

Morning sun filtered through the tall, dense trees of the Forest, reaching down to the needle covered dampness of the ancient earth. Some evidence could be seen of the terrible thunderstorm which beat the Forest relentlessly during the night. Varmit holes filled with rainwater and new green leaves ripped from their branches were just two signs of the storm's ferocity.

Life in the Forest had always been peaceful and calm. Such storms as the one of the previous night were quite unprecedented. There had been no unrest, no war, no catastrophes in over a generation. But disaster struck that night. Two trees were hit by lightning and virtually destroyed. Not just any trees; these were Homute Trees.

Treflins, the peaceful little people of the Forest, make their homes in Homute Trees. The news spread through the community that friends and relatives had lost their homes. The Treflin clans were in shock. This little folk dwelled in the large, hollow Homute trees with anyone they considered family. There are limitations, of course, depending on the size and arrangement of the host Homute Tree.

Such were the habits of some of the Treflins that in the mid-morning lull between breakfast and lunch, a treflin named Trafla lay stretched out on the damp ground beneath the high canopy of the Forest. He had wandered from his Homute to find some quiet, away from the added Treflins taken in after the storm. Yawning, he pondered the events of the previous weeks.

"It just doesn't make sense. None of our people has ever lost a home," he said quietly to himself. "Some strange things have been happening."

Closing his eyes, he remembered discussions about a dense fog rolling in from the lake each night. The Treflins living in the area near the river brought that news, along with talk of animals behaving oddly. It seemed the whole Forest was out of balance.

"Ho! Trafla! Up, you lazybones! Haven't you anything to do besides lay around and sleep?"

Trafla jumped up, startled at the sudden interruption of his thoughts. "Oh, hello, Trohm." The young Treflin looked at his friend. "I didn't notice you approaching. Heard any news?"

"You mean about the lightning strikes? No, I mean, no more than you have, I'm sure," Trohm answered. Trohm was a rather shy and not very talkative fellow, but no finer-hearted a Treflin lived in the Forest. In fact, finding a Treflin would be difficult, as they try to remain as quiet and inconspicuous as possible. Only if a clan is riled or excited will they become boisterous.

Trafla was genuinely concerned about the problems in the Forest and was curious if he was alone in his worry. "Trohm, what do you think is going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you've noticed the strange happenings lately," Trafla said quietly.

"Like what?" Trohm seemed uneasy.

"Great Greems! Are you growing denser? Since when does a storm, or anything else, destroy a Homute?" Trafla seemed agitated.

“Well,” Trohm said hesitantly. He looked around for a moment. “It is a bit queer. I never heard of such a thing, and neither has old Grandpa Trig. I heard him talking. He seemed to remember some old stories and was telling...” Trohm’s voice fell to a whisper. “Something about the storms being...evil.”

“Nonsense!” cried Trafla. “I declare some stories do get out of whack. No, surely that’s not it. There is something strange happening, but it...it couldn’t be that.”

“I only say what I heard. You asked. Any height, I must be off to home. Almost lunchtime, you know.” Trohm seemed glad to be off the subject. He visibly perked up thinking of lunch. Though he was a shy Tremlin, he was far from bashful when mealtime came around.

As Trohm hurried away, weaving through the trees, Trafla again sat quietly for a while. He took a deep breath and thought about how beautiful the Forest was. The ferns and undergrowth glistened with moisture from the rain. There were so many different shades of green, each with its own magic when sunlight lit the leaves.

The Forest looked healthy and happy. Tiny insects buzzed about and small animals rustled about on the grassy floor. So why did Trafla have such a bad feeling? He sighed and leaned against a log.

“Maybe I’m getting sick,” he said rolling his eyes. Exasperated with himself, he knew he was fine and as fit as the tall Troppa tree. Neither the Homute or Troppa tree was abundant in the Forest, but each was very important to the Tremlins. The Homute was their home, the Troppa fueled their legends.

Unlike the Homute tree, the Troppa did not sprawl or become hollow. It was the king of the Forest. Some of Grandpa Trig’s stories told of days when the Troppa were known to have personalities and speak to those who might listen. Even in modern times, they seemed to be listening. Trafla thought if a Troppa spoke to him, he would certainly listen. They were supposed to be wise beyond all imagination. But that was just old Grandpa Trig’s stories.

Trafla’s mind wandered along such tangents until he dozed off while resting against the log. His brain was so preoccupied he immediately fell into a dream. It became a nightmare.

Never had Trafla known such a terrible, desperately lonely feeling. He felt his entire world was terribly wrong. There was no Forest, no trees, no grass beneath his feet. Nor did he smell the fragrance of any growing plant or flower. The only sensations were thirst, heat, and that horrible loneliness.

He was aware of other people nearby, but didn’t know, or even care, about them. All he knew was he was miserable and lost and helpless. There was absolutely nothing he could do to help himself. Hot sands stretched out as far as he could see. The relentless heat from the sun beat down upon his thirst ravaged body. The feeling of hopelessness was paramount, yet contrary to Trafla’s normal manner of thinking.

Curious, he roused himself to take notice of the people also stranded in the hot sands and found they were looking directly at him. Trafla looked away, but returned his gaze to them and saw something he lacked-hope. He then realized the other lost people were looking to him for guidance.

“Ha!” he thought cynically. “How can I help them when I can do nothing for myself?” He watched with terror as the people approached him with hands extended. They gathered closely all around as he sank into the sand crying, “No, no, no. NOOOO!”

Trafla awoke from the nightmare with a start, perspiring and quivering in the wake of the awful dream. Breathing deeply to calm his fast beating heart, he shook his head side-to-side to clear his mind of the negativity of the dream. Looking about he saw the Forest with its beauty and took another deep breath.

He was at home, not in some horrific place. The Tremlin sat up straighter to gather his wits. The air was clean and refreshing. Trafla rose to his feet.

“Great Greens! What a horrible dream! How could anything be as terrible as THAT?”

Still a bit stunned from the awful vision, he started walking toward his Homute. Trafla was still a bit shaky so he proceeded carefully, keeping a close eye on the ground for fallen twigs or other tripping hazards. He noticed some mushrooms growing beneath a stand of fern. With each step, he left the nightmare behind.

The Homute was buzzing with activity. The influx of added members put a bit of a strain on resources. Many Tremlins bustled about carrying bedding and clothing, climbing ladders to the sleeping platforms while others set out a lunch of nuts, salad, breads, and pitchers of water. Soon, most everyone was settled in for lunch.

From the eating platform one could see upward to the sleeping quarters, and down the ladders to the sitting areas where folks gathered after meals to tell familiar stories while children played games. Many of the older men sat back and smoked their pipes, carefully of course. When one lives in a hollow tree, one shouldn’t scatter sparks.

After eating a light lunch, Trafla sat still in his usual spot for some time, somewhat away from the bustle of other Tremlins. His pipe had gone cold and eyes must have closed, because he was startled when a hand tapped him on the shoulder.

“Oh!” he cried, dropping the pipe to the floor. He scrambled to retrieve it and was relieved to see it wasn’t burning.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Trafla, I wondered something...” The girl was hesitant.

“It’s all right, Shala. What is it you need?” Trafla looked with affection at his cousin. She was just one year younger than he, and quite a beautiful girl. A few of the elder Tremlins glanced in their direction and chuckled.

“Oh, I saw you coming home from the north and wondered if you might have seen some mushrooms out that way?” The girl was embarrassed by the attention. They were both of marriageable age, but that was not in either of their minds.

“Yes, I sure did see a few growing over toward Trohm’s Homute. Are you cooking up something special?” he asked.

“Well, no. The storeroom needs a little restocking, as you might imagine. Besides, I like to sneak one as a snack now and then.” She smiled shyly at her cousin.

“I know what you mean, Shala. I’m that way with walnuts. Can’t ever seem to get enough of them. And those at lunch were scrumptious.”

“All right. I’ll sneak you some walnuts if you’ll help me gather some mushrooms. Deal?”

“Sure! Anything for walnuts!” Trafla rolled his eyes with his little joke.

“Greems, you are something else. All right, meet me outside in just a little while. I’ve got to help clean up.”

“Will do. And I promise not to go digging without you!” Trafla chuckled at himself. One minute scared to death, the next making jokes. He shook his head side-to-side and watched Shala walk away.

After eavesdropping on a few conversations and learning nothing new, Trafla climbed down the ladders to the ground to find Shala waiting for him with a sack and small digging tool in her hands.

Off they trekked into the Forest toward the area where Trafla saw the mushrooms. They chatted merrily along the way until at last they found the area.

“Oh, these are nice ones!” Shala was delighted.

“They sure are. I didn’t really notice there was this many when I passed by earlier. I was thinking of something else...” His voice trailed off as the memory of the nightmare returned.

Shala noticed the change in his tone and looked at him with concern. She saw he seemed to be in another world, a rather disturbed one, and let him be for a while.

They dug all the choice mushrooms from the area then sat down to rest. The two made light conversation, but eventually got back to the terrible storm from the night before and the devastating lightning.

“Yes, this morning Trohm and I were discussing the feelings and fears that storm aroused. We couldn’t decide anything. It’s probably nothing to be worried about,” Trafla said.

*“OH, BUT IT IS!”*

“Shala, did you say something?” Trafla asked nervously.

“No, I thought you were talking...”

*“IT WAS I.”*

The Treflins looked around quickly and saw no one. Suddenly, the legends of the Troppa trees and their ability to speak rushed into their minds. Both peered about even more nervously.

*“DO NOT BE FRIGHTENED. WE NEED TO SPEAK OF HAPPENINGS PAST, PRESENT, AND TO COME.”*

“It is a Troppa!” Trafla exclaimed. “Where are you, uh, sir?” he asked more hesitantly.

Shala put a hand on her cousin’s arm. “Trafla, look over there.” She nodded toward a large tree.

Trafla looked and saw the tree was a Troppa, some five feet in diameter. It appeared to have a face, of sorts. He had to imagine a little, but there was a face.

*“COME CLOSER.”*

The Treflins inched toward the great Troppa. The closer they got, the stronger a feeling of peace and contentedness was present. Good will was in the air all around the tree.

*“TRAFLA.”*

The little Treflin clutched Shala’s arm. “He knows my name? How does he know my name?” he whispered.

*“I KNOW MANY THINGS OF THE FOREST. SADLY, KNOWING IS ALL I CAN DO AT THIS TIME. OTHERS MUST ACT. FOR NOW, I CAN ONLY ADVISE.”*

Trafla and Shala were visibly shaking with fear, holding on to each other tightly. If not for the aura of goodness in the air, they both would likely have fainted.

Trying to get hold of himself, Trafla knew he should attempt to speak to the mighty and legendary Troppa. But what should he say to the talking tree? The words spoken by the fabled character were grave and mysterious. Trafla decided he should begin by being very polite.

“Sir, please pardon us, but this is indeed an experience beyond belief,” he said while bowing. Shala caught the lead and delivered her best lady Treflin curtsy.

*“YOU HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WE CAN COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PEOPLE, AND OTHER BEINGS AS WELL. BELIEVE IN ME, TRAFLA, AND LISTEN, AS WE HAVE MUCH NEED TO SPEAK.”*

“Oh, sir,” Trafla said seriously, “Might this be about the troubles lately here in the Forest? We’ve all noticed something is not quite right, but have written it off to changing times. Perhaps we Treflins simply avoid any such bad ideas.” He paused. “Is there really something bad happening?”

The Troppa seemed to sigh. A slight breeze filtered through the area and a sensation of patience and sadness filled the air. Shala reached to take Trafla’s hand.

*“YES, TRAFLA. THERE IS A FORCE IN THE FOREST WHICH IS ATTEMPTING TO OVERCOME ALL THE GOOD HERE. FIRST, THIS FORCE TOYED WITH SMALL THINGS IN*

*THE FOREST. THE SPIDER, THE BIRD, THE LIZARD WERE TWISTED FROM THEIR NATURAL FORMS INTO UNNATURAL CREATURES. NOW THE FORCE HAS REACHED ITS CLAW TO AFFECT THE WEATHER, CAUSING IT TO BEND TO THE FORCE'S EVIL PURPOSE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"*

Trafla stood speechless for a few moments. The air carried a feeling of questioning and anticipation. He thought he understood what the Troppa was saying, he just could not accept it. But the words were just what he had been thinking all day. The little Treflin felt befuddled under all these thoughts. He released Shala's hand and crossed his arms.

*"CLEAR YOUR HEAD, SON. YOU MUST UNDERSTAND WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU."*

"Me?" Trafla's voice squeaked out the tiny word. He cleared his throat to continue. "But...I'm just a small Treflin. I have no special powers or abilities or strengths. I can do nothing...Sir."

Suddenly, a twig fell from high within the tall tree. It hit several limbs and branches during its fall which reduced the pace of the descent and directed it to fall gently at Trafla's feet. Though it would be considered a twig to larger folk, it was just the right size for a walking staff for a Treflin. Both Trafla and Shala stared at the precious Troppa wood.

*"TRAFLA, I GIVE TO YOU A PART OF MYSELF. THOUGH THIS BE BUT A SMALL BRANCH, IT IS A FINGER OF MY GREAT HAND. USED PROPERLY AND WITH GOOD HEART, IT WILL AID IN YOUR MISSION. TAKE IT NOW AND GO. THINK, SON, BUT ALSO FEEL WHAT IS RIGHT. STAY AWARE AND BE MERRY."*

With that, the great Troppa withdrew back into itself and then there stood just a very old, large tree. The face was gone and nothing at all seemed unusual. The clearing was as it was before- just a clearing.

Still a bit stunned, the two Treflins looked at each other with the same question in their eyes. Did it really happen? Then Trafla felt the staff in his hand. He didn't recall actually picking it up, but there it was, strong and smooth. The wood was golden in color, the grain showed through boldly and the entire staff gave an appearance of majesty.

Trafla looked up at the tree. "But, how do I use it? What am I to do?" he cried, running up to the tree trunk as if he expected an answer. There he stood for a time, an expression of wonder and confusion upon his face. The spell was only broken when Shala touched his shoulder to gain his attention.

"Trafla, are you all right?" she asked softly.

The young Treflin turned slowly to face his cousin. As he moved, Shala observed a change occurring in his face. Not something physical, but he seemed altered in some way under his skin. There was fire in his eyes and his jaw was firmly set. His face had a look of wisdom that only many years could etch.

Trafla did not realize what had happened, but the Troppa had indeed given him a great gift. The ancient tree's wisdom, knowledge, and strength were stored in that staff which Trafla held so

tightly. He didn't know why, but he knew it was time to act. He turned to Shala with a deep, thoughtful look and spoke like the leader he had just become.

"Shala, come."

The girl was still stunned from the events of the past few minutes. The tone in Trafla's voice flustered her further so that she started walking without the sack of mushrooms.

"Pick up your sack, cousin, let's not forget our original purpose for coming here," he said firmly, but with a hint of humor.

Shala retrieved her sack and walked beside Trafla with her mind racing, trying to sort out the events of the past several minutes. They had gone to dig mushrooms, she and her cousin Trafla. She glanced at him and his staff briefly. He was the same, but different. Shala looked more carefully at Trafla. The difference was in his eyes and stature. As she stared, her foot caught on a root and lost her balance. She tumbled to the ground.

"Shala!" Trafla knelt down at her side. "Are you all right?" The girl nodded. "Ah, then you should really watch where your feet are going!"

He smiled at her and she sheepishly returned the grin. This was her cousin. A nice young Treflin. Now to think he might be the leader of some daring adventure! She rested her head back in the leaves refusing to think of such things. Then she remembered the mushrooms.

"Oh, my, have I spilled my sack?" she asked while scrambling to her feet.

"I'll get them, you just sit there on the log and catch your breath." He quickly gathered the scattered mushrooms.

With the slight crisis averted, the two walked back to the Homute and to their own purposes. Shala slipped away to hide the mushrooms in the storeroom. Trafla was to gather the smaller Treflins for the afternoon story time.

Each male beyond childhood took a turn at telling some story, true, make believe, or legend, to a group of youngsters every afternoon. So Trafla made his way to the designated corner of the community room and found he was running late. The children were already in place and waiting for him.

There in the soft brown of the wooden haven in the Homute, Trafla took his place and realized he had given no thought to what story he would tell. Little faces stared at him in anticipation. He moved about slowly, trying to think. Suddenly he stood with the staff planted firmly on the wooden floor and looked at the little gathering. When he spoke, his voice rang out strong and clear.

"Young ones, many, many years ago there was a race of beings called elves. These folk were very different from anyone you might see today in the Forest. They were tall, strong, and gentle, yet fair and fierce.

"They reigned over all the Forest and the lands beyond. All creatures loved and respected them, as they were very just rulers. There were a few different tribes of elves; some dwelled in trees,

much like we do, and some lived in caves. Many were quite comfortable in boat houses on the legendary lake. All were considered leaders.

“The King of the Forest was the head of the elves. His name was Treekin, as legends spoke of his being a cousin to the great Troppa tree. All was very good in those days. Crops grew profusely in the clearings, water flowed from countless fresh, cold streams. There was plenty of game to hunt and no one feared any other being.”

The young Treflins were spellbound. This was not a familiar story. In fact, no one had ever heard of elves. They were shocked that their familiar friend, Trafla, was telling a tale he could never have heard himself.

“Then one day, a new elf advisor appeared in Treekin’s court. They were not suspicious of the newcomer as he was even more beautiful than most of the elves. His voice was mesmerizing and his speech was eloquent. He captured the king’s attention and used his persuasive powers to influence Treekin’s decisions.

“Slowly, gradually, the people of the Forest felt a change in the air. No one knew what was happening, but the elves lost their power in the Forest. The tribes scattered, finding new ways of life however they could. No one ever knew exactly what had occurred. Over time, the elves just faded away. A few elves, loyal to Treekin, returned to his court and found it deserted and overgrown with vines. Those last elves then also disappeared.”

Trafla paused, amazed at himself. He found he was holding the Troppa staff tightly and realized the words he had spoken had come from it. Taking a breath, he continued.

“Young ones, we have never heard of elves because our ancestors chose to forget what they could not understand. Hence, we have never known of the great beauty of the Forest elves as they were in that time. We must now know and talk of the elves so that we do not do as they did-disappear.”

He stopped, took a deep breath, shook his head a bit and slumped down in the cushioned chair behind him. The children were still and continued to stare at the tired Trafla. He snapped his fingers to break the spell they were under and they scattered immediately speaking animatedly about elves and magic.

Trafla lay back in the chair completely exhausted. He placed the staff across his lap and slid quickly into a gentle, sound sleep.