

**Prince Marcus**  
**Gracie Gillypot**  
**Gubble**  
**Foyce Undershaft**

BATS

**Marlon • Alf • Billy**

KINGS, QUEENS AND DUCHESSES

**Hortense**..... Dowager Duchess of Cockenzie Rood  
**Queen Bluebell**..... Queen of Wadingburn  
**King Frank**..... King of Gorebreath  
**Queen Mildred**..... Queen of Gorebreath  
**Queen Kesta**..... Queen of Dreghorn  
**King Horace**..... King of Niven's Knowe

PRINCES AND PRINCESSES

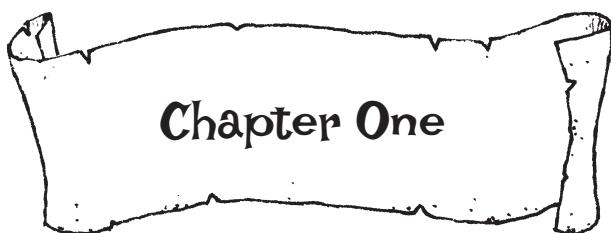
**Albion • Arioso • Fedora • Loobly • Marigold**  
**Nina-Rose • Tertius • Vincent**

WEREWOLVES

**Jukk • Keel • Agony Clawbone**

THE ANCIENT CRONES

**Edna**..... the Ancient One  
**Elsie**..... the Oldest  
**Val**..... the Youngest



“**W**OOOOOOOOWL!” The sound echoed over the moonlit forest. Small creatures shuddered, and ran for the darkest cracks and deepest crevices. Birds shivered on their branches, and rabbits cowered at the bottom of their burrows.

The tall thin figure of Agony Clawbone stood still, and listened. As the mournful wailing faded she heard an answering howl from further away, and she sighed as she walked on between the silver stippled trees. The moon was nearly full, and it was the time of howling, but she dared not join in. The company of werewolves was not for her, even though she was werewolf by birth. She had been cast out ... cast out for ever, because many years before she had made a terrible mistake. Soft words and false promises had persuaded her to marry a man, an ordinary human.



She had soon discovered that humans could be cruel. Not only cruel, but evil. And when she finally made her way back to the forest, there was no sympathy for her. She had betrayed her kind, and was no longer welcome.

On she strode, her cloak wrapped tightly round her bony shoulders.

“Wh-wh-who’s that, Mr Alf?” The very small bat circling high above was staring down, his eyes wide. “She looks WEIRD!”

His companion looped a speedy loop. “That, Billy my lad, is a typical inhabitant of the Less Enchanted Forest. Zombies, werewolves, trolls, dwarves, goblins – you get all types around here. She’s a werewolf. Bit of an odd one, Unc says, but that’s what she is.”

“A werewolf, Mr Alf?” Billy squeaked. “A real werewolf?”

“Ssh...” Alf warned. “Keep cool, Billy – keep cool.”

The very small bat landed on the top twig of a tall pine tree in order to give this idea proper consideration. He found it difficult to fly and think at the same time.

“So has she got sharp teeth, Mr Alf? Does she go all bristly when it’s full moon? Does she eat people?”

Alf waved a dismissive wing as he flew down to join Billy. “Don’t ask so many questions, young ’un. Watch

and listen, that's the thing. Watch and listen, and one day Unc might let you be One Of Us."

"Yes, Mr Alf. Billy fluttered in apologetic agitation. "I mean, sorry, Mr Alf. Erm ... might you be meaning —" he took a reverential breath — "your Uncle Marlon?"

"The very same." Alf's small chest puffed up with pride. "Taught me all I know. Made me a fully paid-up member of the Batster Super Spotters last week. And —" he gave a modest cough — "AND he gave me my training certificate. First one ever, he said. So you pay attention to what I tell you, Billy my lad."

"Oh, I will, Mr Alf. I will!" The little bat quivered with enthusiasm. "Just you wait and see! I'll be the best Super Spotter there's ever been! I'll remember everything! I'll—"

Alf held up a claw. "What did I say, Billy? Cut the cackle. Watch and listen!" Then, as Billy subsided, he went on, "Unc said we should start with a tour of the Five Kingdoms." He pointed towards the moonlit horizon. "See those tall trees? That's the end of the Less Enchanted Forest, that is, and the beginning of what we Super Spotters call the civilized lands. Gorebreath, Niven's Knowe, Wadingburn, Cockenzie Rood and Dreghorn." He paused, so his next statement would have maximum effect. "Know them all like the back

of my toes, I do, even though I say it myself.”

“Woweee!” Billy whistled his admiration in a highly satisfactory fashion. “You’re ever so clever, Mr Alf! And –” his voice dropped to a hushed whisper – “my cousin told me you’ve actually met Royalty.”

Alf nodded. “Some of my best mates,” he said casually. “Now, save your breath for speedy flying. And I’ve thought of something else. We’ll call in on the Ancient Crones on the way ’cos we’ll be practically passing the House.”

Billy all but fell off his twig. “But...” he stuttered. “But ... Mr Alf! My ma says they’re witches! That’s worse than werewolves, Mr Alf! We can’t go there!”

“Witches?” The disapproval in Alf’s voice made Billy flinch. “The Ancient Crones? You’d better thank your lucky stars Unc didn’t hear you say that! You’d have been off the training scheme quick as a wink.” Alf shook his head. “Whatever do they teach you in school these days? Don’t they tell you little ’uns about the Web? There’d be zombies and giants and all sorts tramping about the kingdoms if it weren’t for the Web. Can’t say as I understand exactly how it works – magic sort of stuff – but it keeps the evil types on this side of the border. Surely you knew that?”

The only answer was a loud sniff.

“Hey! There’s no need to cry.” Alf gave the very small bat a consoling pat on the back, but the sniffing grew louder. “It’s OK – really it is. You’ll soon learn better.”

The sniffing continued.

Alf tried again. “Even I got things wrong to begin with. Lots of things!”

Billy brightened a little. “Did you really, Mr Alf?”

“Fell down a chimney and into a fireplace once,” Alf said cheerfully. “Made a terrible mess. Now, blow your nose, and we’ll be offski.”

And he set off with a steady wingbeat. Billy, wiping his nose, followed close behind.

In the heart of the forest was a deep green hollow filled with a mist that came and went according to the mood of the occupants of the ramshackle building that lay in the centre. Messengers from the Five Kingdoms often found the mist impenetrable, and wandered for hours before either giving up completely or falling into the Bottomless Swamp. Those of a hardier nature battled on and, if they were fortunate, eventually reached the House of the Ancient Crones.

“Hm. No mist tonight. I’ll give the young ’un the full tour,” Alf decided as he and Billy flew down, “and

I'll introduce him to our Gracie Gillypot." His devoted heart beat a little faster at the thought. "Start with the best, that's what Unc always says. It'll be downhill all the way once we hit the Five Kingdoms. No Truehearts there, and that's for sure."

Inside the house all was peaceful. Alf, a regular visitor, led the way through the neat little bat flap in the kitchen window. A loud rumbling snore was coming from one of the cupboards, and he grinned.

"That's Gubble," he explained.

"Gubble?" Billy looked anxious. "What's a Gubble?"

Alf's grin grew wider. "He's a troll. The green type. Goes on adventures with me and Miss Gracie and Mr Prince. You'll meet Miss Gracie – her and Mr Prince, they're sweethearts. Ever so romantic." He paused for effect. "We're a team, we are."

Billy stared. "You go on adventures with a Royal, Mr Alf?"

"They couldn't do without me," Alf boasted. "Saved the day time and time again, I have." He swooped round a chair back. "I'm the best hero ever."

"Woweeee!" Billy was breathless. "Fancy me being trained by a hero. Woweeee! Just wait till I tell my mum! The best hero ever... Wowee!"



Alf decided it was time to change the subject. “We’re going to see the Web of Power now. No chatting! One of the crones is sure to be weaving ... but she’ll be too busy to talk.”

“Mum’s the word, Mr Alf.”

“That’s my boy.” Alf gave his protégé an approving nod and headed out of the kitchen and down a long corridor. There were several doors on either side, and to Billy’s astonishment they were sliding up and down. Alf made no comment, however, and Billy was too shy to ask if this was usual.

“Here we go,” Alf whispered, and he led Billy into Room Seventeen. Billy took a deep breath, followed Alf to a perch on the curtain rail, and looked round.

An old woman was fast asleep in an armchair, cats piled high on top of her. Beside her another old woman was weaving steadily on the Web of Power, the translucent silver fabric gleaming faintly in the darkness of the room. A glow from the fire was the only other source of light; the thick velvet curtains were firmly closed against the moon. The second loom was set up for the next day, but the shuttles lay empty beside it. All of the Five Kingdoms admired the cloth woven by the Ancient Crones (and paid a suitably high price for it) but as a rule, no weaving of commissions took place at night,

unless it was a particularly important order. Royal weddings and pageants left the crones exhausted and cross.

“The one in the chair’s the Ancient One. She’s the top boss. Gracie calls her Auntie Edna.” Alf was whispering so quietly that even Billy had to strain to hear him. “The other one’s the Oldest. Real name Elsie.”

Billy was staring at the Oldest with fascinated eyes. “She’s bald, Mr Alf!”

Alf suppressed a chuckle. “Her wig’s on top of the loom. Makes her head hot, she says. Cooler without it. Come on ... we’ll go back and find Miss Gracie.”

As the two bats slipped silently away, the Ancient One opened her one eye.

“Hm,” she said. “Top boss, am I? And part of the tourist route, it would appear.” She shifted slightly, and a cat fell on the floor with a yowl. Bending down, Edna scooped it back onto her lap. “There, there.” Stroking the cat’s head, she looked thoughtfully after the bats. “Hope that little one knows what he’s doing, trailing after Alf like that. He’s awfully young.” She yawned. “Let’s hope he doesn’t get himself in any trouble...” And her eye closed once more.

Flying out into the bright moonlight, the two small bats circled the House. As they flew higher they could

see a row of bedroom windows; in the first the curtains were only half drawn, and a snoring shape was clearly visible humped beneath a heap of fleecy blankets. A pile of empty plates was close beside the bed.

“That’ll be the youngest crone,” Alf said. “Miss Val. Didn’t think she lived here any more ... she must be staying over. Likes her cake, as you can tell.”

“The youngest?” Billy looped a loop to have another peep. “Is she very pretty, Mr Alf?”

Alf snorted. “Miss Val? She may be the youngest, but she’s still about a hundred. And the Oldest is twice that at the very least. And as for the Ancient One...” Alf whistled. “Unc reckons she’s older than Fracture Mountain. She knows EVERYTHING!”

“Woweee!” Billy was impressed. “Does she know about the wolf woman? The one we saw? I didn’t even know there was werewolves in the forest till you told me, Mr Alf. You learn ever such a lot when you’re a Super Spotter, don’t you?”

Billy, wittering as he flew, had reached the next window. At first glance it appeared to be firmly shuttered, but he was almost sure that he could see an eye – a very beautiful eye – peering through a small knothole. Billy flew closer, and the eye winked at him. It was not, however, a cheery kind of wink. It was a

cold, calculating snarl of a wink, and a shudder ran down Billy's spine as he flapped hastily away.

"Careful," Alf warned. "Bit of a nasty character in there. Not one of the crones, that one."

Billy was trembling. "I saw an eye! It was horrid, Mr Alf! It was a witch! I know it was—"

Alf shook his head. "Nah. That's Foyce Undershaft." He waved a wing at the shutters as he closed the gap between himself and Billy. "Half a werewolf she is, and bad through and through," he whispered in the little bat's ear. "At least, she was before she came here. The crones'll sort her out though. That's what they do. That Miss Val you saw, she was a holy terror once – but look at her now. All the evil washed out of her. Good as gold, she is. Good as gold."

"Oooh!" Billy looked at the remaining window. "Who's in that one?"

As if it had heard him, the window slid round the corner of the house and out of view. It was replaced by the front door, and the letter box rattled at Billy by way of greeting. Billy squeaked his alarm. "What's going on, Mr Alf? What's happening?"

Alf dodged sideways to avoid a chimney determined to join the front door. "Something to do with magic," he explained. "You should see what the path gets up

to – ties itself up in knots, and won't go anywhere. Miss Gracie's the only one it ever takes any notice of – oops!" He swerved again as the chimney changed its mind and headed back towards the roof. "Follow me, young 'un!" And he put on such a turn of speed that Billy was hard-pressed to keep up as the older bat zoomed round the corner of the house and in through the elusive third window. Billy followed blindly, shivering.

Inside the moonlit room a girl stirred, turned over, and sat up in bed.

"Alf? Is that you?" She pushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. "What are you doing here? Is anything wrong?"

Alf settled comfortably on her shoulder. "Everything's A-OK, Miss Gracie. Fine and dandy – well, as far as I know. Not sure if you've noticed, but the House is rocking and rolling a bit."

Gracie Gillypot smiled, but she was looking at Billy. He was balanced on the windowsill, wings folded tightly over his eyes, and trembling like a leaf in a winter gale. "Poor little bat," she said gently. "Nobody's going to hurt you. Are you a friend of Alf's?"

Alf suddenly remembered what he was meant to be doing, and left Gracie's shoulder to push Billy further

into the room. “Billy – this is Miss Gracie Gillypot. She’s a Trueheart, and there aren’t very many of those around, believe you me. Ever so special, Truehearts are! They make good things gooder, and bad things badder. Isn’t that right, Miss Gracie?”

Gracie nodded, trying not to smile.

“And this is Billy, Miss Gracie.” Alf gave the tiny bat another push. “I’m training him to be a Super Spotter.” He sounded extremely pleased with himself.

Gracie was impressed. “Goodness, Alf! I thought only Marlon trained Super Spotters?”

Alf tried to sound modest. “S right, Miss Gracie. Quite right. But he’s made me a fully paid-up Batster Super Spotter With Full Training Capability!”

“WOW!” Gracie’s smile lit up the room, and Billy, peeping over the top of his wing, felt a comforting warm glow creeping through his small body. “That’s wonderful!” Gracie went on. “Congratulations! I’m thrilled!”

Alf beamed back at her, dropping all attempts to be cool. “Good, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is. And how are you enjoying your training, Billy?”

Billy couldn’t answer. He had had little experience of humans, and he was in no way prepared for a girl like this. All he could do was blink at her, awestruck.

Alf regarded his pupil with pride. “Feeling a bit odd, Billy? Quite right. What you’re feeling now is what we Batsters call the Trueheart effect.”

Gracie laughed, and picked up the little bat. He snuggled into the curve of her fingers and gazed into her very blue eyes. “Miss Gracie,” he whispered, “I seed a witch! She winked at me through the shutters! It made me go all weird inside, but it feels better now.” He rubbed at his chest. “I went all chilly and cold.”

“A witch?” Gracie looked at Alf for an explanation.

“Sorry, Miss Gracie,” he said. “He doesn’t know any better. It was your – erm – half-sister. Well, not half-sister. Your stepsister – I mean, your stepdad’s daughter...” Alf gave up. “Her in the room next door.”

“Foyce?” A shadow crossed Gracie’s face, and she pulled at the end of one of her plaits. “That’s strange. Auntie Edna always makes sure the shutters are closed and locked before Foyce goes to bed – especially when it’s coming up for a full moon. Are you quite sure you saw someone, Billy?”

Billy nodded. “It was an eye, Miss Gracie. The window was shut but it peeped at me through a hole.”

Gracie sighed. “I hope she’s not up to something. She’s always more difficult when the moon’s very

bright. I had to unpick everything she did on the loom today; it was all lumps and bumps and horrible knots. I wonder if I ought to tell one of the aunties?"

"It wasn't a very big hole, Miss Gracie." Alf fluttered back to her shoulder. "Not even Billy could squeeze through." He put his head on one side. "Seen Mr Prince lately?"

"Marcus was here earlier today," Gracie admitted. "He was escaping a royal parade. Some kind of practice for the Centenary Celebrations."

Alf, who was an old friend of Prince Marcus, and well aware of the prince's dislike of royal puffery and paraphernalia, nodded wisely. "So he ran to the arms of his one true love," he said in his most sentimental tones.

Gracie blushed a fiery red, and concentrated on Billy. "Is Alf going to show you round the Five Kingdoms, Billy? Make sure he introduces you to Queen Bluebell. She's wonderful, and she's a great friend of Alf's Uncle Marlon, so she'll be ever so pleased to meet you." She paused for a moment. "But I'm sure you've been warned that some of the royal families aren't very – um – sensible about bats."

"She means they do lots of screaming and jumping up and down if they catch sight of us," Alf explained.



“Just remember it’s because they’ve never been properly educated,” Gracie said. “Try not to let it worry you.”

Billy nodded. “Yes, miss.”

“We’d better be going, I s’pose,” Alf said reluctantly. “Let you get your beauty sleep, Miss Gracie.” He giggled. “Although I bet Mr Prince doesn’t think—”

“That’s quite enough, Alf,” Gracie said firmly. “And you’re right about my needing sleep.” She yawned. “It’s been such a long day. We were much later going to bed than usual because of sorting out Foyce’s tangles. It probably sounds really lazy, but I think I’ll tell Auntie Edna about the hole in Foyce’s shutters in the morning.” She leant back against her pillows, and tickled Billy’s furry tummy. “It was nice to meet you, Billy. Enjoy your trip around the Five Kingdoms, and don’t believe everything Alf tells you.”

“*Ciao*, Miss Gracie!” Alf dipped in salute, and flew through the window.

“Bye, Miss Gracie,” Billy echoed.

Gracie smiled, and snuggled under her blankets. In no time at all she was asleep again.

There was no sleeping being done in the room next door. The eye was back at the knothole, watching, and

waiting. It saw the two little figures flittering past, and noticed with evil satisfaction how the smaller of the two kept glancing nervously back before disappearing between the moonlit trees.

“So you saw a wolf woman, did you?” The voice was as cold and sharp as a sliver of ice. “Well, well, well. How interesting. How very, very interesting..”

