




Podkin saw Pook was right. The creature was the same breed of giant, fanged wolf that ran through the oldest parts of Grimheart. Somehow it had been captured . . .



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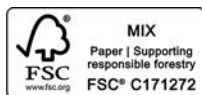
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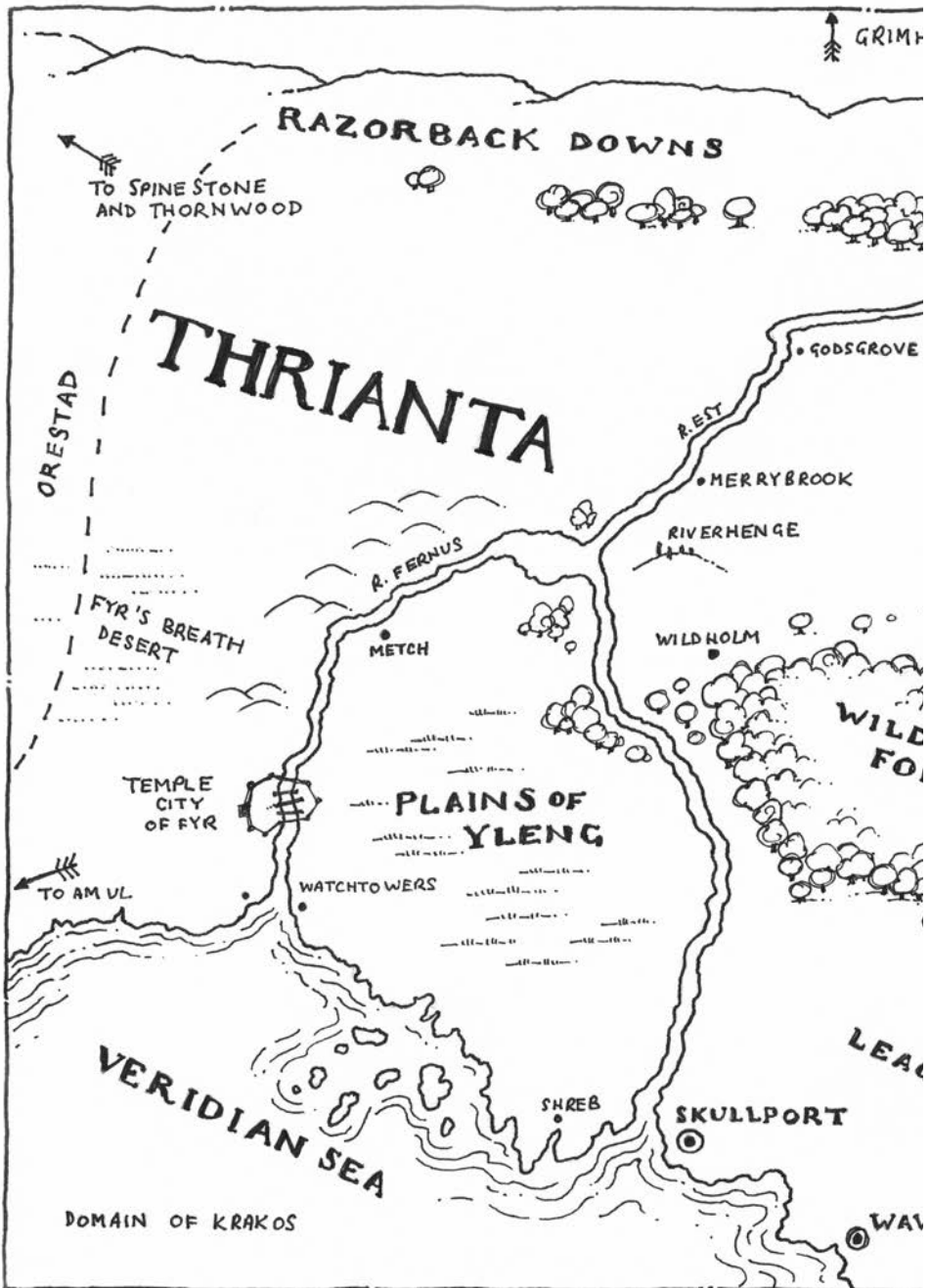


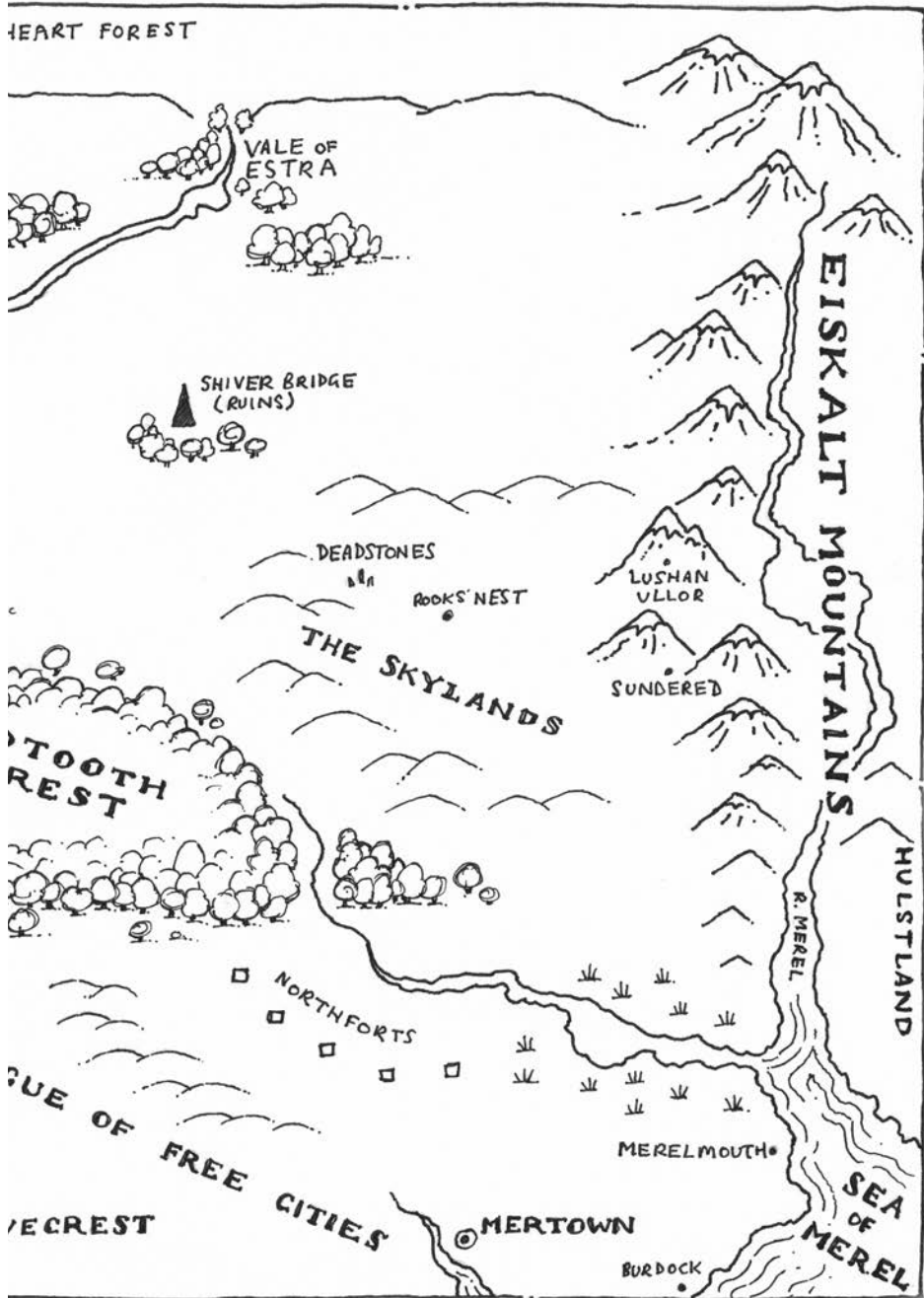
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To Correy









Prologue

Deep beneath the ground, in a lightless world of roots and soil, a mole pushes her way through the soft loamy earth.

It is dark and quiet down here. The only sounds are the soft *shunk shunk* as the mole digs her mighty paws into the mud and heaves it back behind her. The snorting *choof* as she blows dust from her snout.

Nudging along, she crafts her tunnel, winding around the great bones of long-lost creatures. Around their crumbling skulls and through the empty arches of their jaw bones. She carves her way over buried

slabs of carved stone, their sharp edges completely alien in this silent, earthy world.

Then, sensing the cool pull of dampness above, she bends her tunnel upwards, spiralling through tree roots until she can smell the clear cold scent of the open air.

She has come hunting near the river, where the muddy bank is always full of plump juicy earthworms.

Up, up, up she pushes, the crumbling mud pouring off the soft grey velvet of her fur.

Finally she breaks through the crust, tumbling soil out to make a little hill of fresh brown dirt. She pokes her pink nose skywards, snuffling, sniffing.

Rabbits, she smells. Those things that build the big pockets of air underground. But what are they doing on the riverbank?

And there is something else as well. An ancient, mushroomy smell, as old as the deepest part of the forest. *A warden*, the mole thinks. One of those who guard the trees. A safe, comforting scent. But, along with it, is another . . . one that reminds the mole of sharp teeth and the crunching of bone and soft mole flesh.

Wolf. Danger.

Today is not the day for snuffling about in the Above.

Leaving the rabbits to their business with wolves and wardens she turns her nose and burrows back down to where it is dark and safe.

To the dim, mulchy underground with its bones and forgotten secrets . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Race to the Downs

‘**T**hornwood is burning.’ Rue repeats the bard’s words, as if he doesn’t quite understand. His little speckled nose twitches as he sniffs the air, trying to pick up the scent of smoke, but he doesn’t smell anything.

He is sitting at the stern of a sleek longboat, one of a pair that are cutting their way down the Red River which runs through the middle of Grimheart forest. With him is his master, the old bard, and his friends Jori, Nikku, Mish and Mash. And they have taken on new passengers recently: Pocka – one of the giant

forest guardians – and Yasmin, the priestess from the Vale of Estra who can see into the future. In the seats before them, a crew of burly rowers heave at their oars, eyes fixed on the surrounding trees, which until very recently were full of enemy rabbits from the sinister Endwatch. They have just survived an ambush, and the deep shadows between the trunks could be hiding any number of other nasty surprises.

‘Pocka’s nose is much more sensitive than ours,’ the bard explains. ‘And, if there are trees being harmed, he can probably sense it as well. If he says Thornwood is on fire, then we’d better believe him.’

The towering guardian, with his wooden horns covered in fungi, nods his head. A frown creases his enormous brow and those gentle eyes look frightened.

‘But my parents . . . my brothers . . .’ Rue spots the terrified look on the bard’s face as well. ‘*Podkin*. They’re all in danger!’

‘Try and stay calm, if you can.’ Yasmin rests a paw on both Rue and the bard’s shoulders. ‘The Endwatch may have reached them, they may be under attack, but we don’t know exactly what is happening. There may be time to get there, to help . . .’

‘But the warren is on fire!’ Rue wails, tears beginning to spill from his eyes. ‘We weren’t quick enough to warn them! It’s too late!’

‘Did you send sparrows?’ the bard asks Yasmin. ‘Did they know?’

‘I did,’ says Yasmin. ‘As soon as I received your own message. The warren would have been prepared.’

‘Then we might still be able to do something.’ Jori leans across and puts an arm around Rue, who snuggles into her worn leather armour, quietly sobbing. ‘Rabbit warrens can survive long sieges, and the Endwatch can’t have many agents left. If we take the jerboas, we can be across the downs in two days or less. We shall catch them unawares and pick them off from the rear.’

‘We will follow on after,’ says Mish. ‘It’ll take us a bit longer by foot, but we’ll bring our boat crews with us. They’re all good fighters, as well as rowers.’

‘We may yet make a difference.’ The bard thinks aloud. ‘Yasmin, have you seen anything of the future? Do you know what will happen?’

Yasmin shakes her head, her ears pressed tightly

down. ‘Nothing other than that there is serious danger. I had a vision of fire and fighting and after that . . . it all went blank.’

*

The boats whistle through the water, shooting in between the trees like twin arrows.

Gradually, the banks begin to draw in, the river narrowing until it becomes too tight to row down. From here on, it is little more than a wide stream, bubbling up from its source somewhere beneath the chalky rocks of the Razorback downs.

‘Ship your oars!’ Mash bellows, then coughs as his voice cracks. He turns to the bard and Rue. ‘We will unload the jerboas and set you on your way. You should be able to make the forest edge by nightfall.’

The bard nods and helps Rue on with his pack. They wait for the rowing crew to set the gangplanks in place and then help them lead the three jerboas down on to the riverbank. Great fluffy things with faces like gerbils and legs like kangaroos, they *neek* with pleasure when their paws touch solid ground again. They nibble at grass on the bank as Jori, Nikku and the bard climb up into their saddles.

‘Be swift,’ says Yasmin, as they gather the reins, ready to ride. ‘And be safe.’

‘We’ll be there as soon as we can,’ says Mish. She stands, arms linked with Mash, watching their friends with nervous looks on their faces.

Pocka, the giant guardian, reaches down with one paw and lifts Rue with it, cupping him as if he is a tiny fieldmouse. He sets him on the saddle in front of the bard, and then raises a thumb and forefinger and sweeps it across his massive nose.


‘He says *good luck*,’ translates the bard.

‘Are you coming to help as well?’ Rue asks the mighty guardian. Having a horned giant on their side seems like it might be a very good idea.

Pocka nods, then shakes his staff. The size of a small tree trunk, it is covered all over in layers of mushrooms and toadstools, for Pocka is the guardian of all the fungi in Grimheart.

‘We shall see you soon,’ says the bard. Then adds under his breath, ‘I hope.’


‘Let’s ride!’ Jori kicks her jerboa on, and it darts between the trees, clearing metres with each leap of its enormous legs. Nikku follows, the bright red




of her arrow fletchings gleaming from the quiver on her back, and then the bard taps the sides of his mount with his feet and the beast springs away.

Rue has one last glimpse of Pocka and the others watching them go from between the trees, and then they are quickly lost amongst the thick trunks and soft mossy darkness.

*



They ride for the rest of the day, weaving over roots, crouching low on the backs of their steeds to avoid being whipped in the face by passing branches. Still, every now and then one catches the bard on the ear and he yelps.



‘Stupid twigs! I’m going to have shredded ears to match the bruises on my saddle-sore bottom,’ he grumbles. And he keeps grumbling until they find a dusty path that heads south, towards the downs and the forest edge.

Before they can reach clear ground, though, night begins to draw in. The gaps between the trees become choked with shadow, the jerboas begin to catch their paws on invisible roots and stumble over stumps in the dark.

Jori reins in her mount, and the other two skid to a halt.

‘It’s getting too hard to see where we’re going,’ she says. ‘We’ll end up breaking the jerboas’ legs if we carry on. I know you don’t want to, but I think we should make camp. At least until dawn breaks and we have some light.’

The bard sighs but nods. Without the jerboas it will take them days to get there. They can’t risk them getting injured.

‘Very well,’ he says. ‘But just until dawn.’

*

Working swiftly, they unslung their packs and tie up the mounts with a nose bag of seeds each. Jori runs a quick scout around the area, slipping through the trees like a rabbit-shaped patch of shadow. She returns minutes later with an armful of firewood and soon has a blaze going.

The firelight paints the trunks around them orange. The branches overhead flicker with fiery colours, and Rue has the feeling he is sitting inside a cosy cave. One with walls of wood, rather than rock.

He tries to imagine himself as one of the Lushan Ullorka – the dwarf rabbits of the Eiskalt mountains – living high up among the peaks. But his mind keeps turning to his home at Thornwood, to what might be happening there right now. How they could be fighting for their lives.

He looks across at the bard and sees his furrowed brow, his tattooed ears flat to his head with worry.

He must be feeling the same, Rue thinks. He must be just as worried about his brother, Podkin.

And Rue moves closer to him, nuzzling his head against his side.

‘We’ll be there soon, little one,’ the bard says, his voice a raspy croak. ‘As soon as we can. Maybe you should try to get some sleep.’

‘I can’t sleep now,’ says Rue. ‘I just keep thinking about my mother and father. And my brothers. Will they be fighting too?’

Jori sits down on the other side of the young rabbit while Nikku sets a tripod and pot over the fire and begins to cook up a stew.

‘Listen,’ she says. ‘I have an idea. Why don’t you carry on with the story you were telling? It will take

both your minds off things, and perhaps help Rue fall asleep as well.’

‘Ah, yes,’ says the bard, staring into the flames. ‘I was forgetting about that power of stories. The way they can take you off to another place and time. The way they help you forget about your troubles, at least for a moment or two.’

‘And it might make us feel better,’ adds Rue, ‘to hear about tiny rabbits like us, fighting against danger and winning. When I hear about Podkin and Paz, it makes me feel like I can do anything even though I’m just nobody.’

‘You’re far from nobody, little one,’ says Jori with a chuckle. ‘You understand as much about stories as this old badger for a start.’

She gives the bard a shove and, just for a moment, he breaks into a smile. Then he clears his throat, preparing to tell his tale.

In the distance, in amongst the thick trees of the forest, the echoing sound of a wolf pack can be heard. They are drowned out by another howl: louder, deeper, thrumming with power. It makes Rue jump, but then he realises it must be the giant

fanged wolf who helped them earlier. One of the ancient creatures of the Grimwode who must have been escorting them as they rode through the forest.

The bard peers into the shadows between the trees and raises a paw as if he is waving to an old friend.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he says to Rue. ‘We have a great-great-grandchild of Truefang keeping us company. I think he wants to hear the story as well.’

‘Best not leave him waiting then,’ says Nikku as she stirs her pot of turnip stew.

‘Best not,’ says the bard. ‘Now. Where was I?’