

# THE VOLCANIC NORTH

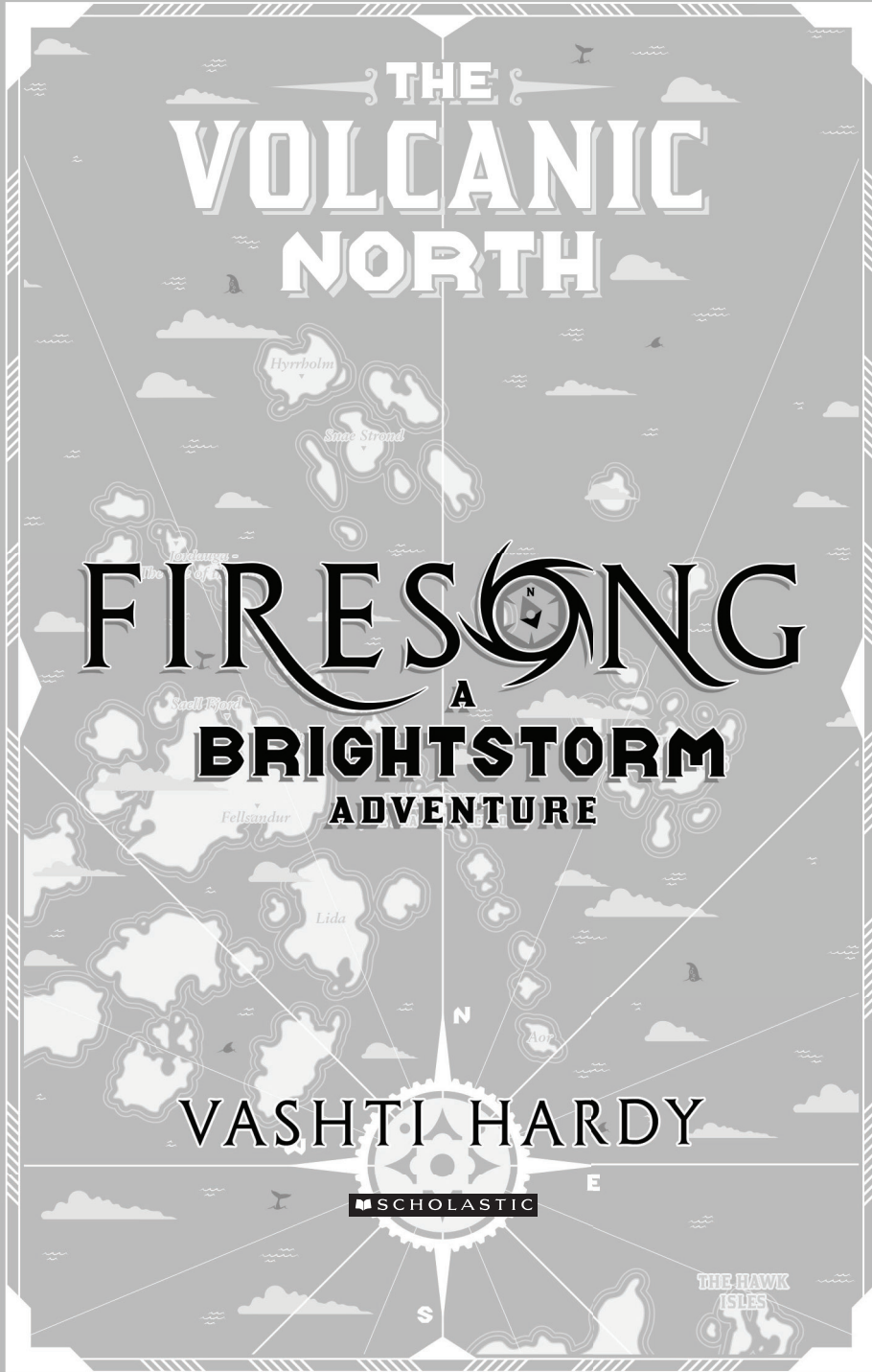
# FIRESONG

A  
**BRIGHTSTORM**  
ADVENTURE

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SCHOLASTIC

THE HAWK  
ISLES



Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2022  
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London, NW1 1DB  
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,  
Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

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Map illustrations by Jamie Gregory

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ISBN 978 0702 31225 0

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
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Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY  
Paper made from wood grown in sustainable forests  
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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For Kate and Linas

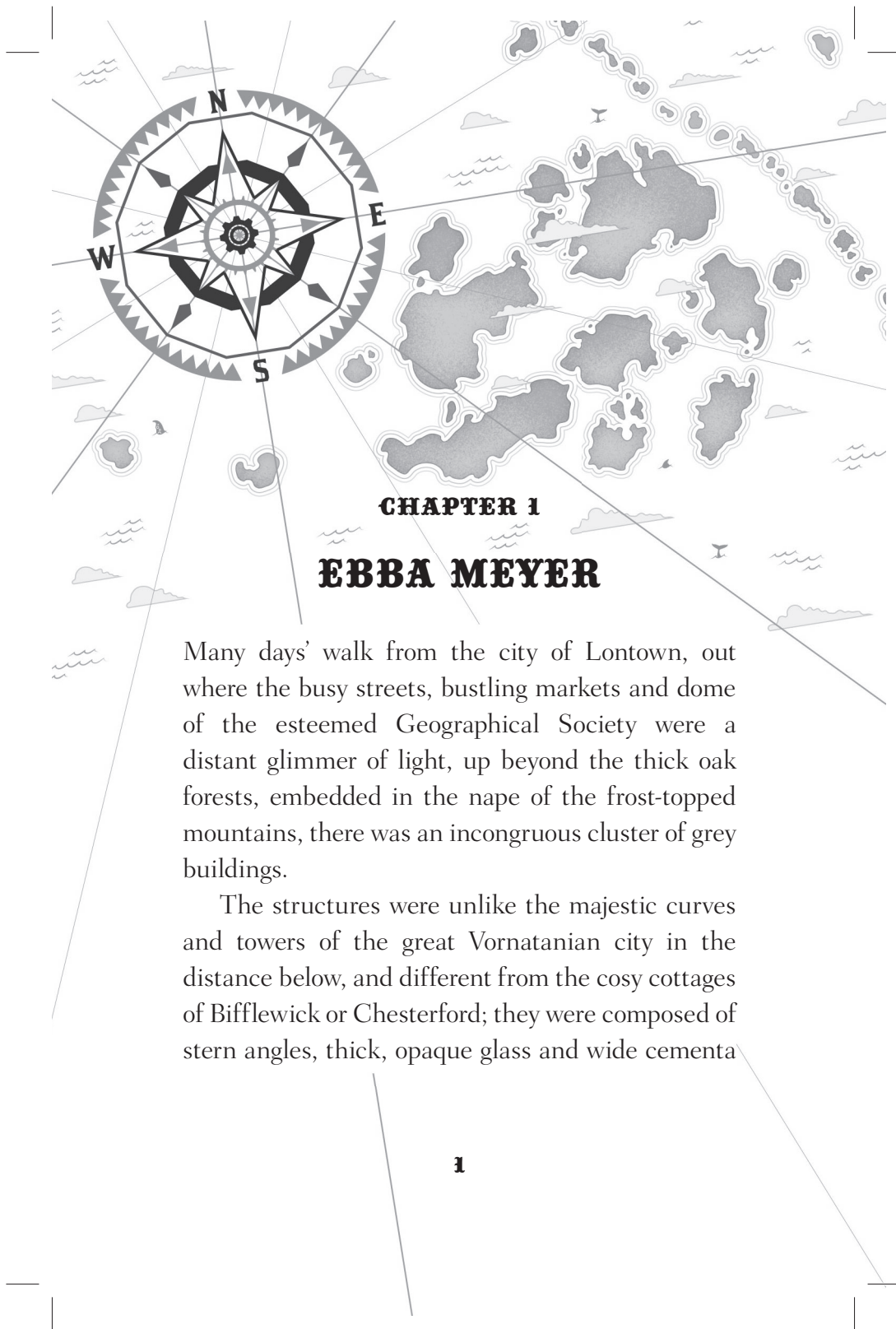




*In the huge, wide-open, sleeping eye  
of the mountain  
The bear is the gleam in the pupil  
Ready to awake  
And instantly focus.*

TED HUGHES  
from "The Bear"





**CHAPTER 1**

**EBBA MEYER**

Many days' walk from the city of Lontown, out where the busy streets, bustling markets and dome of the esteemed Geographical Society were a distant glimmer of light, up beyond the thick oak forests, embedded in the nape of the frost-topped mountains, there was an incongruous cluster of grey buildings.

The structures were unlike the majestic curves and towers of the great Vornatanian city in the distance below, and different from the cosy cottages of Bifflewick or Chesterford; they were composed of stern angles, thick, opaque glass and wide cementa

walls, a material the architect had hoped would take off in the Wide. It was practical, cheap to make, and represented the strength of Lontown well. And it would turn a healthy profit.

The underground rooms, and most of the upper layer, were empty at that moment, but in several of the east wing labs, a handful of scientists busied themselves with samples and specimens, working from sunrise to twilight, into dusk, and on into the night. Ebba Meyer didn't want to work there; far too many questions went unanswered and the ethics were problematic, but the pay was good and she had a family to look after. And who was she to stand in the way of progress? Besides, the HAC did make some good points about the threat of misplaced intelligence.

Ebba pulled her pen from her hair bun and walked along the row of sapient creatures in their steel cages, ticking her observation chart as she went. The way they watched unnerved her sometimes: there was certainly heightened intelligence there, but sapients couldn't talk, so how could you ever really know what was going on behind their eyes? Ebba's shoulders lifted in a silent chuckle; as if an animal



would be able to talk like a human! Of course, those Brightstorm children had said they'd heard wolves talk in their minds. . . But how convenient that only they had been able to hear them. Attention-seeking nobodies, trying to be like the heritage explorer families. Ebba sometimes thought that if she hadn't been a scientist, she would have been an explorer, but it had never really been an option: the Meyers were from the west of Vornatania and not from an esteemed family. It wasn't how things were done.

The lab door swung open as a frenetic-looking man hurried into the room. "He's on his way," said Thomas Northwood, who was working the shift in the lab with her that evening. The stark lights of the lab shone on the sweat of his balding head.

Ebba glanced at the clock above the cages. "Aren't you supposed to be on your break? And who's on their way?"

"The boss, of course! He's inspecting Lab One already. He flew in from Lontown, not a word of warning."

Ebba beckoned him over. "Quick, help me get the sapients their meds; you know he hates it when they stare."

They hurried along the enclosures, hastily putting the bowls of specially prepared food through the shutters.

A small terrier whom Ebba liked to call Frank stared at her with big brown eyes. Frank, she knew, was different from the others here; he was normal.

He had been found in a village north of Lontown and had become a local celebrity on account of the fact that he apparently liked to read the newspaper. Ebba suspected he'd been mimicking the actions of humans and hadn't actually taken anything in, but when word had gone out to report any animals behaving curiously, in return for a small bag of sovereigns, news of the stray dog had been passed on to them and Ebba had been sent to retrieve him.

"Here you are, Frank." Ebba patted the dog on the head.

"Don't get attached to them," said Thomas.

"I won't," said Ebba, although she'd wondered if, when they would eventually prove that Frank wasn't a sapient, she might be allowed to keep him as a pet.

Frank didn't want to eat the food. It was bitter and made him forgetful and sleepy. He just wanted to go back to the village and catch up with the

*Lontown Chronicle* crossword. But it was all they were offered, once a day, and he would starve without it, so he lapped it up quickly so as not to taste it. When he'd finished, he looked at the human with his wide-innocent-eye look, knowing it was his best chance of getting out of this place.

"As if you could read a newspaper with those soppy eyes," Ebba said as though talking to a baby, tickling him under the chin.

Footsteps echoed along the corridor. Swiftly, Ebba straightened her lab coat.

Frank whimpered, then fell asleep.

Back in Lontown, the deep velvet-blue of midnight covered the slumbering city. The moon showed no bias, dusting the crooked, misshapen buildings of the Slumps and the elegant shapes of Uptown with equal beauty. The air was uncommonly still over the continent and all was quiet.

The inhabitants of four Archangel Street slept peacefully:

Harriet Culpepper in her office-cum-bedroom, surrounded by neat piles of paper, books and instruments, her flying goggles on her bedside table.

In the room at the end of the hall, a glint of silver shone from beneath a pillow: the handle of Felicity Wiggety's lucky spoon. She muttered softly in her sleep about a new recipe, curls billowing from her nightcap and her large feet protruding from the end of the bed. Her feet were her greatest asset, she said, on account of how she was certain they could detect anything from a change in the weather to a bad omen.

Between, in one of the central rooms, Maudie Brightstorm lay beneath a blanket drawn over her like a tent, amid a litter of tools and gadgets, one hook of her dungarees unclasped from when she'd begun to get ready for bed. But she had been struck with a sudden revelation about designing the valve that would be the answer to a more efficient energy transfer in the sky-ak engine, so she'd fallen asleep slumped over, on top of her notebook, with Valiant the sapient water-bear curled like a furry pillow at her feet, snuffling softly.

In the room next door, Arthur Brightstorm slept on his back beneath the open window. He liked to breathe the cold air of night because it reminded him of days in flight, when the extraordinary house

invention that was number four Archangel Street had transformed itself into a sky-ship and they had spent weeks away on an expedition. The waning gibbous moonlight glinted off his iron arm on the bedside table to one side, and on the other, his hand lolled towards the floor, where a book by P. Acquafreeda titled *Into the Depths* lay beneath, splayed on the boards.

It had taken a while for everyone to fall back into the rhythm of Lontown life after the expedition to Erythea and the loss of the crew's beloved second-in-command, Welby. But there had been a lot to occupy them all with the conversion of the twins' former family home, Brightstorm House, into a home for orphaned children, which they'd renamed Welby House in his honour. With the heavy emotional toll of the past two expeditions, there hadn't been any talk of another trip yet. Yes, it was true that Arthur was itching to take flight once more and be back with his hand at the wheel, with the wind in his hair and the promise of new horizons, but he didn't feel it was right to press Harriet on the possibility just yet. Besides, funds would need to be replenished.

Above, the pale-feathered hawk Parthena

perched sentry on the windowsill, looking out on the Lontown night and keeping watch.

Arthur's dream had him back in Brightstorm House with Maudie. They were young, four or five, and his father and mother were there, which was strange because his mother, Violetta, had died when they were born, so he only knew her from the few photographs he'd seen. His father's russet beard was wild, and he was suntanned and freckled as though he'd been away exploring for a while. Violetta was much like the one picture he still had of her, with a warm smile and an adventurous glint in her eyes. His parents were singing to them, and it filled Arthur with the kind of warmth that comes from belonging, as though his heart were made of sunshine. The soothing voices melded in harmony so that the depths of his father's earthy tones and his mother's shining, light notes were one in a hypnotic melody:

*The beat of the earth is strong, strong,  
Forged from the roars of time.  
Slow, slow. Thrumming high.*

\*

Arthur's eyelids flickered in his sleep.

Parthena flew down from the open window. She nudged Arthur's cheek.

"Parthena?" he asked sleepily, trying to bury himself back in the arms of his dream. He didn't want to leave it; it felt so beguiling. His parents sang on:

*It calls, we call, the voices.*

Parthena nudged him again.

Rubbing his eyes blearily, Arthur looked at Parthena. "Whatever's the matter with you?" He glanced to the window. "It's the middle of the night." Half asleep, Arthur yawned and pushed himself up to peer outside. He'd had experience of strange characters sneaking around Lontown at night, so he thought it best to check, in case Parthena was alerting him to something. He yawned and ran his hand through his rusty brown hair, which stuck up in all directions from sleep. A light early-autumn frost dusted the pitch-lamps and the yellowing leaves of the lime trees below. The moon reflected directly above the distant dome of the Geographical Society. All was still and silent.

*The beat of the earth is strong, strong.*

The echoes of the song drifted through him. Perhaps Parthena had sensed Arthur's dream of his parents. She was a sapient animal, uncommonly understanding of human language and feelings, even though she couldn't communicate back through speech. Before Ernest Brightstorm's death at South Polaris, Parthena had been the loyal companion and sapient friend to Arthur and Maudie's father; Ernest and Parthena had discovered each other when he was young, on one of his expeditions into the north, and they'd formed a lifelong bond. Now Parthena stayed close to Arthur, although she sometimes chose to be with Maudie, and was even partial to spending time with Harriet's sapient cat, Queenie.

"You still miss him, don't you?" Arthur said, sitting back on his bed and stroking her silken white feathers. Her eyes seemed to say more; he wished he could hear her mind, like he had understood the thought-wolves speaking to him in the far south. His heart felt suddenly constricted as memories of his parents, then Welby, entered his mind, followed



by Tuyok, the leader of the thought-wolves, who was alive but so very far away.

Arthur thought about going next door to wake Maudie. They only recently decided to have their own rooms: Maudie's tools and various inventions overran their old room, and she complained that she would always trip over his piles of books, so they decided it was time. But at moments like this, he missed being able to get her thoughts by calling out in a whisper across the room. The dream had felt so real, almost as though his parents were in his room, standing beside him.

But that was impossible.

Arthur drifted back to sleep, and although he willed the dream to return, it didn't.