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‘Rich with custom, myth, and a little touch of magic.’

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kieran Larwood has been passionate about stories and storytelling ever since reading *The Hobbit* age six. He graduated from Southampton University with a degree in English Literature and worked as a Reception teacher in a primary school. He now writes full-time. He lives on the Isle of Wight with his family, and between work, fatherhood and writing doesn't get nearly enough sleep.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

David Wyatt lives in Devon. He has illustrated many novels but is also much admired for his concept and character work. He has illustrated tales by a number of high-profile fantasy authors such as Diana Wynne Jones, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman and J. R. R. Tolkien.

THE GIFT OF DARK HOLLOW

KIERAN LARWOOD

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID WYATT

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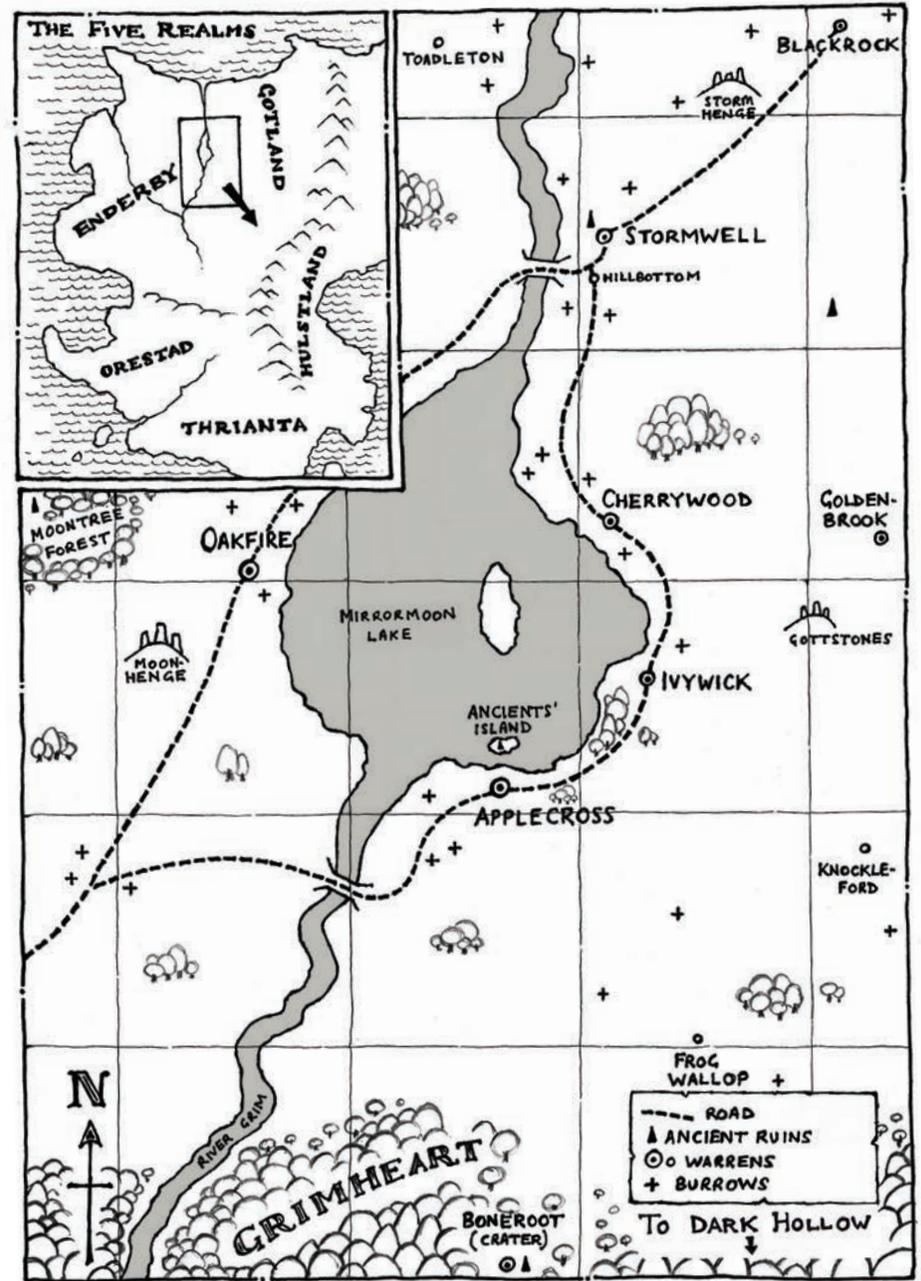
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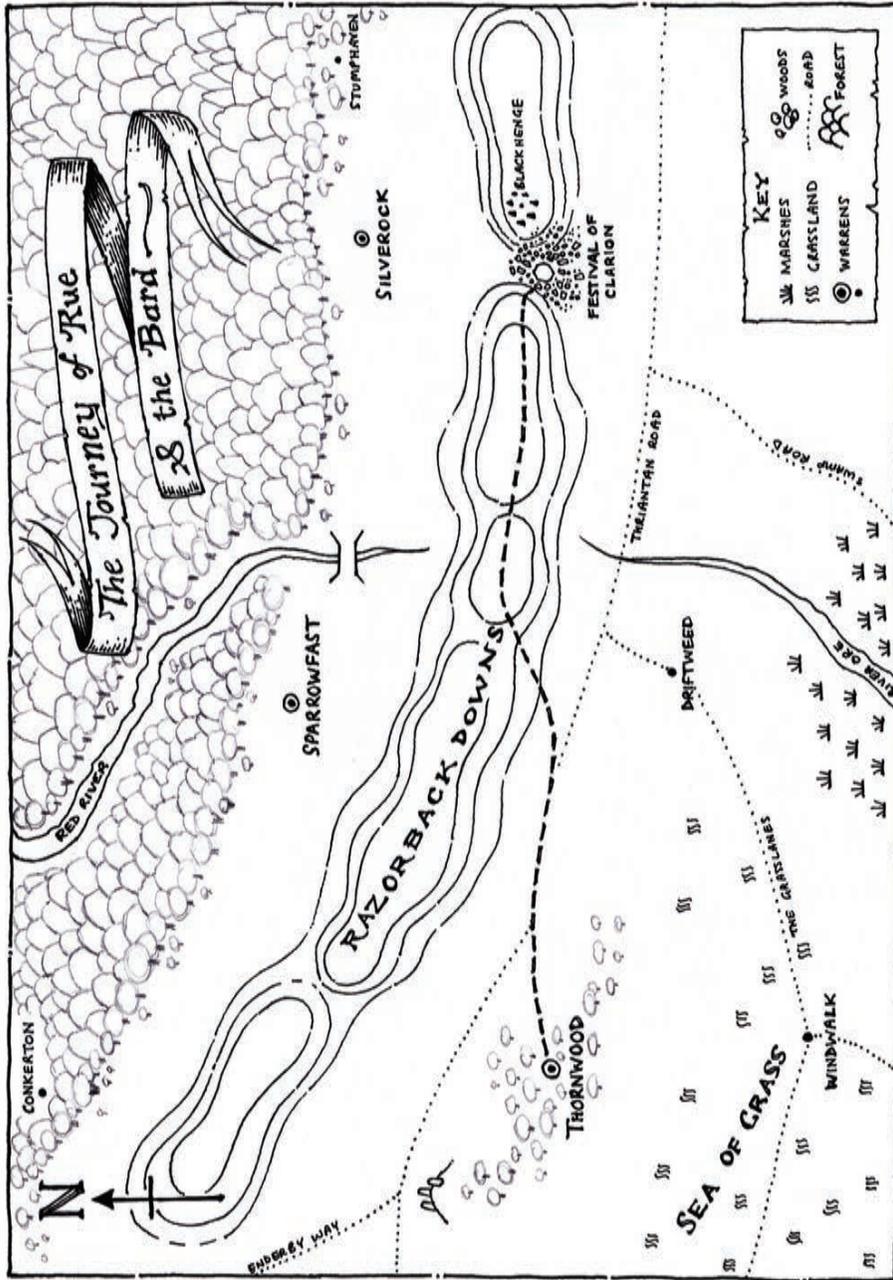
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Prologue

He still dreams about them sometimes. Nightmares that leave him wide-eyed and gasping, with fears sixty years old pounding fresh through his blood.

It is never the Gorm themselves, strangely enough. Those hulking, clanking monsters of iron and flesh with their blank red eyes. Anyone would think they would be the things to haunt him all the way to old age.

No. It's always the crows that plague his sleep. The mindless servants of the Gorm. Simple birds,



twisted by magic into jagged, flapping things with bladed beaks and torn iron feathers.

He sees them gathering in dark skies: swarms of them circling in a clashing, crashing mass of metal, cawing and screeching to each other in a chorus like a thousand hammers pounding on a thousand anvils.

They wheel and spin, striking sparks off each other as their wings touch, and he stands – a small rabbit once again – staring up at them, praying they don't spot him alone and helpless on the wide open ground below.

But they always do.

One red eye at first, glaring at him from the throng. A single crow shrieks with horrible joy and peels off from its brothers and sisters, flapping towards him, making all the others turn and stare, their hungry, hungry beaks like razor-sharp shears . . .

And on a good night, that's when he wakes up.



CHAPTER ONE

Cuckoo

Thornwood warren is still sleeping as the bard tiptoes out of his room, the crow-dream still echoing in his head, making him twitch at imaginary creaks of iron wings.

The longburrow is empty but for the slumped shape of one lazy rabbit, snoring with his head on a table; an empty mead jug and a pool of dribble in front of him. The fire is quietly smouldering, giving the place a dim orange glow as the bard pads silently past. He wraps his cloak about him and heads up the draughty entrance tunnel.

At the doorway, the usual guard, huge and annoying, is asleep at his post, blowing bubbles and twitching his ears as he dreams away to himself. Making a mental note to report him to Chief Hubert, the bard steps around him and opens one of the broad oak doors a crack – just enough to slip outside.

It is moments before dawn, and the brightening sky peeps out between the bare branches of the trees above. The snow has all but vanished from the ground, and here and there the bard can see a brave daffodil or snowdrop pushing its head out of the cold hard ground to greet the coming spring. He follows the path between the trees, out to the edge of the Thornwood, where he can see the spine of the Razorback downs stretching away to the east. A blanket of mist is draped across the valley, and the line of hills looks like a giant serpent, wriggling its way through a pale, smoky sea.

The bard stands and stares, breathing in the fresh new scents of the season. Soon, crinkly green leaves will be bursting from the branches all around, blazing away the last of winter with their bright living colours.

Time for me to be on the move again, he thinks. It is not often he stays in one place for three months (and there are reasons it isn't safe to do so) but it also isn't often that he sees his older brother.

Podkin. The bard sighs. It will be a shame to leave him. To every other rabbit in the warren, he is just an old longbeard. A retired warrior, sitting in the longburrow corner every night, playing Foxpaw with the other veterans and dozing. If only they knew . . .

A twig snaps somewhere on the path behind, and the bard suddenly stops his dreaming. Tiny paws patter, and there is a rustle as something hides behind a bush.

'You might as well come out,' calls the bard. 'You're about as stealthy as an overweight badger with granite clogs on.'

The bush rustles again, and a small figure steps out, all huge floppy ears and brown speckled fur. It is one of the chieftain's sons: the little lad who sits and listens to the bard's tales so intently every night, chipping in with vivid observations and difficult questions. 'The sensible rabbit', the bard always

thinks of him, although he has learnt that his name is actually Rue.

‘Sorry, sir,’ Rue says, eyes on the ground. ‘I wasn’t spying on you, just . . .’

‘Sneaking up behind me and watching what I was doing? I believe that is the *actual definition* of spying.’

‘Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.’ The little rabbit looks as though he is about to cry. He has mentioned several hundred times how much he wants to become a bard, and now he probably thinks he has ruined his chances. The bard takes pity on him.

‘Oh, whiskers I wasn’t doing anything worth spying on, anyway. What I *would* like to know is how you managed to spot me coming out here at this time of the morning. Shouldn’t you be tucked up in your burrow, asleep?’

‘I couldn’t sleep, sir. I’ve got six brothers in my bed, and they all snore so much, it keeps me awake. I was under one of the tables in the longburrow, practising some of my tales, and I saw you walking past. I wondered if you might be doing something . . . bardy. So I followed you. I really *would* like to become a bard, sir.’

‘So you’ve told me. At least half a million times. And stop calling me “sir”. I’m not a chieftain or a knight. Just an old, tired storyteller.’ The bard pulls at his beard, wondering how much to encourage the little rabbit. If he’s awful at storytelling then there’ll have to be a very awkward conversation. And if he isn’t? All bards know there is a duty to train up newcomers with potential. And who will that fall on? *It can’t be me*, the bard thinks. *Not now, with things as they are . . .*

The bard notices Rue is still blinking up at him, the tender light of hope in his eyes. He’s left it far too long to just say ‘go away’ and be done with it now. He’ll have to do or say something. Preferably something encouraging.

A little test then. Just like the bard’s old master gave to him. He wanders over to a fallen tree and makes himself comfortable amongst the moss and mushrooms. Rue follows, his huge brown eyes drinking in the bard’s every move. For a moment they stare at each other, and then the bard nods to himself.

‘Very well, little one,’ he says. ‘Let’s see what you’ve got. Why don’t you tell me a tale?’

‘A tale? Here? Now?’ Rue’s ears begin to shake. He has never imagined actually *telling* someone one of his stories, let alone the bard himself.

‘Yes, on you go.’ The bard’s eyes twinkle. ‘The Tale of the Twelve Gifts would be a good one. You’ve heard me tell it at least five times this winter.’

Rue gulps. He breathes deeply. He reaches into his mind for the story, and begins to unravel it.

‘Well. It was a long time ago, see? I mean a long, *long* time ago. Back when the world was new and memories hadn’t even begun.’

Rue looks at the bard for approval, but his face gives nothing away. Rue continues. ‘The Goddess, she summoned the chieftains of the twelve tribes together. She had a gift for all of them, she said, so they all gathered at the standing stones called Moon Henge and had a big feast and stuff.’

‘Then the Goddess appears, and she has twelve magic items, one for each tribe. They all have amazing powers, but they all have a weakness too, because she wants the chieftains to use them wisely and not go all crazy about it.’

‘They’re all different as well. A dagger for Munbury that can cut through anything except iron, a sickle for Redwater that can sense poison, and a helmet for Sandywell that makes the wearer invincible.’

Rue blinks at the bard a few times, wondering how to finish. Telling stories to an audience isn’t as easy as he thought it would be. ‘The end?’ he says, with a wince.

‘Hmm,’ says the bard. And, ‘Hmm,’ again.

‘It was bad, wasn’t it?’

‘Well . . .’

‘I’ll never be a bard, will I?’ Rue looks as though he is about to cry again.

‘It wasn’t *that* bad,’ lies the bard. ‘But I’m sure you know a lot more detail you could have added in. Tell me . . . who were the chieftains of the tribes? What were their names?’

Rue’s tongue pokes out of his mouth for a moment as he tries to remember. ‘Well, there was Ruddle the Healer of Redwater, and Shadow the Hidden of Dark Hollow. Oh, and No-kin the Lost of Munbury, of course. He’s my favourite.’

‘Tell me about No-kin then. What was he wearing to the feast? What colour was his fur, his eyes? What food did he like to eat? What songs did he sing along with?’

Rue looks at the bard as if he has gone crazy. ‘How would I know that? It was thousands of billions of years ago, probably. Everyone who was there is dead now.’

‘Ah,’ says the bard. ‘But you don’t need to know what the answers *actually* are. That’s where the storytelling comes in. What you told me was not a tale. It was the bones of one: a few facts put in order, without any life breathed into them. What a bard does is to add meat and skin and ears to the bones. Bring the story to life. Make your own No-kin live in your head, and then give him to your audience. Doesn’t matter if he’s not the same as the real No-kin – like you said: it was thousands of years ago now. Who’s still around to tell you you’re wrong? A few more years practise and you’ll get the hang of it, I’m sure.’

Satisfied that he has put Rue off in the gentlest way possible, and without completely shattering

his dreams, the old rabbit begins to get up from the log, ready to head back to the warren for breakfast. He is interrupted by Rue clearing his throat to speak.

‘No-kin is a white-furred rabbit, with sky-blue eyes. He has a mane of long hair that he spikes up from his head, like all the warriors of the Ice Waste tribes where he comes from. He wears a dark green tunic and trousers, with a silver torc at his neck. He has a scar down the left-hand side of his face, where an ermine scratched him before he killed it with his bare hands. He eats the same carrots, radishes and turnips as everyone else, but his favourite food is crowberries, which grow on the tundra. He barely speaks, and when he does it is with a strange accent. The other rabbits all want to know why he left his tribe in the Ice Wastes, but he says nothing, and he is the first rabbit to take his gift from the Goddess. It is a copper dagger, as sharp as starlight, which is where its name comes from: Starclaw.’

The bard stares, open-mouthed, at the little rabbit. Rue’s eyes have glazed over as he speaks, as if he is

seeing something in another world. In a few seconds he has come back to himself, shaking his head to clear it, and looking puzzled, not quite knowing what has happened.

But the bard knows. It was the storyteller's trance: that sideways step into another place, partly in your head, and partly somewhere else. It means that the little rabbit does indeed have a gift, worse luck, and that the bard is the one to do something about it.

As if to confirm it, a cuckoo calls out somewhere in the Thornwood. The first cuckoo of spring, and a sign from the Goddess, if ever there was one.

The bard sighs and mumbles a very rude curse under his breath.

'What's the matter?' Rue asks. 'Did you just say something about badgers' bottoms?'

'What? No. Nothing of the sort,' says the bard. He sighs again. 'Come on, we need to get inside and get this over with.'

'Get what over with?' Rue is more puzzled by the second.

'Asking your father if you can be an apprentice bard, that's what.'

And with a delighted little rabbit skipping along at his heels, the bard heads back to the warren.