

Stefan Seitz

NETTLEWOOL[®]

A SECRET OLDER THAN THE ANCIENT TREES

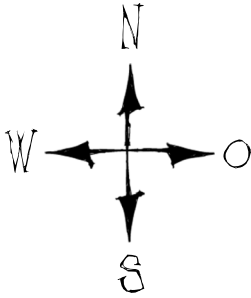
Vol. 1 - Fragments of the Moon



CLEON


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The Land of Nettlewooz



-  Primus
-  Plim
-  Wiserville
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Prolog

This is what it said on the final pages of a little yellowed book:

*In days gone by, so long ago,
The forest lay there deep and dark.
What happened then we do not know.
A secret that has left its mark.*

*A Crescent Moon, so slim and bright,
Cast its glow on the dark night.
The valley, too, and all the hills
Bathed in silver. And the rills
Gleamed and twinkled, flashed and shone.
The forest dark, it slumbered on.*

*But what was this? So suddenly
Tree and flower, land and sea
Fell silent. From the forest floor
Arose a mist and then before
They knew it, all the grass turned pale.
The mist, it then became a veil.*

*Those years ago, on that dark night
In the clear glow of the starlight
A white dress from the mist arose
And then some hair, and then a nose:
A fairy bright, who must have been
More beautiful than any seen.*

*Through tears, the wispy fairy fine
Saw the light of the moon shine.
She loved this moon, though it was fain
To give her always naught but pain
Of every sort. How hot it burned,
And still her face she to it turned.*

*Full moons, they caused her so much pain –
She only danced when it was plain
That nought would be there that night present
Except the slender little crescent.
And so she danced in its light
And never thought of taking flight.*

*But in the darkness, hiding there,
A stranger watched her. O beware!
The south wind cried. Alas, alack!
The fairy never looked back
To see the man with dev'lish frown.
Sheer evil with an icy crown.*

*The dawn broke then, and the dark night
Turned into a morn so bright.
The veil of mist vanished anew
And landed on the grass as dew.
Soft and distant came the sound
Of sobbing, deep and so profound.*

*The next night fell – but o, so strange!
New Moon was due – but what a change!
The crescent's rays felt very cold;
They shone into the forest old.
The fairy danced, full of glee,
“The rays – they are not hurting me!”*

*The south wind cried: “Look out! Now run!”
The fairy turned – but it was done
Too late. A clap of thunder filled the land.
An evil laugh. An icy hand
Took her away. She knew not where.
And there was no more fairy fair.*

*But then came one almighty crash.
The moon fell down and it did smash
The earth in two. The thunder roared;
The lightning flashed. With one accord
The tall trees rocked and swayed and fell.
The forest croaked its own death knell.*

*And hail and snow as ne'er before
Smote the land so very poor.
The crown it fell, and darkness, too.
An Ice Age dawned. And then anew,
From years of frozen sadness felt,
The ice and snow began to melt.*

*The years they passéd by the horde
Until the land could be restored.
But ne'er again was there a sight
Of fairy fair by pale moonlight.*

*And not even the wind doth know
What might be buried far below.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Things Look Bad for Primus

Strange noises filled the air. It sounded as if someone were holding a hose-pipe to his mouth and saying odd words down it. Everything was booming around Primus as he gradually came to. He had no idea where he was or what had happened to him. The distorted sounds whirled around his head like a swarm of angry wasps. Primus tried to think straight. Had he fallen out of bed?! He might have done, as he was lying on something hard and uncomfortable. As he tried to move, however, he was surprised to realise that he wasn't so much lying *on* something as lying *in* something.

He groaned and opened his eyes, only to shut them again. Moments passed, and then he squinted hesitantly at his surroundings. Where was he? Everything looked so weird. But that was because he could barely move. He shook his head and saw that he was inside a cottage, but everything was upside down. But that wasn't all. The walls and furniture looked oddly warped or distended. Primus gulped as he realised that it wasn't the cottage that was upside down. *He* was the one that was upside down. And the simple reason everything looked so peculiar was that he had been stuffed into a preserving jar and was now looking out of its curved glass. This in turn told him where he was: in Miss Plim's cottage!

Slowly and with creaking movements, Primus began to turn around in the preserving jar. His stomach and his cheeks squeaked their way round the glass, and his small lips followed slowly after. Half way round, with his nose pressed to the glass, he paused briefly for breath and looked out. Right next to him was the jar containing the two toads, Taddel and Mills, who were observing his contortions with amusement. Primus tried to speak, but in this position managed only an unintelligible babbling sound. This was also the moment when the pair of them almost exploded with laughter. They gasped for breath.

“Hello, neighbour,” the fatter one called. “Well, what exclusive quarters you have. Might we come to stay?”

“Nah, he’s not got time for that,” the other one said. “You can see he’s busy cleaning his windows.”

Taddel and Mills snorted with laughter and slapped their thighs.

The two toads had spent forever on Miss Plim’s shelf, and had long since abandoned any thought of going anywhere else. Plim had no idea what to do with them, as none of her recipes called for ancient toads. In the *Witch’s Book of Rules*, though, it said that any self-respecting witch ought to own a couple of toads. Thus she kept Taddel and Mills, even though they sometimes irritated her beyond belief.

Primus had to admit that he had had a pretty rotten day. He would have been better off staying at home, listening to Bucklewhee squawking. He heaved himself into a better position and twisted his neck round. Then he looked up. The lid of his preserving jar had little air holes which also enabled him to hear what was going on. Plim was standing by her cauldron and was, apparently, quite satisfied. On a table

beneath the window was an open book which she was consulting every now and then. Presumably a recipe or something similarly diabolical. She grabbed a handful of herbs, crumbled them over the cauldron, and stirred the bubbling brew vigorously. She then went over to the furthest wall, where there was a large wardrobe. The doors were half open as the wardrobe was stuffed so full of shoes, hats and clothes that it wouldn't shut properly. Plim forced the doors fully open, and half of the contents came tumbling out. However, this didn't bother her in the slightest. Humming, she rummaged around in the mountain of clothes, pulled out a brightly coloured apron, and stuffed everything else back inside. She tied the apron around her waist, bent over the book, and started to read aloud.

“Two squirts of newt-groats. Hmm, with a bit of luck, there will be some left.” She went over to the shelf next to the window and dug around in a cardboard box. “Ah, there it is,” she murmured, pulling out a squashed tube of something. “Though it might have gone off.” She took the cap off and sniffed it. “Pooh!” she exclaimed. “That smells worse than a boys' locker room.”

She added two large and disgusting squirts to the brew and then hurled the tube back into the box. Then she went over to the mirror. She looked into it, pulled a serious face, and nodded decisively. Primus had no idea what this might mean – though there was no way he could have known ...

Miss Plim, you see, had a problem. She was extraordinarily attractive but her mirror was anything but honest. On the contrary: it was deceitful and profoundly malevolent. Unfortunately, though, she was unaware of this. She had acquired the mirror some time ago from Master Glazier Plundersack

in Wiseville – it had been a freebie in return for the clown’s nose he had bought from her at a huge discount (after hours of haggling), and which he had never been able to take off again.

Master Glazier Plundersack’s mirrors were normally very polite to their owners, and indeed were slightly over the top with their compliments. However, this mirror – which he had made especially for Miss Plim – was very different.

This mirror would start off by praising her big eyes and long eyelashes. But that was it. It would then change her reflection and would draw her attention to tiny lumps and bumps on her skin. And then came the day when the mirror said: “Plim, you’ve got spots.” And it pointed them out to her. Every time, it got worse. The mirror could always be relied on to come up with some new insult. Plim was horrified to discover that, despite her youth, she was already developing wrinkles. Then it was greasy hair and yellow teeth. Her hips expanded in line with her double chin, and her porcelain skin always looked greasy and sallow in the mirror. Plim had gradually become convinced that she was now the ugliest woman ever born, and she called anyone who said otherwise an old liar.

Thus she did everything she possibly could to try to restore her former good looks – and this included brewing up daily beauty potions. Today, too, there was a new formula bubbling away in her cauldron which she had been intending to try out for a while now and which was apparently twice as good if it included a fresh bat.

Primus took a deep breath.

"Hello!" he cried through the air-holes in the lid. "Hello! Let me out!"

Plim turned round and scanned the room.

"HEY PLIM!" Primus yelled again.

She looked in his direction, but saw only Taddel and Mills.

"What are you on about now?" she asked the two toads.

Taddel and Mills shook their heads innocently. They pointed their fat fingers at Primus who was lying as flat as a flounder against the glass wall. Miss Plim went across and looked at him through the curved glass. Her features seemed to triple in width.

"What's up, little one?" she cooed with a smile.

"Open the lid and let me out!" demanded Primus.

"No way," she retorted. "You're staying where you are. You won't get bored. It looks as if you've made friends already."

Taddel and Mills squatted there cheerfully, and waved. Plim shook her head.

"I should really close my toy shop," she said. "I could start a travelling circus with this collection of creatures. It'd probably be more lucrative."

Then she returned to her cauldron and started stirring again.

Primus peered up at the lid of his jar and pressed himself against it with all his might. In vain. The lid refused to budge. His mind was whirling with possible escape plans, but none of them was very promising. He thought of transforming himself back into a human, but quickly rejected the idea. The jar was so narrow and sturdy that he'd probably break his neck rather than the jar.

"PLIM!" Primus shouted, banging angrily on the lid. "Just you wait until I get out of here. Then you'll be in for the

shock of your life. Yesterday's snow shovel will feel like a feather duster compared to what's coming to you."

"SO IT WAS YOU!" Plim screeched, stomping angrily through the room. "See this?" She held up her right hand and stretched out her little finger. "I broke a nail yesterday, thanks to you. If anyone's in for the shock of their life, it's you, pal. Got it?!"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at Primus.

"Oh, I am so sorry to hear it," he replied patronisingly. "That's a terrible injury. Poor Miss Plim. Perhaps you ought to treat yourself to a few more flying lessons? I can recommend someone. He lives in my clock case, and I'm sure he'd be able to give you a few tips on how to fly properly ..."

Plim snarled. She grabbed the jar and stood it on its lid with a bang. Primus, upside down again, watched as she returned to her cauldron. Then he struggled back the right way round.

"She's not going to let me out of her own accord," he muttered. "That much is for sure."

He needed an escape plan. And quickly.

Plim had meanwhile calmed down somewhat and was kneeling by the fire, holding a bellows. She stood up, scurried to the table, and looked in the book of spells. Although Primus' jar was upside down, he could still hear what Plim was reading out loud:

"Right ...", she began. "Five bush roses, 19 ground slugs (female), eight dessert spoons extra hot Devil's Pepper, a handful of Deadly Nightshade, four snake's tongues, and – for particularly good skin – two dried snow yams." She paused and looked at the ceiling. "Snow yams ... snow yams ... I saw them not long ago."

She then remembered. She clicked her fingers and scuttled up the creaky steps to the attic which also housed her blue four poster bed. There she leaned over to the washing line, and unpegged two pale roots. She came back downstairs, looked in the book once more, wiped the roots with an old cloth, and threw them into the cauldron.

"What have I forgotten?" she mused, reading through the recipe again. "Oh goodness, how silly of me ..." She looked at Primus and raised her eyebrows. "For the best results ... add a whole bat."

She picked up the jar and held it up. "So, little one. Now we'll see how palatable you are."

Primus opened his eyes wide as Plim carried him across to the cauldron. He looked with horror into the brew, which was giving off bilious green bubbles.

"Listen, Plim," he said. "You're not seriously planning to chuck me in there?! That would be a huge mistake. I'm not a bat. I might look like one, but I'm actually ..."

"If you really think," she broke in, "that you're going to escape as soon as I open the lid, you're very much mistaken. I'll make sure of that."

She went to the cauldron, leaned forwards, and regarded the steaming potion with a critical eye. She gave it another quick stir and then held the jar containing the trembling Primus above the boiling liquid. It was so monstrously hot that the sweat trickled down Primus' wings. Miss Plim tipped the glass upside down, unscrewed the lid, and quickly took it off.

Primus stretched his wings out as far as they could go, in order not to slide out of the glass and into the potion. Plim, however, prepared her other hand to give the base of the jar

a whack. Then, however, the potion suddenly thickened and the bubbles stopped bubbling.

Plim acted quickly. She immediately closed the preserving jar again.

"Fusty fug and slobbery slime!" she exclaimed. "How am I supposed to be in two places at once?"

She went over to the wall and put the jar on a red stool by the staircase. Then she picked up the little bellows again.

Primus clung to the underside of the holey lid, gasping for breath. He had no time to lose now. He absolutely had to escape from the jar. Next time he wouldn't get off so lightly. However, he now had one slight advantage: he now knew when and how Plim would remove the lid. He just needed to cling on to the glass until the moment came when he could bolt from the jar. If, that was, nothing was in his way.

Should he provoke Miss Plim a bit beforehand? That might distract her.

Primus looked across at her.

"Hey, Plim!"

"What?" she snapped. "You'll get your turn. And sooner than you'd like. There's no getting away from it."

He was no doubting from her tone that Plim was about to explode with anger. So Primus stood a chance. It looked as if he would just need to say one stupid thing and Plim would go ballistic. She might even hurl the jar at the wall, just as she had done with her tin opener. Primus wondered what he could say to drive her up the wall. But it was hard to think, with nothing but the blazing fire in his line of vision. He tried to look round the cottage. There must surely be some topic which would cause her to lose the plot. Desperately, he looked over his shoulder at the wall behind his preserving

jar. There was something on this wall. Primus squinted at it. It was an old piece of parchment.

It looked crumpled and tattered. Its edges were torn and the ink had run in places, as if it had been immersed in water a long time ago. He turned his head and tried to make out the strange drawings; the distorting effect of the glass made it even more difficult for him to understand them. So far as he could tell, it looked like an old plan – a blueprint for a slender, curved object depicted from various angles. Primus could also see letters and numbers. Unfortunately, though, they were so smudged that he couldn't see them from inside the jar. But that was no particular problem. Much clearer was a repeated pattern on the drawing. This was without a doubt the same pattern as the one on the shimmering stone which he used once a month as his reading lamp. His stone must, then, be a fragment that had once belonged to this crescent.

Whatever the case: the topic was ideal as a way to irritate Plim. He immediately got stuck in.

"Hey, Plim, if you'd had something like this on your broomstick yesterday, you'd probably still have your fingernail."

"What are you talking about?" Miss Plim hissed, operating her bellows vigorously.

"You know what I'm talking about. That stone on your plan," Primus continued. "Last night just happened to be the night that it was glowing. Perhaps you ought to attach one to your handlebars as a kind of fog light. Then you might find your way home more easily, the next time someone catapults you into the forest." Primus laughed solicitously. "Just for your own safety."

Plim stared at the parchment. She was pumping much less vigorously now. She looked at the cauldron, then back at the parchment, and finally put the bellows aside.

She then stood up and strode across to Primus. "How do you know that a stone like that can glow?" she demanded.

"That's easy enough. I've got one in my bedroom at home. I use it as a reading lamp."

Plim's eyes opened wide. She grabbed the jar.

"DO YOU TAKE ME FOR AN IDIOT?!" she yelled. "What stone have you got in your bedroom?"

Primus was delighted. Not long now, and Plim would boil over. "That one there," he said calmly, pointing to the parchment.

"Don't talk poppycock," she said. "That stone's enormous!"

"Mine isn't," Primus trilled. "Mine's small and very handy."

Plim gave him a sidelong look. Had she reached snapping point? If she now threw the glass at the wall, he would just have to transform himself at the right moment. Miss Plim, however, reacted completely differently from how he had anticipated.

Still holding the jar, she strode straight across the room, snapped the spell-book shut, and put the jar on top of it. Then she grabbed the stool, sat down, crossed her legs, and took a deep breath. She patted her hair straight, put her elbows on the table, and gazed seductively into Primus' eyes.

"Just tell me again," she said in honeyed tones, fluttering her eyelashes oh-so-charmingly. "You're really trying to say that ... that a bit of this slender crescent ... the one in the plan over there ... is in your bedroom?"

Primus pressed his nose against the glass and looked back into her eyes.

"Yes," he said.

"Aha," Plim burst out. She then righted herself to pursue her enquiries. "Which bit, exactly?"

Primus pretended to think deeply. "The ..." He paused, then added, "... tip."

Plim's expression darkened and she suddenly bent forward.

"THERE ARE TWO TIPS TO THIS CRESCENT, IN CASE YOU HADN'T NOTICED," she screeched at him.

"Well, what do I know?" Primus shook his head reproachfully. "What difference does it make, anyway?"

"IT MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE!!!" Plim shrieked through the holes in the glass.

She then leaned back again and scrutinised the bat.

"So where exactly is your bedroom? Somewhere in the forest, in a tree?"

"What kind of question is that?" Primus tried to sound horrified. "Do you imagine I'm going to be inviting you back with me?"

"I've got a suggestion," she said sharply. "You give me your stone, and I'll let you go."

Primus laughed. "Pull the other one. What would you do with it, anyway?"

Plim rolled her eyes. "Light-up advertising. I could put a neon sign up above the front door."

"One that only lights up once a month. Very useful."

"For special promotions. Anyway, I haven't got time to waste discussing this with you. Either the stone or the cauldron." She pointed at the cauldron. "You choose."

Primus, needless to say, didn't believe a word she said. However, if he could lure Plim out of her house, it would give him enough time to come up with another escape plan. In any case, he didn't care if she had the stone; he would just read by the fire instead.

"Garret, crooked tower, at the end of Thistleway," he said. Then he added: "In the trunk under the window."

"Is that the old ruin on the hill that looks as if it's about to fall down? Then we need to get a move on. You're coming with me. Just to make sure that you don't get up to any nonsense here while I'm out."

With these words she grabbed a dark green string bag, dropped Primus and his jar into it, and fetched her broomstick from the corner by the wardrobe. Her pilot's hat dangled from the handlebars next to the horn, along with the rest of her flying gear. She swung the string bag over her shoulder, and put on her long gloves and hat. Then she strode through the curtain and out of her wretched kitchen.

Rather than waltzing straight outside, however, she opened the front door a crack and peeped round it. The perfect little shop's excellent reputation would be wrecked at one fell swoop, if any customer had seen her in this particular get-up. By now, though, night had fallen, and there was nobody for miles around. Primus was surprised that it was already dark – though he had been unconscious in the jar for a while after being thwacked by the fly-swatter.

As they left the house, he could hear the crickets chirping and could smell the fresh forest air. It didn't last long, though, as Plim started up her ratty old broomstick.

"Right," she said, putting on her goggles. "Let's have a look at this stone, then."

And, with a stinking cloud of smoke, the broom shot from the clearing and up into the sky.

Plim headed southwards, straight across the Dark Forest, which stretched out beneath them in all directions like a black carpet. However, it wasn't particularly difficult for them to get their bearings in the air, as they could always see the Plumbum Peaks on the southern horizon. They raced diagonally across the forest. The string bag flapped madly in the wind, almost turning Primus' stomach. At length, they reached the edge of the Lunar Lake and turned slightly westwards. Even from a long way away, the old tower was clearly visible.

Plim forced the broomstick downwards and flew around the hill several times. Then she aimed for one of the open windows in the half-timbered part of the tower before preparing to land. She steered the broomstick skilfully towards the window, ducked, and braked in the sitting room with screeching exhaust and a thick cloud of smoke.

She coughed and flapped the smoke away with her hands. Then she pushed her goggles off her forehead and clambered off the broomstick. Plim's nose was looking slightly blackened; the imprint of her goggles served to draw attention to this. She looked around the room curiously.

"Not bad," she said, taking in the big armchair. "A bit rustic for my taste, but could be worse. Oh, look. The latest Magic Circle. What fun!"

Without a moment's hesitation, she grabbed Primus' brand new magazine, rolled it up, and stuffed it into the string bag along with him. The cheek of it! Primus was quite speechless.

"What did you say before about the trunk?" However, Plim didn't wait for an answer. "Under the window in the garret?" She looked up at the railings. "Where's the staircase?"

She quickly opened the door to the dusty kitchen. "Bit like mine," she said as she saw all the rusty pots and pans.

Then, however, she spotted the step ladder leading to the hatch. She scuttled nimbly through the kitchen and scamp-ered lightly up the creaking rungs. Then she cautiously opened the hatch and peered suspiciously into the garret. The two skylights made the top floor much lighter than the kitchen. Plim had no trouble spotting the bulging trunk which stood right next to the clock.

"I can't wait to see this," she said slipping into the garret.

She jerked the trunk open. Her eyes began to gleam as she saw the milky stone. It wasn't glowing as it apparently had done the previous night, but she nevertheless caught her breath.

"So, Plim," Primus called. "Now you take that stupid stone, and unscrew the lid at once."

"Not so quickly," she replied, taking the stone out of the trunk. "There's something I need to try first."

She went over to the skylight and looked up at the night sky. The stars twinkled down brightly, illuminating the garret. Plim moved to one side. She stood by the window and with both hands, held the stone into the starlight. She took a deep, portentous breath.

Then she suddenly moved her hands away entirely. Primus couldn't believe his eyes. The stone didn't go crashing to the ground, but floated in mid-air as if held by an invisible hand. He really hadn't been expecting that one. And that

wasn't all. Moments later, the stone started to move slowly around in the air. It turned sedately on its axis until its tip was pointing straight downwards. The reverent silence in the room was suddenly shattered.

"That's the wrong end," Plim said testily while placing herself in front of the window. The stone immediately dropped down onto the ground.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Primus said indignantly. "Didn't you just see what it could do? It doesn't just glow every now and then – it can fly, too!"

Plim grabbed the preserving jar and tapped it with her index finger. "Whatever. It's no use to me." Then she added in a very clear voice: "Which means that you're heading for the cauldron."

As she spoke, the clock behind her struck midnight. Plim jumped and turned round. Bucklewhee was staring her straight in the face. Punctual as always, he was sitting on his perch on the end of the concertina arm, giving her a puzzled look. Plim's mouth fell open. For a moment, there was a deathly silence. Then, however, Bucklewhee chose this moment to utter the most earth-shattering wake-up screech he had ever managed.

Plim's hair stood on end. She turned as white as a sheet. Bucklewhee screeched at full volume. As if struck by lightning, she flung the preserving jar at the floor in order to clap both hands to her ears. The jar clattered along the floor and smashed to pieces.

Plim whirled round. Panicked, she made to flee – but Primus was behind her in his full human form. Plim's heart almost stopped when she saw him. He gave her a devilish grin and said:

"BOOO!"

Plim's shrieks were enough to make the windows rattle.

Primus grabbed her by the shoulders, turned her round, and pushed her against the wall.

"So, young lady," he hissed. "It's time we had a little chat."

It was tricky to stuff a struggling Plim into the trunk, but he managed eventually. He quickly shut the lid and sat on top of it.

Bucklewheel had retreated to his clock upon hearing Plim's screeches. However, he didn't want to miss anything, so poked his head curiously out of the door.

Primus was sitting triumphantly on the wobbling trunk. A mixture of muffled screeches and the foulest imprecations emanated from it. Very slowly, the commotion within the trunk abated, and Plim's screeching gave way to a piteous whimpering.

"Hey Plim," said Primus. "Is everything okay now? Has Madam calmed down?"

No answer.

Then came further struggling and squealing. "Let me OOOUUUT! Nowwwww!"

Primus nodded understandingly. "Come on, Plim. Don't be ungrateful. You don't appreciate how comfortable it is in that lovely trunk. Just imagine how you'd feel if you were upside down in there and had an audience of fat old toads laughing at you."

"I thought you were an ordinary bat," she cried. "I didn't do anything to you."

"Hang on," Primus said thoughtfully. "First of all, you were going to boil me up – and that's leaving aside the

whack with the fly-swatter. But that wasn't enough. You then went flying around my sitting room on your stinking broomstick, stole my magazine, and made my reading light float around the room. I think you're a complete environmental liability, and everyone ought to be grateful to me for having disposed of you."

More cursing resounded from within the trunk. It soon gave way to whimpering, though.

"I'll tell you what. I'm prepared to offer you a deal," Primus called through the lid. "I'll let you out of the trunk, and you can answer some questions. But if you turn nasty and start scratching and biting, then you'll find yourself straight back in that nice cosy trunk. How about it?"

No reaction.

He knocked on the lid. "Plim? Did you hear me?"

"Oh, alright, then," came the sulky reply.

Primus jumped off the trunk and opened the lid. Miss Plim sat there with her arms folded. She looked highly offended and didn't dignify him with even a glance.

"If you want to stay in there, I'll happily bring you a cushion. Make your mind up."

Pouting, Plim gave in. She clambered out of the trunk and sat with her arms around her knees on the edge of the bed. Primus shut the lid and took up his position on the trunk again.

"So. You can start by telling me what kind of magic it is." He gesticulated at the stone. "Can that thing do more than just glow and fly?"

Bucklewhee leaned out of his door. "Good question," he chattered. "Maybe it plays music, too. I wouldn't be surprised."

Plim was clearly in a huff. She stared disdainfully ahead of her.

"Well?" Primus persisted. "What's so special about this stone? And what's the parchment on your wall all about?"

"I didn't draw it," she said.

"I know you didn't draw it," Primus said impatiently. "It's far too old for that. But where did you get it?"

"I found it."

"*Where?*" he asked, rolling his eyes. "Crikey, this is like pulling teeth."

"It was under a pile of leaves. In the west, somewhere around the marshes."

Primus looked up at Bucklewheel and shook his head. "Amazing where this young lady gets to. Everyone knows that the Western Swamps are not exactly the place for a nice walk."

Sir Bucklewheel sprang out of his clock.

"But it's earthquake-proof there. Maybe she wanted to move there."

"Don't be so ridiculous," Plim cried, flapping her arms around. "My broomstick was misbehaving and took me right round the whole forest. I fell off somewhere in the far west, and it was very difficult to get out of that stinking swamp. I was jolly glad that I fell into the pile of leaves, otherwise I'd probably have broken my neck, too. While I was scrabbling around in the leaves, I found the parchment."

"And you took it," Primus nodded. "What kind of crescent is it that's on the diagram?"

Miss Plim looked at the ground and at the stone. "I don't exactly know," she said seriously. "This stone appears to be a fragment of a Crescent Moon which was apparently built

several thousand years ago and hung right above the Dark Forest."

Primus stopped her.

"Built? By whom?"

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Neither do I know what it was ultimately meant for. According to the plan, it was made out of some unusual material. Or, rather, out of several *alluring* elements."

"Alluring elements? What's that supposed to mean?" Primus sat up.

"The Crescent Moon was made up of several segments. Five, to be precise. Each segment had a particular quality. *Wealth* and *Happiness*. *Immortality* and *Beauty* were there, too. And, finally, *Power!* It floated above the forest, carried by starlight and held together by darkness. Or that's what it says on the plan, at any rate."

"Aha," Primus said. "So that's how you knew that the stone could float in mid-air. You just have to have some starlight."

She set her jaw proudly.

"But if that's the case, then this Crescent Moon can't in fact have been hanging over the forest for very long," Primus said. "By dawn, or even if it were cloudy, it would have fallen down just like my stone just did."

Plim blew out her cheeks.

Primus, however, jumped off the chest, held the stone up, and examined its chipped face.

"To judge by this bit, that's precisely what happened." He tapped his nose. "Assuming this strange story about the elements is actually true, then just imagine what else you could do with this thing."

"I can't imagine," said Plim. "But perhaps you could use the stone's particular quality for something? Though it would depend on which of the five elements it contains."

Primus laid the stone on the trunk and put his finger on it. "Do you have any idea which particular quality this bit of stone has?"

Plim shook her head. "When the stone was floating, it turned to point downwards. This would mean it was the bottom point of the crescent. But this part of the plan is completely illegible. It would be something to do with either Happiness or Immortality."

"And what, may I ask, were you looking for when you wanted my stone?" Primus raised his eyebrows.

Plim looked silently at the ground.

Primus shrugged. "Never mind. It's not important. So here we've got a whole element of this mysterious Crescent Moon."

"A *whole* element? Don't make me laugh. It's just a tiny fragment. The Crescent was enormous."

"All the better," he said, sitting on the trunk again. "Then there must be lots more pieces of it. It's just a shame that there are so many gaps in your story. If this moon really did once hang over the forest, then I'd love to know *why*." He paused, then added: "And I'd be even more interested to know *who* hung it there."

"What do you mean?"

"Alluring elements don't just appear in the sky," he said. "There must have been a reason for it. Someone used the Crescent Moon for something – and that *Someone* was evidently a complete master – or mistress – when it came to magic. I've never heard of anyone being able to handle hap-

piness or power as if they were pouring dough into a cake tin." He flicked the stone with his finger. "Are there any other drawings of this moon?"

Plim looked at him, baffled. "How would I know?"

"Haven't you ever tried to find out more?" Primus was visibly astonished.

"No," she said. "I didn't even know until today that there were any bits of it in existence. Where did you find it, anyway?"

Primus stood up. He suddenly realised that he had never given it a moment's thought. He regarded the stone thoughtfully. Then strange images shot through his head. Images of a warm summer's day – wild grass – and ... images of two boys running across the Mizzle Meadows.

"I don't remember rightly," he said. "I think I found it in the forest. But it must have been a long time ago. I seem to have had it in the trunk forever." He looked at the window. "There might be records of it in Wiseville."

"What do you mean?"

"In the big library," he said. "Haven't you ever been there? There's bound to be a chronicle which mentions the Crescent Moon."

Miss Plim nodded slowly. Primus, for his part, was completely in his element. He also knew exactly where to look. He had visited the main library countless times, and knew his way around the place.

"Plim," he said cheerfully. "Do enjoy the rest of your evening. You know your way home. It would be nice to chat for a bit longer, but I need to go out first thing tomorrow."

He straightened his tailcoat, clapped his hands together, and opened the hatch.

Plim regarded him with astonishment.

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "What are you planning to do?"

"Well, I'm going to search for the Crescent Moon tomorrow. Surely you could have worked that out for yourself?"

"*You're* going to search for the Crescent Moon?" she cried indignantly. "If it weren't for me, you'd still be using that stone as a bedside lamp. You ought to be grateful to me for showing you my diagram."

Primus winked at Bucklewheel. "I really wish you could have seen what '*showing me her diagram*' involved."

"That's not fair!" Plim exclaimed. "I've been investigating this for a long time."

Primus looked at her questioningly.

"It almost sounds as if you want to come with me."

Miss Plim folded her arms and pointed her nose at the ceiling. "I would merely like to know what you find out. Nothing more."

"Well, Plim," he began. "If you're very good and don't cause any bother, then you can come to Wiseville with me tomorrow."

Plim immediately agreed. She grabbed her string bag and swung it over her shoulder. "I need a few things from the market anyway," she said. "Let's meet first thing tomorrow by the shop."

"Very well," he said. "But just remember: no fly-swatters or funny business. Got it? It won't take us long. It'll only take us half an hour to fly there."

"We can't," Plim announced. "We'll have to walk."

"WALK? No way. Do you know how long that would take us?"

"I don't care," she said. "What would people think if I arrived on a broomstick? I'd have to shut my toy shop then and there."

Primus gave in. They clambered through the hatch into the kitchen and went into the sitting room. There, Miss Plim bestrode her broomstick and put her goggles on.

"See you tomorrow," she said.

Primus raised his finger and held his hand out. "I think there's something you've forgotten."

"What's that?" Plim asked innocently.

"My magazine. Hand it over."

Plim smiled sadly and pulled the magazine out of her string bag. Then she and her broomstick rattled away into the night.



Want to know more about Primus and Plim?

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