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Opening extract from

The Windvale Sprites

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The Storm

When Asa Brown thought back to the actual night of the storm he found he couldn't really remember it very well. He'd had a busy day previously and had fallen into bed exhausted. There he slept fitfully through noisy dreams of howling beasts and old steam trains until, eventually, he was woken by the sharp rap of a stick hitting his window. He vaguely remembered peering through the curtains but not being able to see anything clearly. It was so dark, unusually dark, there were no streetlights, no cars on the road and the rain was coming straight at the



windowpane. He lay back down and listened, for a while, to the tempest.

The raging wind was playing the houses and trees like the instruments of an orchestra, producing extraordinary noises. It whined and whistled, changed direction and dropped an octave, turned to the window and rattled the glass. Then it dropped silent for a second and crept back across the road to start again. Each time the wind slammed into the house it seemed to get louder until it reached a crescendo, when a terrifying bass note would kick in and make the house vibrate to its very foundations. Beneath this noise, Asa could make out the smashtinkle of greenhouse glass and toppling terracotta pots, with fence panels and gates banging out an idiotic rhythm.

Strange though it might sound, these noises eventually lulled him back into a deep sleep. The house was old and prone to making unearthly noises, which he was used to and the drone of the wind was not unlike being on a train. So he

went back to dreaming of locomotives thundering through tunnels and slept that way until morning.

The next morning was calm by comparison. The hurricane was now a mere gale and was carrying out its final checks, seeing that everything was dislodged that could be dislodged, uprooted or simply repositioned.

Many power lines across the area had been blown down and so, as there was no electricity, school was closed. Asa lost no time in exploring the damage outside.

There was a large pampas grass deposited in the middle of the lawn like a giant, stranded jellyfish. It had probably been blown there from Mr and Mrs Singer's front garden at number 72. A television aerial was trying unsuccessfully to get a signal at the top of the Hawthorn.

Then he saw it. Floating amongst the duckweed at the edge of the fishpond was a small figure. Asa

assumed that it was a toy that had been blown from somewhere else, why wouldn't he? But as his fingers closed around it he jumped back in horror for what he touched was not plastic or wood. It was skin.

He sat down with a bump on the wet grass with his back to the fishpond and tried to calm down. His heart was pounding and he felt shaky. Thank goodness there was nobody around to see him, he thought, he must have looked pretty silly. Slowly he turned back to the pond and looked over the tall iris leaves.

There it was, floating face up just a few feet away.

It had big eyes. Huge black eyes that were all pupil. It was skinny like a stick with extraordinarily long legs that were bent back unnaturally. Its slender arms ended in delicate hands and fingers that tapered to fine points.

It was hard to tell exactly how tall it was but it couldn't have been more than six inches long.

Asa crawled closer.

The creature had olive-brown skin with a seam of sharp-looking thorns running up the outside of each limb. It had dark wispy hair on its head from which sprouted two long antennae and pointed ears.

As Asa looked more closely he could see that the surface of its eyes were made up of countless facets that glittered in the light. The tiny face had a sharp chin and framed a small nose and an even smaller mouth. On the creature's chest was tattooed a design like a Celtic knot and its skin was covered in bruises and scrapes.

With heart thumping, Asa dipped his fingers into the water and underneath the creature. It was all he could do to stop freaking out as he lifted it out of the pond and deposited it on the bank, quick as he could.

It flopped on to its front on the grass and Asa saw, with amazement, that sprouting from its shoulder blades were four, slender, transparent wings. An intricate network of veins divided each



like a stained-glass window.

That is when the thought struck him. *I've found a fairy.* Just like that with no exclamation mark.

It's dead, but I am almost certain that I have found a real-life dead fairy. It suddenly all made sense. This is what 'fairies' are. Not wand-waving Tinkerbells but sinewy insect-men: wild creatures that must be very secretive and hardly ever spotted. This one must have been blown in the hurricane from the remote place where he lived and ended up in my fishpond.

Asa ran inside and found a shoebox to put the creature in; he didn't know quite what he was going to do with it but he knew he had to do *something*. He also had the presence of mind to grab his dad's old camera and, returning outside, he took snaps of the creature until the film was used up. It wasn't a great camera and the light was not good but at least you would be able to make something out.

Eventually he lifted the limp body into the box and took it back inside the house where he almost

collided with his mum at the foot of the stairs.

'I just saw Chris's dad up the road and he said your school will be closed until the end of next week while they repair broken windows and roof tiles,' said Mum. 'Dad and I will be back at work on Monday so you'll have to occupy yourself until the end of the week. Don't forget to find out if your school trip is still going ahead next Sunday as we've bought all the stuff for it so I'll be annoyed if it's cancelled.'

The impending biology field trip had been hanging over Asa like a dark cloud for a couple of months. The entire class were off to some bleak cove for a week in a remote part of the country to study species of lichen growing on drystone walls. The stories told of this field trip in previous years were of seven days of crushing boredom. It was an endurance test just to make it through without going insane. Many boys, much tougher than Asa, ended up feigning illness and being picked up by their mums on day two.

But for now this was the last thing on his mind.

'OK,' said Asa and tried to slip past.

'Were you listening?'

'Yes,' Asa lied.

'If it is cancelled you'll just have to come with us to Grandma and Grandpa's.'

'OK.'

'What's in the box?'

Asa froze.

'What do you mean?'

Mum looked at him then the box.

'What's in the box?' she repeated.

'Oh! The shoebox!' Asa acted as though he'd forgotten he was holding it. 'Oh nothing, it's empty, I need it . . . for the school trip.'

Mum looked unconvinced but decided not to pursue it any further. Asa saw an opportunity and legged it up the stairs and into his room where he carefully hid the box under some clothes at the back of his wardrobe.