

THE FIVE REALMS SERIES

The Legend of Podkin One-Ear

The Gift of Dark Hollow

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Uki and the Outcasts

Uki and the Swamp Spirit

Uki and the Ghostburrow

THE FIVE REALMS

— UKI —
AND THE
GHOSTBURROW

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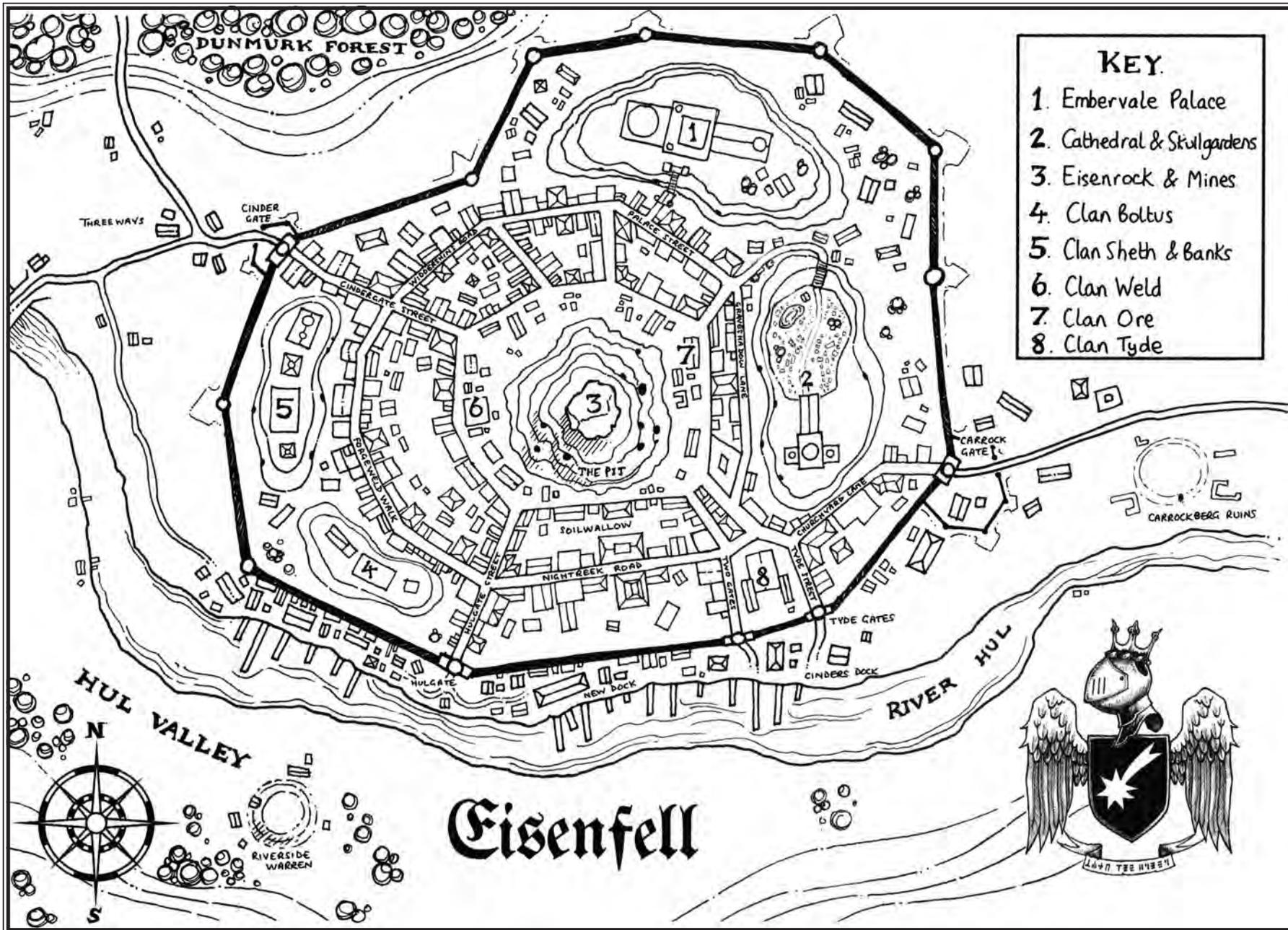
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For my parents



- KEY.**
1. Embervale Palace
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 3. Eisenrock & Mines
 4. Clan Boltus
 5. Clan Sheth & Banks
 6. Clan Weld
 7. Clan Ore
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Eisenfell





Prologue

Stoneaxe is watching.
Hidden behind a stunted, twisted tree that clings to the mountainside, she peeps out from between the branches. Her cloak covers her mouth, so nobody can see her breath steaming. Her fingers clutch the shaft of her best spear as she tries to decide whether to throw it or not. A thin crust of frost has formed on her whiskers, on the braids of her wild, woolly hair. Her ears went numb hours ago.

She has been watching for a long time.

Down on the slopes of the foothills, riding

towards the mountains, is a cart. Pulled by two jerboas, there are four – maybe five – rabbits on board. Too many for such a small vehicle with no proper road to ride on.

As the hills get steeper, the ground rockier and more frosted, the jerboas have begun to struggle. Soon, the riders will have to climb out and continue on foot. Stoneaxe can hardly believe what she is seeing.

Nobody ever comes into the mountains.

She shifts the grip on her spear. If they get close enough, she might not need it. She might get to use her axe instead. Slowly, silently, she unhooks it from her belt. It is made from a lump of flint, sanded smooth as a beach pebble, but with an edge sharp enough to cut sunbeams. She tests the blade against her arm, shaving off a small patch of fur.

Four sets of ears to hang over the fire, she thinks. Maybe five. Four pelts to line my floor.

It is safe to say the Arukh rabbits don't like strangers.

There is a scabbling amongst the rocks next to her. A tiny skittering of pebbles as

someone – or something – makes its way closer. Stoneaxe rolls her eyes.

‘Do you have to make so much noise?’ she hisses.

‘It was just a pebble!’

Another rabbit flops down next to her, budging her across to share the cover. Stoneaxe glares at the newcomer. Her brother, Brightwing. Only a year younger than her, he shares the same thick mane of brown-speckled fur. The same quick, grey hunter's eyes; the same pattern of black-and-white warpaint on his face.

And now he will want to share the invaders' ears she is about to claim.

‘What are you spying on?’ he says, nosing through the tree branches. It only takes him a second to spot the cart and its occupants. ‘By the crystals! A cartload of idiots! Don't they know what we do to intruders on our land?’

Stoneaxe sighs. Now she will only have two pairs of ears to hang over the fire. Maybe two and a half.

She holds up her axe where Brightwing can see it and smiles.

‘Perhaps we should go down and show them.’





CHAPTER ONE

Of Moss and Mushrooms

That's as far as I can take us,' Jaxom says, reining in his jerboas. The fierce trader, the fearless Foxguard agent, looks down at his animals like a worried parent. They sag in the traces, exhausted at having hauled the overloaded cart through such rough terrain.

'There's still quite a way to walk,' says the bard. 'Will we make it in time?' He is cradling a bundle of blankets in his arms. A small white nose, speckled with delicate brown spots, pokes out of the folds.

Jori leans over, pulling the blanket aside to look

at Rue, the bard's young apprentice. His breathing is slow and shallow, his eyes closed as if sleeping. But she knows there is poison coursing through his blood from the arrow of an Endwatch assassin.

She shakes her tattered ears and sighs. 'It doesn't look good,' she says. 'But we're almost in the mountains. I might be able to find some of the ingredients I need. If we stop here a while, I can have a look around.'

'Yes,' says the bard. 'Look. Please. If you are well enough.'

'I'm fine,' she says. Having taken a swig of her toxic dusk potion during the battle in which Rue was wounded, she has been weakened and exhausted herself. But the ride in Jaxom's cart has given her a chance to rest and recover, even if her legs are still a bit shaky.

As Jori limps off, nosing amongst the rocks and grass, the bard climbs out of the cart and sinks to the ground, gently lowering Rue on to his lap. Jaxom takes his panting jerboas some seed and water, while Nikku, the Foxguard leader, fits a string to her bow and nocks a red-fletched arrow. Her eyes scan the

sides of the mountains that tower just ahead of them, looking for danger.

‘We’re sitting ducks out here in the open,’ she says. ‘We’d better not stay for long.’

‘The Arukhs will have the antidote. We *want* them to find us,’ says the bard. All the spark in his voice has gone, and his green eyes are full of tears. ‘I’d like the chance to speak to them first though. Up amongst the rocks, where they can’t use us for target practice.’

There is a scurrying of footsteps and they both jump, relaxing as they see Jori dashing back towards them.

‘I’ve got some!’ she says, holding out a pawful of scrapings. ‘Purple haircap moss and an eagle mushroom. Well, most of one.’

‘Is that all?’ The bard looks at the tiny amount of muddy plant matter. ‘Will it be enough to cure him?’

Jori shrugs and pulls her pack off the cart. With her other paw, she unlaces it and begins to rummage, dragging out pots, flasks and a tinderbox. ‘Not cure, no. We’ll need a lot more. But it might slow the poison a bit. Buy us some time, at least.’

‘You’re not going to start a fire, are you?’ Nikku says.

Jori pauses, mid-rummage, a saucepan dangling from her paw. ‘I have to,’ she says. ‘To brew the antidote.’

‘Every Arukh in the mountains will see it! They’ll fill us full of spears before we can squeak!’

‘We need the antidote, Nikku,’ says the bard. ‘Rue might die without it.’

‘We’ll *all* die if you light a fire out here. If we’re lucky, it’ll be *before* we’re skinned.’

‘I don’t think it matters now anyway.’ Jaxom, finished with his jerboas, has walked around the cart and is pointing towards the mountains. There, strolling down the slope towards them are two Arukh braves. Both have spears raised over their shoulders, ready to hurl. One also clutches a lethal-looking flint axe.

‘That’s it,’ says Nikku. ‘We’re dead. Even if I shoot them both, there’ll be dozens more up in the rocks, ready to charge.’

‘Hold your fire,’ says Jori. ‘Let them approach.’

‘I speak Arukh,’ says Jaxom. ‘Maybe I can reason with them.’

Jori sets her precious clutch of ingredients aside and stands, holding out her ravaged paws with their bandages and missing fingers.

‘This tribe speaks Lanic,’ she says. ‘And they are more likely to listen to me.’

Jaxom stares at her, wide-eyed. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Because I have met them before,’ Jori says. ‘And I happen to be best friends with their god.’

*

As the braves approach, the bard flicks his eyes over them, taking in all the details of their appearance and filing them away in his memory. It is an old storyteller’s habit – noticing everything – and he can’t help himself, even when his apprentice lies dying in his arms.

They look quite young, with fur markings that almost match. Brother and sister, perhaps. Their clothes are stitched together from scraps of leather and hide. Simple, but well-made and warm. Their weapons are stone and wood – no metal – but he picks out a copper belt buckle and a silver earring on the girl. Evidence of trade or, more likely,

trophies taken from other intruders they have ‘met’ in the past.

But the most striking thing about them is the warpaint daubed on their faces. Chalk white on the right-hand side, coal black on the left. Half and half, like magpies, or – and at the thought the bard’s fur begins to tingle – like a certain legendary rabbit hero from around these parts.

‘Uki . . .’ the bard whispers. ‘Could it be?’

He would ask Jori about it, but she has already started to walk towards them, paws spread wide. When they are about ten metres away from each other, they all stop.

The silence holds for a moment as they eye each other. The points of the raised spears waver a little in the air, picking out juicy parts of Jori that they might land in.

‘Please,’ she says. ‘We mean no harm. We have come to visit your chieftain, Darkfire. I am an old friend of his.’

‘Darkfire has no flatlander friends,’ says the girl Arukh.

‘And we don’t like rabbits coming on to our

lands,' adds the boy. 'Except for when we get to kill them and take their skins.'

'Yes, we like *that* part,' says the girl. She smiles like a cat who has just bumped into a particularly plump mouse.

'He is friends with *me*,' says Jori. 'Although he hasn't seen me for many years. The last time I was here, I was with your ... Crystal Holder? Crystal Bearer? The black-and white-furred rabbit. Uki.'

Both Arukhs blink in surprise. Their spear grips falter. 'The Crystal Keeper? What do you know of him?' says the girl.

'How dare you use his name!' The boy tenses, as if about to attack, but Jori keeps her cool. She points to the silver-capped flask at her waist.

'I was one of his companions. Jori. Of Clan Septys. Haven't you heard the tales of us? Don't you recognise my potion bottle?'

The Arukhs narrow their eyes as they take in the flask and Jori's sheathed sword of Damascus steel. Then they turn away and mutter to each other, casting wary glances back.

'How do we know you haven't stolen those

things?'' says the girl, finally. 'Or that you are some other flatlander, pretending to be the dusk wraith?'

'I think I can help there,' says the bard, drawing their attention.

'Who is this?' asks the girl, pointing at the bard with her axe. 'And why does he have painted fur and ears?'

'He's a bard,' explains Jori. 'A travelling storyteller. They dye their fur and tattoo their ears. Don't ask me why.'

'It marks us as servants of Clarion, god of tales and poems,' says the bard. 'And I know lots of tales about your Crystal Keeper, Uki. Jori there, too, as it happens. If you let us light a small fire and brew some medicine for my apprentice, I can tell you one. That should prove who we are. Then you can take us to your chief.'

'What is wrong with the young one?' the girl asks.

'Poison,' Jori says. 'Crowbane. He needs purple haircap and eagle mushrooms. Do you have any at your warren?'

The girl lets out a small laugh. 'Lots,' she says. 'Haircap is used for making dye, and curing

toothache. Eagle 'shrooms are good to eat. We have pots and pots of them.'

At this news, the bard's ears prick up. 'Please,' he says. 'We need them to save his life. Why else would we be here, when all rabbits know what you do to trespassers? And we really do know Uki. Jori, myself and Nikku. We can tell you lots about him.'

The Arukhs share another long glance, before the girl nods. They lower their spears and fold their arms – a signal that the bard's offer has been accepted.

'Thank you,' he says. 'Thank you so much. You won't regret it, I promise.'

Jori wastes no time in kindling a fire. Then she hangs a small pot over it on a tripod, throwing the moss and mushroom pieces inside with a splash of water from Jaxom's flask. Soon steam begins to seep from the mixture, along with a bitter, musky smell.

'Hold him up,' Jori says to the bard, scooping out a spoonful of antidote. The bard lifts Rue a fraction, and between them they manage to trickle the gloopy

mess into his mouth. The bard gently rubs his throat until he swallows.

'Again,' says Jori, and they feed him the rest. Just a few tiny mouthfuls.

'Will it work?' asks the bard, gently rocking Rue as if he were a tiny kitten.

'Have to wait and see,' says Jori, watching the little rabbit closely. After a few minutes he gives a cough and opens one bleary eye.

'What . . . what happened?' he croaks. 'Where are we?'

'Thank Clarion's sacred tuning pegs!' shouts the bard. 'I thought you were dead!'

'He may yet be,' warns Jori. 'That was only a tiny amount of antidote. It will hold off the poison for a few hours at best. He will need a full dose to make sure he recovers.'

The bard looks up at the Arukhs, pleading. 'Couldn't we just go now? It will make no difference to the story . . .'

'You promised us a tale,' says the girl. 'One that proves you know the Crystal Keeper. Once we believe you, then we can go.'

‘That was the deal,’ says the boy.

‘A story?’ says Rue, blinking up at the bard.
‘What about?’

‘That’s typical,’ says the bard. ‘Your very life is in the balance and all you care about is hearing another yarn.’

‘But I want to know what happened to Uki. How he fared against Mortix and Necripha.’

‘It seems everyone does,’ says the bard. ‘Very well. Come and sit down you Arukhs. Jaxom, Nikku and Jori too. This isn’t much of a fire, but it will have to suffice.’

The Arukhs share a wary glance before their curiosity gets the better of them. They move closer to the meagre campfire and sit down on one side, just as the others take their places opposite. Even though she is sitting, the girl Arukh keeps her axe to hand. Her eyes twitch to and fro, as if expecting a trap of some kind.

‘Why does she keep looking at my ears?’ says the bard.

‘They collect them,’ says Jaxom. ‘From their enemies. I expect she hasn’t got a tattooed pair.’

The bard gulps, and draws his hood up over his head. ‘Then I shall have to make sure my tale is good enough to keep them attached, won’t I?’

‘It will be,’ says Rue, his voice just a whisper. ‘Your stories always are.’

The bard gives him a gentle squeeze and then clears his throat, ready to begin.