

THE HARE'S MESSAGE

LITTLE HARE HAS
BEEN RUNNING
FOR SO LONG.





His eyes are wild, and his whiskers frazzled. Thorns have jabbed at his weary legs, and dew soaks his tight belly. There has been barely a moment to rest or feed on his long journey over these barren hills, which is why his ribs now poke through his ragged fur. A glittering mist flies from his feet as he bounds over the marshy earth, a mist that has trailed him all the way.

Can't stop . . . don't stop . . . won't stop, he gasps, over and over, until he wonders whether he will ever stop again.

As he bounds over the wet green, he keeps twisting his head around, sniffing the wind, staring in terror. His long, black-tipped ears twitch in alarm, as they have since he left the valley of his birth, a whole moon ago.



Can't see it . . . can't smell it . . . can't hear it, he keeps reminding himself. But he knows it is coming, faster than any hare can run, and the thought of this drives him on, over highlands and moorlands, over hedges and ditches, as if he is trying to outrun the wind itself.

He runs until he worries his hare-heart, powerful as it is, might burst with exhaustion. Little-Hare hopes that will not happen, as he has only lived for two summers, and would like to see at least a couple more.

Here and there, as he lopes in swerving lines across the moors, he spies a sheaf of grasses or a clump of crispy, withered bracken, and imagines how sweet it would be to stop, scabble a shallow form out of the earth behind them, and lie down, out of sight, and sleep.

But if you stop now, he thinks, leaping over a boggy puddle, you might never get up!

Besides, he has a promise to keep, one he must keep all on his own. His fath-hare and moth-hare have long crossed over to the Great Beyond, and his sist-hare . . . is why he must keep his promise.

Little-Hare hopes he is racing the right way. He has never been this far north in the Island before. The weather is only ever strange these days, but grows worse the further he travels. And the land is so wide and bare, unlike the soft green valley of his home wild.

Dandelion Hill.

Even the name sounds warmer than here, he thinks,

as he runs under drizzly skies up marshy slopes. He has dreamed of little else on his journey. The wide opens of golden wheat, the soft ash, beech and oak tall-homes, and the high ridge overlooking all, with a view down to the ever-roaring fish-road.

Little-Hare remembers a grassy hillside bright with rain – and rolling down it with his sist-hare, frisking and fighting, batting her away with his forefeet. Or chasing butterflies in the wheat open, pelting through the stalks as fast as they could, trying to outrace each other – and how she was *always* bigger, stronger, faster.

They sat on the ridge together and watched the summer sun set, a honeysuckle light that sweetened the whole valley. They sheltered under willow boughs when the autumn sky wept tears and dug out the white in winter with frozen paws.

They skipped and gambolled. They touched noses and felt together.

Yes, that was Dandelion Hill, he remembers sadly.

*That was *before*.*

And now Little-Hare's heart swells, only not from all the racing, but from a feeling of longing rising deep within that threatens to wash him clean away.

I mustn't! he thinks. Never!

He must not let it overwhelm him, ever again.

Got to run on.

Then, just as he feels he can run no further, what is this looming out of the marsh breath that rolls over the

hilltop in front of him? The leaves and branches of some tall-homes! Just to see them in this empty land makes something quicken inside.

The calls and cries grow stronger here, and the scents too, so many beasts, some he does not recognise, not even from his long journey north. *Is this it?* he wonders. *Have I found them at last?*

For, to keep his promise, Little-Hare seeks a *wild*. In the language all beasts share, a group of creatures brought together by breeding, place or shared need, guided by their chosen leader, a *Wildness*.

This is the last wild he must reach with his message. Everywhere else he has tried, he has been . . . too late. His own wild lived on farmland, with all beasts united together, led by a—

Can't think about that. Block it out.

He shakes his head, blinking. He must not dwell on the past, he must focus on the message he carries, the news he has to deliver.

Little-Hare hopes for a friendly welcome at this new dwelling, as is traditional between wilds. There will be a Great Rock for addressing fellow creatures from, brave Guardians keeping the wild safe from unwanted intruders, secret shelters concealed under bushes in the deepest parts of the forest. Calls will be sung, dreams revealed, and lonely animal as he is, he will be together again, feel part of something bigger than him, all connected and tangled, joined through root and stem and cry.

The wild world.

If he was not so dizzy with tiredness, he would jump for joy.

I'm here, Run-Hare, he says to the voice inside his head, the voice that has not left him this whole time. *Like I promised. I made it.*

At least, that is what he hopes.

For what he arrives at is not the cosy tall-home wood of his daydream, full of sun-dappled walk-upons, cooing pigeons and chattering rooks. Instead, sombre, ancient oaks, taller and wider than he has ever seen before, rise out of the ground to block his way. Two wizened trunks stand out front, solid as gateposts.

It is winter. There are traces of white on the ground, and pretty patches of sow-bread flowers brightening the roots of the gateway tall-homes. He slinks to a halt and loiters just inside the edge of the old forest. Beyond, there are twisting roots, strands of cobweb stretching from bough to gloomy bough, with no other sign of life . . .

Apart from the eyes!

How could he miss them?

The three pairs of amber eyes, glowing in the shadows.

Little-Hare bobs up straight away, standing tall on his hind legs, to let these foxes know he has seen them. A signal which warns any hunter that even if they leaped for him now, he would beat them in a race. There is no faster animal across land on this island than a hare, even one as tired as he.

This plan might have worked, except that these watchers are not foxes. Slipping into the greyish light, these are animals whom the hare did not realise still lived in the further reaches of the Island. No wonder they have stayed hidden, in this faraway forest. But not so hidden now, with their stone-coloured fur and shining eyes, teeth bared as they circle him.

Wolves.

The hare doesn't know if he can outrun these new hunters, so he doesn't even try, and collapses into a crouch, ears flat, overtaken by an uncontrollable shiver.

What brings you to Stag Wood, stranger? growls one.

State your business, says another.

*And quick, for we are *hungry*,* adds the last.

The hare glances at each one in turn, taking in their size and strength.

My name is Little-Hare, small for my kind . . . he begins, and they snicker.

What a shame. I was hoping for more than a snack, murmurs the third, padding closer to sniff the cowering hare. His muzzle is starting to grey.

But Little-Hare has not come this far to be eaten so soon.

And I bring urgent news, from the wild of Dandelion Hill, in the south.

Very well, sneers the first wolf. *Tell us your news, and if it is interesting, we will give you a head start, before we rip you limb from limb.*

Little-Hare shakes his head. *I am under strict orders to speak to your Wildness only.*

He leaps back, a pair of jaws snapping in his face.

We are the Guardians of this wild! We decide who speaks to our Wildness! The second wolf is nearly upon him.

Little-Hare can feel her weight, her breath and heat, ready to consume him in an instant. For a moment, he feels death, a night-black smoke coiling around his paws, leaching into his fur, and he shudders.

At the same time, he remembers. He has seen death before. In fact, he and death know each other well, even if they are not exactly the best of friends. What are these wolves, compared to the wave of horror that follows fast behind him, that can outrun any hare or wolf, smothering them in one instant under its dark crest?

He looks up, his damp head trembling, to meet the wolf's eye. The Guardian pauses, puzzled. This is not typical hare behaviour. Hares should be wary and quick. This one is stubborn and sullen.

Get out of my way, says Little-Hare.

The wolf throws her head back, howling with laughter.

I'm sorry, what did you say?

*I said, *get out of my way*.*

The other wolves join in the laughter, shaking with mirth. They are too amused to even tear his soft belly open with their claws, as they were about to.

Give us one good reason why we should, says the first wolf.

Little-Hare is not laughing. His watchful amber eyes

never leave the wolves for a second. He sighs, and delivers the message that has been burning in his belly since he left the valley he called home.

*Because our world is about to end. There is nothing you wolves can do to stop the enemy chasing me. I was chosen, I tried, and . . . your wild is my last chance. *Our* last chance. So unless you want to die, get out of my way. Now.*

Then, before they can reply, he is off, bounding further and further into the deep oak wood.

For he is not just any hare.

He is the hare of all hope.