MONSTER IN THE WOODS



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To the memory of Chocolate Phil





Chapter 1

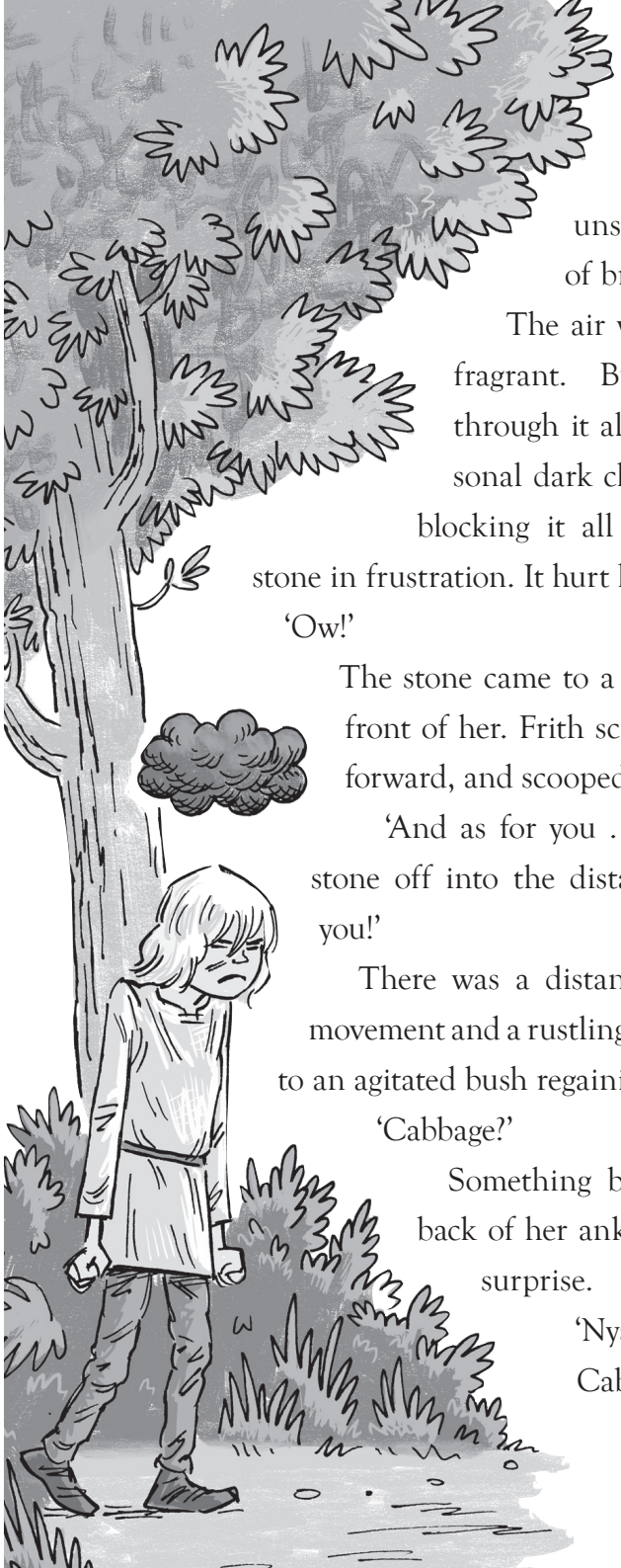
Frith turned for home, empty-handed. She hadn't caught a thing in any of the snares, and every shot from her sling had missed its target. So, she had nothing to add to the cooking pot. Again. She frowned down at Cabbage, dancing round her legs.

'And you were no help,' she said. 'It's no wonder all the rabbits and squirrels get away when you scare them off before I can even take aim.'

Cabbage looked up at her with bright, adoring eyes, and gave a joyous bark.

'I'm telling you off!' said Frith. 'Don't wag your tail.'

Cabbage yapped, wagged his tail some more, then rampaged off through the undergrowth ahead of them. It was a beautiful afternoon to be out in the woods. Butterflies and bugs were dancing in the slanting beams of afternoon sunlight that cut between the trees. Birds



gossiped and sang, unseen in the canopy of branches high above. The air was crisp, clear and fragrant. But Frith trudged through it all as if her own personal dark cloud hung over her, blocking it all out. She kicked a stone in frustration. It hurt her toe.

'Ow!'

The stone came to a stop a few paces in front of her. Frith scowled at it, stepped forward, and scooped it up.

'And as for you . . .' She hurled the stone off into the distance. 'That'll teach you!'

There was a distant yelp. A flurry of movement and a rustling noise drew her eyes to an agitated bush regaining its composure.

'Cabbage?'

Something brushed against the back of her ankles. Frith leaped in surprise.

'Nyah!'

Cabbage looked up at her with a big stick in his mouth.

'Bad dog!' hissed Frith. 'Here, give me that!'

Cabbage released the precious stick into Frith's care, and cocked his head to one side, tail wagging.

'I am *not* throwing it for you.'

Frith turned her attention back to the bush. If Cabbage had come up behind her, then what had disturbed it?

Frith weighed the stick in her hand. It would make a good club. Cabbage turned a tight circle at her feet.

Frith pushed aside some foliage and stepped towards where the noise had come from. The undergrowth was thick, but Frith moved through it with silent, practised ease, her eyes fixed ahead of her, her ears straining for any new sound of movement. If the birds were still singing, she didn't hear them.

Two paces from the bush now, and Frith could hear a low snuffling noise coming from behind it. She gripped the stick tighter, took another step, and stretched to peer over the top of the leaves.

'YAAAAH!'

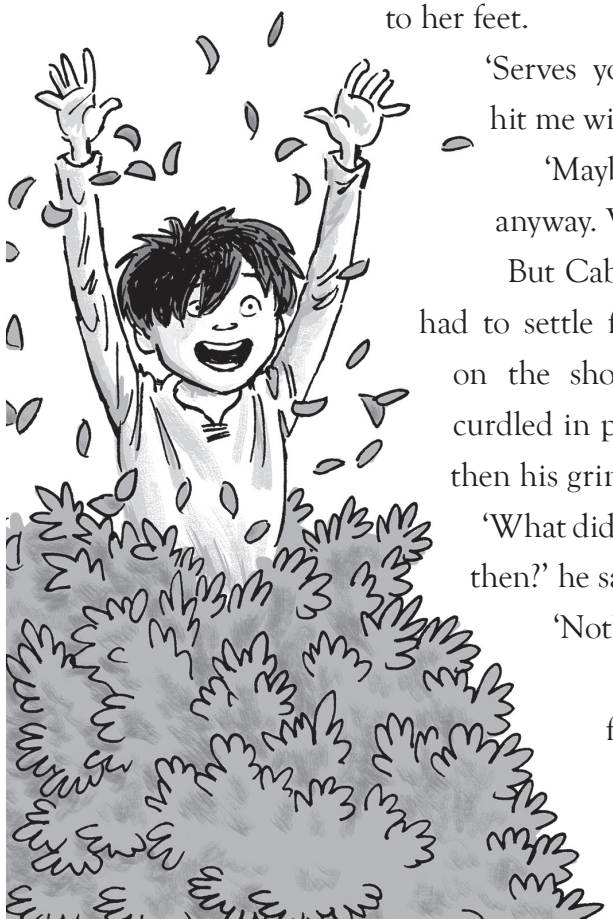
A strange, grotty figure sprang up, arms flailing, yelling into Frith's face.

Frith fell over backwards in shock, dropping the stick.

'Spuggy!' she snarled.

The grubby face of her younger brother grinned down at her. 'Ha! Got you!'

'You stupid . . . I thought you were a boar or something. I was going to bash you on the head and take you home for dinner!' Frith rubbed her bottom as she rose to her feet.



'Serves you right. You nearly hit me with that stone!'

'Maybe I should hit you anyway. Where's that stick?'

But Cabbage had it, so Frith had to settle for punching Spuggy on the shoulder. Spuggy's face curdled in pain for a second, but then his grin returned.

'What did you get us for dinner, then?' he said.

'Nothing.'

'Oh.' Spuggy's face fell. 'That's a shame.'

'Well, it's not as if *you're* doing anything to help. You've probably been crashing about playing with your imaginary friend as usual, and scaring away all the dinners. So stupid and childish!'

Frith took a breath. She hadn't meant to sound so angry, but Spuggy was just *so* annoying sometimes that she couldn't help herself. Deep down she knew that, really, she was disappointed with herself. But knowing that only made her even more annoyed.

So, she hit Spuggy again, but not so hard this time.

'Ow!' said Spuggy, louder than the pain really deserved. 'And Edward is *not* imaginary! He's my *real* friend. And he's much nicer than you!'

'Of course he is. But it's odd that no one else has ever seen him. If he's real, and nice, then you'd think he might have said hello to the rest of us in the village.'

Spuggy scrunched his face up in thought.

'He's just shy,' he said, stooping down to take the stick from Cabbage, then hurling it into the woods ahead of them. Cabbage sprang after it, disappearing into a mass of ferns. Spuggy quickened his pace to follow. 'And he's probably especially avoiding *you* because I've told him how horrible you are.'

'So, now I'm being avoided by an imaginary friend,' Frith said to herself. 'That's a new low, even for me.'

She broke into a trot, following the sounds of her irritating brother and her idiot dog crashing through the underbrush ahead of her, back towards the village and home. The cloud of her disappointment was still with her, but she noticed it less now she was running. And she would be glad to get home. Mum and Dad were irritating too, of course. They were grown-ups after all. But she would be pleased to see them even so.

The trees began to thin out as Frith neared the edge of the wood, and she saw Spuggy ahead of her, standing still in the dappled sunlight that filtered through the leaves, Cabbage at his feet jumping and barking in agitation. As Frith drew nearer, she could see that Spuggy's shoulders were slumped, his head hung low, and the first whiff of trouble hit her nostrils.

Smoke!

She sprinted the last few paces, and arrived panting by Spuggy's side. Spuggy raised his arm and pointed down the grassy slope to a hut on the near side of the village. The one with smoke pouring out of it. Their hut. Their home.

'Oh no!' said Frith.

'Disaster!' said Spuggy.

'Mum's cooking!' they both said together.



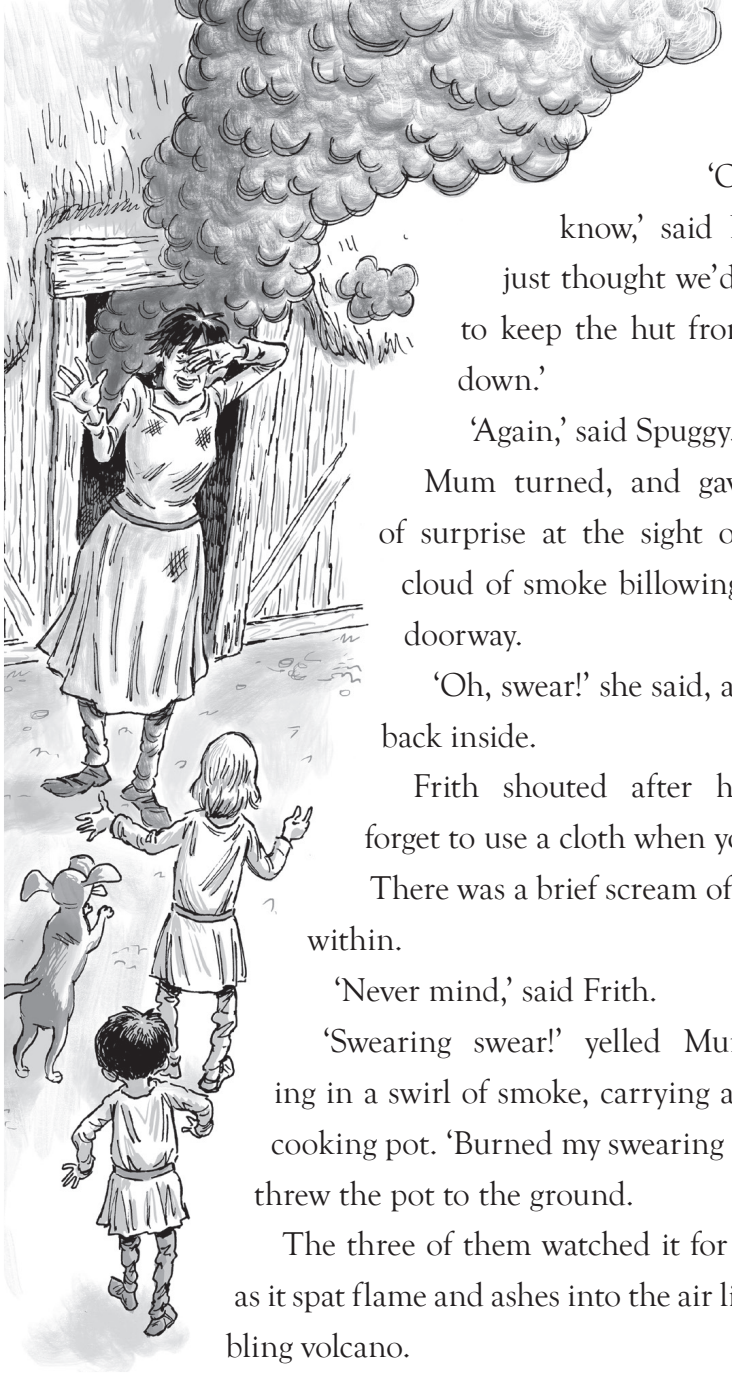
Chapter 2

At that time of a summer's day, the grassy slope down from the woods to the village was a beautiful sight. The golden light of early evening highlighted bright patches of wildflowers on a rich background of shrubs and ferns. The grass rippled like the surface of a lake as a gentle breeze played across it. It was an enchanting, peaceful scene, noiseless except for the songs of unseen birds.

At least until two children and a dog trampled noisily through the middle of it, yelling 'Mum!' and 'Dad!' and 'Woof!'.

Mum emerged from the doorway of the smoking hut, recoiling from the light, just as Frith and Spuggy came to a breathless halt outside.

'Oof!' said Mum. 'It's a bit swearing bright out here, isn't it? Oh, hello you two. What's got you so hot and bothered then?'



'Oh, I don't know,' said Frith. 'We just thought we'd better try to keep the hut from burning down.'

'Again,' said Spuggy.

Mum turned, and gave a jump of surprise at the sight of the grey cloud of smoke billowing from the doorway.

'Oh, swear!' she said, and dashed back inside.

Frith shouted after her: 'Don't forget to use a cloth when you—'

There was a brief scream of pain from within.

'Never mind,' said Frith.

'Swearing swear!' yelled Mum, emerging in a swirl of smoke, carrying a large iron cooking pot. 'Burned my swearing hand!' She threw the pot to the ground.

The three of them watched it for a moment as it spat flame and ashes into the air like a grumbling volcano.

'I was cooking,' said Mum.

'We worked that out,' said Frith.

'It went a bit wrong,' said Mum.

'We worked that out too,' said Spuggy.

'Unless we were having fire for supper,' said Frith.

'In which case,' said Spuggy, 'it's perfect!'

'Less of your swearing cheek! Now go and get some swearing water so we can put it out, will you?'

Spuggy grabbed the bucket from beside the doorway and ran off to the stream. He returned a minute later with Dad walking alongside him carrying the sloshing bucket.

With a sigh, Dad poured some of the water into the cooking pot, unleashing a cloud of steam, then some more over Mum's hands.

'I'm all right,' she said. 'There's no need to swearing fuss.'

A puddle formed at Mum's feet. Cabbage arrived to drink from it.

'Didn't I say *I* was going to cook?' said Dad.



'Yes. But I was getting hungry, so I thought I'd make a start.' Cabbage gave the cooking pot a sniff, yelped in alarm, and ran away. 'Thought I'd have it ready for you when you all got home from farming and hunting and . . .' Mum's gaze passed from Dad and Frith to Spuggy. She looked puzzled for a moment. 'And . . . whatever it is that Spuggy does all day. I thought it'd be a nice surprise.'

'Well,' said Frith. 'You were half right, at least.'

After Dad had cooked, they sat around the fire in the hearth at the centre of the hut, and ate together. Outside, the sun was sinking behind the trees of the woodland. Inside, the fire spread its own ruddy glow.

'So, Dad,' said Frith, 'what kind of soup is this, exactly? Because, for once, it doesn't taste like cabbage *or* turnip.'

'Ah!' said Dad. 'I'm glad you noticed. That's because it's my new experimental recipe. Due to unforeseen events, I didn't have enough cabbage or turnip to make a soup on its own. So, this is – ta dah! – cabbage *and* turnip. What do you think?'

'I'm sure it's very . . . good for us?' said Spuggy.

'It tastes like it must be,' said Frith.

Dad took a mouthful himself.

'It does, doesn't it?' he said, with a sad nod.



'But at least it doesn't taste of cabbage or turnip,' said Mum, trying to sound much more enthusiastic than she looked.

'No,' said Dad. He set his bowl down and laid his spoon inside it. 'No, somehow I've made it taste worse than either cabbage *or* turnip. It's awful, isn't it?'

'It *is* probably the worst meal anyone has ever cooked,' said Mum. 'But at least it's not on fire.'

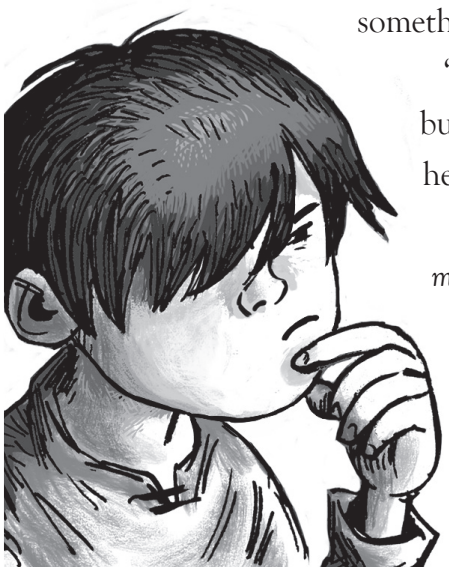
'That's true,' said Spuggy.

'Although fire probably *would* taste better,' said Frith.

'Ooh! That's cruel,' said Mum, patting Dad's hand. 'Absolutely true, of course' – she gave Dad a massive grin – 'but also, cruel. As punishment, Frith: you can't have any seconds.'

'Oh,' said Spuggy. 'In that case, can I be punished too, please?'

'Not until you've earned it,' said Mum. 'Say something rude about your dad.'



'Hey!' Dad tried to look insulted but his smile ruined it. 'How come he has to be rude about me?'

'Because I'll clout him if he gives *me* any cheek.'

'Good point. Off you go, son.'

Spuggy gave the matter some thought, his brow furrowed.

'You smell . . .'

'Yes?' said Dad.

'. . . worse than dog poo . . .'

'Oh,' said Dad.

'. . . from a dog that has eaten nothing but . . . rotten eggs and cabbage . . .'

Dad gave an approving nod.

'. . . for three years, fifteen months and seventy-seven days!' said Spuggy.

Dad thought about this.

'That really *would* be quite smelly. Well done. Ahem . . .' Dad pulled his saddest sad face. 'I am very hurt and offended. You may not have any seconds of my disgusting dinner!'

'Hurray!' said Spuggy.

Then they all laughed, for as long as their hunger would allow.

Later that evening, Frith heard Mum and Dad talking in their serious voices. Their serious voices were the same as their normal ones but quieter, and more serious. Mum and Dad had been using them more and more in the last few weeks, mostly when they talked about work, or food, or money.

'What about the other farms?' Mum was saying.

'I can probably get a few days' work here and there, but they're all the same. Something's got into the fields and made an awful mess, digging the crops up in the night. The best of the harvest is ruined already.'

'What do they think it was?'

'No idea. Something big, though. Maybe a boar? Whatever it was, it's done a lot of damage to four farms at least. And this dry spell isn't helping the crops that are left, either. There won't be much work even at harvest time.'

Mum kept on quietly working her loom, and even by the dim light of the fire Frith could see her frown.

'That's terrible,' she said at last, though Frith couldn't tell if she meant for the farmers or for Dad.

'Old Robert said that Bill had lost some cattle too.'

'Just *lost*?' Mum looked up. 'Or does he mean . . . ?'

'Well, Robert thinks Bill left a gate open, but of course Bill says it must have been' – Dad gave Mum a dramatic look, his face full of mock terror, and dropped his voice to a sinister whisper – 'the Monster in the Woods!'

'Monster?!' said Spuggy. 'What monster?'

'Now you've done it!' said Mum.

'Is there a monster in the woods?' Spuggy's eyes were wide with fright. 'Will he eat me?' He paced a knotted

path of worry on the floor. 'He won't eat Edward, will he?'

'No, of course not,' said Dad. 'No one's going to eat Edward.'

'Well, *that's* true,' said Frith.

'But there *is* a monster though?'

Dad shook his head. 'No. Absolutely not.'

'How do you know?'

'Well,' said Mum. 'You play in the woods a lot, don't you? Hours and hours you spend in there. And have you ever seen a monster?'

'No, but . . .'

'And your friend, Edward, he's in the woods a lot too, isn't he?'

'Yes. All the time. He lives there.'

'And has he ever seen a monster?'

'No.'

'Well, there you are, then. Bill Simpson is a nice man, but he's also a silly old fool with too much imagination, and he has never seen a monster in the woods. OK?'

'OK, Mum.' Spuggy rubbed his eyes, smiled, and yawned.

'Now, off to swearing bed with you!'

Spuggy gave Mum a hug, and stumbled back to his straw-filled mattress in the corner of the hut.

‘Did you,’ whispered Dad, leaning in close, ‘just use the imaginary evidence of an imaginary boy to prove that an imaginary monster doesn’t exist?’

‘Why, yes,’ said Mum, ‘I believe I did.’

‘And that,’ said Dad, ‘is why I love you.’

‘You had swearing well better,’ grinned Mum.

Frith turned her head away as Dad gave Mum a kiss, and that meant that she was looking out of the doorway when she heard the noise outside. Only it wasn’t just one noise. There was a low, rasping, gasping sound, and a creepy grunting sound, and a scratching, scraping sound, like claws dragging along the ground.

Frith stared out of the doorway through the smoky air, out into the fading twilight, as the noises grew nearer.

Rasp, gasp, grunt, scratch, scrape . . .

A huge, dark figure came into view, framed in the doorway, drawing closer . . .

‘Eek!’ said Frith.

Mum and Dad’s faces snapped round, taking in the giant presence hunching over to squeeze through the doorway into the hut. Frith scooted backwards across the floor towards her parents, squinting through the smoke at the intruder.

‘Hello,’ it said. ‘I wonder if you could do me a favour.’

