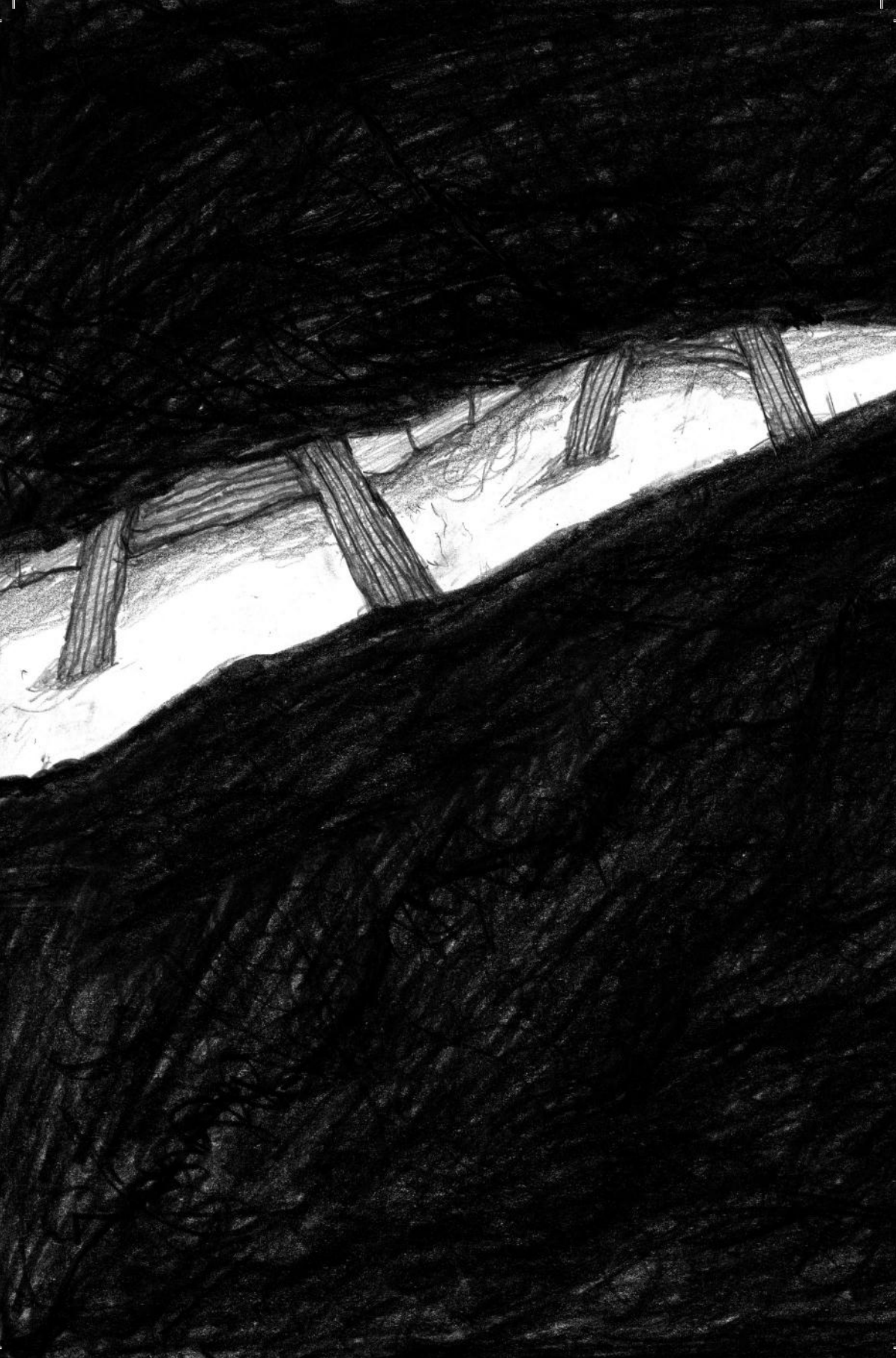


Part One
The Mine
of
Happiness



1. This Isn't Going to Help Wish's Fear of Small Spaces



Deep in the heart of the Emperor of Iron Warriors' territory, there was a mine.

This mine was called the Mine of Happiness, but there was very little happiness going on in this particular mine. In fact, absolutely the opposite, there was quite a lot of misery.

Nearly a mile underground, deep in this dreadful iron mine, three children were crawling down tunnels so narrow they had to wriggle worm-like on their tummies.

These tunnels were just above the water table, and only children were small enough to squeeze into spaces this tiny. So it was children who were braving the terrors of the deepest darkness. It was children who were taking out their hammers and their tools, and scraping out the rocks that contained the iron ore that would later be smelted. It was children who were loading the carts, and pulling them behind them on their hands and knees, up to the upper levels.

It was dark, very dark. A kind of dark that choked around you and suffocated you, and felt like it was going to swallow you up.

The three ragged, hungry children who were currently squirming through these terrible tunnels,

trying not to panic, were Xar, thirteen-year-old second son of the King of Wizards; Wish, thirteen-year-old daughter of the Queen of Warriors; and Bodkin, thirteen-year-old Assistant Bodyguard to Wish.

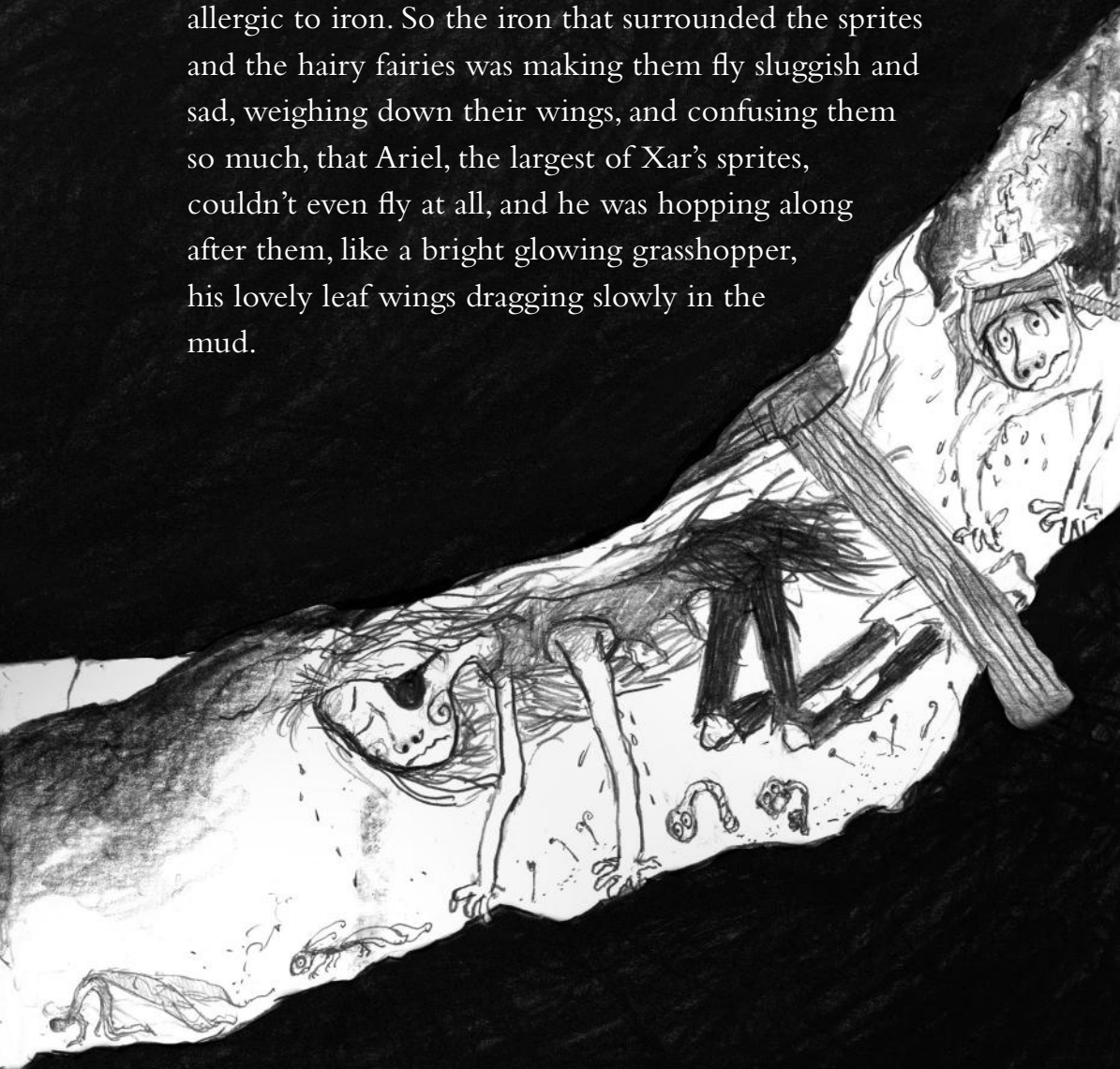
Let me introduce you to these three unlikely heroes.

Xar, as I said, was the thirteen-year-old second son of the King of Wizards. His name was pronounced ‘Zar’, I don’t know why, spelling is *weird*. Xar was the kind of boy who *meant* well, but acted first and thought later, and he was partly the reason why the three children were in all this trouble in the first place. Wizards aren’t born with Magic – their Magic comes in when they are about twelve years old. Xar’s Magic had not come in yet, and so he had set a trap to catch a Witch and use its Magic for himself. As you can imagine, this was not a very good plan, and as a result of this, Xar had a Witchstain on his hand that was beginning to control him.



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Xar had a number of companions. Six sprites, and three hairy fairies, who were buzzing slow and sad around Xar as he wriggled forward, and the glow from their stick-insect bodies provided some light in that dark place. But this was an iron mine, and Magic is allergic to iron. So the iron that surrounded the sprites and the hairy fairies was making them fly sluggish and sad, weighing down their wings, and confusing them so much, that Ariel, the largest of Xar's sprites, couldn't even fly at all, and he was hopping along after them, like a bright glowing grasshopper, his lovely leaf wings dragging slowly in the mud.






Xar also had a talking raven called Caliburn. Caliburn was supposed to keep Xar out of trouble, and the worry and the general impossibility of this task meant that Caliburn's feathers were falling out.

Xar had other companions, too large to join this secret operation, so three snowcats, a werewolf and a great Longstepper High-Walker giant called Crusher were hidden outside in the forest, anxiously waiting for the return of the three heroes.

The last of Xar's companions, and his favourite, was an eager little hairy fairy called Squeezejoos, and he had been captured by the Kingwitch, so nobody knew where *he* was.

The eyes of the sprites were lit up green as emeralds, blinking on and off as they hissed 'danger danger danger' to themselves, sometimes varying to 'get out, get out, get out' or even more alarmingly, and at a dreadfully high pitch, 'we're trapped! We're trapped! We'llnevergetoutofHERE!' – and this didn't really improve the mood of the situation, as you can imagine. It made it hard to relax.



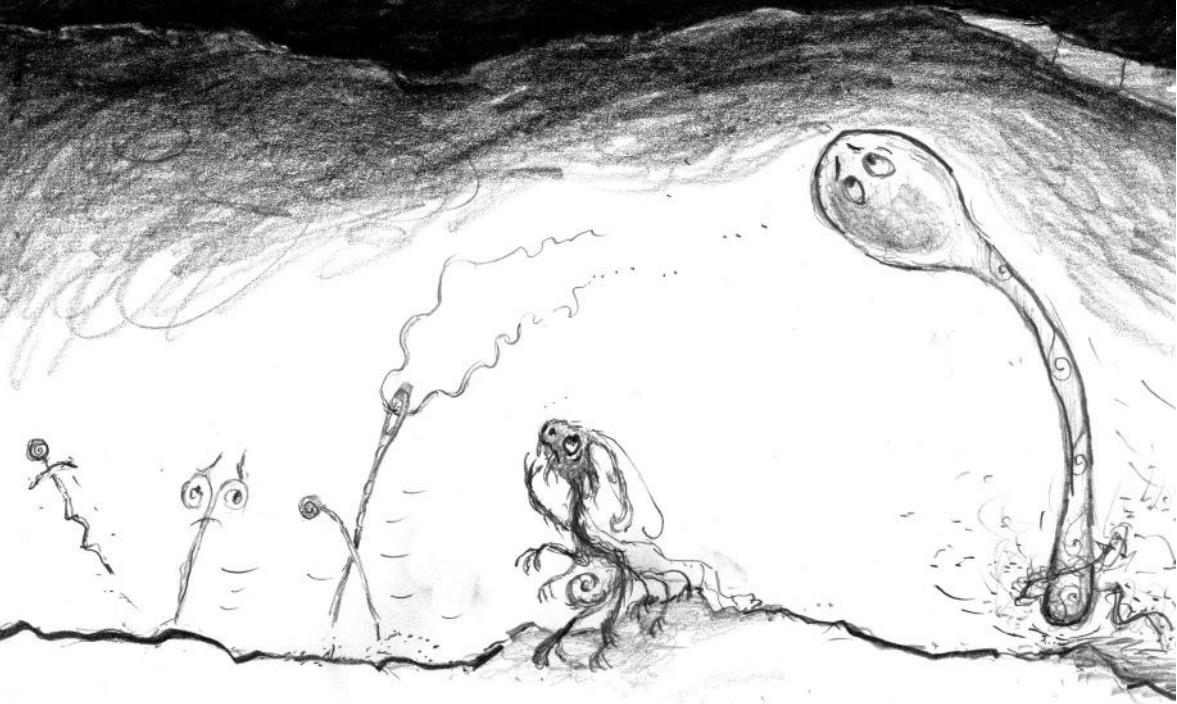
Xar was whistling and trying to pretend that he wasn't frightened at all.

The second hero was Wish, who was the thirteen-year-old daughter of Sychorax, Queen of the Warriors. Wish was a curious little matchstick of a girl, with a kind but extremely determined expression on her face. She had hair that stuck out too wispily, as if it had hit some unnoticed spot of static electricity, and a black patch over one eye. Warriors, of course, are not supposed to be Magic. But Wish had a secret. Hidden behind her eyepatch, Wish had an extraordinarily powerful Magic eye, and this eye had a Magic-that-works-on-iron. Wish was a Person of Great Destiny, for nobody had ever been born before with this kind of Magic, and the Witches were desperate to get hold of it, for it would make them all powerful.

Wish had companions too.

Wish's Magic was so strong that it made things around her come alive, and she was currently accompanied by a number of enchanted objects, all made out of iron. An Enchanted Spoon, who was her oldest, and indeed *only* friend, when she was living in her mother's iron fort. The Enchanted Spoon was hopping along beside Bumbleboozle, helping the sprite along, and scooping up any little sprites if they were lagging behind.

And then there were an Enchanted Key and an Enchanted Fork, who were both in love with the spoon. And a sprinkling of Enchanted Pins, scattering and re-forming, jumping and cartwheeling after them all in little prickly clouds.



Wish was scared of small spaces so she was finding their current situation particularly hard. She was singing the ‘Warrior Marching Song’ under her breath as she squirmed forward, to give herself courage, so her song of ‘NO FEAR! That’s the Warriors’ marching song! NO FEAR! We sing this as we march along!’

was trying to drown out the sprites' rather unhelpful high-pitched cry of 'we're trapped! We're trapped! We'll never get out of HERE!'

I'm not really in a tunnel, a mile underground, Wish tried to think to herself, as the dark crowded in on her. She scraped her knees as she crawled forward, her hair all on end as if it were alive and brushing the ceiling. Wish could feel the rough surface of the rock above because something to do with her Magic meant that her hair seemed to have nerves in it like her fingers, especially when she was alarmed like this.

I'm not really so frightened I feel like I might be sick any moment . . . thought Wish to herself. *I'm in a wide open space . . . the sun is shining . . . this is all fine . . . it's fine . . .*

The third, and perhaps most unlikely hero was Bodkin, the thirteen-year-old Assistant Bodyguard to Wish.

Bodkin was a skinny long twig of a boy, who liked following the Warrior rules, and this was a bit of a problem, because for the last year he had been breaking so many Warrior rules it was difficult to know where to begin. He should not have let Wish join up with Xar, because Xar was a Wizard, and the first rule of being a Warrior was that Wizards and Warriors should never be friends. And he certainly shouldn't be helping Wish and Xar run away from their parents, and go down mines.

Bodkin had only been made Wish's bodyguard in the

first place because he had come out top in the Advanced Art of Bodyguarding exams, and her regular bodyguard had caught a nasty autumn cold. Every now and then, like when they got into an absolute skin-crawling *nightmare* of a situation like this one, Bodkin couldn't help wishing that this had never happened.

Bodkin had a slight problem as a bodyguard, which was that he had a tendency to fall asleep in times of danger, and although he had made great progress with this problem, he still had to concentrate very hard on keeping his eyes open. One of Wish's pins was helping him stay awake by jabbing him sharply in the bottom when it saw him yawning.

'Come on, everyone!' said Xar, impatiently looking over his shoulder as he crawled through the tunnel at the front of their little crawling procession. 'You're lagging behind! Follow me . . . I'm the leader . . .'

'Oh dear . . . we shouldn't really be here . . . there are terrible creatures down here . . .' moaned Bodkin. Just then, he noticed a flickering light coming from a candle . . . with a helmet attached. He fastened it to his head, continuing behind Xar and Wish. 'What about Bluecaps? What about Knockers? What about *the Tatzelwurm*?'

At the mention of that last name, the sprites gave little shrieks of horror and started flying around in desperate circles, like moths sent crazy by a light. The

Enchanted Spoon was so terrified it plunged headfirst into the ground, under the childish illusion that if *it* couldn't see anyone else, they couldn't see *it*.

'Don't say that name!' whispered Wish furiously. 'You're making everyone panic!' And then she added, more loudly, 'There's absolutely no evidence that any of these creatures actually exist . . .'

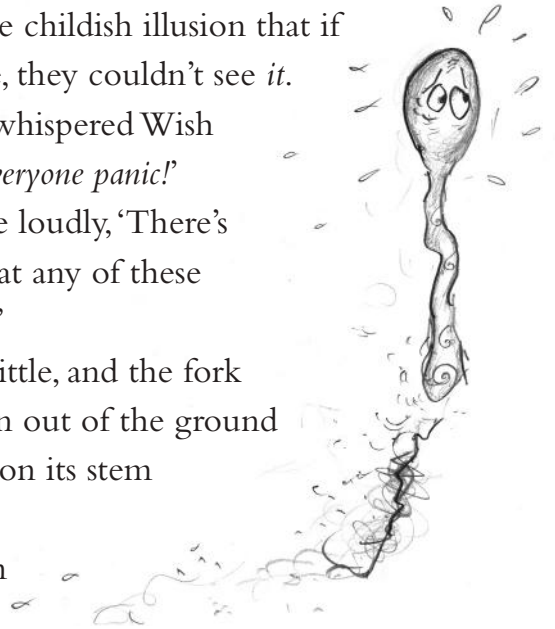
The sprites relaxed a little, and the fork and the key dug the spoon out of the ground and helped it to stand up on its stem again, very shaken, poor spoon, and wobbling from side to side.

'Okay, okay, but just remind me,' said Bodkin, 'how we have got into this mess in the first place? Why are we here anyway? Is this really necessary?'

'Oh for mistletoe's sake!' exploded Xar. 'I told you all we shouldn't have come, but none of you listened to me! But now we are here, we just have to make the best of it, and get out of here as quickly as possible and—'

But Xar was interrupted by Bumbleboozle crying out, in a voice so screechily shrill that it shredded Wish's nerves like a cat having its tail pulled:

'STOP!' shrieked Bumbleboozle. 'STOP!'
Everyone stopped.



Bumbleboozle was a sweet little dozy dormouse of a hairy fairy, who made a noise like a bumblebee when she flew.

'*I thinks . . .*' whispered Bumbleboozle, putting five of her eight legs on her little fuzzy face in horror, 'we mights be *lossssst . . . bbbzzzz . . .*'

She ended this terrible statement with an attempt at a buzz that fizzled out miserably.

The fork did an emergency handstand on to the top of Wish's head and wound its prongs round her hair, tugging the individual hairs so exquisitely that she cried out with pain. Hinkypunk the sprite ran around in circles shouting, 'Don't panic! Don't panic! Don't panic!', so hysterical with fear himself that he ran right up the walls and upside down across the ceiling, and back again.

'Bumbleboozle's right . . .' hissed Tiffinstorm, drawing from her quiver a sharpened thorn, as if that tiny stab of a pinprick would protect her from the unholy horror of a Bluecap. 'I can'tsss hardly hear the otherss anysmore . . .'

It was true.

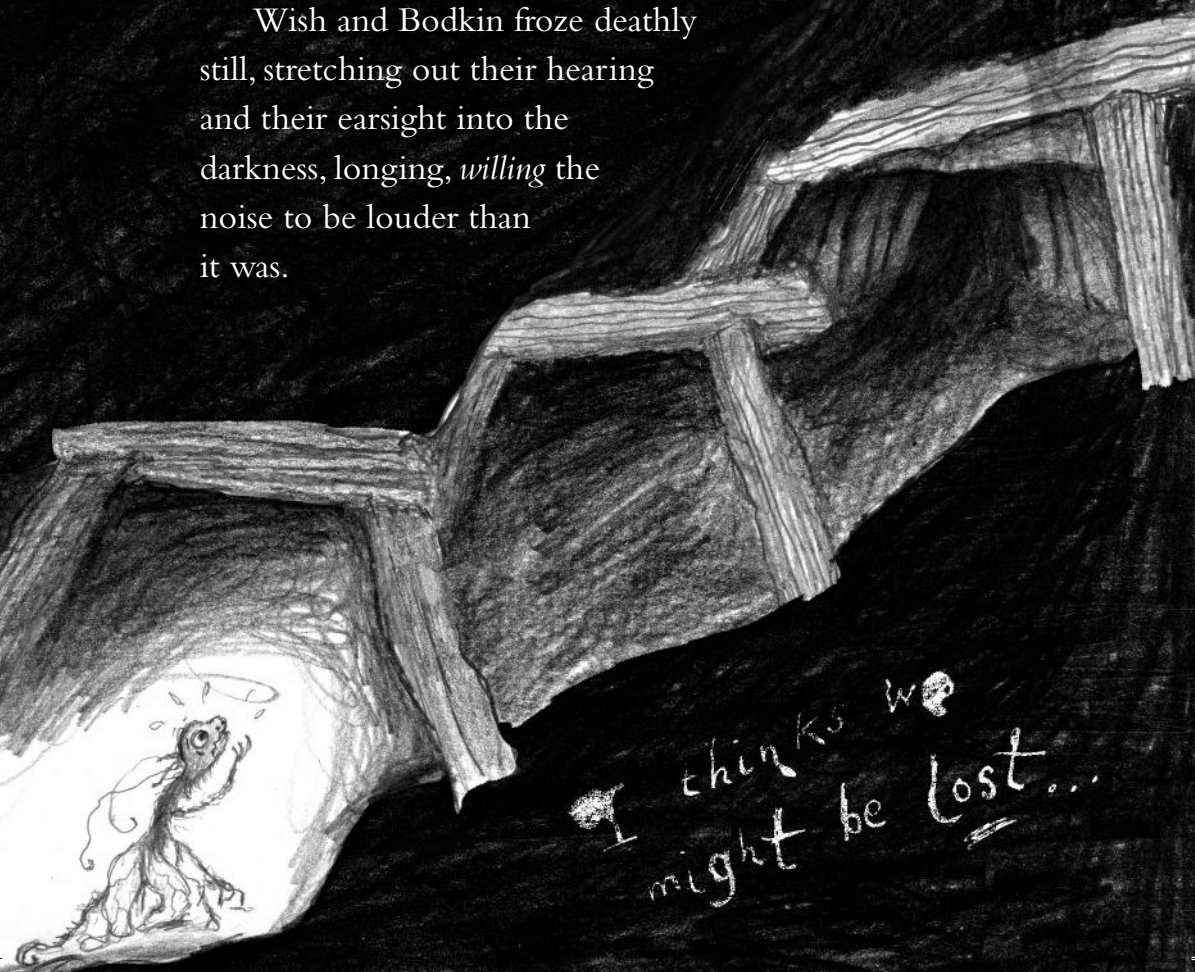


PART ONE: THE MINE OF HAPPINESS

The mine was full of children and other Magical creatures who were also working as miners, and only a few minutes ago the bouncing sound of axe on rock had filled the tunnel with bright ringing echoes. The sad songs of goblins, of kebolds and the smaller elves, lamenting the dimming of their Magic and the terrible heartbreaking toil of their work, had tumbled through the subterranean shafts, with haunting melancholy.

Now that sound was muffled and distant.

Wish and Bodkin froze deathly still, stretching out their hearing and their earsight into the darkness, longing, *willing* the noise to be louder than it was.



Xar turned around and crawled over to them.

‘We can’t be lost,’ said Xar crossly. *‘I’m the leader, and I’m brilliant, aren’t I, Bumbleboozle?’*

‘Yes,’ whispered Bumbleboozle reluctantly, in a tiny, and not very convincing voice. ‘You’s brilliant . . .’

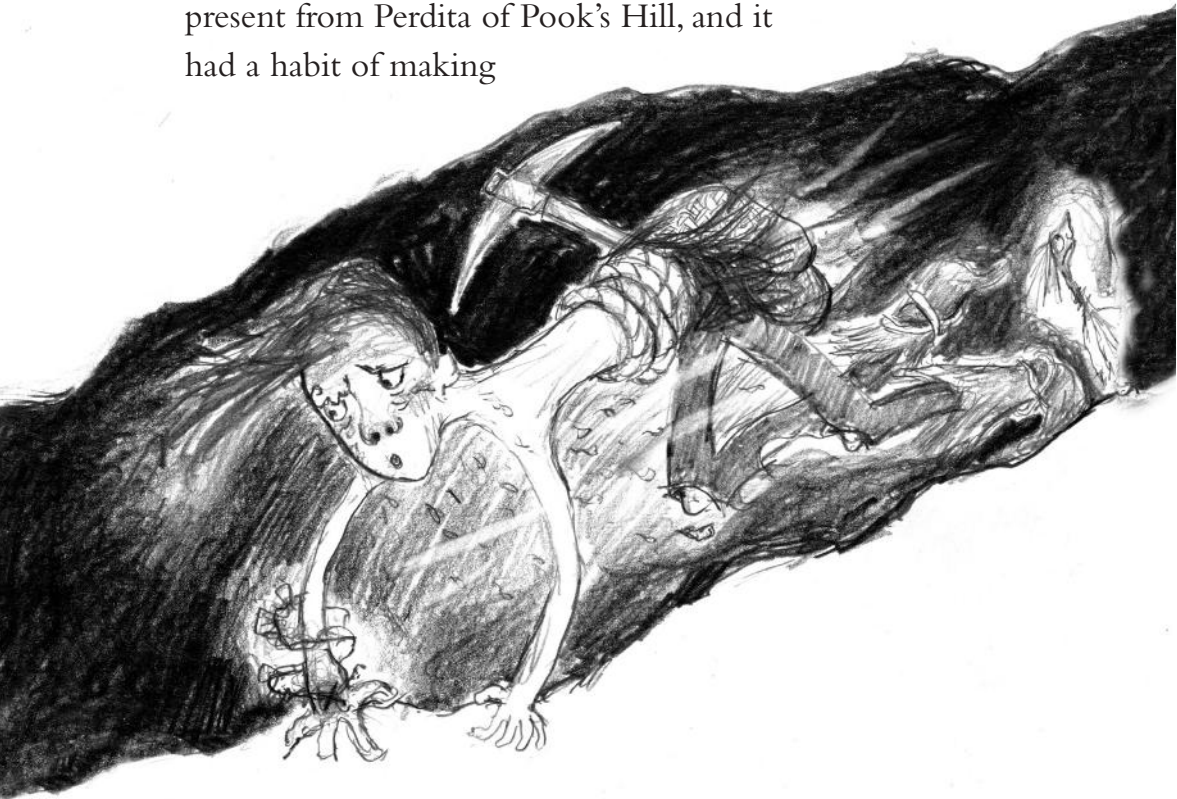
At this point the trumpet in Xar’s backpack made a small but distinct raspberry noise.

Parp!

‘I AM brilliant!’ objected Xar.

PARP! replied the trumpet, a little louder, and even more impolitely.

Xar sighed. The Enchanted Trumpet had been a present from Perdita of Pook’s Hill, and it had a habit of making



a rather rude raspberry noise whenever anybody lied, or boasted, or even exaggerated a little. This was very annoying, because Xar loved playing the trumpet, but he also had a tendency to garnish the truth. If the beastly trumpet kept on embarrassing him like this, he would have to get rid of it.

You see, this is why I miss the old Squeezjoos so much, thought Xar longingly. SQUEEZJOOS would say I was brilliant, and Squeezjoos wouldn't have to lie. Squeezjoos would really mean it . . . I told them we shouldn't have come here . . . I TOLD them we should have been rescuing Squeezjoos instead, but did they listen to me? Oh no . . .

The thought of Squeezjoos stiffened Xar's resolve.

They couldn't get stuck here, they had to get back to Squeezjoos.

'Look,' said Xar briskly. He could just about sit upright in the tunnel. He got out the Spelling Book to show the others. The Spelling Book was a Magical book with over a million pages in it, and Xar typed in the letters that would take him to the maps section.

'I've been following the map, I haven't been making this up,' said Xar as he reached the page which showed the map of the meandering tunnels that were the Mine of Happiness. Their own route was marked in bright gold, blinking on and off helpfully, and they were quite clearly going in the right direction. There were even

little illustrations of themselves, delightfully animated and cheerful, crawling steadily through the illustrated passages to where they wanted to be.

It was all very cheering.

‘Oh thank goodness for that . . .’ said Wish as she peered over Xar’s shoulder. ‘The map’s saying we’re going in the right way . . .’

‘I’s *so* glad I’s didn’t panic,’ said Hinkypunk to the other sprites, all letting out whooshes of breath in relief.

‘Of course we’re going the right way,’ said Xar. ‘I told you we were, didn’t I? I’m very good at map-reading because I’ve spent such a lot of my life running away and—’

Xar broke off, not just because the trumpet in his backpack was making a succession of rude and musical noises, but also because he had a sudden, particularly sharp twinge of pain in his right hand, the one with the Witchstain on it.

This hand had a continual dull aching agony to it, painful as a burn, and it seemed to have a spooky life of its own. Something in the nerves of Xar’s fingers was trying to pull him in its own weird direction, and it was deeply unsettling.

One of Xar’s good qualities was that he didn’t make a fuss about physical discomfort, so he tried to