



“Wheeeeeee!” The small bat did a double backflip, then a twist, and landed neatly on the branch below. “Did you see me, Uncle Marlon? Did you *SEE* me?” Alf squeaked.

“Shh!” The older bat flapped a warning wing. “Button up, kiddo. We’ve got company.” He stared into the night. “Hmph. It’s those dames from Wadingburn.”

The small bat’s eyes widened. “The *witches*? Oh, Uncle Marlon! Can we stay ’n’ watch? Will they do scary spells?”

“They’re no big deal, kiddo.” The older bat settled back on his branch. “Deep Magic’s not allowed in the Five Kingdoms. This lot are Shallow, through and through. Couldn’t magic a bird off a branch. But keep mum, all the same. You don’t want to end up in a pot. Your ma’ll kill me if I bring you back half-boiled.”

The small bat shivered, half in fear, half with pleasure. “Okeydokey, Uncle M.” And he froze into stillness as he watched the line of women, varying in shape and size but all dressed in black, making their way into the clearing at the top of Wadingburn Hill. Limping at the end of the line was the small, skinny figure of a girl, her head bent tenderly over the bundle in her arms. As the witches hurried here and there, collecting firewood and setting up the old and dented black cauldron, she slipped away and settled herself at the foot of the tree where the two bats hung motionless. Softly she began to croon to the bundled-up object she was holding, rocking it gently to and fro.

“Loobly Higgins!” said a terrible voice. “What on EARTH do you think you’re doing?”

Loobly jumped. “N-n-n-nothing, Auntie,” she quavered.

The Grand High Witch of Wadingburn took a step closer. “Did my eyes deceive me, or were you KISSING that rat?”

Loobly shook her head so hard that her long, stringy hair broke loose from its ribbon and fell over her thin little face. “Wasn’t kissing it,” she whispered. “Not kissing. Just telling sorry. Sorry it be picklified.”



The Grand High Witch sighed in exasperation. “It’ll be no use now. No use at all. How many times do I have to tell you to leave my ingredients alone?”

“Sorry, Auntie Levangeline. Loobly hear you. Loobly very sorry.” Loobly pushed the hair out of her eyes and looked up hopefully. “If no use, can Loobly keep he?”

“Certainly NOT!” The witch was on the point of snatching the rat away when she was distracted by the sound of cackling laughter. Instantly forgetting Loobly, she turned to see her five fellow witches gathering around the cauldron that was now bubbling gently in the center of the clearing. At once the Grand High Witch drew herself to her full height and strode forward to greet them.

“*Dear Mrs. Cringe!* I’m so glad you’re with us tonight! *And Mrs. Vibble and Mrs. Prag as well. Fabulous! And darling Ms. Scurrilous is here too! And Mrs. . . .*”

The Grand High Witch faltered for a moment. What was the name of the hunched old witch on the far side of the fire? Even with the flames now burning brightly under the cauldron, it was too dark to see her face. It certainly wasn’t Mrs. Gabbage, and Ms. Pettigroan had sent a bat earlier that evening with polite apologies.

Mrs. Cringe shuffled up, looking distinctly guilty,

and the Grand High Witch's heart sank. Even worse, her little toe had begun to throb, which was a far more reliable warning of impending trouble. She had always been wary of Mrs. Cringe, not least because she was known to have relations outside the Five Kingdoms who were suspected of indulging in Deep Magic of the nastiest kind.

"Ahem," Mrs. Cringe addressed the Grand High Witch, whose toe was becoming increasingly painful. "That there's my grandmother, Truda Hangnail. She's come visiting from the other side of the More Enchanted Forest. Asked if I could invite her in for a week or two. Things got troublesome for her over there, she said. Too many two-headed cows and sheep with five legs appearing all over the place." She stepped closer and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Best to be polite. She's in a bit of a temper. Fell in a ditch on the other side of the border gate." She nudged the Grand High Witch. "Shouldn't even be here in the Five Kingdoms. Deep, she is. Very Deep. But we won't tell, will we?"

Evangeline Droop, Grand High Witch of Wadingburn, froze. It was a serious offense to invite a Deep Witch to cross the border of the Five Kingdoms. They had been banished many years before, together

with werewolves and sorcerers. On the other hand, she had absolutely no idea how to confront a Deep Witch, let alone how to tell her to go home.

Evangeline's little toe was now excruciating. All the same, she extended an unwilling hand and said as gracefully as she was able, "Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Hangnail!"

The visitor stared at her with beady little eyes, and the strangely sinuous animal draped around her neck lifted its head and stared too. "Deep or Shallow?" the witch croaked.

Mrs. Cringe took her elderly relation by the arm. "I told you, Grandma. There aren't any Deep Witches in the Five Kingdoms."

Truda Hangnail gave a laugh like knives scraping steel. "There's no fun in that," she sneered. "You can't turn princes into toads with Shallow Magic. How d'you put red-hot nails in a milkmaid's shoes? And how d'you scare folk into giving you plump young chickens and apple pies and bowls of eggs and dishes of cream?"

"Actually, Mrs. Hangnail," the Grand High Witch said haughtily, "we are respected members of our community."

Mrs. Prag looked smug. "We've all been invited to

Queen Bluebell's eightieth-birthday party to hear the Declaration."

"It's a Declaration Ball, Vera," Mrs. Vibble corrected her. "*Do* get it right."

"*So* exciting!" Ms. Scurrilous beamed with pleasure. "We'll be among the very first to know who she's chosen as her successor!"

Truda stiffened like a fox who has seen a foolish young rabbit. Even her nose sharpened. "Successor?"

Ms. Scurrilous heaved a romantic sigh. "So sad. Her daughter ran away, and there's only a grandson. And of course we don't have kings in Wadingburn, so it's been a terrible worry."

"Serves the old bag right," Truda snapped.

"Excuse *me*, Mrs. Hangnail!" Evangeline's voice rose several octaves. "You are speaking of our beloved monarch!"

"Oooh—beg your pardon, I'm sure." The old witch bobbed a sarcastic curtsy. "So what else do you do, besides visiting royalty?"

Mrs. Vibble bridled. "We offer charms and soothing cures for the afflicted."

"That's right," Ms. Scurrilous added. "And we get paid for our work without frightening anyone."

"YAH!" Truda stuck out her long green tongue.

“Mimsy-whimsy sort of stuff. Cough drops and love potions as well, I’ll be bound.” She hobbled toward the bubbling cauldron and peered inside. “Just as I thought. Moldy mushrooms, shriveled spiders’ legs, chicken soup, and nail clippings. Call yourselves witches? Spineless old hags is what you are! Now, let me see . . .” She began to fish in the pockets of her shabby old cloak, then pulled out a tattered cloth bag. “Frog bones, bat bones, rat bones, cat bones . . . How about a few dragon bones to begin with? Nicely ground into dust, of course.”

Mrs. Prag grabbed Evangeline’s arm. “What’s she doing?” she hissed. “Stop her! Dragon bones are illegal!”

Evangeline swallowed hard. As Grand High Witch of Wadingburn, voted into the post by every witch in the kingdom, she knew she should take command. She should order this terrible old hag to go, scat, vamoose, and refuse to take no for an answer. But there had been something in Truda Hangnail’s eyes that was making Evangeline feel oddly indecisive.

“Erm . . .” she began. “We don’t usually use those kinds of ingredients.”

“You don’t, eh?” Truda sneered. “Well, could be

it's time you did. I'm thinking we could have some fun and games in this cozy little kingdom of yours. I'm thinking we could make it a tad more exciting. Could just be I've found something worth staying for!" She gave an evil cackle, opened the bag, and tossed a handful of gray dust into the cauldron.

Nothing happened.

Truda swore and gave the cauldron a sharp kick.

At once there was a flash, and a cloud of thick purple smoke rose up and swirled around Truda's shoulders before spreading across the clearing. The witches of Wadingburn coughed and spluttered, and Evangeline felt her eyes sting and water. Strange thoughts raced into her mind; she remembered how only that morning the butcher's boy had accidentally ridden across a corner of her flower bed, and she was suddenly seized with a burning desire to raise a huge red boil on the end of his nose.

"Do it! Do it!" Truda Hangnail was standing right in front of her. "Let the evil do its work! Let wickedness rule! You call yourself a Grand High Witch—so make folk suffer! Take the power and follow me!"

Evangeline swallowed. On the other side of the cauldron, Mrs. Prag and Mrs. Vibble had linked arms and

were muttering curses. Mrs. Cringe and Ms. Scurrilous were scowling terrible scowls and making threatening gestures as they stamped up and down.

Truda pointed a withered finger at Mrs. Cringe. “Granddaughter of mine,” she intoned, “you brought me here. Come to the cauldron and take the power of the Deep Magic . . . you and all who are in this place. Let the Deep Magic return to Wadingburn . . . Deep, Deep, *Deep* Magic!” And she strode to the seething cauldron and held out her bony hand. Mrs. Cringe, moving like a sleepwalker, drifted inexorably toward the hand and took it. Ms. Scurrilous followed and was grasped by Mrs. Cringe. Mrs. Prag and Mrs. Vibble, hand in hand like schoolgirls, joined themselves to the chain, and the Grand High Witch felt an acute longing to join them. Her head was swirling with wicked thoughts and the desire for power, but there was still a part of her that knew this was not her true self, that this was the wish of Truda Hangnail.

“Don’t go! Oh, Auntie Levangeline, don’t go hand-ling hold!”

The small squeaky voice cut through the confusion in Evangeline’s mind, and she stopped. Loobly was dancing up and down in agitation, still clutching the



rat. “Smell badness,” she shrilled. “*Bad* badness, Auntie! Loobly knows it is!”

With a last desperate effort, Evangeline, Grand High Witch of Wadingburn, spoke as her real self. “Loobly!” She gasped. “Loobly . . . go to the crones . . . the Ancient Crones . . .” and then she was sucked into the purple mist.