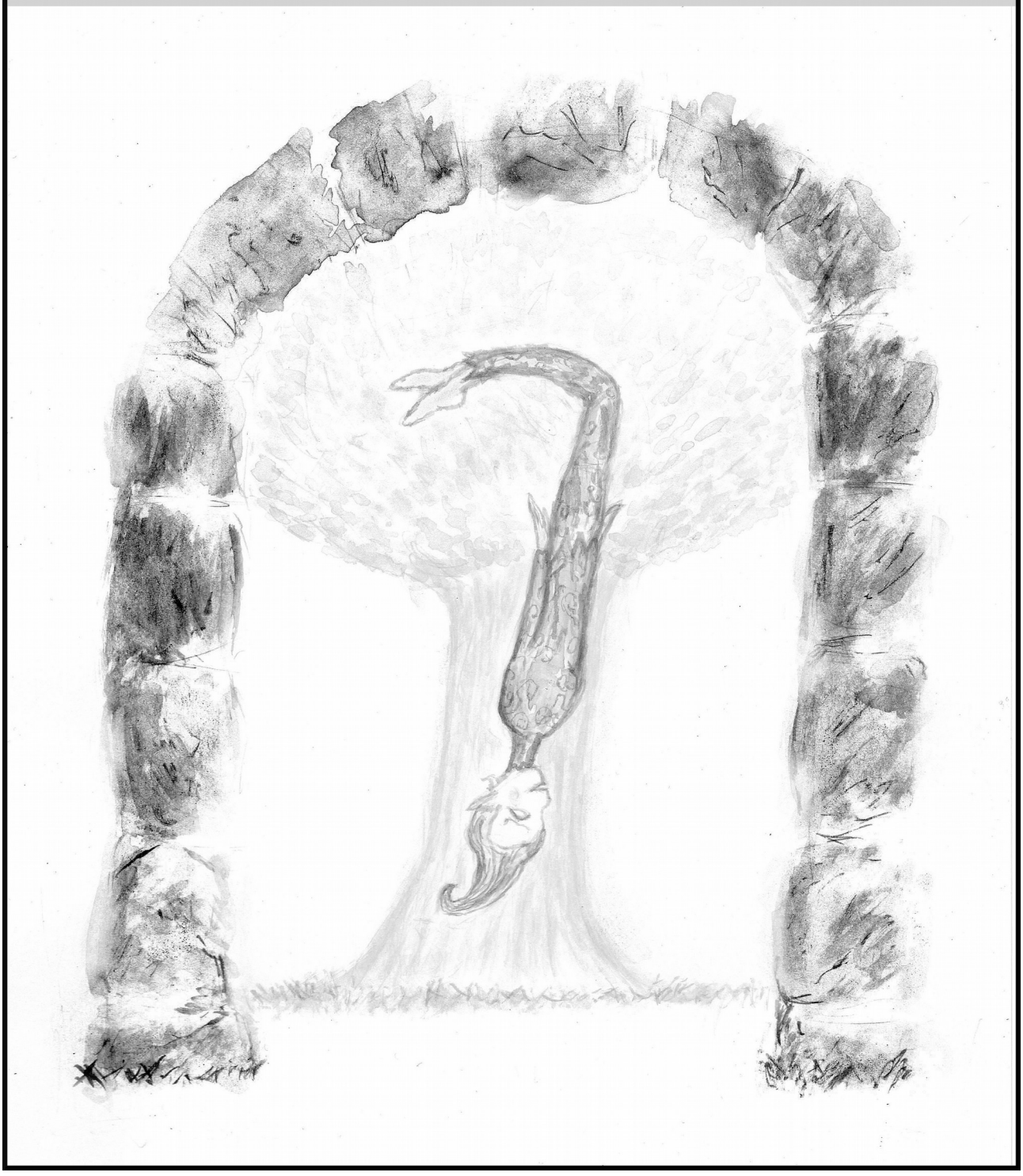
Riddling Faire

by

M. Lazarus



Riddling Faire

by M. Lazarus

"Pfft! Adults!" said Ru, flopping his gangly limbs onto the grass. His full name was Ruben, but everyone called him Ru, which was lucky, because he found the name Ruben very embarrassing and couldn't imagine why his parents had chosen such a silly name.
"Pfft!" said his little sister Sal, dropping straight down onto her bottom. Sally, also known as Sallywag or Miss Mischief, was little and burly, and enough of a young age where she still found great delight in running straight into objects.
"Honestly!" said Ru with an exasperated sigh, "I'm sure parties are supposed to be fun. What I'm not sure is why Mum and Dad insist on having such boring ones, and then having them all the time!"
"Pfft!" said little Sally in agreement, "I wanna go down to the beach!"
Ru nodded. "What's the point in being out here near the seaside when they won't let us explore just because they think it isn't safe for us to be down at the beach at night!"
"I ain't scared of the night," declared Sal, which was certainly true right now, although not always true when Mum and Dad put her to bed for the third or fourth time.
Lying there on the grass, Ru waved his arms and legs up and down. At least it was a nice enough garden, away from the light and noise of all the grown ups having their awful drinks and boring chats they found so funny. The house had a nice stretch of lawn where Ru and Sal played football and cricket during the day, but Mum and Dad had been very insistent that they weren't to play any of that sort of fun stuff in the dark when their guests might wander about and cop a ball to the head.
The only thing they dreaded more than Mum and Dad's boring parties was if the two of them were forced to go join the grown-up crowd. Mum would almost certainly want to play piano and have Ruben sing, which he found excruciatingly embarrassing. Also, grown-ups had a very rude habit of picking up Sallywag just because she was little. She supposed they did it because they had bad eyes on account of how they were so old and couldn't see her all the way down there. Sally didn't like being picked up at all, and no matter how much she frowned and harrumphed and kicked her legs, grown-ups would insist on always scooping her from the ground and squeezing her cheeks.
"If I had a party, there'd at least be ice-cream," declared Sally, who mostly thought about eating things when she wasn't thinking about colliding with things. "Also, some monkeys, maybe," Sal went on, "For everyone to play with in case they got bored."
Ru gave her a look to express that he thought this was a very silly idea. Being a few years older than Sally, he thought most of her ideas were a bit childish and silly, but the pair of them did their best to entertain themselves in this time of endless dinner parties and tennis parties and musical parties, none of which ever had ice-cream, monkeys, or anything fun for the pair of them whatsoever.
The garden really was quite a good one, with lots of lush old trees giving cover in the daylight. There was also a hedge that grew around an ancient stone arch. Ru and Sal weren't sure whether the stone arch had been built ages ago, or whether it was an old pile of rocks that the garden had grown around, and whenever they asked Mum and Dad, they didn't seem very much interested in finding out the answer.
After a few more attempts at bombing herself down onto the lawn, Sal decided she'd go and climb the side of the stone arch. As she was very small, it was quite the mountaineering effort to clamber the first foot or two off the ground.
"You know, Sal," said Ru, "If we aren't allowed to go explore the beach, I just wish we could go somewhere else! Somewhere a bit exciting!"

Sal grunted in agreement and, unable to find another hand-hold in time, fell to the ground with a bump.
"Come on, then," said a bright melodious voice.
Sal and Ruben looked at each other to check that it hadn't been the other who had just spoke.
"Who said that?" said Ruben cautiously.
"Who said *that*?" countered the voice.
"She did," said Sal, pointing to a figure in the stone arch. It was quite an odd looking figure, too. This stranger was slender and light as a blade of grass, and had hair that seemed to grow straight up in a sort of wave. The colour of her hair also seemed to change depending on where you stood. Her clothes were all sorts of different colours in different spots, and looked like they were made from that funny sort of mixed-up light you get from stained-glass windows or a dragonfly's wing. Most oddly of all, Sal and Ru thought, she seemed to be floating lazily in the air.
"Are you here for the party?" demanded Sal, who tended to be rather direct, and was too young to know she was supposed to be surprised when a floating individual suddenly appeared in the garden arch. Ru, on the other hand, was old enough to know better, and he went suitably goggle-eyed and made some confused sounds that weren't really words at all, but sounded a bit like "Ug?Blug?Hwah?".
"It was awfully kind of you to throw me a party," replied the floating figure, "I had no idea you were going to the trouble, but I suppose it makes sense to throw a party for me wherever I happen to arrive. It'd be rather embarrassing if you held my party somewhere I hadn't gone."
Sal shook her head, although she didn't quite follow this.
"It isn't your party, I'm 'fraid, or even mine and Ru's. It's Mum's and Dad's, and not really a party at all. It's the most boringest thing on the whole entire world."
The floating lady tutted disapprovingly.
"I suspect that these Mum and Dad people, whoever they might be, have got it a bit wrong, and when they meant to hold a party, they have accidentally thrown something entirely different."
"You ain't a grown-up, are you?" said Sal, suddenly suspicious.
The floating lady drew herself up to her full height, which made her float down so that her feet were almost touching the ground.
"I," she declared imperiously, "Am the Lady Gloriana Riddling Faire of the Peridevs."
"The Lady Glory of whatnow?" said Ru, who was starting to get ahold of himself.
"Yes, yes," said the Lady, waving her hand, "We don't have time for all that. You may call me Faire. I often do."
Ru walked around the Lady Faire, and waved his hands around her to make sure there weren't any strings or anything holding her up.
"How on earth are you floating?" he asked.
"I'm not floating on earth," the Lady Faire said, tilting her head back and sniffing, "That wouldn't make any sense. Anyway, there's no call to be rude. I don't go around demanding to know why you insist on clomping about on the ground, do I?"
Sal did a few experimental little hops to see if she could float too, but found that she couldn't quite manage it.
"What are you doing here?" hissed Ruben, who was now worried that one of the adults might get lost and come wandering out of the party and see Faire floating about. He didn't have the first idea about what he would say then.
"I heard you two call me," Faire explained, "And since I had a pocketful of time or so, I thought I'd pop by."
"Call you? We didn't call you," insisted Ruben.
"You certainly did!" said Faire huffily, "You just wished that you could go somewhere

else, so here I am to help you, although," here she peered at Ru and Sal, "I didn't expect you'd turn out to be such odd creatures." She waved a hand at Sal. "I don't think I've ever travelled with a baby wombat before, but I suppose there's a first time for everything."
Ru crossed his arms indignantly.
"She is not a baby wombat! She is my sister Sally, and is a person, and my name is Ru, and I happen to be a person too!"
Faire looked sceptically at Ru.
"Are you entirely sure? I don't remember persons having quite so many knees and elbows all over the place like you."
Ru, who was awkwardly conscious of his long limbs and knobbly knees that hadn't quite grown into the right shapes yet, fumed a little at this.
"Are you magical then, Faire?" asked Sal, who was now trying to grab on to the floating lady's foot to see if that would make Sally herself float too.
"Naturally!" said Faire.
"Go on then, prove it!" insisted Ru, "Do some magic. Make a rabbit appear out of a hat or something."
This seemed to befuddle Faire.
"But I don't have a hat. And why would I want to bother a harmless rabbit? Anyway, that's not how my magic works. I can only do magic if it's interesting."
"Would takin' us somewhere else be interestin'?" wondered Sal out loud.
Faire nodded her head.
"Yes, I think an adventure with a wombatling and a person made of elbows would certainly be interesting. I can manage that. Shall we pop along?"
"We can't just run off with you, we only just met you!" Ru insisted.
Faire shrugged.
"You could do the rest of the meeting me along the way. That will save time. You don't want to be stuck here in this dreadful un-party, do you?"
Sal shook her head. Much as he hated to admit it, Ru agreed too.
"But I don't think Mum and Dad would like it if we was gone for long, an' we ain't allowed to leave the house and gardens just right now, either," said Sally.
Faire snorted.
"Oh, don't worry about that. I'll make sure that you're hardly gone for any time at all. Those tyrant Mums and Dads won't even notice. And we won't leave the gardens, we'll just go through this stone arch I've got here and be off on our adventure, shall we?"
Ru and Sal peered through the stone arch. On the other side was just an old tree and the garden they spent so many hours in.
"Come on now! Come on now!" said Faire, shooing the pair towards the arch. Then, just as they were walking under the old stones, Faire did something odd with her hands and said some words that sounded like they were backwards or perhaps sideways.
For a moment, Ru and Sal felt like they were swirling down a plughole, and all the light and directions got muddled up.

Then they rubbed their eyes and they were somewhere else. Sal had fallen onto the ground again and she beamed with delight at having got away from the dull party. Ru looked around with uncomprehending amazement. Everything appeared to be different here. It was light now, for one thing, and it was a funny sort of hazy light that was just a touch lime-coloured and not at all like the bright light Ru and Sal normally got by the seaside. Why, the very ground here didn't look like normal ground, much less the lawn they were on just a moment ago. Ru dropped to his

knees and tapped at the ground. It was hard and made up of all sorts of swirling lines that went everywhere, making for bulging knots and hills around the flat plain where they had arrived.
"Looks a bit like wood!" declared Sal, stomping the ground and offering her considered opinion.
"You know, Sal," said Ru with wonder as he looked out across the wooden landscape, "I think you might be right."
"You *are* a bit magic!" Sal said to Faire, who was floating about the place inspecting colourful blooming shrubberies that sprung up here and there.
"Where on earth are we now?" asked Ru.
Faire counted on her fingers.
"Well, I was just Thereabouts, and then I came to visit you Over There, and now, I suppose we are Over Here."
"Yes, but here where?" asked an exasperated Ru.
"Here where we are going to explore and have an adventure," said Faire, as if that was the most obvious thing in the world and clearly didn't need any more explanation.
"Hooray!" declared Sal, who thought that was good enough for her, as she was keen to get started on the adventuring as quickly as possible. She clumsily picked herself up and began to run off in a random direction. Her brother had to dash after her and hold her back with her shirt as her little legs pumped with mad excitement.
"Now hang on, Sallywag, let's stick together. Adventures are one thing, but I don't want you to go get lost. Mum and Dad wouldn't let me hear the end of it."
Sal pouted.
"I can't believe we've actually been magicked elsewhere!" said Ru, "You know, this place reminds me of something." Ru tapped his chin as he thought, which was a thing he had seen his Dad do and thought it looked clever. "It sorts of looks like a giant version of that old tree that was on the other side of the arch! Faire, have you - have you shrunk us down and stuck us inside a tree?"
Faire waved her hand.
"Oh, we aren't exactly *inside* that tree, we're on the other side of it. Anyway, let's not fuss about that. The wombatling had the right idea! Let's go see what they've got around here!"
With that she eagerly floated off towards signs of life in the centre of the broad-lined plain, and Sal broke free to chase after her. It was all Ru could do to keep up with them.

To make matters even more troublesome, they were soon running through the biggest marketplace Ru had ever seen, where noisy, colourful stalls stretched out in every direction and people milled about everywhere, haggling and shouting all the time. Unfortunately, at that moment, both Faire and Sal must have had something catch their eye, and since it wasn't the same thing that caught their fancy, they rushed off in opposite directions, and Ru lost them in the crowd. Panicked, Ru was then also delayed by a young man who was selling what looked like big fake beards made out of wicker. The young man was proudly wearing one of these giant fake woody beards, and thought Ru could do with one too, and it took quite a bit of doing to convince the disappointed seller that while he was sure they were first-class quality, he wasn't interested in a fake beard just now, thank you, and actually he had to be getting along and finding his little sister and the strange floating lady who had brought them here.

Squeezing through the crowds and shouting his sister's name until he nearly went

hoarse, in the end Ruben found Sally because he almost tripped over her. She was standing longingly by a fried-food cart with her mouth watering.
"Ru, can I have some of that to eat? I'm hungry!" she pleaded.
Checking his pockets and finding nothing but a toothpick, a few flat stones for skimming on the water, and some sort of squished flower he couldn't remember picking up, Ruben shook his head.
"Sorry, Mischief," he said to his sister, "Haven't got any money."
Sal stomped her foot. Of course, she didn't have any money, either, but what was the point of a big brother if he couldn't remember to arrange this sort of thing?
Sensing that he had to stop his sister getting into a storm, Ruben quickly jostled her along.
"Come on, Sal, let's just find Faire. She looks like she's done this sort of thing before. I'm sure she's bound to have some money, and maybe she'll lend us some so we can get you a snack."
With her jaw set, Sally reluctantly allowed herself to be dragged through the market and tried to ignore her growling tum.

It took some doing, but they found Faire at a stall where she was trying on hats. Perhaps to save time, Faire was trying on five hats all at once, stacked one on top of another on her head, and inspecting herself in the mirror.
"Have you got any money, Faire?" demanded Sal, "I'm very hungry and want to get a thing that looks like a pie."
"I had some money once, but I can't think what I did with it," said Faire thoughtfully, "I may have left it on the sea bed, or perhaps I am thinking of some lovely shells I once had."
The little woman who ran the hat shop was not pleased to hear that Faire hadn't a single cent, and huffily demanded Faire give the hat stack back until she could pay for them.

Sighing, the three of them found a spot where the market was reasonably peaceful, where there was a sort of fountain-pool decorated with statues of balloon-shaped fishy things blowing bubbles in the water. Ru and Sal sat on the edge of the pool pensively.
"We haven't any money and I'm so peckish!" fumed Sal.
"And we don't even know exactly where we are," replied Ru.
Faire didn't seem to be at all worried about either of these things, and hovered above the gush of the fountain, splashing her hand back and forth in the top of the spray of water, whistling a merry tune. When Faire whistled, it sounded not like one person whistling, but like five or six whistles all playing in harmony. It was rather a neat trick, thought Sal and Ru.
An old fellow tottered past pulling a little cart that had 'Best Haircuts!' written on the side, Ru called out to him.
"Excuse me, sir, I'm sorry to bother you, and I know this is a silly question, but would you mind telling us where we are?"
The old hairdresser blinked once or twice.
"In the market," he croaked.
"Which is in...?"
"Why, the Disjuncted Thingdom of Battenbranchborough, of course," he said, looking at Ru suspiciously, and then pulled his cart rapidly off into the market.
"Of course!" said Faire, beaming, "Lovely to be back here, although, I can't quite recall at the moment if this is my first time here or not."
"At least we know where we are now," said Ru, who had a map in his room where

he put a pin in all the places he had visited. He would have to draw up a separate section of paper to stick on the side to mark Battenbranchborough.
Sal hopped to her feet with a scowl.
"We might know what it's called, but we still can't get any nice food from the Butterbrunchborrow market."
Faire's eye's lit up.
"We shall get some money then!" she declared confidently.
"How?" Sal and Ru demanded.
Faire dismissed such details.
"You two must be able to do something. Everybody can do something. We'll perform here in the market, and some of the good marketing folk of Battenbranchborough will certainly give us some money because we are so good at whatever it is we are going to do!"
Ru shrugged. He supposed it was worth a go. And so they began their busking in front of the fountain. Ru sang all the songs he could remember, and unlike when Mum made him do it in front of her friends at home, he hardly felt embarrassed at all. Sal, meanwhile, did a sort of stompy-jig dance that wasn't exactly in time to the music, but she was so enthusiastic about the whole thing, it didn't matter too much. Faire found some different coloured pebbles about the place, and juggled some twenty different stones of all sorts of sizes both clockwise and anti-clockwise. She said that she was delighted to find out that she could juggle, as she had never tried it before. Soon the generous people of Battenbranchborough passing by had given them enough of the colourful local coins that they had enough to buy some snacks, although not, much to Faire's disappointment, enough to buy a pile of hats. After much arguing, they all agreed to purchase a large, lovely-smelling pie that was as big as Sal's head, as well as a small sack full of squeezy, brightly-coloured jelly sweets that were each the shape of a strange fruit that Ru and Sally had never seen before.

Resuming their seat on the edge of the fountain, the trio enjoyed the fruits of their labour, or rather, the pie and jelly sweets of their labour. Faire had an odd habit of taking a single small bite of each thing and then passing it on as if she had already eaten enough. When Ru asked her about it, Faire replied that she only wanted a little taste of the different things, and couldn't imagine having to sit and wait until she had finished each and every morsel. This seemed incomprehensible to Sally, and no matter how often she thought about it, she couldn't understand the idea of only wanting a small taste of things, until she finally decided it was probably just because Faire was magic, and therefore, a bit odd.

They were just debating about what they should do next, and Faire was putting forward a case for having a quick swim in the waters of the fountain, when they were interrupted by a new noise, louder than the normal talk of the market that the children had become used to by now. It was the din of a great big row, and the trio were so curious that they got up to find out what it was all about. The noise was coming from two groups who were lined up, glaring, and shouting insults at each other. On one side was a group of thin-faced serious individuals who wore solemn robes and carried long sticks. Their insults tended to be well-thought out and so clever that neither Sal, Faire, or Ruben had any idea what they actually meant. The other side wore giant coats that made them look like big fuzzy balls, and their insults tended to be less clever-sounding than the other side, but they made up for this with creativity, colourful language, and lots of shouting.
"Fie upon you blowsy dullard Grumools!" said one of the people in the robes.

"Stick it up your noses, you burp-brained Fanfarons!" replied the people in the big fuzzy coats.
Faire tapped her chin.
"You know, there's something just a little bit familiar about this lot, although I can't quite put my finger on it. Not even the tiny tip of my pinkie finger."
Just when it looked like these robed Fanfarons and fuzzy-clothed Grumools were about to run at each other and pit staff against fists in a giant brawl, one woman in a headscarf rushed into the midst of the angry crowd, waving her arms and pleading for peace.
"Please, please! Grumools! Fanfarons! Do not forget! The market is the one place in Battenbranchborough where your clans may not fight!"
"Whatchya fighting about anyway? asked Sal curiously, who had wandered up to the angry crowd when Ru had not been paying attention.
"Is it something to do with a stolen crown?" asked Faire brightly, "I think I might know where we could get our hands on a spare one if you need it."
"The feud begun by the wretched Grumools is ancient and deep," recited one of the robed Fanfarons.
"Bosh!" spat one of the Grumools, "It was you snooty Fanfarons who started the fight, not us!"
"My, my," said Faire, "What a muddle!"
The crowd turned to Faire and murmurs started to run up and down the place.
"The Lady Faire!" they said to one another.
"Looks like you have been here before," Ru whispered to Faire nervously.
"It's entirely possible," whispered Faire, floating-upside down near Ru's ear so that she could whisper better, "I've been an awful lot of places. Sometimes I forget I've been there before, and sometimes I remember visiting somewhere before I've ever been."
"With all due respect, revered Peridev," said one of the Fanfarons with a bow towards Faire, a Fanfaron who appeared to have the brightest robe, and the tallest staff, and the thinnest face, and so appeared to have been appointed as a spokesman, "With the greatest of humility, Lady Faire, you will no doubt recall that you had given your word not to return to the kingdom of Battenbranchborough after what happened on your former visit."
"Did I?" said Faire innocently, scratching her head, "Well, I'll take you word for it."
"Yes, Peridev, you weren't to come back here," roared a woman who had the biggest and fuzziest coat, one that trailed all over the place, which showed that she must be the spokeswoman of the Grumools. "Because of you, the Grumools lost one of their most noble, handsome, and clever sons!"
The Fanfaron spokesman gritted his teeth.
"That is of no concern. What is of greater import is that because of the Lady Faire's unfortunate actions when last she was here, we Fanfarons lost our most wise, beauteous, and philosophical daughter!"
"Our little Ormolo was worth twenty of that stuck-up Fanfaron girl!" shouted the Grumool spokeswoman with her hands on her hips.
The thin Fanfaron spokesman sneered.
"On the contrary, Madame, our beloved Gaetia was worth more than all the jewels in the kingdom, and it would take incalculable numbers of the dumpy fool named Ormolo to make up even a fraction of our Gaetia."
"Our Ormolo would never have run off if it wasn't for that snooty Gaetia of yours!"
"And our darling girl Gaetia would never have left us if it wasn't for that low devil Ormolo!"
"Say, those names ring a bell!" said Faire cheerily.

"That's because you turned them into butterflies!" said the Grumool woman.
"And off they flew," snarled the Fanfaron man.
Faire's face lit up.
"Oh yes, now I remember! It was that nice boy and girl who wanted to run away together!"
"A good Grumool lad wanting to run off with a hoighty-toighty Fanfaron girl? Nonsense!" scoffed the Grumools.
"Nor is it conceivable that a fine Fanfaron maiden would decide to run off with a grubby Grumool!" the Fanfarons proclaimed.
"Bluch! Love!" said Sal with her tongue stuck out in disgust.
"Faire, you didn't really turn them into butterflies did you?" Ru asked nervously.
"Oh no, I don't think so," said Faire squinting into the distance as she tried to recall, "I believe that I just gave them some lovely-looking wings so that they could fly off somewhere to be together."
"We cannot chance that you may cause the same sort of chaos again, Lady Faire," said the Fanfaron.
"That's one thing we can agree on, at least," said the Grumool.
"Well, I promised to show these two around," huffed Faire with her arms folded, "And I jolly well am not going anywhere until they've had an adventure."
"Then you'll have to stay somewhere safe while you are here!" declared the Grumool.
"Agreed!" said the Fanfaron, "Lady Faire, we regret that you must be confined somewhere secure while you are here in the Thingdom of Battenbranchborough, lest you cause more strife, distress, and any other assorted forms of trouble!"
Faire was about to open her mouth to declare that she was sure she never caused trouble, or at least never intended to cause trouble, but the crowds of Fanfarons and Grumools swarmed together, grabbed hold of her, and rushed her towards a dark metallic building that looked like a big, stern, upside-down colander in the distance. Despite Ru and Sal's protests, the crowd threw Faire in the big metal colander and slammed the curved gate shut behind her. The spokesman for the Fanfarons produced a big metal key from somewhere and held it in front of him in formal fashion, while the boss of the Grumools produced a similar key from inside her big coat. Scowling at each other, the two enemies put their respective keys in the double lock of the door and turned them with a satisfied nod, then tucked the big keys away. Both the leaders went back off to their clans, dusting their hands at a job well done.

Faire peered sadly out of one of the round holes in the wall.
"Don't worry Faire, we'll get you out!" declared Sally.
"Yes, but how, exactly?" said Ruben, scratching his head. The leaders of the Fanfarons and the Grumools had taken away the keys when they had locked Faire in the colander jail, and there didn't seem to be anybody about who might listen to reason and let her out. But Sal was right, they couldn't give up! Faire hadn't done anything really bad and it just wasn't just to throw her in jail. Besides, if Ru and Sal didn't get her out of prison, how were they supposed to get back home to Mum and Dad?
"P'rhaps we could break you out?" said Sal, giving the walls an experimental kick. There was a dull clang, but to her disappointment, the curved wall showed no signs of collapsing or exploding.
"Can't you, I don't know, magic yourself out?" said Ru desperately, waving his hands about.
Faire gave a big sneeze and rubbed her eyes, which were starting to look watery.

"I don't think it'd be interesting enough - achoo! - And anyhowways - choo! - this place is made out of that metal I'm allergic to. Achoo! I can't stop sneezing long enough to get out of here."
Indeed, Faire was starting to look quite miserable, sniffling and sneezing any time she went anywhere near the walls.
"We shall simply have to ask someone for help," decided Ru, "Come on, Sal, let's catch up to one of them lot who locked Faire up."

With that he ran off after the departing crowd. The first person in charge he caught up with was the thin-faced spokesman for the Fanfarons, who was talking earnestly to some of his robed fellows about all sorts of complicated philosophy which may as well have been gibberish to Ru's ears.
"Pardon me, er, Mr. Fanfaron, sir," he interjected, "I am sorry to bother you, but I came here with Faire, um, you know, the floating lady you all just locked away. I say, gosh, there must be some way you'd let her out again? We've only just met her, you see, my sister and I have, I mean, but she doesn't seem like she's a bad sort really, just a bit odd in the mind."
"Oddness of mind can be the chief ill," intoned the spokesman, "As the great thinker Phalagonash once wrote. I am the Prime Proclaimer, Sophidon, young sir. What would you name be?"
"I am Ru, Mr. Sophidon."
The tall, thin-faced Sophidon gave a slow solemn bow, which Ru returned, as it seemed to be the done thing.
Sophidon looked at Ru thoughtfully.
"Some of our number heard you sing in the market place earlier," he said, "As you are no doubt aware, we Fanfarons are great believers in the harmony and mathematical beauty of the musical arts, and all the best composers of Battenbranchborough were invariably of our people, such as Bombastiach. I have no doubt that the wondrous Bombastiach is well known to you, that great and wise creator of the three-day opera 'The Epic Songs of Fractional Omnitemporality'."
Ru had never heard of any Bombastiach, and a three-day opera sounded like an awful lot of work, but he didn't want to appear rude, so he made a sort of noise that wasn't exactly a 'Yes' but wasn't quite a 'No' either. Luckily, Sophidon seemed to take it that Ru was a fan of that sort of thing, and he gave a tight-lipped smile.
"Ah!" Sophidon said, "I can tell from your own musical disposition, youthful fellow, that you are likely to be a thoughtful young man of a similar wisdom to the Fanfarons. Perhaps we can converse fruitfully if you would care to join us?"
Ru nodded eagerly. If he went along with the Fanfarons, he might be able to convince Sophidon and the rest that they didn't need to keep Faire locked up!
He was so excited at the idea that he went straight off with the Fanfarons without a second thought, which was a shame, because if he had taken a moment to look down and around, Ru would have noticed that his sister Sally was nowhere to be seen.

When Ru had run after the Fanfarons, Sal had decided to wander off to see if she could find anything else to snack on, as it had surely been several long whiles since she had last had something to taste, and what was the point in Faire bringing them to this funny place of Battenbranchborough if they didn't get to try all sorts of new and delicious things? Besides, Sally didn't think she could catch up with her brother's silly long legs now in any case. So Sal wandered over to a circle of Grumools. One of them had pulled a sort of pudding from inside his big furry coat and was currently carefully dividing it among his friends.

Sal sniffed. The pudding smelled delicious.
She smiled up at the Grumools with her hands clasped behind her back.
"Yes, little one? Can we help you?" asked one of the Grumools.
"Oh no, that's all right," said Sally, "I just thought I might be able to help you. If you need someone to finish off a bit of that pudding you've got there, I'm happy to help."
The woman with the biggest coat, who was the leader of the Grumools, heard this and laughed heartily.
"Spoken like a true Grumool, little one!" she said, "Even if you did come here with that tricksy Peridev, the Lady Faire."
"I'm Sal, and I also came here with my brother Ru, but he's run off somewhere like he does sometimes, so I thought I'd come talk to you."
"I," said the imposing spokeswoman of the Grumool, "Am the Chieftesst Munluna, little bold Sal, and I welcome you to Battenbranchborough on behalf of the noble and great-shouting Grumools."
"I'm pretty great at shouting, too," confided Sal, and did her best imitation of a giant growling lion.
Munluna grinned with delight.
"Excellent! So you are, and a worthy companion for us Grumools."
"What do Grumools do mostly?" asked Sal.
"Well, little roarer," said Munluna, "Right now, we march back to camp where we will feast and plan our next attack on the arrogant Fanfarons."
Sal nodded thoughtfully. She couldn't get Faire out of her prison on an empty stomach, and the money they had earned performing was all gone.
"I've decided I will come along," Sal declared with her hands on her hips, "To help you with the feast while my brother finishes whatever silly thing he is up to. I don't wanna wait for him all on my own here in the market. I'd soon get bored."
"Then come with us if you will, little roarer!" agreed Munluna, and off Sally went with the Grumools, wondering where she could get one of their splendid fuzzy coats.

In the meantime, Faire was feeling very sorry for herself indeed. Every time she tried to do some magic, even if it was just to amuse herself rather than to try and escape, the metal walls would make her nose so twitchy and her eyes so watery that she hardly knew what was what. She sighed. The cross people of Battenbranchborough could at least have left her something to do if they were going to throw her in jail, like a pack of cards, or a jigsaw puzzle, or perhaps some matchsticks to build a model palace out of. But there wasn't a thing to do in this dull metal colander. In despair, Faire tried to poke her head through one of the holes in the metal walls to get some fresh air and stop that horrid tickling in her nose and maybe to see if she could sneakily squeeze out if she wiggled just right.
She had got most of her hair poking through, and then her nose, but found her ears were refusing to go any further out the hole.
"Blast!" said Faire to herself and decided she better retreat back into the cell, as no fresh air was worth this discomfort. To her horror, however, she discovered that her head was stuck in the porthole. Because she was now wedged so close to the allergy-inducing metal walls, Faire now found herself in a noisy sneezing fit. In the brief seconds between sneeze-explosions, she wondered what had happened to that funny boy with all the knees and his wombatling sister. She hoped they'd come back soon, as Faire didn't really fancy spending one thousand or so years stuck in a round metal hole and having nothing to do but sneeze.

Amongst the sombre Fanfarons, Ru had finally noticed that Sal was not where he

expected her to be. He shouted out her name in increasing panic, and ran about looking behind the robes of the Fanfarons to see if she might be hidden somewhere there.
"Sally! Sallywag! Where have you got to?" Ru called out. If he lost his little sister here in Battenbranchborough on the other side of the garden tree, his Mum and Dad would never forgive him, and besides, although she was a little bother, Ru had sort of gotten used to having her around.
"Pardon me Sir Sophidon, but have you seen my little sister Sal about the place?" said Ru, who was by now becoming terribly worried, "It's just that I was sure that she was just there and now she isn't and I can't seem to find her anywhere. If I could find her, and then if you wouldn't mind letting me borrow the key to let Faire out for a moment, we could be on our way and I promise we'd be no bother to anyone."
Sophidon the Prime Proclaimer of the Fanfarons looked grave for a moment, as if he was making some very serious calculations and philosophical weightings in his head. Finally, he shook that thin head of his.
"Young master Ru, I am afraid that I have thought upon all the possibilities and it must be that the dreaded barbaric Grumools have taken your sister, for she was neither left in the market, nor is she among us."
"I have to go and find her!" exclaimed Ru.
Sophidon shook his head again.
"That would be inadvisable, Master Ru, for the Grumool are a savage and illogical people, and despite the nobility of your convictions, you could not hope to triumph against them all on your own, thus and therefore being unable to retrieve your sister."
"I can't just stand about and do nothing!" said Ru, exasperated.
"The only logical option," said Sophidon stroking his chin, "Is for you to join us in our conflict with the Grumool. This very day in precisely one hour and fifteen minutes, we have planned to meet the hated Grumool to battle upon the Weald Plains, and while the Grumool are a slovenly lot who are never punctual, we Fanfarons shall be there on the dot, ready to fight!"
To emphasise the last point, Sophidon clapped his staff down on the ground. "Once we have defeated the foul Grumools in this last battle, it will no doubt be safe to release your troublesome companion, the Lady Faire, when she can no longer do any harm to our glorious struggle."
Ru wasn't especially keen to get mixed up in the squabble between the Fanfarons and the Grumools, but if that was the only way to find Sal and free Faire from the metal prison, than he would just have to be brave about the whole thing. The problem with being brave was that if you had a bit of imagination like Ru did, you could imagine all the things that might go wrong, which made it much harder to be courageous.
"Very well, Sir Sophidon," said Ru, swallowing down his nervousness, "I shall accompany you and the Fanfarons onto the field of battle."
"Capital!" said Sophidon, banging the end of his staff on the ground again, "We can always use another head against the Grumool. They are dull of wit, but fierce for all that. Today we shall have vengeance for the ancient wrong done to our people! To the flutterers!" At that command, Sophidon and the other Fanfarons marched in orderly lines to hop on the back of what looked like giant dragonflies. Ru supposed these must be the flutterers - creatures used as the aeroplanes of Battenbranchborough. He nervously climbed up behind Sophidon and before he could think twice about it, Sophidon whistled and the flutterers lifted high up into the sky. Ru was not normally afraid of heights, but as there were no rails or gates or anything on the side of the flutterers, there was nothing between them and the

sprawling map of the land below. Ru tried not to think about the things that might go wrong in a situation like that, when you are up at a dizzying height on the back of a dragonfly off to battle. He had to get back to Sally and Faire!

In the camp of the Grumools, a similar discussion was taking place. Sal, once she had brushed the crumbs of a very excellent Grumool pasty from her face, thought she better ask Chieftesst Munluna if she had seen her brother Ru anywhere.
"He's taller than me, an' has long wobbly arms and legs, an' thinks he is very grown up. Everybody says he looks like me, but more stretched in a silly way."
"The other stranger who came with you and that meddling Peridev, Faire?" said Munluna, who had eaten three whole pasties, impressing Sallywag very strongly, "If he isn't about here, the only explanation is that your brother has fallen into the cold clutches of those stone-hearted Fanfarons!"
Sal nodded. It would be just like Ru to fall into some clutches, whatever they were. He was always falling over and into things because he didn't know which way his feet were going.
"Fear not, Little Roarer!" said Munluna, springing on to the table and waving her fist in the air, "We go to battle the snotty Fanfarons this very day at sometime or other. We will smack them into the ground, those pompous bean-poles, and no doubt your brother wossissname will be somewhere amongst the wreckage."
As Munluna boomed through her rousing speech, Sal caught sight of the key to Faire's prison poking out of a pocket in the Chieftesst's coat and she decided that she might just borrow it from Munluna once she found her brother.
With a last great roar for good measure, Munluna stirred her fellow Grumools to action. They all sprang up in their big fuzzy coats and produced clubs with knobbly ends that they waved in the air and bonked on things to make a very satisfying noise. Sal joined in the roaring, because she felt she was getting very good at it, and although she did accidentally burp halfway through her roar, unlike Ru who would have given her a filthy look, the Grumools did not seem to mind in the slightest. Sal thought that as well as getting the key, she should see about getting herself one of those knobbly Grumool clubs. They looked very handy.

Munluna lifted Sal onto her shoulders so that she wouldn't get trampled by the Grumools going off to battle. The group streamed off in higgledy-piggledy fashion with lots of pushing and shoving, climbing onto several giant caterpillar things they called wrigglers. When each caterpillar was crammed full of fuzzy-coated Grumools hanging on, someone would shout "Hophup!' and the wriggler would wriggle off extremely quickly. Bumping up and down with the wind in her hair, Sal felt like she was on a roller-coaster and thought that this was a splendid way to travel.

It just so happened that Faire's prison overlooked the Weald Plains where the Grumools and Fanfarons were coming to fight, bringing Ru and Sal along with them. From where her head was trapped in the round window, Faire heard the high buzzing of the giant flutterers flying and the drone of the Fanfarons singing about their great and clever deeds of the past. Soon, if Faire swivelled her head just a quarter inch to the left, she could hear the rhythmic rumbling of the gargantuan wrigglers and a great commotion, which was made up of the sound of the Grumools banging each other with their clubs and shouting songs about how stupid the Fanfarons were.

The two crowds rushed at each other, and battle was joined. The Fanfarons marched in formations, shouting out numbers and configurations to one another,

twirling their staves in fancy ways and poking them at the Grumool in light-toed, dancing fashion. The Grumool, on the other side, relied more on noise and strength to push through the ranks of the Fanfarons so they could whack them with their knobbly clubs. Everywhere the two sides were giving each other a good beating. Ru, who decided that he didn't like this sort of thing at all, ducked below a spinning Grumool club that nearly bonked him on the head, and almost ran into a troupe of Fanfarons twirling their staves like they were at a parade. There was so much dust and din everywhere, he despaired of ever finding Sal. Ru was so busy squinting and weaving amongst the fighters that he didn't notice something in his path until it had tripped him up and made him land flat on his stomach. The thing gave a little roar. Then it poked at him.
"Hallo, Ru," the thing that tripped him up said.
"Sallywag!" Ru said, relieved to have found his sister at last. Then he recalled that he had just fallen over her and then he was reminded that he had lost her before and then he remembered to be very cross.
"Where have you been?" he demanded, "What are you playing at, wandering off like that in a strange place?"
"I didn't wander off, you did," insisted Sally with her arms folded most decisively.
"I've been having fun with the Grumools and their chiefteress, Munluna," explained Sally, "She can eat three whole pasties and nobody ever tells her off. I think I shall be a chieftesseress too."
Ru picked himself up off the ground and dusted himself down.
"Nevermind all that," Ru said, who was really very happy that Sal was okay, so that he was a little bit less cross. Sally didn't mind his scowling too much. It was her understanding that big brothers were always a little bit cross and a little bit worried. It was a silly habit they had, and Sal couldn't understand what they did it for, but there you are.
"We have to free Faire so we can get out of this terrible battle!" shouted Ru over the crash of Fanfarons and Grumools attacking one another. "Luckily, in all this confusion and to-do, I managed to get one of the two keys from the Fanfaron boss, Sophidion, when he was reciting some very long lecture on warfare to his troops and had put it down for a moment."
Ru held up the key with a guilty look.
"Ooh!" said Sal, "I've got one just like that! Munluna let me borrow it, sort of, although I haven't asked her if it's all right quite yet."
Normally, Ru would have given his little sister a good lecturing about taking things without permission, but since he was just as guilty, and these were desperate times, he was going to have to pass over that.
"Hang on tight to that key, Sal, and follow me!" shouted Ru, and with his head tucked down, he dashed towards the big metal colander where Faire was imprisoned. Ru squeaked and flinched every time one of the combatants came near him, almost jumping out of his skin when one of the Grumool giant wrigglers came crushing past and almost squashed him. Sally, in the meantime, found this all rather fun, especially since she was short enough that she could run through the legs of all the fighters without having to go around them like Ru. Besides, unlike her brother, Sally didn't mind being bumped around a bit. One Fanfaron lady was about to whack Sally over the head with her staff, but Sal just blew a raspberry at the lady in her silly robes, which confused the Fanfaron woman enough that she paused in mid-thwack, giving Sally time to dash away past a crowd of Grumools lying and groaning about the place, all battered and sore. Sal did her triumphant little roar, and heard her big brother squeak in response. He waved at her as one of the flutterers zipped past the battlefield, dropping water balloons that exploded with a

funny smelling liquid that turned into a mist and made everyone in it sleepy. Grumools were yawning and flopping to the earth wherever the mist spread. All it took was a few whiffs of the fog, and they'd collapse into snores on the ground!
"Don't breathe that stuff!" exclaimed Ru, who thought that now was not the time for a nap. Unfortunately, his sister was not all that good at holding her breath just yet, and Ru could see her starting to struggle after a few seconds of being surrounded by the snooze-mist. Ru quickly lifted the drowsy Sally onto his back, and with her yawning, he ran as fast as he could towards the colander-prison. For once, Ru was thankful for all those embarrassing singing lessons Mum had insisted on, because his lungs were now good and strong and he could hold his breath long enough to get them past the snooze-mist.

At last, they reached Faire's prison, miraculously without being squashed, knocked out, pummelled, procrusted, grated, rotated, mooshed, or tenderised. The pair of them tumbled to the ground, gasping for breath.
"Hello – achoo! - you two," sneezed Faire, her head still poking out of the prison window, "Do you - choo! - have anything – aaaachoo! - about you for a bad sneeze? My – achoo! - allergies are playing up something terrible."
"Yes, we've got something that might help with that," said Ru brightly, holding up one of the keys, "We've got these."
"I got one too, see?" said Sal proudly, displaying it to Faire.
"Marvelerrific!" said Faire, "That way if you lose one, there's a spare!"
A couple of rocks whizzed past their heads.
"Quick," shouted Ru over the din, "Let's get you out of there, Faire! You need to help us stop this fight before someone gets badly hurt!"
He nodded at his sister and unlocked his lock. Sal stretched up on tippytoes, but wasn't quite tall enough to reach. Since Sally looked very unkindly on her brother's offer to do it for her, with a sigh, Ru had to lift her up so she could get her key in.
"Hurry up, Sal," said Ru, who was worried that one of the Grumool caterpillars was looking at him like he might be a bit tasty.
"It doesn't know which way to go!" exclaimed Sal, who was jiggling the key about with both hands.
"Have you -achoo!- tried squeezing it?" added Faire unhelpfully.
Sal tried it every which way and eventually they all heard a click, and she and Ru dragged open the metal gate with all their might.
Faire rushed out and stretched her arms.
"At last some fresh air!" she said, rubbing her nose with delight. She looked about her at the fighting Grumools and Fanfarons and shook her head disapprovingly.
"I'm afraid I can't recommend staying in this part of town. It's rather a bit too noisy to be restful."
"Look out!' shouted Ru, and he and Sal fell flat on the ground, as a flutterer zoomed just above them. The big dragonfly must have brushed against Faire, because she was now spinning about in the air and looking very confused. Ru got up and grabbed a leg to steady her, while Sal hung on to a dangling arm. This seemed to do the job, and Faire was soon back to normal, or whatever was normal for a floating magic Peridev.
"Phew, thanks!" said Faire.
"Here comes more!" Sal put in, "An' they look very angry!"
Indeed, the massed forces of the Grumools and the Fanfarons were at the moment charging at each other for one last catastrophic clash. This was bad enough, but was made just a bit worse because Faire, Ru, and Sal were right in the middle of the two opposing forces. In a moment or two, they were going to be squashed and trampled

underfoot by the collision of these bitter enemies!
"Faire, can't you do something?" pleaded Ru, as the trio huddled together.
"Oh, I can do lots of things," said Faire confidently, "I can lose things, and find places, and I can pick out the tastiest meal from a menu, and I can hear people talk about me from far away."
"No, something useful!" said Ru with a scowl.
"Something magic!" added Sal, waving her arms and jumping up and down, as she often did when she had an idea, but couldn't think of the right words for it. Luckily Faire seemed to understand what Sally was getting at, because she moved her hands in a complicated way and said some topsy-turvy words and suddenly Ru and Sal felt very different.

They looked about them. All of a sudden the warring Fanfarons and Grumools appeared to be very, very, very small. No, that was not it exactly. Faire had made the three of them gigantically big! They were bigger than the forests, bigger than the flutterers and the wrigglers, bigger than all the Grumools stacked up on top of the Fanfarons would be.
Sal, who was used to be being the shortest person everywhere, thought this was brilliant and cackled with delight.
Ru shooed away some of the flutterers, which were now the size of normal dragonflies, at least compared to giantified Ru.
"By the revered locks of Professor Agatha!" squeaked Sophidon the Fanfaron when he looked up and saw the giant trio.
"Holy gumballs!" agreed Munluna of the Grumool when she looked up as well.
Both the Fanfaron and Grumool armies came to an awkward halt, since they couldn't now very well run at each other without making a detour around Ru and Sally's giant legs.
"What's all this rumpus about?" demanded Faire, bending down to squint at the tiny figures.
"They're a war," confided Sal to Faire, but since she was now the size of a skyscraper, her whispering was not all that quiet, especially since her whispering had not been very quiet to begin with even when she had been regular short Sally height.
"We must defeat the barbarian Grumool, for the sake of reason and clarity and our ancient honour!" declared Sophidon of the Fanfarons, waving his staff around so that the three giants could tell it was him speaking all the way down there.
"Bosh!" shouted Munluna of the Grumool, "We have to have our revenge on the smarmy Fanfarons for *our* ancient honour!"
"Your low people first began this conflict," insisted Sophidon, who was getting very worked up.
"Baldersquatsch! Your snobs started this fight!" replied Munluna.
It was clear that the topic of who was responsible for the great conflict was starting to get everybody riled up again, and from all the angry murmuring that was rising up, Ru was beginning to worry that they would try and run around their giant legs to start thumping each other again.

"Now hang on, everybody, let's not get into all that again, let's all try to stay calm," pleaded Ru, waving his hands about. Ru was a bit uncoordinated at the best of times at his normal height, but now he was a giant, the people below were suddenly nervous that those colossal flailing arms might accidentally knock them all over, which quietened them all down.
"I say," said Faire brightly, "Why don't we all sit down and have a nice cuppa? That'll

calm the old feistiness down!"
"And we can have some cakes!" added Sal, who now had to think about a much more giant-sized tum.
"I would rather drink the putrid mud of a snortbeast's lair than have a drop of the foul varmbrew that the Grumools drink!" spat Sophidon.
"And my people wouldn't take a single sip of the sickly Fanfaron varmbrew if you paid us all the money in Battenbranchborough!" countered Munluna.
"Our varmbrew is a healing, subtle, warming drink that clarifies the mind and soothes the spirits! Yours is like stagnant ditch water!"
"Our varmbrew is a stout and tasty hot drink, yours tastes like stagbug sick!"
"Look, look," said Ru desperately, "You Fanfarons drink your hot drink thingy, and you Grumools drink your one, just so long as everyone sits down and is quiet for a moment."
After a bit of grumbling, Sophidon and Munluna eventually gave their assent, and with great ceremony the two sides set about making big kettles of their respective versions of the drink called varmbrew. Water was boiled, herbs and leaves were added and cups and mugs were passed around.
The two sides sat there, facing each other, sipping their hot drinks and scowling at the enemy.
Faire had bent down to get a closer look at the goings-on and must have forgotten to keep them at giant size, because next thing they knew, the three of them had shrunk back down to their regular height, which was a bit disappointing for Sal, who had enjoyed being giant and had planned to stomp some things while she had the chance.
Curious to see what all the fuss was about, Ru accepted a dainty cup of varmbrew from the Fanfarons, while Sal wandered over to the Grumools and politely demanded a mug of their version of varmbrew, which was presented in a mug that was much too big for her and had to be held with two hands at all times. Faire, on the other hand, flitted about, taking one Fanfaron varmbrew and one Grumool mug, mixing them both together and pouring them into her mouth, where, with cheeks bulging, she gargled them about some more as if it was some sort of warm mouth-wash.
Ru took a cautious sip of his dainty cup of Fanfaron varmbrew. It wasn't that horrid at all. In fact, it was quite nice. Fanfaron varmbrew tasted a bit like a sort of cocoa-tea with cardamom and cinnamon flavours too. Sal, who had a good chug from her mug, came over to her brother and did a little burp.
"This varmbrew stuff isn't too bad," she declared of the Grumool recipe, "Lemme try yours."
Ru and Sally swapped cups. Sal took a little sip from the dainty cup and Ru had a swig from the big mug. They looked at each other and leaned close towards one another.
"Sallywag," said Ru quietly.
"Yes, Ru?" she said in her noisy whisper.
"Do these two drinks taste the same to you?"
"Yes, Ru. 'Zactly the same."
They both agreed that it might be taken badly if they pointed out that Grumool varmbrew and Fanfaron varmbrew were exactly the same drink, so they decided not to mention it.

"Now, now, what's this all about?" said Faire, when she had finished using her varmbrew mix as mouthwash, "Locking up visitors and running about the place trying to knock each other into little pieces? Is that any way to behave? I'm afraid I

can't remember. It might be precisely how you behave around here. Have you though about trying something different?"
"What exactly is the feud about, really?" asked Ru.
"Ancient honour!" Sophidon and Munluna declared at the same time.
"What's that then?" asked Sal curiously, who had never seen an ancient honour and wondered if it looked like a sort of old camel.
There was a lot of grumbling and mumbling at this point, but it was clear that neither side could remember exactly what the problem had been about the ancient honour.
"Look, if you're all angry with each other, there has to be better way of dealing with it," insisted Ru, "Have you tried sitting down and talking about whatever is upsetting you?"
Sal blew a disdainful raspberry at this idea and Faire nodded in agreement.
"Talking is boring. How about they just get angry at each other for a little bit and then everyone can go home safe afterwards. Perhaps they could have an angry game?"
"Like...a sport?" ventured Ru.
"Yes!" said Sal with an approving stomp, "That way they can push and shove each other and shout and stuff, but if you do anything too bad you aren't allowed to play anymore and you have to go sit in the corner an' nobody talks to you an' you don't get any cake."
The Fanfarons and the Grumool didn't seem to be too keen on the idea and would rather have got back to their war, since that was how they'd always done things, but both sides were just a little bit worried that if they didn't give it a try, Faire might magic them into puffs of perfume or bouquets of flowers.

And so with the very reluctant cooperation of the two sides, Ru, Sal, and Faire went about inventing a new sport that Faire decided was going to be called Battenstick. Ru wished he had a pen and paper, because Faire made up rules as quickly as she could think of them, and she could think of them very quickly indeed. As it stood, the game of Battenstick was played by fifty-three players on each side, who would use staves or clubs, depending on whatever was on hand, to drive four balls of different sizes towards four goals on the other end of the opposition's territory. Sal also insisted that there be regular breaks for snacks, which Faire duly added to the game, and at Ru's last count, there were eight different food-and-drink breaks throughout the game, called snacktime, healthy drink, other snacktime, crumpets, varmbrew and biscuits, another snacktime, varmbrew again, and caketime.

The first ever game of Battenstick, with Sophidon as captain of the Fanfarons and Munluna directing the Grumools, was almost as noisy and messy as the battle. Ru and Sal acted as umpires, which was tricky because every five minutes Faire would make up new rules such as 'a penalised player had to run backwards for five minutes', or 'nobody was allowed to hit the ball into the far right corner with their eyes open'. After one hour and seven minutes of play, Faire gave a whistle that was as loud as a steam boat's, and declared that the first Battenstick match was over. Ru had to quickly tally up the goals on either side, since nobody else had really been keeping score properly, and declared that the Fanfarons had won this match, but that Munluna had scored the most goals, points, and near-misses. Sally presented Sophidon and Munluna with their respective trophies, both of which looked suspiciously like the keys to Faire's prison wrapped up in some leaves and string. The final result meant that neither side was really satisfied with the result, but everyone was so tired from running around while Faire called out rules at them,

that they were looking forward to sitting down and having a rest with some varmbrew and cake.

"Thank goodness that is over," said Ru, wiping his forehead. It had been rather stressful, narrowly avoiding a nasty battle.
"And next time they feel like they need to bash each other, Mister Sophidion and Chiefteresstest Munluna can arrange another match of Battenstick," declared Sal, whose face was covered with crumbs.
"Yes, I think that all worked out quite well," beamed Faire. Suddenly she cupped her hand to her ear, "Goodness, is that the time? I'd better be getting you two back to your tyrants and their party."
"But I don't wanna go back!" pouted Sal, "I like adventures. They're much better than borin' parties."
Ru patted his sister on the head.
"I'm sure Faire will come and visit us some time soon," he reassured his sister.
Sal looked up expectantly at Faire, who was rushing off, dashing through the air.
"Hang on, wait for us!" Sal called, rolling to her feet and rumbling after Faire.
"Good-bye! Er, I hope it all works out for you all!" Ru called back over his shoulder at the weary Battenbranchboroughians.
"Byeeee!" shouted Sally without turning around, because she had picked up momentum chasing after Faire and didn't think she could turn around now without tumbling over.

Huffing and puffing, Sally and Ru were starting to catch up to Faire, when that floating individual came to a sudden stop, her feet scraping in the air. This caused Sal and Ru to run into each other.
"Here we are!" declared Faire waving her hand.
"Where?" asked Ru.
"Where we were!" explained Faire in that twisty fashion she had, where she didn't make things any clearer.
Sally squinted. She could make out a vague shape in the air. It was the stone arch in their garden!
"Well, ta for all the help," said Faire, waving her hands about in magical fashion, "It was rather fun and gaudiferous. You two aren't bad travel companions at all, although you wouldn't think it to look at the pair of you, you funny creatures!"
Ru was just about to protest, but he and Sal suddenly felt that odd sensation of going down a plughole and things stretching and squishing in every direction and before they knew it, they were on the other side of the stone arch, on the other side of the tree in their garden, and gone from Battenbranchborough and the Lady Riddling Faire.

They looked about the garden. It was still night-time here and it sounded like Mum and Dad's boring old party was still going on. It looked like Faire had got that one right at least, and nobody had noticed that Sally and Ruben had been gone at all!
Ru sat down on the grass in befuddlement.
"I wonder if that all really just happened," he said aloud.
His little sister scoffed.
"'Course it happened, you big dummy. Look, I got a souvenir just to make sure."
Sally produced a club of the variety that the Grumools had carried.
"Sallywag!" hissed Ru, "Where on earth did you get that?"
"Munluna gave it to me," Sally said defensively, "'Cos she said I was a very good little roarer and that I needed to practice whacking things if I was gonna grow up to be a

good Grumool some day."
A voice called from inside the house. It was Dad, wondering if Ru and Sal wanted some dessert.
"No thanks, Dad, I'm not hungry any more," answered Sal, which was such unexpected news to their Father that he hardly knew what to make of it.

Ru yawned and lead his little sister back into the house. The guests were starting to leave, which might mean they could get some peace and quiet at last. They were both rather tired after their adventures and felt they could do with a nice sleep in their comfy beds.
Just as they were heading off to brush their teeth, Mum announced that they were going to have a garden luncheon in a week or two and she was thinking about having some outdoor musical performances, so Ru and Sal would need to have some nice clean clothes for that and wouldn't that be fun?
Sal and Ru sighed at the same time. They would just have to hope that the Lady Riddling Faire would come back to visit them in time!

THE END.

If you enjoyed this story,
you might also enjoy *WINGO!*,
which you can find at
http://www.subsidingsun.uk/wingo/

and you can email us
at wingo@subsidingsun.co.uk.