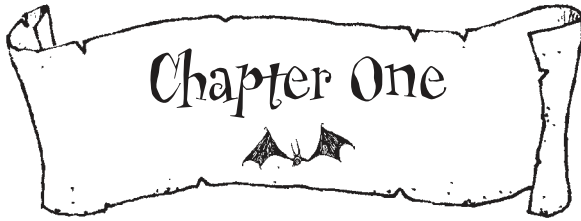


PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Prince Marcus	second in line to the throne of Gorebreath
Gracie Gillypot	a Trueheart
Marlon	a bat
Alf	Marlon's nephew
Millie	Marlon's daughter
Flo	a bat (no relation to Marlon. Or Alf. Or Millie.)
Gubble	a domesticated troll
Queen Kesta	Queen of Dreghorn
Princess Fedora	Queen Kesta's oldest daughter
Princess Marigold	Queen Kesta's third daughter
Great-Aunt Hortense	Dowager Duchess of Cockenzie Rood
Queen Bluebell	Queen of Wadingburn
Prince Vincent	Queen Bluebell's grandson
Professor Scallio	Prince Vincent's tutor
Fingle	Queen Bluebell's coachman
King Thab	King of the Underground Trolls
Spittle	King Thab's scribe
Mullius Gowk	an Old Troll, servant to King Thab
Clod	an Underground Troll
Oolie	half Old Troll, half goblin, wholly evil
Bestius Bonnyrigg	a dwarf
Master Amplethumb	a dwarf

THE ANCIENT CRONES

Edna	the Ancient One
Elsie	the Oldest
Val	the Youngest
Foyce	Gracie's stepsister, and apprentice crone



“If I were you, kiddo,” the bat remarked, “I’d close your mouth. Dangerous, leaving it open like that. Never know what might pop in. Flies, midges, the odd moth. Furry things, moths. Not nice unless you’re used to them.”

Prince Marcus, second in line to the throne of Gorebreath, did as he was told. “But where IS she?” His voice was shaking. “One minute she was leaning against that tree, and then — *WHOOOMPH!* She was gone!” He rubbed his eyes. “And was it that tree? Or that one? They all look exactly the same! Did you see, Marlon?”

“Cool it, kid,” the bat said. “Alf’s ahead of you. Alf? Where are you?”

“Here, Unc!” The small squeak came from some ways away.



Marcus stared at Marlon. “What’s he doing?”

“Hanging on a branch.” Marlon sounded pleased. “Marking the tree. Good work, Alf!”

Marcus shook his head. “That can’t be right. Gracie was here beside me. I *know* she was!”

Marlon sighed. “Look at your map, kiddo. Where are we? The Unreliable Forest. Now the thing about unreliable forests, in case you hadn’t guessed, is that they’re unreliable. See a handful of berries you fancy? Walk toward them, and—FFFFT! They’ll be behind you.”

Seeing his companion’s doubtful expression, the bat sighed again. “Try it for yourself. Got a hankie? Well, tie it to a branch.”

Unwillingly, Marcus did as he was told. The scarlet handkerchief, emblazoned with the royal arms of the House of Gorebreath, fluttered in front of him . . . and vanished.

“That’s gone too!” The prince took a step backward and looked at Marlon. “What’s going on?”

“Turn around.”

Turning, Marcus was just in time to see the tree his hankie was tied to make a sudden sideways leap and hide behind a substantial oak. The oak showed no inclination to move, and Marcus leaned against it,

feeling breathless. “That’s SO weird,” he said. “And however are we going to find Gracie?”

Marlon twitched his wings. “Kiddo,” he said, and he sounded far more solemn than usual, “we need help on this one. You stay here. Keep an eye on Alf.”

“What?” Marcus stared at the bat. “Where are you going?”

“Trust me, kid. I’ll be back pronto.” Marlon was circling high in the air. A moment later he was gone.