

Flaxfold died on a Friday,

which was a shame, because she was the person Sam needed most. She died in the same room where Sam had found Flaxfield dead. Except that the old man had died in his sleep, an afternoon nap, and Flaxfold had been killed in the first battle of a war.

It was the same kitchen, the same house, the same day, only more than a year later.

Either way, they were both dead now, and Sam was left to deal with it on his own again.

First, there was the kitchen. Sam didn't know where to start.

"It doesn't matter where you start," Flaxfield had always told him. "As long as you do the first thing."

"What's the right first thing to do?" Sam remembered the question. He was always asking the old man questions.

"You'll know when you've done it," Flaxfield told him.

Sam looked around at the mess. The floor was littered

with the bodies of dead beetles, the shards of the smashed bodies of kravvins. The rushes and sweet herbs were stained with the slime and pus that burst from the creatures when they split open.

Where to start?

Sam took his staff in both hands and grasped it high above his head, level with the ground. He drew in a deep breath and held it. Mist poured out of both ends of the staff, curling down, rising up, billowing out. White mist, cool and clean. It wrapped itself round Sam and flowed out, filling the whole room. Every small space, every crevice, every tiny gap filled with the mist.

He waited until all was still and the cloud had come to rest. Slowly releasing his breath, he crossed the room and walked out through the door into the garden. He slid his hands over the staff, bringing them together at the end. The mist followed, a trail of cloud. No longer white and clean, it was stained yellow and green. Sam whipped the staff round and pointed it up to the sky. The mist curled after the movement and spiralled away, dragging the slime and debris with it. A whirlwind of filth and death.

Sam watched it disappear, leaning on his staff. When it was clear, he made his way back into the room.

"It's clean now, at least," he said.

He ignored Flaxfold's body. There were others to deal with and he sorted them first, just making them straight and seemly.

"Next?" he said.

Next was the furniture. Chairs were scattered and the table was broken. It leaned lazily on its side. Smashed pots and broken windows. The wall next to the kitchen range had a wide gap in it. The range itself had twisted and buckled. Sam righted the table, found the broken leg and made a mending spell. He put the chairs back into place around it. The small things took a lot of time and were picky to deal with. He mended them one by one, putting each in its proper place as it was finished. All the time he kept his eyes away from Flaxfold and the other bodies.

The gaping hole in the wall he filled with smoke and watched it blend together and heal.

He enjoyed mending the kitchen range. The metal was pleasing to work and it soothed him.

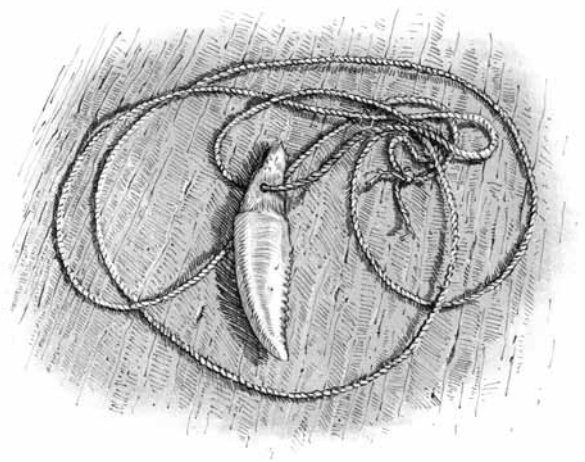
After a long time, too soon, all was complete. Sam looked for something else to mend, something new to tidy. Nothing. All was done. Only the bodies remained.

He went outside. The light was failing. Clouds covered the moon and stars. A soft drizzle dampened the grass. Star-back nuzzled up against him, his rough skin pleasant against Sam's legs.

Sam sat on the wet ground with his back to the wall and cried so hard that it made his throat hurt.

He was thirteen years old. ||





Part One

STARSEEKER

In the Deep World

it is never night. Far underground, guarded by secret doors and passageways, the sun never shines and the light never dims.

“I want to see the stars,” said Tadpole.

“They’re nothing special,” said his father. “You’ll see them one day.”

“I want to see them now.”

“That’s your trouble. You always want everything now.”

Megatork smiled down at his son, to take away some of the sharpness of his answer. Roffles are, for the most part, kind sorts.

“I’ve been twelve for over a year now,” said Tadpole, who didn’t give up easily, “so I should have been Up Top.”

Megatork stroked the neck of the memmont which sat next to him. Tadpole waited.

“You know why you can’t go,” he said, at last.

“No.”

"Seventeen," said his father. "Seventeen roffles killed. In one week."

"I'll be careful."

"We're all careful. They were careful. Roffles have to be careful Up Top. You know that. It doesn't matter how careful you are, you're not going, and that's that."

Tadpole sat down on the floor next to the memmont and put his arm around it. The creature nuzzled up against him and Tadpole felt comforted by the soft fur, the solid yet graceful bulk.

"What's changed?" he asked his father. "Why is it dangerous now? More dangerous?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you. I promised your mother I wouldn't."

Tadpole jumped up.

"If you won't tell me, I'll go Up Top and find out for myself."

It was a challenge. Tadpole measured his breathing while he waited for an answer.

"Come outside," said Megatork. "Walk in the garden with me."

Where his mother wouldn't be able to hear. Tadpole pressed his lips together in tight triumph.

The memmont loped behind them, snuffing at scents on the path.

"Since Flaxfield died," said the older roffle, "things have been getting worse Up Top. You know about Flaxfield?"

Tadpole nodded. Of course he did. Every roffle did. You learned about Flaxfield the way you learned about how to tie a knot, or the proper way to lift a roffle pack on to your back, or how many ten times seven is.

“Flaxfield kept things in order Up Top. More or less. Or when they went wrong he put them right.”

“Did you ever meet Flaxfield?” asked Tadpole.

“No. I never did. I wish I had. It’s too late now. He died the best part of two years ago. It was like taking the keystone from an arch. All the other stones lose their support and tumble against each other and then the whole building falls.”

Tadpole had a secret about Flaxfield and he came very close to telling his father then, but he hesitated a moment too long and Megatork carried on with his story.

“Death has been busy amongst the people Up Top since then. And in new ways, cruel ways. Villages destroyed. Whole populations killed. Kravvins, creatures never seen before, with blank shiny faces, more beetle than man, have ripped through the countryside. They kill and carry on, red and ruthless.”

“Where do they come from?” asked Tadpole.

His father shook his head. “You know how stories grow,” he said, “and how many stories answer one question. All I know is that people say that Ash made them.”

“Ash?”

They reached the end of the garden and looked back at the house. The memmont circled round, looking for things to tidy. Tadpole looked up at the never-dark sky above them.

“Isn’t there anyone who can stop it all?” he asked.

His father put his arm around him. “Not you,” he said. “So you’ll stay down here, in the Deep World, until it’s safe to go up again.”

“When will that be?”

He had never seen such a look of sorrow and regret on his father’s face.

“Perhaps never,” he said, and walked back to the house.

Tadpole shut his eyes tight and tried to conjure up the image of a black sky, peopled with stars. It was no good. The light was too strong for his eyelids.

He tickled the memmont’s ears.

“Let’s go and see Delver.”

Megadelveradage’s house was famous.

“You can come in, young Tadpole,” said the old roffle. “But leave your memmont outside.”

“Sorry,” said Tadpole.

The memmont sulked away and curled up under a tree.

Going into Delver’s house was like stealing food from a hungry person, or kicking a wounded dog. It felt wrong. Tadpole’s skin prickled every time he walked through the door.

Yet he loved it there.

“Apple?” offered Delver.

“Yes, please.”

“Help yourself.”

It was an old game between them.

"Where are they?" asked Tadpole.

"If you can find one, you can have it."

When Delver sat down his armchair leaned to one side.

His house wasn't dirty. No roffle could live in a dirty house. But it was untidy. Tadpole started to search for a bowl of fruit.

"Tell me about magic," he said, lifting a fanned pile of old papers with black handwriting and red drawings. No apples there.

"Why is it always magic with you?" asked Delver.

"You've seen magic. Tell me about it."

"Again?"

"Again," Tadpole insisted.

He looked under the table. There was a hat and a saucepan, but no apples.

"Try behind the cupboard," said Delver.

Tadpole shook his head. "No," he said. "I've been tricked like that before."

"Suit yourself."

"I'll do without," he said.

"Sit down, then," said Delver.

Tadpole looked around for a chair. There were plenty. It was just that none of them had any space for a roffle to sit. Piled high with Delver's stuff.

"Try that."

Delver pointed to his leather roffle pack.

Tadpole smiled and shook his head.

“Go on.”

“I can’t.”

“Go on.”

Tadpole started to clear a pile of books and plates from a chair. A rabbit hopped out and landed with a gentle splat. It turned a sleepy, accusing face to Tadpole.

“Go on.” Delver kicked his pack with his toe. The leather was hard, dry, and smooth, worn to a deep shine. A squashed barrel in shape.

“No one sits on a roffle pack, except the roffle who owns it,” said Tadpole.

“Have you got one of your own?”

Tadpole shrugged. “You know how it is,” he said. “No one goes travelling any more.”

“Sit on that one, for now. I don’t mind.”

Tadpole pushed it into place, flat end up, and sat on it, roffle-fashion.

“Please, tell me. Magic.”

“If you were a wizard,” said Delver, “you could just clap your hands now, and the apples would rise up into the air, spin round and round, turn blue and gold, silver and red, come tumbling down into your lap, ready to eat.”

Tadpole shivered with pleasure.

“And you’ve seen that?”

Delver smiled. “How many times have I told you?”

“But that? The apples. You’ve seen that?”

Delver thought for a moment.

“Not exactly that. But things just like it. That’s small magic,” he said. “The sort of thing a village wizard would do. A proper wizard does more than that.”

Tadpole pulled his chair closer.

“Why is there no magic in the Deep World?” he asked.

“Ah, now that’s a good question.”

Tadpole waited. Delver didn’t say anything.

“What’s the answer?” he asked, at last.

“I don’t know.”

Tadpole stood up and started to tidy the table.

“Stop that.”

Tadpole straightened the papers, cleared some pens and a couple of small clay pots.

“Don’t.”

Tadpole grinned. Tidying Delver’s house was like throwing things around anywhere else.

“I like all this jumble,” said Tadpole.

He stopped tidying and sat down again.

“I lived a long time Up Top,” said Delver. “Too long for a roffle, really. When I came back everything looked too neat, too tidy. This reminds me of happy times, when I was a young roffle, like you.”

“I’m going to go Up Top.”

“No. Not now. It’s finished. It’s all death and danger there now.”

“I know about the kravvins,” said Tadpole.

“Do you, now?”

"I don't care. I've got to go. I've got to see the stars. I've got to see magic." Tadpole clenched his fists. "You understand. You've been there. You know what it's like. I have to see it."

"I've been there," said Delver. "But I wouldn't go now. Not with the things that have happened. Not now the kravvins are there."

"Can't the wizards get rid of the kravvins? Can't they use magic?"

Delver looked more serious than Tadpole had ever seen him.

"Magic isn't like that. It's not that simple."

Tadpole surprised himself with the fierceness of his reply.

"Tell me, then. Not just nice stories about magic. Tell me the truth. How does magic work? Why can't I do it? What's wrong with roffles that they haven't got any magic? Tell me, or I'll go Up Top and find out for myself."

Delver put his finger to his lips.

"Hush. I'll tell you all I know."

Tadpole settled himself on the roffle pack and waited while Delver gathered his thoughts. It was surprisingly comfortable.

"This is a secret story," said Delver. "I'm not supposed to know about it."

"How do you know, then? Who told you?"

Delver wagged a finger.

"You listen, and you don't speak. Or I won't tell you anything. Understand? Good. It's the story of Smokesmith.

Long ago. Before memory. There was no magic Up Top. And then there was a blacksmith. He made swords and shields, axes for war, chainmail and visors. The best ever seen. Molten iron, mixed with charcoal. It gleamed. It cut. Arrows and spears bounced off it. He hammered it to a perfect shine. One day, he made a mirror. Beaten steel. Smooth as sleep. The first mirror there ever was.” The old roffle’s voice dropped to a whisper. Tadpole had to lean in to hear him. “When the first person looked at herself in the surface of the mirror, the magic burst out.”

“What happened? Sorry. I’ll shut up.”

“The mirror was locked away. That’s all I know. It was never seen again. Magic was loose by then.”

Tadpole breathed out slowly.

“What about that apple?” said Delver.

Tadpole looked around the room. Too many places. Too much stuff. He’d never find it. He reached out and picked up one of the small clay pots from the table.

“You like that?” asked Delver.

“What is it?”

“I got that from Flaxfield’s kitchen.”

Tadpole nearly dropped it.

“Careful.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You met Flaxfield?”

“Shake it,” said Delver.

It rattled.

“Have a look.”

Tadpole tipped it upside down and a tooth fell out. A length of cord had been threaded through a hole drilled into the root. Delver held out his hand for it.

“This is a dragon’s tooth.”

Tadpole smiled.

The old roffle tossed it to him.

“How do you know?” asked Tadpole.

“See how big it is.”

Tadpole weighed it in his palm.

“You can have it.”

“Is it magic?”

“Tie it round your neck.”

“Did Flaxfield give it to you? What was he like? Did you see him do proper magic?”

“This little clay pot had dried herbs in it,” said Delver. “Smell.”

Tadpole put it to his nose and breathed in the dusty aroma.

“Have that as well.”

“Are you sure?”

“What do I need with it? Is there anything else you want? Have a look. I brought back lots of things from Up Top.”

Tadpole felt embarrassed.

“I didn’t come to take your things,” he said.

“I know. What about that apple? Look behind the cupboard.”

Tadpole, feeling foolish, decided to play the game. He bent

and looked, and there they were, piled on a shallow dish.

"Told you," said Delver. "Bring the whole thing."

It was surprisingly light.

"Tip them on to the table," said Delver. "That's the way. Help yourself. Now, what do you think of the bowl?"

It wasn't a bowl at all. There was a strap inside. Tadpole turned it over.

"What is it?"

"What do you think? Put your arm through."

It was black, light, thin and very hard. And very shabby and wretched-looking. Tadpole didn't want to, but he slipped his arm through the strap and lifted his hand.

"It's a shield," he said.

"There's a knife as well, somewhere. Where did I put it?"

The roffle looked around as though searching for something. Tadpole waited.

"Help me look," said Delver.

"Where is it?" asked Tadpole.

Delver smiled.

"Can't fool you, can I?"

Tadpole smiled back.

"You know where every single thing is in here," he said.

"Perhaps I do. Try the little drawer in the table."

And there it was.

"I'm not allowed to have knives," said Tadpole.

"Just pass it to me."

Tadpole picked it up. As his hand closed over the handle he

had a sense that it had been shaped to his palm. It belonged to him. He handed it to Delver.

"There's a story," said the old roffle. "This knife and that shield were made by the same blacksmith who made the first mirror, time before knowledge."

"How did you get it?"

"Just picked it up. Like I just picked up the story."

"You said it was a secret story."

"It is. But, if you'd ever been Up Top you'd know that people forget about roffles. Because we talk in our Up Top voices they think we're a bit stupid. They say all sorts of things they wouldn't want us to hear, if they were thinking about it."

Tadpole sat on the pack again.

Silence licked round them and Tadpole didn't know how to make a sound again. At last, Delver said, "Roffles don't do magic. Never have."

Tadpole answered him quickly, too quickly. "I know. I just want to see it."

Delver waited.

"How did you know?" asked Tadpole.

"When I was a young roffle I wanted to do magic," he said. "You're not the first. And when I saw it, Up Top, when I saw what it could do, I wanted it more than ever."

"That's it," said Tadpole. "I've got to see it."

"Seeing it makes it worse," said Delver.

"It can't."

"It does. You just want to do magic yourself more than

ever. But,” he added, “it’s better to see magic and not do it, than never to see it.”

Tadpole jumped to his feet. Delver held out his hand for silence.

“One day, you will go Up Top,” he said. “But you have to wait until the kravvins are gone.”

He lowered his hand but Tadpole didn’t answer.

“Anyway,” he said, “you’ll need a roffle pack when you go, and you may as well have that one.”

“I can’t.”

“There’s no other way of getting one now, is there? Go on, take it.”

Tadpole started to lift it.

“Wait. You may as well put that thing in there.” He pointed and Tadpole lifted the lid and put the shield in, without looking inside. “And tuck the knife into your belt. You never know when you might want to peel an apple. But you’d better not let anyone see you’ve got a pack. They might jump to conclusions. Go on now. Before I change my mind.”

“Thank you. I promise that—”

“Shh. No promises. Just remember. I’m telling you very clearly. Understand. You must not go Up Top until the kravvins are all gone and your father gives you permission. Is that clear?”

“But...”

“What?”

“You gave me your pack.”

“And I’ve told you not to go. Right?”

Tadpole grinned.

“Right.”

“Get out, then. And come back and see me soon. All right?”

“I will.”

“And take that memmont with you, before it creeps in and makes a tidy of my things.”

The memmont was asleep under the tree.

“Come on home,” said Tadpole, stroking him awake. “I want to show you something.”

The creature looked at him as though it understood what he had said and followed him into the house.

“Look at this,” said Tadpole, opening the door and letting the memmont in with him.

Tadpole had been working secretly in the box room, trying to make it like Delver’s house.

The memmont sprang on to a broken wardrobe and started to straighten the door on its twisted hinges. The creature’s slender fingers were strong and they bent the metal back into shape as though it was pastry dough. Before Tadpole could stop him the memmont had ordered the doors so that they hung straight and it was rummaging inside, sorting piles of old sheets and blankets, broken toys and boxes of screws, empty bottles, a paperweight, a comb with missing teeth.

“That’s enough,” said Tadpole.

He spoke sharply and the memmont cast a reproachful look over its shoulder.

“Sorry,” said Tadpole. “Stop that now and come here.”

The memmont forced itself away from the wardrobe, but not before it straightened one last pile of papers and an old hat.

Tadpole stroked its neck. It sat next to him and licked the back of his hand.

“You can’t always be tidying,” said Tadpole.

The memmont blinked and put its head to one side.

“I mean, I know that’s what memmonts do, and it’s good. But not here. Not now.”

Tadpole, not for the first time, felt how difficult it was to make himself understood. If his mother and father didn’t know what he liked and what he thought was worthwhile, how could he expect a memmont to?

“Sometimes it’s good for things to be tidy,” he said. “But not everything. And if this place was tidy...” He paused and looked at the closed door. “If this place was tidy, then anyone could find what’s in here, couldn’t they? I like things to be jumbled sometimes.”

The memmont moved a sly paw to one side and straightened a drawer in a scruffy desk.

“I saw that,” Tadpole warned him. “No more tidying.”

He gave the memmont a friendly scratch on its head.

“I’m going to show you something,” he said.

He moved the memmont aside and opened a little cupboard in the kneehole of the desk that it had just tried to tidy. He drew out a box, big enough to hold two two-pound loaves of bread. Leaning against the desk, he put the box on the floor in front of them and opened it.

“I found these in here,” he said, “a couple of months ago.”

He opened the box. The memmont’s busy fingers darted in and, as fast as a flea’s leap, the contents were all in order and arranged ready to read on the floor.

“No. Stop it. I mean it.”

The memmont nuzzled its nose against Tadpole’s neck. He laughed.

“No. Really. Do you know what this is?” he asked. “Of course you don’t. No one knows. Only me.”

There were five big notebooks, with stiff covers. There were loose pages, covered in writing and tied with blue string. There were other pages with exquisite ink drawings, sometimes just one to a page, others where the whole page was covered with pictures woven into each other so that there was no empty paper to be seen.

Tadpole ignored the loose pages and opened the top notebook.

“This belonged to Megapoir,” he said to the memmont, which looked back at him as though it understood. “He was my great-great-something-grandfather. I don’t know how many greats.” He put his head close to the memmont and whispered, “He knew Flaxfield. He was his friend.”

He showed the memmont the pages, covered with closely written notes.

“This is his diary. And these—” he showed it the loose papers — “are letters from a friend Up Top. A wizard. Called Waterburn.”

Tadpole looked at the locked door again.

"And there are directions," he said. "To Flaxfield's house. From here."

He snapped the book shut and put it back into the roffle pack with the other books and papers, except for one, which he folded and put into his pocket.

"I'm going there," he whispered. "To Flaxfield's house. Now."

The memmont stood up and followed him to the door.

"You stay here," said Tadpole. "I'm just going for one hour. Well, perhaps longer. I don't know what time it is there. But I'm going to Flaxfield's house. There won't be any danger there. And I'll wait until it's night."

He slung Delver's roffle pack on to his shoulders, and, making his way to the front door, walked out into the light.

"Stay here," he said.

The memmont sat and looked up at him. Tadpole felt he needed to explain.

"I just want to see the day turn to night. To see the sky go black. To watch the stars come out. That's all. And I want to see magic. I'll be back before anyone knows I've gone. Now, stay there."

He walked past the Up Top door three times, looking as though he wasn't interested in it, to make sure no one saw him go through. When he was sure that no one was looking he opened it and stepped through, as fast as he could, and kicked it shut behind him. Or nearly shut. He didn't notice

the memmont slip through. And the memmont, which knew just how important it was to keep the doors closed, folded its fingers over the handle and closed it with a soft, secret swish.

Tadpole consulted his paper and took the passageway to the left, then up and round a corner and left again. And there it was. As near as that.

“It can’t be,” he said. He checked his paper. “As close as this, all the time.”

It seemed right, so he folded the paper, put it away and opened the door. It was thick and wide and solid, so he braced himself to push hard, and was taken by surprise when it moved as easily as the door to the pantry at home.

“Right,” he said, and stepped through, round a gloomy bend and was, all at once, Up Top.

It wasn’t dark, so there were no stars. He was standing at the corner of a house, with a garden, a fence where the ground sloped down to a river. He could smell fish cooking. He moved slowly, quietly, round the corner and found himself face to face with a monster.

“Kravvins,” he said.

He tried to run back but the creature was too quick for him and seized his arm, holding him fast. ||