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**Chicken
House**

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PROLOGUE

It was night when Pog heard weeping in the forest.

He'd been patrolling for an hour, and the only sounds had been the occasional cries of foxes, or the low hooting of owls.

Pog sniffed the air. There was a scent.

Human scent.

Pog followed the smell. He skipped over tree roots, his eyes finely attuned to the night, his furry ears twitching as he got closer to the sound. It was coming from the trees encircling the dark forbidden heart of the forest. Pog's hackles immediately stood on end. He paced back and forth fretfully, listening to the weeping before plunging into the undergrowth.

Pog peeked out from behind a bush and into the circular clearing which was dotted with stunted tree trunks. There was a human child sitting on one of the old stumps. A girl with dark curly hair. She was sobbing inconsolably into her hands. Pog knew her instantly and nodded in understanding. He'd already seen tall ones that very morning. They'd arrived at the house in their metal box on wheels.

This was something entirely new for Pog. He was used to protecting and patrolling, not coming across the children of tall ones crying in the forest. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to reveal himself, but the girl was clearly lost. *What to do? What to do?* he thought, chewing on his thumb.

The decision was made for him as he saw the girl suddenly look up towards the ancient twisted tree that lay at the centre of the clearing. It was as if she'd heard something. She stood up, frowning curiously at the tree, and then started to walk carefully towards it.

'Pssst! No!' Pog hissed, drawing his sword and staff without thinking.

The girl wheeled round. 'Who's that? Who's there?'

Pog hid behind the bush, his chest tight, muscles tensed.

'A friend,' he said. 'Is you lost?'

The girl wiped her eyes and nodded. 'Yes,' she whimpered.

'Come then, and Pog will show you the way home.'

The girl hunched her shoulders and didn't move. Behind her, a sliver of moonlight shone on the tree, and the black bark rippled for a moment, as if a

serpent were twisting beneath it. Pog smelt something fetid and rotten. He licked his lips. He needed to get the girl away from the tree, but he couldn't reveal himself. It was forbidden.

'Come now,' he said, trying to keep his tone light and friendly.

The girl clutched her hands to her chest and retreated a couple of steps closer to the tree. Pog saw that supple insidious movement again beneath the skin of the tree, and he fancied he heard a hissing whisper. The girl was frightened, and hiding from her was only making things worse. There was only one thing for it.

Pog stepped into the clearing.

The girl blinked in disbelief. 'Who are you?' she asked, her lower lip trembling.

'Pog Lumpkin. A friend.' Pog smiled at the girl to show her he meant no harm. The warmth he felt when she smiled in response was a surprise to him.

'You're all furry,' said the girl.

'Pog is of the First Folk. We's all furry. Not like you tall folk.' He beckoned the girl forward, smiling at her while keeping one eye on the tree. 'Pog will show you the way home. Come, follow Pog.'

As the girl came towards him, Pog sighed inwardly with relief. He cast one eye over his shoul-

der as they left the clearing behind. Pog thought he heard that whisper again, but perhaps it was his imagination. The tree was still, but its bark had a reptilian sheen.

Clouds cleared and the moon came out and lit their way. Pog bounded through the forest, the girl keeping pace with him. Pog started to speed up and the girl laughed as she chased after him. Pog laughed too, but he took care not to go too fast in case he lost her.

It didn't take them long to reach the large house that lay at the edge of the forest. Pog and the girl went up the driveway and stopped outside the door. There was a light on in one of the windows.

‘There now,’ he said.

The girl smiled up at him. ‘Thank you, Pog.’

Pog felt strange. There was a fluttering in his chest. No one had spoken his name in years.

‘Pog must go now.’

‘Will I see you again?’ asked the girl.

‘Maybe,’ said Pog.

‘Are you alone?’

The question took Pog by surprise. He felt an ache in his throat. He shook his head. ‘Not now,’ he smiled.

The girl waved goodbye and Pog slipped around

the corner of the house, and watched as she knocked on the door. A tall man with grey hair opened the door. He and the girl embraced, and the sight of it made Pog feel sad and happy at the same time.

They both went inside and Pog felt almost disappointed as the door closed.

He shimmied up the drainpipe and squeezed in through the hole that led into the attic. Pog landed deftly on the attic floor and started to remove his sword and staff.

Are you alone? Pog thought about the question. Yes, he had been. He had been alone in the dark for a very long time, but he wasn't alone now.

But what Pog didn't know was that in two weeks' time the girl would be gone. Her grandparents would soon follow, and the house would be empty. And there Pog would stay in the attic, patrolling at night, keeping to a long-held promise. And spring would come, summers would pass, many autumns, many winters. It would just be Pog then, alone in the dark, for what seemed like for ever.

Until they came.

(A)