

Travel Light

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Chapter 1

The Bears

IT IS SAID THAT WHEN the new Queen saw the old Queen's baby daughter, she told the King that the brat must be got rid of at once. And the King, who by now had almost forgotten the old Queen and had scarcely looked at the baby, agreed and thought no more about it. And that would have been the end of that baby girl, but that her nurse, Matulli, came to hear of it. Now this nurse was from Finmark, and, like many another from thereabouts, was apt to take on the shape of an animal from time to time. So she turned herself into a black bear then and there and picked up the baby in her mouth, blanket and all, and growled her way out of the Bower at the back of the King's hall, and padded out through the light spring snow that had melted already near the hall, and through the birch woods and the pine woods into the deep dark woods where the rest of the bears were waking up from their winter sleep.

Now when anyone changes into a bear, it is bearish they become, and the nurse Matulli was the same. Little Halla crawled around with the bear cubs, and many a knock she got from hard claws and many a lick from rough tongues. She learnt to fight the other cubs, and, having the use of her hands, she would get her own back from time to time, pulling ears and scrambling on to black backs, and sometimes she wondered when her claws would grow. She got to know the thought and language of the bears. It was a language that did what it wanted to do well enough, so that there were many ways of showing the difference between one taste and another, the taste of crunched mice, the taste of many different berries and roots and the taste of honey either on the front, back, or sides of the tongue. It did the same for smells, and the forest was always speaking in smells to the bears. It did much for hearing and something for sight, but there was no way, for instance, to think about clouds or the flying of eagles, because the bears did not look up into the sky. And if anyone had wanted to explain to the bears about Halla and her stepmother, they would just not have been able to do it at all.

There were plenty of other wild beasts in the woods, wolves and foxes and martens, reindeer and elks and roe deer and hares. But most of them kept clear of the bears. In summer the woods were full of tangles and hollows and mosses, scented with crushed ferns, rich earth scooped for sweet shoots and young mushrooms, birds' nests full of warm eggs, and the thick friendly fur of bears. Matulli-bear looked after Halla-baby as well as any bear can be

expected to look after any baby. Halla had plenty to eat, a long tongue to wash her and a warm bear to cuddle against all night. But Matulli was a fine figure of a she-bear and the he-bears all wanted her to keep house for them. It came on for winter, and behind rocks and under fallen fir trees were deep and cozy dens waiting for Matulli and her bear husband. The nights got longer and colder and every morning Matulli found it harder and harder to wake up. But Halla woke and fidgeted and pulled Matulli's whiskers and wanted her breakfast. And it came back to Matulli that one of the queer things about human beings was that they did not sensibly sleep all winter, but instead went to a great deal of trouble to cut fuel and shear sheep and weave blankets and thick cloaks and make themselves hot soup. And Halla, in spite of her excellent upbringing, was going to take after the rest of them. What was a poor bear to do?

And then a very fortunate thing happened. Matulli and her bear husband were walking through the woods, looking for the last of the wild bees' honey or a late fledgling from a nest, and Matulli's husband was grumbling away to himself because he could feel that the snow was not far off and it was time to go home to the den and sleep and sleep. But Halla was running around like a crazy butterfly and clearly had no intention of sleeping. Sometimes the he-bear thought it would be both nice and sensible to eat Halla, but he did not dare because of Matulli.

And suddenly a deer came galloping past them, looking back over its shoulder in a terrible fright. And after that a badger which

was in a hurry too. But the badger had time to tell the two bears that there was a dragon coming along and they had better get out of the way. The he-bear turned round at once and went galumphing back; never had his den seemed so desirable. But Matulli sat back among the cranberry bushes in the wet moss and pulled Halla down beside her. Sure enough, in a little while the dragon came along, puffing and creaking and rattling. Matulli in the bushes coughed and said: "My Lord." For she knew in her mind that dragons appreciated politeness from the rest of the world.

This dragon was somewhat startled and blew out a flame which singed the tops of the cranberry bushes and the tips of the fur all along Matulli's back. But he had meant no harm, and he stopped and listened very graciously to Matulli's story about Halla Bearsbairn. Matulli was speaking in the language of humans, since the thing could not be explained in bears' language. But dragons are, within their limits, very intelligent, and most of them understand, not only the language of several kinds of animals, including the birds who have beautiful feelings but few facts, but also the languages of trolls, dwarfs, giants and human beings.

Now, if there is one kind of human being which dragons dislike more than another, it is the kind commonly called kings or heroes. The reason is that they are almost always against dragons. So when the dragon, whose name was Uggi, heard that the poor little pink human had been so badly treated by a king and a queen, he did not hesitate, but said at once that he would adopt Halla Bearsbairn and see that she grew up in all the right principles of

dragonhood. “And you will see that she gets regular meals, my lord?” said Matulli.

“Have you ever heard of dragons going hungry?” said Uggi.

“And you will see that she doesn’t fall into the fire, my lord?”

“I will fire-proof her myself,” the dragon said.

“And you will comb her hair every night, my lord?”

“I will comb it with my own claws,” said the dragon, “for I see that the child has hair the colour of gold, which is the only right colour for hair.”

“And you will dry her eyes when she cries, my lord?”

“I will dry her eyes with the silken scarf of the Princess of the Spice Lands who was so thoughtfully offered to my cousin, the Dragon of the Great Waste. For I see that the child has eyes the colour of sapphires, which is the only right colour for eyes.”

“What happened to the Princess of the Spice Lands, my lord?” asked Matulli, for she thought that this princess might be a nice playmate for her Halla.

The dragon coughed behind his claw. “The Princess of the Spice Lands was offered to my cousin by the populace. It was a very suitable and acceptable idea on their part. Unfortunately there was a hero sent to interfere with everybody’s best interests. In the result the princess—and the hero—perished. My poor cousin had a nasty jag over one eye. He gave me the scarf in exchange for a duplicate bracelet which I had acquired. Yes, yes.” And Uggi the dragon held out a glittering claw to Halla who caught hold and swung.

“And you’ll see she’s warm at night, my lord?” said Matulli,