

With a bark of fury, Beastie leapt down the molehill, reaching the ground in two bounds. He ran across the open space towards the mole, skidding to a halt just behind it and sending Podkin flying through the air . . .

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KIERAN LARWOOD

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID WYATT

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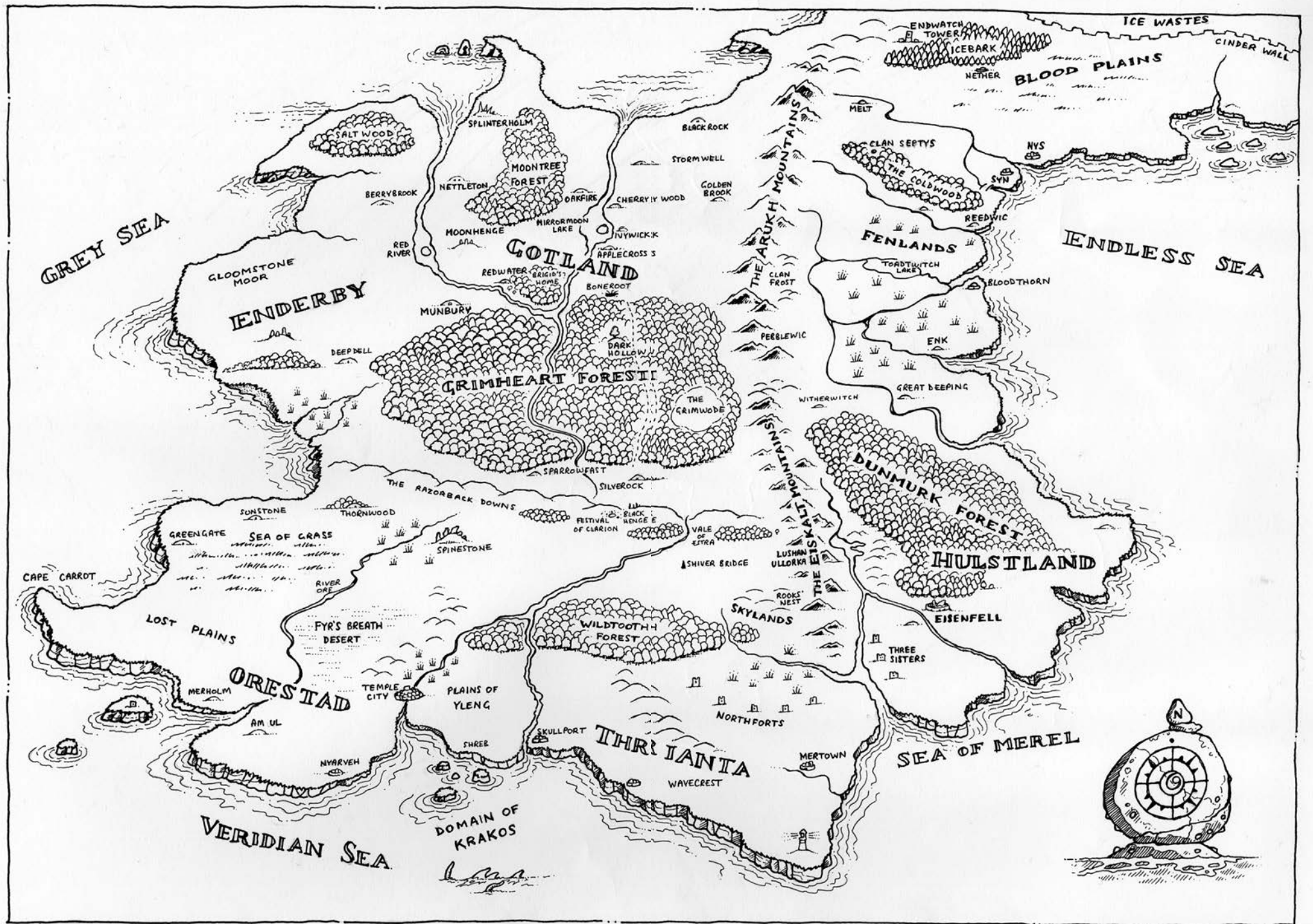
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*This one is for all the readers, the teachers, the
librarians, the booksellers . . . everyone who has
dressed up as a Podkin character for Book Day,
or come to my events, or who has sent me letters,
messages and pictures over the past years that I
have been telling this very long story. Thank you
for travelling the Five Realms with me.*





CHAPTER ONE

In a wooden bed, piled high with blankets, lies an old, old rabbit.

His brown fur is streaked with grey. He has one ear only; the left one ends in a clean stump, long healed. His tired eyes are closed as his head rests on the pillow, and his breath comes in wheezing, shaky rattles.

He lies in a room with walls of hanging tapestries, at the back of a grand tent.

By his side, clutching his paw, is an aged bard. He looks down on the sleeping rabbit with sad, worried, green eyes. Beside him is a young lop rabbit, his long ears speckled with brown-spotted fur.

Silence hangs heavy in the room, broken only by the breaths of the sick rabbit. Through the canvas walls, the noise of a bustling crowd creeps, but the sounds of joy

and laughter seem as if they are coming from another world – one in which happiness still exists.

Outside, great change has come to the little warren of Thornwood.

The grassy mound it hides beneath is a mass of wooden scaffolding and bustling carpenters, toiling to fix the gaping hole in the roof and replace all the charred beams and splintered doorways. Gardener rabbits scurry to and fro from the nearby woods, planting saplings and trimming away damaged shrubs, working to repair the crown of trees and plants that sits proudly on top.

But the biggest change is outside the warren, on the rolling meadows that lead up to the heavy oak doors. A whole city has sprung up there, made of round tents, square tents, wooden shelters and – in the middle of it all – the large marquee made of patchwork green canvas that holds our patient.

Dozens upon dozens of rabbits can be seen, many more than the small number of inhabitants that normally live there. Some are bards, with swirls painted in their fur and tattooed on the bare skin of their ears. Others are druids, with white robes and long braided beards. There are soldiers in boiled leather armour, carrying spears and shields. Farmers and merchants in clothes of dyed wool and felt. Children run everywhere, filled with

excitement at all the change, all the strangers.

And the reason for it is the poorly rabbit himself.

‘Has he changed?’ the little rabbit asks the bard. ‘Is he any better?’

‘No, Rue,’ the bard sighs. ‘He hasn’t magically got better in the last thirty seconds.’

‘There’s lots of rabbits outside,’ Rue says. ‘Maybe you should go and have a look.’

The bard sighs again. ‘I don’t want to leave Podkin,’ he says. ‘He’s my big brother. I need to be here. When he goes to the Land Beyond.’

Rue takes the bard’s other paw and squeezes it, wishing he could wring out some of his old master’s sadness. ‘Maybe he won’t though?’ he says. ‘Maybe he’ll have a nice sleep, then hop up and tie his false ear on and go back to being just an old greybeard sitting in the corner of the longburrow, like he was before. Except this time I’ll know who he actually is . . .’

The bard takes his eyes off his fading brother and tries to smile down at Rue as best he can. ‘That won’t be happening, Rue. He’s hurt too badly. All the healers say so. And Podkin said himself. He knows it is time. Finally, it is time.’

‘Perhaps . . .’ Rue pauses, wondering if it is the right moment. ‘Perhaps you should do something to take your

mind off it? Like, maybe . . . tell a story?’

The bard manages a chuckle. ‘I was wondering when you’d ask,’ he says. ‘But I’m not sure I’m in the right mood for storytelling.’

‘But master,’ Rue persists, ‘didn’t you say that stories have the power to take us away from the real world? To help us when we feel sad or worried or lonely? To remind us that, however bad things are, there are others who felt the same way? That we’re not alone, that these things will pass and—’

‘Yes, all right, all right!’ the bard snaps. ‘I did say all those things, but when I said them I didn’t know you’d be storing them up to use against me!’

‘I store up everything you say, master.’ Rue looks up at him with the biggest, most innocent eyes he can muster.

Again the bard sighs. ‘I suppose you might be right,’ he admits. ‘Sitting here feeling sad is no good. A story might be called for. And I guess you want the rest of Podkin’s, don’t you?’

‘Well,’ says Rue. ‘You *did* leave it on rather a big cliffhanger.’

‘I love a good cliffhanger,’ says the bard, smiling.

‘So, will you?’ Rue prods his arm. ‘Please? Please please please?’

‘Very well,’ says the bard. ‘I will finish the story. Here with its hero. And perhaps, Goddess willing, Podkin might be able to hear it as well.’

Rue looks at the sleeping rabbit nestled in his bed. ‘I reckon he will,’ he says.

‘Well then, shall we begin? Shall we go back to Temple City and see what happened when the Gifts came together?’

Rue claps his little paws together. ‘I thought you’d never ask,’ he says.



CHAPTER TWO

Podkin

The little one-eared rabbit stared wide-eyed as the white-hot sphere that the Gifts had melted into began to shift its shape. It rose up, as high as his head, sending beams of light out across the stadium, bathing its Gift Bearers in a golden glow: a blessing, a show of thanks for their long, hard task completed.

Then, finally ready, it began to stretch and fold itself. The molten bronze bubble that had once been split into the twelve legendary items, which had fought battles and performed miracles all over the Five Realms, started to become something else – something new.

Podkin's eyes drank it in, marvelling at the power of the Goddess's magic as, a thousand years after she

separated it, the chestful of material moulded itself into its true form. Twisting, bending, flowing, he watched as it changed itself into what looked like a body, a person.

Arms, legs, head, a single ear . . . It was a child, exactly the same size as Podkin, except that it was made of gleaming, twinkling bronze.

'Hello?' Podkin spoke to it as the last curls of metal flowed into shape and it sank to the floor of the Emperor's box. 'Can you hear me? Are you awake?'

But the body didn't respond. It simply fell in on itself, boneless, lifeless.

If this is a champion sent by the Goddess, I don't think very much of them, Podkin thought. He took a step closer, and then he realised . . . the Gifts hadn't become another rabbit, they had shaped themselves into a suit of armour. One the exact size for him, for Podkin. It even had a single ear, just as he did.

'Nooo! Noooo!' A raw, furious scream came from below, on the floor of the arena, tearing his attention away from the armour.

Podkin leaned over the balcony to look down and saw Scramashank – the Gorm leader – curled on the sand, clutching the stump of his arm where Stormcleave the axe had been ripped away. Behind him, the open iron mouth from which he had emerged was trembling,

shaking. As Podkin stared, one of the iron tentacles of Gormalech juddered and snapped, falling down to crash into the sand.

‘Curse you!’ Scramashank howled, scrambling to his feet. His iron armour was cracking and splitting. Pieces of it began to crumble and scatter around him. ‘My master will crush you for this!’

Podkin’s eyes flicked from the screaming Gorm to his friends. They were gathered together, facing their enemy, looking as though they might dash in to finish Scramashank off.

But before they could, the Gorm Lord staggered towards his iron tunnel, his soldiers following him. Bunched together in one yelling, wailing mass, they tumbled inside and were swallowed by the living iron. The metal tentacles of Gormalech vanished beneath the arena floor, making the ground shudder and quake with their passing.

‘Podkin!’ Paz was calling out to him, looking up towards the Emperor’s box where he stood. All she could see of him was his ear, poking up from inside the balcony. ‘Are you hurt? What happened to the Gifts?’

‘I’m fine!’ Podkin leaned over the box wall and waved back. ‘And the Gifts . . . they’ve changed.’

‘Into what?’ Yarrow shouted. ‘Hurry up and show

us – I can’t bear the suspense!’

Podkin turned back to the armour, which still lay in the corner of the balcony, quietly glinting. How was he supposed to get it down there? Throw it over the edge?

Put it on, you idiot, he told himself and almost laughed. The suit looked so fine, so beautiful. Could it really be for him?

How many other one-eared children are here? The thought made him chuckle. With trembling paws he reached down and lifted the suit, examining it more closely.

Despite it being made of solid metal, it was surprisingly light. When his fingers touched the surface, he felt the familiar tingle of energy that used to come from Starclaw.

‘You’re perfect,’ he whispered to it as he turned it round and examined it.

There were plates of bronze on the shoulders and covering the chest. The helmet was solid metal shaped into the face of a rabbit with holes for the eyes.

A skirt of metal panels hung from the waist, and the arms and legs were made from finely linked chainmail. It even had boots and gloves attached, delicately jointed. The whole thing was fitted together in one piece. It looked like Podkin could simply

pull it on over his clothes.

‘Here we go then,’ he said to himself. He unpinned his cloak and let it fall to the floor, then turned the armour around so he could step inside through the opening in the back.

He placed one foot inside a boot, then the other. When they were snug, he pulled up the trousers and stuck his arms through the sleeves. The chest plate slipped around his ribs, and he ducked his head inside the helmet.

It fits perfectly, he thought. It really was made just for me.

He was wondering how he would manage to fasten up the back on his own when he felt the buckles snap themselves closed, the suit pulling itself shut. The helmet fitted over his head, his eyes peering through the slots, his mouth and nose poking through beneath so he was able to breathe and speak freely.

‘Some time before Bramblemas would be good!’ Yarrow shouted up to him. Podkin rolled his eyes and walked over to the balcony edge so they could see him.

As he moved, he felt the armour buzz and crackle. It was powerful, of that there was no doubt, but what was it for? Why had the Goddess replaced all of the miracles the Gifts were capable of with this?

‘Ahh! A baby Gorm!’ Pook shrieked out when Podkin



appeared, and he realised that was how he might look: a rabbit covered in metal, although this time it was gleaming bronze instead of twisted iron.

‘Don’t worry, Pook! It’s only me!’ Podkin waved and pointed to his missing ear.

‘What is it?’ Crom called out. ‘What’s happened?’

‘The Gifts have turned into a suit of armour,’ Paz explained to the blind warrior. ‘Podkin’s wearing it.’

‘By Clarion’s lute strings, he looks wonderful!’ Yarrow clapped his paws. ‘Hurry down here so I can commit it to my memory properly. This is incredible!’

‘Coming,’ Podkin said. He looked around, seeing a passageway leading into the arena’s interior. The one Emperor Yoth had vanished down earlier. Something told him that might not be a good way to go: he had no idea where it led or what might be waiting for him inside.

That only left clambering over the balcony and dropping down to the arena floor. Would his armour be strong enough to protect him? He had a sense it would, but there was only one way to find out.

Podkin swung a leg over the balcony and began to lower himself until he was clinging on by his paws.

‘Pod, what are you doing? You’ll break your neck!’ Paz yelled at him, and the others gasped as he dangled. But Podkin could feel the gloves of

his new armour gripping tight. They had hooked themselves into the stone of the balcony like a fly walking up a sheer wall.

‘I think I can climb down,’ Podkin called. Gingerly, he took one paw off and grasped a lower part of the wall. When he was sure he had tight hold, he moved the other down.

‘Poddy’s a spider!’ Pook looked up from where he had been cleaning the wound on Beastie the wolf’s shoulder to point and laugh.

Podkin laughed too, as that was how he felt, climbing down step by step, sticking to the wall like glue.

A few moments later and he had joined them on the arena floor. They all crowded around, cooing at his shiny new armour.

‘It’s only got one ear!’ Mish said.

‘It was made for you, Podkin!’ Mash agreed.

‘The Goddess *knew*,’ Yasmin said, almost too quiet to hear. ‘She knew there were bits missing from Copperpot and Blixxen. That there wouldn’t be enough to cover all of you. That’s why you had to lose your ear.’

Podkin stared at her, shocked. He was about to protest at the idea of the Goddess wanting him to have an ear sliced off when they were all interrupted by a sudden, grinding roar.