

WILDSMITH



INTO THE DARK FOREST



Praise for *Wildsmith: Into the Dark Forest*

‘A lush, rich, page-turning adventure from one of the most versatile writers we have.

There’s no genre Liz can’t write in.’

PHIL EARLE

‘*Wildsmith* has everything I want in a story – magic, mystery and dragons! Liz is the mistress of dragons and in this thrilling adventure she has cast her story-telling spell with utter charm and skill. Children are in for such a treat! Thank goodness there’s a sequel – I want more!’

JASBINDER BILAN

‘Wildsmiths, dragons, witches and the protection of magical animals! What’s not to love? An enchanting read. Beautifully written and utterly charming.

I can’t wait for the next adventure!’

ELOISE WILLIAMS





'Into The Dark Forest is packed full of the best kind of magic – I want to be a Wildsmith!'

DAISY MAY JOHNSON

'Liz has crafted a stunningly rich world and characters – brimming with magic and wonder, yet wonderfully warm and familiar. The lush illustrations feel reminiscent of the beautiful animations of Studio Ghibli.'

GABRIELLE KENT

'Sneak inside the wonderful world of the Wildsmith, and take a peek at the secrets and magic, that lay hidden, deep within an enchanted fairytale forest. This is a fantastic first chapter book which will delight young fans of magic, animals, and adventure.'

HARRY HEAPE





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LIZ FLANAGAN

Illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton

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To Abi and Phil, with thanks





CHAPTER ONE

ON THE MORNING HER LIFE TURNED UPSIDE down, all Rowan could think about was the race against her best friend, Bella. None of the other children were as quick as them. This race would prove who knew the city's secrets best, who was fastest and most agile. They lined up just inside the city walls, both determined to win today, as they waited for the bell to chime the hour.

'Your hand isn't even touching the door!' Rowan complained. 'You know the rules, and that one was your idea.'





‘It’s covered in cobwebs, yuck!’ Bella reached out her fingers, barely grazing the huge wooden door with its rusty iron hinges. ‘I don’t even know why they have a door – it’s always open.’

Rowan wanted to giggle at her friend’s expression, but she faced forwards, planning her route through the streets of Holderby, all the way to the lookout tower in the palace gardens. ‘No cheating this time – your feet mustn’t touch the ground, right?’ That rule was hers – it made it more interesting.

‘It wasn’t the ground, it was Milo!’ Bella laughed. She’d won her last race by using her brother as a way of crossing a tricky section of open street.

The bell rang out, chiming the hour.

‘Go!’ Rowan gasped, and they both sprang into action.

Rowan climbed up the city wall to the east, using uneven stones as handholds, then pulling herself up onto a flat roof. From there, it was easy enough to tiptoe along the row of shops and houses. She knew where she was by the smells floating up: past the bakery with its





delicious steam; round the back of the forge, avoiding the iron blast of heat rising up; trying not to breathe as she passed the tannery with the stink of drying leathers. Some people waved; others ignored her; and the grumpy butcher muttered about wildcat children with nothing better to do.

She didn't look up, focusing purely on her next move. She came to the end of the street. This was the hard part: it was too far to jump across the street, but she had gambled on having help. A cart was coming along, piled with straw bales, heading for her father in the palace stables, just as she'd hoped – right on time. As it drew level, she leapt out, landed on the cart, and rolled, feeling the scratchy straw through her worn linen tunic.

'Oi, you. Cheeky! Get off my cart!' the driver yelled at her.

'Thanks!' Rowan scrambled to her feet, judging the moment perfectly, and then jumped off the other side onto a high stone wall. This was the hard part.

Her hand grabbed a stone, but it was loose. It came





right out of the wall, crashing onto her leg and smashing down onto the track below.

‘Ouch!’ She’d have a fine bruise on that leg tomorrow. She dangled by the other hand, feet scrabbling. She couldn’t fall now!

Gritting her teeth, gripping hard till her fingers burned, Rowan pulled herself back up onto the top of the wall.

Panting, she looked around. Finally! Rowan was near her home now – the airy rooms above the stable block. She took her favourite shortcut through the palace gardens, keeping to the walls, never touching the ground. She’d even played this game with the prince himself once. He was younger and he’d fallen in the fishpond trying to catch her. She’d delivered him safely home, happy, grubby, slightly damp but quite unharmed.

Her lips curved in a smile. She was going to win today! She hoisted herself up an apple tree, darted along a high wall covered in ivy, and there was the lookout tower itself. She reached up and began to climb.







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This morning the sky was blue, and the sun warmed her back as she went steadily higher.

She was almost at the top, when she heard voices and realised that the lookout tower was already occupied.

And not by Bella.



CHAPTER TWO



H-OH. ROWAN STOPPED CLIMBING, ALMOST at the top of the lookout tower. She couldn't afford to be spotted by the guards and thrown out now. She would have to wait for them to leave.

She clung on to the old stones with her hands and feet. Her arms started to ache. Her legs began to shake. *Hurry up*, she thought, as she waited.

Two grown-ups were talking, about boring things she'd heard before: some far-away war, waged by a country called Estria. She didn't know what that had





to do with them – there was no war here in Gallren.

Rowan stopped listening, watching a pigeon soar down and land in the gardens below, where there was a little dovecote. This bird had a message tied to its leg – she could see the tiny roll of paper from here.

You look tired, she thought to the pigeon. *I hope you can rest now.*

It cocked its head and looked straight at her, as if it had heard. Then Sam, the pigeon boy, ran out to take the message off and give the bird some well-deserved food and water.

‘When will Kaine Stonelaw’s army reach us?’ a woman’s voice said, in the tower above her.

‘Any day now. I’m expecting a note from our border guards,’ a man answered.

The first person said, ‘Stonelaw thinks he can just reach out and take my country next? Not without a fight. Gallren will not give up.’

‘We don’t have much time,’ the man said. ‘Where will you go?’

‘Oh, I’m not leaving!’ the woman replied.





‘Your Majesty, we must keep you safe.’

Your Majesty? Rowan almost fell off the tower, but she pushed her toes between the stones even harder and managed to hang on. She was eavesdropping on the queen! There were probably punishments for that.



She peered over her shoulder for Bella, so she could warn her to stay away, but there was no sign of her friend yet.

‘I won’t abandon my people,’ the queen was saying. ‘If I’m asking them to fight back and defend us, I must be here. Whatever happens.’

‘At least send the prince away,’ the other person suggested.

‘No.’ The queen sounded stubborn, her mind made up. ‘What message does that send? That we are





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cowards? No. We are staying right here in Holderby. I know you will keep us all safe.'

The other person sighed. 'We will do our best, Your Majesty, but war with Estria is coming.'

'And our soldiers are the finest and the bravest,' Queen Silvana said, firmly.

After a few moments, the two of them walked away, still talking, and Rowan got a clear view of the queen in her long velvet cloak, and the general, in his smart hat and uniform.

War was coming. Here? To her city? Though the sun still blazed down, Rowan suddenly felt freezing cold.