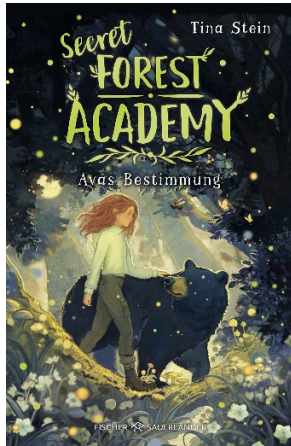


Secret Forest Academy: Ava's Calling – 30 Page Sample

Tina Stein

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English translation by Anna Schmitt Funke



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Something is off this morning. At least that's my first thought when I wake up. Before I even open my eyes, I can tell that I'm not in my bed. My dachshund Fred is not cuddled up to me and I'm in a weird sleeping position. My heart jumps into my throat. It happened again. I sleepwalked. Where am I? In the living room? In the garden shed or the hammock again? Only yesterday I woke up in the forest, right in the middle of a small clearing. My head was resting on a moss-covered, fallen tree.

I slowly open my eyes. There are leaves. Fresh, heart-shaped leaves and yellow flowers with bees buzzing around them. Other than that, there is ... air. A lot of air. So much air I can't seem to find enough to get a breath down.

I'm lying on the branch of a tree! Like a sloth, arms and legs dangling on either side of the branch! Tears flood my eyes.

I'm at least fifteen feet above the ground! How did I get up here?

I look down. The ground below blurs into a gloopy mass. Really it looks like there is no ground at all anymore. Like there is nothing but a vortex where the ground should be, maybe even a hungry maw, waiting to swallow me whole.

I close my eyes for a moment and take a deep breath. It's a miracle I managed to *sleep* on this branch without falling off. If I don't panic now, surely I'll also manage to get back down, right?

The branch below me I can reach fairly easily. The next one as well. I slowly climb down, heart beating wildly. Soon I reach the lowest branch. From here I can lower myself down. I land softly on the ground and look up. The branch I just dropped down from is pretty high up. Even with my arms stretched all the way up I can't reach it! How did I get up there? In the dark? Sleeping? All by myself?

I startle at a rustling sound in the bushes behind me.

'Fred?' It wouldn't be the first time he followed me when I sleepwalked. But unfortunately, he is nowhere to be seen. Instead, there is more movement, followed by a panting sound. My stomach drops. Crap! That's definitely not Fred! My dachshund doesn't *pant*. And he doesn't sound *big* and *heavy* either. Something in these trees is not what it's supposed to be. Different. For the very first time I feel cold in the forest.

I stumble forward; feet numb. Luckily, I *thought* of putting on my sneakers while I was sleeping! And at least I know where I am: right in between the Beehive and the Linden Castle.

The Beehive is Lina's house, our only neighbor. I'm living with her at the moment, but really, the Linden Castle is my home: a small, former stronghold made from red sandstone in the palatinate in Germany, surrounded by woods and meadows. I'll reach it soon. And it smells strange already. Like burnt wood. A smell that doesn't belong here, it bites into my heart.

The fire changed everything. Destroyed everything in this one day two weeks ago while I was at school. Nothing but skeletal, sooty walls are left of our castle. Only the linden trees in the courtyard, the workshop, and the stables survived the fire. That's when I remember: the tree I woke up on - wasn't that also a linden tree? I was probably looking for *my* linden tree in my sleep, wanting to spend the night here. In the tree house that Dad and I built together.

I turn away with a heavy heart and go to feed our donkeys Fries, Ketchup and Mayo, like I do every morning. I walk past Dad's workshop. I poke my head inside briefly, imagining my father at his workbench: humming quietly like he always did. I wonder what happened to him and Mom. The specialist from the police found that they weren't inside the house at all during the fire. Which I'm really happy about of course! But still they just disappeared! Something must have happened here, something bad because they never would have left without telling me! Did someone kidnap them? Did they have a secret I didn't know about? My worry for them throbs sadly in my chest, it feels sticky like rain-wet ashes. I quickly reach for Dad's cardigan. He always keeps it on the same hook for cold days.

'Hey, good morning!' I greet the donkeys. Fries and Mayo stick their heads out of the stable window as soon as they hear my voice, just like they do every morning while Ketchup grumpily sticks to the back wall. I have come to expect this by now. Ketchup just isn't the same anymore since my mom disappeared. He used to be completely different, following my mother everywhere. And when I say *everywhere*, I really mean it. He was always showing up in the kitchen, in her consulting room, sometimes even in the living room! One time he even tried to follow Mom to the *bathroom*, but she shut that down with a deadbolt. Either way, the relationship between Ketchup and Mom was something *special*. Intense. Loving. Which only makes the donkey all the more sad today.

'Did you sleep well?' I try to cheer him up.

At that moment, my cheeks start to itch.

Another one of those things that started after the fire, just like the sleepwalking. I carefully touch the rash on my face. It has gotten worse! Much worse. My left cheek feels

rougher than usual, calloused. Almost *grooved*. Great! Why isn't that useless cream that Lina insists on rubbing all over my face every night doing anything?

After I have fed Mayo and Fries with some old carrots I turn to Ketchup. He is standing in the corner looking sullen.

'Come on, Ketchup! You have to eat something!'

When the animal doesn't react, I call more loudly. 'Ketchup! Ketchuuuuup! Ketchup, come here!'

'Who is Ketchup?' A voice behind me suddenly asks, startling me so badly that I drop the carrot.

There is a man standing just a few steps behind me. His pants have holes in them, and he is wearing a worn-out coat with the hood pulled up over his head. His skin is brown and leathery. As if he laid in the sun for too long. His lips are thin, almost emaciated. But that's not the worst part. The worst part is the smell. Like rotten eggs. Like the worst fart I've ever smelled. Dachshund Fred's flatulence is nothing by comparison. It would pass as a mist of perfume next to this stench!

All right, this guy's gross. He doesn't belong here. At our castle. He is an ugly picture that's lopsided on the wall.

I wrap myself a little more tightly in Dad's cardigan. Now it feels as if he were standing next to me, wrapping a protective arm around me.

Instinctively I back up a step. And another. Then my back hits the stable door. Ketchup is suddenly standing there and starts to neigh.

'Not exactly friendly, you're donkey!'

'Well, it isn't exactly friendly *sneaking up* on someone like this!'

'I'm Charon', he says as if reading my thoughts. 'And you can rest assured, Ava. I won't hurt you.'

'You are ... *who*?'

'Charon! I'm here to talk to you about your parents.'

Something hot sloshes around my stomach, like molten lava. 'My parents? Do you know where they are?'

'You could say that.' His face twists into a grin.

'You know what happened???' The words fall from my mouth with a croak; my thoughts are racing. Does this stranger have something to do with Mom and Dad's disappearance? Did he burn down our home? I have to call the police!

'Well, I know more or less what happened ...' He starts to chew his fingernails. And I immediately wish he'd stop. Because now I notice his hands. They are encrusted with dirt.

'Please tell me what happened! Or let's go to the police together!'

'The *human* police can't help you, Ava. They don't know anything about nothing!' Ketchup's back hooves kick against the stable door. As if he were shouting 'Get out! RIGHT NOW!'

'Tell me, is that your soul animal? Can't you tell him to settle down?'

'Soul animal? What does that even mean? That's just a regular donkey! It's not like he can understand us!'

'Of course soul animals can understand us! And that this one here is no ordinary donkey I can smell from thirty feet up wind! But whatever. He probably belongs to your mother or father, right?'

Something comes crawling out of his sleeve. Something black and repulsive. Three bugs with a green shimmer. Like fat blowflies. They slowly make their way across the back of his hand. And what's really disturbing: They don't bother him at all! He doesn't wipe them away but just leaves them there! I stumble a few feet along the wall.

'I have to go see my grandma now.'

'Grandma? You mean the old woman living at the Beehive? Lina? She is not your grandmother! You don't have any relatives left. No aunt, no uncle, no one. You only have your parents. And if you want to find out what happened to them you have to come with me. Now!'

'Are you crazy? I'm not going to just leave with some stranger!' He just stands there for a moment, completely still. He takes a deep breath, then lets it out slowly, clearly annoyed.

'I was afraid of that', he says, throwing back his hood.

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What I see is so bad I want to run for the hills. If only my feet weren't stuck to the ground. I can only stare at his head.

He is completely bald he doesn't even have eyebrows. He looks like the skull of a mummy. But the worst part is that there are even more black bugs on it. They're *crowding* his skull. I stumbled away.

'Running away now isn't a good idea, Ava. You will regret it! Just come with me. We'll get this whole thing behind us, quick and painless.'

Painless?

Fear explodes in my stomach. I run. As fast as I can!

But I don't get far. Only thirty feet, maybe forty. Then I can't breathe any more. My throat is suddenly *closing*, too tight for air. It feels as if someone were standing next to me, *choking* me. But there's no one there. Panicking I whip my head around.

The stranger is standing a few feet away from me. Stock still. He's reaching out his arms, his hands formed into claw like spiders. He looks like a zombie who's about to choke someone!

That can't be... That is... *impossible*. He can't be choking me! He is not even touching me!

'Ava, Ava', he warns me, his mummy face twisted into a lopsided grin. 'No running away, understand? *Come along*.' He drops his arms and I can breathe again, greedily I suck down air. My throat burns like fire.

I want to shout at him and scream for help, but I can't. I just can't speak. All I can do is gasp and cry a little. Because he scares me so much. Because he's evil. Because he's doing something that is impossible.

'Will you come freely now?'

He is talking to me like a nice uncle. But he is nothing like that, I know that now. So I take off again, faster this time. I have to escape him!

But it happens again. He reaches out his hands and chokes me, without choking me. It hurts even more this time. It feels as if he is *squeezing* every fiber of my airways. Tears are burning on my cheeks as I grab my throat trying to shake off his chokehold. But it's no use. You can't shake off what isn't there.

Dark spots start to dance across my vision. Ketchup's neighing has become louder, more desperate. Then there is suddenly a roar, so throaty and rumbling that it shakes me to the core. The stranger drops his hands in surprise and one of the dark spots races towards him. In the same moment I can fill my lungs again.

The black spots in my vision dissolve except for one, which grows larger and larger. I blink a few times just to be sure. Because there, only a few feet away, something is defending me that shouldn't even be there. Something that I've never seen before. Well, maybe at the zoo. Or in videos. But never here in the forest. At my home.

'Get away!' The zombie man's screeches, raising his arms in an unspoken threat. But it's no use. The attacker beats down Charon's hands with a violent blow. With paws by the way. And sharp claws. Mummy man's cloak hangs in tatters, and bloody streaks cover his skin.

'You might have gotten away this time, Ava!' He pants and gives me a furious glare. 'But next time I'll get you, don't forget that!'

My defender straightens to his full height and roars like there is no tomorrow. If Charon had hair, it would probably flatten to his skull. Instead, his disgusting bugs fly off in every direction. I hope they disappear. Forever. Just like Charon, who is running away into the forest. I want to get out of here as well when suddenly someone speaks.

'Wait, Ava!'

I flinch. Who just spoke? Charon is out of sight. There's no one here! Except... It's not seriously the *bear* who just spoke, is it?

'Hello! My name is Urs.'

Sure, I think sure. Urs. An animal that speaks. Or more precisely a bear. A damn giant bear! He's not moving his mouth, but he is speaking. In my head. 'I'm your school guardian. I can speak to you telepathically.'

'Trust ... animal,' I repeat. '*Telepathically*. Sure. Makes sense.'

Am I losing my mind? I mean, who wakes up *in* a tree? Who gets choked by a freak with fifty bugs hanging around on his mummy skull? And who talks to *bears*?

'I'm sorry that I roared like that. I never roar, honestly!'

'Right.'

'I only did that to drive away the death finger.'

'Death finger?'

'*Xyliaria polymorpha* from the genus woodclubs! That man just now. He is dangerous. I'm sorry that I couldn't protect you sooner. I took a little detour in the forest earlier because I didn't want you to know yet that I was following you. And I was looking for something to eat as well. I have to admit, I was really hungry after the journey!'

'What is going on here? Are you a damn grizzly bear!' The animal made a sound as if he was clicking his tongue.

'I'm not a grizzly bear! Those are much bigger! No, I belong to the genus *Ursus americanus*, also known as black bears.'

'That doesn't really make a difference to me! You can SPEAK!'

'Well, I suspect there are a lot of things in this world you don't know anything about yet. Magical things. You'll discover them with time. And in the process, you'll find out what you're really capable of.'

I give the bear a confused look. *Ursus americanus*.

'What's your name again?'

'Urs.'

'Listen, Urs, I don't care if there are more speaking animals or deathclubs or whatever walking around out there...'

'Woodclubs. Also known as *death fingers*. Their Latin name is *Xylaria polymorpha*.'

'Whatever! I don't care! I just want to find my parents!'

'Parents?' His voice sounds scratchy. 'Would you mind if I sniffed you? Just briefly. I promise I won't bite!'

'If you must' I stumble over my words as Urs gets closer. One step, two, three. When he stands next to me, he reaches up to my hip. His snout reaches towards me, warm and steaming it roams along my arm.

'Oh' he says and sits down on his back paws, which is pretty cute if I'm being honest. Like a fluffy teddy bear.

'I thought I smelled them earlier but I wasn't sure! But it's true. You smell like Quinn and Freya!'

'You know my parents?' My heart suddenly beats with such force that I'm afraid it might burst from my chest.'

'Course! I was their school guardian as well! I will never forget their scent!'

'Do you know what happened to them? There was a fire here two weeks ago and since then they've just been gone!'

Instead of answering, Urs gets up and sniffs around what is left of Linden Castle.

'Hmm, hard to say. The smell of the fire covers up almost everything else. There are a few dead spore beetles lying around, some of those disgusting creatures that live on putors like Charon.'

'Pu ... what?'

'Putor – that's Latin for *stench*. When you meet a person with a foul odor like that you know it is a putor.'

'Seriously?'

'Course! They're not to be trifled with! They are magical creatures who have aligned themselves with a dark figure who calls themselves *Morbus*.'

Speechless I stare at Urs. He stares back. There's a friendly shine in his dark eyes. Besides that, this morning has gone back to being completely normal. A butterfly flutters past. Bees are humming in the tree behind us. Everything is as always. Except that a bear is sitting in front of me.

'This Morbus ...' I start. 'Does he have something to do with my parents disappearing? I'm really worried about them!'

'I'm sure that Morbus is behind it!'

'Where can I find him?'

Urs lets out another sigh, heavier this time, longer. 'One doesn't find Morbus, Ava. He finds you.'

'What's that supposed to mean: *he finds me?*'

'That means that he is looking for you already! He sent Charon after all. He was probably supposed to talk you into something.'

'I don't understand!'

'You don't have to for now. You will understand everything in time. But for that you'll have to come with me. At our Secret Forest Academy, you'll learn everything you need to know in our magical world.'

This bear is crazy! And he seems to be completely serious!

'Didn't Freya and Quinn tell you anything about our magical world?' His voice sounds gentle, as if he were stroking my hair.

'No.'

'Oh well, they probably had their reasons.'

'Oh really? Like what?' I cross my arms in front of my chest. Something is poking me from inside, it feels hot and heavy.

'I don't know exactly. I've just picked up a couple of things here and there.'

'Urs, can't you just tell me what's going on?'

'We don't have time for that right now. We have to hurry. The new school year begins soon and you're the last student I'm picking up. It's important that we get there in time for the first day of class!'

'I'm going to school *here*. I have *friends*, you know?'

'I'm sure you do. You're a great girl after all. And you'll see your friends again. Sometime. But first, you have to come to our forest school to learn certain things.'

'Definitely not!'

'I understand that all of this isn't easy for you. But it's not a good sign at all that a death finger showed up here. He could come back. And bring more putors with him.'

'I can't just leave here! What am I supposed to tell Grandma Lina? That I've met a speaking bear in the forest who's taking me to a secret school?'

'Who is Grandma Lina?'

'Our neighbor! She's looking after me!'

'Hmm, difficult. I suppose you care about her?'

'What do you think? I don't call her *Grandma* Lina for nothing! I've known her my entire life!'

'If you care about her, it's all the more important to leave here. And quickly. The putors are a great danger, for her as well. They can use all sorts of powers.'

'That Charon, he choked me! From fifteen feet away! How did he do that?'

'You'll find out soon enough. I promise. For now, all that matters is that you understand this: there are magical creatures. Some are good, some are bad.'

'And what do I have to do with all that?'

'What do you think? You're one of them!'

'That's ridiculous!'

'Oh really? Then why are you talking to a bear right now?'

'Because...'

'You don't just have that rash for no reason. You're changing. That's why you've been sleepwalking. The forest is becoming your home. Soon you'll be able to smell and see better, especially at night. And other things will change too.'

'What do you mean?'

'Let's start heading towards Grandma Lina's house. Can you show me the way? We'll think of a plan while we walk. When does Lina usually get up in the morning?'

'On weekends usually around nine.'

'Good. Then you'll be able to pack in peace without her asking awkward questions.'

'And then I'll just leave? I can't do that!'

'You're not just leaving! You'll write her a letter and say that you have some information that may lead to your parents. That you're looking for them. And that you have to do it on your own without help from her or the police.'

'Lina will be terribly worried!'

'I understand this is painful, Ava. But you have to leave your life here behind. For now. You will see Lina again.'

'I don't know if I can do this', I whisper thinking about my friends Leah and Julius. We went to kindergarten together, elementary school, used to hang out at the treehouse, throw Halloween parties and bake muffins.

'You have to decide. If you stay here, you won't just be putting yourself but also everyone you love in danger. Trust me.'

'Maybe it'd be better to call the police ...'

'The police is powerless against putors! You can always just come to the Academy for a few days, try it out. No one will force you to stay if you don't want to. Despite the fact that you'd be putting everyone else in danger, like I said.'

'You're *blackmailing* me! And I don't even know if I can trust you. You seem nicer than the mummy man but... Well, you're still a *bear*.'

'I'm no regular bear!' Urs grunts. 'I'm a *school guardian*. I'm responsible for your well-being and that of all the other students. I would protect you with my life!'

'I guess you did do that just now', I allow. 'Thanks for that by the way, Urs.'

'Now are you going to write that goodbye letter to Lina?'

The Beehive appears in front of us as if summoned by his words: a small house with roses growing up the blue timber frames. The lump in my throat is thick and oily somehow. All of this is my home; how can I leave it behind? Tears fill my eyes.

'Do you mind ... Do you mind if I touch you, Urs? You know, just to make sure that you're actually real?'

'Course! You can pet me too. I like it. Especially behind my ears.'

His fur is shaggy, almost black that fades into a light brown around his snout.

'Do you mind giving me a scratch? On my right shoulder? Something bit me there. Probably a flea.'

'Umm...'

'Shouldn't be contagious!'

When I do him the favor he grunts with pleasure. And when I finally scratch his head, he gently leans into my hand.

He really is cute. Even though his nose is wet. And he smells a little. Earthy somehow.

'Alright, I'll write the letter to Lina', I say and swallow the fist-size lump in my throat.

I put the letter on the kitchen table, right next to the cake that Lina and I baked together last night.

‘Can we take some of that? As provisions? It smells delicious!’

‘How far do we have to go? Where is this school exactly?’

‘I can’t tell you that. But we will need something to eat. Take as much as you can. I’m hungry already!’

‘I can’t just disappear and take all the cake on top of that!’

‘You can leave a piece for Lina. Old people don’t eat that much anyway. The dachshund will just end up eating the rest. That would be a waste. Also, he should be on a diet.’

‘Fred is *old*. He can be a little bit plump.’

‘Plump? He’s just fat! He should be getting a lot more exercise. Look, he’s only sitting around in the corner!’

‘He’s *scared*! Of you’, I shoot back and run a soothing hand over Fred’s fur. His short legs are shaking.

‘I will miss you, little one. Take good care of Lina, okay?’

‘Maybe take some food from the fridge as well’, Urs interrupts and licks a few crumbs off the table.

‘You are a little food obsessed, aren’t you??’

‘Course! I’m a bear! And I’ll have you know I had nothing but some berries for breakfast today. By the way I can smell that there’s bees behind the house. Would you mind...’

‘Don’t you dare! You will not steal the honey, understood? I can make you a sandwich if you like.’

‘Oh yes! Do you have jam? Can you put on a lot?’

I can’t believe it! He is just standing there tilting his fluffy head to the side. The outer corners of his mouth have pulled up ever so slightly making him look like he’s smiling.

I make his sandwich at snail speed, head lowered. I don’t want Urs to see that I’m crying. How much will it hurt Lina if I just disappear? I wrote how much I love her. But that I have to go because I found out something about Mom and Dad. I asked her to forgive me. And that I will come back. For sure.

'Are you ever going to finish? I get why you are wanting to stall but if we're still here when Lina gets up it'll only make it worse!'

With shaking fingers, I put the sandwich on a plate expecting him to devour it right away. Given the loud noises his stomach is making, I'm all the more surprised when he presses his head against my leg. Silently. He probably knows that there is nothing he could say right now to make me feel better. I feel for his soft ears, hold on to them.

Finally, I shoulder my backpack. I have to find out what happened to Mom and Dad. What that death finger did to them. Or that *Morbus*. That's all that matters right now. That the open wound that the fire scorched into my life can finally heal.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

We walk for a long time. I like being in the forest but hiking isn't really my thing. My parents forced me into it sometimes, but I don't really enjoy it. Of course it's slightly different in the company of a bear, at least I can ask Urs tons of questions.

'How far away is the secret school?'

'I can't tell you that. Wouldn't be a secret otherwise.'

'How many students are in my year?'

'Including you, twelve.'

'And how many years are there?'

'Just Two.'

'Really? So, the school is tiny!'

Urs lets out a loud grunt. 'Not really.'

'Where will I live?'

'You'll see when we get there. Everyone else is already there. Some interesting personalities. Some pretty cute boys, too. Do you like boys?'

'Erm...'

'Or do you prefer girls?'

'I...'

'Well, you have plenty of time to find out. Are you thirteen yet?'

'No, still twelve. But my birthday is in a month.'

I quickly swallow down the thought that I'll have to celebrate it without my parents, Grandma Lina or my friends this year.

'So, Dad also went to this school?'

'Yes. Your mother too. You look a lot like her. The same red brown hair. Only your blue eyes they're your dad's. And that little gap between your front teeth, neither of them had that.'

'I don't particularly like it. I was meant to get braces soon.'

'Don't! You're pretty already, you don't have to be any more... perfect, you know?' He looks and winks at me.

We walk along silently for a while. I wonder why my parents never told me about the secret school, putores, or magic. And then I remember how they had wanted to have a talk with me a few days before they disappeared. They had meant to tell me something important. We had already sat down at the kitchen table. But in that exact moment the telephone rang, and Mom had to go care for a patient.

‘Urs, what happened to my parents?’ My voice sounds scratchy, heavy with emotion. Just like my heart.

‘Unfortunately, I don't know’, he grumbles. ‘Hopefully Billie will be able to give you some answers. She is the director of the Giant Academy.’

‘Giant Academy? Are there giants at your school?’

Urs stretches his face towards the sun and pulls up the corners off his mouth. ‘You know what, Ava? In a way, there are!’

'Giants, sure!' I grumble as we settle down on a clearing for a short rest. 'What's next? Dancing frogs? Flying unicorns?'

'You'll see', Urs says happily as he digs into our food. He makes short work of the cake, the cereal bar and the sandwich. All he leaves me in his feeding frenzy is a browning banana.

'How much farther is it?'

'Just a bit. Maybe an hour.'

'What? That much longer? This is taking forever! Will you at least tell me what kind of *magical creature* I am? Will I also be able to do that choking thing like the zombie man?'

'It depends.'

'On what?'

'What magical kind you belong to.'

'What kinds are there?'

'You'll see soon enough.'

'*You'll see soon enough, I can't tell you, I don't know*' I mock him. There is a heavy knot in my stomach. By now Lina will have found my letter, called all my friends and filed a missing persons report with the police. I struggle to fight back my tears. 'Can't you tell me *anything*?'

'Okay, Ava, fine! I will tell you something. About the three donkeys in your shed. What are their names?'

'Ketchup, Mayo and Fries.'

'I love fries! Our school cook, Iris, will always save me some whenever she makes them! Her roasted vegetables are just to die for! Sometimes she also makes...'

'Urs! Can you get back to the point?'

'All right! Your donkeys, right. The one with the red brown fur is a soul animal. I assume that's Ketchup?'

'Yeah.'

'He belongs to Freya, your mom. He is devastated that she's gone. At least that's what he told me.'

'Told you?'

'Yes exactly! Soul animals can communicate with each other. Telepathically. Other than that, they only ever talk to the human they are bound to.'

'If Ketchup is Mom's soul animal – whatever that means – wouldn't he have seen what happened to her?'

'He was out in the pasture when the fire started. To take care of some personal business, if you know what I mean. Then he heard screaming. But when he made it back your parents were already gone. And so were the putors.'

I take a few quiet moments to let this information sink in. I finally understand why Mom and Ketchup had such a close relationship! I mean - Ketchup even helped Mom *hang up the laundry* by passing her pieces of clothing from the basket with his snout! Why did I never think anything of that? Instead of wondering what that was about I just got annoyed when Ketchup got drool all over my underwear again! Somehow, I always just assumed that Mom had *trained* the donkey!

'Shouldn't we have taken the donkeys with us? Maybe Ketchup wouldn't feel as lonely at your forest school?'

'Sweet that you ask Ava. But no. Ketchup preferred to stay behind and be there in case your mother returns.'

His words left a stabbing feeling in my chest. Did I *abandon* my parents by going with Urs?'

'You don't feel bad for coming with me to the Giant Academy, do you? Because your parents would have wanted exactly that!'

'Are you sure?'

'Course I am! And while we're on the subject of soul animals: during his first year at the Academy a coyote found your dad. He had stepped into a hunter's trap and injured his leg. It never really healed properly, so Quinn made him a prosthetic one. His name was Quentus, and he died a long time ago, before you were born. He wasn't exactly the best looking creature in the world, but your dad loved him more than anything! Quinn and Quentus. Everybody knew the two of them!'

'A *coyote*? What kind of animal is that?'

'A wolf.'

'And where do those live? Not here! So where is the school?'

'That, my dear', Urs turns his bear grin on me. 'Is still a secret!'

And it stays a secret for the next few miles as well. During this time Urs tries to distract me with exactly one topic of conversation: food. What type of berries he likes the best (raspberries), that honey is his absolute favorite, even though wild bees are becoming rarer and rarer. That he leaves enough honey for them when he steals some. That he can't resist a juicy fish.

He asks me about my favorite foods. When I evade his question because it makes me sad (Mom, Dad and I used to cook together and it was always lots of fun), he starts raving about the school cook again, a woman named Iris. After just a few minutes I know exactly what she looks like (black, gently curled hair, pretty birthmark on her cheek, delicate hands), what she cooks and how absolutely *enchanting* she is. Urs sounds as if he's hopelessly in love with her!

'She's my favorite teacher! She leaves a plate out for me every day! She always thinks of me! And how good she smells! Like freshly cooked food!'

After that he tells me old stories about Mom and Dad. What they were like as students. That they used to love flying kites and having picnics in the forest. Where they had their first kiss.

'Did you spy on them?'

'Course not! But as a school guardian you pick up a lot. And Quinn came to visit me once in a while.'

It is nice to find out things about Mom and Dad that we've never talked about. But my feet are starting to feel heavy. And not just those. My back is protesting as well. Even though I don't even have a lot of luggage with me. I really just packed some underwear, a toothbrush and Dad's cardigan. Oh right, and the pajamas I wore last night.

Urs stops so abruptly that I almost trip over him.

'We're here.'

'Here? But we're in the middle of the forest. There's not even a path here! Just a game trail!'

'That's right. But do you notice anything?'

'I see trees. But I've been seeing those for *hours*!'

'What kind of trees?'

'Beech trees.'

'Good. At least Quinn and Freya taught you how to identify trees. Mushrooms too, I assume?'

'Yes, but what...'

'Do you notice anything else in this section of the forest?'

I look around. Here and there there's a pine tree. So, nothing special! Although... Something looks strange back there. When I take a few steps closer I see two unusual looking beech trees. Their trunks twist around their own axis like a spiral and around five feet off the ground they start leaning towards each other, forming a kind of passageway.

'There you go', Urs says approvingly. 'You found the portal!'

I inspect the trees more closely. They look old. Moss and lichen grow on their trunks. But there's something else. Something I can't really name. I just know that there's a prickling sensation in my stomach.

'What you feel right now is the energy of the magic tunnel!' Urs says. 'The current that runs behind the portal.'

Small, radiant spots are buzzing around the beech trees. Like sparks swirling up from a campfire.

'You already have a connection! Regular people don't even see the magic sparks! With time you'll be able to sense magical portals more easily. You will sense them even when you're still miles away!'

'How is that possible?' I reach out a hand for a particularly beautiful spark. It is a little bit stronger than the others and glows with a white golden light.

'A part of this beautiful energy also lives in you.'

'What happens when we go through the portal?'

'We get to the Giant Academy. It will be a little bumpy. Not as bad as the passageway to Australia, but it's a little uncomfortable.'

'Urs, *where* exactly...?'

'Ready? I will activate the portal now!'

My legs are shaky. I have no idea what to do. What if I do something wrong?

'Urs, wait!'

But the bear doesn't even think about waiting. He puts his heavy paw on one of the trunks and says loud and clear: '*Academia Sequoia sempervirens.*'

The sparks that were just buzzing around the trees, fly closer together. Like fireflies getting together for a party. They form a glowing ball. It's growing quickly, completely filling the space between the beech trees, radiating a fascinating light.

'Then let's go, Ava! Here we go, to the Giant Academy!'

I step into the gap and get ripped away at the same moment, whisked into a black tunnel surrounded by a halo of light. I can't see Urs at all anymore. I sit in a weightless capsule, which is travelling at breathtaking speed. Through a tunnel of *stars*! Like a roller coaster! I laugh out loud when we race straight down for a second. There's a tingling sensation in my stomach. With joy, with excitement! It goes on like this for several minutes. Or maybe it's a whole hour? When Urs takes shape in front of me again. I'm almost a little disappointed. He steps through the gap that has opened in front of us, and we stagger into a wooden hut. But, no. It's not a hut. It is a hollow tree. A very wide one. So wide that Urs and I both fit inside comfortably.

'How was it?'

'Amazing! I wish we could go again!'

'Soon, don't worry!'

'Are we here? At your *academy of giants*?'

'Well', Urs responds gently shoving me out of the tree hollow with his snout. 'Just take a look around!'

The next moment my chin drops. With awe. With surprise. With a sense of reverence. I'm so small. Simply because everything around me is so incredibly *big*.

It's the trees. They are giant. And wide. And powerful. I put my head back and let my eyes roam up the trunks all the way to where they appear to meet the sky. Up there, so far up, are their crowns. Their needles whisper in the wind.

Suddenly I know where we are. Like I said, Mom and Dad taught me a lot about trees. Where the smallest ones grow, the oldest, the most poisonous, the prickliest, the funniest. And the biggest.

That's why I recognize a mammoth tree when I see one.

And there's only one place on earth where they grow in forests.

My stomach drops a little bit. Can it be? Can that portal really have transported me to the *other side of the world*.

'Are we in California? In the United States of America?'

'Good, Ava! I live here. *Ursus americanus*, remember? We are in the most northern part of California.'

'Why is the school here of all places?'

'Oh, that's a question that's difficult to answer. There are a lot of scientific theories about that. You can ask Bo about it, the history teacher. Fact is, there are four secret academies around the world. But let's take a moment to arrive at this one. Do you like it?'

I follow after Urs. I feel like a puppy just learning how to walk.

If I like it? This forest is gigantic! But relaxing at the same time. Maybe it's the air. It's so clear and fresh that it soothes something deep inside me. Maybe my soul.

'We are right in the middle of Redwood National Park' Urs explains. A protected part of land. Back in the day these forests covered large swaths of the Californian coast. But unfortunately, more than ninety percent of them were cut down.'

It feels like Urs just slapped me.

'Are you saying that nine out of ten trees are just gone today?'

'Yes, unfortunately. The clearing started with the gold rush in 1848 and lasted about a hundred years. But luckily the trees in the national parks are well protected now. By many brave

firefighters for example. And by a lot of great people, who are committed to the effort of reforesting the Redwoods!

'The trees are called Redwoods?'

'Exactly. Because their trunks are reddish. There are two different kinds by the way. The trees you see here are coastal mammoth trees. *Sequoia sempervirens*. They grow a little taller than their cousins the giant mammoth trees. Those are called *Sequoiadendron giganteum* and are a little wider.'

'You know a lot of Latin names, don't you?'

'I suppose, I have picked up a lot over the years. I like to nap outside your classrooms. To make sure that everyone is doing well.'

'Urs?'

'Yeah?'

'You really are a friend, aren't you?'

'Course I am, Ava.'

'I thought we would arrive at the school!' I say as we walk on.

'We'll be there in 5 minutes.'

'What other animals live here? Besides bears I mean?'

'There are owls, mountain lions, wolves, deer, skunks, squirrels, banana slugs...'

'Mountain lions? Aren't they dangerous?'

'No more dangerous than bears. They are very shy. Also, you'll notice that animals behave differently towards you than regular humans. They can sense that you're a magical creature.'

Magical creature. Not a regular human. I could strangle Urs for not just telling me what's going on! And my rash is itching again. I probably look really terrible. Ideal conditions for meeting new people!

After a little while the path is blocked by two mammoth trees. They're a little smaller than the others and stand closely together. At the very top they are entwined. Their shape is almost *human*: the branches they have wrapped around each other look like arms and two thick outgrowths are round like heads. No, they *are* heads because I can make out boney noses, mouths, and closed eyes! The strange creatures are sleeping. One of them with a smile the other with a dark expression on his face. Something in me softens when I realize their foreheads are resting against each other. Like friends snuggled up together. But then I noticed their hands. They are as big as truck tires. I swallow. Those could easily smash a person!

Urs walks towards the trees without a care in the world. 'Allow us entry, friends!'

With a lot of creaking, they opened their eyes. They are as large as dinner plates. I stumble backwards. I hope I don't pee my pants!

The eyes of the smiling guard sparkle like bright green gemstones. Those of the frowning one are ice blue and feel so cold I get goosebumps.

But that is nowhere near everything. The trees don't just open their eyes. They straighten and drop their huge arms! Their movements groan and creak so loudly that my ears almost fly off! The ground shakes as if an earthquake is thundering through the forest.

'Don't be afraid, Ava', Urs tries to comfort me. 'Everything is fine!'

'Everything is fine? They're *moving*!'

'They're just doing their job! They check everyone who wants to enter the Academy! To make sure that no putors get inside!'

A deep voice blares through the forest. It sounds as if someone was shouting into a megaphone. The sound vibrates in my chest.

'WHO DESIRES ENTRY?'

Of course it is the unfriendly guard asking the first question.

'Better answer him! Blue can be impatient!'

Panicking slightly, I grasp for words. For a moment I can't even remember my own name. The giant does not seem to like that. With an earsplitting creak he leans forward a little to get a better look at me. His cold eyes pierce mine. It feels like he's *scanning* my brain.

'WHO DESIRES ENTRY?'

'Um, I do! Me! Ava!'

'Ava hmmm... Let's see. Give me your hand!'

My hand?! Ohh boy! He could easily *tear out* my entire arm! Like a cruel child tearing the leg off a Daddy Longlegs! But I do what he says. This is a test, isn't it? What if I don't pass? What if I'm not good enough? The guard could smush me. Right here and now! As soon as my hand grabs his wooden finger, my face starts to burn. At the same time something starts to flutter around my belly: the feeling of being welcome. Of belonging. It is so overwhelming that tears come to my eyes. I belong here. In this academy. While this thought shoots through my head with absolute certainty the guard frowns. He leans down again. With jerky creaks he lifts his nose a few times in quick succession. Is he sniffing me?

'All right', he finally says. 'You smell fine. Even if I don't like what's sticking to you!'

'She was attacked by a putor recently', Urs explains. 'More specifically by Charon.'

The guard breaks our contact and straightens to his full height making a strange gurgling noise. He opens his mouth, and something slaps onto the ground next to me. I flinch when some of it splatters onto my sneakers. Probably sap or something.

'Charon, the worm! The lousy traitor!'

'Sorry, Ava', a new voice sounds from high above. It is also loud but sounds softer, lighter. It belongs to the other tree, the one with the green eyes.

'Blue is impulsive sometimes. But he didn't mean to frighten you!'

'That had to be done! Just the thought of a putor makes me sick! Those disgusting stinkers! What do you think, Ava?'

'Sure', I croak out. 'I feel the same!'

'So, we understand each other.'

'Of course!'

Only a complete blockhead would ever disagree with this giant.

I take a closer look at the female tree. Sheets of leaves fall around her head. Like long hair. And small twigs surround her eyes like eyelashes. Now it is her reaching out her hand.

'I'm Green by the way', she says.

I grasp her hand, feeling a little braver this time.

'Ah!' She calls out. 'Of course. You will live with Summer! She gets the hiccups sometimes but is very friendly otherwise!'

'Okay...'

'Welcome to the Giant Academy, Ava!'

She makes an inviting gesture with her impressive hand pointing through the school portal. 'Please come in!'