

SEVEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-NINE ELVES... AND ONE BRIDGE

TEXT BY ANTONIO MALPICA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUIS SAN VICENTE





ANTONIO MALPICA was born in Mexico City in 1967. Although he studied Computer Engineering, he soon realized that telling stories made him happier, so in 2001 he published his first novel for adults, *El impostor*, and his first for children, *Las mejores alas*. Today he has several children's and youth novels published and has received various awards for them, such as the Premio Internacional Norma. He has been the first Mexican to obtain the Premio Iberoamericano SM de Literatura Infantil y Juvenil. His most recent works are *Principio y fin*, the last book in the saga *El libro de los héroes*, the illustrated book *La porción más grande de pastel*, and the youth novels *Una tribu* and *Al final, las palabras*.

SEVEN HUNDRED
AND FIFTY-NINE ELVES...
AND ONE BRIDGE

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SEVEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-NINE ELVES... AND ONE BRIDGE

First edition in English, 2026

Original title in Spanish: SETECIENTOS CINCUENTA Y NUEVE ELFOS...

Y UN PUENTE

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Viaducto Tlalpan núm. 100, esquina Periférico Sur,
col. Arenal Tepepan, 14610, Ciudad de México

ISBN complete electronic work in English: 978-607-8870-87-5

ISBN electronic volume in English: 978-607-2604-57-5

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AND FIFTY-NINE ELVES...
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Text by Antonio Malpica
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PRESENTATION

Seven Hundred and Fifty-Nine Elves...and One Bridge is a work that is part of the **Árbol** collection, which the Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE, National Electoral Institute) makes available to children to be able to share, in an easy and enjoyable way, topics related to the formation of citizens and democratic values through literature.

This publication forms part of the Estrategia Nacional de Cultura Cívica 2017-2023 (National Civic Culture Strategy 2017-2023), which, with its topics, intends to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life in our society as citizens with rights and responsibilities. In this context, its aim is to encourage the active participation of our youth in events of public interest and contribute to their transformation into relevant participants in the political life of our country.

In the following pages, the reader will delve into the history of two communities that have been enemies for so long that the cause of their differences has been forgotten. Finally, they manage to achieve a space to converse, and thanks to attentive listening and dialogue, they manage to resolve the conflict in a way that satisfies both sides.

This short tale is an opportunity to enjoy a literary work of great value, and to do it with your family or friends. While the story is attractive for all ages, it is intended particularly for children in the upper grades of elementary school. The readers will have the chance to reflect on the importance of dialogue and respect for the rights of others in their pursuit of the common good.

The final pages include a section called “To Reflect and Discuss,” which is intended for children, so that, alone or with the support of a close adult, they can reflect on the importance of analyzing the causes of the problems that afflict our society and proposing realistic solutions to resolve conflicts, while highlighting that we all have the civic duty to participate in these solutions.

Seven Hundred and Fifty-Nine Elves... and One Bridge

“What now, my lord?” said Orvil, the royal assistant.

“We’ll wait a little longer,” responded Borgon, the one and only king of North Asgardonia.

At that moment, the sun was shining; as were the swords of three hundred and eighty-four elves ready and willing for the fiercest of battles.

And a horn...

I mean, there was something else that was shining that morning. It was a horn; the one that Orvil was holding and that, when it sounded, would signal all the blue Asgardonians to attack.

A horn that, in reality, was not unique.

There was another one exactly like it on the other side of the battlefield. Gurdran, the royal aid of South Asgardonia, was holding it.

“So, what do you say, my lord?” Gurdran would ask after a few minutes of tense calm.

To which Marliq, the one and only king of South Asgardonia would respond, “Give me a few minutes, boy. I am defining the strategy.”



Behind him three hundred and seventy-five green elves held their spears, their swords, their lances...and they waited for the signal. Not impatiently, in truth. If it were up to them, they would have postponed the war a few more minutes. Or maybe hours. Or days.

Since after all, the only difference there was between them and the elves on the other side of the river was that their standard was blue, and they lived to the north. Beyond that, you could not say which was the North Asgardonian at a South Asgardonian family dinner, not even if you looked at them with a magnifying glass. And I know it very well because I live in a cave on Mount Moad, right in the middle of the plain where they were about to engage in the most ferocious of battles.

To say the truth, I was a little impatient. And tired from lack of sleep. This issue of them hating each other had lasted so long that even I was anxious for it to end. One way or another.



However, North Asgardonians' horn did not sound. Nor that of the South Asgardonians.

They were driving me crazy.

This is because the plain of Mount Moad is on the north side of the river, which means that the southerners had to climb into their boats, go ashore and prepare for battle. That is, King Marliq did not wake up that morning and, after looking out the window, conclude, "What a nice day to start a war." No, sir. This was well thought out and had likely been in the planning for a long time.



For this reason, I could not understand why neither of the horns had sounded. It was enough to drive anyone crazy.

“Why don’t we just get it over with and attack?” said Orvil when the sun was high in the sky and the troops were playing cards on the grass.

“I don’t know,” said Borgon. “They’re the ones who crossed the river. If we had marched over to their side, then maybe...”

Something similar was happening on the other side.

“What do you say? Shall I sound the horn?” asked Gurdran.

“I think they should at least have the courtesy to attack first,” asserted Marliq, biting the nails on his left hand. “It’s what I would do if we were on my side.”

The sun started to set, and I started to really get impatient.

I recalled that the strife between the green and the blue Asgardonians dated back to such ancient times that not even I could remember the real cause.

But it was totally true that they could not even look at each other. When the North Asgardonians needed to cross the river, they did it without touching South Asgardonian soil. And vice versa. It was well known that if two ships flying different flags met crossing the river, they would end up trying to sink each other.



The same happened if two wagons from the two regions met on a road, the drivers would do everything they could to push the other off the road. Not to mention two Asgardonians who came across each other in a cafe in a foreign country. Brawl for sure!

And yet...

It had never come to a war between brothers.

And maybe, because of that, neither of the two monarchs wanted to take the first step.

Consequently, when the first horn sounded timidly on the south side, there was complete turmoil among the troops. The head of the green force had to go ask Marliq:

“Sir...was that actually a call to battle or some sort of sound check?”

“Eh, well, now that you mention it...a drill first doesn't seem like a bad idea,” snorted Marliq, clearly relieved.

It was then that I could take no more and I left my peak.

I spread my wings and sailed across the sky, roaring furiously. I bathed the sky with a radiant flash and landed in the middle of the battlefield. A cloud of dust blew up and I took advantage of it to discharge a new and powerful roar.

Regardless of this, not one of the seven hundred and fifty-nine elves ran away or anything like that. I suppose that we were all just too used to each other.

“King Marliq! King Borgon!” I thundered. “Might I have a brief chat with you two?”





A murmur awoke amongst the soldiers in both armies, which quickly quieted down with the presence of the two monarchs. Meanwhile they approached me.

Once they were by my side, the silence was absolute.

“Might we know what it is that you want, Mage Irdril?” Borgon asked me, still staring furiously at his rival. “Can’t you see that you are interrupting a war that is in progress?”

“Yes, stop butting into our business, Mage Irdril,” joined in Marliq, staring furiously at his adversary as well. “If it weren’t for you, we would have finished off these northerners already.”



Since my transformation into a dragon had not had much effect, I decided to leave it and take on my human form.

“Come on!” I intervened. “You both know that I didn’t interrupt anything. And I’m giving you a good pretext to sit down and converse like people.”

This said, I made two cushions appear so they could sit down, a sofa for me, and a tea service.

“There is nothing to talk about with this kind of despicable barbarian!” argued Marliq, who, of course, refused to sit down.

“I feel the same way. Indeed, I had already thought those very same words!” grunted Borgen, crossing his arms, and, of course, refusing to take a seat.

I looked at them with interest. Maybe it was naive of me to think that we could sit down and talk, have tea and cookies, and come to an agreement if we were talking about such an old grievance.

“Alright,” I said, “But...just out of sheer curiosity, can you tell me what caused all of this hate?”

“The Great and Unforgivable Incident!” they said in unison and perfectly synchronized, as if they had agreed beforehand.

“Oh! I really didn’t know,” I responded. “And can you tell me who offended whom?”







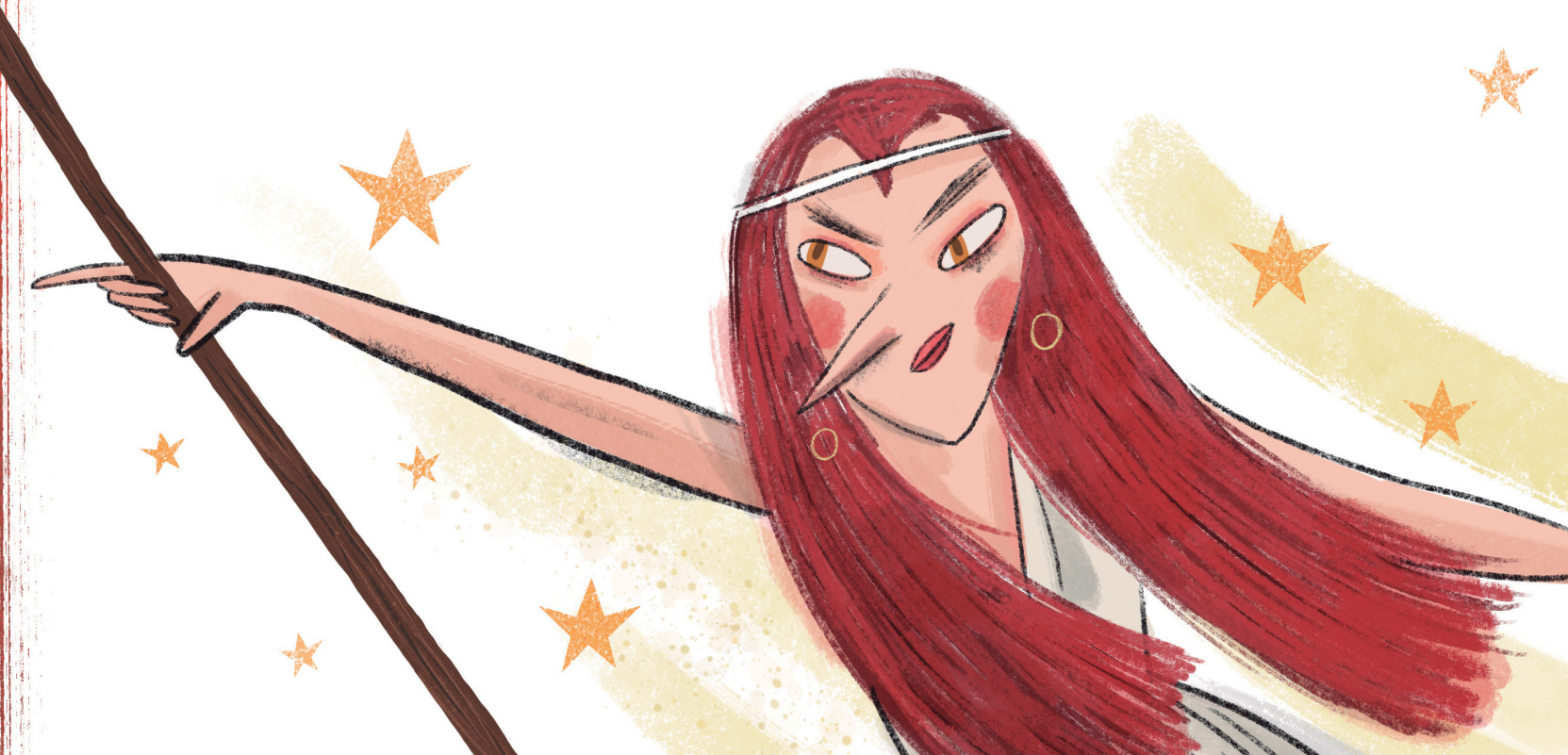
“They offended us,” they replied again simultaneously, and then continued in a sort of chorus where their words always coincided:

“What do you mean, scoundrel? You offended us! Stop repeating what I’m saying! You are going to regret this, monkeyface.”

I had to resort to magic, which I am not always proud of, but there are times when there is no other option. I put a lock on the mouth of both elves, and I did not free them from silence until they promised to speak as politely.

“And can you tell me, ahh...what the ‘incident’ was?” I asked with genuine interest, making quotation marks in the air. I had already sat down and served myself some tea. I could never have imagined the kings’ reactions to my question.

“Well...indeed...the incident...you tell her, Marliq.”



“By no means...you tell her, Borgon.”

“But I insist. You are our guests, Marliq.”

“The incident...of course...the Great and Unforgivable Incident...uh...”

As it turned out, neither of them knew!

This, in their opinions, was not reason enough to absolve each other from suffering their ruthless and terrible revenge. I understood that my intervention, in the end was inevitable. I deposited the cup of tea on the tray (eventhough I had only just added the two sugar cubes I like to drink it with) and I got to my feet.

“I’ll tell you what we are going to do,” I declared, suddenly inspired. “I will go back in time and find out what the tremendous incident you all talk so much about was. If I can, I will resolve once and for all. And for no extra charge. After unravelling the knot, I will return to the present. And then I’m sure that we will all be able to have tea together like the best of friends...because we will be! Do you agree?”







I had to sit them down with magic. And put in their hands their respective cups.
“Don’t delay, Mage,” grumbled one.

“Bring some cakes,” growled the other.

I waved my wand and transformed myself in an eagle. I went back in time to the very moment when the Great and Unforgivable Incident occurred.

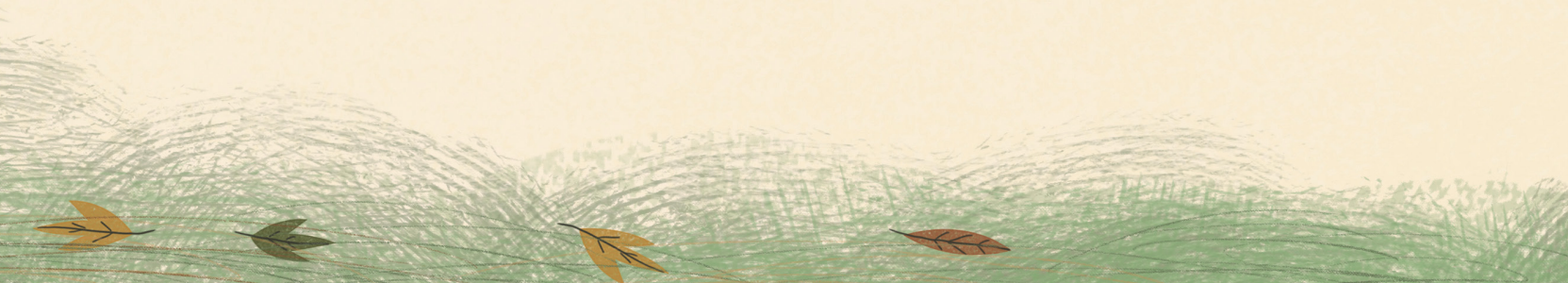
I flew over the region and the first thing that caught my attention was that there were not two Asgardonias. There was just one. And that both regions belonged to the same kingdom and were joined together by a wooden hanging bridge that crossed the River Oyur from one side to the other. On the bank, there was a sign: “Asgardonia North Borough.” And on the other side there was a matching one that said: “Asgardonia South Borough.” Furthermore, everything indicated that they were times of peace and harmony.

I remember, however, thinking something about the bridge. “Isn’t it rather narrow?” I said to myself. Almost immediately, adding: “If we had the bad luck that two fat elves wanted to cross at the same time from opposite sides...”

And guess what.

Halfway across the narrow bridge there were two elves, from both boroughs of the cities. And if ever in my life I have seen fat elves, well these take first prize.

“It’s a pity,” said the one going from north to south, “but I need to pass.”



“Too bad, because so do I,” replied the one going from south to north.

“Yes, but my business is more important.”

“No offense, my friends, but it’s easy to see that my business is much more important.”

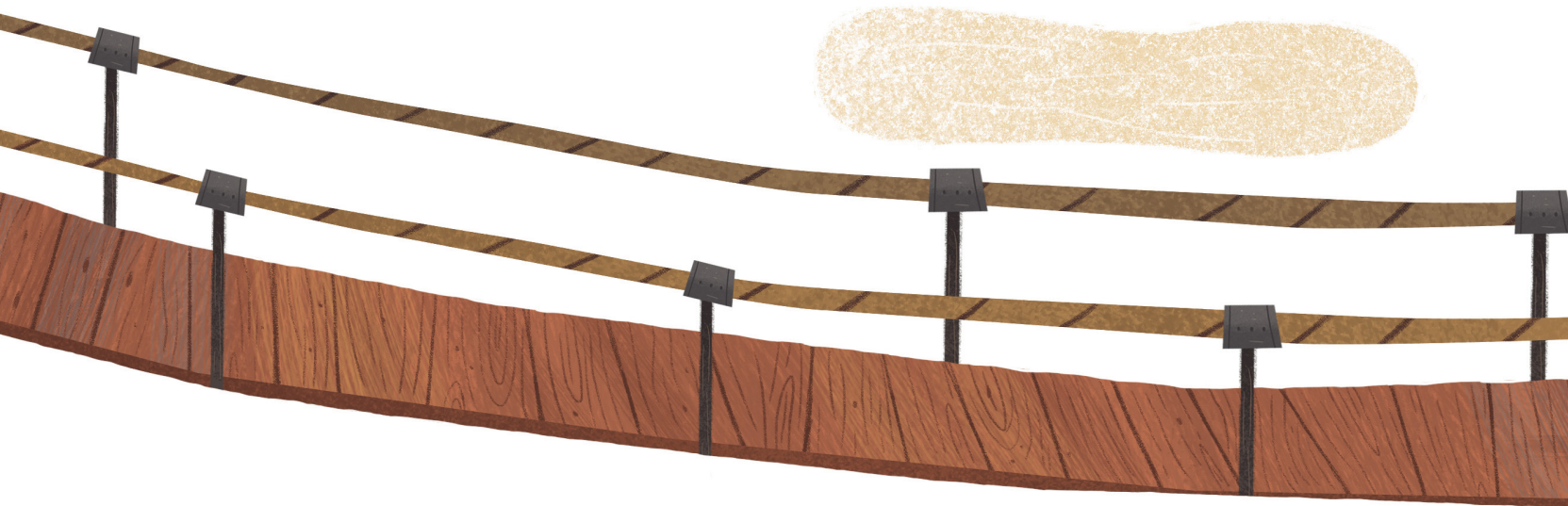
They looked at each other in much the same way as Borgen and Marliq had looked at each other in the present. Then one of them blared out:

“Well...I just want to say that I’m not going back. And that’s a fact.”

“What is a fact, my dear friend, is that I’m not going back.”

“We could be here for days blocking the passage.”

“As far as I’m concerned, it could be weeks.”





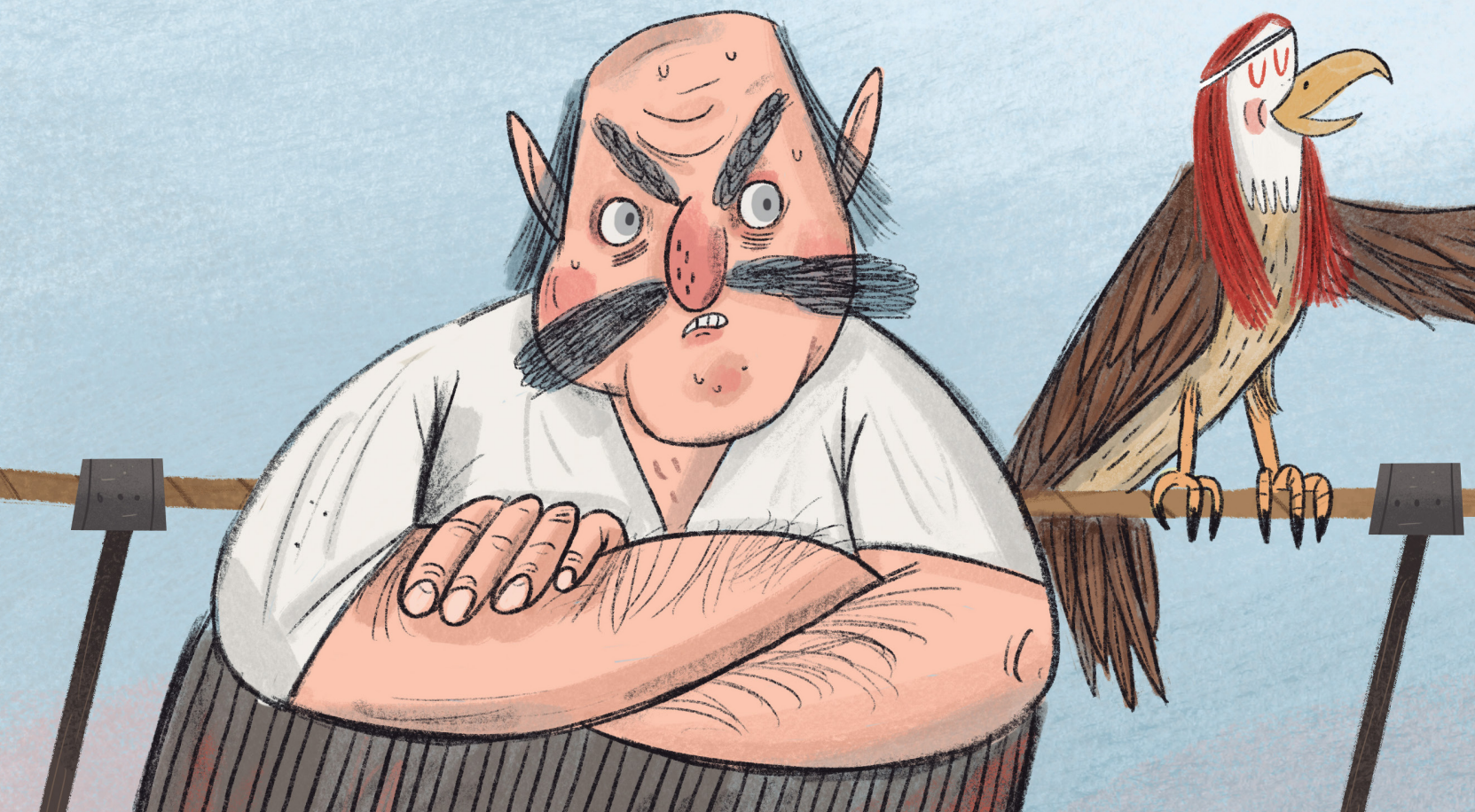
I found myself at that moment perched on the handrail of the bridge.
And I thought of a way out, which I shared with them instantly:

“Hey, friends...,” I said, as if it weren’t a big deal, “Why don’t both of you give your reasons and try to come to an agreement?”

They looked at me with evident annoyance.

“And why would we do what a smart-alec bird orders?”

“Yeah, why?”



“I don’t know,” I pointed out, “maybe because I’m right.”

The truth is that my intervention aggravated the situation and a struggle broke out between the two enormous elves ending up with one of them in the water. I won’t say which so as not to give my tale a political edge. I will say that it was “the incident” that triggered everything. Gossip spread. Factions formed. And two weeks hadn’t gone by before the boroughs were enemies and, finally, destroyed the bridge.

Frankly, the problem seemed so petty that I felt almost no desire to fix anything. I got the impression that all the Asgardonians had got what they deserved.





But then I concluded that it wouldn't cost me anything and that possibly it would bring a bit of peace and harmony to everyone in the present time. Some of us might even be able to get a good night's sleep for once in our caves, without wars to wake us up.

So, I went back to the past to the moment of the "incident." This time in my human form. I stood behind the elf from the south, trying to go north.

"No offense, my friend, but it's easy to see that my business is much more important," said the chubby pedestrian.

To which I said:


"May I suggest something?"

Since the presence of a magician always has a greater impact in these lands than that of a talking bird, both paid attention to my suggestion. And since they weren't very good at discussing, I suggested they leave it to luck.

They played "rock, paper, scissors" two out of three.

And then, three out of five.

Finally, and only because a magician has no other choice but to turn into a dragon when she gets angry...they played five out of nine. One of the elves had logically lost. I won't say which for the same reason as before, but in the end he was obliged to retrace his steps back to where he had started. And resentment invaded his heart.



He declared himself beaten and humiliated. And, consequently, the gossip spread. Factions formed. And two weeks hadn't gone by before the boroughs became complete enemies and, finally, destroyed the bridge.

A little disappointed with myself, I sat down and tried to think of some other alternative. After a few days, I thought I had found a solution.

So, I went back to the past...again.

Except now, not to the exact moment of the incident, but half an hour before it.

My calculation was perfect. I placed myself on the north side of the bridge, and I did not have to wait long. This time in the form of a malignant troll.

As soon as the North Asgardonian elf arrived, I planted myself in front of him.

“Greetings! I am the troll of this bridge! To cross you must solve a riddle!”

The overweight and temperamental elf looked at me with scorn.

“What kind of joke is this? This is a public bridge!”

“Not anymore, pal. You must solve the riddle!”

“And if I don't want to?”

“You cannot pass.”



And in case there was any doubt, I added:

“And maybe I’ll devour you.”

“You know what? I am tired of the city council. This isn’t the first time they commit such a blunder. I’m going to complain. I am a responsible elf who pays his taxes... almost always.”

Regardless of this, the plan was working out wonderfully. The only thing I needed was to buy time, so these hearty elves did not meet halfway across the bridge, and thus save the future.

“Alright. Tell me the riddle, bridge warden.”

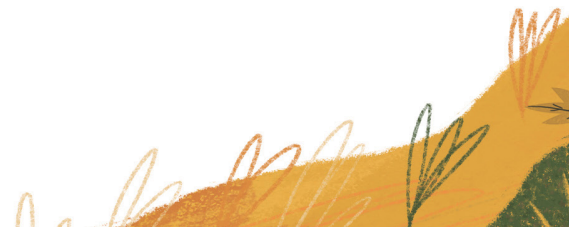
“Hey...I don’t like your tone. I’m only doing my job!”

I looked over my shoulder. At a distance, I could see South Asgardonian elf coming. Nothing could be better.

“Tell me the riddle, troll, I have lots of important business to attend to on the other side.”

“Okay, pay attention. Two elves leave at the same time from two different boroughs, A and B, with 200 meters separating them; they are moving towards each other. How long will it take for them to meet if one is traveling at a speed of 40 meters per minute and the other is traveling at a speed of 50 meters per minute?”

“What???”



“You guessed correctly. You can pass. It was a trick question.”

The thing that was correct was that the other elf had reached the bank. And I got out of the way. Piece of cake. Both elves were able to pass with no mishaps. One more triumph for Mage Irdril!

This time I did not hang around to make sure of anything since I was sure that peace and harmony would be a reality when I went back.

I would find only happy, friendly faces when I got there! Joy would reign in the united Asgardonia! Yes, sir!



And a horn...

I mean...that when I got back, that's what I found on my armchair, which made me jump with surprise. But both kings were in exactly the same spot as when I had left; only now their assistants were with them.

"Why did you take so long, Mage Irdril?"

"And you didn't bring the cakes!"

I studied their faces. Could it be possible, that they were now actually friends?

"How did it go, by the way?"

"It went wonderfully well! I would tell you about the Great and Unforgivable Incident, but you wouldn't know what I was talking about because thanks to me it never happened! Never!"

The four of them looked at me as if I were insane.

"What are you saying, crazy Mage?" growled Borgon. "That's the incident we have all been ready to wage a combat for a few hours ago!"

I did not need more than a couple of seconds to understand the problem. And it came about in the form of a mathematical riddle. "What is the probability that two obese elves who live on different sides of the same bridge meet up in the middle of the bridge any day in their long lives?"



I understood that I had only postponed the incident, I never eliminated it. A little disappointed, I put on a brave face and admitted my mistake.

“It’s my fault, friends. But if you give me a moment...I can still...”

“It’s not necessary,” King Marliq said, with a slight smile.

To which the others nodded. Incidentally, they were each holding a cup of tea and a piece of cookie. And I noticed that Orvil and Gurdan were chatting with each other cheerfully.



“What do you mean?” I asked the king curiously.

“As you heard, Irdril,” insisted Marliq. “In truth, the only way your magic has helped us was by giving us a good place to converse...and pushing us to do it.”

“We have realized,” added Borgon, “thanks to a few minutes of frank negotiation, that the past is...the past. That our differences can be resolved. And that we have a lot to gain if we both try to work together for the common good. Actually, the first thing we are going to do is build a bridge that joins our two lands.”

The four toasted with their cups, and I preferred to interfere no more. I did not, in truth, even want to mention that once a long, long time ago there was a bridge. And that it was the real symbol of unity of the two Asgardonias.

So, everything worked out alright. And it was thanks to them, which made me very proud.

Even so, there was still an “incident” worth mentioning. And I put it in quotation marks because for almost nothing, there could have been a new “incident” of “great offense” which could have led to many years of renewed animosity.

And, well, let me tell you. When they built the bridge, they made it so narrow that when I saw it, only one thought crossed my mind: “If we had the bad fortune that two obese elves wanted to cross at the same time from opposite directions...”

And guess what.

There was prosperity these days in Asgardonia. The only flag was purple. Everything worked perfectly.

But one day...

In the middle of the narrow bridge, two elves met up, from both boroughs of the city. And if in my life I've ever seen more obese elves... These easily could have been descendants of those I, myself, had met in the past and who would, no doubt, take both the gold and silver medals.

"It's a shame," said the one going from north to south, "but I need to pass."

"Too, bad, because so do I," replied the one going from south to north.

"Yes, but my business is more important."

"No offense, my friend..."

I felt the overpowering urge to appear in a flash, I was the eagle on the bridge handrail. And, truthfully, I was about to open my beak when one of them said:

"Why don't we both give our reasons, and we try to come to an agreement?"

I felt like turning into an orchestra and playing a tremendous fanfare.



Even so, incredibly, the other countered.

“Agreed. But I think I have a better solution. Though I am a little embarrassed to suggest it.”

“Fear not, say it, my friend,” responded the other. “Since we are already conversing.”

And that is how years and years of peace and harmony began in Argardonia of the purple flag.



Just when one elf hugged the other, and like that, hugging, they slowly turned around, they found themselves on the side of the bridge that they wanted to be.

I know because I witnessed it. And because, since then, I have slept without interruptions.



TO REFLECT AND DISCUSS



Dialogue and Coming to Agreements

Today more than ever our country needs its people to be united, to discuss our desires and worries, to look for answers, to express our differences, to understand and respect one another in our search for agreements and the achievement of common good, so that together we can change our present to construct a better future.

We can learn this in daily life, from childhood, in our families and in the environment that surrounds us. For this reason, we offer elements for analysis that can motivate and facilitate reflection and discussion about this important topic, which affects our lives as citizens.

To ensure that this story is meaningful for children, we invite caregiver, teachers, and parents to accompany them as they read, to enjoy the story, discuss it, and reflect, with them, on how it relates to them and what they imagine a more active civic participation would be like. Through literature we can contrast, on a small scale, what this means.

The Estrategia Nacional de Cultura Cívica 2017-2023 (National Civic Culture Strategy 2017-2023) is a program designed by the Instituto Nacional Electoral, which proposes different areas of action to help strengthen our democratic life with dialogue and coming to agreements as its foundation.

In the story *Seven Hundred and Fifty-Nine Elves...and One Bridge* the inhabitants of two communities were about to wage war on each other, under the orders of their representatives they demanded their rights. The problem had initiated years previously and revolved around the use of a bridge, over which both claimed ownership and right of way.

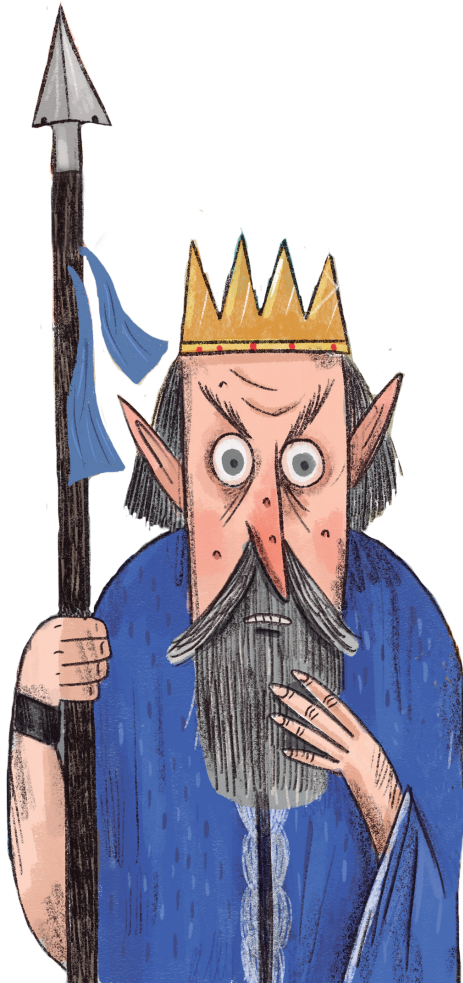
The necessary condition for there to be civic participation is related to the amount of interpersonal trust that exists between the members of society.

Even though at the beginning of the story neither kingdom trusted Mage, Irdril, she explored different ways to solve the conflict that separated the two elf communities, she even traveled to the past to find out the cause of the problem and to obtain more elements to resolve it.



Neither the North Asgardonians nor the South Asgardonians trusted themselves enough, which made it impossible to come to an agreement that would benefit everyone.

To achieve democratic dialogue amongst our citizens, it is fundamental that we build bridges of understanding in search of improvements that will benefit us all.



Although Irdril used magic to help the North Asgardonians and the South Asgardonians to end their problems and live in peace, the key that allowed them to achieve their goal was her invitation to have tea and cookies and to converse, so that they could express their reasons calmly and try to come to an agreement. King Marliq recognized this when he said:

“In truth, the only way your magic has helped us was by providing us with a good place to converse...and pushing us to do it.”

“We have realized,” added Borgon, “thanks to a few minutes of frank negotiation, that the past is...the past. That our differences can be resolved. And that we have a lot to gain if we both try to work together for the common good. In fact, the first thing we are going to do is to build a bridge that joins our two lands together.”

And so, everything ended well. And thanks to themselves, they would all be able to get a good night's sleep with no wars to wake them up.

All of us, as citizens, have the obligation to participate in the solutions of public problems and to be vigilant that laws are being abided by.

The North Asgardonians and the South Asgardonians achieved peaceful coexistence. They learned that they could express, without fear, the suggestions they had for improvements in their communities and decide on symbols that would represent them all. Thus, there would no longer be a blue or a green flag, only a purple one, which would represent all of the inhabitants of Asgardonia.

It will be very important that you listen to any doubts children might have about the story, and their experiences and opinions about how they experience this topic, at school as well as in their community. We hope the children and the people close to them enjoy this story and that it contributes to their citizenship education.





*SEVEN HUNDRED AND FIFTY-NINE ELVES...
AND ONE BRIDGE*

The Bembo Std font family was used.



LUIS SAN VICENTE was born in Mexico City in March 1970. The eldest son of Don Miguel and Doña Pilar, from his childhood he showed devotion to drawing and used to scratch notebooks, papers, desks and any surface where he could trace with ink or pencil. He studied Graphic Communication Design at the UAM. He has illustrated more than 40 children's books for publishers in Mexico, the United States, Spain, Argentina, Poland, Colombia and Venezuela. His work has been recognized with several national and international awards, including the Catálogo de Ilustraciones de Publicaciones Infantiles y Juveniles awarded by Conaculta (twice) and the Noma Encouragement Prize from Japan (Unesco). Likewise, he has received two honorable mentions at the Encuentro Latinoamericano de Diseño in Palermo, Argentina. He has been selected in the Nami Concours of South Korea, and obtained two mentions in the Catálogo Iberoamericano de Ilustración. His work has been exhibited in various countries, such as Germany, France, Slovakia, Italy, Spain, Cuba and Mexico.



Since time immemorial, the North Asgardonian elves have been enemies of the elves of South Asgardonia. It's been so long that they can't even remember why they're upset.

However, they remain tense, about to start a war.

With the help of Mage Irdril and her delicious tea with cookies, they will be able to sit down together to talk and listen to each other. Then, they will reach an understanding that benefits the inhabitants of both towns.

This volume is part of the *Árbol* collection, whose objective is to contribute to the civic culture of children and young people through attractive stories that encourage reflection and active participation in society.