

# THE BOOK OF THE GORMWITS

il castoro

**THE BOOK  
OF THE  
GORMWITS**

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MARIO MUCCIARELLI

# THE BOOK OF THE GORMWITS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEFANO TARTAROTTI



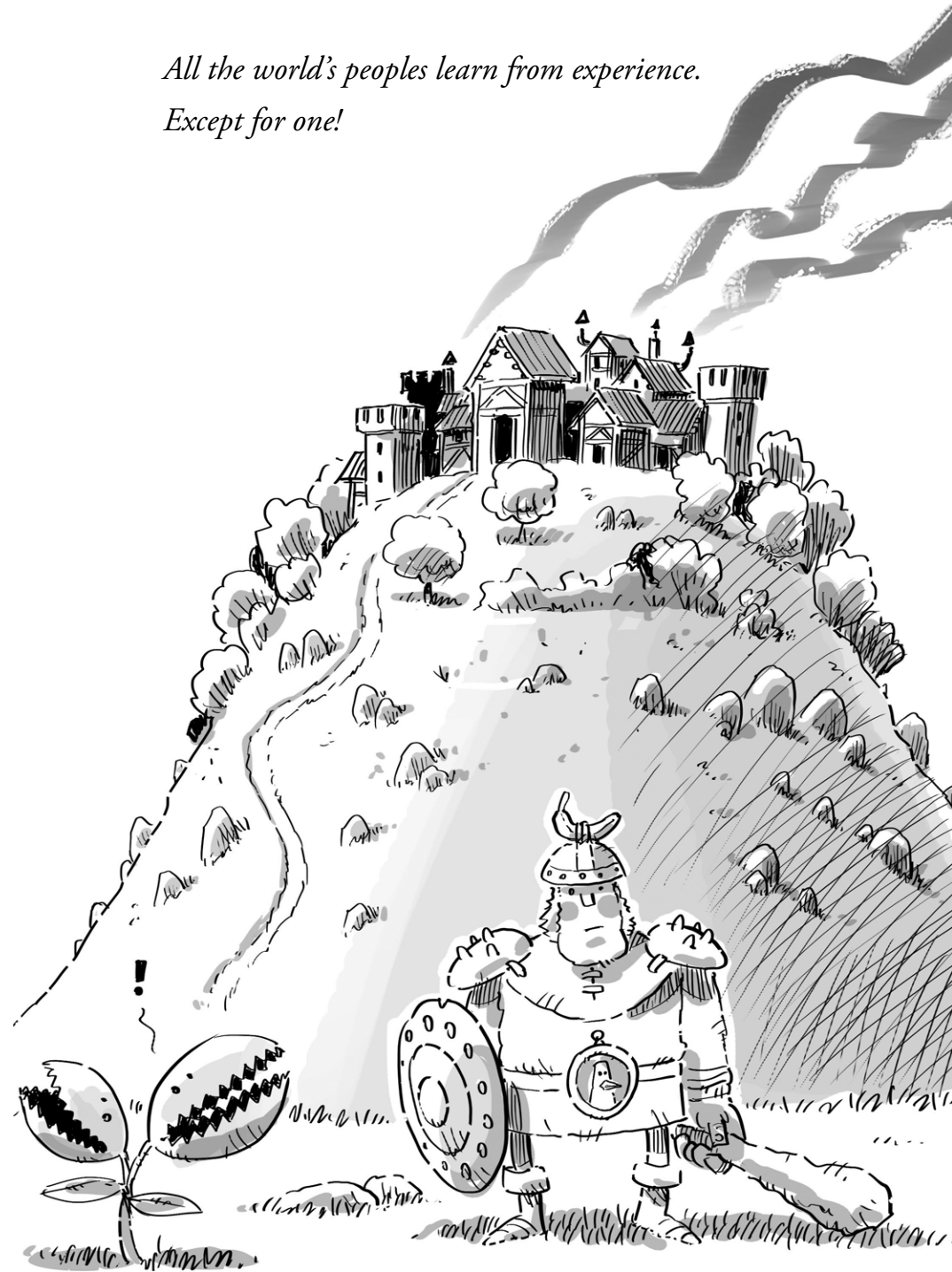
Mario Mucciarelli  
*The Book of the Gormwits*  
Illustrations by Stefano Tartarotti

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Viale Andrea Doria 7, 20124 Milan – Italy  
[www.editriceilcastoro.it](http://www.editriceilcastoro.it)  
[info@editriceilcastoro.it](mailto:info@editriceilcastoro.it)

English Working Translation by Sara Benjamin

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*All the world's peoples learn from experience.  
Except for one!*







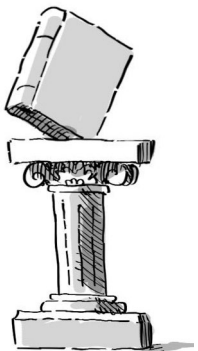
## CHAPTER 1

Who the Gormwits are and why  
I'm telling you about them.

Once upon a time, there was a very – but truly  
very – dumb people.

They were known as the Gormwits, and they  
lived high up on a remote hill about as fertile as a  
rock, a place without one single cultural attraction.  
Wow, what a great place to settle in for the rest of  
time, the Gormwits thought as soon as they came  
upon it. And that's exactly what they'd done.

The Gormwits' stupidity was so mind-blowing  
that even they were surprised they hadn't gone  
extinct yet.





Pretty weird that we scraped through yet again, Grufierce, King of the Gormwits, would often think to himself. The most intelligent adult in the village, he had an IQ that occasionally managed to hit the level of mediocrity.



Yet that's how it was: year after year, the Gormwits got by.

No one was quite sure why, but maybe it was because every once in a while, by pure chance, without really wanting to, the Gormwits actually managed to learn something.



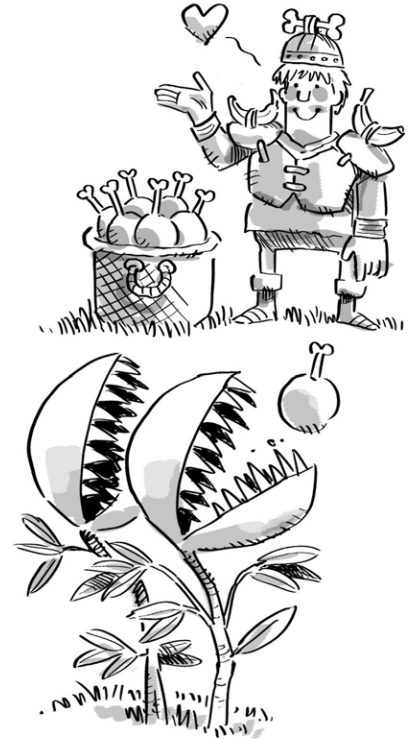
“Wow, the people that learn something new every month!” That's how the sarcastic Polyineans described them, though they certainly didn't mean it as a compliment.



«Yes – something new every month. Pretty

amazing, right?!» Grufierce would reply, not having understood a nanosquit.

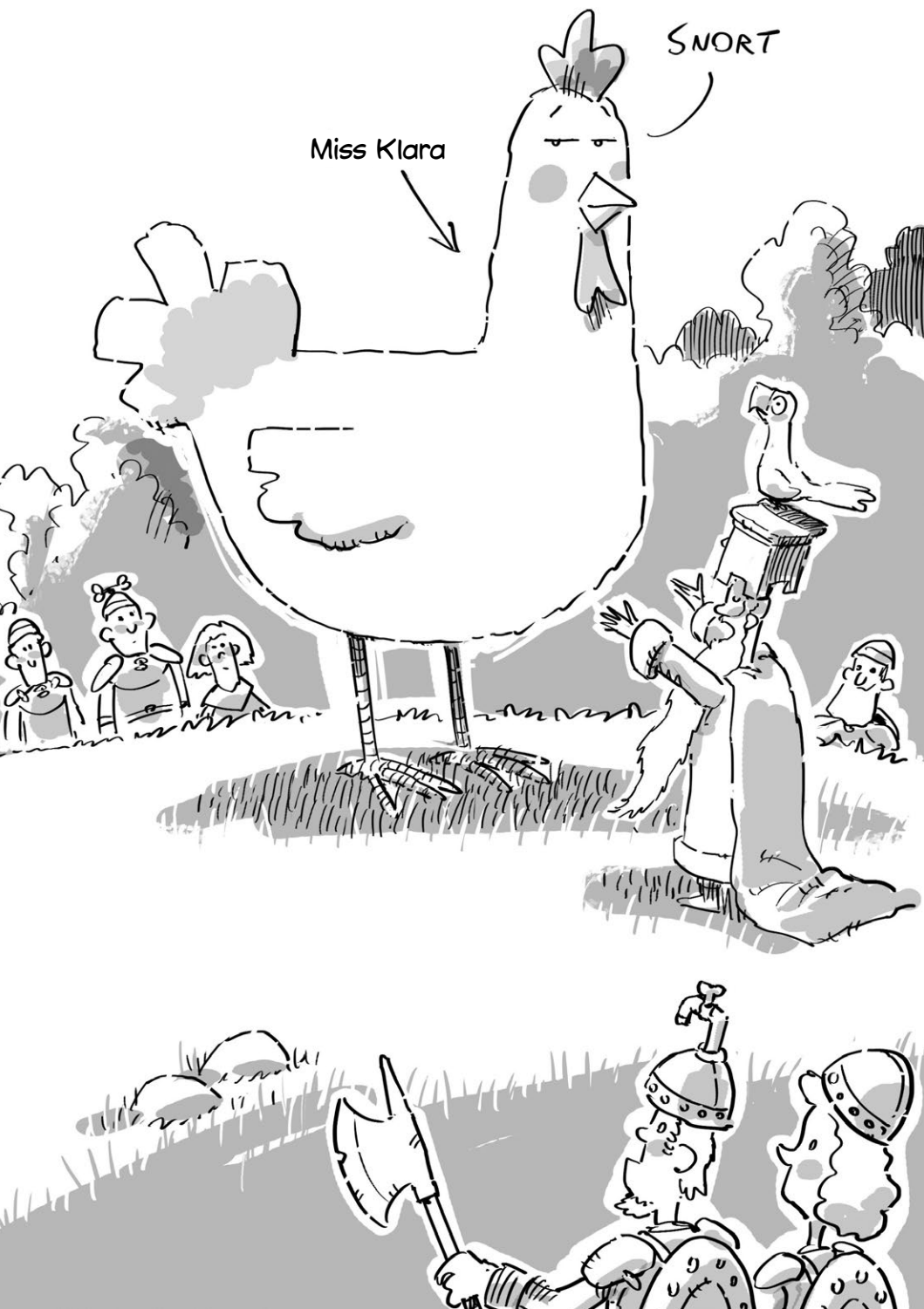
Given their nearly 360-degree ineptitude, the Gormwits devoted themselves primarily to growing the three things that grew most easily where they lived, namely bananas, carnivorous plants, and hair.



Oddly enough, the Gormwits considered bananas the most brutal of beings, but were very fond of those absolute sweeties that are carnivorous plants. As for hair, let's not even discuss it.

But these eccentricities were nothing compared to the Gormwits' latest “thing”, word of which had flabbergasted everyone in the valley below.

For some time, in fact, the Gormwits had begun to worship an animal they deemed sacred,



and the epitome of wisdom.

Nothing wrong with that. Even the nearby people, the erudite Eirenians, had oracles of their own. The problem was that the Gormwits' was...

Well, no point in beating around the bush. Their oracle was a four-meter tall talking hen.

Her name was Miss Klara and she'd moved to the area after leaving her birthplace, the Land of Ginormous Animals, for some unknown reason.

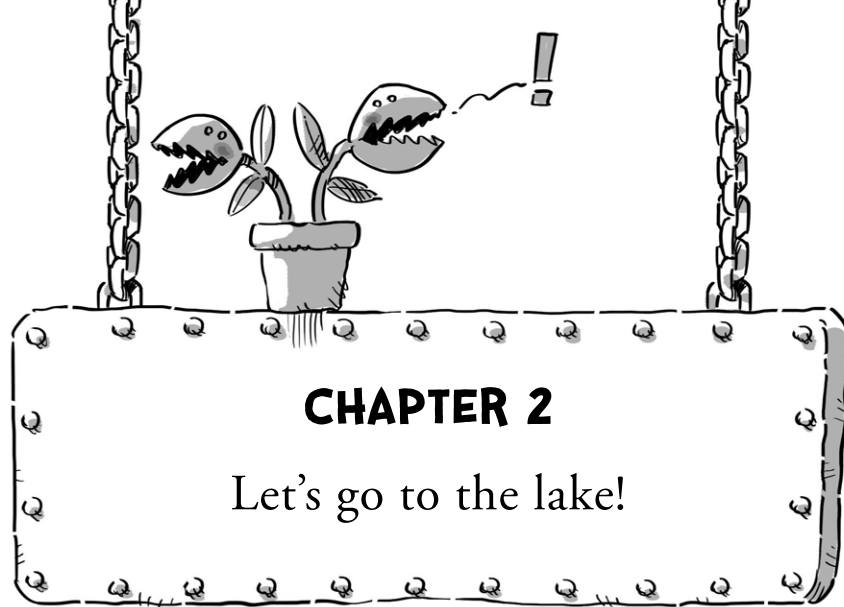
Now, Klara was no genius. She could talk, and was huge, but still just a hen – creatures, as you know, not renowned for their brilliance.

As an oracle, though, she worked just fine, at least for the Gormwits.

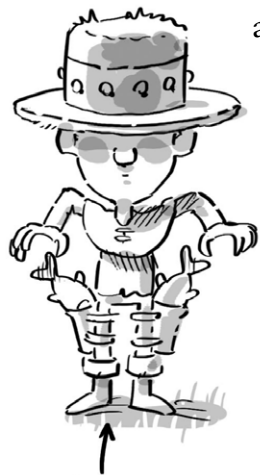
You see, Klara possessed something that the Gormwits were notoriously lacking in: a smidgen of common sense. And she used hers to give them decent advice.

Now whether or not the Gormwits actually followed that advice is a whole different matter.

And now, having explained the basics about the people this story concerns – the Gormwits – let's get started with the actual tale.



The morning it all started, Tadpole, Porchie, Spitty and Yuki had snuck out of school and were wandering around in the countryside looking for something to do.



Tadpole

Tadpole and Porchie were busy outboasting each other about something or other.

Spitty was giggling, remembering the time he'd chomped down a piece of chalk. Yuki, on the other

hand, was keeping to himself, and silent.

«Hey, let's go to the lake!» Tadpole kept shouting.

«What lake?» Porchie replied frowning.

Spitty, completely smitten, grinned over at her dopily.

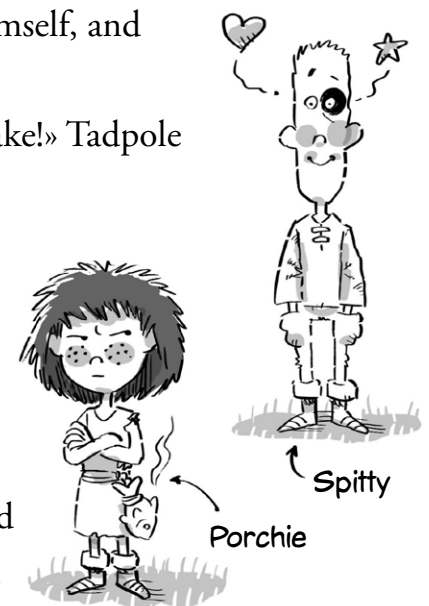
Seconds later Yuki had to help poor Spitty back up after Porchie floored him with a powerful right hook.

For as long as anyone could remember, Gormwitian girls had always been pretty rough.

«What were we talking about?» Tadpole asked, already distracted again.

«A lake,» Yuki answered, sticking a blade of grass between his teeth.

«Oh yeah!» Tadpole said. «Come on, let's go!»



Yuki

«There is no lake here, imbecile!» Porchie retorted. «Right, Yuki?»



Yuki shrugged his shoulders. «None that I know of.»



See?» said Porchie. «There is no lake, so we're not going there! There are none. I hate lakes anyhow, for crying out loud!»

«Hey Door-Key, anyone ever tell you how gorgeous your eyes are when you bellow like a boar?» Spitty replied, gazing moonily at Porchie.

This time he was really looking for it. Porchie answered him accordingly.

«Oh yeah? Thanks, Spitty. That's real sweet.»

Spitty looked around in confusion: «Huh?»

«I think she's thanking you for the compliment you just gave her,» Yuki suggested.

«Huh?» Spitty said again.

Porchie whacked her admirer in the face, knocking him back to the ground.

«Forget about it, Spitty,» Yuki answered as he pulled his friend back up.

«I like that girl!» Spitty stated. «What's her name?»

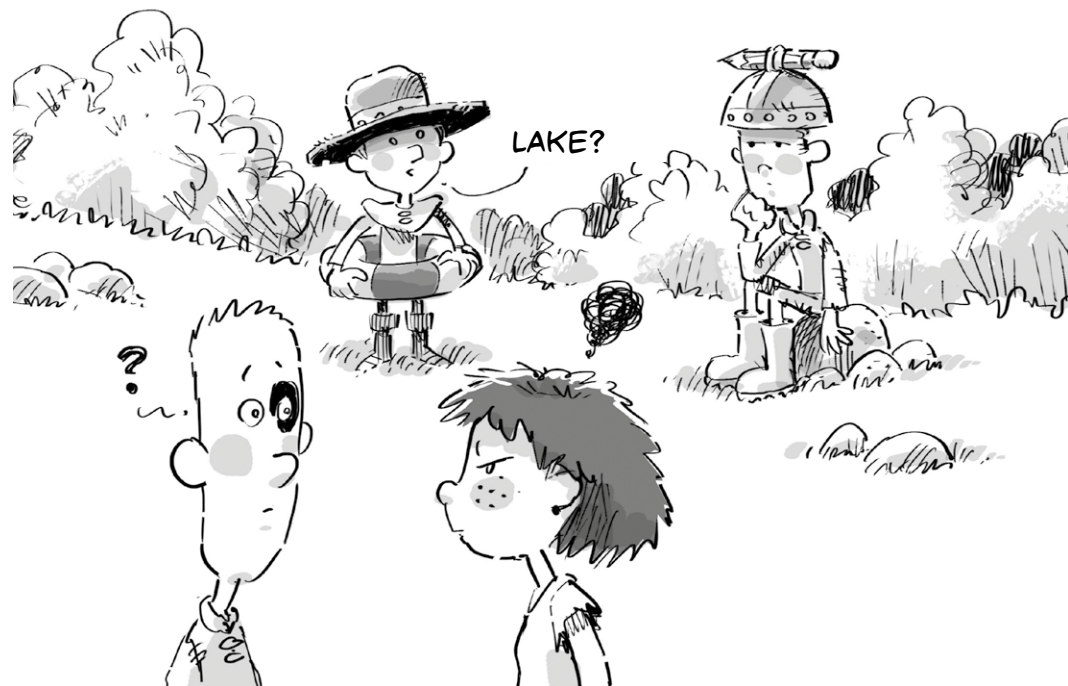
«So who's gonna come to the lake with me?» Tadpole insisted.

«Me!» Spitty shouted. Getting punched in the face apparently didn't do a guy much good.

«I already told you: there aren't any lakes here!» Porchie shouted, stomping her feet.

«Fine, but how about we go anyway?» Tadpole rejoined.

It was a typically Gormwitian thing to say: it meant absolutely nothing, in fact. Tadpole was considered the leader of the gang precisely because he never had the faintest idea what he was saying.



Yuki sat down on a rock and yawned. Going to the lake, even if there was none to go to, was better than sitting in the classroom watching their teacher stare blankly at the abacus. They'd stolen it from the Eirenians a month earlier, but nobody had been able to figure out its purpose yet.

«Hey, what are those voices?» Porchie asked suddenly.

«Cool! You can hear what I'm hearing in my brain?» Spitty exclaimed. «I knew that sooner or later – »

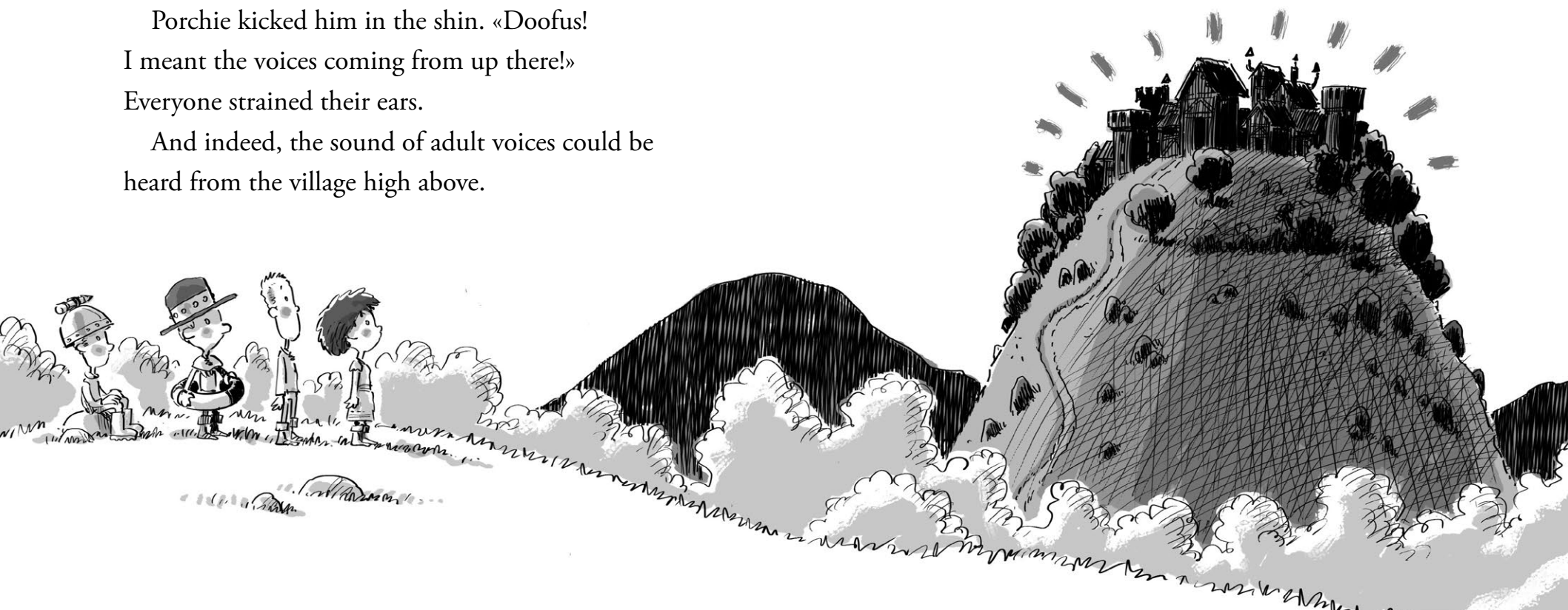
Porchie kicked him in the shin. «Doofus! I meant the voices coming from up there!» Everyone strained their ears.

And indeed, the sound of adult voices could be heard from the village high above.

«Maybe they're talking about the lake too,» Spitty said.

Porchie positioned herself to punch him again. Then the far-off voices distracted her, and Spitty was saved.

It was a good thing, too, because it gave him a chance to say the only sensible thing uttered so far that day: «You're smart, Yuki. What do you think we should do?»





Yuki scratched his head, shut one eye and studied his friends for a moment.

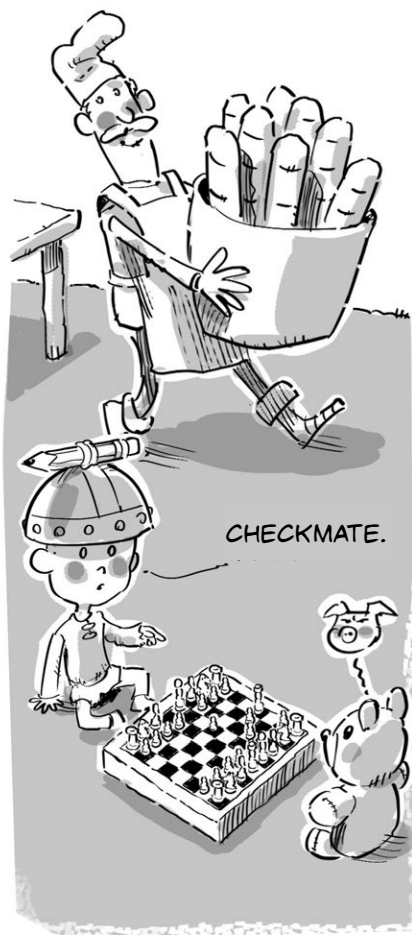
It was true: unlike his fellow Gormwits, Yuki was smart.

At age two his grasp of language was as good

as his father's. At three he'd felt puzzled while observing his fellow Gormwits. At six, it took him two months to wrap up the program for the entire year, while his schoolmates were still wandering around looking for the right classroom.

But why was Spitty thinking about all of this right now?

The Gormwits had long ago recognized how much smarter Yuki was than the rest of them.



The problem was that most of the time they completely forgot the fact.

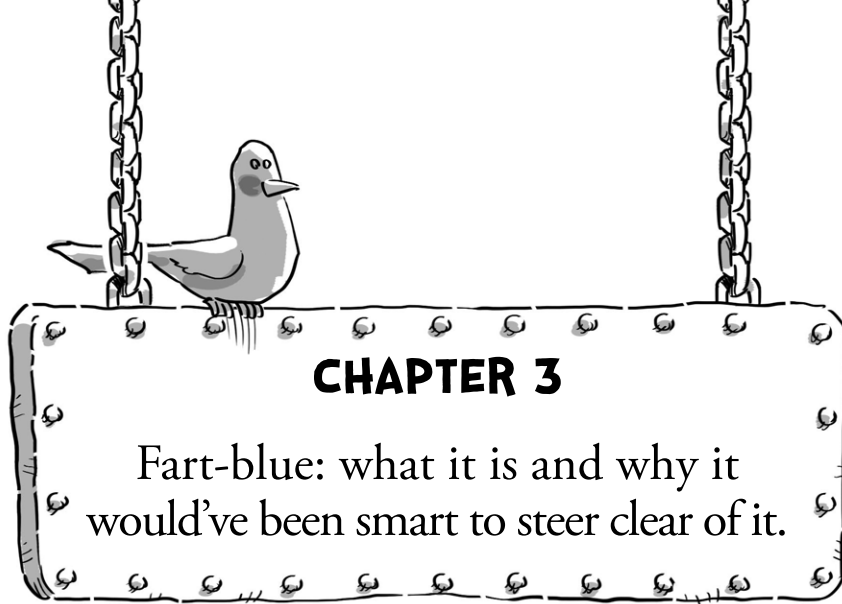
After some thought, Yuki said «Let's go have a look.»

«At what?» Tadpole asked.

Yuki was about to explain, but stopped himself. «Just leave it up to me,» he said sagely.

Better not to complicate things.

Too much explaining doesn't always untangle certain people's brain-garbles.



When they reached their village, Yuki, Spitty, Porchie and Tadpole found the square packed with their fellow Gormwits. A pall of gloom hung over everything as the adults muttered among themselves, although it was impossible to understand even a lillibiddle.

The situation did not bode well for any of them.

Since time immemorial, in fact, a square filled with morose Gormwits has meant just one thing: a sea of trouble.

«We better find out what's up,» Yuki told his friends.

«I'll go ask about the lake!» Tadpole shouted. «Follow me!!»

Who on earth knows why, but Porchie and Spitty did just that.

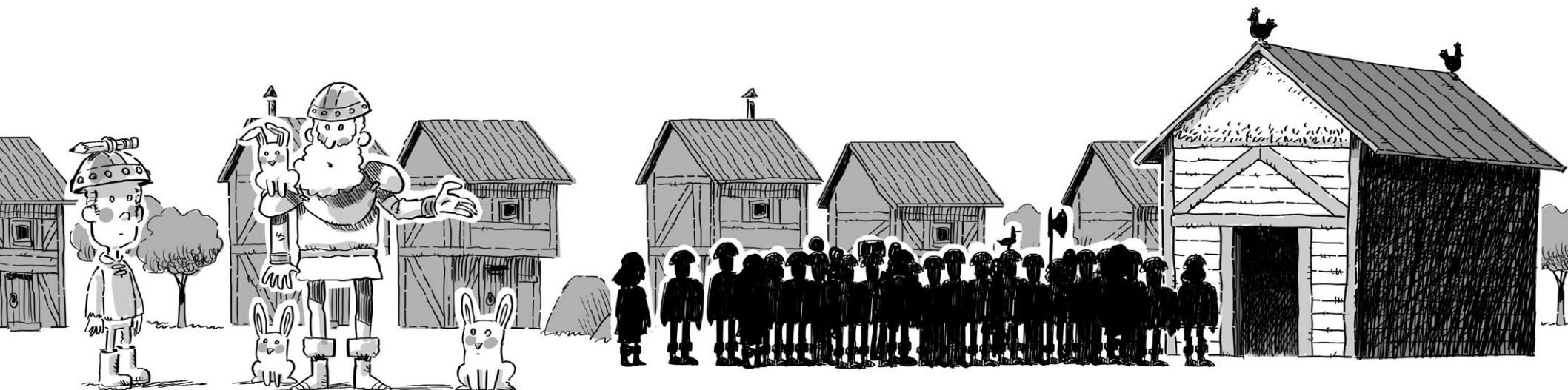
Yuki sighed and began wandering through the crowd in search of answers.

He was fond of his pals, but sometimes it felt like they'd always let him down just when he most needed them.

Not to mention that they'd gone off to look for a non-existent lake...

The first thing Yuki saw was Gruferce, King of the Gormwits, standing on





a platform at the edge of the square looking dejected.

«How'd we even get here?» Gruferce asked Julep, his political advisor. «What do you think?»



Perched on Gruferce's shoulder as usual, Julep was happy to oblige: «Caaa-whaddy-caaa-think-caaa?!»

It wasn't the greatest as political advice goes (actually, it was completely worthless), but let's not forget that Julep was a parrot first, and a political advisor only second.

«How'd you even get here?» asked Yuki as he approached Spittles Sr., Spitty's dad.

«Yuki!» Spittles Sr. said, thrilled to pieces to see him.

«What are you guys talking about?»

«A color. Yes, a color: the one we're gonna use to repaint that.»

And Spittles Sr. pointed to the Gormwitian Imperial Palace.

The Palace was the most elegant building in town. Perched high up on the hill where the Gormwits lived, even seen from down below it stood out with a certain je ne sais quoi.

Now, it should be noted that it looked more like a barn than an imperial palace. Actually, it should also be noted that it was a barn.

«Why've you decided to repaint it?» Yuki asked.  
Spittles Sr. shrugged. The question was far too complex.

Yuki tried a different method: «So... you're debating what color to use, is that it?»

«Nope. We've already chosen one.»

«What is it?»

«Fart-blue,» Spittles Sr. replied, pointing up at the sky.

«And you're not sure whether it exists, right?»

Spittles Sr. gaped at him obtusely. So the answer was yes.

«Who picked the color?»

«What kind of a question is that? Grudim, of course!»

At that precise instant Grufierce – King of the Gormwits, the man who'd led his people into battle for years, sometimes even managing to get most of them back home (a few dozen would always get lost in the forest) – grabbed his sacred imperial bullhorn – also known as the sacred imperial funnel – took a deep breath, and bawled into it at the top of his lungs: «UUUKIII!»



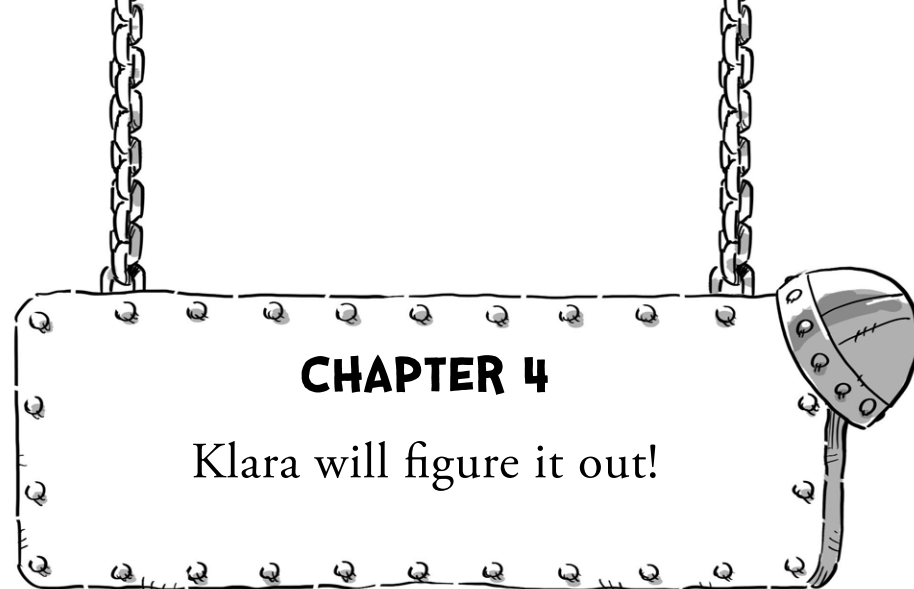
Even Yuki turned to look at him, although he knew Grufierce wasn't actually calling him. It was more of a generic "Uuukiii".

«There's only one way to fathomize something, my loyal subjects,» Grufierce said majestically. «Let's go ask Klara! UUUKIII!»

«UUUKIII!!» his subjects roared back. It was the customary joyous cry of the simple-minded Gormwits, who always expressed their shared elation by belting out the meaningless word.

Yuki waited until the adults left the square, then looked around for his friends. They'd disappeared into thin air. They could be anywhere – maybe even at school. He was going to have to manage on his own.

Taking his secret shortcut, he crossed the banana forest and headed towards Botched Hill.



For almost ten years now Yuki had been wondering what dark, evil force had motivated his parents to choose a rallying cry as his name.

Yikesaroooney, could anything be more idiotic?

Yes, actually: Grudim, Grufierce's son, was definitely more idiotic. But that was another kettle of fish.

"Uki", in fact, wasn't only a name (although he spelled his with a "Y"), but – again – also the multipurpose collective cheer used by the Gormwits from time immemorial.

Imagine how tough it must've been for the poor kid, never quite sure whether his parents were calling him or had instead burned themselves (they were bakers), or were about to depart on a malevolent expedition to the nearby land of the peaceful, kind Eirenians.

It was kind of like being named “Hurrah!” or “Yeah!” or “Crikey!” or “Charge!”: a ginormous pain in the neck.

After reaching Botched Hill, Yuki looked around the meadow where Miss Klara usually hung out. He found some of her footprints, but she herself was nowhere to be seen.

He wanted to forewarn her that the Gormwits would soon be popping around to ask her one of their absurd questions. After all, she was a hen, and everybody knows how hens detest surprises.

Yuki was just about to go look for her near Treacly Gorge and the Placid Forest, dreary spots that Klara liked spending time in, when he heard something shuffling and

rustling towards him – something like the sound of a hundred Gormwits flapping their hands about (for no particular reason) amid a dense tangle of undergrowth.

But it turned out to be Klara, feathers flying about everywhere as she tottered towards him, one big foot after the other.

«Good thing she's the peaceable type,» Yuki





thought to himself. «Imagine if she accidentally mistook us for grain... that'd be pretty rough.»

«Yuki, how nice to see you! Everything OK, dear?»

Yuki hesitated for an instant before letting the cat out of the bag: «Not really. The Gormwits are on their way to see you.»

Klara frowned: «What for?»

«The boss wants the Imperial Palace repainted. Someone suggested some ridiculous color, and now they're gonna ask you whether it exists.»

«Ugh, here we go again with that darned Imperial Palace,» Klara grumbled.

«Gruferce likes it,» Yuki replied with a shrug. «He likes throwing parties there when neighboring peoples drop by.»

«I didn't know that neighboring peoples ever did drop by.»

«Sure they do! Just not by choice.»

Klara gave him a disapproving look. As hens



go, she seemed pretty reasonable to Yuki, but he felt she had a bit of a hang-up when it came to good manners.

«I need to talk with Gruferce,» Klara said, sounding annoyed. «He promised me he was going to get rid of those bad habits of his.»

«But we haven't attacked the Eirenians for a whole week!»

«You shouldn't attack them, period!» Klara retorted, shaking her feathers so hard that Yuki jumped. «So, you still haven't told me what color they're planning on using.»

Arms crossed tight over his chest, Yuki frowned and kicked at the ground.

Then he blurted it out: «Fart-blue.»

«What?»

A second later, an explosive, ebullient, obnoxious “UUUKIII!” echoed through the valley.



## CHAPTER 5

### Grudim gets carried away by his enthusiasm.

The arrival of that tumultumble of Gormwits to Botched Hill made everything way less quiet and way more chaotic – as is always the case when a tumultumble of Gormwits invades a place.

«Hey, look! There's Yuki!»

«Yuki!!!»

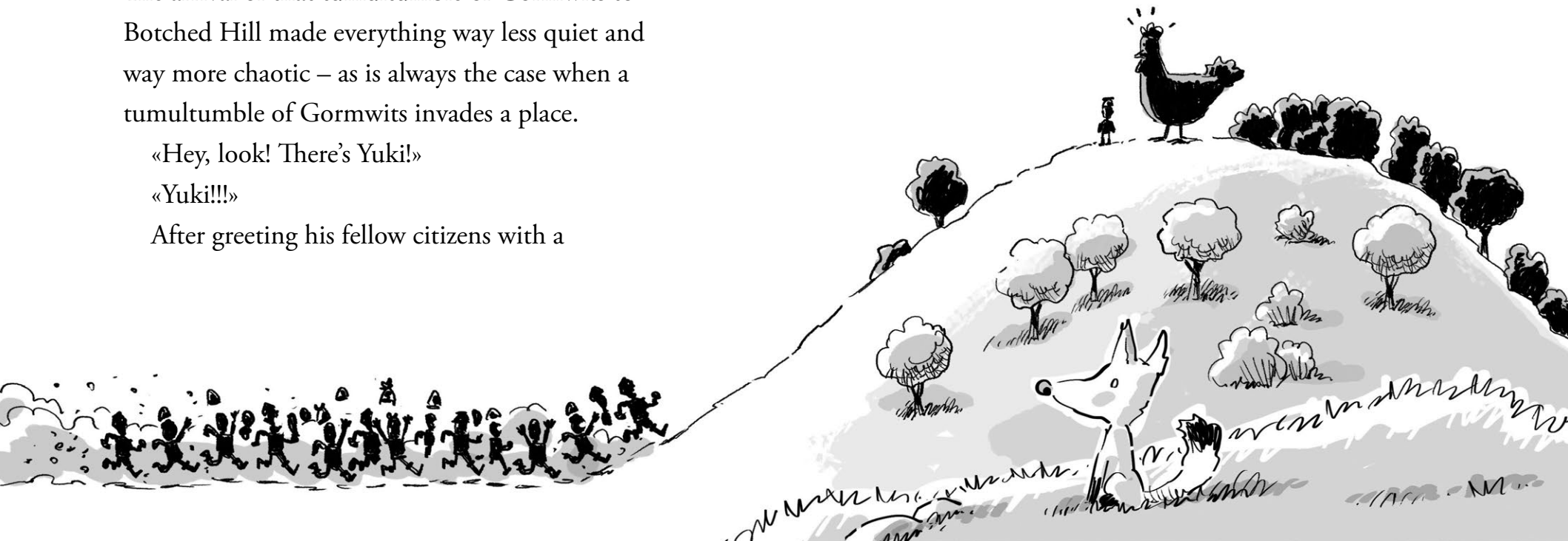
After greeting his fellow citizens with a

perfunctory smile, Yuki got swept up by the crowd back in front of Klara, and right next to Grudim.

«Yuki!!» Grudim exclaimed, walloping him on the back.

Nice fellow, this Grudim guy, Yuki thought to himself as he got back up off the ground and wiped the dirt off his pants. If only he weren't so hopelessly daft.

Don't be fooled by the Gormwits' enthusiasm for Yuki. They loved getting wildly excited anytime they ran into anyone. They were even



known to give their horses to people they'd just met on the street, although it's also true that they had a habit of taking them back, without a word, shortly thereafter.

Yuki had a chance to see these dynamics in action when Moseyabout, a guy who never had a job, joined the crowd.

«Moseyabout!!!» everyone shrieked ecstatically, pushing him up front while tossing presents at him.

Moseyabout reached Yuki, who had himself been gifted two clubs and three hats and had oodles of munchies stuffed down his pockets.

«Yuki!!» exclaimed the jobless Moseyabout.

«Hey, Moseyabout,» Yuki replied unenthusiastically.

In the meantime, Gruferce, King of the Gormwits, got ready to explain to Klara the reason for his and his subjects' visit.

Knowing it might take him weeks to do so, Miss Klara cleared her throat: «Cluck cluck, cluck-cluckkk! Excuse me...»



«Fart-blue!» someone shouted out from the crowd.

«Exactly, fart-blue,» Klara replied. «So, dear friends, you'd like to know whether such a color exists, correct?»

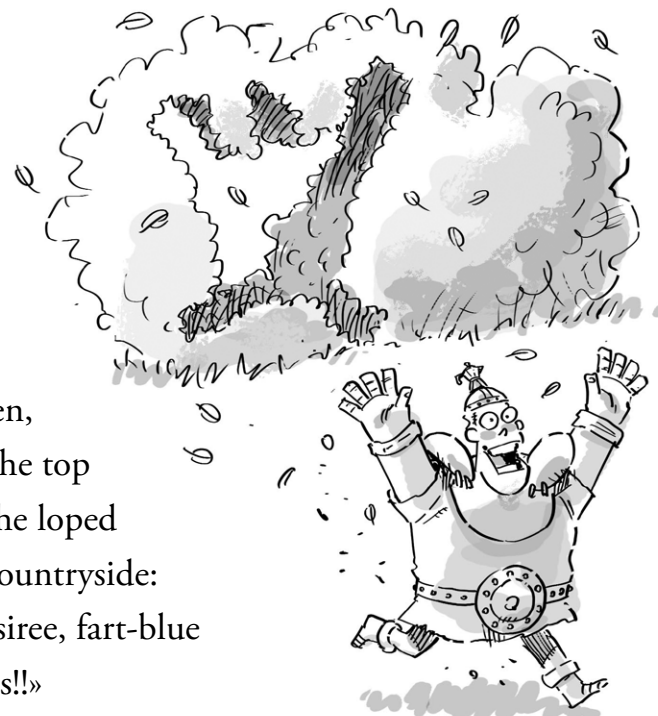
Nobody asked themselves how Klara knew this. After all, it would hardly be unusual if they'd told her themselves and simply forgotten.

«Well, dear friends, for what it's worth, I happen to believe that...»

«It exists!»

Grudim shouted, as if Klara had already given her opinion.

«It exists! It exists!» Then, shrieking at the top of his lungs, he loped off into the countryside: «It exists, yessiree, fart-blue exists! It exists!!»



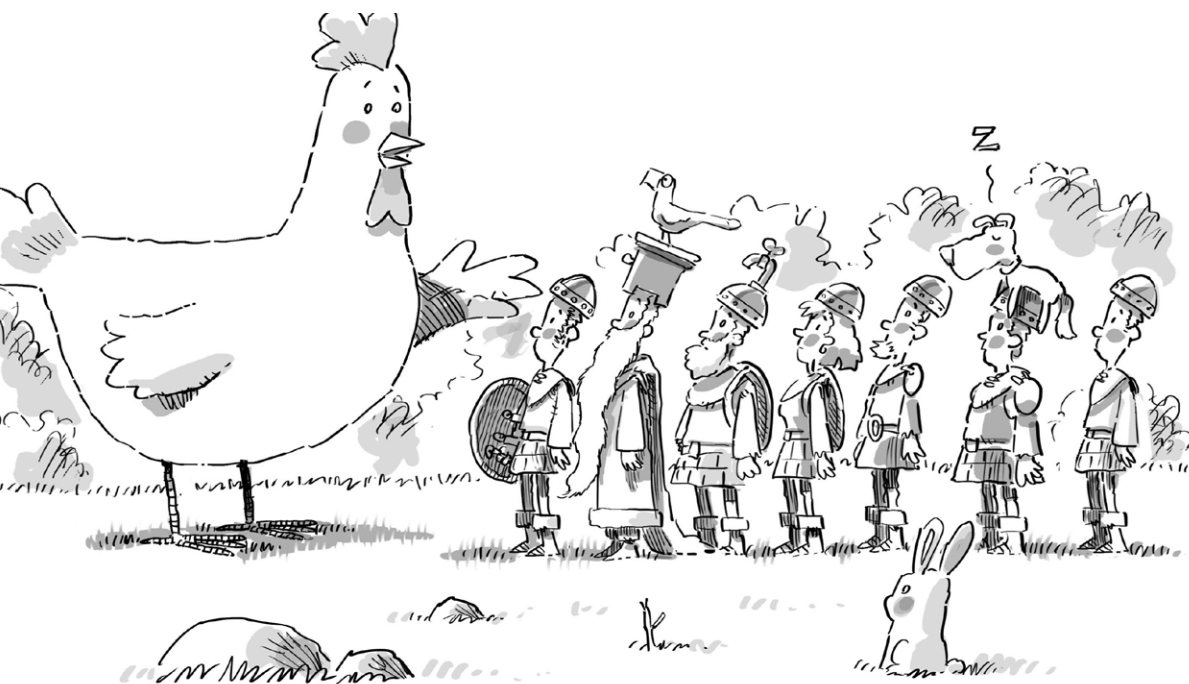
As they watched him rush off, even his fellow citizens looked puzzled, which is saying a lot.

As soon as Grudim vanished over the horizon, the other Gormwits turned back to Klara.

«No, dear friends. I'm sorry, but it does not exist.»

The Gormwits let out a collective wail:  
“Ooooooh!”

«Grudim is not going to be pleased when he



finds out that fart-blue is a fakefudge color,» said Grufierce, shaking his head.

People's moods had begun to sour again. Like all thickheaded peoples, the Gormwits had a tendency to transform from valiant warriors into sulky little dogs in the blink of an eye.

«My dear Gormwits,» Klara resumed, «if you want the palace repainted, you ought to ask specialists in that field, not Grudim.»

«Color inventors!» shouted Spittles Sr., a forest ranger.

«No. House painters. People whose job is to paint walls, facades... You know, house painters!»

«Never heard of 'em,» Spittles Sr. replied, astonished.

«Sure. It's a job plenty of people do, including a lot of Eirenians.»

«Great! Let's go attack 'em and kidnap their housepai —,» Grufierce began. But Klara cut him short.

«No, NO! No attacks! And it's rude to kidnap house painters.»

«But if we don't,» asked Collarbone the mime,



«why would they even bother coming up here?»

Klara and Yuki looked at each other: it was a good question.

«Listen,» Klara said. «You just can't kidnap them, period. Don't even ask why. It's just not something that's done. It's not proper. All you have to do is hire them, OK? There's no need for violence.»

But then Moseyabout interrupted Klara: «Hey, look! Look!»

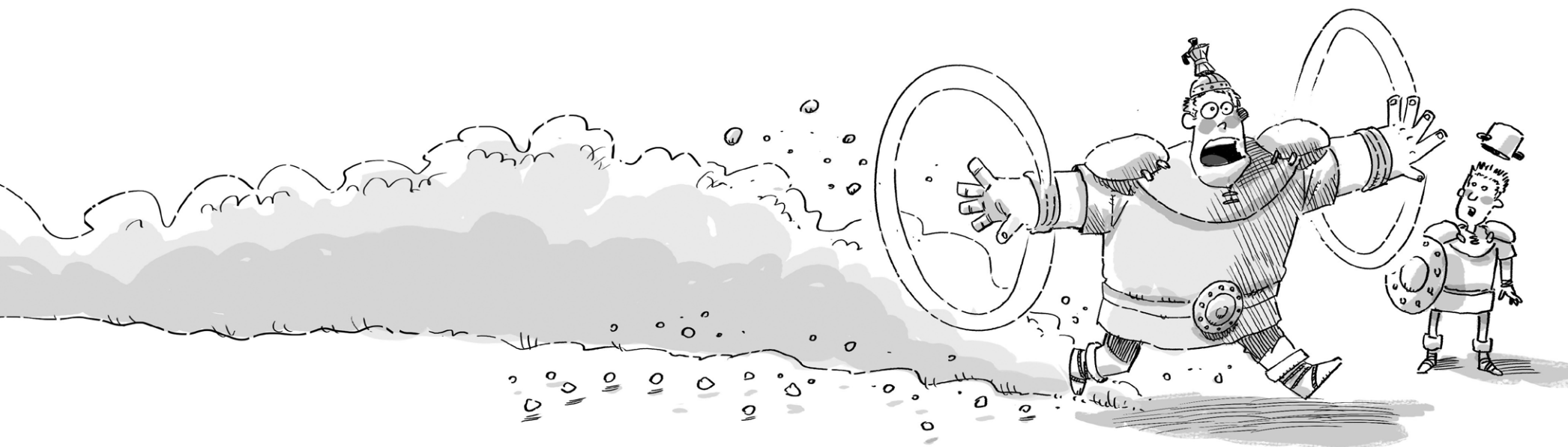
A huge cloud of dust was sweeping towards them. It came from the same direction that the blockhead Grudim had run off in shortly before.

Hmm, could be a clue... Want to try and guess who was hidden inside the dust cloud?

## CHAPTER 6

You got it, good for you!

Yup! It was Grudim, Grufierce's fearless, good-looking, can't-even-count-to-three dolt of a son rejoining his fellow Gormwits – indeed, hurtling



towards them at top speed with his arms spinning wildly around him.

«Yikesaroonney...» Yuki mumbled, afraid Grudim would fell them all upon reaching them.

But by leaning back on his heels, Grudim managed to come to a halt after skidding for a few feet through the grass.

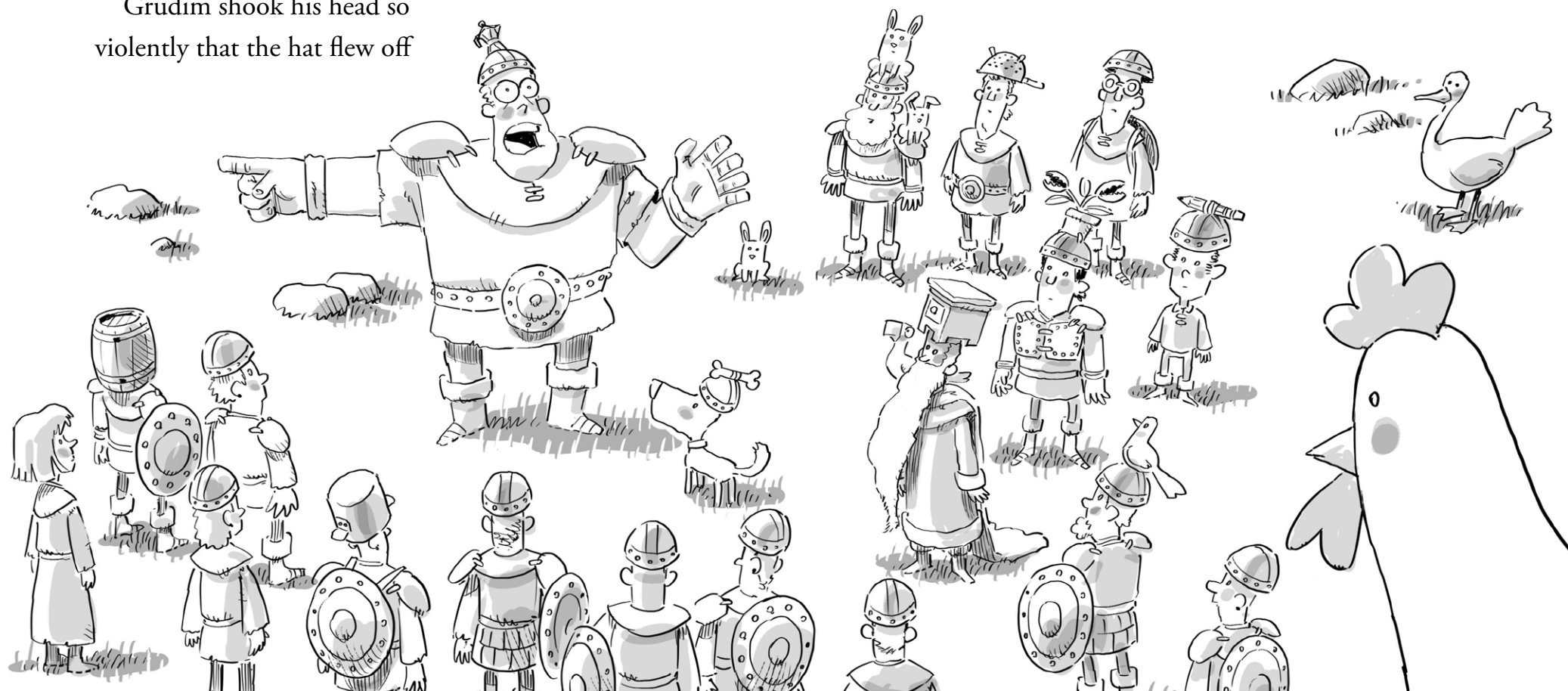
«Grudim!!» Collarbone shouted, placing a hat on his head.

Grudim shook his head so violently that the hat flew off

(word has it that Collarbone was so upset by this incident that he's laid only fresh fruit on people's heads ever since).

«Magna! Guuuts! Dang!» Grudim bellowed with a crazed look in his eyes.

Gruferce, King of the Gormwits, gently approached his heir: «Dearly beloved, half-imbecilic son – indeed, both halves – try, perhaps, to use human words?»





Then the king turned apologetically to Klara: «He spends far too much time with carnivorous plants, you know...»

«The Eirenians!» Grudim shouted, rediscovering human language. «Eirenians! The Eiren – »

«Like a broken record,» Miss Klara muttered.

Yuki tried to help out: «We got it, Grudim: you saw the Eirenians. But tell us, please: what've they done?»

«Yes, my supreme fool of a son, what have the Eirenians done?»

«They're leaving!» Grudim replied.

«What?!» shouted dozens of Gormwitian voices in unison.

Grudim took some time to reply. He'd shocked himself by having recalled something so lucidly.

«Yes! They had suitcases. They were leaving,» he added. «With the suitcases!»

A long silence followed during which plenty of reflection would have taken place anywhere else in the world. Here, not so much...

«We were talking about the color fart-blue,»

Merynx said.

«About what, pardon?» asked Spittles Sr.

«Uh... don't ask me!» Merynx answered.

«Merynx!!» Spittles Sr. replied, hugging him.

«Long time no see!»

Klara tried to regain control of the situation: «Folks, let's not digress. This matter of the Eirenians is critical. If they leave too, the whole region will be impacted in a clu-cluck.. cluck-clu... cultural sense. They're the only decent people around for thousands of hen-steps. Grudim, please explain exactly what you saw.»

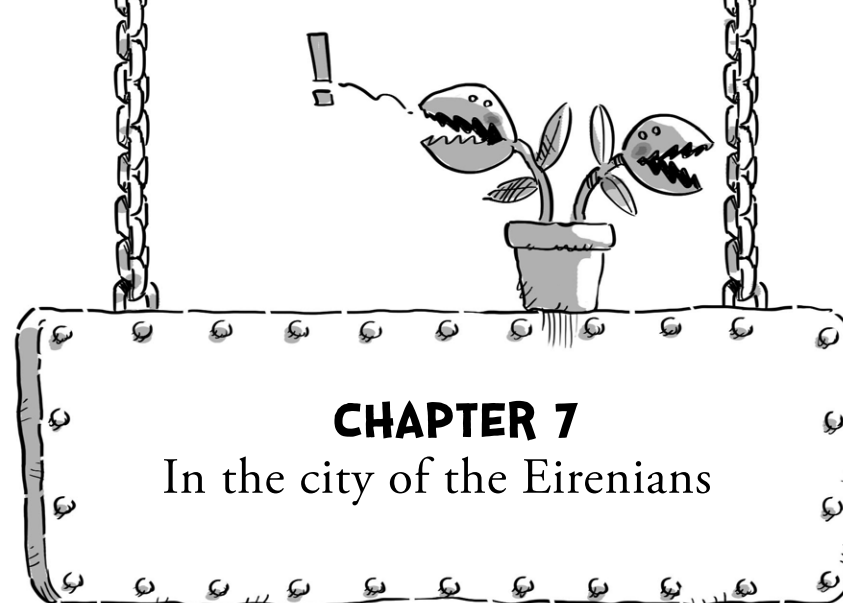
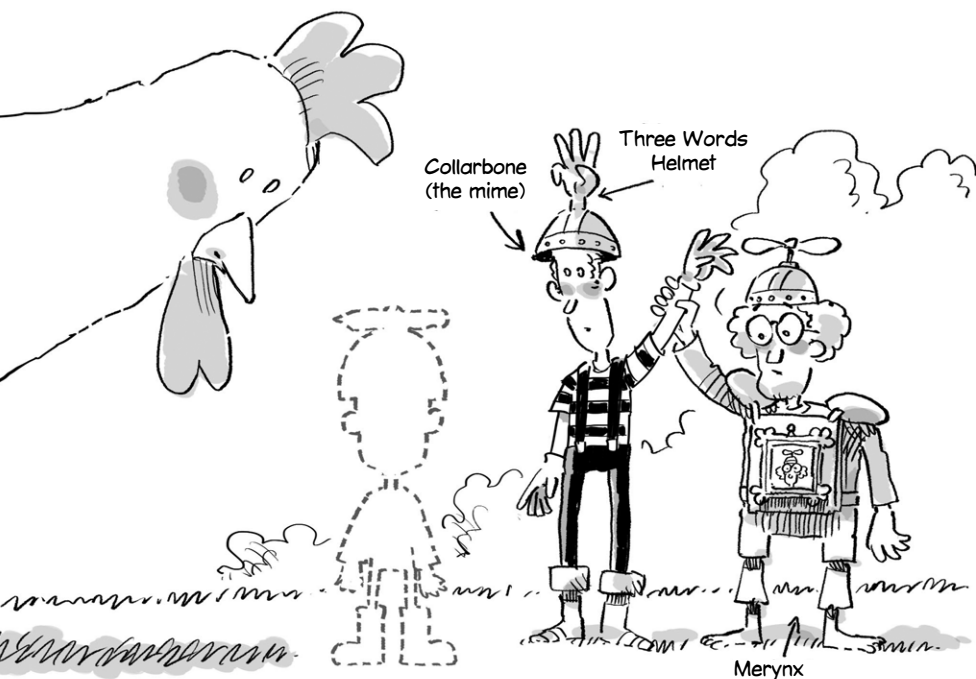
Grudim shrugged confusedly. By now his neurons had accomplished all they were capable of – that is, next to nothing.



«For the love of hard-boiled eggs!» Klara exclaimed. «Yuki, please, help me to... Yuki? Yuki?!!»

Everyone starting looking around for young Yuki, the cleverest boy around. But he was nowhere to be found – not even under Collarbone's armpits, where Merynx was determinedly searching for him.

In fact Yuki, the instant he heard that the Eirenians were leaving the area, had run off himself as well.



Now, this seems the right juncture to waste a bit of precious time – mine, in particular – to talk about the phenomenal, sophisticated, well-respected people who were known as the Eirenians.

They – and by they I mean the Eirenians – dwelled in a fertile, sun-drenched valley surrounded by gently dappled hills. Through the valley ran the most enchanting possible brook in which a refined individual could immerse and rest his or her lower extremities. Fruit trees flourished



effortlessly and farm animals thrived, plump and contented. Born and raised in this heaven-on-earth, with its exceptionally mild climate, the Eirenians had cultivated a small, caring, idyllic society, building the most aesthetically-pleasing abodes, two public squares that would have fit in perfectly even in a magical realm, and streets designed for optimal traffic flow.

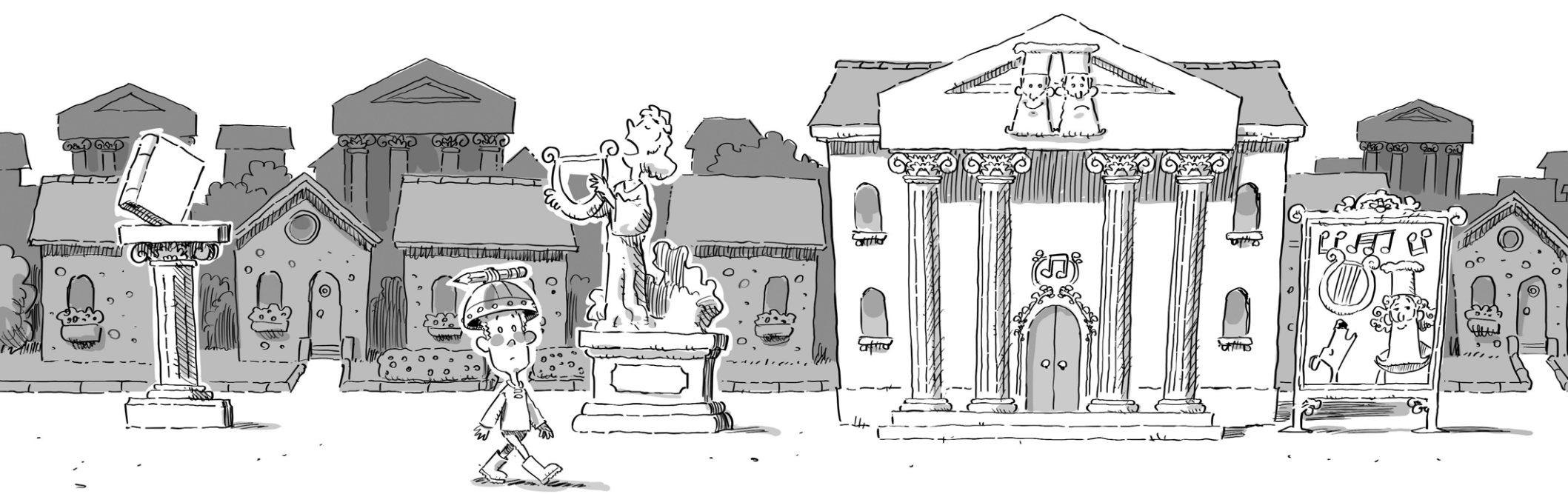


The sole problem faced by this petite pastel-hued paradise is that it was situated adjacent to the greatest monument to foolishness and indiscipline in all of human history: the Gormwits' barren, impassable, fertile-as-a-rock hill town.

Yuki always entered the streets of the city of the Eirenians feeling a mix of apprehension and curiosity. Everything he saw impressed him.



But it was all so peculiar, so utterly unlike the world he came from, that he couldn't appreciate it fully. And as he walked about there now, after discovering that the Eirenians were fleeing en masse, there was no way that young Yuki could feel calm. He didn't, in fact.



Yuki didn't encounter a single soul until he reached Dead Tongues Square.

It looked, as Grudim had claimed, as if all and sundry had left. Not a good sign.

In Dead Tongues Square stood one of the city's seventeen theaters: the venerated Theater of Sorrowful Joy, the outermost yet best-regarded one in the entire valley.

Yuki sidled over to the show bill.

That evening the National Eirenian Orchestra was to perform two works by Sbritz, the celebrated local composer: the legendary Whiners'

Symphony and the equally celebrated Sonata in F Minor for Piano and Dogs.

«Good morning, young man!»



Swiveling around, Yuki found himself face to face with an Eirenian, a gentleman wearing the most elegant attire, his feet shod in his people's customary pointed shoes.

Yuki had no idea who he was, but was glad to see him; it meant that at least some Eirenians were still in town.

«If you're looking for the ticket office, it's over at the Ministry of Culture,» the man said kindly,



gracious as the Eirenians always were.

«No thanks.»

«There's a discount for students tonight.»

«Still not going, but thanks.»

«The composer Ulaia Sbritz will be there this evening in person!»

«Oh, now that's exciting!»

«He might even perform something with his castanets!»

Yuki decided enough was enough. «I'm here on behalf of the Gormwits,» he said, putting his hands on his hips.

The elegant Eirenian began to tremble, and his face turned beet red. Yuki always underestimated the terror the Gormwits instilled in the Eirenians.

Seeking to reassure the man, he laid a hand on his shoulder.

It's fascinating to observe the phenomenon of a body as it transforms from a solid to a gaseous

state. Yuki got a chance to do just that, for the moment he laid his hand on the volatile Eirenian's shoulder, the man sank to the ground and more or less vaporized.

«Oh, for Klara's sake!» Yuki cried out.

An Eirenian woman rushed over to help her fellow citizen.

«I didn't do anything!» Yuki cried out, frowning. «He fainted all by himself.»

Ignoring Yuki, the woman slapped the man's face again and again: «Come to, man! For tidy squares' sake! Always fainting when you see a Gormwitian! This one's only a child! Come to!»

Then she turned to Yuki. «He's my husband. But he's constantly fainting!»

Grabbing her comatose husband by the feet, she began to drag him back home like a sack of potatoes, walking backwards.

«You shouldn't be here!» a male voice suddenly shouted out, interrupting Yuki's train of thought.

Another Eirenian had

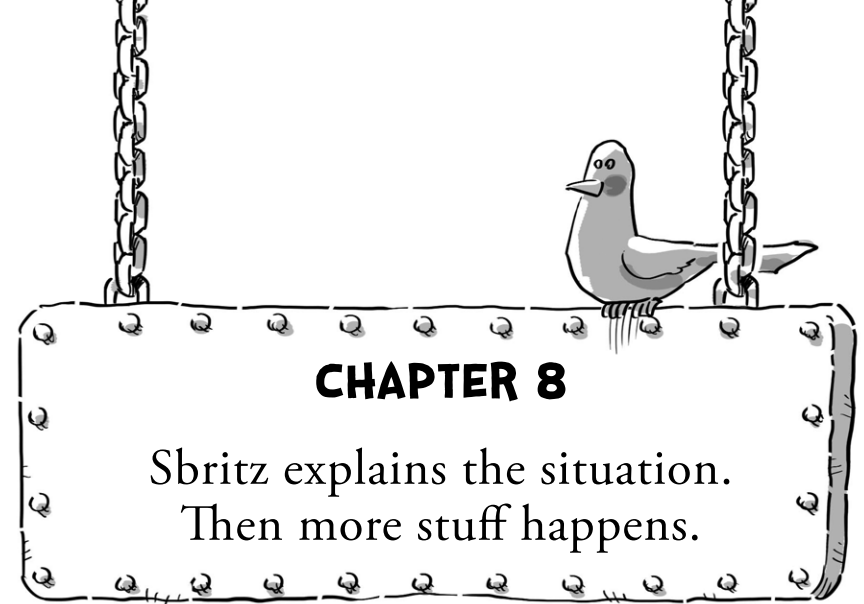




appeared in front of the theater. He had the same curly white hair as the guy pictured on the show bill. Also the same prideful frown – a romantic composer’s frown. And the same face, too – perhaps because he was actually the same person.

«Sbritz!» Yuki cried out.

Johan Ulaia Sbritz, the illustrious Eirenian composer, muttered something in return.



The history of political relations between the Gormwits and the Eirenians is long and complex. If necessary, though, it could be summarized as an unending series of attacks (by cudgel) courtesy of the Gormwits; so perhaps we could simply characterize it as long.

Indeed, Ulaia Sbritz – a great artist and highly-esteemed Eirenian politician as well as the foulest-tempered man in the valley – would never have believed there was anything worth saving in Gormwitian culture. But after meeting Yuki one



day, he realized – to his great surprise – that he found the child almost interesting.

Now, as they chatted together backstage at the Theater of Sorrowful Joy, Sbritz observed Yuki with his usual air of haughty curiosity.

«Yes, some Eirenian families are leaving; and they have plenty of good reasons for doing so,» he said smugly.

«Why? Did they see your show bill?» Yuki asked.

«No, they saw you folks,» Ulaia Sbritz snorted. «A lot of families here are fed up with having you people as neighbors, with that mania of yours for attacking us incessantly and gratuitously.»

«So people are picking up and leaving, just like that?»

«Well, we're doing everything we can to stop them, but it's not easy. We've even opened a new pottery museum, but it hasn't helped much.»

«Whooping woohaws, a brand new pottery museum?!» Yuki said, trying not to smirk.

Sbritz gave him a nasty look.

«I'm just joking,» Yuki said conciliatorily.

«Everyone has their hobbies... We Gormwits play cards with carnivorous plants, which is much worse: I mean, those things bite when they lose. But that's not important. What is is – »

But before Yuki could finish his sentence, a sudden noise made him turn around.



The door behind him had opened, and a girl entered the room.

She was more or less Yuki's age, but he'd never seen her before.



Now, Yuki didn't know about it yet, but there's a well-known scientific phenomenon whereby when a green-eyed girl – and this girl definitely had green eyes; what's more, a pair of 'em –



glances over at you smiling the way this one was, you can't do a thing about it: you're going to have the same exact, universal reaction as everyone else, that is, panic. Utterly intimidated, Yuki gulped hard and began to sweat.

He felt disoriented, like he'd been sucked into a huge floppy soap bubble. Outside, though, the world went on as usual.

«Excuse me, uncle. When did the Eirenians found their city?»

«Arabella!» Sbritz answered reprovably.

«I can't remember!»

The girl glanced back at Yuki with a smile of complicity. Yuki responded with an idiotic-sounding titter.

«In the twelfth year following the discovery of emerald-green,» Sbritz said, irritated.

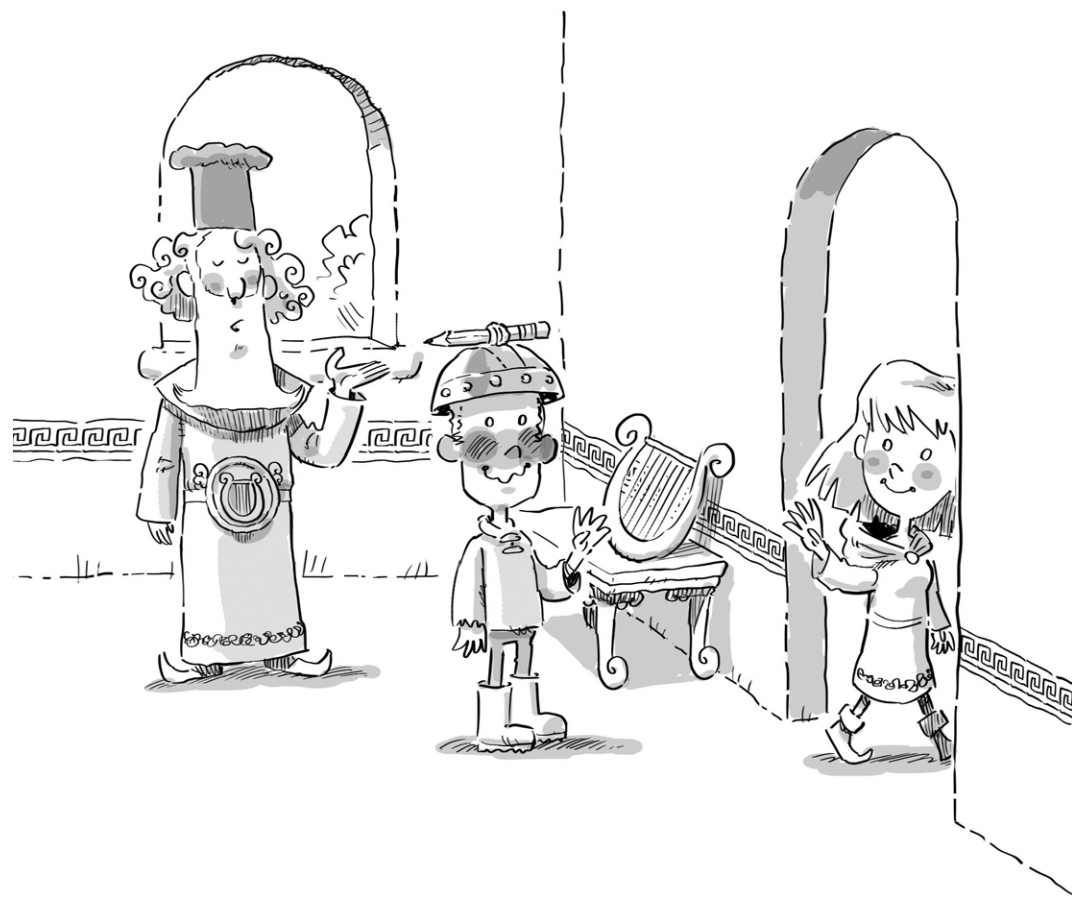
«Really? Cool. Thanks!»

Then, smiling at Yuki once more, Arabella

swept out of the room like a spring breeze.

«I'd really like to know what these Eirenians down south study!» Sbritz grumbled. «How's it possible not to know what year the Eirenian civilization began?! I mean, really!»

Arabella... So that's her name. Arabella! What a gorgeous name. Ara-bella! Ari...



Then Yuki shook himself hard to make the bubble burst. He felt weird, like he was about to come down with a cold, or the way he always felt after speaking with Merynx.

«I bet you didn't know there were other Eirenian communities,» Sbritz said.

«I didn't even know you guys counted years in terms of when you discovered certain colors.»

«Wherever you find kindness, blossom-filled meadows and sweetly-gurgling brooks, that's where you'll also find an Eirenian!» said Sbritz.

Then he muttered halfway under his breath:

«What an absurd situation! My niece moves up here and half our city's people leave...»

«The important thing is for you not to all disappear,» Yuki said, getting up. «What would we do without you?»