trickled down her face. Never before had she felt so miserable and forlorn, even that time she had got lost at the zoo.

‘I’m scared, so scared,’ she hiccupped while wiping at the tears with her fists. ‘Everything is so scary here... I want to go home to Mum. I’m really scared.’

‘Hey, listen,’ said the backpack eventually. ‘I don’t know how to get out of here either.’

Anne went on crying miserably.

‘I mean, I don’t think I’ll be all that much help.’

‘But at least you’re here,’ moaned Anne. ‘I can’t begin to think how I’d manage on my own.’

She hiccupped a bit more, and once she had calmed down she thought for a minute, gave her eyes a final, decisive wipe and said, 'Please don't be angry any more. I mean it, I really want us to be friends. I'd be all alone without you. Please don't leave me!'

A timid hope shone in the backpack's eyes. 'Real friends?' she asked, still rather distrustful. 'Not just the convenience kind?'

'The realest kind you can get. I promise!'

'And you won't be so bad-tempered when I say something you don't like?'

'That too.'

'Are you quite sure? You can't break a promise!'

Anne pondered for a moment and then said, 'Real friends. The very realest sort!'

The night passed quickly and without incident. Luckily, it was summer in the forest and fine for sleeping out in the open. Besides, the furry backpack was as warm as a thick, cosy blanket. In the morning the two travellers woke up a little damp with dew, but the sun quickly dried them, so Anne soon remembered she hadn't eaten anything since the day before. Now the backpack proved itself priceless. She gathered two handfuls of lovely blackberries as big as strawberries and just as delicious, though a little more sour. It was a real treat for Red. Although it could speak, the backpack didn't need food, and soon Anne was full enough to start thinking about getting home.

'Which path do you think we should take?' she asked while wiping her fingers on a patch of her T-shirt that was a bit cleaner than the rest.

'Whichever. Let's take the right.'

No sooner said than done. Anne put on the backpack and bravely set off on the path. She hadn't gone ten metres when a strange sight suddenly met her eyes.

The path led to a second, smaller meadow, but the way was closed off by a mighty old tree so huge that it completely blocked the way. However, a tunnel had been built into it so that you would easily be able to walk

upright through it. But the way wasn't open: suspended on a complex system of levers and gears right in front of the entrance there hung a thick spider's web. To the left of it there was a kind of slot machine in the shape of an animal's head. On the right-hand side sat a large, hairy spider with two pairs of his eight legs crossed, intently cleaning his fingernails with a rather large knife. Trapped in the web and thrashing about desperately was a fat fly about the size of the backpack.

'Let me go at once! You monster! I haven't done anything to you!' shrieked the fly in a trembling voice.

The spider grinned with self-satisfaction exposing several rows of sharp teeth. 'Wait just a little longer till I find time for you, my sweet. It's my lunch break soon.'

'Help! Oh my!' exclaimed the fly, scared to death. 'He's going to eat me!'

'All in good time,' muttered the spider philosophically without paying it any more attention.

'Hello, little one,' he turned towards Anne, who was just on the point of running for her life. 'If you want to get through, then be quick as I close soon. What are you waiting for?'

'Well, I...' Anne began to stammer. 'I only wanted to have a look.'

'What's there to look at? It's just a path like any other. This young lady here has been held up because she tried to pass without paying. No one gets past me, that's for sure.' He cast an evil glance in the fly's direction and continued, 'Put your money in the slot and I shall see that the web is raised immediately. If you're not sure what to do, the instructions are over there,' he pointed towards a notice board which Anne hadn't seen until then. 'If you can't read, then I can help you.'

'Oh, no need,' Anne's heart was pounding like a sewing machine. 'I can manage... and I'll just take a quick look.'

'As you wish,' said the spider disappointedly. 'Just don't say I gave you bad service. To me the customer is always right, please remember. You see that diploma? Mr Heino personally awarded it to me.'

'I've ... forgotten something, I've just remembered. Excuse me, I must hurry.'

Anne turned and ran away as fast as she could. She stopped once she was back in the meadow. Her heart was still beating loudly.

‘Oh my, what a brute!’ cried the backpack from behind. ‘God help whoever falls into his clutches. Put me down a moment, will you? My legs are shaking.’

‘Wh-What should we do now?’

‘That path obviously wasn’t the best choice. Let’s try one of the others.’

‘Let’s rest a bit. I’m feeling quite faint.’ The two friends huddled together.

‘Nice service, eh? If you don’t pay you get eaten,’ the backpack blurted out.

‘Oh, I was so scared, It made me feel quite sick. What do you think, what does all this mean?’

‘Well, it’s a kind of toll road as far as I can tell. You have to pay in order to get through. Have you got any money?’

‘Not a penny.’

‘Nor me. What a mess! Listen, we can probably find a solution, but I reckon we’d better stay off that path for the meantime.’

‘Poor fly, how she screamed! Maybe...’

‘What?’

‘Oh, nothing. I was just wondering if there was some way we could help her.’

‘Come on, don’t be ridiculous!’ said the backpack, outraged at the suggestion. ‘Didn’t you see his teeth?’

‘Yeah, well, if I was as strong as Pippi Longstocking...’

‘Yes, *if* you were, but you’re not. And this isn’t a kids’ story, this is for real, remember. Have you had enough rest? Let’s go. We’ve no time to lose.’

Anne put the backpack on again and set out in the other direction. Soon the path led them to a wide, open area. It looked like the forest ended there.

A vast swamp stretched out as far as the eye could see, and was dotted with little islands on which stood fat tree stumps. At first Anne thought she had reached the river, but then realised she was mistaken. The air was

thick with the stench of slime and swamp, and the still, muddy water looked nothing like a river. Several metres ahead of her, not far from the edge of the swamp, there was a large stump covered from top to bottom with different machinery parts. Red moved closer cautiously and started to look it over from a safe distance.

What first caught her attention was that here was the same kind of slot machine as the one in the spider's meadow. It was a grinning animal head with a number of thin whiskers on the snout, a black velvety nose, shiny glass eyes, and a wide-open mouth with two protruding front teeth. Next to it was a television monitor connected to a satellite dish mounted on the top of the stump. Two large loudspeakers completed the set-up. In between there was all manner of technical gadgetry such as a propeller, some pedals, a little display with buttons beneath it, as well as several metal signs with unreadable words written on them.

'What do you think it is?' asked the backpack.

'I don't know, but it looks a lot more complicated than Mum's computer. Do you think it would be dangerous to get any closer?'

'I haven't a clue, but look over there. That's the same notice board we saw at the spider's. He said it explains everything. Let's see if we can understand any of it,' suggested the backpack.

Not far from the stump was a large signboard displaying a series of pictures and instructions. Anne approached it cautiously and took a closer look. At the very top in large, bold letters was written:

Heinomat®

Beneath that in normal type it said:

'Welcome to "Heinomat®". The last word in technology! Our system ensures easy and fast clearance through every obstacle. For a small fee you gain access to the latest technological breakthroughs of "Heinotech™". Trust in "Heinotech™": the greatest firm in the whole of Ghost Forest.'

Underneath that were several illustrations showing a hand placing coins in the mouth of the slot machine, then a bridge spanning the swamp, and finally, a person walking over the bridge.

At the very bottom was a photo of a fat, sleazy figure with the caption: 'You can always depend on me: Heino the Beaver!' Then there was an illegible signature. The head in the photo matched the shape of the coin machine exactly.

'Hey, Anne, look at this! The slot machine is actually a beaver. I thought it was a giant rat,' said the backpack.

'Yes, but I still don't see how we're going to get through. They want money here, too.'

'At least there isn't a scary spider here. That's something, isn't it?'

'Mmm,' agreed Anne without much enthusiasm. 'It's something.'

'Look, let's try to get through,' suggested the backpack. 'It could work. After all, it's just a machine, isn't it?'

'Oh, I don't know,' Anne hesitated. 'I don't want to get into trouble.'

'We could always go and beg the spider, if you'd rather,' the backpack suggested casually.

'Is that some sort of a joke, or what?' said Anne, becoming angry, but then remembering her promise she added more calmly, 'Ok, if you insist. Let's see what happens.' The two of them slowly approached the stump and looked it over from every angle.

'Where do we begin?' asked the backpack.

'Well, there must be some sort of button,' Anne replied uncertainly. 'That one, for example.'

'Go on then.'

Anne raised her hand and pressed the button. The giant satellite dish began to buzz softly and started turning. The head of a fat female beaver appeared on the screen, and from the loudspeakers came the sound of a tinny voice. 'Welcome, welcome! It's good to see you! To use the system, insert a coin into the mouth of the machine, it's as simple as that! Next, wait for the motorised bridge to assemble itself. The individual sections connect the stumps in the swamp, and the total length of the construction is over 500 metres. This is the most complex engineering feat to be found in the entire Ghost Forest. According to our records....'

Anne pressed the button again. The screen went dead and everything fell silent.

‘An advertisement’, she said, in a bored tone. ‘Let’s try another button.’

The next one turned a noisy propeller, while the rest of the buttons didn’t do anything. Anne was getting desperate.

‘Hey, Anne, look what I’ve found over here,’ cried the backpack from the other side of the stump. ‘Come and help me. I can’t move it by myself.’

Red walked around the stump and saw that the backpack was straining to shift an big lever.

‘Together now,’ said the backpack, ‘one, two, three.’

With their joint force the lever gradually gave and moved with a horrid creaking sound. Anne waited to see what would happen.

Two doors on opposite sides of the stump opened softly and out popped a pair of long metal hands wearing thick rubber gloves. Before Anne knew what was happening, the hands had grabbed her and bent her over, and a third hand that had appeared from somewhere overhead started spanking her backside methodically. ‘Oh my, help!’ she screamed. ‘Let me go!’

However, the machine continued spanking as long as it had been programmed to, and by the time it stopped Anne had already given up screaming and was accepting the situation with patient resignation. Finally, the hands dropped her unceremoniously on the ground and without further ado retreated behind the doors from where they had come.

‘Oh Anne, I’m so sorry,’ cried the backpack, clearly full of remorse. ‘I had no idea it was a trap. I’m very, very sorry!’

‘That’s ok,’ said Anne through clenched teeth, while silently wiping away her tears. ‘He won’t get away with this. He’s got it coming, that Heino. I’ll teach him a lesson or two!’

‘Wait, wait a moment,’ said the backpack thoughtfully. ‘Do you remember that the spider mentioned that name, too? Yes, he said that he’d been awarded his diploma from Mr Heino personally. In other words, this lump of blubber there is his boss, isn’t he?’

‘Yeah, it looks like it.’

‘Then we’d better keep out of his way. We’ve already seen the kind of hoodlums he employs, so he’s not likely to be a bundle of laughs himself, is he?’

‘Oh no,’ exclaimed Anne. ‘Hoodlum or not, I’ll show him. I don’t put up with treatment like that.’

‘All right, don’t get angry. We’ll worry about him when the time comes. Right now our efforts are getting us nowhere. It looks like we won’t be able to get through here either.’

‘Yeah, you’re right,’ agreed Anne gloomily. ‘There’s only the third path left. If we draw a blank there, I don’t know what we’ll do.’

‘We’ll think of something. Let’s get going, I’m dying to find out.’

‘It’s easy for you,’ thought Anne. ‘No one is worrying or crying about you. No one is going to be asking where you’ve disappeared to. Mum has probably raised the alarm in the neighbourhood already. If she only knew I’m just two steps away!’ She gave a deep sigh, put on the backpack and set off.