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# THE LITTLE WOOD THIEVES AND THE PUZZLE OF THE JUGGERNAUT

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INSEL

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PART I:  
BEFORE

## CHAPTER 1: NO ESCAPE



A monster made of wood in the middle of the forest: Karl had never seen anything like it. He had headed out on his morning walk to collect firewood, but then decided to walk up the hill on a whim, to look down onto the village and the surrounding woods.

He used to love sitting in the sun for hours looking out at the landscape, which was only interrupted here and there by a few small houses with smoke coming out of their chimneys. But today something was different: it was not the village life that captured his attention but the incredible creation sitting on top of the hill.

Karl was familiar with the simple wagons that the local farmers used to take their harvest into the city on market day. And since his father sometimes let him tag along, Karl was also familiar with the splendid coaches in which the queen



was driven around by her subjects. But not even in a fairytale had he heard of the kind of humongous vehicle that was now standing in front of him.

Karl carefully approached the wooden wagon, filled with fear that it might begin to roll at any moment and flatten him. But it stood there motionlessly, as if it wanted him to inspect it. It was almost as tall as the trees around it and as wide as the little house in which Karl lived with his family.

The wagon was so ornately decorated that Karl didn't even know where he should look: brightly coloured pennants were flapping on the pyramid-shaped roof and inside was a golden throne. The front boasted two strong horses made of wood that looked like they might charge forward at any moment and drag the wagon down the hill. But their powerful legs, which were hovering a metre above the ground, were not moving, and so the wagon stood still, as if nailed to the earth.

The longer Karl got to know this monster, the bigger his awe grew. Up until now, his life had passed without too many surprises. Like many children from his country, he led a simple life and helped his parents with the harvest or around the house. He only ever left the village – which was made up of just a few families – to help his father for a few hours at the market. Otherwise, each day was like the one before it, and

only the shifting of the seasons brought any real change. And suddenly something as puzzling as this!

Karl loved puzzles. His mother was constantly having to think up new ones to really give him a challenge. While he was looking for firewood in the forest or picking carrots in the fields, he would then wrack his brains thinking about his mother's riddles, until eventually a lightbulb would go on in his head. This made the work much less monotonous. So he had plenty of practice working things out in his head, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't come up with anything that might hint about the origins of the wooden colossus.

"The wheels of such a heavy vehicle must have left behind some tracks," pondered Karl, but the ground all around the wagon seemed undisturbed. No furrows that would have suggested where it had come from. The longer Karl thought about it, the more impossible the position of the vehicle seemed to him: to haul the massive wooden wagon across the gentle slopes of the meadow up to the top of the hill would have required a dozen strong men, and it couldn't have come from the other directions, since the clearing on the crest of the hill was otherwise surrounded by dense trees.

And the puzzling questions didn't end there: "Who could the wagon belong to?" wondered Karl. The throne was empty, there was no coachman anywhere to be seen, nor was there a



guard. “A throne without a king?” That seemed unimaginable to Karl. Who would leave a throne unattended, meaning that anybody could just come along and sit on it? And then a final and particularly worrying question flew through Karl’s head: How could it be that the wagon was just sitting there so calmly on the sloping ground? High above the village where Karl’s family lived? He couldn’t shake the feeling that the wagon was preparing to attack, as if it were ready to start rolling and to devour the few houses in the village along with the people inside them. It was like countless invisible hands were holding it in its dangerous state of balance, and only the slightest gust of wind would be needed to get it rolling.

Karl looked around worriedly: he still couldn’t see anyone, it was just him and this great big colossus. There wasn’t even an animal wandering around on the hill: no fox, no fowl, nothing, nobody. He had a bad feeling, and it was getting stronger by the minute, for apart from his own footsteps and breathing, he couldn’t hear a sound.

Suddenly, there was a change: grey clouds moved in front of the sun, the sky became more overcast, the wind picked up. The flags on the wooden roof waved to and fro. And then it happened: almost imperceptibly, the wagon began to move. With a loud creaking sound, the wheels began to turn, millimetre by millimetre, the wooden monster crept forward. Karl

walked along beside it and then looked frantically in the direction it was rolling: off in the distance he could see the village that the wagon would roll toward if nobody stopped it.

Karl ran over to the front wheels and tried desperately to block one of them. He jammed himself against it with all his might, but no matter how hard he tried, the wagon was too heavy, and now the decorations came to life as well. The flags on the roof joined together as if by magic, forming a sail that caught the wind and sped up the wagon. The horses on the front woke from their wooden slumber. And though they couldn't reach the ground with their hoofs, they kicked at Karl, who managed to dodge them just in time, diving onto the ground near the monster. It was too late, there was nothing more he could do.

The massive wagon rolled faster and faster, and nobody, no human being and no force of nature, could have brought it to a halt. Karl was forced to stand by and watch helplessly as the wagon hurtled over sticks and stones, speeding up with every passing second. Then it occurred to him that nobody knew about this looming calamity! He ran off screaming like crazy to wake up and warn the sleeping villagers. But he was too far away, nobody could hear him. Desperately, he sprinted after the wagon, which was now hurtling down the hill at full speed.

The colossal cart first drove across the small stream that separated the forest from the village. Then the wagon crashed into the fruit trees on the edge of the town. On hot summer afternoons, Karl would often lie down in their shade, but now, from one moment to the next, the apple and cherry trees were being ripped out of the ground and toppled over. Karl had no time to mourn the trees, for the wagon continued on at break-neck speed. The collisions seemed to have caused it no damage, in fact, the wagon had gobbled up the trees and was now visibly bigger. Once the dust that had been kicked up began to settle, Karl could see a fence being mown down in the distance; the palings twirled through the air and were then absorbed by the wooden giant, which had now cleared the last obstacle between it and the houses. By now, Karl, panting along behind it, was close enough to the village that the people could hear him.

“Look out! Danger!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. Upon hearing his panicked cries, the doors of the farmhouses opened, and the people, still half-asleep, looked onto the road in a daze.

But it was too late. The wagon had already cleaned up the first building and would flatten the entire village. When the wagon reached the house of Karl’s family, it made an enormous bang – and Karl woke up.



## CHAPTER 2:

# SELLING THE FOREST



Karl was now wide awake, and his heart was pounding in his chest. Although he understood that the all-crushing, all-devouring wagon had only existed in his dream, he was still terrified by this spine-chilling danger. Might this be a bad omen, he puzzled, sitting on his bed, his blanket pulled up to his chin.

In the little room that he shared with his sister Rosa, everything looked normal. A little bit of light was squeezing through the shutters and landing on the narrow bookshelf, where, next to books of fairytales, the wooden figures carved so carefully by their father stood. Now, the only thing still missing was the chess board to go along with them. It was supposed to be finished by Karl's eleventh birthday. Apart from that, their little room was furnished only with two chairs and a small table.

Everything was made of the wood of fir and oak trees, because that was what grew all around the village. Then Karl noticed that he had woken Rosa, whose bed was next to his. She looked at him uncertainly, almost fearfully, and sat up.

“You were mumbling really weirdly,” she said, “at the end you even yelled out for a second. Are you okay?”

“I, I ...” stammered Karl, but in his confusion, he couldn’t string together a single complete sentence. “I was dreaming, I’ll tell you about it later.”

Karl got out of bed, put on his slippers, and carefully crept across the creaking floorboards so as not to wake his parents. Although it was getting light outside, his father and mother seemed to still be asleep. It must have been before six o’clock, because that was when they usually got up to start their day’s work. Everything seemed normal around the house. Karl breathed a sigh of relief.

Rosa’s parents had died a few years ago. After their death, she had moved in with Karl’s family, because their fathers had been good friends. Karl had quickly grown fond of Rosa, she’d become like a sister to him, and he was happy that his parents were willing to look after another child.

Ten-year-olds can sometimes be stressful, Karl knew that, after all, he was that age himself – to be precise: ten years and seven months. Rosa was just a few weeks older. Having her

around had made the house more lively, Karl had scored himself a clever playmate, and suddenly, there was another person saying “Mum” and “Dad” to his parents. Everyone had quickly gotten used to this, and together, they were now a family.

Karl and Rosa were almost the same height right now and asked themselves who would eventually win the competition being tallied on the doorframe. That’s where they were measured each month, and their mother would scratch the latest results with the utmost precision. Currently, Karl was a centimetre taller than Rosa. Apart from that, though, they could hardly look more different: while with his pointy, tapered nose, Karl’s face resembled that of a fox, Rosa had a little button nose covered in freckles. And while Karl’s brown hair was just about impossible to tame (even after hours of brushing it would still stand up on end), Rosa’s hair always sat perfectly: it took her hardly any time each morning to pin up her orange-red hair into two perfectly pointy little buns.

Karl’s heart was now beating a little slower, it seemed as if everything was in order. He let out a sigh and crept around on his tiptoes through the cozy kitchen, which also functioned as their living room. Then he crawled back into his bed and waited for everyone else to wake up.

At breakfast, he was less hyper and chatty than usual, the wagon was still thundering about in his thoughts. Rosa, on the other hand, seemed particularly pleased.

Mum and Dad spoke about their plan to plough the fields over the coming days. The horses, which would have to pull the heavy plough behind them, were well-rested and well-fed. If there was not some sudden, unexpected storm, the fields should be finished in a week.

Ever since Karl reached an age where his mother didn't need to spend the whole day looking after him, she had worked just as hard in the fields and the stables as his father.





Everyone had to pitch in. There were two young lads who helped to clean out the stables or when it came time to do the harvest, and who funnily enough were both called Jan, but they often didn't have enough time. They were the two youngest sons of the farmers next door, and they had to work there too. But since their farm, which was run by their older brother, didn't produce enough, they would earn some extra cash helping their neighbours. Rosa and Karl also had to get their hands dirty. Though they were usually cheerful and spirited, even at this early age, they knew that life could be a lot of hard work. But that was nothing out of the ordinary on the island of Feudalia, that's how it was for nearly everyone who lived on the island.

Their parents were also born in Feudalia, and so were their parents, and their parents' parents, and so on. The little island was made up of twelve villages. The villages were connected by bumpy roads, and each village was home to maybe twenty people. It was only in the city that more than a thousand people lived and worked. There was also a harbour there. Whenever they got bored, Rosa and Karl would try to count to a thousand. Their mother taught them to add up, because although there was a school in town, none of the village kids went there. They just didn't have the time for it, what with having to help out their parents around the farm and all. So

often Karl and Rosa would teach themselves things on their own: Rosa loved numbers, and Karl loved letters. She liked doing arithmetic more, and he loved reading out loud – most of all fairytales. Their days were often monotonous, each passing day was like the one before it, and the day after that didn't promise too much either. There weren't even dangerous animals lurking around anywhere, except from the wild boars that roamed around in the dense woodlands. Though over the course of this story, a very unusual animal will soon come shuddering toward them.

They also didn't have a whole lot of playmates: the children in the village – like their friends Margarethe, Walter, and Leon – also had to often work on their parents' farms. Which meant that Rosa and Karl could only do things with them in the brief window between work and dusk. Only in winter, when they didn't have to sow seeds or help with the harvest could the kids play together every day. But then it was so cold that nobody ever left the house.

Karl and Rosa hated being bored, which is why they were always inventing new games – or they would go into town with their father. Their father would sell everything they produced at the weekly farmer's market, whether it was apple jam, fresh milk from their two cows, or if the hens had been especially busy, sometimes a few eggs as well. But the wheat



they produced, which was particularly important for the family's livelihood, they sold to the two best bakers on the island. The money allowed the family to buy what they needed, and sometimes there was even a bit left over, allowing their mother to put something aside for a rainy day. After all, not every year brought a bumper crop.

But today there would be no trip into the city. "Hopefully," thought Rosa and Karl at the same time, "we won't have to clean out the stables!" They found the squeaking of the pigs funny whenever they swept and scrubbed the enclosure, but they sure did leave the place looking like a pigsty. And the cows and the chickens weren't a whole lot better! It's just that nobody ever says that your bedroom looks like a cow stable or a chicken coop. As soon as her parents would look at her with an air of anticipation, Rosa would start to wrinkle her nose.

But then she heard some soothing words come out of her father's mouth: "There's not much for you kids to do today. Why don't you just go and play in the forest a bit?" Karl and Rosa were over the moon, but they made sure not to let it show too much. As they made a beeline for the door, they were given another task by their mother: "Bring back some wood, will you? The next winter is always..." she began, "... just around the corner," Rosa and Karl chimed. Whenever their mother started a sentence with "The next...", then "just around the corner"

was always just around the corner, regardless of whether she was talking about the next summer or the next storm or the next farmer's market.

The children laughed and their mother pretended not to understand why that was supposed to be so hilarious. Karl and Rosa headed out. Gathering wood so that they had enough to keep the house warm didn't feel like real work. They still had time for other things, and they always kept an eye out for some really straight branches that they could carve into walking sticks, or spears, or swords. Because there wasn't really anywhere in Feudalia where you could just go and buy toys.

Rosa and Karl usually kept to the edge of the forest. After all, the deeper in you went, the darker and denser it got. To be honest, it was pretty spooky in there. But Rosa and Karl would never admit that to each other. Rosa didn't want Karl to think she was afraid – and Karl always tried to appear more courageous than he actually was. Which is why, as he ate his breakfast, Karl had been uncertain whether or not he wanted to tell Rosa about his nightmare. Even though he had told himself over and over again: “Come on, it was just a dream!” he was still feeling worried. Lost in his thoughts, he dawdled behind Rosa, who had already reached the stream. Then he plucked up his courage and sprinted towards her. When he caught up to her, desperately trying to catch his breath, he

blurted out: “Rosa, you won’t believe what I dreamt last night!” Rosa wanted to respond with something super clever, but Karl kept talking like a waterfall: “Everyone got run over by a ginormous wagon with little flags on it. It looked like a big hut on wheels, it was racing toward the village from right up there.” Karl pointed excitedly at the hill and recounted the story like a whirlwind, jumping around from one detail to the next, describing the wagon, then his fear, and then repeated: “And everyone got run over.”

His sister gave him a confused look and asked: “And then?”

He snapped back: “Well what do you reckon, then I woke up.”

“Oh, right,” mumbled Rosa, with a hint of disappointment.

“Haven’t you got anything else to say?”

“What do you want me to say, Karl? It was a dream. It was just a dream.”

“Gee, thanks for explaining that to me!” he replied grumpily, “I’m aware of that. But everything seemed so alive, so real, so terrifying... I’m afraid that the dream might be a bad omen.”

Rosa looked at him quizzically: “What do you mean, an omen?”

“An omen warns you about something that’s going to happen in the future.”

“Like when mum says that the next winter is just around the corner?”

“No, an omen tells you that something completely unexpected is going to happen. Like, I’ve never seen a wagon like that anywhere in my life. Not on another farm or with the merchants in the city. Not even our queen has a coach that could compare to it. Even her parade wagon would be swallowed by it three times over. You can’t imagine it. The crazy thing was that the colossus kept getting bigger and bigger. It looked like it wasn’t just ripping the trees out of the ground but was eating them up, the same with the huts and the houses. I mean, have you ever seen a coach that eats and grows?”

Rosa couldn’t help but laugh, but then quickly grew serious: “No, I haven’t even heard of something like that. Now I get what you mean with a bad omen. But: What could it be a warning of?”

“I don’t know,” said Karl impatiently. He had hoped that Rosa might be able to offer an interpretation of his dream. But now she was just as confused as he was.

“Let’s just go and collect some wood, maybe we’ll come up with something else about your dream later,” she suggested. “Okay,” Karl said. They jumped across the narrow stream and wanted to run straight to the fir trees when they suddenly stopped with a start: there was a red rope tied between the

trees cordoning off the forest. This time, Karl was sure he wasn't dreaming. The rope was real.

"What's that?" asked Rosa.

"Careful! We should keep our voices down."

Neither of them wanted to admit that they were afraid, but there was certainly something a bit weird about the whole thing. Otherwise Karl and Rosa wouldn't have both grabbed each other by the hand at the same time. Cautiously, they walked towards the rope, and after a few metres they saw that somebody had nailed a sign to the trunk of one of the thickest trees in the forest. They read the few words in silence and then repeated them in a quiet voice: "Gathering wood prohibited. Effective immediately. Wood thieves will be dealt with harshly. This forest has been sold!"



## CHAPTER 3:

# THE QUEEN AND THE MAN WITH THE HAT



The next morning, the family set off bright and early to travel into town. The warning that strictly forbade them from collecting wood, written in big letters, had left Karl, Rosa, and their parents somewhat shaken. For generations, it had been normal for families from the surrounding areas to collect firewood in the forest – as long as the trees had already fallen. They were not allowed to chop down the big trees with an axe or to saw off branches. But dead branches would fall off all the time and could be used as firewood. At least, that's how it had always been until now: but now they'd put an end to that, once and for all! At first, their parents had thought the children had been telling them some bad joke. It wasn't until Karl dragged his father into the forest and showed him the sign himself that he took this horrible news seriously. He shook his head in disbelief, grew first enraged

and then sad, and the whole way home he was shaking with outrage. His own father, and his father before him, had gathered wood in that forest. And why shouldn't they? Nobody had any use for it, so it was better that it gave families some warmth than leaving it to rot in the forest! Their mother was also confused, but she kept her composure.

"There's no use getting upset about it," she said, "we have to head into the city. That's where we can find out what's going on and what the queen was thinking."

Recently, their parents had begun to question their opinion of Feudalia's queen. For many years, the family had lived their lives with almost no interference. They worked every day to secure their livelihood and were left in peace, so long as they paid their tithe to the queen. Their tithe was a part of their harvest and the money they made at the market, which Karl, Rosa, and their parents had to give to the queen and her court.

While their parents would sometimes grumble about it, because they led a very modest life already and didn't have so much left over to give to the queen, they had still always obeyed these orders, because in exchange, the queen offered them security. If their crops ever failed – because of bad weather, for example – the queen would open up her big granary and made sure that nobody had to go hungry. Alt-

though their parents had the feeling that over the years they had to give the queen much more than she gave them in return in times of hunger, they never even considered rebelling against this system.

But a few months ago, a piece of news started doing the rounds that shocked their parents. The queen had ordered that a bridge be built connecting the island to the neighbouring country of Capitalia. Which was strange because people had always said that they wanted nothing to do with the people of Capitalia. They were completely different, the queen had said, dishonest and dim.

Karl and Rosa always thought that was a bit weird: Why should the people living on Capitalia be different to the ones they knew? The children found it difficult to imagine.

The queen also seemed to have changed her opinion: because from one day to the next, the inhabitants of Capitalia were no longer enemies, but friends. At least that's what the queen announced, and she had a bridge built that was supposed to connect the two islands and improve trade between them. They heard on the grapevine that this was supposed to significantly increase the wealth and prosperity on the island of Feudalia. And really, who could have a problem with that!

These rumours sounded great: new friends on a foreign island, and more money for everyone! But their parents remained sceptical. Their life was simple, but secure, and they were afraid of the changes being announced. And then came the sudden ban on collecting wood, which just seemed to confirm their doubts.

So the family set off into town, and Jan and Jan from their neighbour's farm came along with them. The two Jans had prepared a small wagon that was pulled by an ox. Karl and Rosa got to ride along on the wagon. And so they all marched off: Jan and Jan out front, followed by the ox with the wagon,



in which the kids sat marvelling at the landscape, and last of all came their parents, who barely said a word.

“Can you explain your dream to me again?” Rosa whispered to Karl.

“How come? You didn’t believe me anyway,” Karl replied, sounding offended.

Rosa placed her hand on his arm to calm him down, and said: “I just didn’t understand what you meant by omen at first. But now I think I’m starting to get it.”

“What do you mean? What do you get now?”



“Well, you said that at the end of the dream, the gigantic wagon was gobbling up the trees, right?”

“Yeah, it drove straight through the trees! And instead of stopping, it just got bigger and stronger!”

“And then the very next day, we get forbidden to collect wood in the forest. Don’t you think those two things fit together pretty darn well?”

Karl thought about it for a second, then shook his head. “I’m not so sure. There are so many other things in that dream that I don’t understand. Like, why did the wagon have an empty golden throne? And why did it get bigger and bigger? That doesn’t make any sense!”

Rosa couldn’t explain that either. So they sat there in silence.

Their parents did the same: neither of them said a word. Usually, they were talkative people, but today they seemed to be lost in gloomy thoughts. Just last night they had talked until they went blue in the face, wondering what they should do now that collecting wood had been banned. Since they couldn’t come to a decision without knowing more about what was going on, they had decided to head into the city. The closer they got to their destination, the more excited the children grew. A trip into town like this was a rare event, and

normally it came with lots of work. When they went into town on market day, they had to sell veggies, wheat, and eggs. This time they didn't have to work at all, because their parents just wanted to find out what the whole ban was about.

"You think we'll get to see the queen today?" Karl asked Rosa.

"I sure hope so! Nobody else has such a beautiful coach and such splendid clothes! There's always something to look at when she gets driven through the city. And do you remember how last time she threw sweet into the crowds!"

The kids were rudely awakened from these daydreams when the Jans' wagon hit a bump in the road. And their father sounded rough too when he said: "Huh, I see you two are pretty easy to win over!"

"What do you mean?" asked Rosa, turning around to face him.

"Well, the queen has just banned collecting firewood, and you two are going gaga over her pretty clothes and a few little lollies? What a load of codswallop!" he said grumpily.

"Oh, let the children have their fun," said their mother, and patted their father gently on the back. The rest of the way, the family barely said a word.