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Opening extract from

Shadow Forest

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Rudolph soup

‘What is it?’ Samuel asked, looking at the bowl of murky brown liquid.

‘Reindeer soup,’ Aunt Eda replied, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to eat a reindeer.

Samuel looked at the hairs on her chin and upper lip.

She’s as disgusting as the soup, he thought to himself, finding it hard to believe that she and his mum had been twin sisters.

His mum was pretty, and always wore nice clothes and make-up. She used to put stinky cream on her upper lip that got rid of her moustache, and she used to do workouts twice a week to keep her figure. She wore jeans and brightly coloured T-shirts, and went to the hairdresser’s every Saturday morning to get it styled or to put highlights in.

Samuel looked at the grey and black hair his aunt scraped back in a bun. He looked at her red cheeks. He looked at her blouse and her cardigan that looked two hundred years old. It was hard to believe that she and his mum belonged to the same species, let alone that they were twins.

‘Reindeer? That’s disgusting.’

Ugh, he thought. Rudolph soup.

‘It is really werry nice,’ said Aunt Eda. ‘I think you’ll find it tastes like beef.’

Samuel watched his sister take a sip from her spoon, with no visible pleasure or disgust. He did the same, and nearly wretched.

‘That is disgusting,’ he confirmed.

‘It was Henrik’s fafourite,’ said Aunt Eda.

‘Well, Henrik must have had very bad taste,’ said Samuel.

Aunt Eda leaned across the table. ‘Don’t talk that way about Uncle Henrik. Do you hear me?’

Her voice wasn’t much louder than a whisper, but it had the sudden quiet anger of a cat’s hiss. It wasn’t her voice that worried him though, it was the expression on her face. Her eyes looked so hurt that, for the first time since he had arrived, Samuel felt guilty for being so rude.

He wanted to say ‘I’m sorry’ but somehow couldn’t get the words out. However, the apology was there on his face, as Aunt Eda nodded and sipped her soup.

There was an awkward silence which was only interrupted by the sound of Ibsen’s whimpering. ‘Oh, Ibsen, what is it?’ Aunt Eda asked.

Ibsen was looking at the window, pointing his nose towards the forest. Samuel looked at the dog and thought there was something strange about it, but couldn’t decide what.

Aunt Eda ignored Ibsen and carried on sipping her soup.

‘Now,’ she said. ‘After we haff eaten I will explain the rules to you both. After all, you can’t follow rules unless you know what they are in the first place. OK?’

Martha nodded. Samuel did nothing. He didn't want to hear the rules. Why should he do as his aunt said? After all, no one ever did what he said. Not even when doing what he said was a matter of life or death – like stopping his parents' car before a log crushed it.

'Rules keep things in place,' Aunt Eda said. 'And me and you must be kept in certain places too. And for our own good.'

Samuel looked at her cardigan, buttoned right up to the top, and realized exactly what Aunt Eda was. She was a person buttoned right to the top. He wondered what it was that kept all her invisible buttons in place.

'OK,' said Aunt Eda. 'Now you haff finished your soup, it is time to hear the rules.'

Samuel was going to argue, but he looked at his sister and saw she was listening to his aunt. Maybe Martha's interested, he thought. Maybe she wants to know the rules. So Samuel decided to be quiet and sit perfectly still as his aunt ran through her list from one to ten.

The rules

1) Never go up to the attic.

2) Don't say anything bad about Uncle Henrik, as he is not here to defend himself.

3) Take your shoes off at the front door.

4) Never feed Ibsen between meal times, even when he begs.

5) Eat all your meals. One day you might need all the strength you can get.

6) Always ask my permission before you go outside.

7) Don't ever go outside after dark.

8) If it starts to get dark when you are already outside, come in straight away as fast as you can.

9) Never – under any circumstances – go into the forest.

10) Never question any of the rules. Especially number nine.

The huldre-folk

It was dark outside the windows.

Samuel and Martha had never known darkness like this. In England the nights were always softened by some distant streetlight. But here, next to a dense forest and miles from the nearest village, the darkness was so intense it almost had a weight. You could feel it pressing in outside the windows, as if the whole house was in the grip of a giant.

Samuel saw something reflected in the glass and turned round. 'What's that?' he asked. He was pointing to the weird light that shone up at Aunt Eda's face.

'It's a special lamp,' she said softly. 'A happiness lamp. It stops me getting too sad when it is so dark.'

Samuel looked at his sister and wondered if the lamp might help her.

'Could Martha have a go?' he asked.

‘If she wants a go. Martha, do you want to use my happiness lamp?’

Martha looked at the ultraviolet tubes of light and shook her head.

Aunt Eda turned from the lamp and smiled at Martha. ‘You might be a huldre,’ she said, smiling sadly. The look on her face indicated that she hadn’t meant to say this aloud.

‘What’s a huldre?’ Samuel asked, on Martha’s behalf.

Aunt Eda paused for a long time and looked through the gap in the curtains at the darkness. Maybe it would be a good idea to tell them about the huldres, she thought. Just in case anything happens.

‘The huldre-folk are creatures who are said to be scared of light,’ she said eventually, changing the angle of her lamp. She was trying to make the huldres sound less serious than she knew they were, as if they were just something out of a story book, rather than creatures living in the forest behind her house. ‘They effaporate if they are exposed to the sun. They liff in a separate world under the ground and only come out at night. They get jealous of the humans who don’t haff to spend their days in the dark. Huldre in Norwegian means “underneath”. The huldre-folk are supposedly as tall as you and me, but they are werry ugly. They haff a tail and grey skin and strange eyes and bony bodies. They are said to trap humans and other creatures in prisons underground . . .’

She went quiet suddenly, remembering what Old Tor was meant to have seen.

Samuel thought of the nightmares he sometimes had, about grey-skinned monsters with tails and wide-apart eyes. But these were only nightmares. He knew they weren’t real.

‘Do you believe in the huldre-folk?’ Samuel asked.

Aunt Eda moved her mouth as if the question was something to chew on. Then she said: ‘I believe there are more things out there than we understand.’

She’s mad, thought Samuel. Absolutely raving mad.

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