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Opening extract from

Tom Trueheart and the Land of Dark Stories

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Chapter 1

THE TRUEHEART HOUSE

7 A.M.

THE WEDDING MORNING

Once upon a time there was a family of adventurers called the Truehearts, and their neat wooden house sat near a crossroads, not far from the Land of Stories. The house was painted in bright contrasting colours: red and green. The timber walls were painted red, and the shutters, with their heart-shaped cut-out holes, were painted green. On the roof there was a chimney stack and an iron chimney pipe which was topped with a wind cowl and a weathervane. The weathervane was made of iron, forged in the shape of a witch riding on a broomstick with her familiar cat, a recent gift from the Master of the Story Bureau

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himself. Early on a perfect midsummer morning, a big black crow landed on top of the weathervane. The bird settled itself, fluffed up its feathers and waited . . .



Inside the cosy house, the youngest of the family, Tom Trueheart, was already having a horrible morning. Something dreadful was due to happen to him, and Tom could not see any way of getting out of it. Should he just stay in bed for a little while longer and try to escape by staying very quiet and hiding, or should he open his bedroom window, slide down the roof, hop into the garden, shimmy over the fence, and be away on an adventure, with (hopefully) his old friend Jollity the crow, before anyone noticed that he had gone at all?

He would have liked to enjoy this particular day-dream, but there was so much noise outside his little attic bedroom, such a crashing on the stairs, such a clattering of wood against wood, that it was hard for him to even think straight, let alone try and organize a running-away attempt. It was, of course, two of his older brothers jousting with quarterstaves on the stairs.

The noise outside his door got steadily worse and the moment of decision would soon come. He knew that he should get up, brace himself, and help his mother with the breakfast. He knew that he would soon have to get ready, just like all his big beefy brothers, for the

EVENT.

There was a sudden huge crash, followed by more blistering cracks of wood against wood, followed by the stomping of big feet in big boots, and then by gales of raucous laughter. Tom decided, reluctantly, glumly, that perhaps it really was time to get up and face . . . IT.

IT was the terror from the dark place . . .

IT was the horror from beyond the woods . . .

IT was the thing on the hanger downstairs . . .

IT was . . . a white silk velvet pageboy suit, with a lace collar, ribbon bow, satin knee breeches, and high lace-up kid leather boots! For today was the big day. For most of Tom's big, bold, brave, and beefy brothers, it was their wedding day!

For Tom, it was set to be utter humiliation, for he was to be the pageboy, just as his mother had threatened

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all those months ago last winter. The wedding was meant to have taken place in the spring, but the Master had suggested waiting until the summer roses were in full bloom at the Story Bureau. And so it was: midsummer morning and it was all about to happen.

There was another series of escalating thumps from outside his door. Putting things off for just a moment longer, Tom hopped out of bed and went and looked out of the heart-shaped holes in the wooden shutters across his window.

'Please let there be a hurricane, or a freak storm. *Please* let a rogue sprite set off a sudden blizzard of ice and snow,' he said aloud to himself.

But no, when he looked out he could see that it was as perfect a summer morning as any princess bride and her bold adventurer bridegroom could wish for. Fluffy white clouds sailed across a celestial blue sky, while somewhere nearby a blackbird sang his liquid song.

'Oh no,' Tom said, 'it's lovely.' The weather certainly wasn't going to be of any help to him today, there would be no escape.

Later, after a typically noisy and chaotic breakfast, Tom washed up the bowls at the sink. Jack sat near

him on the window seat. 'That's not proper work for a boy, is it. You're coddling him, our mother; he needs to keep on with some more real hard training, and soon, at that.'

'Don't you mind about our Tom,' said his mother, and she gave Tom a squeeze. 'You sometimes do your best to make him feel small; you leave him be. Tom is doing just fine, he'll be good and ready soon enough. Don't forget, the old hermit taught him all his letters and numbers many summers ago now, and lately our Jake's been teaching him his forest craft, and he will be carrying on his adventure training with you for the rest of the summer, so there's really no need to bully him now, is there.'

After washing up the breakfast things Tom went outside. He picked up a good sized twig, and waved it about as if it were his sword. Then he found a huge spider's web glistening in the early morning sun. He poked at the web with the twig, and watched the spider as it came running down the filament. It had a fat pale body and hairy little legs. Jack always said that some spiders had poison sacs and they could give you a nasty nip if you weren't careful. Then he whacked a crab

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apple with the twig and then he kicked another crab apple and chased after it across the bright grass and around to the front of the house; anything to put off the dreaded moment and THE SUIT.

