

STEWART & RIDDELL



THE  
**EDGE**  
CHRONICLES

BEYOND THE DEEPWOODS

← BOOK 1 OF THE TWIG SAGA →

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## **About the Book**

*Take your imagination to THE EDGE!*

Abandoned at birth in the perilous Deepwoods, Twig is brought up by a family of woodtrolls. One cold night, Twig does what no woodtroll has ever done before - he strays from the path.

So begins a heart-stopping adventure that will take Twig through a nightmare world of goblins and trops, bloodthirsty beasts and flesh-eating trees. One desire drives Twig on: the longing to discover his true identity and his destiny ...

THE  
EDGE  
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BEYOND THE DEEPWOODS  
← BOOK 1 OF THE TWIG SAGA →

PAUL STEWART AND CHRIS RIDDELL

RHCP DIGITAL

For Joseph and William



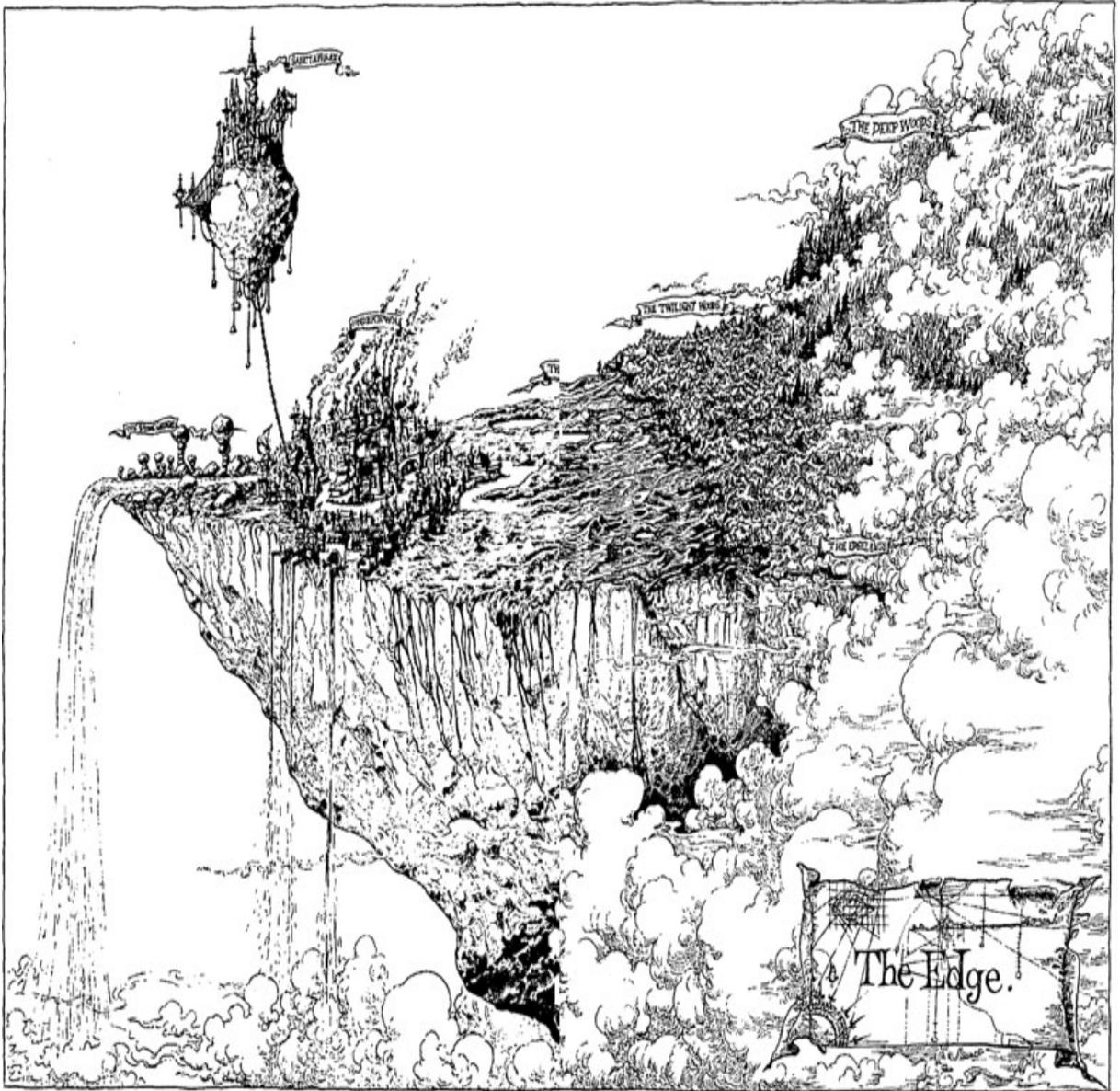
‘Sometimes, in the middle of the day, when the whole village is asleep in the hammocks, I’ll listen. Beyond the crackling braziers that warm us, and the thornwood pens that keep our livestock safe, are the sounds of the Deepwoods. Quarms squealing, fromps coughing, and the yodelling of a distant banderbear.

Here in our village, curled up next to my brothers and sisters in our family hammock, I feel warm and safe. We slaughterers are no different from other tribes of the Deepwoods. We know that safety lies in sticking together.

We tend our shaggy hammelhorns and skittish tilder; drink their milk and fashion their leather into a thousand things, from cloddertrog whips and woodtroll aprons to goblin helmets and sky-pirate breastplates.

It’s a good life. Especially, on Feast Nights - and there are many of those, for we slaughterers love a good feast. Any excuse! The birth of a tilder calf, a new moon ... Trees strung with lanterns, braziers piled high and tables filled with jugs of woodale and plates of hammelhorn steaks and tilder sausages, we feast until dawn.

And when the feasting is over and everyone has gone to sleep, I’ll pause and listen to the sounds from beyond the village, and think to myself: How terrible to be lost and alone out there in the Deepwoods ...’



## · INTRODUCTION ·

FAR FAR AWAY, jutting out into the emptiness beyond, like the figurehead of a mighty stone ship, is the Edge. A torrent of water pours endlessly over the lip of rock at its overhanging point.

The river here is broad and swollen, and roars as it hurls itself down into the swirling, misty void below. It is difficult to believe that the river – like everything else that is large and loud and full of its own importance – might ever have been any different. Yet the origins of the Edgewater River could scarcely be humbler.

Its source lies far back inland, high up in the dark and forbidding Deepwoods. It is a small, bubbling pool, which spills over as a trickle and down along a bed of sandy gravel, little wider than a piece of rope. Its insignificance is multiplied a thousandfold by the grandeur of the Deepwoods themselves.

Dark and deeply mysterious, the Deepwoods is a harsh and perilous place for those who call it home. And there are many who do. Woodtrolls, slaughterers, gyle goblins, termagant trogs: countless tribes and strange groupings scratch a living in the dappled sunlight and moonglow beneath its lofty canopy.

It is a hard life and one fraught with many dangers – monstrous creatures, flesh-eating trees, marauding hordes of ferocious beasts, both large and small ... Yet it can also be profitable, for the succulent fruits and buoyant woods which grow there are highly valued. Sky pirates and

merchant Leagues-men vie for trade, and battle it out with one another high up above the endless ocean-green treetops.

Where the clouds descend, there lie the Edgelands, a barren wasteland of swirling mists, spirits and nightmares. Those who lose themselves in the Edgelands face one of two possible fates. The lucky ones will stumble blindly to the cliff edge and plunge to their deaths. The unlucky ones will find themselves in the Twilight Woods.

Bathed in their neverending golden half-light, the Twilight Woods are enchanting, but they are also treacherous. The atmosphere there is heady, intoxicating. Those who breathe it for too long forget the reason they ever came to the Twilight Woods, like the lost knights on long-forgotten quests, who would give up on life - if only life would give up on them.

On occasions, the heavy stillness is disturbed by violent storms which blow in from beyond the Edge. Drawn to the Twilight Woods, like iron filings to a magnet, like moths to a flame, the storms circle the glowing sky - sometimes for days at a time. Some of the storms are special. The lightning bolts they release create stormphrax, a substance so valuable that it too - despite the awful dangers of the Twilight Woods - acts like a magnet, like a flame, to those who would possess it.

At its lower reaches, the Twilight Woods give way to the Mire. It is a stinking, polluted place, rank with the slurry from the factories and foundries of Undertown which have pumped and dumped their waste so long that the land is dead. And yet - like everywhere else on the Edge - there are those who live here. Pink-eyed and bleached as white as their surroundings, they are the rummagers, the scavengers. A few serve as guides, steering their charges across the desolate landscape of poisonous blow-holes and sinking mud, before robbing them blind and abandoning them to their fate.

Those who do make their way across the Mire find themselves in a warren of ramshackle hovels and rundown slums which straddles the oozing Edgewater River. This is Undertown.

Its population is made up of all the strange peoples, creatures and tribes of the Edgeworld crammed into its narrow alleys. It is dirty, over-crowded and often violent, yet Undertown is also the centre of all economic activity – both above-board and underhand. It buzzes, it bustles, it bristles with energy. Everyone who lives there has a particular trade, with its attendant league and clearly defined district. This leads to intrigue, plotting, bitter competition and perpetual disputes – district with district, league with league, tradesman with rival tradesman. The only matter which unites all those in the League of Free Merchants is their shared fear and hatred of the sky pirates who dominate the skies above the Edge in their independent boats and prey off any hapless merchantmen whose paths they cross.

At the centre of Undertown is a great iron ring, to which a long and heavy chain – now taut, now slack – extends up into the sky. At its end, is a great floating rock.

Like all the other buoyant rocks of the Edge, it started out in the Stone Gardens – poking up out of the ground, growing, being pushed up further by new rocks growing beneath it, and becoming bigger still. The chain was attached when the rock became large and light enough to float up into the sky. Upon it, the magnificent city of Sanctaphrax has been constructed.

Sanctaphrax, with its tall thin towers connected by viaducts and walkways, is a seat of learning. It is peopled with academics, alchemists and apprentices and furnished with libraries, laboratories and lecture halls, refectories and common rooms. The subjects studied there are as obscure as they are jealously guarded and, despite the apparent air of fusty, bookish benevolence, Sanctaphrax is

a seething cauldron of rivalries, plot and counter-plot, and bitter faction-fighting.

The Deepwoods, the Edgelands, the Twilight Woods, the Mire and the Stone Gardens. Undertown and Sanctaphrax. The River Edgewater. Names on a map.

Yet behind each name lie a thousand tales - tales that have been recorded in ancient scrolls, tales that have been passed down the generations by word of mouth - tales which even now are being told.

What follows is but one of those tales.

## · CHAPTER ONE ·

# THE SNATCHWOOD CABIN

TWIG SAT ON the floor between his mother's knees, and curled his toes in the thick fleece of the tilder rug. It was cold and draughty in the cabin. Twig leaned forwards and opened the door of the stove.

'I want to tell you the story of how you got your name,' his mother said.

'But I know that story, Mother-Mine,' Twig protested.

Spelda sighed. Twig felt her warm breath on the back of his neck, and smelled the pickled tripweed she had eaten for lunch. He wrinkled his nose. Like so much of the food which the woodtrolls relished, Twig found trip-weed disgusting, particularly pickled. It was slimy and smelled of rotten eggs.

'This time it will be a little different,' he heard his mother saying. 'This time I will finish the tale.'

Twig frowned. 'I thought I'd already heard the ending.'



Spelda tousled her son's thick black hair. He's grown so fast, she thought, and wiped a tear from the end of her rubbery button-nose. 'A tale can have many endings,' she said sadly, and watched the purple light from the fire gleaming on Twig's high cheekbones and sharp chin. 'From the moment you were born,' she began, as she always began, 'you were different ...'

Twig nodded. It had been painful, so painful, being *different* when he was growing up. Yet it amused him now to think of his parents' surprise when he had appeared: dark, green-eyed, smooth-skinned, and already with unusually long legs for a woodtroll. He stared into the fire.

The lufwood was burning very well. Purple flames blazed all round the stubby logs as they bumped and tumbled around inside the stove.

The woodtrolls had many types of wood to choose from and each had its own special properties. Scentwood, for instance, burned with a fragrance that sent those who breathed it drifting into a dream-filled sleep, while wood

from the silvery-turquoise lullabee tree sang as the flames lapped at its bark – strange mournful songs, they were, and not at all to everyone’s taste. And then there was the bloodoak, complete with its parasitic sidekick, a barbed creeper known as tarry vine.

Obtaining bloodoak wood was hazardous. Any woodtroll who did not know his woodlore was liable to end up satisfying the tree’s love of flesh – for the bloodoak and the tarry vine were two of the greatest dangers in the dark and perilous Deepwoods.

Certainly the wood of the bloodoak gave off a lot of heat, and it neither smelled nor sang, but the way it wailed and screamed as it burned put off all but a few. No, among the woodtrolls, lufwood was by far the most popular. It burned well and they found its purple glow restful.

Twig yawned as Spelda continued her story. Her voice was high-pitched but guttural; it seemed to gurgle in the back of her throat.

‘At four months you were already walking upright,’ she was saying, and Twig heard the pride in his mother’s words. Most woodtroll children remained down on their knuckles until they were at least eighteen months old.

‘*But ...*’ Twig whispered softly. Drawn back inside the story despite himself, he was already anticipating the next part. It was time for the ‘but’. Every time it arrived Twig would shudder and hold his breath.

‘But,’ she said, ‘although you were so ahead of the others physically, you would not speak. Three years old you were, and not a single word!’ She shifted round in her chair. ‘And I don’t have to tell you how serious *that* can be!’

Once again his mother sighed. Once again Twig screwed up his face in disgust. Something Taghair had once said came back to him: ‘Your nose knows where you belong.’ Twig had taken it to mean that he would always recognize the unique smell of his own home. But what if he was wrong? What if the wise old oakelf had been saying – in his

usual roundabout way - that because his nose didn't like what it smelled, this was *not* his home?

Twig swallowed guiltily. This was something he had wished so often as he'd lain in his bunk after yet another day of being teased and taunted and bullied.

Through the window, the sun was sinking lower in the dappled sky. The zigzag silhouettes of the Deepwood pines were glinting like frozen bolts of lightning. Twig knew there would be snow before his father returned that night.

He thought of Tuntum, out there in the Deepwoods far beyond the anchor tree. Perhaps at that very moment he was sinking his axe into the trunk of a bloodoak. Twig shuddered. His father's felling tales had filled him with deep horror on many a howling night. Although he was a master carver, Tuntum Snatchwood earned most of his money from the illicit repair of the sky pirates' ships. This meant using buoyant wood - and the most buoyant wood of all was bloodoak.

Twig was uncertain of his father's feelings towards him. Whenever Twig returned to the cabin with a bloodied nose or blacked eyes or clothes covered in slung mud, he wanted his father to wrap him up in his arms and soothe the pain away. Instead, Tuntum would give him advice and make demands.



'Bloody *their* noses,' he said once. 'Black *their* eyes. And throw not mud but *dung*! Show them what you're made of.'

Later, when his mother was smoothing hyleberry salve onto his bruises, she would explain that Tuntum was only concerned to prepare him for the harshness of the world outside. But Twig was unconvinced. It was not concern he had seen in Tuntum's eyes but contempt.

Twig absent-mindedly wound a strand of his long, dark hair round and round his finger as Spelda went on with her story.

'Names,' she was saying. 'Where would we woodtrolls be without them? They tame the wild things of the Deepwoods, and give us our own identity. Ne'er sip of a nameless soup, as the saying goes. Oh, Twig, how I fretted when, at three years old, you were still without a name.'

Twig shivered. He knew that any woodtroll who died without a name would be doomed to an eternity in open sky. The trouble was that until an infant had uttered its first word the naming ritual could not take place.

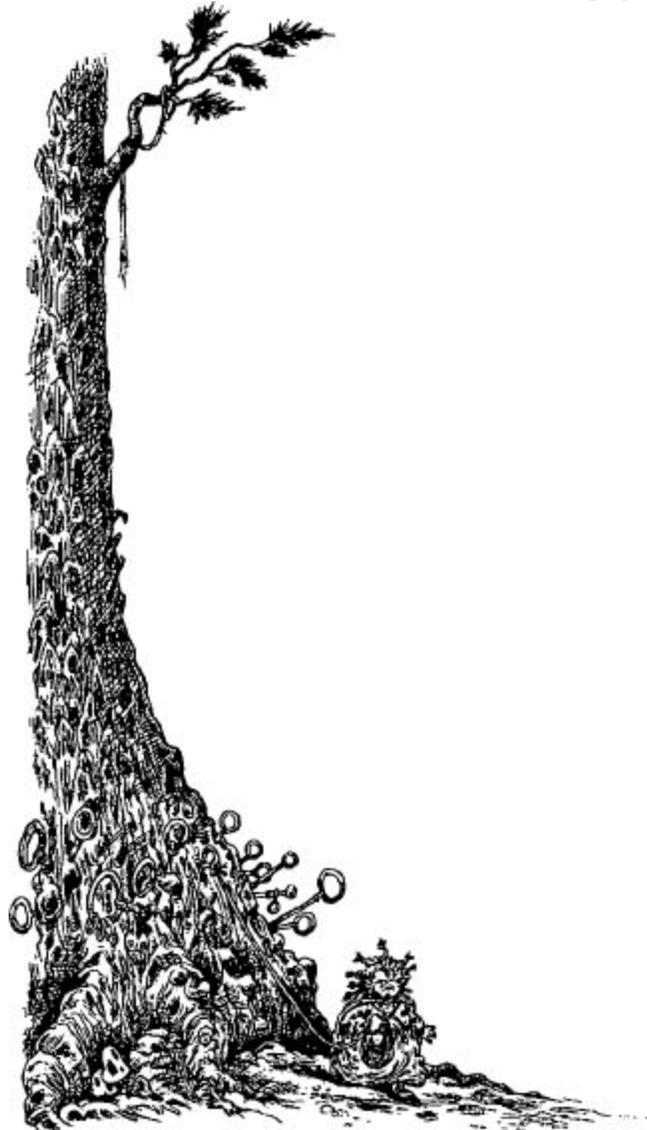
'Was I really so silent, Mother-Mine?' said Twig.

Spelda looked away. 'Not a single word passed your lips. I thought perhaps you were like your great-grandfather Weezil. He never spoke either.' She sighed. 'So on your third birthday, I decided to perform the ritual anyway. I ...'

'Did great-grandfather Weezil look like me?' Twig interrupted.

'No, Twig,' said Spelda. 'There has never been a Snatchwood - nor any other woodtroll - who has ever looked like you.'

Twig tugged at the twist of hair. 'Am I ugly?' he said.



Spelda chuckled. As she did so, her downy cheeks puffed out and her small charcoal-grey eyes disappeared in folds

of leathery skin. 'I don't think so,' she said. She leaned forwards and wrapped her long arms around Twig's chest. 'You'll always be my beautiful boy.' She paused. 'Now, where was I?'

'The naming ritual,' Twig reminded her.

He had heard the story so often, he was no longer sure what he could remember and what he had been told. As the sun rose, Spelda had taken the well-worn path which led to the anchor tree. There she tethered herself to its bulky trunk and set off into the dark woods. This was dangerous, not only because of the unseen perils that lurked in the Deepwoods but because there was always the chance that the rope would snag and break. Woodtrolls' deepest terror was being lost.

Those who did stray from the path and lose their way were vulnerable to attacks from the gloamglozer - the wildest of all the wild creatures in the Deepwoods. Every woodtroll lived in constant terror of an encounter with the fearsome beast. Spelda herself had often frightened her older children with tales of the forest bogeyman: 'If you don't stop being such a naughty woodtroll,' she would say, 'the gloamglozer will get you!'

Deeper and deeper into the Deepwoods, Spelda went. All round her the forest echoed with howls and shrieks of concealed beasts. She fingered the amulets and lucky charms around her neck, and prayed for a swift and safe return.

Finally getting to the end of her tether, Spelda pulled a knife - a *naming* knife - from her belt. The knife was important. It had been made especially for her son, as knives were made for all the woodtroll children. They were essential for the naming ritual and, when the youngsters came of age, each one was given his or her individual naming knife to keep.

Spelda gripped the handle tightly, reached forwards and, as the procedure demanded, hacked off a piece of wood

from the nearest tree. It was this little bit of Deepwood which would reveal her child's name.



Spelda worked quickly. She knew only too well that the sound of chopping would attract inquisitive, possibly deadly, attention. When she was done she tucked the wood under her arm, trotted back through the woods, untied herself from the anchor tree, and returned to the cabin. There she kissed the piece of wood twice and threw it into the fire.

'With your brothers and sisters, the names came at once,' Spelda explained. 'Snodpill, Henchweed, Pooh-sniff; as clear as you like. But with you the wood did nothing but crackle and hiss. The Deepwoods had refused to name you.'

'And yet I have a name,' said Twig.

'Indeed you have,' said Spelda. 'Thanks to Taghair.'

Twig nodded. He remembered the occasion so well. Taghair had just returned to the village after a long spell away. Twig remembered how overjoyed the woodtrolls had all been to have the oakelf back among them. For Taghair, who was well versed in the finer points of woodlore, was

their adviser, their counsellor, their oracle. It was to him that the woodtrolls came with their worries.

‘There was already quite a gathering beneath his ancient lullabee tree when we arrived,’ Spelda was saying. ‘Taghair was sitting in his empty caterbird cocoon, holding forth about where he had been and what he had seen on his travels. The moment he saw me, however, his eyes opened wide and his ears rotated. “Whatever’s up?” he asked.



'And I told him. I told him everything. "Oh, for goodness sake, pull yourself together," he said. Then he pointed to you. "Tell me," he said. "What is that round the little one's neck?"

"That's his comfort cloth," I said. "He won't let anyone touch it. And he won't be parted from it neither. His father tried once - said the boy was too old for such childish things. But he just curled up into a ball and cried and cried till we gave it back to him."

Twig knew what was coming next. He had heard it so many times before.

'Then Taghair said, "Give it to me," and stared into your eyes with those big black eyes of his - all oakelves have eyes like that. They can see those parts of the world that remain hidden to others.'

'And I gave him my comfort cloth,' whispered Twig. Even now he didn't like anyone touching it, and kept it tightly knotted around his neck.

'That you did,' continued Spelda. 'And I can scarce believe it to this day. But that wasn't all, oh, no.'

'Oh, no,' echoed Twig.

'He took your cloth and he sort of stroked it, all gentle like, as if it was a living thing, and then he traced the pattern on it with his fingertip, ever so lightly. 'A lullabee tree,' he said at last, and I saw that he was right. I'd always thought it was just a pretty pattern - all those squiggles and little stitches - but no, it was a lullabee tree all right, plain as the nose on your face.'

Twig laughed.

'And the strange thing was, you didn't mind old Taghair touching your cloth. You just sat there, all serious and silent. Then he gave you that stare of his again and said in a soft voice, "You're part of the Deepwoods, silent one. The naming ritual has not worked, but you are a part of the Deepwoods ... A part of the Deepwoods," he repeated, his

eyes glazing over. Then he raised his head and spread wide his arms. "His name shall be ..."

'... Twig!' Twig exclaimed, unable to keep silent a moment longer.



'That's right,' said Spelda, laughing. 'Out you came with it, just like that. Twig! The first word you ever spoke. And then Taghair said, "You must look after him well, for the boy is special."'

Not *different*, but *special*! It was the one fact that had kept him going when the other woodtroll children had picked on him so mercilessly. Not a single day had passed without some incident or other. But the worst time of all was when he'd been set upon during the fateful trockbladder match.

Before then, Twig had loved the game. Not that he was very good at it, but he had always enjoyed the excitement of the chase - for trockbladder was a game that involved a great deal of running about.

It was played on a large square of land between the back of the village and the forest. The pitch was crisscrossed with well-worn paths beaten out by

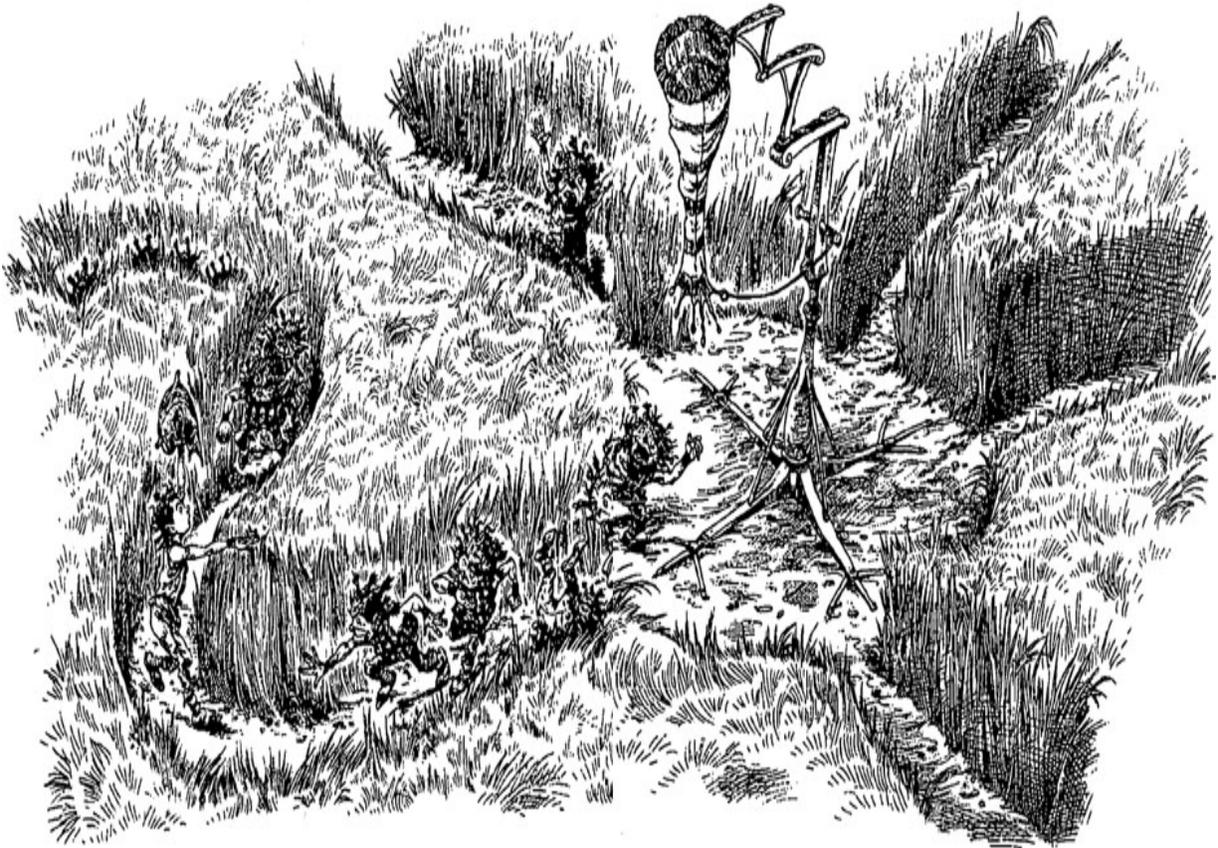
generations of young woodtrolls. Between these bare tracks, the grass grew thick and tall.

The rules of the game were simple. There were two teams, with as many woodtrolls on each side as wanted to play. The aim was to catch the trockbladder - the bladder of a hammelhorn stuffed with dried trockbeans - and run twelve paces, calling out the numbers as you went. If you managed that, you were allowed a shot at the central basket, which could double your score. However, since the ground was often slippery, the trockbladder always squidgy, and the entire opposing team was trying to wrest the ball away, this was not as easy as it sounded. In his eight years of playing the game, Twig had never once managed to score a trockbladder.

On this particular morning, no-one was having much luck. Heavy rain had left the pitch waterlogged and the game kept stopping and starting as, time after time, woodtroll after woodtroll came sliding off the muddy paths.

It wasn't until the third quarter that the trockbladder landed near enough to Twig for him to seize it and start running. 'ONE, TWO, THREE ...' he yelled out as, with the trockbladder wedged beneath the elbow of his left arm, he belted along the paths which led to the centre of the pitch. The nearer to the basket you were when you reached twelve, the easier it was to score.

'FOUR, FIVE ...' In front of him half-a-dozen members of the opposing team were converging on him. He darted down a path to the left. His opponents chased after him.



'SIX, SEVEN ...'

'To me! Twig, to me!' various members of his own team called out. 'Pass it!'

But Twig didn't pass it. He wanted to score. He wanted to hear his team-mates' cheers, to feel their hands slapping him on the back. For once, he wanted to be the hero.

'EIGHT, NINE ...'

He was completely surrounded.

'PASS IT TO ME!' he heard. It was Hoddergruff, calling from the far side of the pitch. Twig knew that if he chucked the ball to him now his friend would have a good chance of scoring for the team. But that was no good. You remembered who scored, not who set the goal up. Twig wanted everyone to remember that *he* had scored.

He paused. Half of the opposing team were almost upon him. He couldn't go forwards. He couldn't go back. He looked round at the basket. So near and yet so far, and he wanted that goal. He wanted it more than anything.

All at once, a little voice in his head seemed to say, 'But what's the problem? The rules say nothing about sticking to the path.' Twig looked back towards the basket, and swallowed nervously. The next instant he did what no woodtroll before had ever done: *he left the path*. The long grass whipped at his bare legs as he loped towards the basket.

'TEN, ELEVEN ... TWELVE!' he screamed, and dunked the bladder down through the basket. 'A trockbladder!' he cried, and looked round happily. 'A twenty-four pointer. I've scored a tro ...' He stopped. The woodtrolls on both teams were glaring at him. There were no cheers. No slaps on the back.

'You stepped from the path!' one of them shouted.

'*No-one* steps from the path,' cried another.

'But ... but ...' Twig stammered. 'There's nothing in the rules that says ...'

But the other woodtrolls were not listening. They knew, of course, that the rules didn't mention keeping to the paths - but then why should they? In trockbladder, as in their lives, the woodtrolls never *ever* strayed from the paths. It was a given. It was taken as read. It would have made as much sense to have a rule telling them not to stop breathing!

All at once, as if by some pre-arranged signal, the woodtrolls fell on Twig. 'You lanky weirdo,' they cried as they kicked him and punched him. 'You hideous gangly freak!'

A sudden fiery pain tore through Twig's arm. It felt as if it had been branded. He looked up to see a wodge of his smooth flesh being viciously twisted by a handful of hard spatula-fingers.