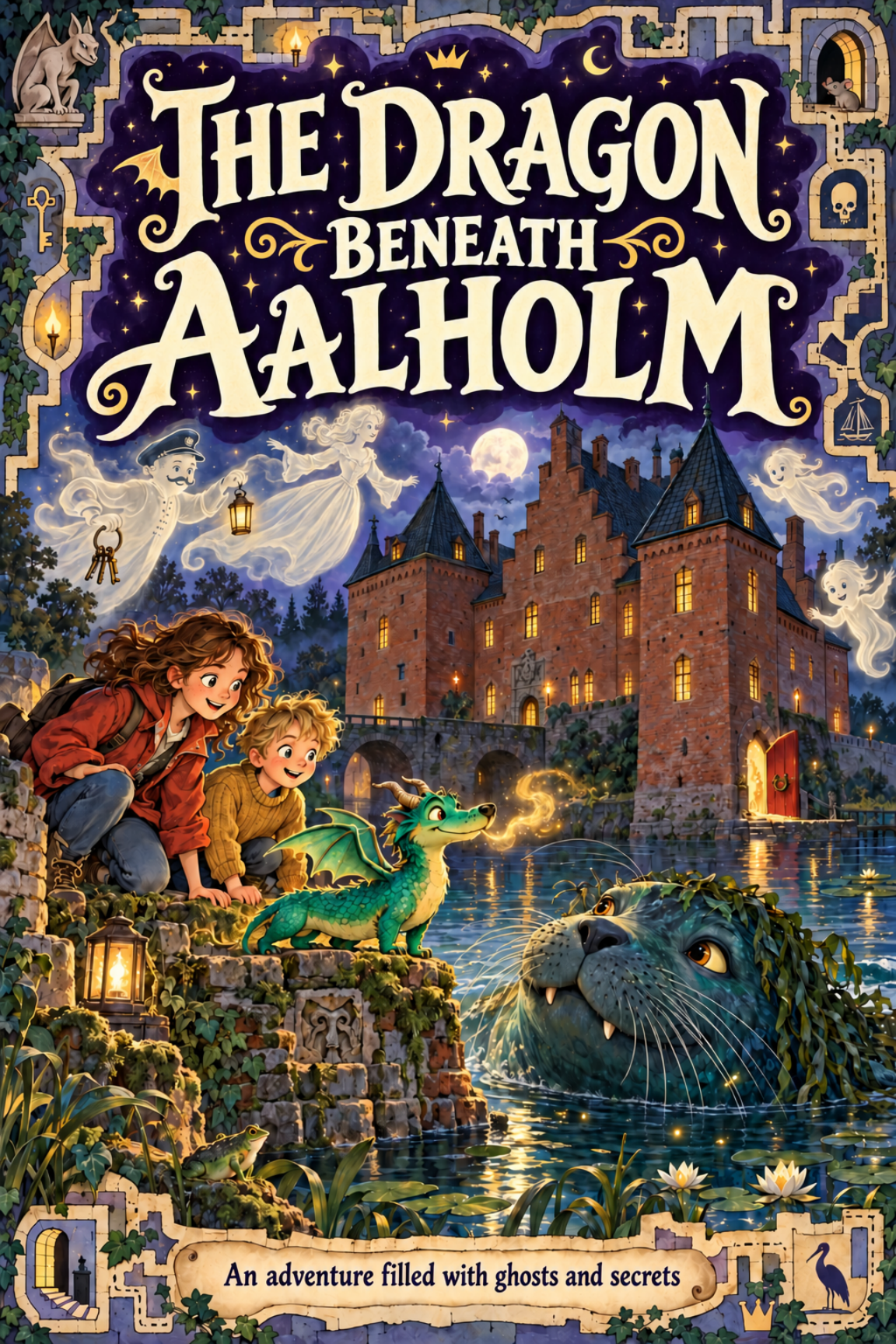




THE DRAGON BENEATH AALHOLM

The poster features a central illustration of a large, multi-towered brick castle with glowing windows, situated on a hill overlooking a body of water. In the foreground, a young boy and girl are crouching on a stone ledge, looking at a small green dragon. The dragon is breathing a small fire. In the water, a large, blue, cat-like creature with whiskers and fangs is visible. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a full moon. Ghostly figures, including a man in a uniform and a woman in a white dress, are floating in the air. The title 'THE DRAGON BENEATH AALHOLM' is written in a large, stylized font at the top. The entire scene is framed by a decorative border with various symbols like a key, a skull, a sailboat, and a bird.

An adventure filled with ghosts and secrets

The Dragon Beneath Aalholm

An adventure filled with ghosts and secrets

English edition

A complete translation of the Danish novel Dragen under Aalholm.

For readers aged 7–11. Twelve chapters, a historical afterword and sources.

The story mixes fiction, legends and historical details. The afterword explains the difference.

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CHAPTER 01

A Very Noisy Nothing

There were three rules at Aalholm.

No running on the stairs. No touching the suits of armour. And under absolutely no circumstances were you to open the little red door beside the cloakroom.

“What’s behind it?” Ella asked.

“Nothing,” said the man with the keys.

His name was Karl, and he was the caretaker. His keys hung in such an enormous bunch that Ella thought he either looked after a castle or had a very serious problem with bicycle locks.

“Then why can’t we open it?”

“Because it needs to stay shut.”

Karl walked on. His keys sounded like cutlery being dropped down a staircase.

Ella looked at her little brother.

“That wasn’t an answer.”

“Yes, it was,” said Max. “Just a bad one.”

Ella was ten. She liked knowing the rules, especially so she could spot when other people were using them wrongly. Max was seven. He had four stones, a button and half a bread roll in his pocket. The stones were for a collection. The button was for something he hadn’t thought of yet. The roll was for an emergency.

They were at Aalholm because their mum worked with old paintings. This weekend she was examining a piece of wall. That didn’t sound exciting, but she had brought three

bags, so there must be something seriously wrong with the wall.

The castle was being restored. That meant repairing it without making it look like a new sports hall. There were scaffolds, lamps and boxes with very firm messages on them.

DO NOT TOUCH.

FRAGILE.

THIS WAY UP.

Max had tilted his head at the last box.

“Does that still work if you’re upside down?”

Their mum had kissed his hair.

“Stay in the rooms Karl showed you. I’ll be just next door. We’ll eat in a little while.”

“How little?”

“Half an hour.”

Grown-ups used the word little very loosely.

Now the sun was sinking behind the trees. Ella had read every sign. Max had investigated whether a suit of armour could sneeze. Apparently it couldn’t, although he had only asked it once.

Then someone knocked behind the little red door.

Three careful knocks.

Ella knocked back.

“Occupied!” a voice shouted.

Max tugged her jumper.

“That’s a very noisy nothing.”

The door flew open.

A small man stood in the doorway holding a toilet brush. He wore a dark coat with shiny buttons, and his face was so pale that his ears were almost invisible.

So were his feet.

In fact, they weren't there at all.

"People always think we just float about," he said. "But there are practical jobs to do as well, you know."

Ella looked from the brush to the place where his feet ought to be.

"You're a ghost."

"And you're in the way of the cleaning trolley."

A bucket slid through her legs.

Ella jumped backwards into Max, who dropped his roll.

The ghost looked down.

"The five-second rule doesn't apply to floors older than electricity."

"It landed crust-side down," said Max.

The man sighed and handed him the roll. His fingers were cool, but they could hold it perfectly well.

"How can you pick things up?" Ella asked.

"Practice. The first fifty years were dreadful. You can get very tired of dropping your hat."

He put the brush in the bucket and straightened his coat. A little brass badge was pinned to his chest.

ALFRED. NIGHT WATCHMAN.

Ella read it aloud.

The ghost smiled.

Then the F disappeared.

There was a tiny, dry sound. Like a rubber rubbing paper.
ALRED.

Alfred clutched his badge.

“Oh no.”

His left hand grew thinner. Ella could see the edge of the door through it.

“Is that normal?” she asked.

“No. I normally spell myself with an F.”

Another letter vanished.

Max hugged his roll. It seemed to have become an emergency.

Ella ran to her mum’s door and pushed it open.

“Mum! There’s a ghost losing his name!”

Her mum sat on her stool, holding a paintbrush.

She wasn’t moving.

A drop of water hung in the air beneath the brush. It didn’t fall.

Ella touched her mum’s arm. It was warm.

“Mum?”

Behind her, Alfred said quietly:

“She’s in the ordinary evening. We’ve stepped into the castle night. To her, it will feel like a moment.”

“Then get us out again.”

“Usually I can.”

Ella turned.

“Usually?”

A white streak crept across the floor from the red door. It wasn't light. The lamplight disappeared wherever it passed.

Alfred took the children's hands.

"Now listen very carefully. If anyone offers you a nice, clean castle without any stories, say no."

"Even if it has a swimming pool?" Max asked.

"Especially if it has a swimming pool."

They ran.

Behind them, the sign on the door went blank.

CHAPTER 02

The Association of Dissatisfied Ghosts

Alfred led them through a door that Ella was certain hadn't been there a moment earlier.

Inside, the ghosts were holding a meeting.

A transparent lady sat at the head of the table. Her white dress occupied three chairs. A man with a tray paced up and down. A horse stood by the window, eating the curtain.

"We've started," said the lady.

"My name's disappearing," said Alfred.

"Then you should have come earlier."

Ella counted six ghosts. Then a seventh drifted through her carrying a soup tureen.

"Sorry," it said. "Didn't see you."

It felt like being overtaken by a fridge.

"This is the White Lady," said Alfred. "She's lived here a very long time."

"I can tell from the dress," said Max.

Ella nudged him.

The White Lady looked down at herself.

"It was fashionable when I got it."

The horse snorted.

"You can talk. You're still wearing the same saddle."

A little man in a chef's hat introduced himself as Cook Poul. A girl sitting with a pile of folded sheets was called Maren. The man with the tray had forgotten his surname, but insisted that the cups must stand in straight lines.

"Are you all dead?" Max asked.

"We're all excused from the dentist," said Cook Poul.

Alfred put his badge on the table. Now it only said AL.

Maren dropped a sheet.

The White Lady stood so quickly that two of her chairs fell over.

"He's started."

She fetched a mirror and set it in front of Alfred. One side of his face had grown blurry.

Ella felt something thumping hard behind her ribs. She wanted to go home to an ordinary evening with an ordinary mum and a wall that minded its own business.

"Who's he?"

"Mr Blank," said Maren.

Nobody laughed at the name.

"He arrived tonight," said Alfred. "Offered to sort out our papers. Now he's sorting us out of existence."

"I thought I recognised his voice," said Maren. "But the longer he stayed, the harder it became to remember where from."

The White Lady pushed a cup towards Ella. There was nothing in it, but she took it anyway. It was nice to hold something with a handle.

"The castle night is made of memories," said the lady. "Of people, animals and things that belonged here. We live in

the traces left behind. Mr Blank removes those traces and collects them in a white book.”

She looked at the children.

“In here, you leave traces too. He mustn’t get hold of them.”

“Then we’ll burn the book,” said Ella.

“Then you’ll burn us,” said Maren.

Ella put down her cup.

“Sorry.”

The horse stopped chewing.

The White Lady pointed towards the window. A narrow, dark rim lay across the sky above the trees.

“When the castle night ends, the pages dry. Then whatever he’s erased will be lost to us for ever. If the whole night goes blank, we won’t be able to open the way back to your mum, either.”

Alfred sagged. Suddenly his coat didn’t fit properly, as if there was less of him inside it.

“Alfred,” said Max.

The ghost looked up.

“Your name’s Alfred. You had a toilet brush. And you said I couldn’t eat my roll.”

The F returned to the badge.

Ella leaned across the table.

“Alfred, night watchman. You dropped your hat for fifty years.”

An R appeared.

The ghost straightened. His cheek became clear again.

The White Lady caught Ella's hand.

"You saw him before he was erased. Living memories."

"I'm living too," said Max.

"How very fortunate."

Ella repeated the whole name. Now she could read it on the badge again. But a little white spot remained at the very tip of the F.

"That will hold him here for a while," said the lady. "But we must open the book to get everything back."

Something scraped inside the wall.

A white sheet of paper slid under the door. It landed on the table without anyone touching it.

It said:

DISORDER RECORDED.

TWO CHILDREN WITHOUT VALID JUSTIFICATION.

"We've got a mum," Max told the paper.

A new line appeared.

THAT IS NOT SUFFICIENT.

Cook Poul turned his hat inside out. He looked like a man who wanted to hit someone with a very large wooden spoon.

Alfred pointed to a narrow door behind Maren's chair.

"We need help from the cellar."

"From whom?" Ella asked.

A deep thump sounded beneath the floor. The cups jumped.

The horse moved carefully away from the window.

"Oh," said the White Lady. "It's awake."

CHAPTER 03

Somebody's Put Fire in the Dog

Alfred took them to the south-east tower.

That was where the secret staircase was.

Ella knew it from a photograph on her mum's computer. In the ordinary world, you could look down at it through glass. In the castle night, a narrow opening stood clear, and a staircase twisted down inside the wall.

"Is this the tunnel to the town?" Max asked.

"No," said Alfred. "It's the stairs to the cellar."

"And then comes the tunnel?"

"Then comes the cellar."

"And after the cellar?"

"More cellar. People keep ordering a tunnel as if it were a pizza."

He explained that the stairs led down through the area by the Red King's Bedroom. They really existed. So did the story of a tunnel to Nysted. But a story about a tunnel wasn't the same thing as a tunnel.

"Good," said Max. "I prefer stairs that know where they're going."

They went down. Ella held his hand.

She had decided two things. They were going to find the white book. And Max was not going to get separated from her.

The staircase smelled of bricks and a little bit of toast.

“Is there a kitchen down here?”

“Not any more,” said Alfred. “But there’s still heat.”

At the bottom was a round room. An old iron cooking pot stood on the floor. Its lid was jumping.

THUMP.

THUMP.

“That’s very angry soup,” said Max.

Alfred lifted the lid.

Something scaly sprang out and landed right on Ella’s shoe.

It was about the size of a long dog. It had four legs, a tail and two wings that looked as if someone had forgotten to unfold them properly. Two little horns stuck out of its head. A thin ribbon of smoke rose from its nose.

Max stepped back.

“Somebody’s put fire in the dog.”

“I’m a dragon,” said the creature.

It had a gravelly voice and remarkably upright posture for someone standing on a shoe.

“You’re quite small,” said Max.

“You’re quite wingless.”

The dragon tried to spread his own wings. One hit the pot.

CLANG.

“They need warming up.”

Alfred crouched down.

“We need you.”

“I need breakfast.”

"It's evening."

"It often is when I wake up."

Max took out his half-roll.

The dragon sniffed it.

"Is there cheese?"

"There was."

"A tragic choice of tense."

He swallowed the roll and took a deep breath. His nose began to twitch.

"Stand back," said Alfred.

The dragon sneezed.

A jet of fire shot across the floor. The tip of Ella's shoelace turned brown. An old broom began smoking in a corner.

Alfred grabbed a bucket and put it out.

For a moment, nobody said anything.

Then Max said:

"Your name's Fnys."

It was the Danish word for a snort. The dragon looked offended.

"I used to have a name with Terrible in it."

"Fnys the Terrible."

He considered this.

"That will do."

A little book lay on a shelf. Alfred opened it to a picture of an old letter.

"A copy," he explained. "A letter was written at Aalholm in 1330. That's how far back this place's traces go."

Beneath the picture was the castle's name. As they watched, one letter turned white.

Fnys stretched his head forwards. A small, warm cloud touched the page.

The letter reappeared, red as an ember beneath ashes.

Ella forgot her shoelace.

"Do that again."

Fnys breathed gently. The whole word glowed.

"Dragon breath can lift the white film," said Alfred. "The erased things are still underneath. Until the pages dry."

Ella pointed at the broom.

"But no sneezing."

"I can hear the tone," said Fnys.

A step creaked above them.

A tall man in a grey suit stood on the stairs. His face was smooth. Not without a nose or mouth, but as if someone had drawn it without being particularly interested in people.

He wore gloves and carried a book so white that it hurt Ella's eyes.

"Unidentified reptile," he said, looking at Fnys.

"Flammable. Unnecessary."

"Mr Blank," Alfred whispered.

The man opened the book. A fountain pen lay between its pages.

"And now we have children in the cellar as well. This will be a lengthy tidying-up."

Ella took Max's hand.

Fnys stood in front of them.

“I am a dragon.”

“Not when I’ve finished,” said Mr Blank.

CHAPTER 04

The King Can, but You Can't

Mr Blank touched his pen to the page.

Alfred grabbed the pot lid and threw it.

It didn't hit the man. It hit his fountain pen.

A black drop flew through the air and landed on his white glove.

Mr Blank stared.

"Stain."

"Run!" Alfred shouted.

They leapt past him on the stairs while he rubbed his glove with a handkerchief. Fnys pattered along on his short legs. Max tried to lift him, but the dragon nipped his sleeve gently.

"I am not hand luggage."

On the next step, he gave up.

"But in exceptional circumstances, I may be transported."

Max carried him the rest of the way.

Mr Blank didn't follow at once. Apparently he couldn't do anything else while there was a stain on his glove.

"We should remember that," said Ella.

They entered a hall with old names on the wall.

"We must keep him out of here," said Alfred.

Ella recognised the place from her mum's papers. There were names and symbols from King Frederick II and

Queen Sophie's visit in 1585. Their whole party had left traces behind.

Max gave the wall an offended look.

"Is the king allowed to draw on the wall?"

"He certainly did," said Ella.

"When I did it, we had to repaint the whole kitchen."

Low down among the names was a little jester's head.

It blinked.

Max blinked back.

"You've got something between your teeth," said the head.

"Where?"

"Your tongue."

Max laughed so suddenly that Fnys jumped in his arms.

"That was dreadful," said Ella.

"I haven't had new material since before the potato," the head replied.

Alfred explained that there really was a name and a jester's head on the old wall. But the talking version belonged to the castle night, just like them.

"Have you seen Mr Blank?" Ella asked.

"Tall. Grey. Face like a closed lunchbox?"

"Yes."

"He was looking for something he'd dropped. An index card."

"Where?"

"He came from the water. Cross as a wet sock."

A lump of green mud lay on the floor. Ella picked it up on a piece of paper.

"The moat," she said.

Alfred glanced towards the window.

"Someone lives there."

"A monster?" Max asked.

"She doesn't like that word."

"So she's dangerous."

"That depends how often you say monster."

The jester's head fell silent. A white line was approaching his neck.

Ella pressed her muddy paper against the wall. It didn't help.

Fnys stretched his neck and breathed a warm cloud over the head. The line retreated a little.

"You're quite good at that," said Max.

The dragon adjusted one horn with a claw.

"I can do all sorts of things that don't necessarily involve the fire brigade."

Alfred put his hand on the wall.

"We'll come back."

The jester's head tried to smile. Only one corner of his mouth moved.

"Bring a joke," he said. "A proper one."

They hurried towards the courtyard.

Ella had an idea. If the creature in the moat had stolen the man's card, perhaps it could steal his book too. Big teeth ought to be handy for that sort of thing.

She told Alfred.

"You haven't met Bodil yet," he replied.

"Bodil?"

"You can be called Bodil and still have teeth."

In the doorway, Ella turned. On the wall, the jester's mouth had gone completely white.

Now nobody said anything funny.

CHAPTER 05

Bodil Would Like an Apology

The moat lay black between the castle and the trees.

Ella stayed behind the railings. Max stood close beside her, holding Fnys. The dragon looked down at the water.

"I'm not having a bath," he said.

"Nobody asked you to."

"People spring these things on you."

Alfred tapped a stone with his key.

"Bodil?"

A bubble burst on the surface. Then another.

A head rose from the water.

It was as big as an armchair. Two yellow eyes sat beneath a fringe of green water plants. Whiskers like wet shoelaces bristled around its mouth. When the creature yawned, Ella saw more teeth than she wanted to count.

Max slowly raised a hand.

"Hi."

"Good evening," said the head.

The rest of Bodil appeared. She had a long, dark back and broad flippers. Something halfway between a seal and a bus. Water streamed down her in shining ribbons.

"We need a monster," said Ella.

Alfred closed his eyes.

Bodil sank ten centimetres.

"Then you'd better put an advertisement in the newspaper."

"I just meant you're big, and there's this man who—"

"Lots of men come here. Most of them want to explain how my water ought to be."

She sank a little further.

Ella hurried up to the railings.

"Wait. Sorry. We don't need a monster. We need help."

Only the eyes remained above the water.

"That's different."

Ella told her about Alfred's name and the jester's mouth. Bodil listened. Now and then she breathed through her nose and shifted a little water lily.

"The grey man was here earlier," she said. "He called me a mistake in the landscape."

"You're quite hard to miss, though," said Max.

"Thank you."

"Did you take his card?" Ella asked.

"No. He dropped it. There's a difference."

Bodil dived. When she came up, she held a tin between her teeth. She set it carefully on the stones beside Alfred.

Inside were a teaspoon, three coins, a pair of glasses with one lens and a wet card.

"Lost property," she said. "I've got a bicycle too, but it doesn't fit in the tin."

Alfred picked up the card.

At the top was a B. The rest was covered by a white patch. Underneath, they could read:

NIGHT ARCHIVE. SOUTH-WEST TOWER.

At the bottom, in smaller writing:

REMEMBER TO RETURN THE BLUE BOOK TO MAREN.

“Maren!” said Ella.

Fnys leaned forwards. His warm breath swept across the card. A couple of strokes appeared after the B, but vanished before Ella could read them.

“It’s very wet,” he said. “And it tastes of bicycle.”

Suddenly Bodil looked past them.

Mr Blank stood on the other side of the bridge.

He was wearing a clean glove.

“My card.”

Alfred hid it behind his back.

Mr Blank tore a page from his book. It was empty, but folded itself into a bird. Then he tore out another. And another.

The white birds flew at the children.

“Down!” Ella shouted.

A bird struck her shoulder. The fabric of her jacket turned white where it touched. Ella pulled Max close.

Bodil slapped a flipper on the water.

A wave rose above the railings. Ella just had time to think that she would rather drown after dinner.

But the water landed in front of them.

The paper birds splatted into it. They flapped about like very bad moods in a washbasin.

Mr Blank jumped back. A drop landed on his trouser leg.

“Unacceptable.”

"It's water," said Bodil. "It lives here."

Alfred pulled the children towards the door. Max managed to take the button from his pocket and put it beside the tin.

"For your collection."

Bodil nudged it closer with a whisker.

"But it isn't lost."

"No. It's for you."

The enormous head went quite still.

Then Bodil nodded, very carefully, so as not to nod anyone off the bridge.

"Call if you need me again."

Inside, Ella wiped her cheek on her sleeve.

"Perhaps she could have taken the book."

"She saved us," said Max.

Ella looked at him. He was wringing water from Fnys's tail while the dragon complained about the treatment.

"Yes," she said. "She did."

She took hold of the dripping tail herself. Together, they carried Fnys back to the ghosts.

CHAPTER 06

A Girl Who Folded Sheets

There were fewer chairs in the meeting room.

Or perhaps they had simply become invisible. At any rate, Cook Poul was sitting some distance above the floor with nothing underneath him. He clung to the table and looked tense.

“No sudden movements,” he said.

The White Lady stood by the window. Her dress now filled only two chairs.

Ella put the card in front of Maren.

“Do you know what the blue book is?”

The girl looked at it.

“My book.”

“Is there anything important in it?”

“I think so.”

“I mean something that could help us. About the castle, or a secret route.”

Maren folded the edge of a sheet.

“No.”

Ella felt impatience prickling. Outside, the rim of the sky was getting lighter.

“Where are the books about everything that’s happened here?”

Alfred pointed to a cupboard. Ella opened it and found a thick book with a picture of a count.

“Otto Ludvig Raben,” she read.

“He kept a diary for forty-two years,” said Alfred. “In French.”

Max looked worried.

“We’d better start now, then.”

It was a book about the diary. Ella leafed through pages about visitors, outings and music. She looked for something that sounded like a battle. A siege. A plan of a secret room.

“He just writes about ordinary days.”

“There were more of those,” said Alfred.

Max had sat down beside Maren.

“What’s in yours?”

“Words I practised. Things I wanted to remember.”

“Like what?”

Maren thought.

“The first time I could write my whole name. A recipe for bread rolls. And a song my mother sang when she did the washing.”

Ella looked up. Maren’s fingers had grown so thin that the checks on the sheet showed through them.

“The blue book was gone when Mr Blank arrived,” said Maren. “I thought I’d mislaid it.”

“Who’s B?” Max asked.

Maren traced the letter on the card with her finger.

“The person I lent it to. He wrote our stories down in the night archive. He was very careful.”

“What was his name?”

She opened her mouth.

Then she shook her head.

A square on the wall behind her was turning white. The picture inside its frame disappeared. Maren blinked as though something had got into her eye.

Ella put down the diary book and knelt in front of her.

“Tell us about the song.”

“I thought you were looking for something important.”

That hurt in an unexpected way.

“I was looking in the wrong place,” said Ella.

Maren looked at her. Then she hummed four little notes.

Slowly in. Slowly out.

The song had words about water and soap and a shirt that refused to get clean. On the last note, Max made a noise like an angry sleeve.

Maren laughed.

Her fingers grew a little clearer.

Fnys lay on the table wrapped in a tea towel. He was trying to dry himself by blowing warm air over his tummy. Every third time, he took in too much air and started coughing.

Max hummed Maren’s tune to him.

“Try doing it that slowly.”

The dragon breathed out on the last long note. A steady, warm cloud lifted a corner of the tea towel.

No fire.

Fnys did it again. The tea towel dried.

“I’ve invented music,” he said.

"You've learnt a song," said Ella.

"You have to start somewhere."

She turned to Maren.

"We'll find your book in the tower. And we'll get you home."

"I am home," said Maren.

Ella looked around the fading room.

"Then we'll make sure you can stay."

Maren handed her the sheet. A small, crooked sun was embroidered in one corner.

"Take it for the book. It falls apart if you don't look after it."

Ella folded it carefully.

At the door, Alfred stopped them.

The passage to the south-west tower was gone.

It wasn't dark on the other side. There was nothing. White, without walls, floor or distance.

Alfred reached his key into it. The tip disappeared.

He pulled it back quickly.

"We're not going that way."

A whistle sounded from the park.

The horse raised its head from the last bit of curtain.

"The train," said Cook Poul.

Ella stared at them.

Of course the ghosts had a train as well.

CHAPTER 07

The Bird That Disappeared Twice

There was another way out through a room full of glass cases.

"We can go through the garden and reach the tower from outside," said Alfred. "The train runs through the park's memories. That way we can avoid the erased paths."

Ella pulled at the first door. It was stuck. A large cupboard had fallen against it on the other side. They could see one corner through a narrow gap.

Birds stood in the cases. Small, big, long, wide. One looked like a feather duster that had received bad news.

Max walked up to a black-and-white bird with a big beak.

"Hello, penguin."

"Try again," said the bird.

"Hello, angry penguin."

"Great auk."

It stood on a low plinth. Its little wings lay close against its body.

Fnys lifted his head over Max's arm.

"Aren't yours finished either?"

"They're for swimming."

"Oh."

Fnys looked at his own.

"So far, mine are mainly for hitting pots."

Ella read the label beside the plinth. A count from Aalholm had once brought a stuffed great auk home from Iceland. Later, it had been sold at auction in London.

“So you’re not even here any more?”

“Not during the day. You’re talking to a memory.”

The bird looked at its feet.

“There aren’t any living great auks left either. We disappeared because people took far too many of us.”

Max put his hand against the glass.

“All of you?”

The bird nodded.

Behind them, the door creaked. White was spreading beneath its frame.

Alfred pushed at the cupboard through the gap. It didn’t move. His hands passed through the wood.

“I’m not quite strong enough any more.”

Fnys wriggled free and stood in front of the door.

“Then I’ll burn it down.”

“No,” said Ella and Alfred together.

“It was a very dragonish plan.”

Max lay on the floor. There was a gap beneath the door, and beyond it he could see one wooden foot of the cupboard. A small wedge-shaped piece of wood was jammed in the gap.

“It’s stuck on that.”

He poked his fingers in, but couldn’t reach.

Fnys lay beside him. His front legs were shorter than Max’s arm.

"I could have been enormous," he muttered.

The great auk tapped the glass.

"You have a tail."

Fnys looked behind him as if this were new information.

He turned round and pushed the tip of his tail under the door. The claw at the end caught the piece of wood.

"A bit left," said Max.

"My left or your left?"

"Your tail's."

Fnys pulled. The wedge slid out. Ella and Max pushed the door together, and the cupboard scraped across the floor with a long shriek.

On the other side, it smelled of night and wet leaves.

"Come on!" said Alfred.

Ella was halfway out when she realised Max had stayed beside the case.

The white had reached the plinth.

"It's disappearing again," he said.

Ella looked from the bird to the door. She could hear the train in the park.

Then she took Maren's sheet from her pocket and spread it out.

"Can you jump?"

The great auk looked down.

"I can try."

Alfred opened the case. Max and Ella held the sheet between them, and the bird landed in the middle with a bump.

It was cold and light, but in its chest they could feel a tiny movement, as though someone were knocking from inside.

They carried it out.

Alfred closed the door behind them. Through the window, Ella watched the cases disappear one by one.

Fnys walked close to Max. His tail bobbed high above the ground.

“It’s also useful for balance,” he said.

“And for being proud with,” said Max.

The dragon didn’t answer. But his tail rose a little higher.

CHAPTER 08

Departure Without a Return Ticket

The train stood among the trees.

It was a little steam engine with open carriages. Its headlamp shone through the trunk of a tree. The rails appeared only a couple of metres ahead of the wheels, and vanished again behind them.

Painted on its side was STUBBERUP STRAND BANE.

"A little train used to run here in the park," said Alfred.

"Between the old motor museum and the coast. Tonight it runs wherever it's remembered."

The driver stuck his head out.

"Tickets?"

"We're being erased," said Ella.

"So are we all. Have you got tickets?"

Alfred showed his badge.

The driver narrowed his eyes.

"Night watchman. Ah. Staff and up to two children. The bird costs extra."

The great auk stretched its neck out of the sheet.

"I'm stuffed."

"Luggage," said the driver. "That's all right, then."

Max carried Fnys into the carriage.

"I'm luggage too," the dragon whispered.

"I thought you weren't."

“Only when it pays.”

The train jerked, but didn’t go any further. The driver looked into the firebox.

“The fire’s forgetting how to burn.”

Fnys had an expression Ella hadn’t seen before. He looked from the firebox to her.

“In here?”

The driver examined him.

“If you can aim through the opening. The rest of us will stand behind you.”

The dragon climbed onto the edge. Alfred lifted him the last bit.

Max began humming, but Fnys shook his head.

“Not necessary for this particular task.”

He sniffed his own wet nose.

Sneezed.

Fire leapt into the firebox. The engine puffed with such surprise that the driver’s cap lifted.

The train began to move.

Fnys staggered back to Max, who wrapped him in the dry end of the sheet.

“I think I need to sit down and be impressive.”

At the next bend stood the White Lady, Maren, Cook Poul, the man with the tray and the horse.

Ella stood up.

“How did you get out?”

"The kitchen stairs," said the lady. "The first time I've used them in living memory. I don't expect it to become a habit."

"Our room's gone," said Maren.

She looked at the sheet wrapped around Max, Fnys and the bird.

Then she sat beside them.

The driver looked at the horse.

"That is not luggage."

The horse walked through him and stood in the last carriage.

"We'll settle that at the terminus," he said.

They travelled on. Leaves slid past, some green, some yellow, some white as paper. Now and then Ella saw the park as it might once have been: people in hats, a child with an ice cream, a man running after the train and losing a shoe.

Then they were gone.

She sat beside Maren.

"The man you lent your book to. Was he tall and grey?"

"Tall," said Maren. "But he had colours, like the rest of us."

"Could it be Mr Blank?"

Maren gripped the edge of the seat.

"He used to laugh when I sang about the shirt. Mr Blank doesn't laugh."

Ella took out the wet card.

"He had this."

Maren touched the B. Her lips moved, but the name wouldn't come.

The train braked.

Ahead of them, the rails ended in whiteness.

Mr Blank stood at the edge of the last sleeper, the book under his arm.

"This railway is closed."

The driver lifted his cap.

"Not according to my timetable."

"Your timetable is cancelled."

The paper in the driver's hand turned white.

Ella stood up. She was shaking, but she could see the tower among the trees behind him. They were nearly there.

"Why do you want a castle with nobody in it?"

Mr Blank smoothed his sleeve.

"I want order."

"Who's the order for?"

For the first time, he didn't answer immediately.

Max carefully tore a corner from the paper holding the moat mud. Ella had put it beside her on the bench.

She saw what he was thinking.

She wanted to take it away. Tell him to stay sitting down, and that she had a plan.

But she didn't.

She nodded.

Max threw.

The mud hit Mr Blank's shoe.

The paper stuck. In the middle of the green mud was a clear print of Max's thumb.

The man looked down.

"Stain."

"Everyone out the other side!" Ella shouted.

They jumped from the train and ran between the trees. Alfred held Maren's hand. Cook Poul carried the great auk, which protested at his grip. The horse came last, with the driver's cap between its teeth.

Behind them came a furious rustling of paper.

Ella looked back once.

The train still stood on the rails. The driver had put his hand on the whistle.

Its note sounded long through the park.

Then both the train and the sound were gone.

CHAPTER 09

The Blue Book

They reached the south-west tower through a low door that Alfred held open with his shoulder.

Shelves stood from floor to ceiling.

"The night archive," Maren whispered.

Ella pulled the door shut. A little board hung on the inside. Names were written on it, but most had been rubbed away.

"Old sheet music was found in this tower," said Alfred. "In 1991. Real music that people had put away. At night, all the forgotten stories are gathered here too."

An open flute case stood on a table. Beside it lay a sheet of music, with a small handwritten note on top:

MUSIC MAY BE PLAYED DURING WORKING HOURS.

The signature began with B. The rest was white.

"He wrote that," said Maren.

She put a finger on the note, the way you touch a photograph of someone you miss.

They began to search.

Cook Poul found a recipe for a sauce he had been on bad terms with for a hundred years. The White Lady found a letter and quickly slipped it into her sleeve.

"Private."

Max found a drawer labelled MISCELLANEOUS.

"Here I am," he said.

Ella was about to smile when she saw what was inside.

There was a dog collar, a broken wooden clog and a blue book with loose pages.

Maren took the book in both hands.

“There it is.”

She sat on the floor and opened it.

On the first page, MAREN was written in big, crooked letters. Beneath it, another hand had written:

Now nobody can be in any doubt.

A little B followed it.

Maren stroked the words. Her fingers grew darker, clearer. Ella could see an old ink stain on one of them.

“How strange,” the girl said. “I’d forgotten I always got ink on that finger.”

Further in was the song. Max hummed the four notes, and Maren joined him.

Fnys breathed gently in time. The pale words on the page glowed.

Ella leaned closer.

The dragon’s breath brought the words out. Maren’s song held them there. They remained even when Fnys drew his head away.

“We have to do both,” said Ella. “The warmth opens it up. The story holds it in place.”

A ledger lay on the table. She opened it.

The first pages were filled with little accounts. A broken plate. A birthday. A horse that had once gone somewhere it wasn’t allowed. Further in, the corrections multiplied. Lines through names. Whole paragraphs painted over.

At the end, it only said:

TOO MANY MISTAKES.

Underneath:

START AGAIN.

The last page had been rubbed so hard that the paper was thin as skin.

“He started with himself,” said Maren.

She stood behind Ella.

“He said something must be wrong when the stories didn’t match. I said people don’t always remember things the same way. But he kept correcting.”

Alfred looked out of the window.

“He’s coming.”

Mr Blank crossed the courtyard. The white book lay open in his hands. Behind him, the trees had disappeared.

Ella opened the flute case fully. Beneath the instrument lay a thin strand of green wool.

“His scarf,” said Maren. “I knitted it. It was far too long.”

She picked up the wool.

“He wore it anyway.”

“Then perhaps you can remember his name,” said Ella.

Maren closed her eyes. She held the little thread tightly.

Outside, a voice called:

“All loose material must be handed in.”

A white line outlined the door.

Ella took Maren’s book and wrapped it in the sheet. Then she opened the window. There was water below, far enough down to make her step back at once.

“Bodil!” she called.

The water moved.

A yellow eye appeared at the foot of the tower.

“I’ve found the owner of the card!” Ella shouted. “But he’s forgotten himself.”

“That explains the behaviour,” said Bodil.

“We need to get his white book without getting it wet. Can you wait here?”

Bodil nodded.

The little crooked sun glowed on the sheet in Ella’s arms.

She was beginning to have a plan.

Then the door opened.

CHAPTER 10

Max Without a Name

Mr Blank stood in the doorway.

One of his shoes was still damp. He looked at Max.

“You.”

Ella stepped in front of her brother.

“You can’t have his name.”

“I don’t need the name,” said Mr Blank. “Only a trace.”

He showed them the paper Max had thrown. In the middle of the mud was his thumbprint.

Ella remembered the paper bird hitting her jacket. The white patch was still there.

Traces. That was what he collected.

Mr Blank pressed the paper against the page and drew his pen across the book.

Max fell silent.

It happened slowly. First, one shoe became transparent. Then the edge of his trousers.

“Ella?”

She caught his hand. It was still there. Warm. Small. With one nail he had bitten too far down.

“I’ve got you.”

“What’s my name?”

The question hit her harder than a scream.

“Max. Your name’s Max.”

He looked at her without nodding.

Fnys leapt forwards. Alfred caught the dragon before he reached the man.

"The book!" the night watchman shouted. "No fire!"

Mr Blank bent over the page again.

Ella knelt in front of her brother.

"You're seven. You have four stones in your pocket."

Max's free hand felt for his pocket.

"One looks like a potato," she said. "You say it's rare because all the others look like stones."

His mouth moved.

"It is."

A little colour returned to his shoe.

"You gave Bodil your button. You wouldn't leave the bird in that room. And you worked out that Fnys could breathe along to a song."

Ella held his gaze.

"I keep telling you to listen. I forget to do it myself."

Max squeezed her hand.

"You're doing it a bit now."

"Yes."

Behind them, the White Lady stepped in front of Mr Blank. Her dress spread across the floor.

"You are treading on my trailing portion."

"Move."

"Then you must move your foot."

Mr Blank looked down. Cook Poul pushed a chair behind his knees. The man with the tray emptied a cup over his hand.

There was still nothing in the cup.

“Sorry,” he said. “Old habit.”

It was enough to make Mr Blank turn.

Ella whispered her plan to Max. Then to Alfred. He looked towards the window and nodded.

Ella put Maren’s blue book carefully on the shelf. She spread the sheet in front of her.

Fnys climbed onto the table.

“I’ll need the song,” he said. His voice wasn’t big any more.

“You’ll have it,” said Max.

Alfred floated behind Mr Blank. Maren held out the woollen thread.

“Do you remember this?”

The man stiffened.

Something shifted around the eyes in his grey face.

“Loose material,” he said.

“A scarf. I couldn’t work out when to stop.”

She smiled nervously.

“You could have wrapped it round yourself three times.”

Mr Blank raised a hand to his throat.

Alfred grabbed the book’s bottom corner.

The man snatched it back.

But the horse poked its head through the wall and bit his sleeve.

It wasn’t a violent movement. More the sort of thing a horse does when checking whether a person might possibly be a curtain.

Mr Blank dropped the book.
It landed in the stretched-out sheet.
Ella and Max tightened their grip.
A dry sound came from the pages.
The sky outside had turned pale grey.
“We’ve got it,” Max whispered.
Ella could see three fingers on his hand.
The other two were gone.

CHAPTER 11

A Whole Book Full of People

Mr Blank lunged forwards.

Ella and Max lifted the sheet over the table. The book slid in front of Fnys and landed open.

The pages were white.

Completely white.

Ella had imagined names they could read aloud. Pictures. A list. Something she could understand.

“Fnys,” she said.

The dragon breathed in.

Maren began to sing.

Max joined her. His voice was thin, but the notes were there.

Fnys breathed out.

A red glow spread across the page. Lines appeared beneath the white. Tiny letters, closer and closer together. Ella saw ALFRED. She saw train wheels and a jester’s head. She saw Max’s four stones.

“Max,” she said. “You found the potato stone on the beach. You refused to throw it in the water because potatoes can’t swim.”

A ribbon of light lifted from the page and curled around her brother’s arm.

His fingers came back.

Max took such a deep breath that it sounded like a snore.

"I remember."

He put his hand on hers. All five fingers were there.

Mr Blank pulled free of the horse. Alfred blocked his way, but the man pushed him aside.

"Stop!"

He reached for the book.

The wet tip of a whisker appeared through the window and curled round his wrist.

Bodil had stretched up the tower. Her front flippers gripped the windowsill.

"I'd like you to let the children work, please."

"Let go!"

"Then stop pulling at the book."

She held him without tightening her grip. Water dripped from her chin into Alfred's bucket, which he hurried to put beneath her.

"Not on the pages," said Ella.

"I'm doing my best," said Bodil. "I'm designed for horizontal work."

Fnys breathed again. Maren kept singing, but her voice shook.

There were so many words.

Ella read Alfred's name aloud. Max told them about the toilet brush and the hat. Across the table, Alfred's buttons shone again.

The White Lady laid a hand on a drawing of her dress.

"I was wearing it when—"

She stopped and looked at the others.

"It's a long story."

"Tell the short version!" said Ella.

Cook Poul described his first soup, which had been so thick the spoon stood up in it. The man with the tray suddenly remembered a guest who had asked for thirteen cups, although there were only two people.

"My name's Søren," he said in amazement. "Of course it is. Søren."

Light rose from the book. It slipped out of the window, down through the floor and into the walls. A short train whistle sounded in the park.

Ella tried to turn the page, but it was stuck.

Fnys drew his head back. His nose twitched.

Max stopped singing at once.

"Not here."

The dragon clamped his mouth shut.

"I know."

His nose twitched again.

Max pushed the book away. Alfred lifted Fnys and pointed his snout towards the open window.

"Head down, Bodil!"

Bodil ducked. A sneeze sent a jet of fire across the empty water. It went out in the air with a little puff.

"I said no fire near my hairstyle," an offended voice called from below.

"You actually didn't," said Alfred.

"Well, I'm saying it now."

"I apologise for the volume," Fnys said hoarsely.

He slumped.

"I haven't got any more."

The final page was still white. It was stuck to the book's cover. Ella tried gently lifting a corner, but didn't dare pull.

Mr Blank stopped struggling.

"That one's mine," he said.

His voice sounded different. Less smooth.

Maren stood right beside him, holding the green thread.

"Bernhard," she said.

The name came calmly. The way it does when you finally find something that's been right in front of you all along.

The man closed his eyes.

"Your name is Bernhard. You wrote in my book that nobody could be in any doubt about who I was."

He shook his head.

"I wrote things wrongly. Got dates wrong. Forgot people."

"Then you had to correct them," said Maren.

"I corrected and corrected."

His eyes moved towards the white pages.

"In the end, there were no mistakes left."

"There was nobody left to read it either," said Ella.

For a moment, all they could hear was water dripping into the bucket.

Then Bodil released his wrist.

Bernhard stood still. He could take the book. Ella knew it. She held Max and waited.

Instead, he took off his glove.

There was an ink stain on his forefinger.

He looked at it for a long time.

“It never quite came off.”

“No,” said Maren. “You tried sand once. That was a bad afternoon.”

Fnys lifted his head. Max put both hands beneath his tummy and helped him over to the final page.

“Just a little,” he whispered. “You don’t have to be enormous.”

Maren hummed the song’s last notes.

Fnys breathed out. Not a cloud, just a warm thread.

Bernhard laid his bare hand beside the edge of the book.

“I was afraid you’d find out I couldn’t remember everything.”

Beneath the white, a name appeared.

BERNHARD.

“I remember you,” said Maren.

The page came loose.

Green spread around the man’s neck. A scarf appeared, loop after loop, until it hung almost to the floor.

Max stared.

“You really didn’t stop,” he told Maren.

She began to laugh. Then she cried a little. Then she laughed again, and Bernhard held her hand without knowing what to say.

A deep sigh sounded all around them.

Bernhard bent over the book. As his own page came free, the rest unfolded like a fan. He read the last names aloud. Whenever he hesitated, the others helped. Maren fetched her blue book, and Søren pointed at a little drawing of a tray.

"I know him too," he said. "He was always dropping teaspoons."

One by one, the final lights lifted from the paper.

The castle got its shadows back. The trees stood outside the window again. Names reappeared on the board by the door, one after another.

Ella carefully leafed back through the book.

Nobody was trapped in it any longer. Little traces of ink and warmth remained on the pages, but all the names had returned to their owners.

She gave Bernhard a stern look.

"You have to help put everything else back."

He nodded.

"And no more erasing," said Max.

Bernhard laid the fountain pen on the table.

"No more erasing."

Fnys was already asleep. His head rested on Maren's blue book, and he snored little smoke rings.

Outside, Bodil rested her chin on the windowsill.

"Are we finished?" she asked. "Because I have the most dreadful cramp in my left flipper."

CHAPTER 12

It Only Took a Moment

Alfred took the children back.

Now the corridors were corridors again. Doors were where they ought to be, and the portraits followed them with their eyes in an almost ordinary way.

In the great hall, the jester's mouth had returned.

"You took your time."

"You wanted a joke," said Max.

The head looked at him expectantly.

"What does a dragon say when you serve him soup?"

"I don't know."

"Could I have it flaming hot?"

Fnys opened one eye in Ella's arms.

"That isn't a joke. It's a reasonable question."

The jester laughed anyway. First a little laugh. Then a bigger one that made his painted hat bounce.

"I'm keeping that one."

Maren waited by the red door, her blue book under her arm. Bernhard stood just behind her, writing on a fresh sheet of paper.

He showed it to Ella.

INVESTIGATE WHAT WE DON'T KNOW.

There was a stain in the bottom corner. He left it there.

"I suppose I'll have to start by asking people," he said.

"And listening to the answer," said Ella.

He nodded.

The White Lady floated down the corridor. Her dress once again took up so much room that everyone had to stand against the wall.

"The train driver is back. He wishes to know who is paying for the horse."

"The horse," said Max.

"That was my suggestion too."

Fnys woke properly when Ella put him on the floor.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

Ella looked at Alfred.

He shook his head gently.

"We belong in the castle night. But now you know where to find us."

Fnys flicked his tail.

"Then I'd like to book some visits."

Max crouched down.

"With bread rolls?"

"With cheese. Present tense."

Max nodded and put a hand between the dragon's horns.

"You're the best dragon I know."

"How many do you know?"

"You."

Fnys considered this.

"A clear majority."

Ella hugged Maren. It was cold at first and warm afterwards, though she couldn't explain why.

Alfred opened the red door.

On the other side was the ordinary evening.

Ella could see her mum's work lamp. The drop still hung beneath the brush.

She took Max's hand.

"Ready?"

He looked back once. All the ghosts stood in the corridor. Fnys sat in front of them, chest puffed out. A little smoke rose from his nose.

"Yes."

They stepped through.

The drop fell.

Their mum turned.

"Right. I think it's time to eat."

Ella flung herself against her. Max arrived from the other side, and their mum nearly dropped her brush.

"Whoa. What's happened?"

Ella wanted to say everything. About the book, the train, Max's fingers. But her throat closed up, and all she could do was hold on.

Their mum put down the brush and wrapped her arms around them.

"Did something frighten you?"

Ella nodded against her jumper.

"We thought we couldn't get back."

"I'm right here."

They stood like that for a while. Nobody hurried them.

Then Max lifted his head.

“We’re going to need a lot of food.”

Their mum drew back far enough to look at them.

“Why are you wet? And Ella, what’s happened to your shoelace?”

Ella looked down. The tip was still brown.

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got time,” said their mum.

So they told her.

They sat on the floor eating sandwiches and talking over each other. Max started with Bodil. Ella started with the red door. They agreed to start with Alfred, but then Max remembered that the roll was important.

Their mum listened. Now and then she asked a question. When they reached the great auk, she found a picture on her phone of the real bird that had once been at the castle.

“It had a more annoyed face,” said Max.

“Most things do when a cook is carrying them,” said Ella.

She began to laugh. Max joined in, and suddenly it was hard to stop.

Later, their mum and Karl walked out with them. By the bridge, Max stopped behind the railings.

His button lay on a flat stone beside the water.

A green stem had been threaded through its holes and tied in a bow. The button looked like a very small medal.

Karl picked it up for him.

“Yours?”

“I gave it away.”

Max looked down at the water.

A bubble burst beside the stone.

“Thank you, Bodil,” he whispered.

Karl glanced quickly across the moat. Then he adjusted his bunch of keys.

“You’d better be getting home,” he said.

Ella stayed where she was for a moment.

“You do know what’s behind the red door.”

Karl looked at her. The corners of his mouth moved a little.

“I know you should knock.”

A distant thump came from inside the castle.

Then a very angry, very small voice:

“WHO PUT THE LID ON?”

Max smiled all the way across the bridge.

Next time, he would bring a whole roll.

With cheese.

What Is Real in the Story?

Aalholm Castle is real. It stands near Nysted on the Danish island of Lolland. But if you visit an old castle, a dragon won't necessarily greet you. He might be out having lunch.

This book mixes real traces of Aalholm's past with old legends and lots of imagination. Here is what belongs where.

The hidden staircase exists

There is a hidden spiral staircase in the south-east tower. It passes through the area by the Red King's Bedroom and leads down to the cellar. A tunnel all the way to Nysted, however, is a legend. It has not been documented. The novel's corridors and doors are freely invented and cannot be used as a map of the castle.

A letter was written at Aalholm in 1330

The oldest known letter issued at Aalholm itself dates from 1330. The book containing the copy Alfred shows the children was invented for this story. An old letter can tell us about a place, even when its writer had no idea that children would read about it hundreds of years later.

The royal visit left traces on the wall

Frederick II and Queen Sophie visited Aalholm in 1585. Painted names and mottoes from the visit survive on a wall. One name is accompanied by a jester's head and a drinking jug. The figure has been interpreted as a court jester. Its ability to tell jokes was invented for this novel.

The horse and the White Lady come from legends

Stories of a ghost horse and a white lady at Aalholm have been passed down. They are mentioned, among other places, in a book about manor houses published in 1938. A legend being old does not prove that its ghost exists. The horse's appetite for curtains and the lady's meetings are pure imagination.

The count kept a diary for many years

Otto Ludvig Raben kept a diary in French for 42 years. Among other things, it describes everyday life. Records like these can help us understand people who lived long before us. Maren's blue book and Bernhard's ledger, however, are fictional. None of their words in the novel are quotations from the count's diary.

The great auk was once at Aalholm

Frederik Christian Raben brought a stuffed great auk home from Iceland in 1821. The bird was later sold at auction in London in 1968. So it is not at Aalholm in the novel's present day. The children meet a magical memory of it. The great auk was a real flightless bird species, now extinct.

The little train once ran through the park

Stubberup Strand Bane was a small railway linking the motor museum of the time with the coast through the castle park. The train in the book is an imaginary version of that former railway. The floating rails and the argument over a horse's ticket exist only in the story.

The sheet music really was discovered

In 1991, a large collection of old sheet music was discovered in Aalholm's south-west tower. That is a different part of the castle from the hidden staircase in the south-east tower. In the novel, this discovery inspired the night archive. Maren's little washing song was created for this story; it does not come from the music collection.

What about Fnys and Bodil?

Fnys, Bodil, Ella, Max, their mum, Karl, Alfred, Maren, Cook Poul, Søren and Bernhard are fictional people and creatures. So are the castle night, the red door, the white book and the children's entire adventure. They should not be read as accounts of particular real employees or residents of Aalholm.

The historical information was checked against Aalholm Castle's own historical articles. These present the castle's history; work on this novel did not include independent research into the original archives. The articles on which the story draws are listed on the following pages.

Sources for the Historical Clues

All the following articles are published in Danish on Aalholm Castle's website and were consulted on 9 October 2026. The links can be opened in the digital editions of the book.

The secret tunnel from Aalholm

The oldest letter from Aalholm

The royal visit and the names on the wall

The ghost horse, the White Lady and the court jester

The count's diary

The great auk from Iceland

Stubberup Strand Bane

The discovery of sheet music at Aalholm