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Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of English

Here be stories: exploring maps in
children's books with medieval cultural treasures and
The Stone Feather lighting the way.



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Volume 1 of 1

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2019

University of Southampton

Abstract

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

School of English

Here be stories: exploring maps in children's books with medieval cultural treasures and *The Stone Feather* lighting the way.

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by Katharine Rowena Lee MA

Through my creative practice in writing the children's novel *The Stone Feather*, inspired by Domesday Book; the creation of my own artworks, including maps of the fictional world I have created; and my research into medieval 'cultural treasures' – in particular manuscripts and *mappae mundi* – I have discovered a fresh lens through which to explore and illuminate the presence and purpose of maps in children's books. I focus on interlace as a 'perceptual mode'¹ and ideas around the 'meditative engagement'² that interlace design encourages, in relation to the roles that literary maps play, as well as its impact on my own process as a writer.

My thesis is presented within the context of contemporary publishing and the need for children to develop a high level of visual literacy in a world dominated by visual images. My critical commentary includes a review of children's books that feature maps and 'cultural treasures' as an integral part of imaginative world building and explores the notion of the 'author as curator'.

As an adventure story for 8-12 year olds with an ethical heart, *The Stone Feather* offers children the opportunity to reflect on different models of masculinity, compassion and strength – aspects of this original work that are valuable and timely.

¹ Andrew Patenall 'The Image of the Worm: Some Literary Implications of Serpentine Decoration', in *The Anglo-Saxons: Synthesis and Achievement*, ed. J. Douglas Woods and David A.E. Pelteret (Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986) p. 105

² Ewan Clayton, *The Golden Thread* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015) p. 51

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Accompanying illustrations

The critical commentary and the manuscript of *The Stone Feather* are accompanied by a portfolio of original sketches, large scale working drawings and final colour illustrations created by the author, who is known as Kate rather than Katharine.

University of Southampton

Research thesis: declaration of authorship

Here be stories: exploring maps in children's books with medieval cultural treasures and *The Stone Feather* lighting the way.

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

24 May 2019

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I would also like to thank Carole Burns and John McGavin for their insights, suggestions, encouragement and close comments during and after my MPhil Upgrade meeting; these proved extremely helpful in steering me in the right direction and offering a firm foundation for developing *The Stone Feather* by illuminating its strengths and flaws, and helping me to see more clearly its ethical heart.

I am grateful to have received the Maureen Taylor Bursary over a period of three years; in addition to financial support this also meant a great deal to me because it showed faith in the quality and relevance of my creative work and my ability, as a mature student, to succeed at doctoral level.

I have been fortunate to have long-term loyal support from my talented writer friends Gill Thompson, Jacqui Pack and Christine Mustchin; and, more recently, from the wonderful writers in The Write Process set up by Sharon Duggal for New Writing South. I would also like to thank Ali Holt who has always believed in me as a writer.

Lastly, my heartfelt thanks go to my husband Grahame Lee whose moral support and practical help has been as staunch as Fen Ironturner's support for Ethon: willingly crossing the Atlantic and driving me through the snow to reach a campus in deepest Michigan then waiting patiently whilst I spoke at a conference; making sure I never ran out of ink cartridges; and putting up more and more shelves as my research expanded into new terrains week by week, month by month.

I dedicate this project to you.

Chapter One: History with a twist

It started with a pig, swiftly followed by an ox, a cow, a kiln and a plough – all items that were of interest to William the Conqueror’s men in 1086 when, after discussions with his advisers at the Christmas Court in Gloucester in 1085, the King sent his men all across England to gather information so that taxes could be levied. This ‘great survey of England’³ led to the creation of Domesday Book – an ‘accessible and coherently arranged record’⁴ of the King’s estates, those of his vassals and their tenants, and their value. According to a contemporary account by John of Worcester, the King wanted to know how much land each of his barons possessed, how much livestock each man owned and how much each estate could render.⁵ The King certainly needed funds to pay the mercenaries he had recruited to defend England from an abortive Danish attack. However, Elizabeth Hallam argues that the content and arrangement of Domesday Book imply that it was ‘far more than a geld book’⁶. She describes the creation of Domesday Book as a ‘dramatic and durable public gesture’⁷ by ‘one of England’s harshest and most able monarchs’⁸ and suggests that it was intended to symbolise the new order. Nicholas Vincent adds that the project might have been intended to assess baronial resources, to see how many troops could be mustered should the need arise – and to establish who could be asked to swear loyalty to the King.⁹ Scholars agree, however, that the wealth of detail sought and recorded, leading to the name ‘Domesday’ which alludes to the final judgement in the Christian faith, was ‘extraordinary’ and ‘exhaustive’.¹⁰ The level of ‘detail and thoroughness’¹¹ scared and alienated the native population and this is expressed with plaintive eloquence in the Anglo Saxon Chronicles, which record that:

³ Richard Huscroft, *The Norman Conquest – A New Introduction* (Edinburgh: Pearson, 2009) p. 200

⁴ *ibid* p. 202

⁵ *ibid* pp. 200-201

⁶ Elizabeth Hallam, *Domesday Book Through Nine Centuries* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986) p. 18

⁷ *ibid* p. 11

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Nicholas Vincent, *Britain 1066-1485 The Birth of a Nation* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2011) p. 65

¹⁰ Huscroft, *op. cit* p. 202

¹¹ Hallam, *op. cit* p. 17

There was no single hide nor a yard of land, nor indeed (it is a shame to relate but it seemed no shame to him [William] to do) one ox nor one cow nor one pig which was there left out, and not put down in his record.¹²

Although the great survey records the names of 13,418 places,¹³ Vincent suggests that ‘less than 40 persons’ were involved in both the gathering of information and the making of the actual book.¹⁴ Arguing that pragmatic reasons lay behind the decision to employ a small, easily managed bureaucracy, he comments that:

If such surveys were to be completed, then they were best made in haste. Anything more deliberate or involving larger numbers of officials was likely to remain unfinished.¹⁵

Hallam notes that, intended primarily as a work of practical reference, while Domesday Book ‘lacks the splendid illumination and fine penmanship of contemporary bibles and psalters, considerable care went into its making’.¹⁶ The 413 leaves of Great Domesday Book were made of parchment, rather than vellum, because any erasures would show clearly upon this material. Its decisions were unalterable and the production methods chosen and employed reflect this. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen comments, the project transformed into ‘the permanence of a text’¹⁷ the Norman hold on the land.

It is these insights into the purpose, creation and materiality of Domesday Book that inspired my creative project, a novel for 8-12 year olds entitled *The Stone Feather*.¹⁸ In particular, the idea of a small number of individuals gathering wide-ranging and very detailed information – right down to pig level – captured my imagination. My creative response focuses on the personal, imagining one ‘counter’ entering one rural community, and the chain of events this sets off for one village boy – my protagonist, Ethon Larksong, whose adventures are summarised in the book’s

¹² Huscroft, *op. cit* p. 201

¹³ Hallam, *op. cit* p. 8

¹⁴ Vincent, *op. cit* p. 64 Note: the project comprised two volumes, Great Domesday and Little Domesday, the latter being completed once the information for Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk was ready.

¹⁵ *ibid* p. 64

¹⁶ Hallam, *op. cit* p. 25

¹⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain – On Difficult Middles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p. 113

¹⁸ Appendix 1 – Synopsis of *The Stone Feather*

synopsis.¹⁹ Victoria James, describing her debut Young Adult novel *Gilded Cage*, explains that the story is ‘set in a contemporary Britain that looks a lot like our world, with a few crucial differences’²⁰ – similarly *The Stone Feather* is set in a world not so very far removed from early medieval England, but with a different belief system, social structure, customs and games, and some entirely fictional flora and fauna. I chose this route because I felt that the social, religious and patriarchal hierarchies of 11th Century England would have prevented an uneducated boy from a poor family from finding and benefiting from the opportunities that I create for my young hero. On a personal level, I wanted to avoid the need to feature the cruelty and brutality of medieval life, because my style and focus as a writer lies in a gentler realm. Young readers can, in *The Stone Feather*, consider and explore timeless themes such as parental fallibility, in a setting that is far removed from contemporary life. My aim is that, through this deliberate choice, the work is helpful for children as well as entertaining.

In creating an original and richly detailed ‘Secondary World’²¹ for Ethon, I have taken a broad medievalist approach resulting in a work of fiction I would describe as ‘history with a twist’. Michael Alexander describes medievalism as ‘a word which gestures towards an unwieldy province of cultural history which comprises both the Middle Ages and what has been made of them.’²² Richard Utz defines it as ‘our academic engagement with medieval culture’²³ while Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl assert that medievalism refers to:

The art, literature, scholarship, avocational and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration.²⁴

Describing how, in the 1850s, John Ruskin used medievalism as a term to designate a historical period, and commenting that dividing up the past in this way can be viewed as a construct and a ‘convenient simplicity’ Alexander suggests that the medieval period

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Vic James on creating *Gilded Cage*. Available at <https://www.waterstones.com/blog/vic-james-on-creating-gilded-cage> [accessed 30 January 2017]

²¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: On Fairy stories, Leaf by Niggle, Mythopoeia and The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (London: HarperCollins, 4th edn) p. 49

²² Michael Alexander, *Medievalism – the Middle Ages in Modern England* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2007) p. xiii

²³ Richard Utz, *Medievalism: A Manifesto* (Kindle Edition: Arc Humanities Press, 2017) Note: pages are not numbered in this edition

²⁴ Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl, *Medievalism: Making the Past in the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) p. 1

can be considered to last from the 5th to the 15th Centuries.²⁵ My approach as a novelist writing for children has been to draw threads from the vast tapestry of medieval culture, with particular emphasis on Anglo Saxon literature and design, and my research into Domesday Book. I have felt no need to faithfully reflect aspects of life in England in 1086 and 1087, when Domesday Book was being compiled, such as the role of shire courts and the hierarchies of land ownership. Instead, with my young audience in mind, I have brought to the fore everyday items such as flocks of geese, a kiln and the village bread oven, and the practical method of counting and recording. My protagonist, 13-year-old Ethon, finds an unexpected escape from biting poverty when a posse of ‘counting men’ led by charismatic Foxwood Flint arrives in his remote fictional village, Greenoak. This is the main historical event within the story, foregrounded in the early chapters by rumours in Greenoak and narrative seeds carefully sewn at Trade (a large-scale market which takes place outside the village) – an aspect of the work that I developed following beta-reader and professional feedback alerting me to the fact that, previously, this key event came somewhat out of the blue. When Foxwood’s young apprentice falls ill, Ethon volunteers to help, ensuring his family will survive the coming winter and opening up a life of adventure – and danger – that he could never have foreseen. I imagined what the arrival of the ‘counting men’ would be like for a clever, resourceful but vulnerable and desperate boy living in an isolated rural community – and the story grew from here.²⁶ As well as opportunity, I have given Ethon plenty of challenges since, as children’s author Nicky Singer observes, strong stories are ‘not about the happy ending but the journey towards it, the bit where our hero or heroine overcomes terrible odds and shows us what they are made of.’²⁷ With an adventure story in mind, I created some tough physical hurdles for Ethon, including hunger, a perilous journey and a terrifying incident down a well.²⁸ My young hero also faces a terrifying worm-shaped monster, Soursigh, inspired by an old Tyneside legend, *The Lambton Worm*. The ensuing fight tests not only Ethon’s physical strength, but also his emotional courage, and brings to the fore one of the novel’s central themes: what does it take to show compassion, and what does it mean to be a man? These are aspects of the project that I will be discussing later on, in relation to monster theory and how

²⁵ Alexander, *op. cit* p. xxvii

²⁶ Appendix 1 – Synopsis *op. cit*

²⁷ Tips for Writers available at: <<http://nicky.com/new/tips-for-writers-2/>> [Accessed 28 January 2017]

²⁸ Appendix 1 – Synopsis *op. cit*

Soursigh embodies this in *The Stone Feather*, within the context of my historical research; and with concerns about ‘toxic masculinity’ acting as a powerful driver for the completion, and successful publication, of the novel.

A key aspect of the story is Ethon’s sense of isolation: as the story opens, he is forced to act as ‘head of the family’ and go to a key trading event, The Showing, because his beloved father, who has not fully recovered from his grief after losing Ethon’s mother in childbirth, is unable to do so. This is an effective aspect of the concept since, as professional structural editor Richenda Todd notes, it is ‘always effective to have a young protagonist needing to step up to life because s/he lacks the support of parents.’²⁹ To ratchet up the tension, I have ensured that supporting his family comes at a price: Ethon’s later decision to work for an outsider means that he risks losing the trust of his community – crucial to survival in medieval times – and his decision causes, for the first time ever, a serious rift with his best friend, Fen Ironturner. Discussing the poem known as *Guthlac A* in the Exeter Book, an anthology of Anglo Saxon poems and riddles, Catherine Clarke describes how devils tempt Saint Guthlac to return to human society by arguing that ‘by removing himself from the supportive networks of kinship and friendship, he becomes uniquely vulnerable’.³⁰ Whilst this sense of Ethon’s ‘unique vulnerability’ on an emotional as well as a practical level is an important theme within *The Stone Feather*, I wanted to ensure that he is never truly alone. The Silver Lady (the moon – and the key focus of this community’s belief system) is a comforting, faithful presence. My intention is for the Silver Lady to represent a mother’s love and care, to give my young hero encouragement when he needs it most, and to offer small, meditative moments of stillness and beauty. In early drafts, each description of the Silver Lady’s presence was equally fulsome. But during the editing process, as I became able to see the whole landscape of the story, I realised that a more effective approach would be to establish the Silver Lady’s role early on, so that subsequent appearances can be handled with a more effective brevity – a positive change in relation to concerns around pace and tension. Now, in the very first chapter, during Ethon’s tense encounter with his unpleasant neighbour Ma Kilter in creepy Viper’s Wood, where he is desperately searching for his lost father, I write:

²⁹ Structural editor’s report by Richenda Todd on the full manuscript of *The Stone Feather* commissioned in May 2018

³⁰ Catherine A. M. Clarke, *Writing Power in Anglo-Saxon England: Texts, Hierarchies, Economies* (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2012) p. 21

Thunder shook the forest. The sky was as dark as iron: there was no sign of the Silver Lady's pale and beautiful curve. Sometimes she was as round as a coin, sometimes as slender as a blade. Sometimes she hid for a whole night.

But she always came back.³¹

The idea of the Silver Lady has influenced the narrative in other ways too: the moon-like circle shape is deeply embedded in the culture of Greenoak, as this excerpt, from a scene where Ethon reassures his neighbour that his pregnant wife is unharmed shows:

“Swear it on the Silver Lady,” Pa Willow gasped.

“I swear,” Ethon replied, drawing the sign of the circle in the earth so that his neighbour could see it.³²

The rhyme³³ sung by the whole village at the feast scene towards the end of the story is another example:

*We make the shape of the Silver Lady
Powerful and serene
And so protect our village
From the Fogger's grip unseen.*

*We make the shape, we make the shape
We make the shape together
And so we'll walk in silver light
Safe and strong together*

*Safe and strong
Safe and strong
Safe and strong forever!*

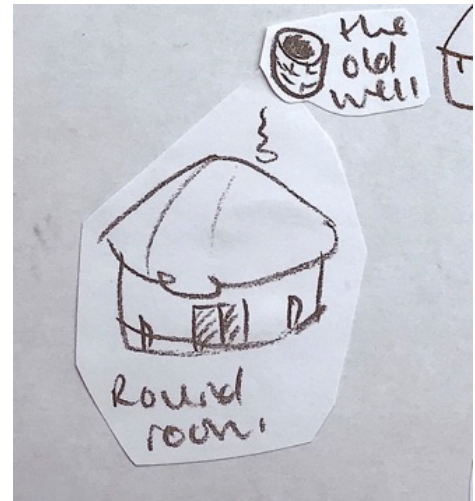
As this theme developed, I redesigned and renamed the main community building in the village. Originally the Long Room, it is now the Round Room, as can be seen in these details from the an early map I created of the village (below left), in contrast with a later rough iteration (below, right).³⁴

³¹ *The Stone Feather*, unpublished manuscript by Kate Lee, chapter 1

³² *ibid* chapter 13

³³ *ibid* chapter 20

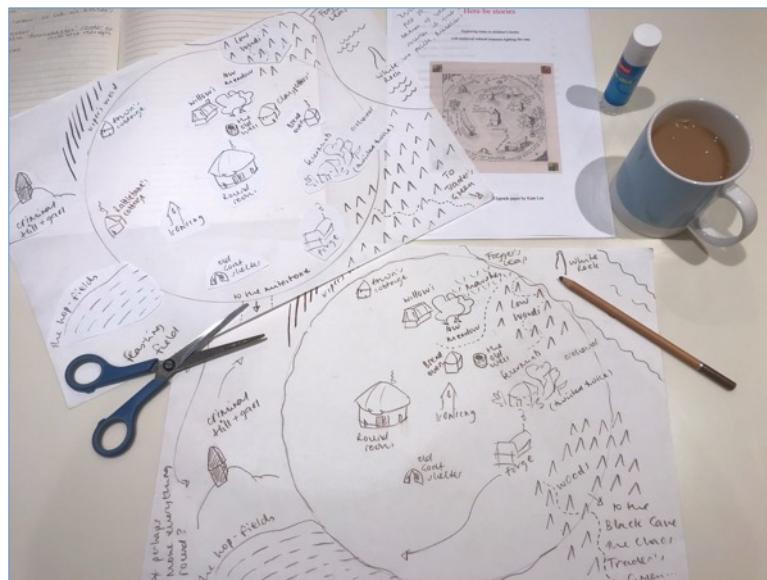
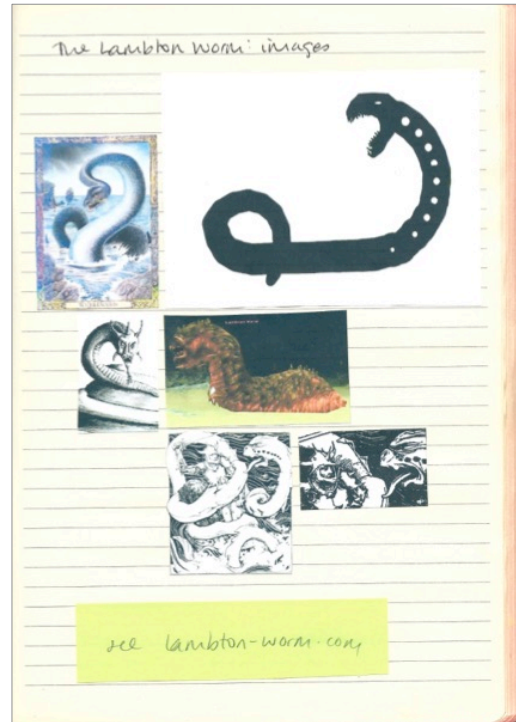
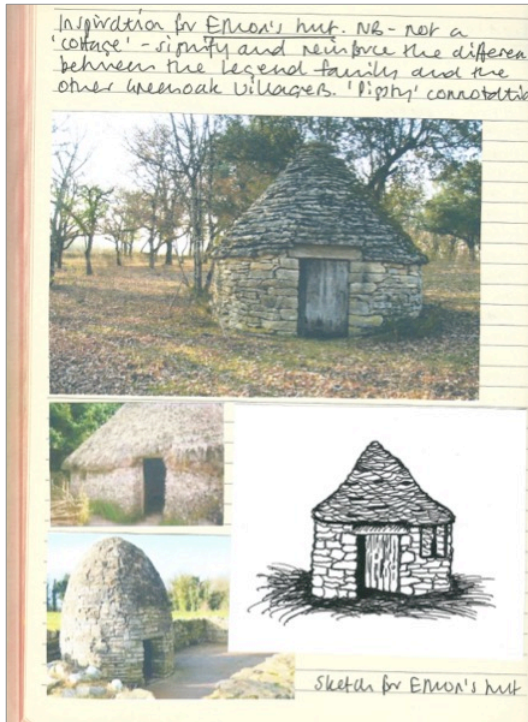
³⁴ Details from original artwork by Kate Lee, 2017



The final map of Ethon's world (presented in Chapter Six and in my portfolio) is circle-shaped, inspired by *mappae mundi* from the medieval period – an original aspect of my work, closely connected to my research, that I will discuss in the coming chapters. By echoing the shape of the Silver Lady, the map also works in visual harmony with this symbolic device. My appreciation of shape, and innate desire to create my own illustrations and maps, reflects my highly visual approach as a writer. It is this aspect of my craft that – along with my research into medieval manuscripts and maps – has led me to consider the presence, position and purpose of maps in children's books, whilst creating my own original work.

Chapter Two: The artist emerges

For me, writing is a highly visual process, as the following pages from my notebooks and photographs of my creative work in progress³⁵ show:



³⁵ Scrapbook for *The Stone Feather* project by Kate Lee, compiled from 2014-2017.

From the earliest stages of my doctoral journey, *The Stone Feather* seemed to be morphing into an art project, with my supervisor Catherine Clarke commenting that the artist in me seemed to be ‘fighting to get out.’³⁶ It was not too much of a struggle: I enjoyed sketching and painting elements such as Ethon’s little sister’s sinister but much-loved doll, Poppety, and story beads – examples of imaginative world-building ‘cultural treasures’ – with their simple, graphic designs carved into wood:³⁷



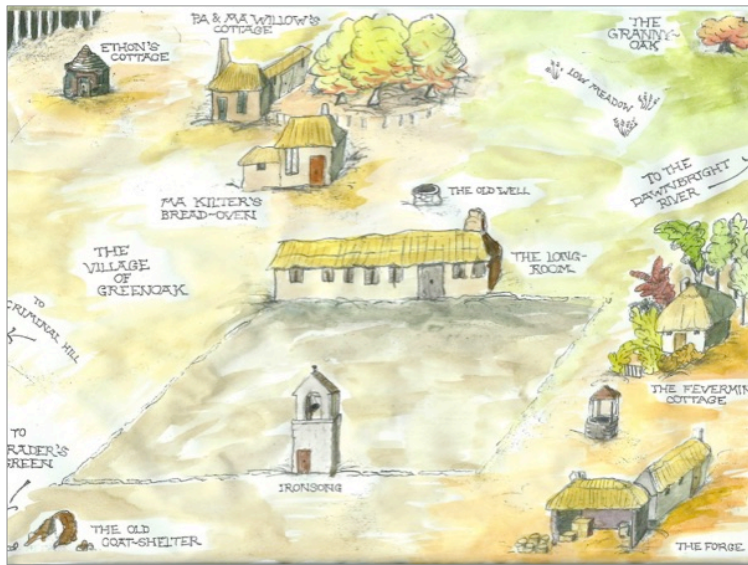
Creating a map that shows the setting for the story seemed entirely natural. I discussed with my primary supervisor Rebecca Smith the possibility of creating multiple maps showing different aspects of Ethon’s world, such as the location of different plants, as these play a key role in the story.³⁸ But as my research progressed, I moved towards the idea of creating one ‘super map’ based on my original drawing,³⁹ which is shown below, and which I will discuss more fully in Chapter Six:

³⁶ Supervision meeting with Professor Catherine Clarke, 7 November 2014

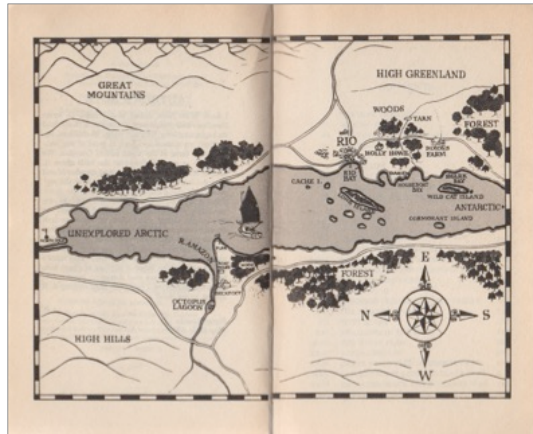
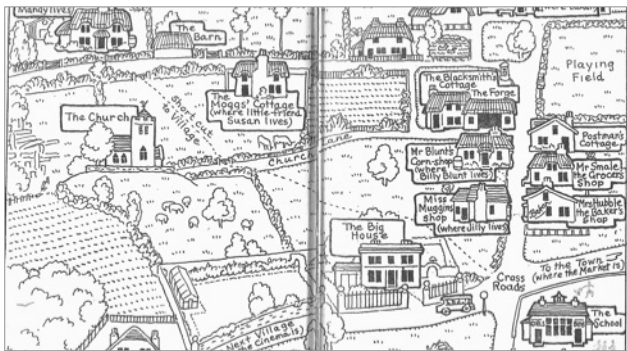
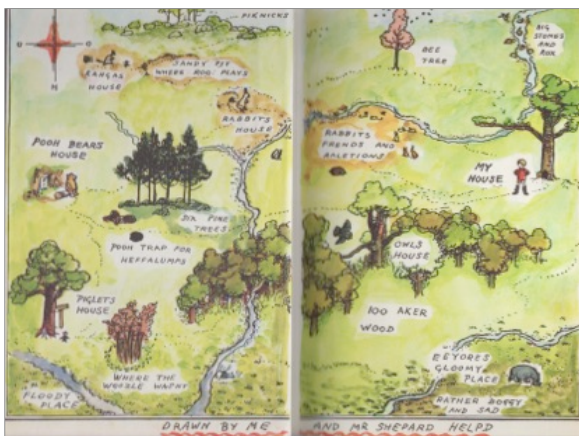
³⁷ This image shows a selection of sketches from the portfolio of original drawings by Kate Lee that accompanies this paper

³⁸ Supervision meeting with Rebecca Smith, November 2014

³⁹ Original artwork by Kate Lee, a map of Greenoak, 2014

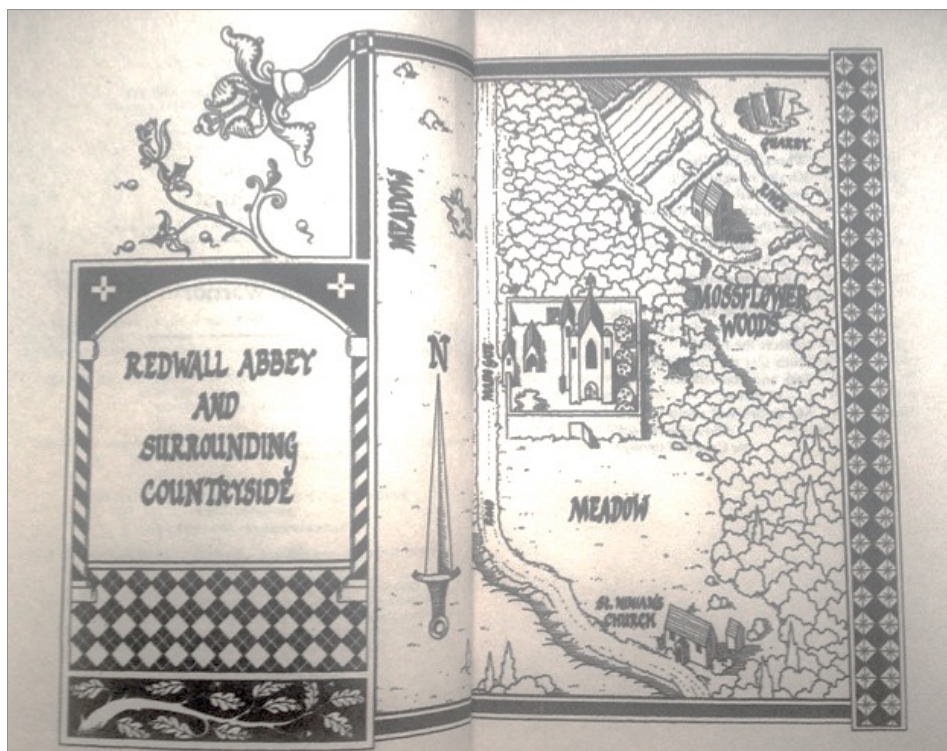


This aspect of my creative practice reflects a lifelong interest in maps in children's books. The images below show some of my favourites:⁴⁰



⁴⁰ From top left, clockwise: A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (London: Egmont, 1973); Shirley Hughes and Clara Vulliamy, *Dixie O'Day Up, Up and Away!* (London: The Bodley Head, 2013); Arthur Ransome, *Swallows and Amazons* (London: Random House, 1993) Red Fox Edition; and Joyce Lankester Brisley, *Milly-Molly-Mandy & Co* (London: Harrap, 1955)

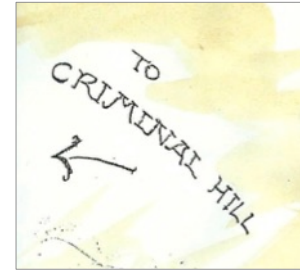
Through elements such as illustrational style, place names, environmental features and scale, maps offer clues as to the levels of excitement, danger or perhaps humour that the child can expect to encounter, as well as more literal information about the setting in which the story will take place. For example, we can see Owl's House and the Bee Tree in the Hundred Aker Wood; we can see the neatly ploughed fields in Milly-Molly-Mandy's village – giving a sense of order and calm – and, in contrast, the excitingly-named Octopus Lagoon west of Wildcat Island. Directional information, usually in the form of arrows or a compass, is often included. In the map at the beginning of adventure story *Redwall*⁴¹ the north-pointing dagger acts as a novel take on the compass rose which, my research suggests, adorns the majority of maps in children's books. This feature gives a chillingly accurate clue as to the sort of story *Redwall* will be, with its graphic descriptions of warring anthropomorphic characters reaching a violent end:



As the expanded details shown below⁴² illustrate, my own artwork consciously highlights features that hold special meaning for my young hero Ethon, and also offers clues about the story world and his position within it:

⁴¹ Brian Jacques, *Redwall* (London: Random House, 1993) Red Fox 4th edition 2006

⁴² Details from the first colour illustration of the map of Greenoak by Kate Lee; the original is presented in the accompanying portfolio



For instance, Ethon's home is much smaller than the others depicted and sits on the very edge of the village, near the creepy dark forest. This helps to establish Ethon as someone who is less comfortable and more at risk: someone, perhaps, who is going to have to fight to survive. Arrows show paths he may or may not take, suggesting that he will have agency but will also be required to make choices. The forest, named Viper's Wood, is drawn in a way designed to evoke unease: against dense shadows, the tree-trunks appear as fragile, ghostly columns. In contrast with the softer colours used to portray the village, Viper's Wood appears forbidding and frightening – and Ethon lives right beside it. Features such as the old well and the village bell, Ironsong, which are both key to Ethon's story, are clearly shown both in early versions and in subsequent iterations. In this way, I have consciously echoed in my drawing a key aspect of the writer's craft: deciding what to keep in and what to take out, in order to present a particular viewpoint or version of events. I am acting as 'author as curator', carefully, deliberately and consciously choosing and presenting elements on behalf of my protagonist: *showing what matters*. The character Inuluk, a 12-year-old Inuit girl, in Nicky Singer's *Island*, explains this beautifully. When she first sees a paper map, shown to her by British boy Cameron, this is her response:

The drawing was strange, Inuluk thought, it made the island into the shape of a polar bear's head, with the lake for an eye. Certain places were marked with crosses or rings. Not any of the important places though.⁴³

Inuluk struggles to appreciate the point of such map, which Cameron sees as factual and 'accurate'. She reflects: 'As if the land – with all its mysteries – could be captured on a piece of paper!'⁴⁴ In Inuluk's particular case, some of the 'important things' such as memories and her ancestors' knowledge, cannot easily be represented, presenting the

⁴³ Nicky Singer, *Island* (London: Caboodle Books, 2015) p. 88

⁴⁴ *ibid* p. 88

‘author as curator’ with significant challenges; perhaps this is one of the reasons that this book, unlike most Middle Grade novels set on an island, does not feature a map.

It is important to note that literary maps offer children the *opportunity* to notice and absorb ‘important things’. As developmental psychologist Lynn Liben suggests, maps have the potential to ‘clarify, embellish or contextualise the narrative’.⁴⁵ However, she also argues that:

Children may be limited in what they gain from encountering a map in a book not only because they have not yet accumulated previous experience with maps in particular, but also because they have not yet mastered foundational cognitive concepts and skills in general.⁴⁶

Discussing the constructivist approach, where a child is seen as an active participant and the map is a ‘shared exercise in communication’,⁴⁷ Liben notes that what children know – for instance about symbolic representation and the components and conventions of maps such as the compass rose, the cartouche, the oblique viewing angle often used, and scale – will affect what they understand and infer from a literary map. While Jerry Griswold notes that the young reader is free to return to a map ‘again and again to point to various locales and trace events as they unfold’,⁴⁸ Liben stresses that little research has been carried out into how children use literary maps whilst reading, either independently or with guidance from an adult.⁴⁹ Both the cognitive development aspects and the practical usage aspects are interesting areas that fall outside the scope of this thesis. Similarly, whilst I considered researching the role of maps in children’s books with reference to marginalia and paratexts, I decided not to explore these paths knowing that, just as the word margin comes from the Latin *margo-inis* meaning ‘edge, border or frontier’,⁵⁰ my project needed a clear focus and a defined frame. These areas could not be considered in appropriate depth within a 15,000 word critical commentary.

In common with the majority of maps in children’s books, the examples I have considered, including my own artwork, show *outside* spaces supporting the idea that,

⁴⁵ Lynn Liben cited in Nina Goga and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibaur (Eds) *Maps and Mapping in Children’s Literature: landscapes, seascapes and cityscapes* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017) p. 17

⁴⁶ *ibid* p. 22

⁴⁷ *ibid* p. 20

⁴⁸ Map Reading: Maps in Kids’ Books available at: < <https://medium.com/@jerrygriswold/map-reading-getting-your-bearings-in-kids-books-13b5c0e2373> > [Accessed 12 November 2018]

⁴⁹ Liben *op. cit* p.7

⁵⁰ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London: Reaktion Books 7th edition, 2012) p. 21

through stories, children can explore the wider world one step removed. Discussing the nature of green spaces, Jane Grafton suggests that a setting is not ‘merely a backdrop for performance but a place [for characters] to do, to build and test their skills, and to prove their abilities’.⁵¹ By leaving the confines of home, young protagonists can cover more ground, both literally and emotionally. Other scholars including Maria Tatar and Anna Juan Cantavella agree with this viewpoint. The forest is a particular focus for adventure – and danger – as in *The Stone Feather*, since as Sara Maitland notes:

Originally forests were not for ‘amenity use’, they were places of hard work, bitter poverty and contested rights. They were places of exile or flight; they were places where trees and animals and plants had to be managed, worked on or with and used; they were workplaces rather than playgrounds.⁵²

Through my research, I have come to see how literary maps in books for children help to signpost genre, in the same way as, for example, the spoken words ‘Once upon a time’ signify that the story to come is a fairy-tale. As neurologist and reading expert Maryanne Wolf asserts, this aids the development of the important and transferable ability to draw inference.⁵³ Illustrational style and the colour palette chosen help set the tone for the story to come. Hand lettering, as opposed to the readily-available option of formal type, is almost always used in literary maps and this offers important clues about the nature of the reading experience to come: it reminds us of the act of creating text and signposts the fact that *someone made this up*. It may also encourage children to reflect on the reliability of maps: just as a narrator may be unreliable, a map with tongue-in-cheek or witty hand-written labels, or which plays with scale and position, may not be entirely trustworthy, too. This forms an interesting counterpoint to the idea that maps, as practical tools, have an intrinsic authority. Peter Turchi comments that:

Most often, what we ask of a map is to help us to get from here to there; and most of the maps we use mean to be transparently useful.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Jane Grafton cited by Nina Goga and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibaur (eds) *op. cit* p. 178

⁵² Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest* (London: Granta, 2012) p. 292

⁵³ Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (London: Icon Books, 2008) p. 90

⁵⁴ Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: the Writer as Cartographer* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2004) p. 82

Giving as examples route maps at bus stops, weather maps on television and location maps in travel brochures, Denis Cosgrove states that the map as a non-fiction tool is ubiquitous, adding that maps are ‘intensely familiar, naturalized, but not natural, objects working within a modern society’.⁵⁵ Maps – as fictional tools – can also be considered ‘transparently useful’ because they help children not only engage with and enjoy story but also develop their reading skills by leaving ‘the surface layers of text to explore the wondrous terrain that lies beneath it’.⁵⁶ For example, ‘curated’ literary maps encourage children to consider what is shown or not shown and why this may be; and what is labelled or not labelled – by whom, for whom, and in what manner? Discussing rights to claim Wildcat Island in *Swallows and Amazons*, lead Amazon Nancy Blackett says: “Uncle Jim called it that because it belongs to us. That shows you whose island it is.”⁵⁷ In *Dixie O’Day Up, Up and Away!* the map that precedes Chapter One is labelled clearly ‘Dixie’s Map’, reinforcing the idea that this is going to be *his* story. As the expanded detail⁵⁸ (below, left) shows, this label is big and bold and, unlike the rest of the map which is drawn in a soft shade of red, has a stark feel to it. The white text on black, set within a panel with crisp, straight edges, is a graphic design choice that ensures this element stands out on the page. It is reminiscent of a stamp or brand and demands attention. In map-making terms, this feature is a cartouche, designed to denote ownership and status, like this elaborate late medieval example (image⁵⁹ shown below) from the Vatican’s Gallery of Maps, created for Pope Gregory XIII to represent Italian regions and papal properties under a common Catholic banner:

⁵⁵ Denis Cosgrove (ed) *Mappings: Critical Views* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999) Kindle edition, 2011, no pages numbers given

⁵⁶ Wolf, *op. cit* p. 138

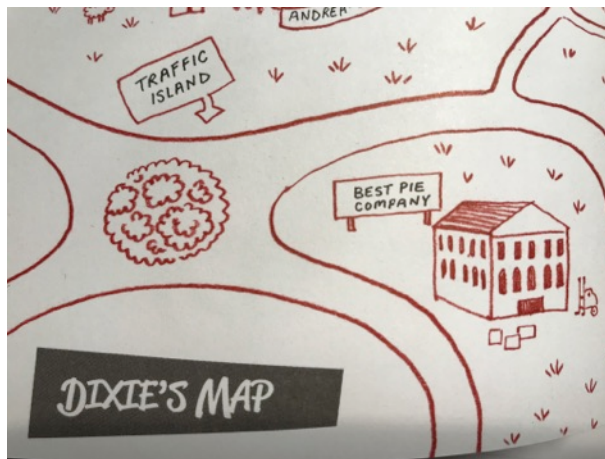
⁵⁷ Arthur Ransome, *op. cit* p. 120

⁵⁸ Shirley Hughes and Clara Vulliamy, *op. cit*, double page spread (not numbered) preceding Chapter One

⁵⁹ Photograph by Kate Lee taken in May 2018 at The Vatican



In *Dixie O'Day, Up, Up and Away!* The same typeface as part of the title on the front cover⁶⁰ – the words ‘Up, Up and Away!’ (shown below, right) – has been used, in contrast to all the other labels in the map, which use hand lettering. Its prominence, scale, style and colouring confer extra authority on this particular label:

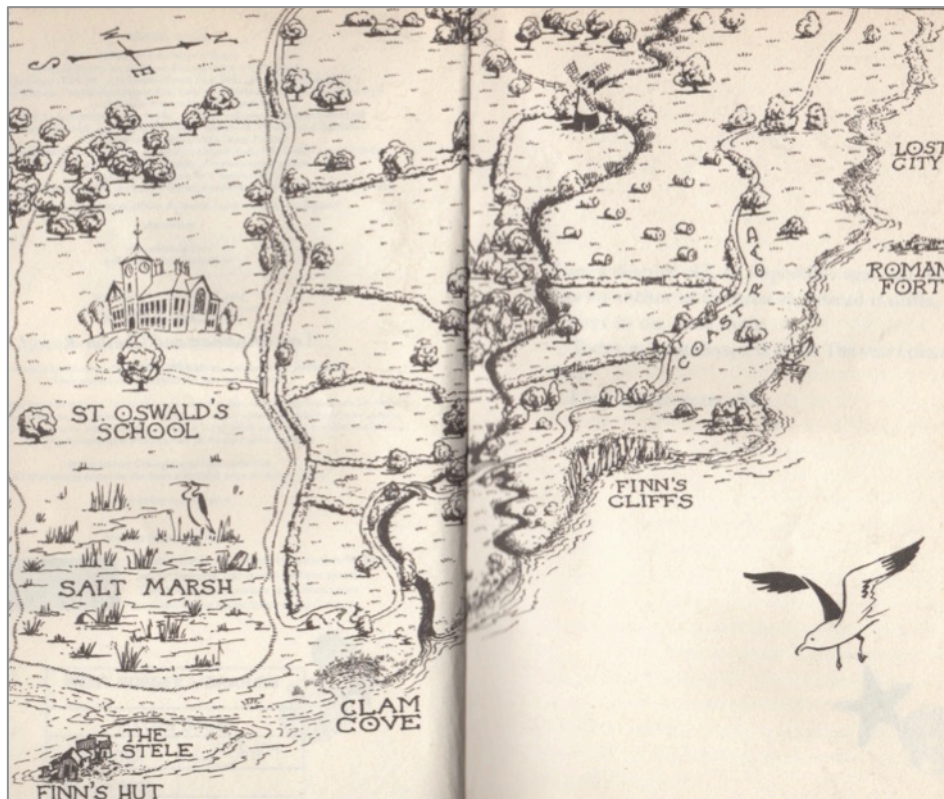


In *What I Was* by Meg Rosoff, the map shown below⁶¹ that appears before Hilary’s coming-of-age story begins presents ‘Finn’s Hut’ and ‘Finn’s Cliffs’; in contrast, the school is not labelled ‘Hilary’s School’ but rather by its proper name, ‘St Oswald’s School’. Landscape features such as the salt marsh and Clam Cove are also presented without reference to either Hilary or Finn. This suggests to the reader that the hut and cliffs – and Finn – are of special significance and offers subtle but accurate clues as to where Hilary’s emotional ties and sense of belonging may lie. In contrast with the approach taken in *Dixie O'Day, Up, Up and Away!* which is a book for much younger children, the map in *What I Was* is not presented as Hilary’s map; the reader may enter

⁶⁰ Hughes and Vulliamy, map and front cover *op. cit*

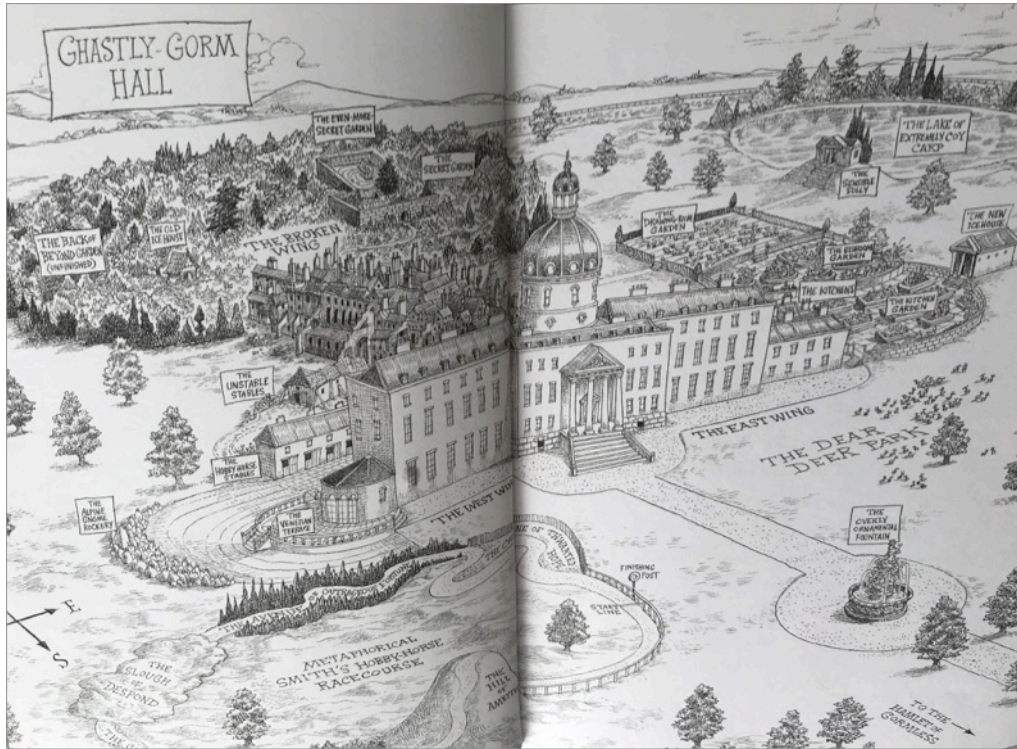
⁶¹ Meg Rosoff, *What I Was* (London: Penguin, 2008 2nd edn) pp. 1-2

this particular story world expecting to encounter Finn's story, subverting expectations in a way that is perfectly aligned with the story's themes and plot.



Labels within literary maps can signpost other aspects of the story, such as where it falls on what might be termed the ‘humour register’. In contrast to its inside front and back covers with their glittering silver and black skull pattern, and the overall black and purple gothic design of the book, the delicately line drawn map in Chris Riddell’s *Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse* shown below⁶² includes labels that suggests a playful approach. For instance, there is a ‘sensible folly’ and the vast mansion Ghastly-Gorm Hall has a ‘broken wing’:

⁶² Chris Riddell, *Goth Girl and the Ghost of a Mouse* (London: Macmillan Children’s Books, 2013 pp. 6-7



The potential significance of labelling within the context of literary maps is reflected in my own work, where I have consciously curated maps of Greenoak and the forested world beyond on Ethon's behalf – and this is an aspect of my practice that I have refined as my research has developed. For example, initially, Ethon's tumbledown hut is labelled 'Ethon's cottage' but in later sketches, such as the one shown below,⁶³ it is simply labelled 'home'. This change quietly but powerfully reinforces the sense that this is his world – his story – and closes the distance created when a third person voice is introduced:



⁶³ Original drawing by Kate Lee, 2017

Confident in my role of ‘author as curator’ in relation to my own creative project, I have given this same degree of careful consideration to each element within the eventual finished map – a strand of the project that was tackled last, and is described in detail in Chapter Six. I was inspired to learn whilst studying for my MA that, in contrast to my own creative practice, Robert Louis Stevenson drew his map of *Treasure Island* before he wrote a single word of the story.⁶⁴ Fuelled by this enchanting discovery, when I first began my Creative Writing PhD in October 2014 my intention was to explore aspects of how maps work in children’s books, within the context of my own creative project and my research into medieval life. Actual medieval maps might seem the obvious place to begin and, as I will discuss later on, they are central to my thesis. But, inspired by Anglo Saxon manuscripts, my research started in a different place: inside the swirls and curls of interlace design.

⁶⁴ Robert Louise Stevenson, ‘My First Book’, *The Idler* 6 (1894) 2-11 cited in Turchi *op. cit*

Chapter Three: Pattern and purpose

Although I did not intend *The Stone Feather* to be a strictly historical work I found delving into the past hugely enjoyable. My research has included visiting exhibitions of material artefacts such as ‘Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery’ at the Victoria and Albert Museum; the Hereford *mappa mundi* at Hereford Cathedral; and the treasures from Sutton Hoo, the group of Anglo-Saxon burial mounds in Suffolk that were first excavated in 1939, at the British Museum. I was intrigued to discover that interlace design, with its knots, ribbons and writhing serpentine forms, is widely acknowledged as the ‘predominant motif in Anglo-Saxon art’⁶⁵. These intricate, enigmatic and tightly woven patterns decorated metalwork, stonework and manuscripts in the 6th to the 11th Centuries. Interlace design adorns, for example, the solid gold belt buckle (pictured below) discovered at Sutton Hoo⁶⁶:



It is also the most common form of ornament encountered in Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture, such as the earliest Christian field monuments, from free-standing carved crosses and innovative decorative elements, to humble grave-markers.⁶⁷ Serpentine design decorates and illuminates manuscripts from this period with astonishing intricacy, elegance and colour. The degree of connection I felt at this point was

⁶⁵ Patenall, *op. cit* p. 106

⁶⁶ Great gold buckle from the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial (Item number 19391010.1) seen at the British Museum. Digital image on The British Museum website available at: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=87202&partId=1> [accessed 5 January 2018]

⁶⁷⁶⁷ The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture website available at <<http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/index.php>> [accessed 10 March 2016]

uncanny, as Soursigh – the serpent of my imagination – slipped into my field of vision on page after page, in codex after codex, in both literal and graphic forms and, sometimes, combined as the images here show:



Left, a zoomorphic detail from St Matthew's carpet page in the Lindisfarne Gospels⁶⁸ and right, an example of interlace design from the Book of Kells⁶⁹

In northern Europe from the 6th Century onwards, under the influence of Christianity, manuscripts developed 'great display pages of interlaced and banded lettering celebrating the life-giving power and the word of God'.⁷⁰ A powerful example is the Lindisfarne Gospels. Created by an unknown hand between 680 and 720 in the island monastery of Lindisfarne, off the north-eastern coast of England, the pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels include stunning examples of interlace design, such as the page preceding the Gospel of St Luke (pictured below) with its intricate knotted patterns.⁷¹

⁶⁸ The British Library website digital image available at <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/lindisfarne/accessible/images/page9full.jpg>> [accessed 5 January 2018]

⁶⁹ Trinity College Dublin website digital image of folio 124r (Item IE TCD MS 58) available at: <http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=MS58_003v> [accessed 5 January 2018]

⁷⁰ Clayton, *op. cit* p. 53

⁷¹ The British Library website digital image of the cross-carpet page of St Luke's Gospel in the Lindisfarne Gospels (ff. 138v) available at <<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/lindisfarne/accessible/images/page21full.jpg>> [accessed 5 January 2018]



The term ‘carpet page’ describes full-page designs that feature at the start of Anglo-Saxon and medieval religious manuscripts, typically on the first left-hand page (known as the verso). The expression reflects these pages’ visual similarities to prayer mats, which help worshippers prepare to move onto holy ground. As Christopher de Hamel notes when discussing the opening of the Gospel of Matthew in the Book of Kells, ‘this graphic term used by art historians is entirely appropriate, for this does indeed look like a marvellously woven oriental carpet.’⁷² The Venerable Bede, an influential Anglo-Saxon scholar, lived in the north east of England between 673 and 735 AD. He wrote that prayer mats were known in Northumbria at this time, as well as in eastern Christian and Islamic lands.⁷³ The carpet pages in books such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells are designed to prepare the reader for the Christian message. In visual terms they deliberately draw the eye of the reader in, acting as an ‘imaginative preface to the text’⁷⁴ and encouraging ‘meditative engagement’.⁷⁵ Describing the carpet page at the beginning of the Gospel of John in the Book of Durrow, Andrew Patenall writes:

The eye of the viewer is led, not back and forth across the page, but into the medallion in which, among the elaborate serpentine braids of gold, green and carmine, are three peripheral and cruciform rivets in black and white; and at the

⁷² Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* (London: Penguin Random House, 2016) p. 118

⁷³ The British Library website *op. cit*

⁷⁴ Patenall, *op. cit* p. 106

⁷⁵ Clayton, *op. cit* p. 51

centre, in a fourth, is the small essential cross. In colour and in form, the page has the succinctness of a charm and the ritual repetitiveness of a prayer⁷⁶.

Christopher de Hamel asserts that an insular Gospel was a work of art rather than a book as we might understand it today. It was a sacred object and tangible symbol of divinity, used for swearing oaths, for carrying in processions and for veneration. It was not 'primarily for textual study. Mere reading was secondary'.⁷⁷ Such manuscripts were so heavy and richly ornamented that it is, he suggests, difficult to imagine these texts being read as a sequential narrative.⁷⁸ In the Anglo-Saxon and early medieval period, text was a 'cue for speech'⁷⁹ and the layout of pages was created with this in mind, for instance with line lengths and column widths designed to support natural breath lengths and facilitate rhetorical pauses. However, discussing the contribution of seventh and eighth century Insular scribes to calligraphy and the development of 'graphic conventions'⁸⁰ in manuscripts, Malcolm Parkes suggests that scribes were 'less concerned with the finish of a book than with the information it contained'.⁸¹ It was, he suggests, the impetus to present arguments in a clear and accessible way that mattered, and that this drove changes to layouts, word separation and the idea of a 'hierarchy of scripts'.⁸² Parkes also notes that, as monastic culture changed in the twelfth century, 'new kinds of readers' emerged.⁸³ A spiritual exercise called *lectio divina* was practised. This involved 'steady reading to oneself, interspersed by prayer, and pausing for rumination on the text as a basis for *meditatio*'⁸⁴ (meaning meditation). Ewan Clayton describes evocatively how an experience of reading from such manuscripts is very different to a modern experience of reading, which is largely private. With the advent of the Internet and social media and the 'split second immediacy'⁸⁵ this offers, reading increasingly involves skimming and scanning for information as opposed to deeply absorbing wisdom. Clayton, an authority on calligraphy who lived as a monk at Worth Abbey in Sussex for some years in the 1980s, writes movingly:

⁷⁶ Patenall, *op. cit* p. 107

⁷⁷ de Hamel, *op. cit* p. 128

⁷⁸ *ibid* p. 136

⁷⁹ Camille, *op. cit* p. 18

⁸⁰ Malcolm Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991) p. 2

⁸¹ *ibid* p. 9

⁸² *ibid* p. 14

⁸³ *ibid* p. 35

⁸⁴ *ibid*

⁸⁵ Wolf, *op. cit* p. 221

One would hear the crackle of the pages as they turned at a particular point, the flashing of gilding and colour, the same illuminations by candlelight and sunlight or in the cool reflected light of snow. Public readings were sung out in particular chanted tones – one for the gospels, one for the epistles or the prophets – and all this would soak into one’s memory.⁸⁶

Contemplating the beauty and intricacy of medieval manuscripts as part of my research whilst writing *The Stone Feather*, I noticed similarities between the ‘pattern and purpose’ of carpet pages and the role of the maps in children’s books. I have found through my research that these maps always appear before the story starts and thus mark the beginning of a young reader’s journey, as this example from an edition of *Swallows and Amazons*⁸⁷ shows:

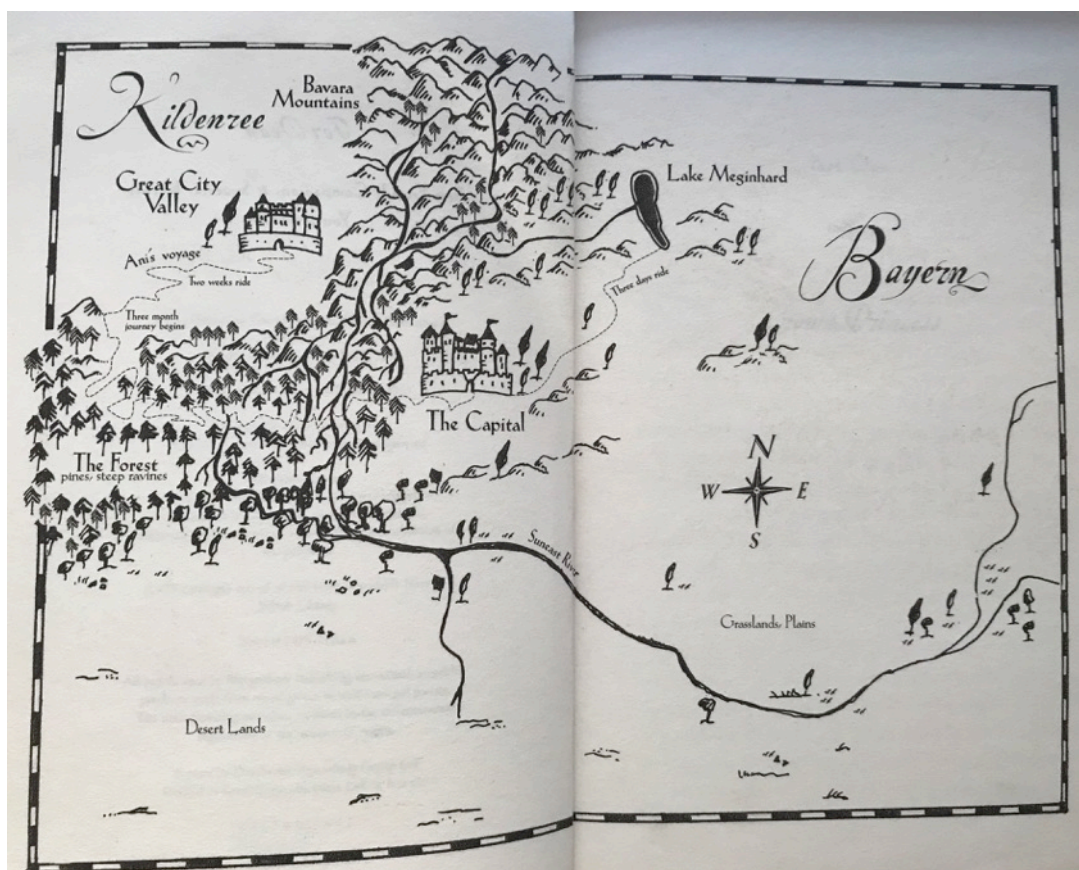


This positioning choice remains the same whether the book is intended for a young child to enjoy – as with Winnie-the-Pooh or Dixie O’Day stories – or is suited to an older, more independent reader, and remains constant whether the story is one of adventure on the high seas, a fantasy land or the relative safety of a familiar domestic world. For instance, in tales as different as *Treasure Island*, *The Girl of Ink and Stars* and *The Adventures of Milly-Molly-Mandy* the maps all appear before the story starts. These literary maps often include swirling pathways, roads, routes and rivers reminiscent of the dynamic loops of interlace design, and a level of detail that, similarly, encourages the reader to pore over the image, absorbing information on many different aspects of the story world the reader is about to enter. For instance, the map of fictional land Bayerne that precedes *The Goose Girl* (shown below) presents information about scale, spatial relationships, distances and the potential temporal scope of the story:

⁸⁶ Clayton, *op. cit* p. 80

⁸⁷ Arthur Ransome, *op. cit* opening pages of the book (not numbered)

we're encouraged to discover how far away the castle is from the forest with its 'steep ravines' (two weeks' ride) and the lake (a three day ride) and to contemplate the likelihood that 'Ani's voyage' will lie at the heart of the story to come (which it does) and just how challenging this might be for her.

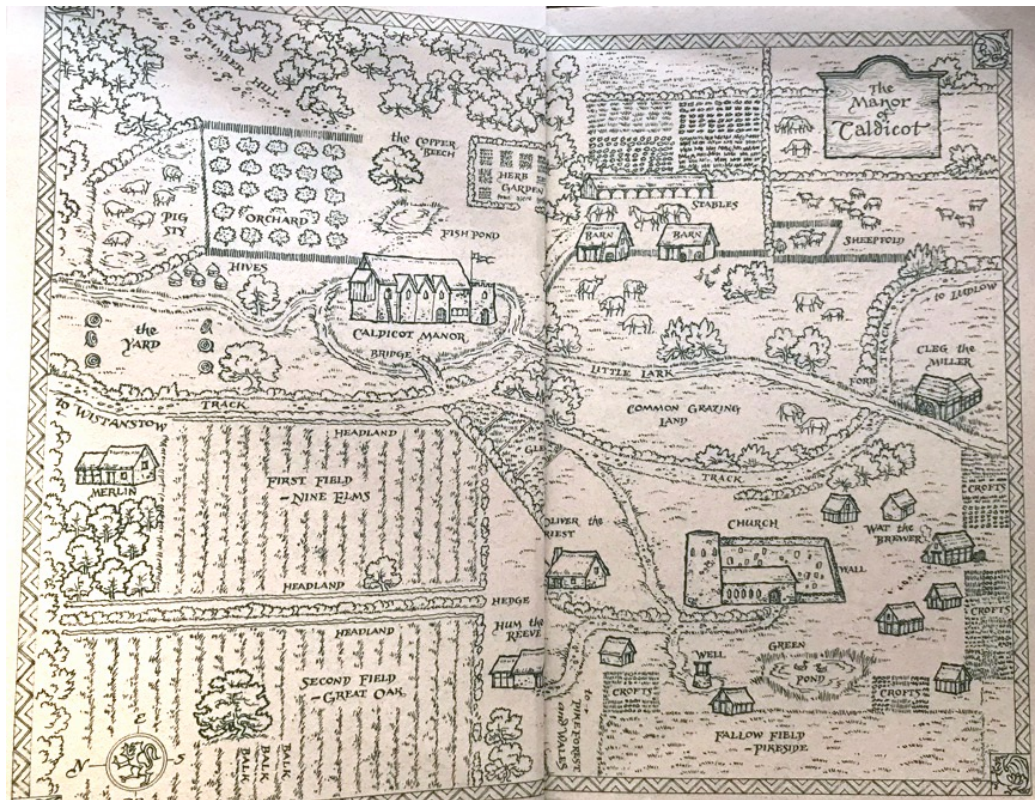


*Map of Bayerne, setting for 'The Goose Girl', presented before Part One of the story*⁸⁸

The highly detailed map of the Manor of Caldicot that precedes *Arthur: The Seeing Stone* (shown overleaf) shows the archery targets in the yard, ducks in the pond and even blades of grass. The world presented here is very obviously rural with its orchard, hives, sheepfold, and 'common grazing land' and sets up an expectation that the landscape will play an important role in this story. The naming of premises, roles and real places such as the church and stables, Oliver the Priest and Cleg the Miller, the town of Ludlow and the route to Wales, suggest a sense of community and imply that

⁸⁸ Shannon Hale, *The Goose Girl* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003) pages not numbered

this story will unfold in a real, as opposed to fictional, world – as it does, being set in the Welsh Marches in the year 1199.



Map of the Manor of Caldicot, setting for 'Arthur: The Seeing Stone', presented before Chapter 1.⁸⁹

Through my research, I have come to see that, through aspects such as position and the level of intricate detail they contain, maps in children's books may be seen to act as carpet pages, actively encouraging contemplative preparation for the experience to come, and so following in the rich tradition of medieval manuscript design. They help prepare children to enter an imaginary world, as well as helping to build that world right before the child's eyes. In 2016, I developed my thinking into a paper entitled 'Pattern and Purpose: reflections on Anglo-Saxon interlace design and my creative practice as a children's writer inspired by historical events'. I presented this at the 'Time, Space and Place' International Graduate Historical Conference at Central Michigan University in April 2016 – an experience that was as challenging as it was exciting.⁹⁰ At this stage in my doctoral journey, I was enjoying my work with its focus on surface design and the

⁸⁹ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Arthur: The Seeing Stone* (London: Orion, 2001) pages not numbered

⁹⁰ Appendix 3: Participating in conferences as part of my doctoral journey

joy of spending time ‘getting lost’ in the colours and rhythms of achingly beautiful ancient manuscripts. However, I was getting lost in another, less positive way too: although I felt I was discovering some ‘satisfying parallels’⁹¹ between medieval carpet pages and maps in children’s books, I was not sure that this alone offered a firm enough foundation for my eventual doctoral thesis. I knew in my heart that it did not, and discussions with Catherine Clarke⁹² confirmed my suspicions: it might not be time to kill my darling, but it was time to move on.

⁹¹ de Hamel, *op. cit* p. 41

⁹² Supervision meeting with Professor Clarke October 2016

Chapter Four: Cultural treasures

My work in this area was not wasted, though – quite the reverse, in fact, because my research led me to consider the idea of interlace existing within narrative structure as well as being a style of decoration. This, in turn, has led to promising developments in my creative work and has fuelled my research into ‘cultural treasures’ – a term I have developed during my doctoral studies, and which I will define later on – and the role that these, like literary maps, may play in imaginative world-building.

In his influential 1967 essay *The Interlace Structure of Beowulf*⁹³ John Leyerle argued that interlacing was a profound aspect of Anglo-Saxon culture – not just a superficial decorative motif – and that narratives themselves were deliberately structured in an interlaced fashion. Leyerle argues that, during this period, this was how people understood poetic narratives, rather than in a linear or chronological fashion. John Niles notes that the *Beowulf* poet uses ring composition as a technique to travel from the immediate reality to another, legendary reality that is used as a point of comparison, and then back again to the present. Niles describes ring composition as ‘one special type of interlace design’⁹⁴ and comments that the poet ‘relied so heavily on this sort of patterning that for him balance and symmetry of thought must have been almost second nature’.⁹⁵ Catherine Clarke describes envelope pattern and ring structure as ‘a common rhetorical and structural principle, in which the first and last elements of a text (or section of text) mirror each other in some way’.⁹⁶ She notes that this narrative approach can be found in a wide range of Old English texts.⁹⁷ Adeline Courtney Barrett perceives Old English literature as a ‘tapestry’⁹⁸ – a notion that I find particularly compelling and relevant to my own creative practice as a visual writer. However, the concept of narrative interlace with its ‘metaphorical braids and symmetries’⁹⁹ is in stark

⁹³ John Leyerle, ‘The Interlace Structure of Beowulf’, in *Interpretations of Beowulf – A critical anthology* edited by Robert Fulk (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991) p. 146

⁹⁴ Niles, John D. 1979. “Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*.” *PMLA*, 94: 924–35. doi: 10.2307/461974 p. 933

⁹⁵ *ibid* p. 925

⁹⁶ Clarke, Catherine A.M. 2003. “Envelope pattern and the *locus amoenus* in Old English verse.” *Notes and Queries*, 50: 263–4. doi: 10.1093/nq/50.3.263.

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ Adeline Courtney Barrett cited by Catherine Clarke in *Writing Power in Anglo-Saxon England: Texts, Hierarchies, Economies op. cit* p. 39

⁹⁹ Clarke, *ibid* p. 40

contrast to a contemporary approach to narrative structure. Today, elements such as the inciting incident, dramatic climax, resolution and the notion that events must unfold in sequential ‘acts’ is deeply embedded in literary theory. This is succinctly described by John Yorke who writes: ‘a character is pursuing a specific goal when something unexpected happens to change the nature and direction of their quest’.¹⁰⁰ Stories have also been described as a ‘chain of gifts’, alluding not only to the importance of linking, but also linear progression.¹⁰¹ The idea of applying principles of geometry to story shape has inspired scholars to create visuals ranging from triangles to mountain ranges to graphs. For example, the nineteenth century German realist novelist Gustav Freytag depicted Aristotle’s description of plot as an isosceles triangle, with action rising on the left and falling on the right.¹⁰² In his Master’s thesis in anthropology Kurt Vonnegut asserted that ‘stories have shapes which can be drawn on graph paper’.¹⁰³ He collected and graphed stories from ‘fantastically various societies’¹⁰⁴ to support his theory which, in addition to visually expressing story shape, argued that the same basic shapes underpin narratives that occur in very different spheres, such as the fairytale *Cinderella* and the Bible. His thesis, developed during the 1940s, was rejected by the University of Chicago because it was deemed too simple, but his ideas have gained lasting traction: contemporary literary experts still draw graphs showing the ideal ‘shape’ of a story:¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ John Yorke, *Into the Woods – A Five Act Journey into Story* (London: Penguin, 2013) p. 25

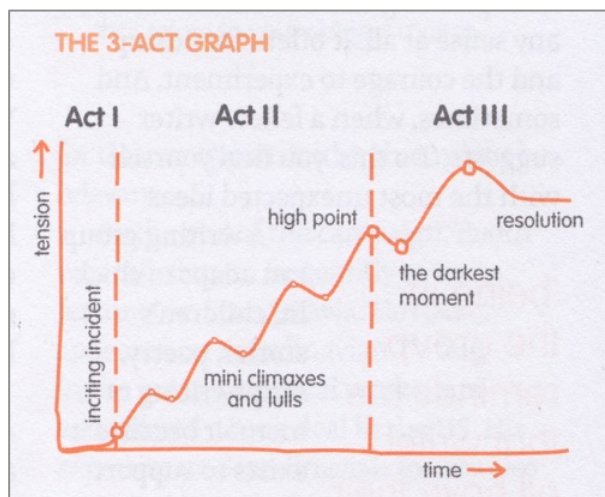
¹⁰¹ Frank Cottrell Boyce, Fickling Lecture entitled ‘What’s in Your Head?’ 27 February 2014, Newcastle University

¹⁰² Turchi *op. cit* p. 188

¹⁰³ Kurt Vonnegut, *Welcome to the Monkey House and Palm Sunday* (London: Vintage, 1994) p. 624

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ Helen Bryant, (2015) ‘Motive and Emotion’, *Msllexia*, June/July/August 2015, p. 23



But in Old English narrative poetry, relationships between events were, Leyerle suggests, more significant than their temporal sequence. Leyerle argues that elements of an Anglo-Saxon literary work – such as past and present, real and not real, reflection and foreshadowing, permanence and change – were woven together with the deliberate intention of a creating a ‘complex artificial order’. This, he argues, reflects the way the human imagination makes leaps and associations rather than proceeding in a linear fashion.¹⁰⁶ Patenall also notes the prevalence of interlace in literature from this period, in imagery, vocabulary and structure. For instance, when discussing the Old English poem *The Phoenix*, he suggests that the progression from concrete to abstract ‘corresponds precisely to the serpentine ornament of illumination, which so often travels from a zoomorphic precision at the head to an ambiguous series of flourishes at the other end’.¹⁰⁷ Patenall highlights the extensive use of serpentine language such as *wunden gold* (braided gold) and vocabulary that evokes intricacy, worm-like forms and woven textures¹⁰⁸ and concludes that the use of serpentine images is ‘a deliberate aesthetic innovation of the Old English poet’.¹⁰⁹ As a writer, I have been inspired by these ideas of linguistic and narrative interlace – but I am also keenly aware of the need for an appropriate pace, and a straightforward narrative progression. To borrow the novelist A. L. Kennedy’s expression, it is important to create ‘a meadow, not a minefield’¹¹⁰ for readers. As readers we need to feel certain that we are ‘following a guide who has not only the destination but our route to it clearly in mind’.¹¹¹ This is especially important when writing for today’s young reader who is used to a ‘beginning, middle and end’ mode of storytelling and not a ‘complex artificial order’.¹¹² While

¹⁰⁶ Leyerle *op. cit* p. 157

¹⁰⁷ Patenall *op. cit* p. 115

¹⁰⁸ *ibid* p. 111

¹⁰⁹ *ibid* p. 112

¹¹⁰ A. L. Kennedy speaking at the University of Southampton, 16 March 2015

¹¹¹ Turchi *op. cit* p. 113

¹¹² Leyerle *op. cit* p. 157

many picture books can be viewed as postmodernist in approach – for instance, when they offer a range of narratives, humorous asides or speech bubbles that may be read in a non-linear way – Middle Grade stories tend to proceed along a linear path. There are some examples, such as the same world 40 years earlier evoked in *Charlotte Sometimes* by Penelope Farmer, and the introduction of two short chapters written in an overtly authorial voice punctuating the narrative for humorous effect in *Shadow Forest* by Matt Haig, pulling the reader outside the story for a few moments. But most stories for 8-12 year olds are straightforwardly linear.

My own creative response to my research into narrative interlace was, initially, to experiment with a temporal approach, writing in different voices – but it did not work. I liked the idea of a contemporary protagonist discovering an ancient manuscript that, in turn, told an even older story. But in reality it felt contrived and complicated. In particular, the different voices jarred. My notes on this material¹¹³ show in more detail why I felt it was not working. The answer lay in the book itself. Whilst, early on, writing a scene (since cut) where Ethon reluctantly agrees to his little sister going into the feared Black Cave, as part of a ploy to restore his employer Foxwood's wounded pride, I imagined Ethon recalling a cautionary tale, *The Little Birch Boy*:

Every child in Greenoak knew the story of the child who, disobeying his mother, wandered into Viper's Wood after dark and came face to face with a huge, silver-eyed wolf. The boy died of fright before the creature could open its jaws. The wolf, blind from birth, simply blinked her shining eyes and padded past, leaving the little body to fade, season by season, into the earth. The boy's mother, bent with grief, found her only comfort beneath the gently rustling leaves of the young silver birch tree that sprang up, forever beautiful amongst the pines. The tree sang to her, she said. But it was a song that only she could hear.¹¹⁴

I realised that my creative response to Anglo-Saxon ideas of narrative interlace could involve creating a set of 'cultural treasures' like this, that could surface, sink and resurface, like a rippling ribbon throughout the story, echoing the unending nature of interlace. Their job would not be to move the narrative forwards, but rather act as invisible threads drawing the reader *into* the story world and encouraging 'meditative engagement'.¹¹⁵ While this may seem at odds with my stated aim to create prose with an

¹¹³ Appendix Four: Experimenting with narrative layers

¹¹⁴ From an early draft of *The Stone Feather*, excerpt available at: 'A story inside a story' blog post < <http://www.kateleeauthor.co.uk/> > [accessed 12 November 2018]

¹¹⁵ Clayton, *op. cit* p. 51

appropriate pace, I am influenced by the viewpoint of Maryanne Wolf who asserts that ‘in music, in poetry and in life, the rest, the pause, the slow movement are essential to comprehending the whole.’¹¹⁶ This technique – offering and even encouraging pauses for thought – may make the young reader ‘more active and responsive’¹¹⁷ and thus help in the development of ‘higher order reading skills’.¹¹⁸ I am also influenced by my research into the formal construction of interlace design, and how this relates to the construction of a believable story world. Catherine Clarke notes that:

Analysis of the construction of interlace designs in Anglo-Saxon manuscript art seems to indicate that the curvilinear elements of the knotwork were conventionally built over a system of points and grids¹¹⁹

This geometric foundation exists, Clarke argues, in parallel with the apparently fluid, free-flowing ‘braids and symmetries’¹²⁰ of interlace design, creating a sense of duality. I decided to turn this to my advantage, consciously assigning the hidden underlying logic of the interlace mode to the creative act of building of Ethon’s world – helping to ensure that it feels real and makes sense.

I initially intended to write a whole series of cautionary tales and embed these in *The Stone Feather* at appropriate moments. This can be an effective technique, employed for example by Carnegie medal winning author Geraldine McCaughrean in *Where The World Ends*, where young teenager Quill makes up stories to calm and offer hope to his desperate, stranded companions on a deserted rocky island. However, I soon realised that in my own work this approach could seem formulaic. The decision to expand my idea of cultural treasures, rather than constraining it to fit within a single narrative template, proved a good one and has developed into an exciting and enriching aspect of my creative practice. As the following page from my notebook shows,¹²¹ I made a list of things that would count as cultural treasures: everything from lullabies to

¹¹⁶ Wolf, *op. cit* p. 213

¹¹⁷ Aiken, Adel G., 2007, “Postmodernism and Children’s Literature” in *Journal of the International Christian Community for Teacher Education*, Volume 2, Number 2 available online at: <<https://icctejournal.org/issues/v2i2/v2i2-aiken/>> [Accessed 5 January 2018]

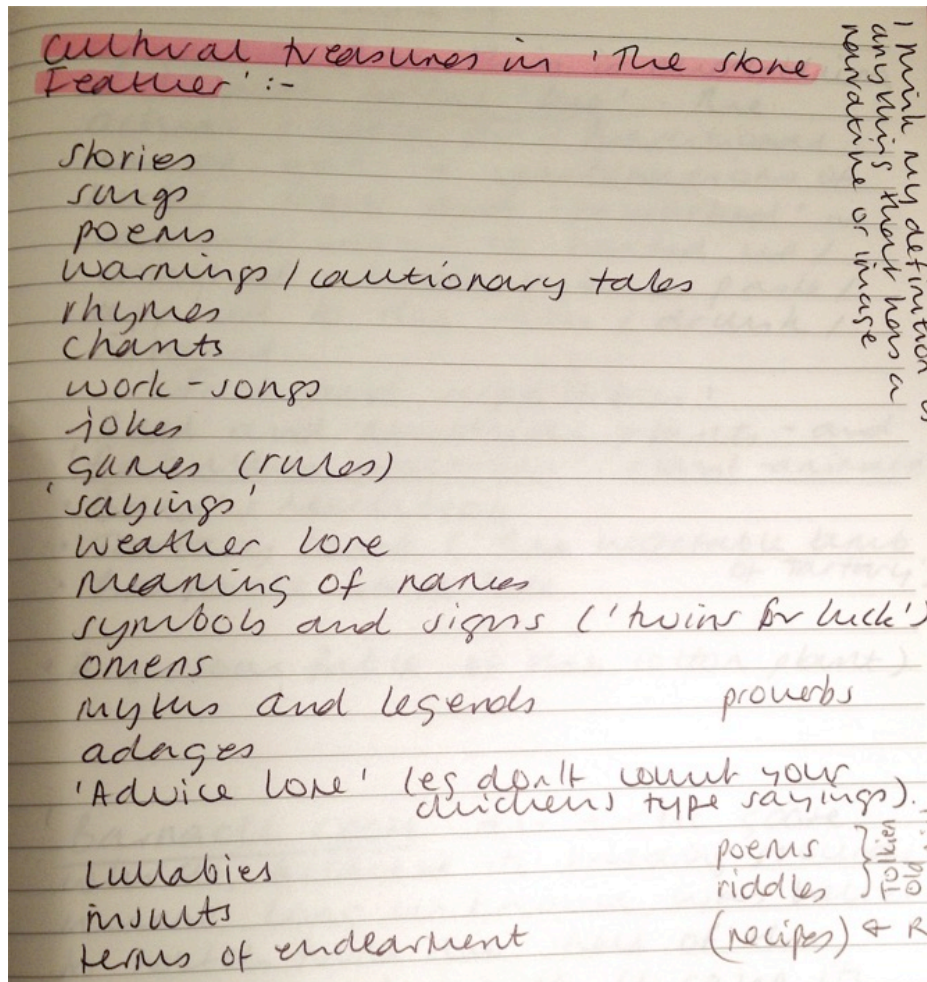
¹¹⁸ Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles, *Children reading pictures: Interpreting visual texts* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003) p. 238

¹¹⁹ Clarke, *op. cit* p. 41

¹²⁰ *ibid* p. 41

¹²¹ Pages from Kate Lee’s project notebook

jokes, poems to recipes, omens to insults. At this stage, I noted that ‘I think my definition [of a cultural treasure] is anything that has a narrative or image’:



I read through my manuscript – at that point around 47,000 words long – to see if and where I had already included cultural treasures according to this definition. To my surprise and delight I discovered dozens of examples. For instance, in the first chapter, when Ethon is in Viper’s Wood after dark and approaches the lightning tree with its three jagged and sinister black branches, I write:

The old rhyme whispered in his head: *One for night, one for day, one to chase your wits away...*¹²²

¹²² Lee, *op. cit* chapter 1

Later in this same chapter, Ethon's little sister Birda sees two copper-winged butterflies and exclaims: 'Look – twins! Twins for luck!' This shows that even at seven years old she knows about beliefs that are commonly held. A number of childhood games are referred to: Dragon Hot, Dragon Cold; Hidey-Hidey; Stones and Swords; and Red Square with its rhyme:

*Touch my arm, touch my hair
You can't catch me, I've got the red square!*¹²³

At different points in *The Stone Feather*, different characters sing the same lullaby, entitled *Calm is the Meadow*. This is important because it shows how deeply embedded this 'cultural treasure' is in everyday life and evokes a sense of shared cultural memory. For instance, Ethon sings it to soothe Birda when she is upset, and his father sings it to calm Ethon's friend Doe Fevermint after an incident at the village well almost ends in tragedy. The lyrics are gentle and comforting:

*Calm is the meadow and calm is the day
Evening beckons as gentle as hay
Safe in your blanket and safe in my arms
Nothing can ever bring harm, my sweet
Nothing can ever bring harm.*¹²⁴

In the world I have created, each family – even the very poorest – has its own collection of story beads which act as a prompt and help everyone to feel involved in oral storytelling. Some are richly carved objects of beauty while others are simple and raw, reflecting family economic status. This is the design I created for *The Little Birch Boy*:

¹²³ *ibid*, chapter 10

¹²⁴ *ibid*, chapter 16



Able now to reflect back on the whole project, with a completed and refined full manuscript, I also now see the Silver Lady, and the villagers' gestures, behaviours, sayings and beliefs that relate to her, in this light. The stone pendant that is Pa Larksong's only reminder of Ethon's mother who died in childbirth is a particularly significant cultural treasure. Pa insists that Ethon wears it when he goes with Foxwood Flint to attack Soursigh. But later, in a fit of rage, Foxwood deliberately breaks it to punish Ethon, who he feels has betrayed him by letting Soursigh go and preventing Foxwood from killing her as he vowed (publicly) to do. Once split, the stone pendant reveals two imprints of a feather – inspired by ammonites – and this incredible sight has a healing effect on Pa. The 'two halves' also become a way for Ethon, who will soon leave Greenoak, to remain connected to Pa and, in the future, to Birda.

As well as offering subtle, often playful and sometimes moving glimpses into Ethon's world, the 'cultural treasures' I have created bind the characters together in a non-linear way that I feel helps me in my ambition to create a 'luminously detailed story world'¹²⁵ with an 'aura of the real'.¹²⁶ I am aware that many writers have woven cultural treasures into works of fiction for children, and that it is a device firmly embedded in the novel as an artistic form, especially where a fantasy or magic realism approach is employed. In the field of children's literature, examples are almost innumerable, ranging from carved 'story sticks' in *Huntress: The Sea* by Sarah Driver to maps with magical properties in *Girl of Ink and Stars* by Kiran Millwood Hargrave; a very special bracelet in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* by Alan Garner to the lullaby in *Holes* by Louis Sachar. My own approach in creating and consciously weaving these throughout *The Stone Feather* is, therefore, by no means unique. However, I feel that I have created a varied, memorable and thoughtful range of 'cultural treasures' for *The Stone Feather*

¹²⁵ Tatar, *op. cit* p. 197

¹²⁶ *ibid*

that effectively supports my aim to build an original and believable story world of ‘solidity and grace’.¹²⁷ Physical cultural treasures within the story are, deliberately, organic and are key to the plot’s forward momentum. For example, it is Foxwood’s act in breaking the stone feather that propels Ethon to re-examine his father’s character and strengths, and decide to follow his lead and choose compassion over brutality: the very heart of the story. This aspect of my practice has supported my aim of writing an original, well-crafted work of fiction for children. I have also developed and used the term ‘cultural treasures’ to describe these rich, creative building blocks in a way that acknowledges their role and emphasises their significance and value. I hope that this term will prove useful for future scholarship and believe that, through this, I am making a fresh contribution to research into children’s literature – one of the goals of my project. By writing *The Stone Feather* and developing it into a work of publishable standard, I hope to contribute in another, very different way to the field, since an emphasis on compassion – one of the key themes of Ethon’s story, explored through the device of terrifying worm-shaped monster Soursigh – is particularly timely and relevant. The story was shortlisted for the Wells Festival of Literature Children’s Novel Competition 2018 so I feel that I am on track regarding this aim.

¹²⁷ Niles, *op. cit* p. 931

Chapter Five: Of monsters and men

My imagined monster Soursigh reflects the idea that, in medieval times, ideas about what was possible and not possible, and which creatures could or could not exist, were very different from modern ideas. Everything from sorcery¹²⁸ to the existence of griffins¹²⁹ was considered plausible by educated as well as uneducated people, an aspect of my research I have found fascinating. For example, as Robert Bartlett notes when discussing miracles and marvels, in *Topographia Hibernia*, written in c.1188 after the Norman invasion of Ireland, the clergyman and historian Gerald of Wales gives an account of the ‘spontaneous generation of the barnacle goose from rotting wood’.¹³⁰ The barnacle goose was a bird believed to hatch from the fruit of a tree that grew over water or by the seashore; or from the shell of a crustacean, hence its name. Gerald also describes beasts including ‘weasels that poison milk’, ‘prophetic songbirds’ and ‘man-eating toads’.¹³¹ Wondrous creatures were represented visually in manuscripts and maps, as the following example¹³² shows:



It was, Bartlett asserts, generally thought in the Middle Ages that the natural world had a playful tendency to produce striking novelties and anomalies. In *Historia Regum*

¹²⁸ Ian Mortimer, *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* (London: Vintage Books, 2009) p. 74

¹²⁹ Carl Lindahl, John Lindow and John McNamara (eds), *Medieval Folklore: A Guide to Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2002) p. 187

¹³⁰ Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales 1146-1223*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) p. 116

¹³¹ Cohen, *op. cit* p. 95

¹³² Photograph taken on 14 March 2017 by Kate Lee of a wall-hung interpretation of the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* displayed at Hereford Cathedral

Brittaniae Geoffrey of Monmouth recounts Arthur's battle with the 'menacing giant' of Mont Saint Michel.¹³³ Discussing the meaning of 'historia' Cohen argues that Geoffrey was 'constructing a past for early Britain' and turning it into a 'meaningful narrative, rather than some time bound set of facts'¹³⁴ and that he used stories such as Arthur's heroic fight with a giant – a kind of monster – to signify the need for a hero's bold, fearless actions, to help create a new social order. Discussing monster theory, Cohen asserts that a monster 'notoriously appears at times of crisis'¹³⁵ and that, as a 'construct and a projection'¹³⁶ the monster acts as:

An embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy.¹³⁷

In relation to the idea that monsters represent otherness, Asa Simon Mittman notes that:

The Anglo Saxons had many genuine Others with which to compare themselves – the painted Picts to the north, the Celts to the west and of course the Vikings and Danes, who periodically landed unannounced for plunder or trade. When the Normans arrived, this remained the case.¹³⁸

My creative response to this research has been to create a huge, writhing monster that symbolises the threats my young hero faces, to both his physical and emotional wellbeing, and which also acts as a monstrous body at a time of frightening change in Ethon's world, inspired by the Norman invasion of England. In taking this approach, I am using a similar technique to that employed by Patrick Ness in *A Monster Calls*,¹³⁹ where the monster embodies the heart-breaking truth that 13-year-old Conor, whose mother is terminally ill, cannot admit to himself or to those who love him: he wants it to

¹³³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants – Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) p. 37

¹³⁴ *ibid* p. 32

¹³⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed) *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) p. 6

¹³⁶ *ibid* p. 4

¹³⁷ *ibid* p. 4

¹³⁸ Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) p. 5

¹³⁹ Patrick Ness, *A Monster Calls* (London: Walker Books, 2012, 2nd edn) front cover

be over. Yet the monster also helps Conor move towards acceptance. In the same way, Ethon's terrifying encounter with Soursigh offers him an opportunity, which he takes, to follow his own instincts, choosing compassion over brutality. As the image below¹⁴⁰ shows, monsters tend to be big – very big:



In *A Monster Calls*, Conor's monster, growing from a yew tree to a human shape has 'giant hands' and 'huge eyes'.¹⁴¹ In *How To Train Your Dragon*, when hero Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third first sees his great adversary the Green Death, the 'impossibly large'¹⁴² dragon fills up the whole beach and is later described as having a 'ridiculously enormous head.'¹⁴³ Soursigh is similarly vast in scale: Ethon discovers that it is 'impossible to guess the length of its great snaking body'.¹⁴⁴

The idea for Soursigh's physical form and role within the story came from an old Tyneside folk song, *The Lambton Worm*¹⁴⁵ that was familiar to me in childhood. In traditional versions of the tale a fish-sized worm is thrown down the well by 'brave and bold Sir John' in his rebellious youth. Abandoned there, it proceeds to grow 'to an

¹⁴⁰ *ibid* front cover

¹⁴¹ *ibid* p. 15

¹⁴² Cressida Cowell, *How To Train Your Dragon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003) p. 159

¹⁴³ *ibid* p.161

¹⁴⁴ *The Stone Feather* by Kate Lee, unpublished manuscript, Chapter 12

¹⁴⁵ Appendix 2: Lyrics for *The Lambton Worm* plus a summary of the legend

awful size' and, able to escape, starts attacking the locals, whose attempts to placate it with troughs of milk, and then to destroy it, prove futile. Only Sir John, returning from the Crusades many years later, is able to slay the monster. Whilst Grendel, 'the most famous monster of Old English literature'¹⁴⁶ enters the narrative of epic poem *Beowulf* at a time of communal harmony expressed through uplifting music, which Grendel hates, Soursigh threatens Ethon's village for very different reasons and in a very different way. I decided to play with the story of *The Lambton Worm* after coming across the idea of 'goat song' as an expression of grief or tragedy during my MA in Creative Writing at the University of Chichester.¹⁴⁷ The word 'tragedy' has etymological roots in the Greek word 'tragodia' which combines 'tragos', meaning goat, with 'oide', meaning song or ode. There are a number of theories surrounding the word's origins. Walter Burkert argues that the 'most prevalent' theory suggests that the term refers to dancers dressed as goats, singing in chorus, in ancient Greek plays.¹⁴⁸ However, he also questions what the relationship could be between 'satyr-like gaiety and the seriousness of tragedy'.¹⁴⁹ Henry Ansgar Kelly suggests that the term comes from songs performed when a goat was sacrificed or that the term is an expression of satire, with a live goat being given as a prize in Athenian play competitions instead of a valuable, high-status bull.¹⁵⁰ Commenting on *Consolation of Philosophy* by the late Roman scholar Boethius, medieval philosopher and literary scholar William of Conches offers the view that tragedy is:

a writing dealing with great iniquities, which begins in prosperity and ends in adversity. And it is contrary to comedy, which begins with some adversity and finishes in prosperity. And it is called tragedy because its writers ['describers'] were remunerated with a goat, in order to point up the filthiness of the vices it contains.¹⁵¹

Kelly notes that William 'ends by etymologizing tragedy as 'goat-praise' or 'goat-song'.¹⁵² Within the context of my imagined rural medieval setting and Ethon's loss of

¹⁴⁶ Cohen, *op. cit* p. 25

¹⁴⁷ Tutorial with Dave Swann, October 2012, University of Chichester

¹⁴⁸ Burkert, W. 1966 "Greek Tragedy and the Sacrificial Ritual", *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* Vol. 7 No. 2: pp. 87-121

¹⁴⁹ *ibid* p. 91

¹⁵⁰ Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 69

¹⁵¹ *ibid* p. 69

¹⁵² *ibid*

his mother as a young child, I decided to focus on the idea of ‘goat song’ as the literal sound made by a mother goat when it is separated from its kid – and to transpose this into my re-imagining of *The Lambton Worm*. In *The Stone Feather* Ethon, like young Sir John, throws the worm down the well where it pines for its mother. When she comes searching for her baby her ‘goat song’, expressed as sour and harmful breath rather than a sound, threatens the harvest. In this regard, Soursigh reflects Asa Simon Mittman’s observation that, displaying abilities such as breathing fire or controlling dreams, medieval monsters were often ‘somewhat magical’.¹⁵³ When Foxwood Flint, Ethon’s employer, vows to slay Soursigh Ethon eagerly volunteers to help. But, during their battle, Ethon realises that Soursigh is a giant version of the worm he threw down the well and understands that she means no harm: she is simply a mother who wants her baby back. His own unresolved grief for his mother, and a growing awareness that compassion is not a sign of weakness, drive him to defy his employer and reunite mother and baby. This leads to a showdown with Foxwood and shatters the security Ethon has fought so hard to achieve for his family. In Middle Grade historical novel *The Executioner’s Daughter*, set in the Tudor period, protagonist Moss also battles a watery monster, Riverwitch, whose narrative centres on the loss of a child. Their conflict is personal: Moss discovers that she is the unwitting subject of a terrible bargain, having been promised to Riverwitch in place of the creature’s own lost child.¹⁵⁴ But I wanted Ethon to be active rather than passive so, echoing *The Lambton Worm*, I make him responsible for the separation of mother and baby when, after catching a strange and sinister ‘worm’ when out fishing, he throws it down the well. As a writer, I have consciously woven together internal struggles, big decisions, high stakes and physical conflict to give the story emotional depth as well as excitement. Discussing the composition and structure of *Beowulf*, and reflecting on the ‘realistic fatalism’ of the poet, John Niles concludes that ‘the poem has the power to move, and that is its reason for being’.¹⁵⁵ While I want *The Stone Feather* to grip and entertain, I also want the story to move.

With its focus on alternative models of masculinity and the courage needed to withstand certain expectations of what it is to ‘be a man’, *The Stone Feather* offers an ethical core described by John McGavin and Carole Burns as ‘persuasive, valuable and

¹⁵³ Mittman, *op. cit* p. 6

¹⁵⁴ Jane Hardstaff, *The Executioner’s Daughter* (London: Egmont, 2014)

¹⁵⁵ Niles *op. cit* p. 934

timely’ and ‘embedded in a narrative which can sustain it’.¹⁵⁶ This work therefore, I believe, has the potential to offer a worthwhile contribution to the field of children’s literature at a time when gentle heroes are badly needed. The subject of masculinity lies at the heart of Robert Webb’s humorous yet profound memoir. First published in 2017 it has sparked wide-ranging debate, particularly in relation to the idea of ‘toxic masculinity’ and its implications for boys and girls as they grow up. Discussing his father’s domestic tyranny in relation to the loss of a child, and the idea that men are trained not to talk about their feelings, Webb notes that anger is considered acceptable. He says: ‘You’re allowed to be angry. It’s boyish and man-like to be angry.’¹⁵⁷ Author Matt Haig’s meditations on severe anxiety affecting men struck a chord with his ‘honest, uplifting and compassionate’¹⁵⁸ 2015 memoir *Reasons To Stay Alive*. The vicious backlash he endured on Twitter when he announced plans to write a book about masculinity (causing him to eventually drop the proposal) demonstrates just how important it is that children grow up with kinder, gentler heroes and role models who – like Ethon – choose compassion over brutality and become able to understand and express their feelings honestly and respectfully.

An associated key thread within *The Stone Feather* is Ethon’s mastery of his fiery nature and his growing awareness that his angry outbursts, which frequently lead to trouble, are an expression of deeply buried grief. In early drafts, this theme remained present in my head but did not make it onto the page – a common issue for writers but one that I failed to recognise. Close comments from Carole Burns on the 16,000 word excerpt submitted for my MPhil upgrade (the first six chapters) were particularly helpful in addressing this issue. Discussing Ethon’s relationship with his best friend Fen, she commented:

There is a hint that Ethon is a hothead, and Fen is the stable one. But I do not sense this within the close third-person narration. I get this only through what Fen says and how Ethon acts. I don’t feel any quick anger in him.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ University of Southampton upgrade report for Kate Lee dated 18 May 2018

¹⁵⁷ *ibid* p.37

¹⁵⁸ Non fiction book of the month selected by Sally Campbell on Waterstones Blog available at: < <https://www.waterstones.com/blog/non-fiction-book-of-the-month-reasons-to-stay-alive> > [accessed 12 November 2018]

¹⁵⁹ Private email correspondence between Carole Burns and Kate Lee

I addressed this major flaw in the work by including more scenes where Ethon loses his temper after which he – or, worse, others – must face the consequences, and finding more opportunities to highlight and show Ethon and Fen’s different personalities. For example, when Ethon first meets villain Grody Hollowtree, I have now added a direct confrontation into the scene, showing Ethon’s fiery as well as protective nature:

“My name is Grody Hollowtree, but you may call me sir.” The man spat, scratched his head and stretched. “You are lucky to have me here – otherwise you’d be reduced to taking the old way to Trade.” He bent down so his face was level with Birda’s. “And that would mean going past the Black Cave, full of MONSTERS!”

Birda shrieked and hid her face.

Ethon squared up to the stranger. “Don’t frighten her!”

The man’s mouth dropped open in shock – a peasant boy, raising his fists to a Trademaker? He lunged for Ethon and caught him a hard blow on the cheekbone.

“Sir! Do not waste your energy on this young fire-spark,” Old Hareld said smoothly, stepping between them to shield Ethon from further blows and grabbing Birda, who was known to be a kicker, by the scruff of the neck.¹⁶⁰

A number of children’s writers are actively seeking to redefine masculinity for young boys. Ben Brooks, author of *Stories for Boys who Dare to be Different*, says that he wants to ‘help boys become better, happier men and open up a debate about what we think of as masculine’.¹⁶¹ He goes on to assert that:

Seeing Trump in all his ugliness has acted like a wakeup call to male authors. We need to teach boys that they do not need to perform outdated gender norms to look like men.¹⁶²

I do not agree that this responsibility lies only with male authors, but I support the view of picture book writer Ed Vere who suggests that we need to demonstrate that ‘being gentle, sensitive or emotionally engaged isn’t a weakness, but part of being a fully rounded grown up man’.¹⁶³ Helping children navigate their way towards future

¹⁶⁰ Lee, *op. cit* chapter 2

¹⁶¹ Authors steer boys from toxic masculinity with gentler heroes, available at: < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/14/how-boys-can-grow-into-real-men-male-authors-fight-toxic-masculinity> > [Accessed 12 November 2018]

¹⁶² *ibid*

¹⁶³ *ibid*

adulthood by offering alternative models of masculinity to consider – and root for – is a blossoming area of Middle Grade publishing, with heroes such as Samuel in Matt Haig’s *Shadow Forest* and Matthew in *Goldfish Boy* by Lisa Thompson paving the way. I hope that Ethon will join them; with the full manuscript ready, he is well on his way.

All he needs now is a map.

Chapter Six: Getting back to maps

The *Hereford Mappa Mundi* shown in full (below left)¹⁶⁴ alongside a detailed section from a colour-enhanced facsimile (below right)¹⁶⁵ is thought to be the largest and best-preserved ‘cloth of the world’ to have survived from the Middle Ages.¹⁶⁶



Created at a time when maps were ‘practically unknown,’¹⁶⁷ it shows not just geography, but history and the destiny of humanity as understood by its creators and ‘what was important and what unimportant’.¹⁶⁸ An item such as the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* intended for public display should be considered, Paul Harvey argues, as a picture intended to inspire, share a worldview and visually represent relationships:

¹⁶⁴ UNESCO website displaying a digital image of the Hereford Mappa Mundi, courtesy of the Hereford Mappa Mundi Trust, available at:

<<http://www.unesco.org/new/typo3temp/pics/69932d7838.jpg>> [accessed 5 January 2018]

¹⁶⁵ Hereford Cathedral website displaying the colour-enhanced Folio Society facsimile of the Hereford Mappa Mundi, available at: <<https://www.herefordcathedral.org/mappa-mundi>> [accessed 5 January 2018]

¹⁶⁶ Sarah Arrowsmith, *Mappa Mundi – Hereford’s Curious Map* (Herefordshire: Logaston Press, 2015)

¹⁶⁷ Harvey, P.D.A., 1991. “Introducing Medieval Maps” *The British Library Picturing Places Project* available online at: <<https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/introducing-medieval-maps#authorBlock1>> accessed 5 January 2018

¹⁶⁸ Alfred Crosby cited in Turchi, *op. cit* p. 35

So far were people in the middle ages from our awareness of maps today that there was no word meaning ‘map’ either in the languages of everyday use or in the Latin used by the Church and for learned writing. When contemporaries referred to what we would call a map they would use some word meaning either diagram or picture, and this was indeed how they must have viewed them: they were pictures of landscape, of regions or of continents, or they were diagrams setting out spatial relationships in graphic form just as they might set out other relationships – administrative, philosophical, theological.¹⁶⁹

In the Middle Ages, travellers used written itineraries to chart a journey and, Harvey argues, when a map was produced, it was intended for a single use, usually to aid seafarers.¹⁷⁰ Jerry Brotton supports this viewpoint, commenting that these ‘portolan’ maps were effectively sailing directions.¹⁷¹ Whilst my instinct as a researcher was to investigate medieval maps in their different forms, including itineraries, the assessors at my MPhil upgrade advised that more depth and detail about my creative practice, rather than further research into maps and mapping, was required for this Creative Writing thesis. I therefore decided to focus on my own practice, relating this to the *Hereford Mappa Mundi*. The purpose of this map remains unclear, with some regarding it as a source of Christian knowledge and guidance, while others believe it contains references to disputes in the local diocese, or that it was made for the glory of Hereford and its cathedral. However, with the East positioned at the top and the figure of Christ presiding above and outside the earthly realm, the map can readily be seen to lead the viewer to ‘a spiritual destination rather than an earthly one’.¹⁷² Indeed, Brotton argues that medieval Christian *mappae mundi* ‘reshaped geography along biblical lines, mixing a literal and allegorical interpretation of the Old and New Testaments to create a world map’.¹⁷³ And then there are the monsters. Photographs (below and overleaf) that I took at the exhibition in Hereford Cathedral, where a version of the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* with annotations in English is displayed, as well as the original, show how both real and fantastic beasts, elements from religious stories and myths, as well as regions, rivers and cities, are portrayed alongside each other:¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Harvey, *op. cit*

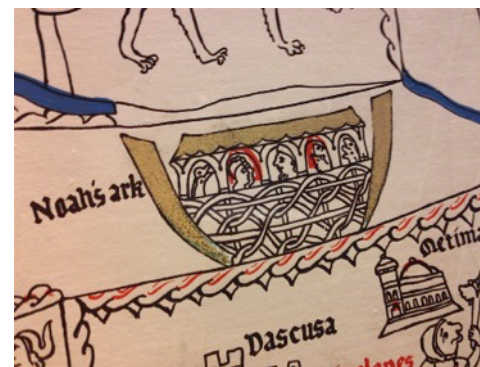
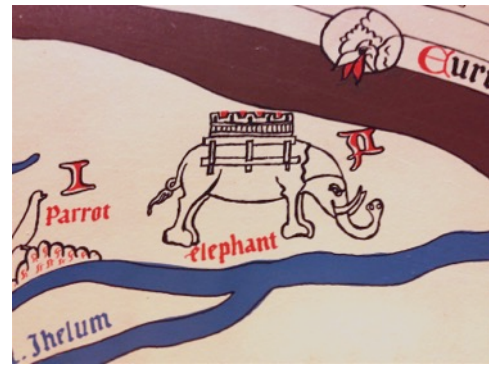
¹⁷⁰ Harvey, *ibid*

¹⁷¹ Jerry Brotton, *Great Maps – The world’s masterpieces explored and explained* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014) p. 11

¹⁷² *ibid* p. 57

¹⁷³ *ibid* p. 59

¹⁷⁴ Photographs taken by Kate Lee, *op. cit*



Discussing the technical methods developed and used over time to create apparently objective representations of the earth, Denis Cosgrove dismisses this approach to map making as a ‘regrettable medieval lapse into mythical mapping’.¹⁷⁵ But for a creative writer this ‘lapse’ is anything but regrettable, since it offers intriguing pathways to explore in relation to the presence and purpose of literary maps in children’s fiction where authors seek to create believable imaginary worlds and/or clues about a particular character’s viewpoint, needs, interests and beliefs. As illustrator Helen Cann notes, ‘the

¹⁷⁵ Denis Cosgrove (ed), *Mappings: Critical Views* (London: Reaktion Books, Kindle edition 2011) (no page numbers available)

map-maker is a curator, editing and deciding what to include'.¹⁷⁶ Discussing endpaper maps in children's books, Anthony Pavlik asserts that whether they depict real or imaginary places, they are 'always subjective representations of some kind'.¹⁷⁷ Initially, my creative response to my research into *mappae mundi* was to redraw my original map of the fictional village of Greenoak, where most of the action in *The Stone Feather* is set, within a circular design so that the idea of this being Ethon's worldview comes across more strongly:¹⁷⁸



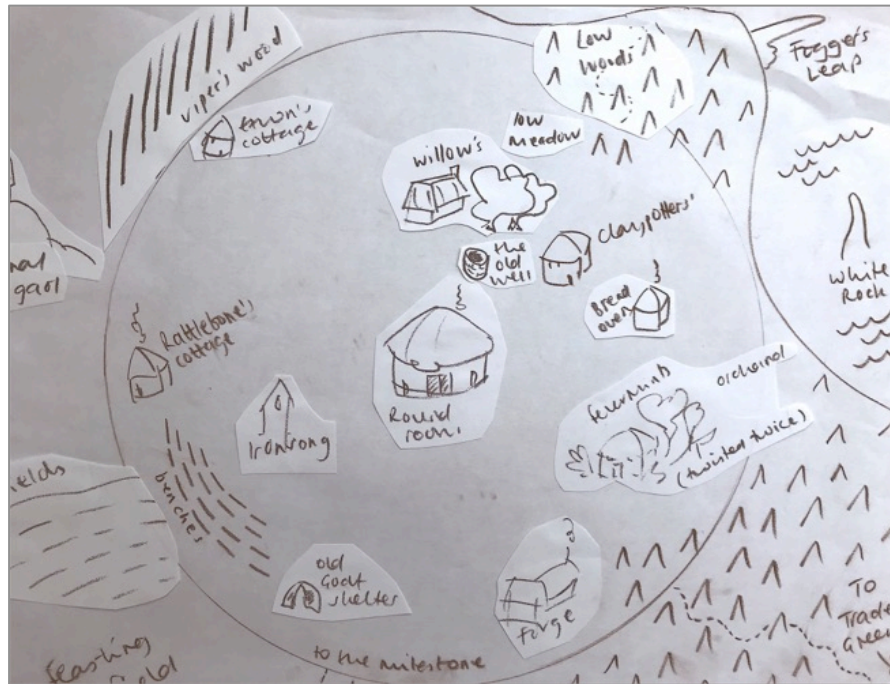
I further developed this, looking at the placement of features in particular. In the image below, is possible to see how I cut and pasted different elements, allowing me to experiment with positioning – hands-on work that is an integral part of my creative process, as the following large scale drawing/collage¹⁷⁹ (which is A3 in size) shows:

¹⁷⁶ Comment made by Helen Cann during Hand Drawn Mapping workshop at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, March 2018

¹⁷⁷ Anthony Pavlik cited in Goga and Kümmerling-Meibaur, *op. cit* p. 32

¹⁷⁸ Artwork showing a fresh iteration of the map of Greenoak by Kate Lee, 2017; the original is presented in the portfolio that accompanies this paper.

¹⁷⁹ Original preparatory artwork by Kate Lee, 2017

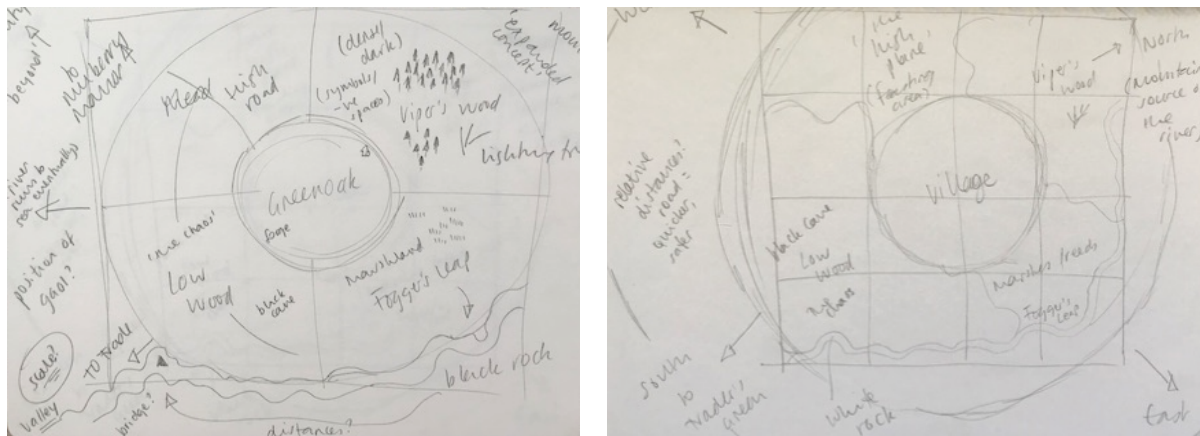


My research has uncovered no other circle-shaped *mappae mundi* inspired maps in children's books, even within books also inspired by medieval times, so I believe that my approach brings a fresh contribution to the field. As I developed the manuscript of *The Stone Feather*, seeking feedback from professional and beta readers along the way, I realised that the scope of the map I had drawn was too limited: key scenes take place in the forest, at Trader's Green and by the river, for instance – and, although it is reasonable to see a small, rural village like Greenoak as isolated, it does also belong in a wider world. It makes sense to depict this, so I redrew the map accordingly. A hand-drawn maps workshop that I attended proved an inspiration.¹⁸⁰ It helped me to develop basic drafting skills, using a 32cm grid of 16 squares – the foundation, I discovered, of the artistic mapmaker's process. For me, the discovery of this mathematical, structured approach, which underpins an apparently organic drawing, echoed the way in which a formal grid system underpins interlace design – and the way in which structure underpins any successful work of fiction. Through my doctoral research, I have come to appreciate far more keenly the value of a formal, logical structure. I now build this into my process, for instance by planning to produce a 'tension graph' before starting to write my next novel.

The map-drawing workshop and my subsequent research also helped me to understand the importance of the presence, position and design of elements such as the

¹⁸⁰ Hand Drawn Mapping workshop, *op. cit*

cartouche and the compass rose. I decided to simply and centrally label the village, Greenoak, and to subtly show that this is Ethon's world through a circle device, rather than introducing an elaborate and potentially jarring cartouche. The sketches below show how I experimented with scale, distance and position:¹⁸¹

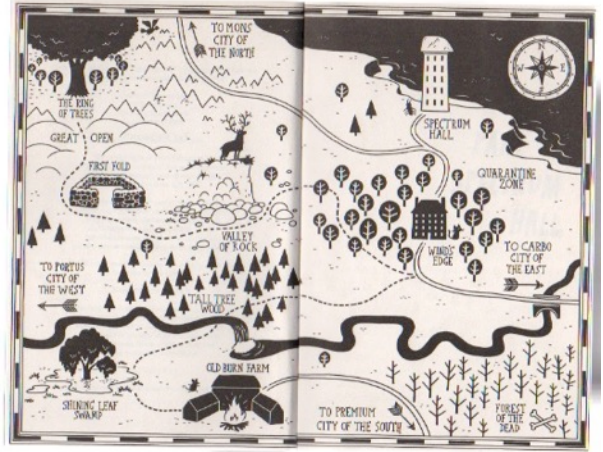


I decided to include a compass rose, to help signify clearly that this is a map, as opposed to an illustration. One the goals of my project is to support children to develop visual literacy and, as Helen Cann notes, the compass rose is ‘the symbol or signature of a map. If you see one, you know you are looking at a map.’¹⁸² I developed this element fully aware that it only has the *potential* to offer information, depending, for instance, on the reader’s prior experience of maps. However, my research suggests that the compass rose is familiar (although not ubiquitous) in the sphere of Middle Grade fiction, echoing broader mapping conventions. It appears in maps in books for younger children too, such as Winnie-the Pooh, and my research suggests that the device is included whether the setting for the story is the real world, or an imagined elsewhere, as these examples show:¹⁸³

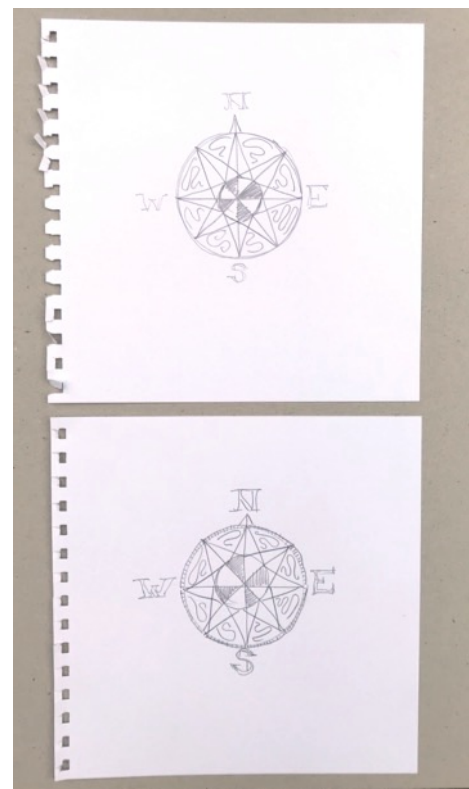
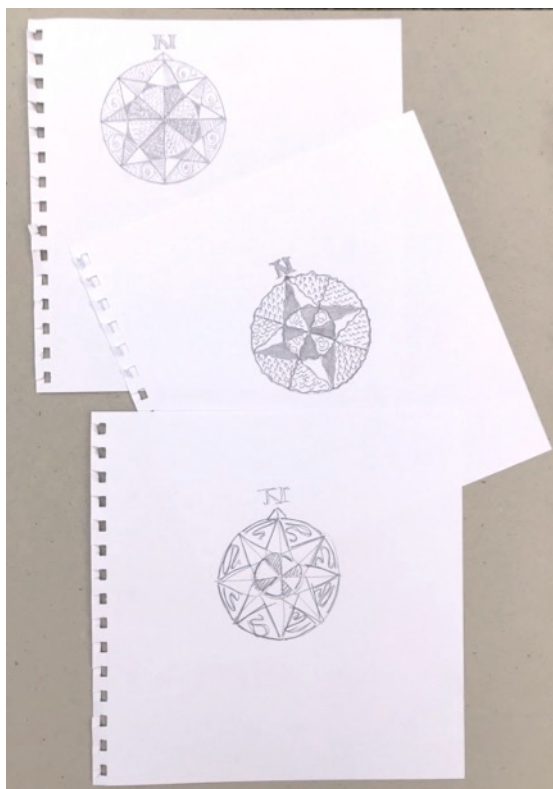
¹⁸¹ Sketches by Kate Lee, originals are presented in accompanying portfolio

¹⁸² Helen Cann, *op. cit*

¹⁸³ From top left, clockwise: Kiran Millwood Hargrave, *The Girl of Ink and Stars* (Frome: Chicken House, 2016) inside front cover; Piers Torday, *The Last Wild* (London: Quercus Editions, 2013) pages not numbered; Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (London: Methuen, 1908) inside front cover; and Geraldine McCaughrean, *Where the World Ends* (London: Usborne, 2018) pages not numbered



When considering my own compass rose design, I decided to explore two routes. The first is a conventional, graphic approach:¹⁸⁴

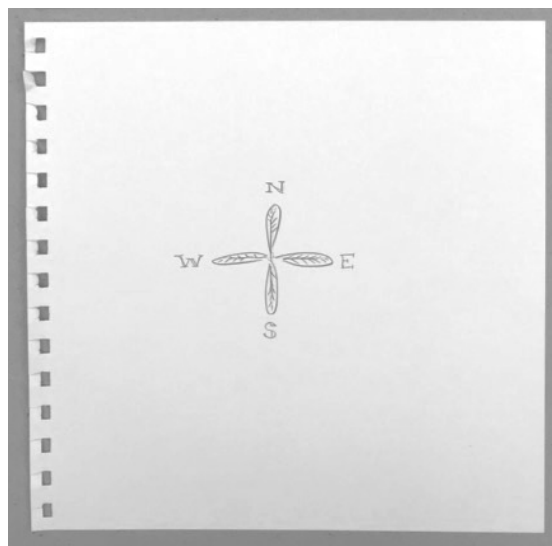


¹⁸⁴ Exploratory artwork by Kate Lee, presented in accompanying portfolio

For this design, I chose to use an obviously hand-drawn, as opposed to a highly finished feel, to heighten the sense that this is an imaginative work – a story that someone has created. The serpentine details (each deliberately different rather than uniform) offer subtle Soursigh clues and encourage the ‘meditative engagement’ that a literary map can offer, echoing the pattern and purpose of carpet pages. I particularly like the combination of geometric planning and free-flowing wormy sketches contained within defined segments in a rhythmic pattern, as this enlarged detail shows:¹⁸⁵



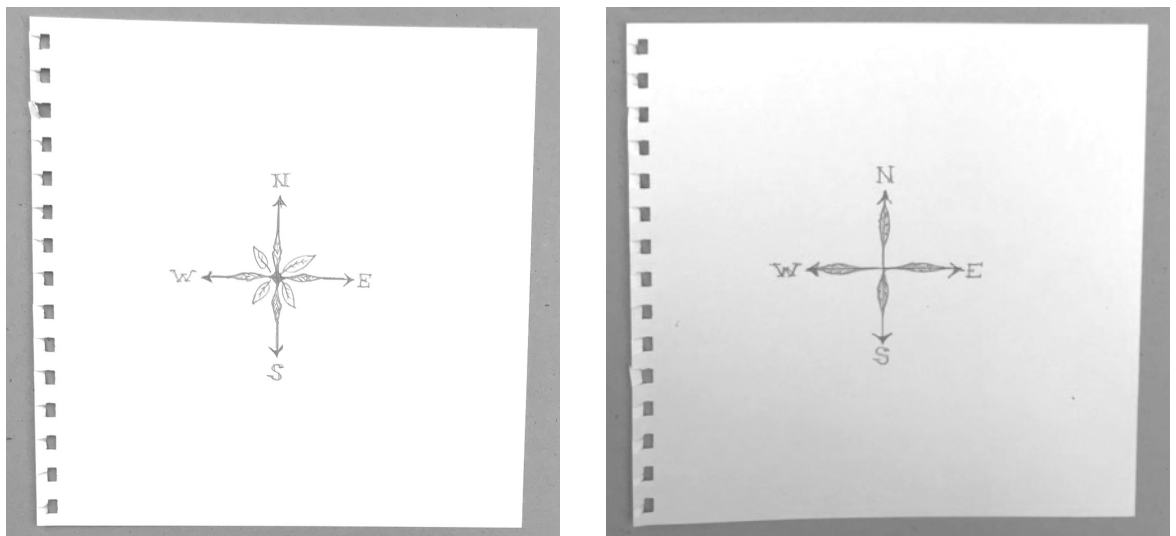
I also experimented with a pared-back feather-inspired design,¹⁸⁶ inspired by the book’s title, again deliberately referencing a key aspect of the story to come:



¹⁸⁵ Sketch by Kate Lee, presented in accompanying portfolio

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*

These initial designs were, I decided, too gentle in feel, so I went on to incorporate arrow points to hint at the danger that Ethon will find himself in. These iterations¹⁸⁷ show how I achieved a visual contrast between the delicacy of the feather and the firmness of the arrow, reflecting wider themes within the work, particularly its focus on strength and compassion.



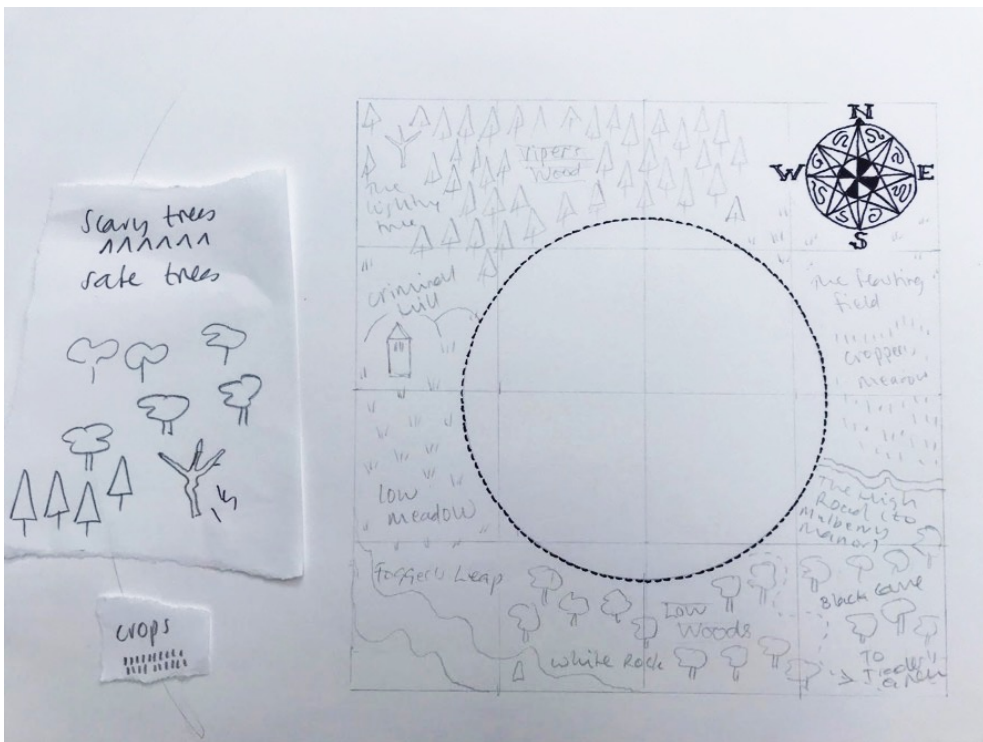
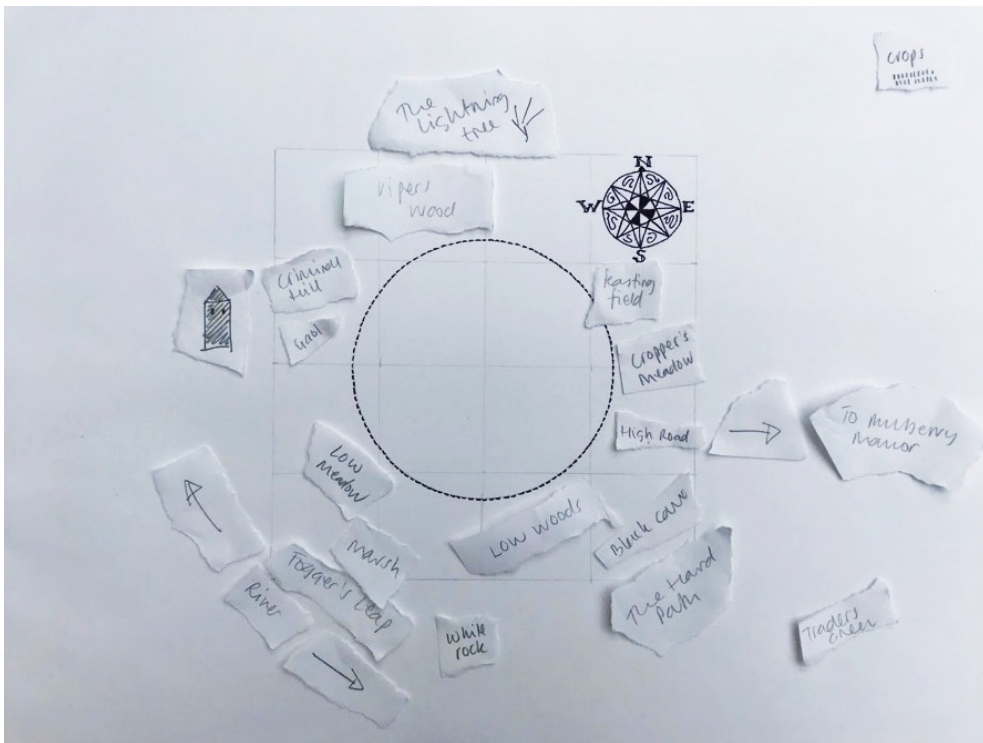
As I intended to create a black and white version of the map for children to download, print out, colour in and add to if they wish, I chose the more conventional design because it is easier (and more fun) to colour in. My decision to develop an interactive version of the map reflects an appreciation of the shared act of experiencing a map and the rising popularity of fan art and other ways that children are engaging with stories – for example by writing online reviews and book recommendations for organisations such as Story Room, and quizzes and puzzles linked to individual authors’ work such as the Dave Pigeon themed ‘fun stuff’ available on Middle Grade author Swapna Haddow’s website.¹⁸⁸

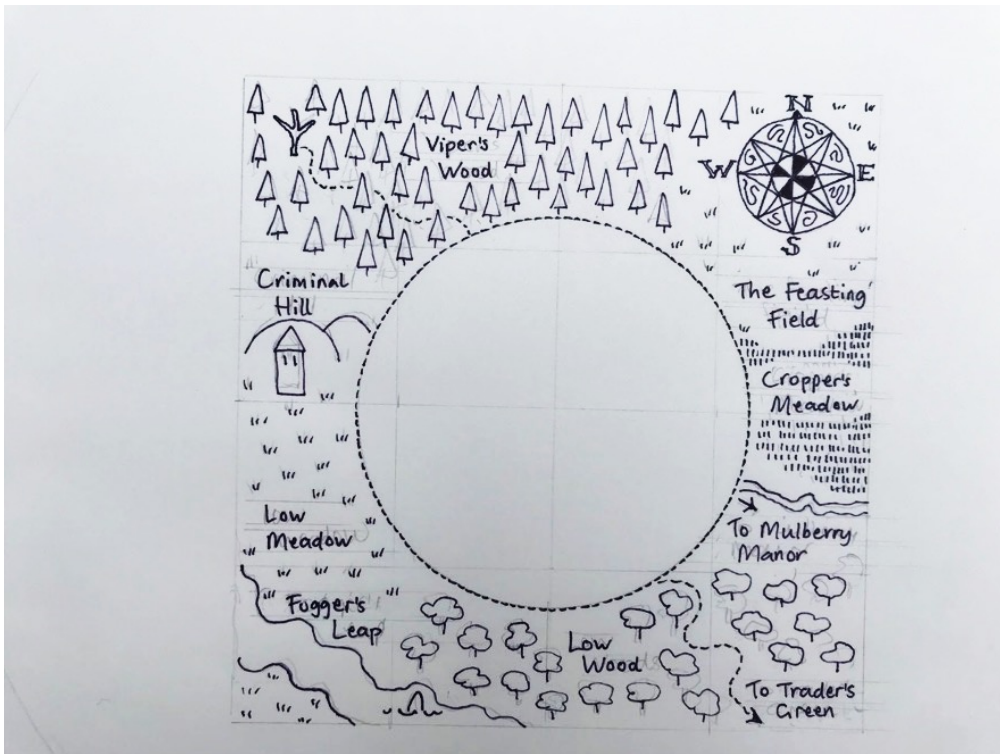
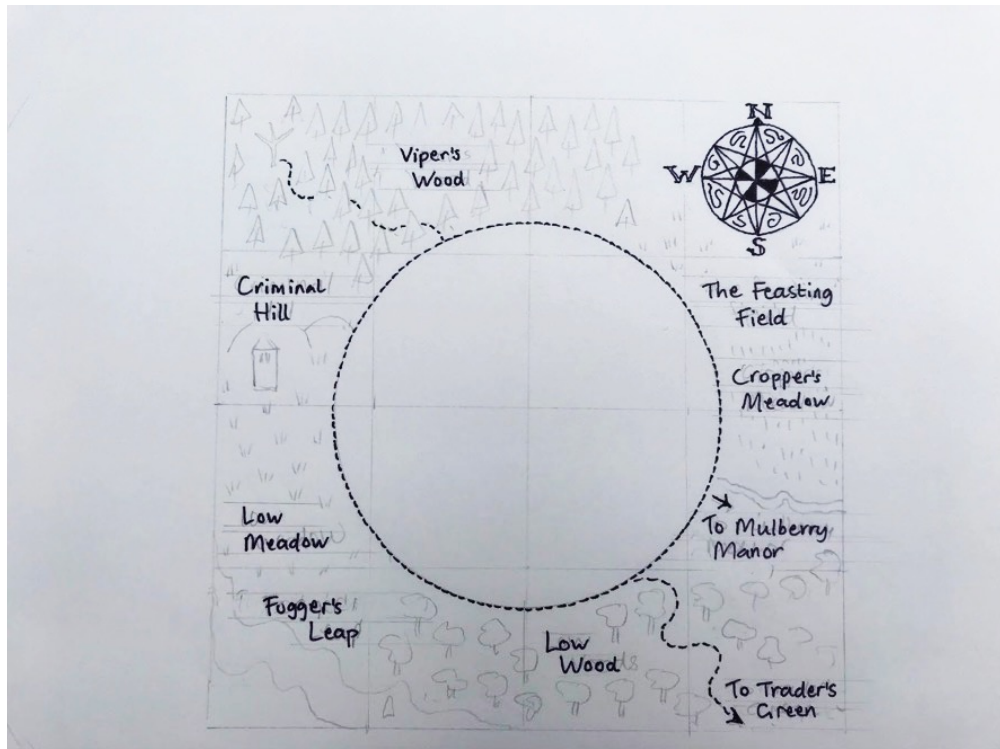
Next I took a big step back, visually speaking – echoing, perhaps, the practice of Old English poets using ring composition – and went on to develop and expand my depiction of Ethon’s world into a *mappa mundi* style visual as the following sequence of six rough-to-finished drawings shows:¹⁸⁹

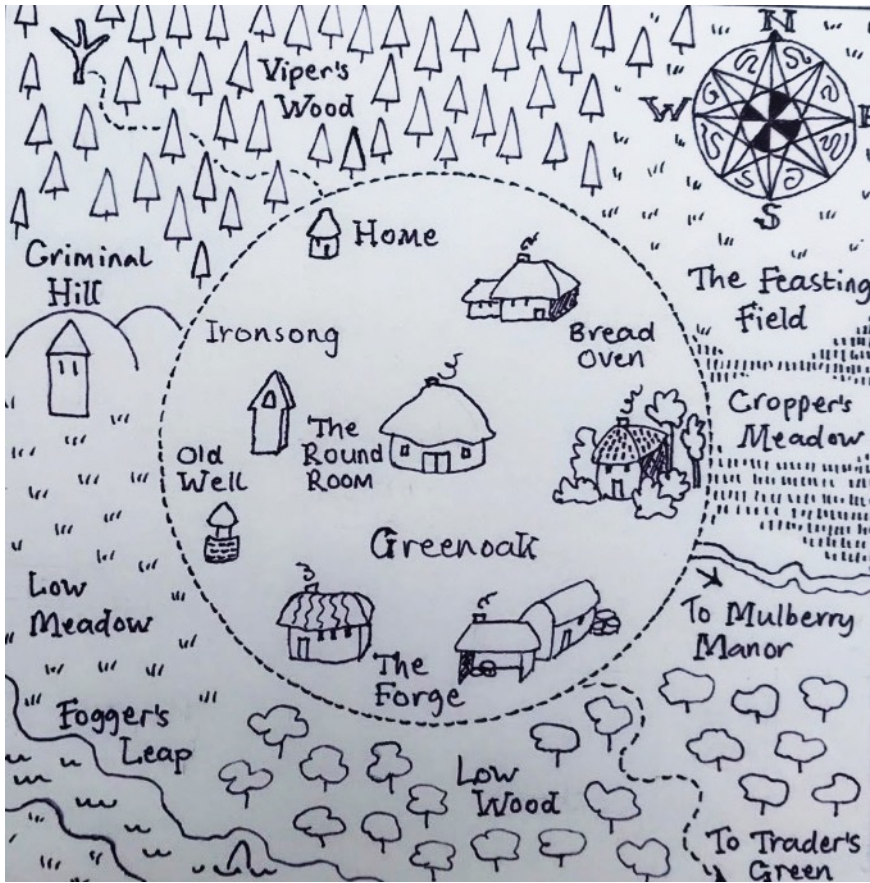
¹⁸⁷ Sketches by Kate Lee, originals presented in accompanying portfolio

¹⁸⁸ Swapna Haddow Children’s Author website available at: <<http://swapnahaddow.co.uk/fun-stuff/>> [accessed 5 January 2018]

¹⁸⁹ Original sketches by Kate Lee







In making my final, water-coloured map of Greenoak, I took a number of key artistic and narrative decisions: the colour palette is muted, mainly greens and browns, except for the reds and purples within the compass rose, chosen to contrast with the rural landscape depicted. Some locations and items are labelled, whilst others are not – for example, I have labelled the forge, where Fen lives, but have only hinted that the cottage to its right might be the home of Doe Fevermint and her herbalist mother, by surrounding it with shrubs and plants. Similarly, while I have labelled Viper’s Wood, I have deliberately shown the lightning tree – described in Chapter One as a ‘skinny ghost’ with three spooky branches – and a winding path to it, without naming it. This reflects my intention for the map to offer clues, encourage curiosity and spark the imagination. Pathways are important, as are arrows: I have shown two key journeys that Ethon will take, leading outside the village bounds. Right from the beginning, I envisaged Ethon’s tiny cottage as small, dark and isolated. Building on this, in my final artwork, I have ensured that the other dwellings shown have smoke curling reassuringly from their chimneys – all except for Ethon’s family home, flagging once again his precarious position. And by placing Greenoak literally within a circle, I have aimed to show that this is Ethon’s world, and to suggest that the spaces beyond it are unfamiliar and, by inference, the likely location of adventures.

I did consider developing a series of location maps that could be positioned at appropriate moments throughout the story, but both my instincts as a creator and my research led me back to the idea of the map as essentially preparatory. I felt that a sequential approach would water down this key aspect. By giving much more space to territories such as Viper’s Wood, and indicating where other significant and more distant places are (such as Trader’s Green) I feel that I have created an artwork that is aligned with the scope of story – the ground that it literally covers – and provides a rich level of visual detail that acts as a filter for Ethon’s viewpoint, his narrative, *his story*. My scholarly focus is, I believe, timely because an emphasis on the visual is especially important in today’s world where children need to be adept at interpreting visual information and developing their visual literacy. We are surrounded by and have access to visual images as never before and, as Denis Cosgrove notes, in our culturally globalizing world, visual images have an ‘unprecedented communicative significance’.¹⁹⁰ Society is ‘dominated by images so it is important that children should

¹⁹⁰ Cosgrove, *op. cit* (Kindle edition: no page numbers given)

be able to decode visual stimuli.’¹⁹¹ I hope that, as part of *The Stone Feather* project, my map of Ethon’s world will help develop these skills in children. Interest in literary maps is high: a number of new books have come out, including the collection of authors’ reflections and artwork in *The Writer’s Map – An Atlas of Imaginary Lands* and the collection of scholarly essays in *Maps and Mapping in Children’s Literature – landscapes, seascapes and cityscapes*. My research is timely within this broader context.

I am conscious that the final map reflects my natural drawing style and is, perhaps, a little gentle in relation to the nature of *The Stone Feather* as an adventure story. Feedback from beta readers suggests it is impressive, but has included comments such as, ‘It reminds me of the Hundred Aker Wood’ and ‘It is so cute!’ There may, therefore, be some further distance to travel in terms of refining the drawing so that it echoes and presents the ‘spirit of the text’¹⁹². However, I am satisfied with the overall design, labelling strategy and the extent to which I have curated Greenoak and the spaces beyond it specifically for Ethon. I therefore believe that it provides a solid base for potential further development. In the event of publication, the likelihood is that a professional illustrator would be commissioned for the map. The style would be considered alongside the cover design and overall presentational approach, since the creation of books is an inherently collaborative process that takes place within the wider context of national and international publishing trends. Very few children’s authors draw their own maps: notable exceptions include Robert Louis Stevenson; Arthur Ransome, who insisted that his own artworks were used; and, in contemporary fiction, author/illustrators Chris Riddell and Shirley Hughes. Much as I enjoy creating my own artwork, I have a strong sense of where my skills boundaries lie, along with a collegiate approach that means I would be comfortable working with an illustrator, in the same way that I am happy to work with a professional editor. Acknowledging and welcoming complementary skills is, I believe, as important to the process of publishing as structure is to the development of the creative work itself.

Jane Grafton asserts that ‘stories are maps – they pinpoint what to treasure’.¹⁹³ Through my practice as a creative writer and artist, and through my research, I argue

¹⁹¹ PhD student Lina Iordanaki speaking at the ‘Marvellous Imaginations’ conference at Roehampton University, November 2016

¹⁹² Coralie Bickford Smith cite in Huw Lewis-Jones (ed) *The Writer’s Map – an atlas of imaginary lands* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018) p. 192

¹⁹³ Grafton, cited in Goga and Kümmerling-Meibaur, *op. cit* p.72

that, similarly, *maps are stories*, pinpointing what to treasure for young eyes, fingers and imaginations. Or, to put it another way, when children accept the ‘invitation to daydream’¹⁹⁴ that a literary map offers, they are poised to discover that, even before turning the page and starting to read the first chapter, here be stories.

¹⁹⁴ Griswold, *op. cit*

The Stone Feather

By Kate Lee

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Chapter One

In Viper's Wood

Snake! Ethon scrambled away from the forest path, leapt for an overhanging branch and swung himself to safety. Viper's Wood was out of bounds after dark. Now he was beginning to understand why. It was only just past dusk, but already it was impossible to tell where the towering pine trees ended and the darkening sky began. Mounds of fern, so delicate and tranquil in daylight, crowded the edges of the forest path like hunched monsters. Sly roots slithered across the track, waiting to grab his ankles. But it was the vipers themselves that posed the greatest threat: sleepy and slow in daytime, at night they became ferocious predators. One swift strike from a pair of poison fangs and Ethon would never go out hunting again.

Listening for slithery sounds and hearing none, Ethon lowered himself to the ground and found the track again. He breathed out hard as he realised it was just a root and not a snake after all. A bitter wind gusted through the forest, shaking the birch leaves. Thunder rumbled and, as if in answer, rain started to fall in heavy drops that splattered Ethon's bare head and thin tunic. His patched old goatskin boots were no match for the downpour and his feet were drenched within seconds. But it would be far worse for Pa: he'd been out here for hours. Distressed, exhausted, and with boots in an even worse state than Ethon's own, now Pa would be soaked too. Ethon started to run, calling out for his father with each pounding, slippery step: *Pa, Pa, where are you Pa?* The forest gulped his words and spat them back in his face. But Ethon carried on shouting as he searched. There was a chance, just a chance, that Pa might hear him.

Swerving to avoid a fallen tree, Ethon crashed to the ground. As he pushed himself up, something squelched under his fingers and the familiar, sickly scent of witches' cape mushrooms filled the air. Their smell was an effective warning: even the youngest children in the village understood that you couldn't eat them. But if you added their juice to leaf-wax, it made candles burn

brighter. Feeling his way in the dark, Ethon scooped as many of the tiny mushrooms as he could into his sodden pockets. The season was turning fast and the tiny cottage he shared with Pa and Birda was already bone-cold. But thanks to this unexpected bounty, candlelight would give the comforting illusion of warmth.

Lightning flashed, edging every leaf with silver. And suddenly Ethon realised where Pa would be: the lightning tree. Why hadn't he thought of it before? Witches' cape did not grow there, but heart's ease fungi did, even this late in the year. Ethon pushed himself to his feet and ran full pelt. As white light sliced the sky again, he saw the outline of the lightning tree with its three jagged branches, standing alone in the clearing ahead. The old rhyme whispered in his head: *One for night, one for day, one to chase your wits away.*

Ethon skidded to a halt. Either the dead tree had miraculously started to grow again, or there was someone hiding behind it.

"It's me, Pa. I've come to take you home," he shouted above the noise of the rain.

"Go away!"

Ethon hesitated, confused: not Pa's voice, a woman's. As he circled the lonely tree, another bright vein of lightning exposed a huddled figure, glaring at him as she stuffed a bulging bag beneath the folds of her cloak. Ethon gasped: no-one else in Greenoak wore a cloak dyed that expensive cherry red. No-one else had eyes as sharp as flints and a tongue to match. Ma Kilter, proud owner of the village bread oven, was as easy to recognise as she was to fear. But she was still a neighbour. And a woman. Out in the forest, alone.

"Can I ... can I help?" Ethon's voice came out in a squeak.

"I don't need help," the woman snapped. "But maybe *you* do." Her lips curled in an unpleasant smile. "So your pa has run off again, has he? And right before the last Trade." She shook her head in disgust. "Such bad luck for you, being the son of a mizzle-man."

Ethon bunched his fists and yelled: "My pa is *not* a mizzle-man! He misses Ma. He finds comfort in the forest, that's all!"

Even as the words burst from his tongue, Ethon realised his mistake. Wandering through the woods *did* help to calm Pa. But heart's ease mushrooms

were far more effective in dampening the sudden fever of his grief. Seductive and addictive, heart's ease was strictly forbidden. So was shouting at your elders.

Ethon's rage trickled away.

He gulped.

Ma Kilter scrambled to her feet, and aimed a fierce slap at his head. "How dare you raise your voice to me," she hissed.

Ethon, ducking just in time to avoid the blow, saw blood oozing from a gash on Ma Kilter's wrist.

"You're hurt," he said.

Quick as a snake, Ma Kilter hid her injury. "It's no concern of yours," she snapped. "Go home. You'll forget you saw me, if you know what's good for you... and that little sister of yours. Isn't Birda afraid, all alone on a night like this? Listen to that wind! Soursigh is hungry tonight," she added slyly. "Even the Silver Lady is hiding."

Thunder shook the forest. The sky was as dark as iron: there was no sign of the Silver Lady's pale and beautiful curve. Sometimes she was as round as a coin, sometimes as slender as a blade. Sometimes she hid for a whole night.

But she always came back.

Soursigh was, it was rumoured, big enough to wrap its great serpent's tail three times round Criminal Hill. But even a creature as huge and strong as Soursigh could not survive on dry land. The beast belonged in the river, just as Pa belonged at home.

Ethon set his jaw and folded his arms. "Soursigh can't come anywhere near the village," he said.

Ma Kilter narrowed her eyes. "Soursigh has the power to harm us in other ways. But the creature leaves us in peace thanks to *me*," she said.

It was true. Ma Kilter might be as ill-tempered as a wet goose, but she laid out The Offering every sundown at Fogger's Leap without fail: one plaited loaf formed in a huge circle, golden and beautiful and, by morning, gone.

Something scurried across Ethon's foot.

He jumped.

Ma Kilter laughed.

Ethon fought the desire to give her a great shove. Lightning flashed again and the outline of the broken tree stood out like a skinny ghost against the dark forest. Ethon's heart thumped. Pa might be lost and frightened and frozen – even hurt – but he was a grown man. Birda was only seven summers old. Suddenly, leaving her all alone on a night like this seemed like the worst idea he'd ever had. He spun away from Ma Kilter's mocking smile and ran for home.

Chapter Two

The Wrong Man

When Ethon crept in, soaked and frozen, Birda jumped from her bed and flung herself into his arms, her face milk-white with fright after being alone all through the storm. Ethon relit the fire with the last of their kindling. After a while, the fire's warmth released the tears Birda had hung onto so hard and one of the stories Ethon knew by heart — a nice, safe one about a rabbit — soothed her back to sleep. Ethon's eyes ached from tiredness but, determined to stay awake, he sat cross-legged on the floor, as far from his own straw mattress as possible in the tiny room. Water trickled down the walls. Shivering, Ethon stared into the little fire. Above the embers, their cooking-pot was as empty as Pa's bed. Would he come back in time? And even if he did, what state would he be in? After a night in the forest, Pa would be frozen and filthy, but calm. If he had eaten heart's ease, he'd be frozen, filthy and raving. Heart's ease was a fickle remedy: soothing at first, muffling pain. But then it unleashed a great wave of madness. Pa's beautiful voice would grow raw, his eyes wild. He would pace about, his hands trembling, and then he'd start to rock. Worst of all, he would cry. Ethon heard Ma Kilter's mocking voice ... *mizzle-man* ... and slumped with misery.

Outside, the wood-sparrows cheeped, welcoming the dawn. The Trademaker would be here in Greenoak soon for the last Trade of the year, bringing with him their only chance to secure food for the winter. But only the head of the family could present their wares to the Trademaker at the Showing: that was the rule.

And Pa was missing.

Ethon crept over to their Trade basket. It was filled with bead necklaces: a whole summer's work. He pictured Birda and Pa, heads bent as they pierced and polished and threaded and knotted to the sound of Pa's rhythmic singing. Birda joined in, word-perfect and chirpy. Ethon, whose fingers lacked the

necessary patience, had been gatherer-in-chief, searching for stones and shells along the river's edge. He'd been chief pattern-maker too, working out how many of each colour and size they needed to create different effects, and placing them in order for Birda and Pa. It had been soothing, even enjoyable work. Some of the finished necklaces were long, some short, some simple, some intricate – but they were all ready. *I'm ready too*, Ethon thought as he held up a green stone necklace. The beads gleamed river-bright: everyone would like those ones best, Birda said. Tally Silverkin the Trademaker would know for sure. Ethon had noticed the way he'd pick out the most beautiful items, holding them up to the light, his eyes flickering with calculations. His voice was soft, though, and his manners gentle. At the last Showing, he'd even let Birda help him put the clay bowls in order, smallest ones sitting snugly inside the larger ones. Surely, just this once, he would accept Ethon in place of Pa?

Sunlight slid through a crack in the door.

It was time to wake Birda.

As Ethon scooped water from their barrel into two wooden cups, she wriggled out from her sleepy layers. "I'm hungry," she yawned. "Where's Pa?"

Ethon smoothed her tangled hair. "He's gone exploring."

"But he promised to take me to the Showing." Birda thrust her chin out.

"He's probably gone to find you something delicious to eat."

A big gappy smile lit Birda's face. Then her shoulders drooped. "But I'm hungry *now*."

Ethon handed her the chunk of bread he'd saved from yesterday. "You'd better eat this quick if you're coming with me." He grabbed his threadbare blanket, flipped it over his shoulder and pushed the ends into his still-damp belt. "There – a proper cloak. Just like the head of the family."

Birda giggled. Cramming the bread into her mouth, she picked up her doll and tucked a scrap of rag around its shoulders. "Poppety's ready too," she mumbled. Made of worn old strips of leather, Poppety's arms and legs were fragile. But her grubby linen body, which Pa had packed with straw and dandelion-fluff, was as hard and round as a stone. Beneath wisps of goat-hair, Poppety's black smudge eyes stared in a way that made Ethon turn her face to

the wall whenever he got the chance. Which wasn't often, for Birda loved Poppety like a baby sister.

Heaving the Trade basket into his arms, Ethon found he could just touch his fingers around its bulging sides. Carrying it all the way down into the village would be hard without Pa to share the weight. Birda was too small, and too fidgety, to help.

"A rich lady is going to buy all our necklaces so she looks extra beautiful," Birda told Poppety. "Then we'll be rich, too. We'll have dinner every day ... look! I'm fat now, because I eat three clover pies for breakfast!" Birda puffed out her cheeks, her eyes sparkling with laughter.

Ethon edged the door open with his foot. "We'll be so rich we'll have a donkey and cart, too," he said.

"And a goat. I want a goat!" Birda shrieked, skipping down the stony path towards the village.

Ethon staggered after her.

The sun had not yet crept over Criminal Hill, which sat just below Viper's Wood. Sitting on top of the hill, with its black pointed roof, the dungeon stood out like a dark warning. Ethon shivered and tried to ignore the faint cries that floated on the cold morning air.

As they approached the village, the path became wider. Here, each cottage stood in its own enclosure. There was Pa Willow the weaver's place with its neat thatched roof. Ma Willow's huge laundry tubs stood in a neat row to one side. The cottage where Hanny Claypotter and her father lived was far less orderly, surrounded by heaps of broken pots, wonky handles and spouts that wouldn't pour. A gate barred the path that led to their kiln, where the jars, jugs and bowls that Pa Claypotter judged good enough were fired. Large pots could sell for twenty silvers, Ethon had heard. They were worth guarding.

Ahead, larger than all the rest, was Ma Kilter's cottage. The chimney from her bread oven puffed, ready for the first batch of the day. She must be up just as usual, baking. Had he imagined last night?

A pair of butterflies swooped past, their coppery wings glinting. Birda chased after them shouting, "Look, twins! Twins for luck!"

Ma Kilter flung her shutters wide, ready to complain as always. But, spotting Ethon, she scowled and held a finger to her lips. Her wrist, he saw, was wrapped in a white cloth. Ethon nodded and looked away. How had she cut herself? And what had been in that bag she'd been so quick to hide?

Birda raced across the village circle towards the Round Room where the Showing would take place. "The door's still shut. We're first!"

Ethon hitched the Trade basket higher in his aching arms.

"Good dawnrise," said a deep, mellow voice. Old Hareld, bent as a shepherd's crook and barely a head taller than Birda, opened the door. His gnarled hands trembled with the effort.

"Fair morning," Ethon replied.

"I'll open the shutters for you." Birda darted past the old man and ran inside.

Old Hareld raised one fleecy eyebrow. "A willing helper. How refreshing," he said, motioning for Ethon to follow.

Ethon set his basket down at the head of the long, polished table and wiped sweat from his face.

"No pa today?" Old Hareld said quietly.

Ethon shook his head and stared at the table. A strip of cloth the glorious blue of a fisher-bird's wing ran down its length. At intervals, dried reeds laid out in crosses marked the spaces for villagers to position their Trade items for the Showing. At the head of the table, a pewter tankard gleamed beside a platter heaped with hazelnuts. A chair with a high, carved back wore a silvery rabbit-fur quilt over each of its heavy arms.

Everything was ready for their important visitor.

"Listen, listen! The silver man is coming!" Birda yanked Ethon's arm and hopped from foot to foot. He heard it too: the thud of horses' hooves and the creaking of cartwheels.

The single sharp wail of a horn confirmed it.

The Trademaker was here.

Ethon gasped as a short man with bandy legs marched through the doorway: who was this stranger? With his dark eyes and high cheekbones, the man could have been handsome. But his hair was as lank as riverweed and his

thin lips showed none of Tally Silverkin's kind nature. The man unfastened his rust-red Trademaker's cloak and shoved the Trade Horn into his belt. His black tunic strained against his belly. "Who's in charge here?" he barked.

Birda jumped. Hugging Poppety, she leaned in to Ethon's side. He placed a hand on her shoulder.

Old Hareld stepped forward, his arms spread wide in welcome, but a frown on his face. "Good dawnrise to you, sir. You are welcome here, of course. But we were expecting Tally Silverkin. Is he unwell?"

"Silverkin fell off his horse. Now one of his legs points the wrong way. We're kin, of sorts, so the job fell to me. If you'll pardon the joke," the stranger smirked.

Ethon stared: even children several summers younger than Birda knew to reply *fair morning* when someone wished them *good dawnrise*. But this man just continued talking, loudly and shamelessly.

"My name is Grody Hollowtree, but you may call me sir." The man spat, scratched his head and stretched. "You are lucky to have me here – otherwise you'd be reduced to taking the old way to Trade." He bent down so his face was level with Birda's. "And that would mean going past the Black Cave, full of MONSTERS!"

Birda shrieked and hid her face.

Ethon squared up to the stranger. "Don't frighten her!"

The man's mouth dropped open in shock – a peasant boy, answering back a Trademaker? He lunged for Ethon and caught him a hard blow on the cheekbone.

"Sir! Do not waste your energy on this young fire-spark." Old Hareld stepped between them to shield Ethon from further blows and grabbed Birda, who was known to be a kicker, by the arm. "You must be thirsty," he went on smoothly. "Perhaps you would like some oak-ale to drink before you begin? But wait – there's no time!"

Nippy as a goat, Old Hareld pulled the horn from Grody Hollowtree's belt, and blew it twice. Like hens chasing feed, villagers rushed into the Round Room. Soon, the space was packed. Pa Rattlebone, the gaoler, was easy to spot with long black robes and his bald pink head. Hanny Claypotter, giggling as she

swerved out of Ma Kilter's way, trod on Ethon's toes. He stumbled into the herbalist's daughter Doe Fevermint, making her drop the sheaves of ripe, pink milkgrass she was carrying. Catching Ethon's eye as her mother scolded her, Doe blushed. Her brown eyes grew wide with concern as she noticed the fresh mark on his cheek. Ethon cleared his throat and shoved back his shoulders to show that it was nothing. Birda held Poppety up, kissed her noisily, then darted away to find her friends, bubbling with laughter.

Ethon closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Doe was nowhere to be seen.

Near the door, the village blacksmith was sharing the weight of a wooden crate with his son Fen. It held iron cooking-pots, fresh from the forge. Just as Ethon was about to shout a greeting to his best friend, the Trademaker put the Trade Horn to his lips and blew three times. By the fading of the third blast, the Round Room was silent.

Ethon smiled as Fen made a mock bow behind Grody Hollowtree's back.

"It begins," Grody snapped.

And Ethon was first.

"You." Grody folded his arms.

Catching Fen's eye, Ethon knew what he must do. "I... I'm sorry, sir. For shouting," he said, forcing himself to look at Grody. An apology without eye contact was the way of cowards.

"Good – now we may continue," Old Hareld said loudly, leaving the Trademaker little choice but to carry on with proceedings.

"Name?" he snapped at Ethon.

"Ethon Larksong, sir," Ethon replied.

"And you are head of your household?" Grody smirked. "It will be a long time before *you* are a man." If ever, his tone implied.

Anger flooded Ethon's face again but this time he pressed his lips tight shut. It was Birda who nipped forwards, planted her hands on her hips and announced. "My brother has *thirteen summers*."

Everyone laughed and even the stranger smiled. "Show me your wares then, boy," he said.

A bubble of optimism rose inside Ethon's stomach as he held out string after string of shining beads. However rude he was, this stranger was a Trademaker. Surely he would recognise the quality of Pa and Birda's work, and agree to take it to Trade? He would demand the usual commission, of course: one silver in every ten. But that would leave plenty for the Larksong family to contribute to the Cold Coffers, earning their right to a share in the village's supply of food. They would be able to eat all winter! Pa would get strong again – strong enough to bear the weight of grief. He'd be his old self, warm and funny, and no-one would call him ... *names*... ever again. Maybe he'd even be asked to sing at the Great Winter Feast again. Because no-one, Ethon thought proudly, has a voice like Pa.

There was a cry from the doorway. The crowd split like an axed log as a tall figure with flapping arms tottered in. Ethon's heart hammered as he saw his father's wild eyes. Beneath his bedraggled hair, Pa's face was mushroom-pale. His beard looked as if someone – or something – had tried to rip it from his face.

The Round Room fell quiet.

Do not speak, Ethon begged silently.

Pa did not speak, at first. He simply pointed at Grody Hollowtree. Grody leaned back in his fur-lined seat and folded his arms. A green necklace dangled from his little finger.

"Not keen to wait your turn?" Grody Hollowtree drawled.

Ethon reached his father's side and, very gently, turned Pa's face towards him. "Be calm, Pa. It is the last Trade. Nothing must go wrong."

"It already has. He's the wrong man." Pa stared at Grody.

Grody chose a nut from the platter before him and chewed it loudly.

"He's just a *different* man," Ethon said. "Tally Silverkin fell off his horse."

Grody took a swig of ale and burped.

"No. He's bad. Don't trust him," Pa pleaded.

Ma Kilter elbowed her way through the crowd. "It's *you* we cannot trust. Mizzle-man!" she cried.

Everyone gasped but, ignoring the insult, Pa pointed once again at the Trademaker. His voice was low and hoarse but it filled the silent space: "But it's true. He *is* a bad man."

Grody jumped to his feet and hurled the necklace to the ground. The beads scattered in the dust. Locking his hands around Pa's neck, he hissed: "How dare you!"

Ethon leapt forward and grabbed the man's wrists. "Let him go!"

The blacksmith laid one huge hand on Grody's shoulder and one on Ethon's. "You will *both* let go."

Grody shook away Big Fen Ironturner's heavy hand and, reluctantly, released his grip on Pa's neck. He prodded Pa in the chest. "I didn't come here to be insulted. Get out! And don't imagine this is the end of the matter."

"What's happening?" Birda's voice rose in panic. "Leave my Pa alone!"

Ethon's father swung his face from left to right, like a dog following some cruel tease. Big Fen laid an arm across his trembling shoulders. "It's time to go, old friend."

Ethon saw Doe's hands fly to her mouth; even Hanny looked subdued for once. Ethon grabbed the necklaces and shoved them back into their Trade basket. Wedging it under one arm, he steered Pa towards the door and held out his hand to Birda. "It's alright, little barleycorn," he said in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "Pa is just tired after all his exploring."

Once they got outside, Ethon's knees wobbled so hard he thought he would fall over. Then Fen was there, taking the weight of the heavy basket and deftly tucking his shoulder under Pa's arm to support him. Fen turned to look at his own father, standing in the doorway of the Round Room, arms folded across his broad chest. Big Fen Ironturner nodded – *yes, you may go* – before turning back to The Showing.

The big oak door slammed shut behind him.

"Come home with me," said Fen. "Ma's been making walnut stew. There's bound to be some spare. And while your Pa has a rest, we can think of a plan."

Ethon nodded. The thought of a warm cottage and warm food gave him the strength to put one foot in front of the other. Even with Fen's support, Pa's footsteps faltered. His breathing was rapid and his eyelids flickered. *Heart's ease has done its evil work again*, Ethon thought bitterly. *And Pa has let it.*

Birda clung to Pa's sleeve. "I knew you'd come. So did Poppety. Because you *promised*," she declared. Then she asked quietly: "What's a mizzle-man?"

Fen and Ethon exchanged a glance.

“It’s a very nasty thing to call someone,” Fen said. “And it’s not true,” he added firmly.

Ethon found he could not speak.

Pa started to mumble. “Grody Hollowtree *is* a bad man. I heard it in the forest.” He gripped the stone pendant that he wore round his neck, his one precious reminder of Ma, as if holding on to the truth.

“Viper’s Wood is full of strange whispers,” Fen said gently. “Especially at night.”

Birda slipped her hand into Pa’s. Over her shoulder, Poppety’s black eyes watched Ethon. If she could speak, he knew just what she would be saying, and how she would be saying it – *what are you going to do now, then?* – in a voice that sliced like a knife.

He stuck out his tongue.

As he trailed along behind the others, his arms aching, Ethon’s eyes prickled with anger and shame. How could Pa insult the Trademaker, of all people? Today of all days? Without Grody Hollowtree, they could sell nothing.

Earn nothing.

Eat nothing.

Chapter Three

Cradles and Caves

Pa sat in the rocking chair in the corner of the Ironturner's cottage. His head hung down onto his chest like a broken flower, but his hands were still. Pa had refused the offer of stew but Ethon had gulped his down. Feeling a little better now, he was pleased but puzzled by how calm Pa seemed: usually the effects of heart's ease took days to wear off. Perhaps Pa had only found a few of the mushrooms this time. The growing season was over, after all.

Birda crouched near Pa, drawing with a stick on the earth floor. Ma Ironturner had fed them all and tended to the bruise on Ethon's cheek. Now she was nursing Fen's youngest brother Seth, always hungry and already too big for his crib. The other Ironturner children were playing outside by the stream; Ethon could hear Mead, next eldest after Fen at nine summers, ordering everyone about, just like a normal day.

Ethon plonked his empty bowl on the table and started to pace, as if the faster he walked, the more likely a plan was to reveal itself. "I can walk to Trade. But our basket is so heavy it's like carrying a donkey! Maybe I can drag it? But then it'll break. At least there is another path, like that horrible Hollowtree man said. I don't care if it means going past creepy caves stuffed with – that is, boring old empty caves," he finished quickly. Birda looked busy, but she heard everything.

"Old Hareld will know the way, he's older than Ironsong," Ma Ironturner said.

Fen finished crumbling bread into a bowl of milk and handed it to Birda. "See if your Pa will eat this."

Birda knelt by Pa and tapped his knee. "Here, Pa, it's all mushy, just how you like it," she said.

A smile as delicate as a feather floated across Pa's thin face. "The darkness is gone. The wheels of kindness have turned," he murmured. He started to eat.

Birda traced her finger around the edge of her bowl. "If *we* had some wheels, we could make a cart," she said. "Then Ethon wouldn't have to carry the basket."

Fen jumped to his feet. "My Pa always makes a pair of wheels for Tally Silverkin. But this time, I think he'll keep them."

"Why?" It was Birda's favourite word.

Pa took the bowl from his lips. "Because Big Fen Ironturner knows good from bad," he said. He yawned, shuddered and slipped back into sleep.

Birda sat down, leaned against Pa's knee and began to plait Poppety's hair.

Ethon drummed his fists on his thighs. "We'd need a box of some sort..."

Fen sprang up and dragged Seth's old crib from its corner.

Ma Ironturner rubbed Seth's back to burp him. "I'd be pleased to see the back of it," she said. "Six sons is more than enough."

"No crib means no more babies," Birda said wisely.

Ethon ruffled her hair. "Now we just need some handles." He ran outside. In moments he was back, dragging a fallen branch. "This will do," he said. "We just have to chop it up a bit."

"Your Pa's got an axe," Birda told Fen.

Fen bowed before Birda. "You are a shining star of cleverness. Far brighter than your brother, even though he is six summers older."

Birda giggled.

"You are not touching the axe," Fen's ma warned her. "And neither is Ethon."

Ethon opened his mouth to protest then shut it again. Fen was muscular where Ethon was reed-thin. And Fen helped his father chop logs every day. There was no point arguing. He went to fetch the wheels.

As Ethon went into the forge beside the cottage, he noticed a row of fat, finished iron pots arranged in a row along one wall. Someone had placed them

in size order: two large, one medium, four small, and one tiny, just like the Ironturners themselves.

Fen worked quickly, slicing the bark from the branch and chopping it into two even lengths. With its handles secured with old strips of leather and the wheels threaded onto an axle, the cart looked as sturdy as its creator. Ethon felt an awkward rush of emotion for his friend.

“Thanks, Fen,” he muttered.

“I helped too,” Birda reminded him. “I helped because it was *my idea*.”

Ethon took Birda’s hands. “You’re quite right, little barleycorn – it’s nearly all thanks to you. When I come back from Trade I’ll bring you a special present.”

“But I want to come!” Birda wailed.

Ethon hugged her. “I need you to keep Pa company.”

“Poppety is cross,” Birda said, stamping her foot.

Ma Ironturner drew Birda close and patted the straw mattresses that were barely large enough for her own family. “You’ll be cosy here. I hope you’re not a wriggler.”

Ethon knelt beside his father and took his hands. Pa’s thin fingers trembled. Ethon felt a great tenderness blossom in his heart. Pa could not help his weakness. Old Hareld had explained it to him once, when he was barely Birda’s age, the winter after their terrible loss. Imagine that Pa’s grief is an eagle, he’d said. A big hungry eagle, watching and waiting, circling and swooping. When Pa saw its shadow, his instinct was to escape its talons. So he’d run and run, and reach for anything he could find to help him keep going.

Why don’t I see the shadow? Ethon had asked. He could still hear the old man’s reply: *I think perhaps your eagle is still in its nest.*

Ethon thrust his shoulders back, pushing the memories away. “I’m going to Trade, Pa. And then all will be well,” he promised.

Pa lifted his shaggy head. “Go well, son.” Ethon could not read the expression in his father’s eyes. Was it worry or fear, shame or pride? Or was he still befuddled with heart’s ease? “May the Silver Lady shine on you.” He took Ma’s stone pendant from around his neck and held it out. “Take this, to keep you safe.”

Ethon had never held it before, since Pa never, ever took it off. To his horror, he felt his eyes prickle. Quickly, he looped the leather string back over Pa's head and headed for the door. "You need it more than I do. Stay well, Pa. And don't worry, I'll be back soon."

"Wrong. *We'll* be back soon," said Fen. "I'm coming with you."

"Is that so?" said Ma Ironturner.

"You wouldn't want *me* to make a journey like that all alone, would you?" Fen said. "Anyway, it'll mean more space for our guests."

Ethon grinned as he saw Fen's easy charm work on his mother like magic.

Ma Ironturner sighed, plonked Seth in Fen's arms and fetched a leather water-flagon, a stone lamp and a clay jar filled with lamp-fat. Tucking them into the cart, she gave Ethon a bread-bundle. "There's a barley-pear in there, too. You boys will have to share," she said. "It's all we have left." Her mouth wobbled.

The younger Ironturners, who'd crept from their woodland games as if drawn by the scent of adventure, stared. Ethon and Fen, like all the village boys, had never gone beyond the village bounds before. What lay beyond? Their eyes grew round with imagining. Mead stood alone, scowling with envy.

Fen patted his mother's arm. "Don't cry, Ma. We'll be fine."

"I'll look after him," Ethon promised.

Fen shoved his shoulder. "I'd like to see you try."

"You'd better go before your Pa gets home," his mother said.

A tall figure darkened the doorway.

Big Fen Ironturner, back from The Showing, frowned at Ethon and Fen. The room stilled. Even Seth was silent. "I would do the same in your boots," Big Fen said at last. He turned to Fen. "You'll be needing this." He handed Fen a long wooden stave carved with swirling patterns like flames. At the top, a dragon's majestic head reared. It was smooth and shiny and magnificent.

Fen tilted the stave so the beautiful carved patterns caught the light. "But the Steadfast Stave belonged to your Pa. I've never even been allowed to touch it before."

"You never needed it before," his father said simply. "Go well, son. Go well, Ethon. May the Silver Lady shine on you both."

Ma Ironturner hugged both boys. "Make sure you keep out of that nasty Grody Hollowtree's way. The Old Way is not forbidden, but even so..."

"It means he won't get his cut. That won't please him. And remember, all Traders have short tempers and long memories. Play it safe," said Big Fen.

"I think that advice was meant for you," Fen whispered.

Ethon snorted.

"Stay well," they chorused.

Ma Ironturner held Ethon's shoulders for a moment. "Your mother would be proud of you," she said.

Ethon swallowed: no-one spoke of Ma anymore. He did not know what to say. But no words were needed. Ma Ironturner had turned away and was busily inspecting her children's hands and pockets. When it came to collecting untouchable things that lived in the stream, they were repeat offenders.

Mead stuck out his tongue at Ethon and Fen before darting away shouting, "I dare you go in the Black Cave. Bet you're too chicken!"

Fen rolled his eyes and grabbed the cart.

They were off.

Old Hareld's cottage sat at the edge of Low Wood. A twirl of smoke rose from its chimney like a welcome. The old man, who seemed to be expecting them, whistled when he saw the cart. "An impressive morning's work," he said, eyes shrewd. "I know how badly you need this Trade, Ethon. And I know why you are here. I will tell you the Old Way on one condition. You must not enter the Black Cave. It is said that even the Silver Lady cannot help those who do so. Will you promise?" Old Hareld crossed his hands over his heart.

Solemnly, Ethon mirrored the gesture, as did Fen.

Old Hareld sat down on the rim of the old well and patted the mossy space beside him. Ethon's heart dropped: Old Hareld's stories were spellbinding but they were as long as Soursigh's tail.

"In my young days, there was only one way to get to Trader's Green," Old Hareld began. "There's a path through the south side of Low Wood. It leads to a place they call The Chaos, full of giant boulders. And it passes the Black Cave." He paused, cleared his throat and continued. "The path itself is steep and

winding and barely five fists wide. It was hard work leaving Greenoak and even harder coming back.”

“So that’s why they made the High Way.” Fen dropped a pebble into the mouth of the old well. They heard no splash.

“Yes. But there was a price to pay.”

“The Trademaker and his commission?” Ethon guessed.

“Exactly so. An arrangement was reached: the High Way would be cut through the forest, if we agreed to the Trade-making terms. At first, the commission was set at was one silver in twenty. Then it became one silver in fifteen. And now, it is one in ten. I warned against it. I was young, then, but old enough to know that certain types of agreement are not carved in stone. They change, and when they do it is usually for the worse. But the Castleborn’s grandfather refused to listen.” Old Hareld sighed at the memory. “His word was final then, just as his grandson’s is now. It was a time of great darkness in Greenoak.”

Darkness: the word Pa used this morning. Ethon pictured his father’s troubled face. It meant nothing, surely – it was just the heart’s ease speaking.

“If you hurry, you will reach Trader’s Green shortly after sunrise tomorrow – just in time for Trade.”

I wish *you* would hurry, Ethon thought, as Old Hareld began to explain the route, lowering his voice as if he feared someone was lurking and listening. “First, you pass Young Granny Oak. After a while you’ll see a big rock shaped like a bear’s head. That’s where you turn left...”

The moment Old Hareld finished, Ethon grabbed the cart and shouted a quick thank you while Fen reassured the old man that they would try to find out more about what had happened to Tally Silverkin.

As Ethon and Fen reached the village bounds, marked by a low stone pillar, familiar sounds floated from the cottages beyond: the braying of goats and the bossy snorting of Ma Kilter’s pig, the thuds and slaps of clay being worked, the scratching of chickens and the rhythmic clicking of spindles. Birda, Ethon knew, was itching to start spinning and, with her deft fingers, would soon be as skilled as a grown woman. He was secretly glad they could not afford a spindle, for Birda worked hard enough already. He’d been free to play all day at

seven summers old, running wild with Fen by his side, as solid as he was gangly. Ethon glanced at his friend. Fen was still shorter by three palms, but his rounded childhood limbs had grown hard with muscle, his black hair shone and his jaw was square and lightly shadowed. Ethon's own arms and legs remained mortifyingly twig like, his face smooth. Since everyone said he and Birda were alike as a pair of scatter-birds, even down to the determined expression in their grey eyes, he knew he looked delicate. *One day*, he thought, *one day I will be as strong as an oak*.

Ethon walked faster, his stomach groaning as he caught the scent of noon-meals being prepared. He could picture the scene in the cottages: mothers stirring herb soup as bright as goose-grass while children squabbled at their feet. The menfolk, who spent their days out in the fields or caring for their animals, would get the biggest meal. It was the only way to survive the physical labour that lasted from sunrise till sundown, each day hard and each day the same. They needed to gather their strength as it would soon be harvest time. The golden rows in Cropper's Meadow were waist-high already.

There was just one cottage to pass before they reached the start of the Hard Path: Doe Fevermint's home. Ethon's heart dropped as he saw her mother bustle out and start to pull handfuls of leaves from the shrubs that edged her garden path, some tough and glossy, some as fine as feathers. She placed each herb in her basket with great care, talking in a polite voice as if introducing them to each other: "Elm-wort for faster healing and giant sweet-wing to stop the flow of blood. You'll work beautifully when I've mixed you with some apple-wood ash and a good splash of oak ale..." she stopped as she saw the two boys.

"And where are you two going?" She looked at Ethon as she spoke, her tone hostile. She had never called Pa a mizzle-man – not to Ethon's face, anyway – but Ma Fevermint made no secret of her contempt for those who misused nature's riches.

Ethon lifted his chin. "To Trade," he said brusquely. It sounded rude even to his own ears. He cleared his throat and looked at his boots.

Ma Fevermint sniffed as if she expected nothing more from the son of Edor Larksong. She turned to Fen. "And do your ma and pa know about this?"

Fen smiled, his eyes innocent. "Of course. Ma gave us her blessing – and Pa gave me this." He held up Steadfast, his face bright with pride.

Ma Fevermint put her hands on her hips. Then, as if deciding it was none of her business, she shook her head and hurried inside.

As the door closed, Doe raced down the side of the cottage. She took a tiny stone jar from a fold in her dress and dropped it into Ethon's pocket. "It's axe-bright ointment to soothe your hands. Pushing that cart will make them sore."

Fen nudged Ethon. "Aren't you going to say thank you?"

But before Ethon could find the words, they heard Ma Fevermint calling. "Doe, where *are* you? Paws needs feeding!"

Doe ran back up the path. "Go well," she called softly over her shoulder. Her copper-bright hair, safely tied up in its long plait, swung as she ran.

"Stay well," Ethon replied. But he wasn't sure if she heard.

"She's not worrying about *my* hands, I notice," Fen remarked. "I wonder why that is?"

But Ethon didn't answer: he was looking ahead now, staring into the tangled arms of Low Wood. Somewhere deep inside its green heart lay the Hard Path, steep and narrow and dangerous – but fast.

And speed was the only thing that mattered.

Ethon marched towards the trees.

"Let's see if we can reach the Bear's Head by nightfall," he said.

Chapter Four

The Hard Path

“It doesn’t look much like a bear.” Ethon let the cart handles rest on the thick branches of a thistle-berry bush. *Turn left at the Bear’s Head*, Old Hareld had told them. Suppose it was the wrong rock and they took a wrong turning? They might not reach Trader’s Green in time. Ethon shook the anxious thought away.

Fen walked around the rock, peering closely in the fading light. “It’s better from this side. That bit looks like the jaws. And there are the ears.”

“Where are the eyes?”

“All around us.” Fen grinned. “Come on – this way. We need to get past The Chaos and make camp. And it’s your turn to push.”

The path became steeper and narrower as it wound down between the towering trees. Pine cones crunched under the cart’s wheels and twigs snapped like tiny whips. Far above the treetops, the sweet sad song of a sorrowlark pierced the air. Somewhere nearby a hidden stream trickled. Ethon jumped as a pair of red squirrels dashed across their path and bounded into the undergrowth. He pushed on, trying to ignore the ache in his arms.

As the trees thinned out, the path veered to the right, past a wall of soaring rocks the colour of old men’s teeth. Ethon stopped, mesmerised.

“Remember what Old Hareld said? We must hurry. It’s getting really dark now.” Fen took charge of the cart.

Beyond the yellow rocks, the path dropped sharply and there before them was The Chaos, just as Old Hareld had described it. The huge grey boulders lay in a tumbled mass, as if a giant had hurled them away in anger.

The air was still.

No larks sang.

No squirrels played.

Ethon shivered.

A small white cave-fox shot out from behind a rock. It zigzagged back into the forest leaving a trail of sour scent.

Fen pretended he hadn't jumped. "At least it wasn't a bear cub."

"Ugh – cave-foxes stink!" Ethon gagged. "And there are no bears in Low Wood any more. Old Hareld said so."

"How do we get round those boulders? They're enormous." Fen pushed against one with his whole weight. He tried using the Steadfast Stave to lever it. It did not budge.

Ethon hauled himself up onto the nearest rock and started searching for a way through. His calf muscles burned as he climbed from boulder to boulder. He clambered down onto a smaller rock with a greenish tinge and felt it shift. "Over here, Fen. Help me push!" he shouted.

Together, they forced the green rock aside. Before them a passageway snaked into the shadows. Far ahead they could see a pool of light.

"The Silver Lady is showing us the way!" Ethon ran round the side of The Chaos to retrieve the cart. With Fen close behind, he pushed on into the darkness. *It's no worse than Viper's Wood at night*, Ethon told himself firmly. But the space beneath the rocks smelled of decay and every surface he touched was slimy. Ethon shuddered. It was like being at the bottom of a well.

As they reached the end of the passageway, the pool of light grew bigger and brighter. The rocks opened onto a wide, flat space edged with ferns.

"We made it!" Ethon grinned with relief. And then, just beyond the clearing, he saw the entrance to a cave gaping like the mouth of an iron cauldron.

"The Black Cave." Gripping Steadfast, Fen took a step back.

A high-pitched scream tore the air. The sound ached with fear and fury, panic and pain and it definitely wasn't human. Was it a mother fox, searching for her cub? A wild boar, far from its usual hunting grounds, trapped inside? It sounded more like a goat at the slaughter. But there were no goats in the forest. And even the Silver Lady could not help anyone – or anything – lost or trapped inside the Black Cave.

Ethon and Fen raced into the woods ahead, panting with relief. Fen swung Steadfast from side to side, crushing the undergrowth and beating a path

for Ethon the follow. The narrow path that Old Hareld had spoken of was, they soon realised, long gone – overgrown or crumbled away, or both. They must forge their own. Every few steps Fen prodded the ground, checking for bogs, sudden drops and sleepy snakes. Rain started to fall. By the time they found a sheltered spot to make camp, the night sky was cloudlessly black once more and scattered with stars. Their tunics were sodden with misty droplets, which sparkled in the Silver Lady’s pure light. Burrowing under a platter-bush, Ethon found some dry leaves. He rubbed them into shreds and made a little heap while Fen sparked two flint stones together to make fire. Soon, their tiny fire smouldered. Ethon lit their lamp. They had warmth, light and, best of all, food. The barley pear Ma Ironturner had given them was overripe, just the way Ethon liked it. He shared it out fairly, but Fen announced it was too mushy and pushed his half back. Ethon started to protest but something in Fen’s expression made him stop. Shrugging, he mopped the sweet juice with a last crust, crunched the core and washed it down pips and all with great gulps from their flagon. Ethon could taste Greenoak in the water, freshly drawn from the well that morning. Tomorrow, Ma Ironturner would fetch water for Pa and Birda, instead of Ethon. It was a strange thought – almost as strange as being far away from home – but, picturing her strong, baby-filled arms, he relaxed. He reached into his pocket for healing paste – and felt the coldness of metal.

“A silver!” Ethon held the coin up. “Doe must have put it there.”

“I wonder why?” Fen fluttered his eyelashes and pretended to peep over his hands.

Ethon flicked earth at him.

“Fine dreams.” Fen rolled himself into his thick brown blanket.

“Fair morning.” Ethon pulled his own thin grey blanket around his shoulders and held his hands closer to the lamp’s gentle flame. The herb paste melted and his fingers hurt less already. As Doe whispered, *Go well*, her brown eyes had seemed larger and brighter than ever. Was she worried? Admiring, perhaps? After all, no-one else their age had ever left the bounds of Greenoak. Ethon smiled and tucked himself up tighter. His thoughts turned to Pa. He had whispered those same words, but his eyes were dark with something even harder to recognise... was it fear? Ethon squashed the nagging thought and,

instead, conjured an image of Birda, innocent and cheerful. Distracted by the happy prospect of showing Mead Ironturner how fast a person of seven summers could run, even with the annoyance of skirts, she had simply cuddled Ethon goodbye. For one so small and thin, Birda could hug surprisingly hard. As the light of the Silver Lady washed over him, Ethon allowed himself to picture his Ma. Soft grey eyes, hands strong from spinning and a wide warm lap. *Such a sweet soul*, he'd heard the village women sigh when they thought he was asleep, the night it happened. *Honey in her veins, that one.*

No wonder Pa was lost without her.

No wonder he turned to heart's ease when the eagle's shadow fell.

The silver coin in his hand was warm now, like the stone pendant. It felt like a sign. Perhaps there would be better days ahead. Pa *could* be healed – Ethon suddenly felt sure of it. He just had to find a way to help him. But how?

“Fine dreams,” he whispered to his family far away.

And he slept.

Chapter Five

Sea Beads

They arrived at Trader's Green soon after sunrise the next day, thanks to Old Hareld's detailed directions. Perhaps there was merit in listening to long stories after all, Ethon thought. The air buzzed as mist-flies raced towards the scent of animals. Livestock in large numbers meant delicious grease and somewhere warm to nest. Ethon and Fen swatted the flies from their hair as they pulled their cart towards the wide sweep of Trader's Green.

"It's a circle. Just like at home. But so much bigger." Ethon gazed across the vast expanse of grass ringed by trees.

"More important, it's flat." Fen rolled his shoulders and blew on his hands.

Trader's Green was already studded with stall-holders. Goats and sheep, chickens and rabbits were gathered in pens and curled up in crates. Children and dogs raced and yapped. Four beautiful horses were tethered beneath a chestnut tree, waiting patiently as a man poured water into their trough. The air echoed with shouts and crashes as Traders assembled their stalls and set out their wares. The female Traders, whose long dresses swept the grass, reminded Ethon of Greenoak women. Most of the men wore grey or brown tunics and leggings like his own and Fen's, but Ethon noticed some in tunics the colour of plums, glittering with silver thread in swirling patterns.

"That's how our Castleborn dresses," Fen said, nodding wisely. "But his clothes are even finer." Fen never tired of mentioning that his Pa had met the Castleborn – lord of Mulberry Manor – not once but *twice* this year, when he delivered a batch of swords and, later, shields. Big Fen had come home with a troubled look in his eyes, willing to talk only of the lord's extraordinary bright clothes. Ethon, along with most of the village, was unlikely to ever see the Castleborn or his embroidered cloak. The well-worn boast normally earned Fen a mock fight. But today Ethon wasn't listening because, right before them, it

seemed that an entire village was being created. There was an iron-worker's stall, piled with buckets and ladles, arrows and spearheads, cooking-pots, long, elegant keys and sturdy locks. On the next stall bowls freshly carved from ash-wood were piled beside pottery jugs larger than any Ethon had seen before. He imagined Hanny Claypotter's pert expression fading to dismay, and smiled. One stall was piled with wooden dolls dressed in tiny, real clothes. How Birda would love one! Nearby, great squares of linen pegged to low branches wafted in the morning breeze. Oak-ale barrels creaked as men rolled them into lines. They sang in time to the work as they heaved the barrels into position. It smelled familiar, just like the Round Room, but Ethon had never heard that song before.

Four huge stalls with their own awnings took pride of place right at the centre of Traders Green, each patrolled by a burly guard. They displayed the wares of a whole village and, Ethon realised, one would be Greenoak! Two Trademakers in rust-red cloaks strolled by inspecting the way the goods were displayed, slapping each other on the back and laughing. Ethon wondered if either of them knew Tally Silverkin and could tell him more about his horse riding accident. Would he recover? Ethon stepped forward to interrupt but Fen pulled him away. "Are you mad? Look – there's Grody Hollowtree!"

Ethon froze: there under one of the awnings was Grody. He was arguing with a taller, younger man with snow-white shirt sleeves, a smart tunic the colour of slate edged with red braid, and an extraordinary little pointed beard. There was a dagger in his boot. He seemed to be enjoying the debate, and winning it: his dark eyes sparkled with humour and victory. Grody, on the other hand, was flushed a dull pink and looked ready to explode. Ethon turned away very slowly. Grody Hollowtree wielded his power like a whip. If their appearance at Trade angered him, who knew what punishment he would unleash, perhaps on the whole village? Ethon touched the bruise on his cheekbone and sprinted after Fen.

Not every Trader had a stall, they discovered. Some had lined their goods up on blankets on the grass: goatskin boots, stone lamps in every size, great yellow lumps of beeswax. One blanket was draped like a bed with cloaks dyed earth red, rich brown and a soft, familiar blue. Just like Birda's before it became

thin and frayed and full of holes, Ethon realised as he reached to feel the cloth. If only he could buy her a new one.

“Don’t touch,” snapped the woman behind the stall.

Ethon snatched his hand away and flushed.

As Fen made to position their cart beside the cloak-stall, a man with a curly beard and a stomach like a grain-sack barred their way. “Small carts over there,” he growled, pointing to the tatty jumble of Traders grouped at the boggiest part of Trader’s Green. When he saw that their cart was made from a crib, he grinned. “Selling babies are we, lads?” he mocked, snatching the cloth that concealed their wares.

Ethon yanked it back and flung it over their treasures.

Fen simply bowed, swung his arm over Ethon’s shoulder and steered him and the cart away.

“I wasn’t going to *say* anything,” Ethon began.

“I can smell a fight, even before it happens. It’s a gift,” Fen said airily. “Or maybe it’s something to do with having five very annoying little brothers.”

He set the cart down and Ethon tilted the bead-basket to make the necklaces easy to see. Their cart was not only the last in the row, but also the smallest. But it didn’t matter: they were at Trade!

An old woman tottered out from behind her cart, which was piled with spiceberries. Cobwebs of hair clung to her scalp. Her filmy eyes wandered from the shining beads to Ethon’s face and back again.

“Pretty,” she smirked.

Fen spluttered with laughter.

And then came the sound of not just one Trade Horn, but a whole army of horns, louder than thunder. And then the thundering of feet.

Fen nudged Ethon. “Look – Traders,” he announced. “And they’re coming this way.”

A great crowd came surging, moving like one mass rather than many individuals. But suddenly, one man stood before Ethon. He was tall and thickset with a wide sweaty face. Hard muscles showed through a rip in the sleeve of his moss-green tunic and a blob of something greasy clung to one of the fat black hairs in his beard.

Ethon forced his eyes away and fiddled with the necklace in his hands.

"I want one." The man jabbed a meaty finger in Ethon's face.

Clenching his fists, Ethon winced as the sharp edge of a piece of shell pierced his palm. A sudden image of Big Fen Ironturner's strong hand waving them farewell floated into his head. *Traders have short tempers and long memories*, he'd warned. *Play it safe*.

"You don't have much to say, boy. First Trade, is it?" the man said.

Ethon nodded.

The man raked his fingers through his beard. The blob slid down to his chest and Ethon saw that it was meat, coated in fat. His stomach growled. They'd seen delicious rabbit pies on one of the stalls. But even with Doe's silver coin, they could not afford such food.

"My friend here needs regular feeding or he gets grumpy," said Fen breezily.

The man's face split into a grin. "Belly first, eh?" His eyes rested on Ethon's thin face. His expression sharpened. "I want the best you've got."

Ethon pulled one of Birda's longest necklaces from the basket. Green stones and white shells, perfectly sized, on a string of fine leather.

"How much?" The man's eyes were as hard as flint now.

"You're here to fill your cooking-pot, remember. Take what you can get," Fen whispered.

"Ten silvers," Ethon said.

The man opened his mouth as if to roar with laughter. But instead he spat. It landed in the grass beside Ethon's feet.

"Keep it," he growled.

"It's a fine necklace. Worth many silvers," Fen said quickly. "But maybe not ten. Maybe... eight?"

"Five."

Fen looked hurt. "Five silvers? When it took my friend's little sister days to make? Her fingers bleeding. Her stomach growling. The cooking-pot *empty*," he finished, stamping on Ethon's toe.

"Seven," Ethon said. "I'll sell it to you for seven silvers."

The man glared.

Ethon swallowed.

“Seven it is.” The big man drew a leather pouch from his pocket. He paused. “Minnow,” he yelled. He shoved two fingers between his lips and whistled. A small girl darted through the crowd like a puppy called to heel. The man patted her matted brown hair. “She likes to count out the silvers, don’t you, flower?”

“Yes, Pa.” The little girl untied the leather strings of the pouch and emptied the silver coins out into her father’s hand. “How many?” she asked.

“Six,” the man said.

“But we agreed on seven!”

“But we never touched hands. No touch, no deal,” the man growled.

“There. Six. Like my Pa said.” The little girl beamed at Ethon.

In the crowd someone sniggered.

Ethon took the silvers from the child’s hand and gave her the necklace.

Minnow pulled her father’s arm. “Home now?”

“Yes.” The man grinned. “But we’ll get a rabbit pie for you first, for your clever counting.”

Ethon watched as the pair melted into the forest of people, an immense tree of a man and his clever little sapling.

“At least you got six for it,” Fen said.

“And I got taken for a fool.”

“We just have to remember to touch on it. Traders are hard but fair, remember? On the whole, that is. Let me have a go.”

Fen gathered two handfuls of necklaces and held them high. “See these beads, the colour of the sky, the river, even the sea itself. Only for sale at Trade here today,” he shouted.

Ethon longed to see the sea in all its vast and glittering glory. The sea, according to Old Hareld, was deeper than the sky was high, and led to faraway lands. Ethon could feel the pull of its waves. “How do you know what colour the sea is?” he muttered.

“It doesn’t matter. This lot have never seen it, either,” Fen whispered as the crowd edged nearer. “We can say what we like!”

Two blonde girls stepped forwards, arms linked. The smaller one hid her face in her sister's shoulder as she held out her palm to show Fen a pile of coins.

"She's got seven silvers," the older girl said. "And she wants a necklace the colour of the sea."

Fen clasped the girl's hand before handing over the necklace. "No touch, no deal, however pretty you are," he said.

The older women in the crowd smiled as the girls giggled with delighted shock. Ethon reached into the basket and picked up two shimmering necklaces. Birda was right: everyone *did* want the green ones. And Trade, it seemed, could be fun.

"Sea beads," Ethon shouted. "Get your sea beads here!"

Chapter Six

A Pie and a Puppy

Ethon shook the bead basket, hardly able to believe what he was seeing.

“There’s only one left!”

Fen passed him the leather pouch that contained their earnings. “You’re the one for counting,” he said. “But it looks like there is plenty of silver in there for the Cold Coffe.”

With his back to Trader’s Green, Ethon sat down cross legged and poured the contents of the bag into his lap. He divided the little silver coins into piles of ten and soon discovered that Fen was right.

“Two hundred and thirty-one silvers.” Ethon sat back on his heels, hardly able to believe his good fortune. Old Hareld had explained to him how it worked: half a silver per person, per day and one hundred and fifty days of winter. Ethon had worked out in moments what it meant: for Pa and Birda and himself, they’d need to contribute two hundred and twenty-five silvers to the Cold Coffe to earn their share of Greenoak’s winter food supply. He’d always found counting easy but, as Ma Kilter had once told him, there was not much point being able to count silvers if you had none.

Now there was every point.

“We can do it – we can make our share – and there’s six left over!” Ethon yelled in delight.

“What about the Trade Maker’s cut?” Fen asked.

“We took the Hard Path, remember?” Ethon grinned. “No road, no reward!”

Fen flipped a stone into the air and caught it on the back of his hand. “So how are we going to celebrate your first Trade success?”

“*Our* success. And I know exactly how to celebrate.” Ethon picked up six silvers. “I’m going to see if that pie man’s still there.”

Leaving Fen to guard their haul, Ethon set off across the empty field.

It was hard to believe that just a short time ago Trader's Green had been packed with people shouting and selling, bartering and buying. There were still a few Traders striding about, shouting farewells as they heaved bundles onto their shoulders. Their outlines were as blurred and misty as the forest beyond. Above the sounds of goods thumping onto carts and the wail of a baby, Ethon heard a goat bleating. Trade was like Greenoak on Feast Day, only bigger, he thought – much bigger. Two men strode by, their white shirtsleeves standing out against the dark trees. They both had strange little pointed beards like the man who'd argued with Grody Hollowtree, Ethon noticed. They did not look like Traders, he thought, although he could not say why. Perhaps it was the way they held themselves so straight and looked so confident, as if they were in charge. And as if they feared no-one. The men disappeared across the Green and Ethon shivered. A sly evening chill crept into Ethon's worn boots, chilling his toes, but the silver coins felt warm in his hand. Ethon stopped and uncurled his fingers. The coins gleamed like drops of water. Suddenly aware of the silence around him, he looked round. His heart skittered. Suppose someone was watching? As he shoved his hands into his pockets, he heard a child's voice behind him.

"I'm lost." The small girl twisted her hair and smiled up at him. In the fading light, the beads she wore shone.

"Minnow." Ethon narrowed his eyes.

"You know my name. That means we're friends. Help me?" The child held out her hand but her eyes darted towards Ethon's pockets, and then towards the trees. In the shadows, Ethon saw a large man thudding a stick against his palm.

"Nice try. Go well, Minnow." Ethon gave her a gentle push. A pick-pocket, at barely five summers old. But she could hardly be blamed for her father's treacherous ways.

"Stay well, stranger!" Minnow giggled at her own cheek and ran off.

As Ethon reached the far edge of the Green a rich savoury scent filled his nostrils. There was the pie-stall, under the arms of a huge oak tree, its leaves already golden brown. The pie man was almost as burly as Minnow's father, but he had a cheerful expression and hummed as he counted the few remaining pies.

"How much are the they?" Ethon asked.

“They’re three silvers apiece,” said the pie man.

“Two please.” Ethon couldn’t contain his grin.

“Are you extra hungry? Or are you here with kin?” The pie man selected the two largest rabbit pies and held them out.

“Sort of,” Ethon replied.

The pie man chuckled. “Sort of hungry, or sort of here with your kin?”

Ethon took the pies and placed his coins on the man’s palm. “Both,” he said. “I’m here with Fen. He’s not my brother, but he feels like it. His Ma is like my own. Except her hair is the wrong colour. Well, not so much wrong, more different,” Ethon finished, suddenly muddled.

“Well, we can all use a spare Ma or two in this life,” the pie man said.

“Here – take these for this Ma with the wrong hair. And your own Ma, of course.”

“I can’t.”

“Take them, lad.” The pie man’s voice was kind. “Next time you come to Trade you can repay me with a trinket. I’ve heard those beads you’ve been selling are mighty popular. Almost as popular as my pies. Even the Starborn’s counting men seemed to like them, and they are used to only the very best. Unlike the rest of us.” He shrugged good-naturedly and crinkled his eyes in a smile as he gathered the remaining pies into the sack. He held the bundle out to Ethon.

“There’s one necklace left,” Ethon said. “I’ll go and fetch it, and gladly –”

“You keep it, lad.” The man’s tone was kind but firm.

Ethon rubbed his nose. His eyes prickled; perhaps it was smoke, drifting over from the last lazy fires that flickered across Trader’s Green.

“My name is Alder Greatbarn,” the pie man said after a moment. “A good name for someone my size, don’t you think?”

Ethon nodded. “I’m Ethon Larksong.”

“Well, Ethon Larksong, Trade’s over and I’m wanting home.” Alder Greatbarn pulled on his cloak. “Go well.”

“Stay well. And thank you.” But Ethon hesitated, a question nibbling his mind. “What are the Starborn’s men counting?” he said. “Are they the ones with the funny beards?”

“They are indeed – and they are counting everything, in every village across the land, or so I’ve heard. Pigs, ploughs, the lot. They want more silver, to pay for a great war. Some call it tax. Others call it robbery. I call it trouble.”

“What about the people who haven’t got any silvers left?”

Alder Greatbarn’s smile faded. “They starve.”

Ethon gulped. That would include almost every family in Greenoak. He must tell Old Hareld the moment he got back. He would know what to do.

Ethon strode away, keener than ever to get back to Fen and start their journey home. Trader’s Green was deserted so the sudden sound of sheep startled him. A little flock came trotting through the dusk. Were they lost? Ethon heard a harsh voice yelling orders and a shepherd boy came racing towards him, chasing a small dog. The dog’s fur was black but Ethon noticed that he had one golden-brown ear. His front paws, too, looked as if they had been dipped in honey. The puppy fled towards Ethon and cowered at his feet. Then, remembering his duty, he bounded towards the sheep. They ignored him.

“Useless creature!” The shepherd boy strode up and brought his crook down hard on the puppy’s flank. Cowering, the creature whimpered.

Ethon set his pie-sack down and raised his fists. “He’s only a puppy. Leave him alone!”

The shepherd boy swung round. “It’s my dog. I can do what I like with it.”

Ethon saw a trail of scars across the dog’s nose. “What’s your name, then?” he said, bending down to speak softly to the puppy. Its tail flickered with hope.

“It’s just a dog. Nobody gives a dog a name,” the shepherd boy sneered. “Nobody from round here, anyway.” A cunning smile slid over his spotty face. His upper lip was dark and his shoulders were broad.

He was older than most shepherd boys, Ethon realised.

Older and stronger.

The boy squared up to Ethon. “You’ve got no business telling me what to do with my dog, stranger.”

“And you’ve got no business beating a puppy,” Ethon replied. “Even your sheep think you’re stupid.”

In reply the older boy clouted him. Ethon staggered backwards as pain burst through his face.

“If you’re going to pick fights, stranger, you’d better learn *how* to fight,” the boy mocked.

“I’m always telling him that.” Fen strolled up and delivered a punch that sent the boy sprawling into a pile of steaming dung. The boy rubbed his elbow and swore.

Fen looked down at him. “Two against one isn’t fair. So I won’t hit you again.” As he stepped forwards, the Steadfast Stave in his hand, the older boy flinched. But Fen simply said, “Get up.”

Refusing Fen’s help, the boy clambered to his feet and wiped his filthy hands down his tunic. He picked up his crook and strode towards the dog.

“No,” Ethon said.

“And what are you going to do – buy him off me?” The boy laughed.

“I’ll swap him,” Ethon said.

“For what?”

“I’ll swap him for a pie,” Ethon said.

The shepherd boy put his hands on his hips. “Even that useless little runt is worth more than a pie. Is that all you’ve got?” His eyes slid towards the cart, which Fen was doing his best to shield.

Ethon grabbed the last necklace. He stood beside Fen shoulder to shoulder. “They’re sea beads,” he said, holding up the necklace so the last rays of light caught its blue-green beauty. “They are as rare as a true friend.”

“And they’re worth seven silvers,” Fen added.

The boy looked from Ethon to Fen. His eyes rested for a second on the muscles in Fen’s arms and the fierce resolve in Ethon’s eyes. He grabbed the puppy by its scruff and thrust him towards Ethon. “You’ve done me a favour, stranger.”

“No touch, no deal,” Ethon said, holding out his hand.

The boy hesitated then gripped Ethon’s hand. He snatched the necklace, marched over to his flock and poked the largest sheep with his crook. She set off, an indignant look in her eye, and the others followed. The sounds of bleating and cursing grew fainter until they were swallowed by the dark green trees.

“So now you’ve got another mouth to feed,” Fen said.

“I know.” Ethon stroked the dog’s head and smiled as his tail sprang into life. “But he’s just a puppy. He deserves kindness. And a name.”

“What about Fighter. Or Bruiser. Or maybe Sheep’s Wits?”

Ethon stroked the dog’s soft ear. The puppy licked Ethon’s hand and looked up at him with trusting brown eyes.

Ethon smiled. “We’re going to call him Chestnut.”

Already he could hear the questions that Birda would ask: *Where did you get him? What’s he called? Can I look after him? Can I please? Please? Please?*”

Fen plonked the bulging sack in the cart. “That’s a lot of pies for six silvers,” he said, looking impressed.

Ethon pulled a pie out, broke it in two and handed half to Fen. He scooped out some filling and let Chestnut lick it off his fingers. “Some of them were were a gift,” he told Fen in between mouthfuls. “We’ll get your Pa to warm them through in his fire tomorrow.”

“Burn them to cinders more like. Have you forgotten how hot a forge gets? You’re no blacksmith.” Fen shook his head as he sucked gravy from his fingers. “But you are a good Trader, Ethon. I reckon your Pa will be proud.”

Ethon tucked the pie-bundle into the cart beside their blankets. “I’m not sure my Pa knows much about pride,” he said, regretting the words as soon as they’d spilled out.

“I didn’t mean...”

“I know.”

The Silver Lady slid out from behind a heavy bank of clouds. In her gentle light, the path ahead shimmered. Ethon picked up Chestnut and hugged him close.

“Let’s go home,” he said.

They set off up the rocky hillside towards Low Wood. Far across the valley, a dog’s bark rang out, making Chestnut prick up his ears before falling back into sleep. Ethon and Fen made their plans as they walked, fuelled by pie and success: they would travel through the night, and stride in triumph through Greenoak at dawn – straight to the Round Room and the Cold Coffin. They would tell Old Hareld all about the counting men and Alder Greatbarn’s

warning. Fen agreed it could not wait. Then Ethon would fetch Pa and Birda, take them home and sleep till noon.

They took it in turns to push the cart and rest their aching arms and sore hands. But as night drew more darkly around them, they found it harder and harder to keep going. Ethon swore that he wasn't tired, but Fen saw his arms trembling and made a decision for both of them. "I'm tired, and I smell rain," he announced as they reached a small clearing edged with platter-bushes. "Let's shelter here. What will it matter if we arrive at noon instead of dawn? You'll still fill the Cold Coffin and that's all that matters." He pointed to a large platter-bush that lay just off the trail. "We'll sleep well under there. Those enormous great leaves will keep us dry."

Ethon lit their lamp while Fen emptied the cart, tipped it on its side and pulled their sacking over it to make a rough shelter.

"I didn't notice that on the way here." Ethon pointed to a strip of moss-green cloth that dangled from the low, spiky branch of a raven's wing tree.

"Those thorns are sharp enough to rip your skin off, never mind your tunic-sleeve. Like witches' fingers, my Pa says." Fen twisted his face into a hideous grin. "Come on," he said, scraping a hollow in the earth beneath the bush. Despite their uphill journey with the heavy cart, Fen's strength never seemed to falter – and nor did his good cheer. "We'll be as safe as mice in a nest in here," he said. "And so will the pies."

"If I were a blacksmith's son I'd be as strong as you." Ethon yawned.

"And if I was a Larksong I'd be as tall as you," Fen replied. "And then Hanny Claypotter and all the others would come giggling round me for a change. When their mothers aren't looking it's all *Oh, Ethon I've dropped my basket! Oh, Ethon, could you possibly reach that branch for me? Apart from Doe,*" he added. "She doesn't say much when you're around. She just blushes a lot. Isn't that a funny thing?"

"Lucky for you I'm tired or I'd fight you for that." Ethon blew out their lamp.

"And you'd lose, as usual."

“One day, I’ll have twice your strength.” Ethon burrowed into his blanket with Chestnut curled in his arms, and settled down to sleep. “I just need a few more pies.”

Chapter Seven

The Raven's Wing

The little light wasn't bright enough to have woken Ethon; there must have been a noise. In the black forest, every sound swelled like a bruise. Sitting up, he pushed aside the leathery leaves that concealed their sleeping place and saw the unmistakable flicker of lamplight.

Then he heard voices.

Checking that Chestnut was still fast asleep, Ethon crept from under the platter-bush and felt for a rock. There: palm-sized, heavy, a perfect weapon.

Two men stood under the light of a lamp which they'd hung on a branch of the raven's wing tree. One was a huge bear of a man, the other short with bandy legs. The smaller man's hair glistened like riverweed.

Grody Hollowtree.

Ethon's mouth grew dry.

Grody began to speak.

"This was a good place to meet. I like to conduct my business somewhere discreet. The forest is usually best, I find. And no-one dares come up this path. No-one except me and you, that is." Reaching up, Grody ripped the rag from the thorns and threw it away. "But all the same, it is best not to leave any tell-tale signs."

"Even I wouldn't risk going any nearer to the Black Cave," the bigger man chuckled, rubbing his arm. His back was turned so Ethon could not see his face. But he recognised that voice. Ethon listened harder. Was it Alder Greatbarn? He'd seemed kind, generous. Surely he was not the sort of man to be making deals with Grody Hollowtree on a dark path? Or was Ethon too easily fooled?

Then the big man spat.

"Pardon me," he said, just like the man who'd tricked Ethon.

Minnow's father. The biggest, most brutal man Ethon had ever come met.

"I'm glad that didn't land any closer." Grody's tone was icy.

“And I’m glad our business is almost done.” Minnow’s father said. “I want to get back to my little flower. She could trick those villagers almost as easily as you, and she’s only five summers old.”

“You’re teaching her well, Blackbull Crooklebait. Perhaps one day she’ll be a Trademaker. A *female* Trademaker.”

The men sniggered. Ethon heard the soft thump of a coin-pouch landing in Blackbull’s hand.

“Ah – easy money, my favourite kind.” The big man stuffed the bag inside his tunic and held out his hand to Grody.

“It’s what we agreed. And it is worth my while to pay you well.” A smile slid into Grody’s voice as they shook on the deal. “No-one would dare challenge me with a guard your size by my side. Not even the Starborn’s counting men, may the Fogger take them all. They think they’re better than everyone else – but they are nothing more than thieves.”

“Whereas *you* are clever,” Blackbull said, as if soothing a child.

“Clever? Hardly. My plan was perfectly simple,” Grody replied. “I told that fool Old Hareld I would charge the usual commission, one silver in every ten. Then I decided to charge three times that and forgot to mention it. What could be simpler? No, my friend, cheating the people of Greenoak is as easy as taking a kid from a goat.”

Ethon dropped the rock.

Chestnut whimpered.

“What was that?” Blackbull spun round.

Ethon tensed every muscle. *Keep still. Don’t breathe.* Behind him, Fen snorted in his sleep. Ethon’s empty hands turned from cold to frozen. Would Chestnut wake? Would they be discovered?

“Just a cave-fox. I’d recognise that grunting anywhere,” Grody said.

“I can’t smell one.” Blackbull sounded doubtful.

“You don’t want to. They’re revolting.” Grody shuddered. “Anyway, the sun will rise soon. We should go.” As he took the lamp down from the raven’s wing tree, its pale flame lit his wolfish face. Ethon gulped.

Grody paused. “One more thing, Crooklebait. Someone challenged me at The Showing in Greenoak. He is a poor excuse for a man – weaker than this

useless lamp.” Grody swore as the little flame disappeared. “But I intend to crush him anyway. Like a mist-fly beneath my boot. And I may need your help.”

“Excellent. I like the opportunity to use my fists.”

“The man – Edor something, his name is – has an unruly son.” Grody went on. “I’d like to teach that young fire-spark a proper lesson.”

Blackbull grunted. “Sounds like an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone!”

The men’s laughter rolled away down the path. Ethon’s heart hammered like Ironsong. All his instincts shouted, *run!* Somehow he found the strength to stay rooted to the spot and wait until the villains had gone. Still trembling, Ethon knew what he must do: find the moss-green cloth. On its own, it wasn’t exactly proof of Grody’s treacherous deal. But no-one in Greenoak had a tunic that colour. Would it persuade his neighbours to believe Pa? Even though he did – Ethon could face the truth now – behave like a mizzle-man?

A mizzle-man who’d been right about Grody Hollowtree.

A strange mixture of fury, pride and shame bubbled inside Ethon. He searched faster, scrabbling all around the tree, up and down the path. He winced as gravel and thorns pierced his fingers. Then he saw the green rag lying in a moonlit puddle. He wrung it out, stuffed it in his pocket and crawled back to their little camp. Chestnut wriggled forwards and sniffed Ethon’s tunic. He whined and started to shake. Ethon stroked his head and carried him back to their makeshift bed under the platter-bush. Wedging Chestnut between himself and Fen, he closed his eyes and tried to ignore the chirpy beginnings of the dawn chorus. But sleep would not come. No matter: the sooner they set off, the sooner they’d be home. And the sooner he could clear Pa’s name.

Ethon flung his blanket aside and went foraging for breakfast.

He found a patch of brambles heavy with juicy fire-berries and filled their flagon from a stream. His fingertips and palms stung so he went and sat on a log and rubbed the last of the axe-bright paste into them. It was cool and peaceful out here. In the treetops cliff-doves called sweetly from nest to nest. He imagined Doe holding his hand. What would that feel like? Using a piece of bark as a shallow bowl, Ethon filled it for Chestnut and sat for a moment, watching golden leaves floating towards the ground. They landed soundlessly. It was easy

to think in the cool peace of Low Wood. Easy to decide what to do. He would explain everything to Old Hareld and ask him to speak to the village. He would tell Pa he was right, and that he was sorry. *I won't let Grody Hollowtree hurt you*, he vowed.

Hearing Chestnut whine, Ethon hurried back. Fen was fast asleep still so Ethon tickled his face with a bit of grass. "Good dawnrise, my little barleycorn," he whispered.

"Fair morning, Ma," Fen murmured instinctively, before bolting upright and giving Ethon a great shove.

Once he'd finished laughing, Ethon offered Fen a handful of the biggest berries.

Fen shook his head. "They make my mouth go numb."

"Sorry. I thought it was only spiceberries you couldn't eat."

"And walnuts. And I'm really allergic to sorrel soup."

"Me too – it's disgusting!"

Chestnut's tail wagged as fast as a bee's wings as Ethon scooped out some rabbit pie filling for him and gave Fen the crust.

Breakfast over, they began the long march uphill. "You missed all the excitement," Ethon told Fen, filling him on the night's events.

"Grody Hollowtree was barely a horse's length away?" Fen couldn't believe he'd slept through the entire drama.

"Your snoring saved us."

"I don't snore. There must have been a cave-fox nearby after all," Fen said as they struggled through the undergrowth. "But the bit I don't understand is, how did your Pa find out Grody is a crook? Your Pa likes to... to take a stroll in Viper's Wood," Fen added carefully. "But Grody can't have been up there, surely? He arrived by the High Way. And that's nowhere near – it cuts between Low Wood and Cropper's Meadow, on the other side of the village." Fen frowned, trying to puzzle it out.

"I don't know." Ethon spoke slowly as he too tried to piece together the day of the Showing. "Pa spoke of a great darkness. And then he told everyone not to trust Grody. He said he heard something in the forest. Perhaps he was in Low Wood that night? I just assumed... because that's where it grows, up in

Viper's Wood... I thought it was just the heart's ease talking. But perhaps he didn't take it."

He could admit it to Fen.

"I'm always blaming Mead for things he hasn't done," Fen said loyally. "Anyway, no-one in Greenoak can afford to lose a single silver. Once they find out the truth, they'll all be thanking your pa, not calling him names. Well, all except one." He grabbed the cloth from the cart, tucked it into his belt and flounced up the path in a wickedly accurate imitation of Ma Kilter. "I'm so important. I make the Offering every day, you know. I go after dark so I don't frighten Soursigh with my horrible scowl!"

The journey back passed quickly even though going uphill, with the extra weight of Chestnut, was exhausting. When at last they turned a corner and Ethon saw the great hunched shoulder of the Black Cave, his relief at finding level ground almost made him forget to be afraid.

But Chestnut woke, sat upright and whined.

"It's only an old cave." Ethon tried to forget the fact that even Blackbull Crooklebait wouldn't venture near it.

A pile of leaves skittered as a cold rush of wind swept the forest floor. And then –

CRACK!

The air burst as a mass of torn wood thundered to the ground. As the huge branch landed, the forest shuddered. Claws and paws hopped and scabbled through the ferns as hidden creatures raced to safety. With his ears flat and his tail curled under, Chestnut jumped from the cart and raced howling into the black mouth of the cave.

"No! Chestnut, come back!" Ethon yelled.

"We promised we wouldn't go in," Fen grabbed Ethon's arm.

"But we can't leave him." Ethon shook him off.

"Wait, Ethon – we'll need light." Fen was already sparking stones to make fire. But their empty lamp refused to light.

Ethon grabbed a stick from the forest floor, yanked the green rag from his pocket and wound it around one end. There: a torch! He smeared it with pie-fat and held it against Fen's flame. The rag sprang into fiery life.

They sprinted into the Black Cave.

“Old Hareld loves to tell a good story. I bet there’s nothing here but darkness.” Ethon’s voice sounded as thin as mouse-breath beneath the cave’s endless roof.

“But what about the falling branch? And that scream yesterday?” Fen shuddered.

“That was just a mother goat, pining for its young,” said Ethon firmly. “Pa calls it goat-song. He says it’s the saddest sound there is.”

“And the loudest, if yesterday was anything to go by,” said Fen, clearly unconvinced by the theory.

As they tiptoed deeper into the cave, Ethon strained his ears to catch the sound of Chestnut whimpering.

Nothing.

Suddenly the torch flared, lighting up the dark walls. And there, staring down at them with angry eyes and teeth like giant knives, was Soursigh. Ethon and Fen crept backwards, afraid to look, afraid even to breathe as they waited for the howl, the slicing, the end.

Their torch hissed and writhed under the dripping rock.

Realising he was still alive, Ethon peered over his arms. The great serpent’s chalky eye gazed ahead.

“It can’t see us,” Ethon whispered.

“It can’t see us because it’s not *real*.” Fen was one step ahead.

Ethon reached out his hand and touched the clammy wall. Dark red dust stained his fingers as he traced the lines of the monster’s belly. He could see every scale, every muscle, even the curves of waves. Whoever had drawn it was blessed with an incredible imagination... or they had seen Soursigh for real.

Ethon backed away.

“Let’s find Chestnut before the torch burns out,” Fen whispered.

As if persuaded by Fen’s good sense, Chestnut crept out of the shadows, shaking from nose to tail. Being alone in the dark belly of a cave was far scarier than the earth-breaking noise that had propelled him inside. It was time to come out, even if that meant a beating.

Ethon scooped Chestnut into his arms.

“By the light of the Silver Lady, you’re safe. Let’s take you home. There’s somebody there who’ll probably cuddle you to death. But at least there are no monsters.”

It was almost noon by the time they reached the Bear’s Head. There was a sharp breeze and the usual Greenoak sounds drifted from the village ahead: chickens squawking, children squabbling and clothes flapping as they dried in the wind. As they reached Doe’s cottage Ethon’s heart started to gallop. Would she come out to see him? But when he paused at the gate, the shutters banged shut. Ethon jumped.

“I expect her ma saw you first,” Fen said.

Ethon tried to believe it.

Ahead, they saw a group of men striding towards the Round Room and disappearing inside. Ethon recognised Pa Willow the weaver with his blond curly hair. Hanny Claypotter’s father was easy to spot, too, with his ginger beard and his big nose. And there, at the front, was the mountainous outline of Big Fen Ironturner. Suddenly, Ethon wanted, fiercely, to see his own Pa. Pa who knew even more stories than old Hareld and could sing like a forest of doves. Pa who without the eagle’s shadow, was gentle and wise and calm. Broken, but beloved.

But I am whole, Ethon told himself.

I am whole enough for all of us.

And I am very nearly home.

As they reached the forge, Fen’s mother rushed out, red-eyed and agitated. She grabbed Fen’s arm and, before he could protest – before Ethon could even say goodbye – she pushed him through the door. Trembling, she whispered to Ethon. “I couldn’t stop them. I’m sorry. Go home to your family.” Pointing towards Viper’s Wood, she burst into sobs and fled inside.

Ethon raced through the village, his head pounding with rage and worry. Ma Ironturner had promised to look after Birda and Pa. How could she let him down? Who had she been unable to stop – Pa, deciding to leave and taking Birda with him? Or someone coming to take them away? The bag of silvers rattled in

the cart as Ethon ran, the sound as cold as knives. Panic rose in his chest. Were Pa and Birda *hurt*? He should never have left them!

Ethon belted past Ma Kilter's place and, ahead, he saw that Ma Willow's door was open. Ethon could see the curved outline of her belly as she tended the cooking-pot. Her baby would come soon, but she worked as hard as ever. He could hear her singing. Ma Willow was young, only eighteen summers, but she'd grown up caring for her little brothers and sisters. She wouldn't hesitate to help Birda and Pa. But as Ethon called out a greeting, the door slammed shut.

Ethon marched up the track towards home, quivering with shock and hurt.

"I'm back!" he called as he reached their cottage.

The leather hinges of their door creaked in familiar welcome as Ethon pushed the cart and its precious cargo inside. His palms grew cold. What would he find?

Birda, curled in Pa's blanket on her mattress.

And an empty space where Pa should have been.

Ethon pulled Birda into his arms. "I'm here now, little barleycorn. Everything will be all right."

Birda buried her face in her arms. "Can't talk."

"We can talk later. Maybe after some food. Look." He held out a pie.

"No!" Birda started to sob.

Chestnut jumped down from the cart and, avoiding Poppety, who was propped on Birda's fire-stool looking smug, he padded towards Birda. As Birda's fingers crept over his soft head, he nuzzled her hand. She drew a deep breath and found words. "It's not me. It's everybody else. They can't talk to us. It's forbidden."

"But why?"

Birda lifted her head. Her eyes were dark with fear. "It's Pa," she said. "He's in the dungeon."

The wind blew open the door and there, in the shadow of Viper's Wood, was Criminal Hill. The dungeon, with its black walls and thin pointed roof, sat on top of the hill. It was a gloomy landmark so familiar that Ethon rarely noticed it. Occasionally prisoners' cries echoed in the trees but, on the whole, the dungeon

was eerily silent. Now, the thought of that silent darkness made Ethon tremble. If Pa had been accused of a crime, that would explain why no-one on Greenoak would speak to them: it was the rule... but only for serious crimes.

“What happened?” he asked Birda gently.

Settled in Ethon’s lap, Birda told him everything: how men dressed in purple had kicked open the Ironturner’s door, making Seth bawl with fright. Big Fen had been out in the forest, gathering wood for the forge fire. Ma Ironturner, without even the Steadfast Stave to defend herself and her children, had brandished a cooking pot at them and yelled words Birda had never heard her use before. But the men simply shoved her aside, pointed at Pa and hauled him outside. When Birda kicked one of them, he threw her to the ground. Birda held up her arms to show Ethon her bruised and bloodied elbows and the cuts on her palms. Ethon flushed with anger and, worse, guilt: why hadn’t he been there to protect them?

“It only hurts a bit,” Birda said, patting Ethon’s face.

When Mead yelled at the men to stop, she went on, they’d slapped him. And then realising that Birda was Pa’s daughter, they’d ordered Ma Ironturner to throw her out. They marched Pa away, yelling the Forbidding rule at everyone they saw. But the worst thing, the very worst thing, Birda whispered, was Pa calling out her name as they dragged him to through the village.

“They made him cry,” she sobbed.

Ethon’s chest felt as if it might burst. Trying to soothe himself, he rocked Birda until both her breath and his own had calmed. He set Birda down, hung the pie-sack on the hook by the door and tied the bag of silver onto his belt. Then he lifted Birda into his arms. Chestnut bounded to the door. Clearly, wherever they were going, he was coming too.

“Good boy,” Ethon told him. “We need all the friends we can get.”

They set off for Criminal Hill.

Chapter Eight

Scaremonger

Criminal Hill was a lonely place. The grassy slope was steep and the steps that led to the big dark door of the gaol were slippery. By the time Ethon reached for the ring of rusted iron and knocked on the door, his legs were shaking. The knocker made a hollow sound like a wooden bucket hitting the inside of a well. Chestnut flinched. Then, with Birda at his side, he pattered from step to step, nose down and tail wagging as he explored a whole world of new scents.

Ethon stood very still and waited.

Someone on the other side turned a key. The door opened, but only blackness showed within.

"We're here to see Edor Larksong," said Ethon.

"I want to see my p-p-Pa." Birda's voice shook.

The door swung further, revealing weak candlelight and dripping stone walls.

"You've brought a little girl to a place like this? Shame on you," a voice tutted.

Chestnut, overwhelmed by the trail he'd found, shot inside.

"By the Silver Lady! Children, dogs – anyone want to bring in a couple of sheep while they're at it?"

A chubby man with a bald pink head beckoned them in. His long black robe swished. Around his neck, a key-chain clanked like an ogre's necklace and, wedged in his belt, his dagger glinted.

Birda's eyes grew as round as wheels.

"Good noonday." Lor Rattlebone smiled down at her. "You won't have seen me in my uniform before, Birda. It does look rather unfriendly. Still, I suppose that is the idea."

"Fair noonday, Pa Rattlebone," Ethon replied for them both. "Can we see Pa now, please?"

Chestnut sniffed the wooden ladder that led to a trapdoor in the ceiling. From the space above, wild voices, banging fists and stamping feet swelled into a gathering storm of sound. With each crash, the candles that sat in a gloomy line along one wall shuddered.

“You can’t come up,” Ethon told Birda as he walked towards the ladder. “It’s too dangerous. Chestnut will keep you company and I’ll be quick, I promise.”

“No, Ethon,” Pa Rattlebone said.

“But I must see him!”

“No – your Pa is down there.” The gaoler pointed to the far corner where a tiny stone staircase led down into darkness. Iron bars criss-crossed the opening.

“Petty criminals go up. Serious cases like scaremongering go down,” Pa Rattlebone said, his expression solemn. “Your Pa’s Trial will take place under Ironsong here in the village within ten dawns. The court at Mulberry Manor is too busy with other matters. The Starborn’s counting men have, it seems, upset rather a lot of lords in these parts and they all want their cases heard. A message will be sent. You must be ready, Ethon, night and day.”

“But that word... scare-ming... scarer-ing... what does it mean?” Birda asked.

“Scaremongering is when someone deliberately tries to make other people afraid, by telling lies or spreading rumours,” Pa Rattlebone explained.

Birda jumped as the shutters of the only window banged in the wind.

The gaoler secured the latch. He sat down on his fire-stool and lifted Birda onto his lap. “No-one will hurt you here,” he said, frowning as he noticed the dried blood on her arms.

“Why do people think Pa’s been scare... scaring... telling lies?” Birda sneezed as Pa Rattlebone’s beard tickled her face.

Ethon and the gaoler exchanged a look over Birda’s head as they recalled the scene at The Showing: Pa, pointing at the Trademaker and pleading with everyone not to trust him.

“Sometimes people misunderstand things.” Ethon chose his words carefully.

“So they’re wrong about Pa!” Birda squeaked.

“Yes,” said Ethon firmly. “But I don’t know how we’re going to prove it.”

“Have you got any evidence?” Pa Rattlebone asked.

I did have. But I burned it, Ethon thought miserably.

He shook his head.

“What’s evidence?” said Birda.

“Your Pa will explain everything,” Pa Rattlebone said, sliding Birda off his lap and selecting the largest key from his chain. He unlocked the grille in the floor. As the metal creaked, the noise from above stilled. A rough voice bellowed, “Scaremonger!”

Ethon flinched and Birda covered her ears to block out the jeers and shouts that followed. The gaoler ruffled Birda’s hair. “Ignore them. Brawlers and drunkards the lot of them. Couldn’t tell a scaremonger from a scarecrow.”

Pa Rattlebone handed Ethon a candle in an iron holder. “Normally I’d check you for knives, ropes that sort of thing,” he said. “You’d be amazed at what people try to smuggle in when they’re desperate. Which everyone is by the time they walk up Criminal Hill, of course. But you’re very young,” he said.

“I’ve got *seven summers*,” Birda informed him.

The gaoler’s chin wobbled. He pulled a whistle out of his pocket. It was black and shiny, carved from the thorn of a raven’s wing tree.

“You have until I blow this, lad,” he told Ethon. “Use your time well.”

Taking Birda’s hand, Ethon led the way down the narrow stone stairs. The dungeon smelled yeasty and sour, like damp straw. It was almost as dark as the Black Cave. As his eyes adjusted, Ethon saw hundreds of tiny marks scratched into the walls. They spoke of long hours spent here, facing monsters of a very different kind.

Pa sat huddled in a corner clutching his stone pendant.

“Pa — are you alright?” Ethon crouched beside him.

Birda and Chestnut snuggled into Pa’s side.

“All is well. Lor Rattlebone has been kind to me,” Pa said.

But Pa was in prison. And he was facing a Trial! The whole jumble of words and worry, so tightly packed inside Ethon’s chest, spilled out.

“It’s all true, that Trademaker is a crook, you were right, I heard him in the night, on the Hard Path, plotting with a big thug called Blackbull Crooklebit. He’s going to cheat the whole of Greenoak. But how did you know he was bad, Pa? The village should have trusted you. I should have believed you. You’re not a scaremonger!”

Pa wrapped his arm around Ethon’s trembling shoulders. “Do not worry, son. It is hard, sometimes, to recognise the truth, even for grown men and women. But the Castleborn will hear my Accuser. Then he’ll hear me. He is a fair man and he will judge wisely.” It was a long speech for Pa nowadays.

My Accuser.

“Who was it, Pa?” The answer rang in Ethon’s ears even as he spoke. The Trademaker’s words marched back into his head: *Someone challenged me at The Showing in Greenoak... a poor excuse for a man... but I intend to crush him, anyway. Like a mist-fly beneath my boot.*

“It was Grody Hollowtree, wasn’t it?” Ethon felt anger rush through his veins. Violence was wrong, he knew. How many times had Old Hareld told him so? But so was lying and cheating and bullying –

“No,” said Pa.

“Then who?” Birda was listening hard.

Pa’s voice dropped to a whisper. Ethon heard odd words... herbs... healer... Fevermint.

“Ma Fevermint?” Ethon could not believe it. She might despise Pa, but surely not enough to want to destroy him – and his children?

“No, Ethon. It was Doe.”

Ethon sat back on his heels. “I don’t believe it.”

“The Castle Guards told me. It is true.”

From the foot of the stairs, Pa Rattlebone gasped. “Never! That is ... I mean ... I just came down to see if you were finished.” His face shone with concern. “Doe’s a kind girl. She gives me axe-bright ointment. I have a little spare, as it happens.” He gave a small clay jar to Birda and mimed rubbing his elbows.

“Thank you.” Ethon flushed at this unexpected kindness.

“Maybe Doe’s mother is desperate for silver,” the gaoler went on. “Most of us are, especially with the rumours of the Starborn and his counting men coming to take what little we’ve got left... anyone could fall prey to an offer... a bribe, say. Hunger, or even the fear of it, makes people behave differently.”

“No. There’s been a mistake,” Ethon said firmly.

“You’re right of course — a mistake.” The gaoler’s keys clinked as he clasped his hands.

“We must go. I have to find out what’s happened.” Ethon took Pa’s hand.

Birda burrowed further into Pa’s embrace. “No.”

“You cannot stay here, little barleycorn,” Pa whispered.

“When we get home you can practise looking after Chestnut. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Ethon said gently.

Chestnut licked Birda’s face and she smiled a wobbly smile. But still she refused to let go.

“Oh — I forgot to blow my whistle!” Pa Rattlebone exclaimed. “I’ll get into trouble if anyone finds out. Birda, will you do it for me?”

Birda released her hold on Pa and kissed his cheek. Instructing Ethon to cover Chestnut’s ears, she blew a single pure note on the raven’s wood whistle.

Before Ethon could thank him, Pa Rattlebone led the way up the stairs.

Visiting time was over.

Six days came and went. Ethon longed to see Pa again, and he longed to talk to Fen. But no-one could risk breaking the Forbidding rule, unless they wanted to find themselves in prison too. Making contact with Fen would put the whole Ironturner family at risk. And Ethon could not ask Old Hareld’s advice. As the villager elder, Old Hareld’s duty was to uphold the rules. He of all people could not be seen to break them. There was nothing to do but wait for a message about when Pa’s Trial would be held, and that would depend on the whim of the Castleborn, Lord of Mulberry Manor. Smoothing axe-bright onto Birda’s grazes, Ethon tried to picture the Castleborn. Old Hareld said his forebears were too trusting and had made bad decisions that bound them all, but Pa said he was

wise. Fen said he wore clothes as bright as rainbows. Perhaps he was vain and frivolous. But why then would he order the swords and shields that Big Fen Ironturner had delivered to Mulberry Manor? Whatever sort of man he was, the Castleborn would decide Pa's fate.

Ethon counted and re-counted their silvers, trying to focus on the one good thing: they would not starve this winter. He hollowed out a special hiding place for the silver-bag in the earth floor, beneath Birda's fire-stool. He imagined presenting it to Old Hareld and listening as their contribution to the Cold Coffin was announced to the village. He felt a sense of astonished pride. But he would trade that feeling, and every silver they had, for Pa to be free. Pa who sat in the dark, locked up in chains.

It started to rain.

Their tiny cottage felt like a prison and, as each day passed, Ethon found it harder and harder not to think about Doe. Doubts nibbled the edges of his mind like evil mice. Perhaps Pa Rattlebone was right: Doe and her mother were so desperate for silver that they'd accepted a bribe to accuse Pa. But Doe was his friend. She *liked* him – Ethon refused to admit it when Fen teased him, but they both knew it was true. She had even given him axe-bright, and even a silver! How could he doubt her? He pictured Doe's sweet face and felt both better and worse. Some of Old Hareld's best fireside stories involved beautiful girls – beautiful, wicked girls. Ethon remembered a night not long ago, the Round Room flickering with light, the whole village sitting spellbound as Old Hareld told the tale of the Proud Daughters. One was dark and one was fair, and they were each so jealous of the other's beauty that they began to hate one another. When a new daughter was born, and grew up to be even more beautiful, they found some common ground: making their younger sister keep her hair as short as the width of her thumb, so that she could never outshine them. She was a quiet girl who devoted herself to caring for sick animals. Her skin became rough and her beauty faded, but the Proud Daughters did not notice. They spent so much time tending to their own long, luxurious hair that they also failed to notice when their little sister grew ill. When she died, they were secretly heartbroken, but each blamed the other. Their sorrow turned to anger and they fought like cats, ripping out each other's hair. It never grew back and they both

died of guilt soon afterwards. "And that," Old Hareld would finish, gazing round at the fire-lit faces, "Is why cats howl in the night. They cannot forget."

Now, when Birda pleaded for her nightly story, Ethon hid all their story beads except the safest ones. If Birda was surprised to find that she'd picked the story of the Smallest Squirrel three nights in a row, she was too tired from playing all day with Chestnut to question it. Poppety, Ethon noticed, had been banished in favour of Birda's new, warm and adoring friend. He was glad.

By the sixth day, Ethon thought he would go mad. Then, miraculously, the skies cleared and the rain stopped. Ethon ran outside, making Birda promise to stay close to the cottage. He sprinted up to the tarn that lay in a hollow behind their cottage. Skimming stones without Fen would not be much fun, but being outside with the sharp scent of pine trees and the crisp autumn wind made him feel a little better. Each leap of the skimming stone, Ethon decided, would bring Pa a step closer to being home again. He skimmed furiously until his shoulder and wrist ached so much he could barely grip a pebble.

Birda had to pour the water that night.

The seventh day began with thunder and became the wettest and darkest yet, with rumbling clouds and a shrill wind. Chestnut hid under Birda's fire-stool while she stamped about. "I want Pa," she shouted. "I want him now! And I'm hungry." She flopped down, exhausted, and fished Poppety out from solitary confinement under her mattress. "Poppety is very sad."

"I know," said Ethon gently, trying to ignore his own hollow stomach and the doll's triumphant expression. "I want to see Pa too. But we have to wait until his Trial is announced. Then everyone will be allowed to talk to us again and we can find out how to help him."

There was a hammering on the door. Ethon pushed Birda behind him. "Stay back," he whispered. Birda shrank down onto her mattress and Chestnut scrambled to join her. Ethon shoved back his shoulders and made himself walk towards the door. Suppose it was the Castle Guards, come to drag him away too: he'd never be able to protect Birda against them. But they would hardly be polite enough to knock, would they? Ethon yanked the door open and his heart leapt when he saw Fen.

“Hello, stranger.” Fen’s voice was light but his eyes were filled with concern.

“It’s you – come in!” Ethon said, unable to resist flinging his arms around Fen. They bundled inside. Fen shared out a gift of bread that Ethon and Birda gobbled like wolves. He told them how, ever since the Castle Guards came, his ma had been too upset to eat. Ma Fevermint tried to calm her with a special potion but it was baby Seth who’d eventually lifted her spirits by saying his first word. Annoyingly it was *Pa* rather than *Ma* but it had distracted her. Now she was busier than ever, trying to stop Mead teaching Seth rude words.

Ethon smiled for the first time in days.

Then he told Fen everything.

Fen could not believe it. “But Doe likes you. I mean, *really* likes you. She would never hurt your Pa. It can’t be true,” he said.

“My Pa is not a liar!” Ethon thumped the floor with both hands.

Fen held up his hands. “I just meant that it makes no sense.”

“Sorry,” Ethon muttered.

Fen rolled a scrap of lamb’s wool into a ball and flicked it at Ethon.

“Apology accepted.” He thought for a moment then went on, “Ma Fevermint is strict. And she’s scary. But she looks after Seth when Ma’s busy spinning. Ma trusts her.”

Ethon recalled something Pa Rattlebone had said in gaol. *Hunger, or even the fear of it, makes people behave differently.* Ethon pressed his hands to his belly, which was hollow as always. Birda’s eyes had dark smudges beneath them and she looked more fragile than ever. What would he do to feed her and Pa? What would Doe’s mother do for her?

“When is my Pa’s Trial?” Birda asked in a small voice.

Fen took Birda’s hands and, when he spoke, Ethon felt as if he’d been punched in the stomach.

“It’s tomorrow,” said Fen.

Chapter Ten

The Fire of Truth

The Trial preparations began at dawn. Even from their home on the very edge of the village, Ethon could hear the familiar chanting work song of men as they hauled wooden benches into the Round. Pa's Trial would take place at noon under the bell tower, Ironsong. The sky was heavy with rainclouds but, even if it snowed, the whole village must attend; that was the tradition. As Ethon and Birda arrived, Big Fen Ironturner was dragging into place two iron stands, a low one for the Prisoner and a high one for the Accuser. The criminal must never be able to see eye-to-eye with the honest person. That was tradition, too. Big Fen nodded at Ethon, his face dark. Ethon knew how angry he must be. His children and their mother had been threatened and terrified in their own home, while he was not there to defend them – a feeling Ethon could understand only too well. And it was all Pa's fault. Could any friendship recover from that?

A group of women had gathered outside the Round Room and there in the centre was Ma Ironturner. Ethon laid his hand on Birda's shoulder and hesitated. But Ma Ironturner met Ethon's eyes calmly and opened her arms to Birda. Chestnut charmed everyone with his wagging and bounding. Even Mead Ironturner, who'd been standing awkwardly to the side of the crowd, knelt to pet him. Ethon smiled his thanks to Ma Ironturner and pushed open the Round Room's huge oak door, hoping to find Old Hareld. There was so much to tell: about Grody Hollowtree's treachery, Pa's innocence, the threat from the Starborn's counting men. But not about the Black Cave and the extraordinary vision of Soursigh; he and Fen had agreed that would remain a secret. After all, they had promised Old Hareld faithfully not to enter the cave. The small, furry reason for breaking that promise would not, they suspected, hold much sway with the Elder of Greenoak

Ethon patted the bag of silver wedged inside his tunic as he waited. He must make sure it was stored safely in the Cold Coffin. Only Old Hareld could be trusted with it and only Old Hareld had the key.

The old man hurried in. "Ethon! I have been so worried about you and Birda." He gripped Ethon's arms, staring into his face with grave eyes. "The Castleborn is wise. He will set your Pa free. You must hold fast to that belief."

Before Ethon could reply, the door flew open and an oily voice slithered into the Round Room. Grody Hollowtree stood in the doorway hugging a bulging leather bag. "Is it time for the show yet?"

"What are you doing here?" Ethon tightened his fists.

"That is a rough welcome. But what can you expect from the son of a scaremonger. A mizzle-man too, I believe?" Grody drawled. "I thought perhaps your neighbours would like their Trade earnings. That is the usual arrangement, after all."

Old Hareld stood very still and the atmosphere changed. "The bag looks smaller than usual," he observed. His tone was neutral but his eyes, despite their seventy summers, held a challenge.

Grody simply smirked. The old man was no match for him and they both knew it.

Ethon opened his mouth but before he could speak, Old Hareld gripped his arm.

"Something you wanted to say, boy?" Grody's smile was gone. His eyes glinted. It was almost as if he was inviting Ethon to show his anger with his fists.

Furious at his powerlessness, Ethon bowed his head.

Old Hareld took the bag from Grody. "I see you are here alone. Perhaps your guard is unwell, like Tally Silverkin?" he said, his voice icy.

"Crooklebait unwell?" Grody said, ignoring Old Hareld's tone. "Not at all – he said that a Trial was no place for his child and refused to come any further than Mulberry Manor! He dotes on that girl," Grody said. "But his first loyalty should be to me. He will pay for it," he added ominously.

"You cannot blame him for putting his child's welfare first," Old Hareld said.

"I can – and I will," Grody replied. "Now hurry up!"

As Old Hareld unlocked the lid of the heavy oak Cold Coffer, its hinges squealed like hungry hogs. Ethon knew he could not reveal his own bag of silver with Grody Hollowtree standing right there, so he had to watch while Old Hareld locked the Trade silver away. "Our business is concluded. You do not need to stay any longer," Old Hareld told Grody.

"Oh, but I must," Grody replied. "I want to see that wretched criminal receive the punishment he is due. I hear that a young girl called... what was it now... Doe Feverleaf? is the Accuser. I am sure she will do very well. So young. So innocent. So *believable*." He turned to Ethon. "And I am equally sure that your pitiful excuse for a father will suffer greatly for his crime." Grody licked his lips as if contemplating a feast.

Anger and fear exploded in Ethon's head but, before he could bunch his fists again, Old Hareld, with surprising strength, dragged him outside. "If you hit Grody Hollowtree, you'll be on Trial, too. Violence is not the way."

Ethon burst free. "I won't let anyone speak about Pa like that."

"Stop shouting," Old Hareld hissed. "There are Castle Guards everywhere. Look — they are lining up. The Castleborn is about to arrive."

The Round was transformed. The great oak chair which usually sat at the head of the Trading Table now stood in front of Ironsong, in the centre of the village. A goatskin canopy edged with red fringing arched over it, ensuring the Castleborn's comfort, since the fat grey clouds would soon burst.

The Castle Guards stood to one side in two neat lines. They wore leather tabards, shiny as conkers, over their purple tunics. Each man held a long wooden pole with a purple streamer tied to the top. Almost like a celebration, Ethon thought bitterly as he slid onto the front bench. Fen, racing across the Round, joined him. At the far end, Ma Fevermint sat, head bowed, a little apart from her neighbours. Ethon twisted round to check that Birda was still safe with Ma Ironturner. Birda would see and hear everything; that could not be avoided. Only babes-in-arms were too young to learn right from wrong. With baby Seth already in residence, there wasn't room on Ma Ironturner's lap for Birda, but she was tucked beside her, tight and safe as a nut. Chestnut dozed at Birda's feet, stirring only when one of Poppety's dangling legs ticked his fur.

Ethon dragged his eyes back to the scene in front of him. There on the High Stand was Doe. Ethon stared, willing her to meet his eyes, but Doe gazed ahead, her body rigid. The wind had dropped and the sun was stronger now. In the fresh early autumn light, Doe's hair shone like polished copper.

Ethon heard Ma Kilter's sly voice. "Pretty as a star-flower. The perfect witness."

"Someone forced her," Ethon replied sharply.

Ma Kilter snorted. "That wouldn't be hard. Look at her, practically fainting with fear. A lily-maid if ever I saw one."

Fingers of doubt squeezed Ethon's heart. Could someone as gentle as Doe be strong too?

"Rise for your Castleborn!" shouted the Head Guard.

As everyone stood, the Guards made an arch with their staffs. A man with springy fair hair and a billowing purple cloak jumped down from his horse and strode through the tunnel of men. Ma Kilter jumped from the bench and rushed forwards. She simpered by the Castleborn's side as he unfastened his cloak. Her face shone with pride as the Castleborn let the heavy cloak fall into her waiting arms. Her mouth dropped open as she saw the tunic he wore. Ethon stared too. It was richly decorated in colours brighter than summer flowers. Silver stitching in extravagant loops and curls shone like water. It was as if a magnificent, magical bird had landed right here in the middle of Greenoak.

"Stop gawping and be off, woman." The Head Guard snatched the cloak away from Ma Kilter. "The cloak of the Castleborn is not for your hands."

Scowling, Ma Kilter scuttled back to the benches.

Pa Claypotter tutted and Ethon heard him say, "That's no way to treat a good woman who's only trying to be of service."

Ma Kilter's angry eyes softened. "Thank you, Hewer."

Pa Claypotter stroked his moustache and nodded.

As the sun lit the iron bell, signalling noon, the Head Guard dropped to one knee in front of the Castleborn and held out a slender wooden box. Its lid was encrusted with glittering red and blue stones and its silver clasp was carved into the shape of strange, winged beast. The Castleborn opened it and took out a slim silver music-pipe. The Head Guard rose, held the pipe to his lips and started

to play the Trial Tune. The melody dripped into Ethon's head, each note as cold as winter water. His heart raced. Even with Fen by his side, he felt lonely.

The Castleborn held up his hand and the Head Guard stopped playing. "It is time," the Castleborn said. "Bring the Prisoner."

Lor Rattlebone led Pa forwards. His son Larken, also dressed in gaoler's robes, was on Pa's other side, holding his arm. Larken caught Ethon's eye and looked away, embarrassment flooding his face. With his ankles shackled, Pa could barely shuffle, let alone escape. Ethon leaned forward to see Pa's face, but his father's wild hair obscured it. His ankles, after the long walk here from Criminal Hill, were rubbed raw. Ethon's heart ached.

The jewel on the Castleborn's little finger sparkled like green ice as he stroked his beard. His chief adviser stood beside him under the fringed canopy, a black whip in his hand, staring at Pa with contempt. With his hair hanging over his face and his hands as busy as a weaver's, Pa was a pitiable sight. He looked broken. And that was after just seven nights in the dungeon. Ethon felt sick. He rolled his shoulders, uncomfortably hot. All around him, wooden benches crammed with men, women and children creaked like branches about to snap. Grody Hollowtree watched from the comfort of his cart, swigging oak-ale. He tipped his head towards the High Stand where Doe stood, and raised his pewter tankard to Ethon.

"Ignore him —" Fen began, but his words were crushed by a sharp sound as the Castleborn's adviser cracked his whip.

"Thank you," the noble man said. "We will begin with the Accuser. Your name is Doe Fevermint?"

"Yes, sir." Doe gripped the rail with both hands. Her knuckles looked like rows of white beads.

"Speak up!"

"Yes, sir." Her voice was barely any louder the second time.

"The charges are as follows," the Castleborn continued. "You heard the Prisoner say, in a public place, that the Trademaker named Grody Hollowtree is untrustworthy. Is this true?"

Doe bit her lip and nodded.

“Trust lies at the very heart of Trading,” The Castleborn continued.

“Without it, the whole system fails. That is why this charge of scaremongering is so serious. Do you understand that?”

Doe nodded again.

“The punishment is equally serious. If convicted, the Prisoner will go to gaol for many seasons. Do you understand that, too?”

Doe nodded once more. Although she was still holding tight, she started to sway.

“Hold on, Doe!” Ma Fevermint jumped from her seat. Pressing both hands to her chest she gulped back a sob. “Hold on, my little barleycorn.”

“Silence!” Sharplight cracked his whip again.

Doe snapped upright. As if shocked out of a dream, she looked straight at Ethon and her lips moved.

I’m sorry.

Ethon’s heart pounded. What was Doe sorry for — obeying her mother, accepting a bribe, betraying Pa?

“Tell us exactly what you saw and heard,” the Castleborn ordered.

“It was at The Showing,” Doe began. “Our usual Trademaker, Tally Silverkin, did not come. Instead, a stranger called Grody Hollowtree did. He was just starting to look at everybody’s wares when Pa Larksong burst in.”

“And why was Pa Larksong not there already? Is he not head of his household?” The Castleborn frowned.

“He was... delayed, I think,” Doe said. She fiddled with her plait.

“Go on,” said the Castleborn. “And remember, you must tell the whole truth.”

“Pa Larksong rushed in and said – he said something like, *do not trust this man*. Then he said, *he is a bad man*.”

“And did he say why he had formed this opinion?”

“He said he heard him in the forest.”

“And what exactly had he heard?” The Castleborn drummed his fingers on the arms of the great chair.

“He... he could not say,” Doe answered.

“Could not? Or would not? Explain yourself.”

Doe straightened her shoulders and spoke again. "Pa Larksong seemed tired and upset. And then Grody Hollowtree attacked him. He put his hands round his neck, I saw it all!" she finished boldly.

The crowd gasped.

Ethon bit his knuckle. Surely Grody Hollowtree would face charges, too?

But the Castleborn sat back and said, as if slightly bored, "After a serious public accusation like that, I am not surprised."

Ethon raked his hands through his hair. Doe was doing her best. She had been both honest and fair and... tactful. If she knew about the rumours of his Pa taking heart's ease mushrooms, she showed no sign of it.

"Is there anything else you want to say?" the Castleborn asked.

"Only that... that... I did not want to do this!" Doe burst out.

"And yet you did," said the Castleborn crisply.

Doe buried her face in her hands.

"You will stay on the High Stand until the Trial is over," the Castleborn ordered.

In the crowd, Ma Fevermint's sobs turned to wails.

Fen shook Ethon's arm. He dragged his eyes from Doe's shaking shoulders and saw the Castle Guards whispering behind their hands. The message rippled up the line until it reached the Castleborn's adviser. Sharplight murmured in his master's ear and then stepped forwards. "The Prisoner is ready to defend himself," he announced.

The crowd sat forward.

Ethon felt his mouth go dry. On the Low Stand, Pa stood silent and still. He lifted the stone pendant to his lips and kissed it, as if saying goodbye.

Then, gazing at the crowd with sad and gentle eyes, he spoke.

"Darkness has come to Greenoak. But I have faith in the Silver Lady and in our Castleborn. And I know that the light will prevail. That is all." He bowed his head.

Ethon gasped. What was Pa doing? Why did he not just tell the court what he had heard? Then realisation dropped like a stone: Pa knew – or guessed – that Grody Hollowtree had forced Doe to accuse him. If he was acquitted, what

fate lay in store for Doe – and her mother? He was protecting them. And he was prepared to forsake his own freedom to do so.

The Castleborn narrowed his eyes. “Speaking in riddles when your liberty is at stake is not, I think, wise,” he told Pa. “I will give you one more chance to defend yourself. I suggest you take advantage of it before my patience runs out.”

Pa smiled sadly. “Thank you, sir. But I have nothing more to say.”

Ethon leapt to his feet.

Fen pushed him down. He mimed deep breaths, urging Ethon to copy.

In the cool space under the canopy, Sharplight handed the Castleborn a small, blood-red cloth with heavy silk tassels at each corner. Ethon had never seen a real one before, but he knew from the games that he and Fen and Doe and the others used to play exactly what it was. The old familiar rhyme danced in his head:

Touch my arm

Touch my hair

You can't catch me

I've got the red square!

They used a piece of sacking stained with spiceberry-juice, and feathers for tassels, just as Birda and her friends did now. Whoever possessed the red square also possessed full authority over the others, and thinking up ever more daring tasks was a matter of honour. Climb up to the third branch of Young Granny Oak ... catch a meadow-rat and let it loose in Ma Kilter's cottage ... sleep in the old goat shelter all on your own ... it led to fear and fun, fighting and falling out. It was their favourite game.

But this was no game.

Panic fluttered in Ethon's chest as the Castleborn placed the red square on his head and stilled the swinging tassels. “And now for my judgement,” he said.

No!

Ethon sprang from the bench, rushed forward and knelt before the great man.

“Forgive me, sir, but I am the son of the Prisoner. The Trademaker who came to the Showing was a replacement. My father got confused. Doe Fevermint... the Accuser... she spoke the truth. She did hear those words. But not the whole story.”

Sharplight stepped forwards, whip raised. “How dare you speak!”

But the Castleborn held up his hand. “Wait. The boy’s words intrigue me. Continue,” he told Ethon.

“Doe is a loyal friend. And my father is a truthful man.”

“And you can prove this?”

“Yes — no — not yet.” Ethon spread his arms in desperation. “But I give you my word. Pa told me you are wise and fair. I beg you, let him go.”

In the silence, the sound of Grody Hollowtree’s tankard dropping to the ground rang out.

The Castleborn leaned back in his chair. “Get up and tell me your name, boy.”

Ethon rose from the dust. “Ethon Larksong, sir.”

The Castleborn curled the ends of his beard around his fingers. “You dare to speak out at a Trial. You defend your father with passion... and yet you defend the Accuser, too. This is very unusual. Very unusual indeed.” He rose to his feet and addressed the rows of villagers. “It seems to me that this boy speaks with the fire of truth.”

Grody jumped down from his cart. “You seem to be forgetting that I have suffered a great wrong. I want my good name restored. I demand justice!”

“You *want*? You *demand*?” Sharplight spat the words out.

Realising his mistake, Grody bowed so low to the ground that his hair brushed the dirt. “I beg your pardon, sir. In my distress I quite forgot my manners.”

The Castleborn raised an eyebrow. He opened his mouth but, before he could continue speaking, Doe shouted: “Silver!”

“She’s just a simple village girl. She doesn’t know what she’s saying. Ignore her, Sir,” Grody whined.

“Silver, instead of prison.” Doe’s voice was strong and clear.

“Compensation?” Sharplight pursed his lips. “The Code of Trust allows it, sir,” he told the Castleborn. “It could be an acceptable alternative. Depending on the amount.”

Grody folded his arms. “In that case, may I request — let’s see — one full rabbit-bag?” His smile spread like oil.

“That seems a fair price, considering the charge. *Scaremongering.*” Sharplight pointed at Pa.

Pa raised his chin but said nothing.

The Castleborn paused. “It is settled.” He handed the red square to Sharplight.

Grody couldn’t resist sweeping the crowd with a triumphant look before striding towards Ethon. In a low voice, so only Ethon could hear, he murmured, “Oh dear. It seems your little friend is not as loyal as you thought. Suggesting silver when you are so obviously dirt poor... even *I* consider that mean.”

Ethon turned to face him and, staring his right in the eyes, pulled the silver-bag from his tunic. “All of this, in exchange for my Pa’s freedom.”

Grody froze like a fox scenting danger. “How... where... you dare to trick me!” Shaking with anger, he wrenched the bag from Ethon. “Your father may be free, but now you’ll all starve,” he hissed. “Enjoy your victory.” Pushing Ethon hard in the chest, he marched towards his cart.

Sprawled in the dust, Ethon saw a small brown blur hurtle past. As Grody climbed back into his cart, Chestnut jumped up and bit him on the ankle. Grody howled and aimed a kick at the puppy’s head. He missed. Swearing, he straddled the wooden seat and jerked the pony’s harness. “Move, you lazy brute!” The cart lurched away.

Scared by Grody’s yelling, Chestnut fled.

“Come back!” Birda wriggled free from Ma Ironturner’s protective arm and dashed after Chestnut.

Fen helped Ethon to his feet. “That dog has his uses after all.”

Ethon smiled weakly. His eyes were full of dust and his head throbbed.

“This Trial is over.” Sharplight gestured for the Castleborn’s men to start dismantling the sun-canopy.

“Not quite.” The Castleborn held up his jewelled hand once more.

“I have a question for the Prisoner’s son. Have you any silver left? Anything at all for the Cold Coffe?”

“No, sir.” As Ethon spoke, he felt Birda’s hand slide into his and heard Chestnut’s tail swishing in the dust.

“And have you any food?” The Castleborn was on his feet now, pacing. Ethon shook his head.

The Castleborn stopped. “A brave man without food,” he pondered aloud. “That is unjust.”

Ethon felt a smile spread over his face. Pa had been prepared to sacrifice his own freedom for Doe – he *was* brave. The Castleborn had seen it – and so had the whole village, No-one would dare call him a mizzle-man now!

Then he realised that the Castleborn wasn’t looking at Pa.

He was looking at Ethon.

The noble man snapped his fingers. “Give three stony-fish to this boy.”

Sharplight beckoned to one of the guards. After a savagely whispered conversation and much frantic searching of pockets, Sharplight cleared his throat and stepped forward. His face resumed its previous cold severity. But as he placed three small, carved fish on Ethon’s palm, Ethon saw a different expression flash in the man’s eyes. He felt that he was being sized up – but for what?

Birda yanked Ethon’s sleeve. “Let me see! What are they for? Can I play with them?”

“They are tokens,” the Castleborn explained, a smile lifting the heavy contours of his face. “For each stone fish, Ethon Larksong, you may catch a real fish from the Dawnbright River. My *private* river,” he added, a note of warning in his voice as he gazed around at the assembled villagers.

“One for Pa, one for Ethon and one for me.” Birda counted on her fingers.

“Indeed.” The Castleborn’s eyes softened as he watched her. He turned to Ethon. “But only three,” he reminded him. “Do I have your word?”

“Yes, sir.” Ethon bowed.

The Castleborn raised both arms, commanding silence. “Then this Trial is over. Release the Prisoner.”

Ethon wrapped Birda in a hug.

Doe sank to her knees.

The Castleborn shook his head. "And send that girl back to her mother."

Ethon, Birda and Pa walked home as if in a dream, leaving the village, awash with gossip, behind them. Although it was barely dusk, Pa slept from the moment Ethon settled him on his mattress. In the damp gloom of their cottage, Pa's face was bone-white, his cheekbones sharper than ever. The chill of night crept under the door and through the cracks in the walls. Ethon tucked Pa's blanket more closely around him, carefully avoiding his raw ankles. Birda crept in beside Pa and slept too, curled like a kitten. Chestnut, who was lying near the threshold gnawing a bone, lifted his head and became perfectly still. Then Ethon heard it too: the sound of footsteps on the path outside. He held his breath. But fear turned to relief as he recognised Seth's babble.

"Friends, not enemies," he told Chestnut, as he opened the door to Fen's mother.

She came in with a flurry of bundles in one arm and Seth in the other. "I couldn't bear to think of you up here with no-one to look after you. Fen is minding the little ones, but Seth goes wherever I go, don't you, honeysweet?" she said, kissing her baby son. "He can sleep in your Trade basket."

When Ma Ironturner decided to mother you, there was no point in resisting. Ethon took the bundles from her and fetched the basket.

"Have you seen Doe? How is she?" Ethon asked as Fen's mother lined the empty basket with a fresh blanket, ready for Seth. He could not talk to Doe himself; Ma Fevermint had made that very clear. *You Larksongs are nothing but trouble. Stay away from my daughter!* she'd screamed at him as the Guards rolled the goatskin canopy away. The Castleborn, deep in conversation with Old Hareld, had looked round frowning. Horrified, Ma Fevermint stumbled. Only Doe's arms kept her from falling to the ground.

"It's been a shock," Ma Ironturner said carefully. "A young girl involved in a public Trial. Her mother is distraught. You understand that, don't you?"

“She hates me. Hates my Pa.”

“No, Ethon. Wren Fevermint doesn’t hate anyone. She loves her daughter and wants to keep her safe. You can’t blame her for that.” As Ma Ironturner unwrapped another bundle, Ethon smelled warm bread.

“Can you spare it?” he asked.

“Not mine to spare, Ethon. It’s Ma Kilter’s finest.”

“And she gave it to us?” Despite his exhaustion, Ethon laughed.

“Not exactly. Lor Rattlebone told her she must pay a fine for daring to touch the Castleborn’s cloak. She paid him in bread. And this.” Ma Ironturner flourished a hunk of goat’s cheese.

Ethon took a small piece of bread for himself, divided the rest of the food into portions and wrapped them in the pie-cloth. There: breakfast for everyone. Suddenly, his legs wobbled.

“Come here, lad.” Ma Ironturner tucked Ethon up. She was warm and soft and she smelled of fresh bread and babies. Ethon drifted into the comfort of sleep. But somewhere deep, images of Pa and Doe and the dungeon swirled. A monster rose from the dark waters: a monster with a sneering face and hair like black river-weed. The creature curled its dark fist around a sodden rabbit-bag. “Now you’ll all starve. Enjoy your victory!” it snarled.

Ethon jolted awake.

Light glimmered at the edges of the door. The cracks in the wood glinted like silver reeds. Ethon pictured the Silver Lady floating in the night sky, her beautiful curve petal white against the darkness. His heart stilled and the nightmare faded.

Ethon felt Ma Ironturner’s plump arm around his shoulders. “The Castleborn called you brave. He was right about that. But you don’t have to be brave *all* the time.” Her voice was lullaby-soft. “Go back to sleep now. Fine dreams.”

“Fair morning.” As Ethon closed his eyes, his hand curled over the three stone tokens that lay in his pocket. The Castleborn trusted his word. The thought was as warm as a blanket. Tomorrow, he’d be going fishing. The moment the Trial was over, Pa Willow had rushed to offer his help. The weaver did not only make reed baskets, but fishing rods too. Ethon had never fished

before. Apparently all you needed was a good sharp hook and plenty of patience. "Patient – you?" Fen had grinned. But for once Ethon hadn't reacted. He would sit stone still for a whole day for the mouth-watering prize he'd been promised.

He drifted back to sleep and dreamed of three fat fish.

Chapter Ten

Ironsong

The fishing rod that Pa Willow lent Ethon was beautifully made from smooth, pale birch wood, as supple as Fen's Steadfast Stave was sturdy.

"I know you'll bring it back safely." Pa Willow frowned with concentration as he tied a fresh line of sheep's gut onto the rod, pulled it tight and tested it for strength. With expert fingers, he threaded on a hook made from bone. Its flint-sharp edges winked in the early morning sunshine. "Fishing is soothing. It will help you forget about everything." Pa Willow handed Ethon a small pottery worm-jar. "Humble-fish are easy to catch but you'll need the right bait. Log-worm is best," he said, explaining how and where to find it. He ruffled his hands through his thick thatch of hair and stood up. "Go well, Ethon."

"Stay well. And thank you."

Ma Willow waved as Ethon walked around the side of the cottage and on past the reed store and the laundry tubs. Supporting her belly with one hand, she wiped her brow with the other, miming heat exhaustion. Despite her blossoming pregnancy Ma Willow had already started the day's work. Ethon grinned and waved back. He vaulted the fence and set off along the trail. The path towards the river wound down through dappled woodland. The air was filled with the scent of wild garlic. High in the trees, maple-doves sang. Ethon started to whistle.

It was, just as Pa Willow said, easy to find bait. Ethon prodded the crumbling underside of a fallen log and a mass of tiny, wriggly pink worms sprawled out. Ethon scooped some into the jar and pushed its wooden stopper into place. He walked through the soft golden grasses of Low Meadow. The crops were high; scything would soon begin. As he reached the Old Granny Oak that marked the boundary of Low Meadow, Ethon saw the Dawnbright River gleaming beyond the reed-beds. The Castleborn's private river was slow and

wide and beautiful, rich with fish, and forbidden. But not today. Ethon jiggled the three stony-fish in his pocket. *You may catch three fish, but only three*, the Castleborn had said. Ethon had made a promise. And he would honour it. Feeling suddenly stronger and at least two summers older, Ethon found a gap in the reed-beds and walked to the water's edge. Mud flies, warm and fat, buzzed in drowsy arcs. Shimmer-reeds nodded their feathery white heads in time to the lapping of the water.

The first two humble-fish were easy to catch. Fresh, plump and wrapped in starflower-leaves, they would smell delicious as they cooked over the fire. And the taste! Ethon smiled as he flicked his line into the water, ready to catch his final fish. The air had cooled now and fine ripples scudded across the water's surface. Ethon watched as a meadow-rat slid into the water and sliced its way towards a floating log. The river shone like a field of coins, mocking him.

Pa is free, Ethon told himself firmly.

And freedom is worth more than silver.

A single oak-leaf landed on the water just as the sun slipped behind a cloud. The season was turning almost as he watched. Today's clear blue sky would soon be replaced by clouds the size of mountains and the terrible beauty of snow. Ethon shivered. They would have fish today, but after that – nothing. And if those counting men came to Greenoak, demanding extra silver, even his most generous neighbours would have nothing to spare. The Cold Coffin would soon be as hollow as his stomach.

How would they survive?

The sky darkened and thunder rumbled. Ethon's fishing line twitched. Expecting another fat catch, Ethon braced himself and pulled hard. But there was no resistance and, yelping with surprise, he fell back and landed in the mud. Ethon stared at the fishy scrap that flicked miserably on his hook. It was thin and shrivelled, barely the size of his hand. It would not make a meal, even for Birda.

He'd promised to catch only three fish.

But he'd promised to feed Birda and Pa.

And he was very, very hungry.

Ethon threw the little withered fish back, still alive. He hooked another log-worm and cast his line. Almost immediately it trembled. Something was biting and this time the force was ferocious. Ethon braced one foot on a jutting root and held on tight. The shadow in the water leapt and thrashed, sending plumes of water into the sky. A fisher-bird screeched indignantly from its nest in the reeds. Ethon's arms ached and his tunic stuck to his skin. As sweat snaked down his back, Grody's smug face leered in Ethon's mind. Anger poured strength into his muscles.

"I won't be beaten by a fish!" he yelled.

The powerful leaping faltered. The line of gut sprang from the water and a solid, writhing shape followed. It landed with a heavy plop.

"Got you." Ethon prodded the creature with his toe. Dark liquid oozed into the holes in his boot. The creature was the length of Ethon's forearm. With its tail flexing and squirming, it looked like a fat black snake. Its bulbous head was marked by two greyish slits and a larger slash edged with pale pink. A tongue the colour of blood darted in and out of the slash.

As Ethon wiped the slime from his boot, the creature opened its jaws and hissed. Teeth glittered like tiny icicles in the red cavern of its mouth. The creature's breath smelled worse than Ma Kilter's pig-pen. It looked like the monster in the Black Cave, Ethon realised as he jumped back. Only this one was real. But it was tiny, and everyone thought Soursigh was huge. A creature this size could not wrap its tail around Criminal Hill, or eat a loaf the size of the Offering. It would struggle to eat a fist-sized hunk of bread! Ethon was about to flick the creature back into the water when he changed his mind. He must show it to Fen and to Old Hareld. Grinning, he imagined Ma Kilter's face once she realised that her daily efforts to placate Soursigh were a waste of time – and precious, valuable bread. Which would make her crosser? Ethon wrapped the worm in a piece of sacking, tied the rough parcel onto the fishing-rod and slung it over his shoulder. He packed the nimble-fish into a bundle: two would have to do. At least they were nice big fat ones. As Ethon turned away from the river, deep sunshine stroked the spreading arms of the Old Granny Oak.

It was time to go home.

He set off. Ahead, the cottages of Greenoak nestled into the mountainside like piglets seeking their mother's warmth. Curls of smoke drifted into the sky. There was no hint of thunder here. It was peaceful and quiet. Too quiet, Ethon realised with a chill of unease. Even from as far away as Low Meadow, you could normally hear the clanging and clumping and shoeing and shouting of village life. As Ethon swung his legs over Pa Willow's fence, the sour smell from the strange black worm swirled into his nostrils and fear prickled his skin.

Where was everyone?

As if in answer, a heavy, musical sound rang out. Ethon had only heard it once before, but he knew it instantly: Ironsong. The great bell only ever rang in the most serious of circumstances. Its sole purpose was to gather the men of Greenoak so that a threat could be faced together.

Ethon started to run.

As he reached the old well, the river-creature wriggled inside its oily parcel. Something warm oozed through Ethon's tunic. *That smell.* Revolted, Ethon tore the stinking bundle from his back and hurled the creature down the well. He did not stop to hear the splash.

As he neared the Round Room, Ironsong filled Ethon's head. In between the bell's deep howls came other sounds: angry whispers, snorting breath and the thumping of hooves. It was horses, not thunder, he had heard before. Ethon crept towards the front of the Round Room. Four horsemen formed a gleaming knot of power before the bell tower. The rider on the largest horse, a magnificent black stallion, brandished a short wooden staff. Like his companions, he wore long, polished boots, a dazzling white shirt and, over it, a slate blue tunic edged with red braid. Swords in carved leather scabbards lay behind the men's thighs. Ethon froze. The counting men were here! He remembered Alder Greatbarn's words: taxes, robbery, *trouble*. Ethon gripped his fishing rod in both hands. The men of Greenoak were herded together in front of the Round Room. Big Fen Ironturner stood at the front, feet planted wide, clutching a hammer. Ethon gasped as he saw his own Pa. How had he managed to leave his bed? Lor Rattlebone, his plump face ashen, was holding Pa's elbow to stop him falling. His son Larken supported Pa's other arm. This

time, when he caught Ethon's eye, his face was flushed with fear, not embarrassment.

Women and children crowded under the bell-tower. Ethon's heart galloped as he scanned the group. He saw Fen, holding Steadfast like a spear. There was no missing Hanny Claypotter's theatrical sobs. Ethon caught a glimpse of Doe's bright hair. But where was Birda?

Using skill rather than strength Old Hareld steadied the bell-rope, silencing Ironsong. As he walked out of the bell-tower, the horsemen turned towards him. Spotting his opportunity, Ethon darted forwards and pushed his way through the crowd to Fen's side. "Have you seen Birda?"

Fen shook his head. "No. I'm sorry." He kept his eyes fixed on the four horsemen. Mead, his face alight with excitement, was struggling with the weight of a poker. The smaller Ironturner boys had weapons, too: an iron ladle, a cracked pottery jug and the leg of a fire-stool. In the uneasy silence, Seth started to wail. Ma Ironturner pulled her shawl over his head but he just screamed harder.

"Silence that infant!" roared the leader of the horsemen. "Or I will."

Big Fen Ironturner burst forwards, his hammer raised. But the other men formed a loyal gate around him. Big Fen flexed his tree-trunk arms but allowed himself to be contained. Beside Ethon, Ma Ironturner's knees gave way. Before he could crouch to help, Ma Willow was there, murmuring reassurance. As she cradled Seth, an image burst into Ethon's mind: newborn Birda, tiny and earth-red, curled in his mother's arms. He saw his own small hand reaching out to touch dark drenched blankets, and he felt again the dampness of the earth floor as he crouched behind a wall of women's backs. He'd heard their words – *the baby's coming too soon* – but at just six summers old, he could not understand them. He sensed panic and grief. And somehow he'd known, even before Pa reached for him with shaking hands, that one life had been exchanged for another. Pa had his little girl, who he adored. But all he had left of Ma was her stone pendant and the unpredictable shadow of grief.

And then Birda and Chestnut were there beside him and the memories scattered like leaves in the wind. "We hid in the old goat-shelter until we saw you," Birda whispered.

“That was a good plan. Stay close now.” Hugging her, Ethon felt Chestnut’s nose snuffling the humble-fish. He hitched the bundle higher.

The man on the stallion spoke. “My name is Foxwood Flint. I demand to see the village leader.” He pointed at Old Hareld. “You, there. Fetch him.”

“There is no need, sir. My name is Old Hareld and I am the Elder of Greenoak. Our hearth is your hearth, our water your water. And may the Silver Lady protect us all.” Old Hareld spread his skinny arms and bowed.

Ethon watched Foxwood Flint’s expression changed from irritation to surprise to grudging respect. His dark eyes flashed with humour as he realised his mistake. Ethon recognised that look: this was the man he’d seen at Trade, arguing with Grody Hollowtree.

Jumping down from his horse, Foxwood bowed low, mirroring the formal greeting. “Long may the Silver Lady light our way. I beg your forgiveness, Old Hareld,” he said smoothly. “I did not mean to insult you. I should have known at once, since you look so wise.”

“Sir, you have caused us great alarm.” Old Hareld, refusing to be charmed, fixed the man with his sharp blue gaze. “What is your business here? If you come to Greenoak as our friends, we will welcome you with warmth. But if you come as our enemies, that warmth will turn to fire.” His voice flowed with authority, a deep golden river of words.

If anyone could talk the village out of trouble, he could.

Foxwood Flint’s smile vanished. “Old Hareld, you speak bold words,” he said. “But do you really think you are a match for us?” At the click of his fingers, his men drew their swords.

As everyone gasped, Ethon pulled Birda closer. But Chestnut growled and scabbled in the dust, eager to confront the strangers. *Don’t bark*, Ethon begged silently. Foxwood Flint did not look like the sort of man who would react well to a small furry interruption. Birda knelt and flung her arms around Chestnut but she overbalanced and they tumbled to the ground. Ethon stepped in front of the flailing pair, shielding them from the horsemen. Across the square, Pa stood with his face turned to the sky. His eyes were closed. Would he stay calm? Ethon’s heart thumped.

“You see our great bell, and you have heard Ironsong,” Old Hareld said. “But, as strangers, you will not know the story that lies behind it. Perhaps you would like to rest here in our Round Room while I tell it? There is a fine fresh barrel full of oak-ale inside ready for your appreciation.”

“Another time, Old Hareld.” Foxwood tapped his wooden staff.

“He’s clearly in charge. Why hasn’t he got a sword?” Ethon whispered to Fen.

“Perhaps he does the talking and the rest of them do the...” Fen’s voice trailed off.

“Then he’s a coward.” Ethon thrust the humble-fish bundle at Fen and gripped Pa Willow’s fishing rod with both hands.

“Can we fight them now?” Mead Ironturner tried to lift the poker.

“No.” Fen grabbed Ethon’s arm, holding him back. “They have real weapons. And they are grown men.”

Mead scowled. “But Ethon’s ready — ”

“Ethon is not taking any stupid risks,” Fen hissed.

Reluctantly Ethon lowered his hands.

“My men and I have come straight from the City of Stars,” Foxwood Flint announced. He paused, clearly expecting a reaction. There was silence.

The man turned to his companions. “We are among peasants,” he sighed. “They know nothing of great cities. I’d wager they know little of anything that lies beyond... beyond that pigsty.” He pointed towards Ethon’s home in the shadow of Viper’s Wood.

Fen covered Ethon’s mouth. Ethon felt angry warmth spreading over his face. He shook Fen’s hands away, but remained silent.

Foxwood Flint let go of the reins and steadied his horse with slow, firm strokes along its powerful neck. He drew something from inside his staff. As he unrolled a long sheet of wheat-coloured material, the sun shone through it, revealing a pattern of black marks. The villagers started to whisper, their fear edged with curiosity. As Foxwood frowned at his parchment scroll, Big Fen Ironturner strode forward.

“Save your breath, stranger. Do think you can round us up like sheep and harm our families? Not while there’s breath in my body!”

This time the other men crowded behind him.

“Be calm.” A look of amused superiority sparkled in Foxwood Flint’s eyes but he held up his hand in a gesture of peace. “We have not come to kill you, my friends. We have come to count you.”

Chapter Eleven

Summer's Curse

"We'll start with the pigs," Foxwood Flint announced. "And then the other livestock: goats, geese, oxen. Horses, if you have them, which seems unlikely. Then we'll count the major items: ploughs, carts and kilns." Foxwood sniffed the air. "I can tell there's a bread oven somewhere nearby. They are very valuable. After that, we'll count the smaller things: barrels and bows, scythes and spinning wheels. And lastly, the land itself."

Old Hareld folded his arms. "All the land belongs to the Castleborn. Every tree in the forest, every berry in the woods, even the water in the well. How are you going to count that?"

A picture of the strange worm he'd caught slipped into Ethon's head. It was deep in the old well now and it couldn't get out. All the same, unease settled over him like a damp cloak.

Foxwood shrugged. "The Silver Lady will help us find a way," he told Old Hareld. "But I expect your full co-operation." His voice was pleasant, but his eyes held a look that said, *defy me if you dare*. It reminded Ethon of another dark and powerful man.

Grody Hollowtree.

Suppose this man was as cruel, but even more powerful?

Sickness rose in Ethon's throat. As he gulped it down, Fen nudged him. "Are you alright?"

Ethon nodded. The whole village held its breath. How would Old Hareld respond to Foxwood?

"The question is, why?" Old Hareld said. "Why do you wish to count everything? You will find no riches here."

"I'm sure you are right, Old Hareld," Foxwood said smoothly. "But whatever assets my men and I do find must be recorded. It is the new law.

Anyone with property of any kind must give a portion of its value directly to the Starborn. Everyone from the Castleborn to the lowliest peasant.”

So the rumours were true, Ethon realised.

“But why? And how will we afford it?” Old Hareld was pacing now, his beard flapping in a way that, Ethon knew, meant his composure was under severe pressure. “People here have so little. We already pay the Trademaker a commission.”

“Have you really not heard?” Foxwood glanced at his companions, who looked surprised too. “The Starborn is building an army. And armies are expensive. Everyone must contribute. That’s what this parchment is for: recording everything we count.” Foxwood Flint held it out for the villagers to see. “We call it the Spearhead Scroll because it is so detailed.”

Beneath the black squiggles on Foxwood’s scroll, Ethon saw a series of small lines arranged into neat patterns.

“Is it a drawing? Are they people, all in a line?” Birda whispered.

“I don’t think so. I think it’s a way of counting,” Ethon murmured back. “One black line for one pig, two black lines for two pigs.”

“But they’re not pigs,” Birda said, puzzled.

One of Foxwood’s men coughed. In the silence that followed, Birda’s voice, as clear as stream water, continued. “If I had some charcoal, I would draw *proper* pigs with trotters and tails and everything.”

“Hush.” Ethon stroked her hair.

“Allow me to introduce my men,” Foxwood continued. “Even though two will be leaving tomorrow. We were, it seems, misinformed about the size of Greenoak. It will hardly take four of us to count everything here.” Foxwood pointed to the two men on his right. “This is Hal Tenblades and Goodmead Arrowhawk.” He pointed to the rider on his left. “And this is Dale Dearson, my apprentice.”

Tenblades was large and blond with a scowling face. His mean little eyes scanned the crowd as if hoping to pick a fight. Arrowhawk was older, his hair sprinkled with grey and his expression steady. Like their leader, both men had astonishing little beards, trimmed to a neat point like flints. But Dearson’s face

was smooth beneath hair the light, silky brown of hens' feathers. He could be no more than fourteen summers old, Ethon reckoned.

Tenblades and Arrowhawk bowed their heads in greeting. But Dearson was fumbling with his water flagon. Lifting it to take a swig, he discovered it was empty. He licked his lips and swayed in his saddle. Only when Arrowhawk said lightly, "Come now, Dearson, where are your manners?" did the boy remember to nod. His face shone with sweat.

Foxwood frowned. "My men are thirsty. Our horses need water, too, and rest."

Pa Willow stepped forward. "My fence is well shaded. Your horses will be safe tethered beneath the beech trees."

"And our finest oak ale awaits you in the Round Room." With perfect courtesy, Old Hareld repeated his offer.

Foxwood motioned for his men to dismount. "Return to your homes," he told the villagers. "Tenblades and Arrowhawk leave in the morning, and Dearson and I have only two days to complete our work here. So we will visit as many families as we can today, before nightfall. First, we will take refreshment – we have ridden far. Then we'll start up there, with the hovel at the edge of the forest." As he looked towards Ethon's cottage, tiny against the great trees of Viper's Wood, a fierce smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "We miss nothing."

It sounded like a threat and Ethon realised he was trembling. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he took Birda's hand. "Come on. Let's get you and Pa home."

"Don't forget these." Fen gave Ethon the fish bundle. "And remember, when the men come, you must be humble too. None of *this*." He mimed a fist-fight.

Ethon managed a smile. "Even I wouldn't try to fight armed strangers on my own."

Fen patted Ethon's shoulder then recoiled. "What's that smell?"

"I caught this strange black worm thing when I was fishing – not even I would want to eat it." He was about to say more, but realised everyone could hear. Soursigh rumours would gather pace like the west wind, scaring everyone

when they had enough to worry about. Imagine if he, too was branded a scaremonger! “I, er, threw it down the old well.”

“Best place for it, by the sounds of it. But there’s something you’re not telling me,” said Fen as he herded his little brothers towards the forge. “Let’s meet tomorrow at dawn. Usual place?” He kept his voice low so only Ethon could hear.

Ethon nodded. No-one would disturb them in the old goat shelter. And it would be a relief to share his Soursigh secret with Fen.

Everyone gathered their loved ones close and hurried for home. Doe caught Ethon’s eye and smiled before her mother pulled her away. His heart flipped. With Chestnut at her heels, Birda ran to Pa’s open arms. Ethon followed, but froze as a voice rang out: “Stop! What have you got there, boy?”

Ethon turned to find Foxwood Flint pointing at him.

“Fish.” The word came out in a faint croak. “Sir,” he added.

“And where would a young ruffian like you get fish from?”

“Stealing, no doubt,” Tenblades circled Ethon.

Arrowhawk stepped between them. “Let the boy explain.”

Tenblades stared at Ethon for a long moment. Then he shrugged and stood back.

Ethon took the three stony-fish from his pocket and held them out. Foxwood examined them, rubbing his thumb over the raised design, identical on each token. Ethon had barely noticed it before; surely it was just some meaningless decoration? But Foxwood seemed transfixed. “This is the Castleborn’s seal. So you had his permission,” he mused. “Extraordinary.”

“Extraordinarily unlikely, I’d say.” Tenblades grabbed Ethon’s arms and pinned them behind his back. “Tell us the truth, boy.”

Pain tore through Ethon’s shoulders. “It was a reward!” he gasped.

“A reward? For what?” Foxwood enquired.

Tenblades squeezed Ethon’s arms harder. He cried out and, like a stone fired from a slingshot, Chestnut raced towards him. Hackles raised, he growled at Tenblades.

“No, Chestnut!” Ethon flinched again, this time with fear. Who knew how men like these might treat a dog? And although Pa could not run, Birda could!

“Answer me, boy,” said Foxwood Flint.

Before Ethon could reply, Doe was by his side, kneeling in the dust and holding Chestnut back. She looked up at the dark stranger. “It was for courage, sir,” she said.

Foxwood looked from Ethon to Doe and back again. “Courage?” he said. There was a long pause. And then he threw back his head and roared with laughter. “A peasant boy who’s brave enough to impress the Castleborn... and a girl who’s bold enough to answer for him!”

Tenblades released Ethon and gave him a shove. Ethon staggered, tripped and dropped his bundle. Wriggling from Doe’s arms, Chestnut scampered to Ethon but, distracted by the smell of fish, veered towards it and nudged it with his nose. Ethon yanked his precious catch from the puppy’s reach.

Birda raced to Ethon and flung her arms around him. “That man pushed you over. Chestnut wanted to bite him and so did I. But Pa wouldn’t let go of me.”

And then Pa was there, helping Ethon to his feet and wrapping him in a bony hug. It felt like coming home. Ethon hugged him back, fiercely.

Ma Fevermint shot across the Round and grabbed Doe’s arm. “What have I told you about that Larksong boy? Come home with me this instant,” she snapped.

But Doe stood her ground. “He’s my friend,” she said quietly. “You help your friends when they need you, don’t you? What about Ma Ironturner? You help her all the time.”

“That’s different!” her mother cried.

Doe shook her head.

“What has got into you?” Ma Fevermint gasped. “You never used to answer me back. This is all because of that trial, that boy – ”

“No. It’s *me*. It’s like I’ve woken up.” Doe smiled as if someone had given her a wonderful gift. She grabbed her mother’s hands and pulled her away as the counting men strode towards the Round Room and the promise of oak-ale.

Ethon, Pa and Birda headed home.

“I like Doe. I like her hair,” Birda said.

I like her too, Ethon thought. *I like her more than I can say*. Happiness spread through him like warm honey.

“But her Ma’s scary.” Birda leaned into Pa’s waist. “Not like my Pa.”

The happy feeling faded. Pa might be as gentle as Doe’s mother was fierce, but sometimes he scared people in ways that Birda did not yet understand.

As they neared Pa and Ma Willow’s cottage, Birda broke away and ran towards the strangers’ horses that stood tethered beneath the trees. They were magnificent animals: strong, alert and gleaming with health.

“I like that one best.” Birda pointed to an acorn-brown mare with a flowing mane and tail the colour of cream. “I wonder if they’ve got names? If they were mine, I’d give them beautiful names. I’d call this one Honey.”

Keeping a firm grip on Chestnut, Ethon allowed himself to share Birda’s wonder. The largest horse — Foxwood’s black stallion — was as shiny as water. The animal’s shoulders rippled with powerful muscles. “He’s called Hunter,” Birda decided. Next to him stood a fine dark brown mare. “And that one is Shadow.” The last horse, smaller than the others, was a beautiful dappled grey. She stood calmly, but her large dark eyes sparkled with spirit.

“What about this one?” Birda could not decide.

Pa held out a hand and stroked the horse’s soft pink nose. “Snowcloud,” he said softly.

Birda jumped up and down. “I like that best of all! I wish I could ride.”

Ethon smiled. What would it be like to ride a horse? He tried to imagine the speed, the power, the freedom. Leaping the village bounds, racing along the High Way as fast as an eagle could fly... suddenly his stomach groaned, bringing him back to the present.

“Let’s go home and eat,” he said. “Before those soldiers come knocking.”

“This fish is nicer than walnut stew. And eggy mess. And maybe even rabbit pie.” Birda had finished the last moist pink flake of humble-fish and was listing her favourite foods one greasy finger at a time.

“And definitely better than boiled goat.” Ethon, his stomach full, was sprawled by the fire watching the star-flower leaves curl and melt in the flames. The sacking he’d used to carry his catch hung on a hook by the door, drying. The stink of the river worm lingered, but neither Birda nor Pa seemed to notice. Chestnut kept his distance, though. Perhaps the stained brown cloth reminded him of his old master, the cruel shepherd boy: he had certainly reeked.

Birda, full of energy now, was dancing around. “Ma Kilter looks like a goat,” she cried. “She’s got horrid little eyes and a long face and her ears stick out like this!”

Chestnut scrambled to his feet and ran barking around the fire. Tripping over Chestnut’s discarded bone, Birda blundered into the door. As she grabbed the hanging sack-cloth to stop herself falling, it ripped into long shreds. Ethon flung the rags away. “Don’t touch that!”

Pa, who was sitting quietly on his mattress, winced as Chestnut’s tail brushed his ankle. His wounds had barely started to heal and the slightest knock brought fresh blood. Ethon scooped out the last of Pa Rattlebone’s kind gift of healing ointment and gave Birda the little stone jar to play with.

“Oh — a water flagon for Poppety!” Birda lined up her collection of acorn-shell cups, chose one and poured Poppety a pretend drink. Ethon waited until he was sure Birda was absorbed in her game before rubbing the ointment into Pa’s skin. As the powerful sting of axe-bright bit, Pa gripped his pendant, his knuckles white.

“I’m sorry, Pa. But it will help. I promise,” Ethon whispered.

Chestnut pricked his ears, slunk towards the door and growled. Ethon heard it then: the crunch of footsteps, brisk and confident. And so did Birda. “Is it those men? I don’t *like* them!” She burrowed into Pa’s arms.

Ethon pulled Chestnut back. “Stay.”

And then came the knocking.

Bang.

Bang.

BANG.

A shard of rotten wood broke from the door leaving a jagged hole. Outside, a voice ordered, “Open up!”

His mouth dry, Ethon pulled open the door. Its leathery creak sounded as weak as an old woman's cry. Foxwood Flint and his apprentice stood on the path. With their snowy shirts, immaculate tabards and shiny boots, the pair looked so highborn that Ethon took a step backwards.

"So it's not a pigsty after all," Foxwood remarked coolly.

"May we enter?" Dearson asked.

There was no point in resisting. Ethon stood aside. Foxwood, who had the good grace to step neatly over their threshold, barely disturbing the straw, strode in and his apprentice followed. Seeing Pa, Foxwood drew out his blade. Then, taking in Pa's hunched shoulders and blood-smeared ankles, he slid it back into his boot. Chestnut growled and bared his little teeth. Ethon held his breath. But Foxwood just patted Chestnut's head.

"You again. I admire your spirit. But perhaps you need to grow a bit."

To Ethon's surprise, Chestnut lay down, rolled over and squirmed. Birda peeped from Pa's arms, her eyes huge grey circles. Dearson coughed. It sounded as if someone was scraping his throat with a badly-made knife. His face had, Ethon noticed, a strange waxy look.

Foxwood planted his feet wide. "Start talking, boy," he told Ethon. "We want to know about all your possessions. And you'd better not be thinking of hiding anything."

"It's all here, sir." Ethon spread his arms. "We have a mattress each and a blanket each and our cloaks. A water-barrel. Our Trade basket, three bowls and three cups. One fire-stool and our story beads." He held up the leather bag that contained the carved wooden discs, worn smooth by generations of Larksong children.

"There is really nothing worth counting here, Foxwood," Dearson said. His voice was croaky.

Foxwood, busy unrolling the Spearhead Scroll, was not listening. He frowned at its black markings. "You have no goods worth recording. But what about the tools of your trade?"

Ethon chewed his lip and said nothing.

“The things your father needs to do his work.” Foxwood sounded each word out slowly, as if Ethon were a small child. “I assume that you are learning his craft, whatever it is... or was?”

Ethon took a deep breath. “We make bead necklaces,” he said. “We have a cutter, a piercer and a polisher.” Crouching, he felt under his mattress and brought out the three worn items. “That’s all.”

Foxwood sighed. Clearly, their precious tools counted for nothing in his eyes.

Dearson coughed again.

“Give my apprentice some water,” Foxwood ordered.

As Ethon filled a wooden cup from their barrel, he smelt again the bitter wormy stench. Then he noticed a shred of sack-cloth floating in the water. He flicked it over the side and handed the cup to Dearson. The boy took a big gulp. Pressing his hands to his ribs, he staggered and dropped the cup.

Ethon caught the cup. “Are you alright?”

“I’m perfectly well, thank you,” Dearson said.

Then he collapsed.

“By the Silver Lady, what’s wrong with him?” said Foxwood. “Wake him up!”

Ethon knelt at Dearson’s side and felt his forehead. The boy’s skin was clammy and hot and the waxy tinge seemed to be deepening: his cheeks bloomed as bright as pollen.

“He’s turning yellow!” Ethon gasped.

Dearson shuddered. His eyelids fluttered like trapped moths. Then he lay still.

“Help me get him up!” Foxwood ordered.

Pa lifted Birda from his lap and shuffled across the room. “No,” he said, gentle but firm. “The boy must rest.” Pa laid his head on Dearson’s chest, frowning as he listened to his rasping breaths. He wove his fingers together in the familiar anxious pattern. Then, pressing the stone pendant to his chest, he raised his head.

“It is Summer’s Curse.”

“What is that? How do you cure it?” Foxwood raked his fingers through his hair.

“I’ll fetch Ma Fevermint. She’s a herbalist, a healer – she knows every cure there is.” Ethon was already at the door. He stopped. How could he leave Birda and Pa alone with this stranger – a stranger who had a knife?

“Pa?”

But it was Foxwood Flint who answered. “No harm will come to your family, boy. You have my word.”

Still Ethon hesitated. Foxwood drew his blade from his boot and offered it, handle first, to Ethon. “Take this, and go!”

Ethon ran.

Chapter Twelve

The Pig Test

The summersweet in Ma Fevermint's garden was in full bloom. Heavy with white flowers, the boughs arched low over the path. Ethon pushed through it, scattering petals in a mad flurry, and hammered on the cottage door. No answer. He ran round the side and almost tripped over a basket filled with crimson berries. Doe was picking them from a large axe-bright bush and her fingers were stained red. "I'm nearly finished. Look – the basket's full." When she saw that it was Ethon, she stopped talking and blushed.

"Who are you talking to, Doe?" Ma Fevermint came hurrying past the raven's wing tree that marked the hidden entrance to the wild garden, where her most precious herbs grew. Hung with tiny copper bells to ward off scavenging birds, its creepy black branches tinkled as she walked towards her daughter. Seeing Ethon, she shook her finger in the air and started to shout.

"Ethon Larksong! How *dare* you come here after I've forbidden you to see Doe. Sneaking into my garden like a fox in the night!"

Doe scrambled to her feet. "Ma, please — "

But her mother was in full flow. "You're not welcome here, Ethon. Go home." Then she noticed Foxwood's dagger. "Get away from my daughter!" she screamed.

Paws the cat shot out from the cottage, arched her back and hissed at Ethon.

"It's not Doe I want!" The words shot out, louder than Ethon intended and harsher too.

Doe bit her lip. Ethon's heart sank. But there was no time to explain. "One of the Starborn's counting men has fallen ill in our cottage. Pa says it's Summer's Curse."

The angry colour drained from Ma Fevermint's face. "May the Silver Lady shine on him!" She ran inside, listing remedies as she went. "We'll need dried

meadowlace, robin's blush and plenty of starflower seeds. Dig up some honeyroot, Doe, quick!"

Ethon stood awkwardly outside as Ma Fevermint flung jars and bundles into her basket. Doe, her eyes turned from Ethon, wrenched a gnarled golden root from the ground.

"It needs chopping. Hurry up!" Ma Fevermint shouted, packing everything into a basket. With her free hand she picked up a large wooden bowl, its inside stained from potion-making. But Ma Fevermint was small and slight and the bowl was heavy. As it slid from her grip, Ethon caught it. "Let me help you."

"You'd better," she snapped. "I can't carry everything."

Doe tied the sliced honeyroot in a blue cloth. "It's ready."

Ma Fevermint balanced the bundle on top of her basket. "You'll stay here," she told her daughter.

"Yes, Ma." Doe turned away.

Now Doe thinks I don't like her, Ethon thought miserably as he ran through the village with Ma Fevermint. Harvest mist, chilly and grey, hung in the air. With each step, Ethon's heart sank a little more. As they ran past Ma Kilter's house, there was a sharp bang of shutters.

"Busy hiding her riches," Ma Fevermint said drily. "But even she can't conceal something the size of a bread oven."

Ma Willow, flushed and flustered, was pulling the last of the washing from its drying-line. "What are you doing out?" she called to Ma Fevermint. "It's not safe, Wren, with those soldiers about."

"Summer's Curse. Up at the Larksong's place!"

Abandoning the washing, Ma Willow fled inside.

Ma Fevermint hitched her basket higher. "Poor dearling. I'd be worried, too. The babe's due any day."

Rain started to fall. Scrambling up the last rocky stretch of the path, Ethon slipped on some wet pine needles. His left boot ripped and he gashed the side of his foot on a jagged stone. He gasped with pain and swore.

Ignoring his cursing, Ma Fevermint pulled a strip of linen, soaked in something green, from her remedy basket. "Bind it with this." The cloth smelled of something green and soothing that Ethon did not recognise.

Ma Fevermint, showing him kindness? Too surprised to speak, Ethon wrapped his cut as best he could and hobbled after her.

Inside the cottage, Birda and Chestnut were huddled on the bed, just as he'd left them.

"Are you alright?" Ethon whispered.

Birda nodded.

Pa was sitting on the floor, cradling Dearson's head. Foxwood stood over them, his face dark. Chestnut's eyes followed Foxwood Flint as, standing back to make room for the herbalist, he started to pace. Dearson's face was now the deep yellow of old candle wax. His eye sockets looked as if someone had stained them with blackberry juice. Ethon's heart juddered. Was Dearson asleep, or were they too late? Calmly, Ma Fevermint took jars and bunches of herbs from her basket and laid them out. She gazed at Dearson then sat back on her heels. "He's only a boy. The remedy may be too strong..."

"If he's old enough to work for me then he's old enough to take a man's medicine. Treat him!" ordered Foxwood Flint.

Ma Fevermint sighed. "Well, I have everything I need." She sprinkled the starflower seeds over the slices of honey-root. With expert fingers, she tore the tough, reddish leaves from the robin's blush and squashed them between her palms. As its juice trickled into the bowl, bright as blood, a sickly scent wafted into the air. "I need something to mix it with," she said.

"My knife." Foxwood snapped his fingers and Ethon quickly passed the blade to Ma Fevermint. She held the knife in both hands, as if weighing it. "But this is a weapon. It cannot be used for healing."

"There is no time for delicacy, or debate. Use it!" Foxwood ordered.

Ma Fevermint pursed her lips but plunged the blade into the bowl and started stirring. "Ethon, fetch me some water."

"Not from there." Foxwood stood in front of the barrel. "The moment Dearson drank it, he collapsed. The water is bad."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ethon saw the scrap of sacking he'd fished out of the water barrel. It lay like a filthy smear on the floor. Suddenly he smelled again the dark, oily stench of the worm. A terrible thought snaked into his mind. Suppose the slime was not just disgusting... suppose it was deadly?

Ma Fevermint stroked Dearson's face. "But can't you see? He's turned yellow. Like the sun. That's where Summer's Curse gets its name."

Then Pa spoke. "Our water is pure. You have my word."

Whipping his knife from the herb-bowl, Foxwood flicked the neck of Pa's tunic. Spying the leather thong that held the stone pendant, he lifted it with the tip of his blade. "And why should I trust you?"

Pa fell back as if slapped.

Ethon grabbed a cup and plunged it into the barrel. "I'll show you it is safe. I'll drink it!"

Before anyone could stop him, Ethon drained the cup. He waited for the chill of sickness, the beginnings of a terrible cough. Would he turn yellow first, or simply collapse?

In the silence, Chestnut sneezed.

Foxwood drummed his fingers on his thigh. "It seems the water is good. Let the herbalist continue her work."

Ethon refilled the cup and handed it to Ma Fevermint. Suddenly, the idea that the river-worm's slime could hold evil power seemed ridiculous. Ethon forced himself to concentrate on Ma Fevermint, who was working quickly now. As she added water to the scarlet paste, the potion turned milky. Its sickly smell grew stronger. Birda buried her nose in Poppety's round stomach. Chestnut whimpered.

Foxwood pointed at Dearson. "Sit him up," he ordered Ethon and Pa. "Or he won't be able to drink it."

Ma Fevermint snorted and, despite everything, Ethon smiled. Drink it? Even Birda knew better than that. Soaking a cloth in the cloudy liquid, Ma Fevermint wrung it out and pressed it against Dearson's face, which was now the dark ochre of decaying straw. She wiped his arms and hands. Then, opening his tunic, she rubbed his chest and neck. As she dabbed his face again, Dearson opened his eyes.

"I feel a bit strange," he whispered.

Foxwood sank to his knees. "By the Silver Lady, you've brought him back! Thank you! Thank you!" He took Ma Fevermint's hand and kissed it.

Ethon held his breath, waiting for Ma Fevermint's outrage to erupt. If Pa Fevermint, with his strong stonemason's hands, were to hear of such behaviour this stranger would soon regret it. But Doe's father was far away, helping to build a great palace, and would not return home before the buds of spring burst open, with Doe's two brothers at his side. To Ethon's surprise, Ma Fevermint merely smiled.

"The boy is weak," she told Foxwood. "He'll need to be washed with fire-milk each day for thirty dawns. And he must rest, at least until the first snow falls." She smoothed Dearson's forehead as he sank back into sleep. "He should recover eventually. But with Summer's Curse, you can never be certain."

"The boy is strong," snapped Foxwood, as if Ma Fevermint had somehow insulted his apprentice. "He will recover."

"How does he know?" whispered Birda.

"Shh!" Ethon drew her close.

But Foxwood's dark eyes softened. "Only the Silver Lady knows," he admitted.

"Healing can be a long road," Ma Fevermint said.

Foxwood, his expression hard once again, wiped his knife clean on the edge of his tunic and thrust it back inside his boot. "Then it is lucky I have fine horses," he replied.

The afternoon sun was starting to fade and the ditch behind Hanny Claypotter's cottage was alive with skinny grey lizards. Crouched in the mud, Ethon flinched as yet another twitching creature jumped onto his hand. "I need these sorrel leaves more than you do. We have nothing else to eat," he muttered as he flicked it away from its feeding ground and gathered a wet clump of leaves. He slapped them into a pile.

Dale Dearson now lay in Ma Fevermint's cottage, carried there by Foxwood Flint, who refused any help. The boy was still very sick, but he was out of danger. Ethon pictured Dearson's face. Without the yellow tinge, he was good looking. Barely able to speak, he had still managed to charm everyone with his brave attempts at thanks. And Doe was probably helping to nurse him at this very moment. Ethon wrenched another handful of bitter green leaves from their stalks. The soup he'd make would be thin and sour and the colour of something that belonged in a sheep's bladder. But at least it would be hot. And there was no other choice. Ethon shivered as rain trickled down his back.

"You must work faster!"

Crawling out of the ditch, Ethon froze as he heard the forceful voice ring out. He slid back down. The sorrel grew wild; anyone could pick it. But somehow, with his pockets stuffed, he felt like a thief. Ethon peeped over the edge of the ditch.

"We're a man down. And you must both leave in the morning," Foxwood Flint was striding about shouting with irritation.

Tenblades and Arrowhawk, their arms filled with pots, staggered after him.

"There's dozens more," Hanny chattered, batting her eyelashes at Tenblades. "Would you like to see my favourites?"

"Be quiet, you dolt of a daughter!" yelled her father.

"Put everything down over there and start counting." Foxwood pointed to the grassy area beside the goose-barn.

"That's not a good idea," Pa Claypotter warned.

But Foxwood carried on and, in a screaming white cloud, the geese hurtled out of the barn. With their wings out and their beaks forward, they surrounded Foxwood. Honking and hissing, they nipped at everything they could reach – his knees, his fingers, his backside.

Ethon burst out laughing.

"Call them off!" Foxwood lashed out with his hands and feet but the geese just flapped and snapped harder.

"You're on their patch," Pa Claypotter informed him. "They don't like it."

Foxwood's men dropped the tools and rushed forwards. Ignoring their yells, the geese renewed their attempts to bite Foxwood's rear.

Ethon scrambled from the ditch, wincing as pain shot through his foot. Ripping the sorrel leaves from his pocket, he squashed the stems between his palms, releasing a strong, bitter scent. The geese raised their heads, folded their wings and waddled over to him. Ethon scattered the leaves and the geese started to feed.

Foxwood took something small and shiny from his pocket and lobbed it at Ethon. "Now be off with you, goose-boy."

Hanny burst into giggles. Her father pulled her roughly inside and slammed the door.

Ethon caught the coin and grinned. Ma Kilter might despise the Larksong family, but she never refused silver. They would eat bread today. "Thank you, sir!" he said.

Arrowhawk was standing well away from the geese, adding charcoal lines to the Spearhead Scroll, whilst Tenblades sorted Pa Claypotter's belongings into piles. Two geese, tussling over a particularly tasty leaf, screeched and both men jumped. They were clearly not used to being so close to animals. An idea leaped into Ethon's head.

"I could help," he said.

Foxwood laughed. "You might be able to tend geese, boy, but I very much doubt you can count them."

"Try me. I mean, please try me, sir." Ethon flipped his wet hair from his eyes.

"Ridiculous." Foxwood Flint turned away.

"I can count, I swear!" Ethon shooed the geese back into the barn. "There are seventeen, sir."

Foxwood stroked his beard. "Your foot's wounded. And you're not strong enough to work for me."

"It doesn't hurt," Ethon lied. "And I *am* strong. Let me prove it!"

"Very well." A grin lit Foxwood's face. "Bring me that barrel." He pointed to the huge keg that Hanny's father used to collect rainwater for his potter's wheel. It was brim-full; even Big Fen Ironturner would not be able to move it.

Unless it was empty! Ethon grabbed two buckets and strode over to the barrel. He upended the larger bucket and jumped on top of it, then used the smaller one to scoop water out. When the huge barrel was half empty he jumped down, braced his shoulder against it, and gave it a mighty shove. As the water heaved from side to side, gaining momentum, it started to sway. Ethon took full advantage, using his whole body to topple it. Then he tipped the barrel onto its side and rolled it across the grass. Heaving it upright at Foxwood's feet, he wiped the sweat from his face. "I've done as you asked. You didn't say it had to be full. Now will you hire me?"

Foxwood clapped his hand onto Ethon's shoulder and grinned. "You might lack muscle, boy, but you certainly seem to have brains."

"More useful, sometimes," Arrowhawk murmured.

Tenblades narrowed his eyes. "But the boy lives in a pigsty," he muttered. "And his father is a –"

Foxwood interrupted. "Grand origins do not always produce grand men," he snapped. "The reverse is also true." He turned to Ethon. "It is settled."

"Thank you, sir!" Should he bow? Before Ethon could decide, Foxwood held up his hand.

"So long as you pass the pig test," he said.

Ethon's smile vanished. Would he have to catch one? Kill one? Animals always seemed to know when the end was coming. Their panic-drenched squealing on slaughter day was almost as loud as Ironsong.

Taking the Spearhead Scroll from Arrowhawk, Foxwood pointed to a row of tiny black lines. "You see these marks? Each one represents a pig. And each pig is worth forty silvers. Tell me, how much tax will be owed by someone who owns this many pigs?"

Tenblades sniggered and a pitying smile tugged Arrowhawk's mouth. *Stay calm. You had plenty of practise at Trade, Ethon told himself. And you've been counting beads all summer!* He ran his finger along the line, then back again, to check.

"Nine pigs. Each worth forty silvers. That makes three hundred and sixty altogether."

The men gaped.

“So the Starborn gets thirty-six silvers,” Ethon went on. “It works just like the Trademaker’s commission. Well, when it’s done fairly.” Anger hardened Ethon’s jaw. One day, he would expose Grody Hollowtree for the cheat that he was. But for now, he had a living to earn.

“You have just counted your way into my employment, boy,” Foxwood declared.

Remembering what he’d learned at Trade, Ethon held out his hand. Foxwood raised one eyebrow, but shook it. Arrowhawk smiled. Tenblades snorted. But it made no difference.

The deal was done.

Back at the cottage, Ethon waited until everyone was full of warm soup before he told them that he would be working for Foxwood Flint as Dale Dearson’s replacement for the next two days. Birda’s eyes grew bright and Pa’s nervous hands fell still.

“Does he want you to draw pictures? Pictures of pigs?” Birda squeaked. “Can I help?”

“You’d be good at that — much better than me — but Foxwood Flint needs me for counting, not drawing.” Ethon tucked Birda’s cloak around her and laid her blanket on top. Autumn was whispering in the forest. The night would be cold.

Birda sat up. “You won’t blow the candle out till I’m asleep, will you?”

“Of course not. Fine dreams, Birda.”

“Fair morning.” Birda yawned and snuggled down.

“Your Ma would be proud of you, Ethon, for supporting our family when I cannot,” said Pa. He looped the stone pendant over his head and placed it in Ethon’s hand. Outside, an owl’s long hoot echoed through the trees.

“Take it, son.”

“Why?” Ethon cradled the pendant in his palm. The stone was a soft blue-grey colour, like the dusty skin of blueberries. Its surface was as smooth and comforting as worn leather.

Pa hunched his shoulders. His voice fell to a whisper. "Foxwood Flint reminds me of someone..."

"Who?" Even as he spoke, Ethon knew what the answer would be. Foxwood's black hair was springy, not lank. His eyes shone with purpose, not malice. And he was tall and lean, with no hint of that barrel belly. But there was a likeness, all the same.

Pa's hands twisted in his lap. "The wrong man."

"No, Pa. You're mistaken."

Pa had been right about Grody Hollowtree: he was a cheat. But Foxwood Flint was highborn, a leader of men – and he was doing the Starborn's bidding! There could be no connection. And there must be no accusations.

"You must not speak of it," Ethon said urgently. "Promise me?"

Across the room, Birda mumbled in her sleep. Chestnut snuggled beside her.

"Very well." Pa sighed.

"And you must keep this." Ethon tucked the stone pendant back inside his father's tunic.

Pa pressed his palm to his brow and rubbed, as if trying to press rational thoughts into his head. "I am afraid for you," he said at last.

"There's nothing to fear," Ethon said firmly. "I am just earning silver. That's a good thing, isn't it? You must sleep now."

Ethon tucked Pa up, carefully leaving his ankles exposed. Pa's wounds were starting to heal. Ethon touched his own foot. Ma Fevermint's strip of green linen was dry now. The bleeding had stopped and, with a few drops of the potion she'd left for him, the pain had mellowed to a manageable throb. She'd been kind. And she had practically wept when she saw Dearson's yellow face. Perhaps her usual fierceness was only an act? Ethon pushed the confusing thought away. He reached for the candle and blew.

"Fine dreams," he said into the darkness.

There was no reply.

Pa was already asleep.

As Ethon too drifted into sleep, the stone pendant filled his thoughts. It was worth less than a trotter, never mind a whole pig. It would not merit so

much as a single black line on Foxwood's precious Spearhead Scroll. But it was Pa's only reminder of Ma, and so it was priceless. Ethon closed his eyes, willing a picture of his mother's face to appear. But nothing came. The darkness was complete. Perhaps he had forgotten her forever. Moonlight slid through the hole in the door and washed the damp earth floor with silver. The Silver Lady's pure light rested on Pa's shoulders and rippled over Birda's tangled hair. And there, deep inside Ethon's sleepy mind, was Ma, her voice loving and low and filled with a smile, saying, *Sit here with me, my little barleycorn*. He thought he felt a gentle hand sweep his brow.

But it might just have been a dream.

Chapter Thirteen

Turn-cloak

Ethon was up before dawn and ran down into the village to meet Fen at the old goat shelter as they'd planned. He'd forgotten all about the strange worm and was bursting to tell Fen about his unexpected employment. To his astonishment, Fen's good-natured face grew dark with anger. He hurled a stone against the wall. "You can't."

"But I must," Ethon said. "How else will I feed Birda and Pa this winter?"

"My family won't see you starve. Ma thinks of you like another son. You know that," said Fen, almost shouting.

Ethon pushed his hands through his hair until it stood in wild clumps. "There are eight mouths in your family. I can't take your food. You wouldn't take food from Birda, would you?"

Fen grabbed Ethon's shoulders. "It's not just about food!" he yelled. "Foxwood Flint is a stranger, an outsider. No-one trusts him. If you work for Foxwood, no-one in Greenoak will trust you. Then when he's finished his stupid counting mission and gone, *you'll* be the outsider – forever. Don't you see?"

"I'll tell you what I see!" Ethon shouted back. "I see Birda with arms like twigs. I see Pa as frail as a cobweb. Foxwood may not be one of us but that doesn't make him bad. He has offered me a fist full of silver to take Dearson's place. I can't refuse it. And it's only for two days."

Fen removed his hands, took a step back and looked at Ethon as if sizing up a stranger. "You're making a mistake. There must be another way."

"There isn't." Ethon folded his arms. "Anyway, it's too late. I've already said yes."

"Yes is just a word. Go and tell him you've changed your mind. What's the worst that could happen? You've taken plenty of beatings before now." Fen aimed a mock punch at Ethon's chest and smiled.

"You're right," Ethon said slowly.

Fen's smile blossomed into a grin. "I knew you'd see sense."

But Ethon interrupted. "This isn't just about food. Foxwood may be a stranger but we made a deal – we touched hands – and I will not break it." He stared at Fen, aware that his mouth suddenly felt very dry. Then he ducked under the low doorway and, without looking back, marched towards the Round Room, where his new employer would be arriving at any moment.

"I follow a strictly methodical approach. We miss nothing," Foxwood Flint proclaimed from his seat at the head of the table. The usual Round Room sounds were absent, Ethon noticed. It was as if every scurrying mouse and crackling log was mesmerised by Foxwood's confidence and sense of purpose. Gulping the last of his oak ale and wiping his mouth, Foxwood announced: "Whoever brewed this deserves a roasted goose."

Ethon, sitting barely an arm's length away, found he could not tear his eyes from Foxwood's beard. How did he make it form that neat little point? And why would anyone go to the trouble? Perhaps it was a sign of wealth or rank. But then again, both Tenblades and Arrowhawk had done the same to their beards and they occupied more lowly positions...

Old Hareld nudged him. *Stop staring.*

Ethon flushed but Foxwood was too busy planning the day's work to notice. "We'll start with that sharp-faced baker woman; I'm sure she has plenty to hide," he said with a conspiratorial smile. He shook his tankard. "More ale!"

Ethon jumped to his feet and went to scoop oak ale from the barrel. The surface of Foxwood's tankard shone darkly. He pictured Fen's eyes, sparkling with anger and hurt and something else, something that Ethon was not sure he could name. Was it concern, or fear – or contempt? Ma Kilter might have plenty to hide, but few others in the village did. Suddenly, Ethon saw how it would be when he arrived at his neighbours' homes with the stranger, invading their privacy, exposing their poverty and raising heart-stopping fears about what might come next. Would their livestock be taken away? Their tools? How then would any of them live? They would be powerless to prevent the intrusion and

shocked to discover that Ethon was a willing part of it. What had he done? He pictured bewilderment flooding Pa and Ma Willow's kind faces... Ma Ironturner shielding Seth's face against such betrayal... Doe's trusting eyes filling with disappointment... even Hanny Claypotter, whose good opinion he neither sought nor valued, would turn from him in loud-mouthed disgust.

But he must earn silver for his family.

And had made a deal.

There was no turning back.

Ethon set his jaw and, the moment Foxwood drained the last drop of ale, he bid Old Hareld fair dawnrise, strode to the door and flung it wide. "I'll show you the way to the bread oven, sir."

Ma Kilter was standing rigid outside her cottage. She narrowed her eyes at Ethon. "So you're one of them now?"

"The boy knows his duty," Foxwood Flint said. "I trust you know yours, too, madam? Now let us in."

Ma Kilter met Foxwood's eyes with an expression that made Ethon shiver. When she spoke, her voice was terrifyingly mild. "Of course, sir. I have nothing to hide."

"That remains to be seen." Foxwood kicked aside the straw that lay in a neat swathe across the doorway and strode inside. Ethon knelt and pushed it back onto place. He felt heat rise in his face. Trampling a fresh threshold was as rude as spitting. If Ma Kilter was coldly angry a moment ago, she'd be boiling with rage now. Ethon's chest flooded with a strange jumble of feelings.

"What are you doing out there, boy?" Foxwood shouted. "I'm not paying you to dawdle in the sunshine."

Trying to make himself believe that he was not entering uninvited, Ethon stepped inside. The first thing he saw was an oak table almost as fine as the one in the Round Room. It was flanked by four perfectly polished stools. Despite the fact that Ma Kilter lived alone, an iron pot large enough for a family simmered over the fire. Wooden bowls, stone jars in every size and an extraordinary sky-blue patterned jug sat in a row along a shelf. A length of warm-looking fabric – enough to make a dozen cloaks for Birda – was draped between two hooks, creating a hidden corner on the far side of the room. Beneath the window lay a

carpet woven in reds and greens and glorious, shimmering blues. It reminded him of the Castleborn's clothes. Ma Kilter may be a widow but she was richer – far richer – than Ethon had imagined.

“I'm waiting,” said Foxwood.

Ethon realised his mouth was hanging open. He shut it and, looking around in panic, pointed to the pot-shelf. “Shall I start there?”

Foxwood snorted. “Cooking pots? Don't be a fool.”

He turned to Ma Kilter. “I already know there's a bread oven. I want to see it, and your storage barrels and livestock. And of course your flour-shed. Ethon will make a record. He has sharp eyes, don't you?” he added, clapping Ethon's shoulder. “And a keen sense of where his loyalties lie. Isn't that right, boy?”

“Yes sir.” Avoiding Ma Kilter's eyes, Ethon unfurled the parchment scroll and took a piece of charcoal from his pocket.

And so the counting began.

Foxwood was methodical, thorough and fast. His experienced eyes missed nothing as he marched through Ma Kilter's home, across the yard, in and out of the bake-house. A half-empty sack of flour fell sideways and, as he pushed it back upright, Ethon saw tucked behind it a small leather bag. The bag from Viper's Wood! He grabbed it and pulled its drawstrings open. He recognised the sweet, musky smell immediately: heart's ease mushrooms. Surely Ma Kilter did not use them – she was fierce and nasty, but never wild. What could she need them for? Ethon shoved the bag back before anyone saw, and hurried outside.

Ma Kilter's chickens, unused to visitors, formed a trembling huddle and eyed him with alarm. Even the cockerel bowed his head and busied himself pecking in the dust.

“Make sure you count them all,” Foxwood ordered.

Ethon made twelve marks on the parchment. He jumped as Foxwood kicked the water trough that stood beside the bake-house. Freckles, Ma Kilter's enormous pink-and-black speckled pig, sauntered out from behind it. He stared at Foxwood, turned around and farted. Somehow managing to stifle his laughter, Ethon saw a faint glow of satisfaction warm Ma Kilter's pinched cheeks. Hastily, he made a new mark in the pig column.

Ignoring them both, Foxwood strode back inside. Ma Kilter hurried after him and, moving very carefully, positioned herself in front of the draped cloth. Ethon saw her hands knot. To his horror, she caught his eye, shook her head and mouthed, *please*. Ethon's heart skipped a beat. If Ma Kilter was pleading with him then something must be very wrong. Despite the silver that Foxwood would pay him, could he really take a stranger's side against a neighbour? Ethon opened his mouth and words rushed out. "I think I missed something outside. A barrel of... of... mead! Let me show you where it was."

"We missed nothing," Foxwood said coolly, his eyes on Ma Kilter's tense face. "Stand aside," he commanded.

Ma Kilter lifted her chin and for a second Ethon thought she was going to argue. But, eyes blazing, she remained silent. Foxwood drew the curtain, revealing a large, domed trunk with elaborate iron hinges. Foxwood turned the key, heaved the lid open and plunged his hands inside. He held aloft its treasures: a flurry of pale linen garments, threaded with ribbon. Ethon wished he could disappear. But Foxwood, his hands full of Ma Kilter's under-clothes, showed no sign of embarrassment, and not a flicker of shame.

"You must barter well for your flour, madam, and sell a considerable quantity of bread, to afford so many delicate items," he said. "I salute your skill."

He slammed the lid.

Ethon flinched.

"We are done here. Good day, madam," Foxwood said airily. He turned on his heel and left.

Avoiding Ma Kilter's eyes, Ethon stepped carefully over the threshold, closed the door gently behind him and followed Foxwood towards Pa Willow's enclosure. His face was hot but tears of laughter wet his eyes – wait till he told Fen!

Fen who thought him a fool and a traitor.

Ethon rubbed his sleeve across his face and walked faster.

Foxwood stopped a few paces from Pa and Ma Willow's neat cottage.

"Let's see what we have so far," he demanded. "Any mead barrels, I wonder?"

Not trusting himself to answer, Ethon handed Foxwood the Spearhead Scroll.

Foxwood scrutinised the parchment. "You have done well, Ethon. My faith in you was not entirely misplaced."

Ethon said nothing.

"Your attempts to protect a woman's modesty do you credit," Foxwood continued. "But I am your employer. I trust you to do this work for me, and I do not give my trust lightly. Our business arrangement is not just about the silver you'll be paid. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Ethon promised.

Ahead, he could see Ma Willow stirring the washing in its vast round tub and scraping winter-bark into the water to make it froth. Bubbles floated in the air like tiny clouds. Ma Willow straightened and massaged her back. The dome of her stomach seemed impossibly large. Anxiety squeezed Ethon's ribs. If he could not resist sour Ma Kilter's plea for help, how would he stop himself protecting people he cared about?

"Good dawnrise, sir – and to you, Ethon," Ma Willow said as they approached, puzzlement in her eyes she tried to work out what Ethon Larksong could possibly be doing in the company of the stranger.

"And fair morning to you, madam. I trust you are well?" Foxwood said smoothly.

"Perfectly well, thank you," Ma Willow replied. "And how is your apprentice? I heard he had..." she stopped, clearly unwilling to name the dreaded sickness.

Ethon thrust his hands deep in his pockets and said quickly, "Dale Dearson has been, er, quite unwell but Ma Fevermint believes he will recover. He must have got sick before he came here. Everyone else is fine," he added firmly.

Ma Willow glanced anxiously from Ethon to Foxwood, stroked her belly and whispered, "But what if it's catching?"

"The herbalist says not," Foxwood said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "If she is wrong then may the Silver Lady help us all." He coughed, straightened and resumed his bossy manner. "Now, let us in for we have work to do. With Ethon's help I will count every asset you own. And I need to know the exact size of your reed beds."

Looking dazed, Ma Willow ushered them in. Ethon stepped over the threshold in an exaggerated way that he hoped Foxwood would notice. The cottage was plainly furnished but light and very clean. Dozens of beautifully woven rush baskets sat along one wall. The largest basket, longer and shallower than the others, was lined with soft white fabric. A crib, Ethon realised, all ready for the baby.

“They are the finest quality, sir, and sell for ten silvers apiece,” Ma Willow said. “But this one is not for sale,” she added, stroking the edges of the baby basket.

Ethon’s heart sank. This was about tax, not Trade. The value of items should be downplayed if at all possible. Surely Ma Willow understood that?

Foxwood’s eyes rested on Ma Willow’s stomach. “A thousand blessings on your cradle, madam,” he said. Then he turned to Ethon. “Count the lot,” he ordered. “I’m going to see where the weaver’s got to.”

Ma Willow sank onto her fire-stool. “What is going on, Ethon? That man is a stranger, and I am not sure he means well. And you are helping him. I don’t understand.”

Ethon knelt and faced her. “Working for him is my only chance to earn our silver for the Cold Coffin. I haven’t got a choice.” He fetched a small, new-looking fire-stool and slid it under Ma Willow’s feet.

“I know you’re a good boy,” Ma Willow said, hiding a yawn with her hand. “But taking sides with a stranger... people will talk.”

“They already do,” Ethon replied.

Unused to daytime rest, Ma Willow’s eyelids drooped. A tiny snore escaped. Ethon unrolled the Spearhead Scroll and, working as fast as he could, counted the towers of baskets. Thankfully, Pa Willow took an orderly approach to his work and each pile contained the same number of baskets, making Ethon’s task much easier. He discovered that small baskets nested inside larger ones, and those lay inside larger ones still. Ethon only included the outer ones; who would check?

He tiptoed outside and studied the marks he’d made on the parchment. It looked like a pattern, he thought. The sun was warm on his back and Foxwood was nowhere to be seen. Idly, Ethon gazed at the cottage in front of him. It was

so big, so neat, so *unbroken*. There were no gaps, no holes, no splintered edges. The windows were perfect squares. Just beneath the thatch, where it stuck out above the door, he saw the knotted rope that Pa Willow had nailed up after he and Ma Willow made their binding vows. It had rained that day last summer, Ethon recalled. Everyone said it was a sign of luck since, once wet, the knot would be almost impossible to unpick. *A union blessed by water*, Fen's mother had sighed, happy tears in her eyes. Hanny Claypotter had giggled her way through the entire ceremony, but it hadn't stopped Larken Rattlebone gazing longingly at her. Larken was tall and freckled and, despite his sixteen summers, painfully shy. Ethon and Fen did not care: they admired him for his wondrous skill with a sling shot. They'd spent the entire feast-night distracting him, in the hope that Hanny would get bored waiting and make eyes at someone else. She did – and Larken had moped for weeks. That was before I started to like Doe, Ethon realised. Had he even noticed her that night? The sound of shouting cut through his thoughts. Pa Willow, back from the reed-beds, was squaring up to Foxwood Flint.

“You went inside my home, when I was not there, with my good lady all alone and in the budding way? Have you no shame?” Pa Willow demanded.

“How dare you speak to me like that!” Foxwood grabbed Pa Willow's wrists and, with a ferocious twist, forced him to his knees.

Pa Willow cried out.

“I was there too!” Ethon shouted, running forwards. “Ma Willow is perfectly safe. She's having a nap.”

“Swear it on the Silver Lady,” Pa Willow gasped.

“I swear,” Ethon replied, drawing the sign of the circle in the earth so that his neighbour could see it.

Pa Willow stopped struggling. Foxwood relaxed his grip. Ethon took Pa Willow's elbow and helped him to his feet.

“A nap, you say?” he muttered, as if it were some kind of joke.

“With her feet up,” Ethon promised.

“Go and see for yourself,” Foxwood growled. “I am a man of honour. I offered blessings to your cradle,” he added, looking offended.

Pa Willow strode off.

So did Foxwood, in the other direction. "You will help me measure the reed beds," he barked, beckoning Ethon after him as though calling a dog to heel.

They climbed over the stile and walked through Low Meadow. Ethon's stomach rumbled. It was almost noon. Even a bowl of sorrel soup would be welcome. Pa and Birda would be eating theirs now; Ethon would scavenge for berries for himself later.

Foxwood halted as they reached the edge of Pa Willow's reed beds. "I'll stride, you count," he said. Foxwood marched along the edge towards the river, shouting as he reached the water's edge. "Forty strides."

Ethon hurried to make his marks on the scroll.

Foxwood crashed his way through the reeds, parallel to the river, and yelled again. "Twenty four!"

He retraced his steps and, his face invigorated by the exertion, grinned as he reached Ethon. "So then, whip-smart. Forty lots of twenty four – what does that come to?"

"Nine hundred and sixty," Ethon replied. Foxwood must be testing him again, for surely he could make the calculation himself?

Foxwood's grin widened. "I chose well," he said. "It seems there's more of value in Greenoak than I expected, in more ways than one. Those reed beds are a good size. The new tax will help raise the funds the Starborn needs."

"For his army," Ethon prompted, spotting his chance to find out more now that Foxwood was in a good mood.

"Indeed," Foxwood agreed. "And it is a costly undertaking. Armies need horses and weapons and armour and, of course, men – thousands of men." His eyes lit up as if picturing himself leading a vast battalion.

"Have you ever fought in a battle, sir?" Ethon asked.

In answer, Foxwood drew back his sleeve and showed Ethon a scar that reached from his broad, muscular wrist all the way to his elbow. "The enemy scratched, but my sword was stronger," he said. His dark eyes danced and soon Ethon's head was full of Foxwood's war tales: his very first battle, after which his courage was the talk of every tavern; the time he outwitted his opponents

under cover of mist; the special design of his sword that made it the sharpest and strongest ever forged.

“Did you ride Hunter into battle?” Ethon asked, entranced. Foxwood’s stories were so much more exciting than anything he’d heard at Old Hareld’s fireside, let alone the familiar childhood tales of their story beads.

“Hunter?” Foxwood stroked his beard, confused.

That was the name Birda had chosen, Ethon realised. “Er, your horse,” he said quickly.

“Oh, you mean Warrior,” Foxwood said. “My brave, loyal companion! That horse once crossed a river to save my life. He has seen many battlefields. But enough of that. It is time for our noon meal.”

It was a relief to sit in the cool silence of the Round Room while Foxwood examined the marks Ethon had made during their morning’s work.

“You have done well, boy,” he said at last. “And good work deserves a good meal.” He whipped the cloth from the platter of food that had been left for him, and pushed it towards Ethon. “Plenty here to share,” he said.

Ethon grabbed a pie, crammed it in to his mouth, chewed his way through a hunk of bread and polished off a bowl of plums. When at last he looked up Foxwood was watching him. Was he in trouble? “I’m, I’m sorry, sir,” he stammered. “It’s just I was hungry. I’m always hungry,” he added.

Foxwood wiped his mouth and said drily but not unkindly, “With that fat belly of yours I’d never have guessed. Eat your fill, boy.”

Ethon did.

With only a few hours till dusk, Foxwood decided they would visit the gaoler’s home next and after that the Fevermint’s cottage; they would leave the forge and the rest of the village until tomorrow. Pa Rattlebone’s cottage was small, with walls that leaned at strange angles, and the thatch was bare in places. The door was made of blackened oak and chains hung at either side. Pa Rattlebone looked shocked, then disappointed, when Ethon stepped over his threshold after Foxwood. Larken, silent as usual, lowered his eyes and fiddled with the arrow he was fletching.

“We have nothing of value, sir,” Lor Rattlebone began. “My profession is a worthy one, but I fear it does not provide a substantial living.”

“We manage well enough,” Ma Rattlebone said loyally, stroking the heads of her youngest children. Her own thick fair hair, neatly braided, reached almost to her waist. *Like Ma’s did*, Ethon thought, suddenly remembering the way Ma used to tickle his face with the end of her plait. He swallowed. This was no time for memories, especially nice ones. He must concentrate.

“I will be the one to judge value.” Foxwood told Pa Rattlebone. “Ethon will record *everything*,” he added sharply.

There were no mysterious trunks or brightly patterned rugs here. Everything was plain and patched and poor. Supper, laid out on the scrubbed table, consisted of one loaf and a platter of eggy mess too small for a family of six. Foxwood strode outside. Ma Rattlebone’s bees seemed to know something was wrong; usually the hives buzzed with activity. Perhaps the old saying was true: *you can’t hide trouble from a bee*. The family’s pig, an elderly sow named Sunny on account of her morose nature, stood by an empty trough with her equally moody sister Sparkle.

“They are old, hardly worth anything,” Ethon pleaded. Foxwood raised one eyebrow. “The pigs, I mean,” Ethon explained. “Sunny is as old as I am. Fifteen summers.”

Foxwood stroked his beard and waited. His mouth twitched as if he was trying not to smile.

“Fourteen, then,” Ethon admitted. “Next year.”

“Ancient.” Foxwood’s eyes danced. He seemed warm, funny, like a favourite uncle or older brother. The sort of man you could look up to. But as he walked back through the cottage, he became stern once again, announcing crisply, “Nothing to count. We are leaving.”

Ma Rattlebone would not look at Ethon but Larken nodded, and Lor touched Ethon’s shoulder before shutting the door.

As Ethon led Foxwood Flint towards Doe’s cottage his feet felt heavier with each step. His injured foot throbbed. As they passed the old goat shelter, Ethon heard children shouting inside it. They were using it as a den, just as he and Fen had when they were small, and were arguing about which game to play next: Dragon Hot, Dragon Cold or Hidey-Hidey? Stones and Swords, which mainly involved chasing and fighting, was Ethon’s favourite. He and Fen were

perfect opponents, one quick and the other strong, which made it all the more fun. But now Fen was really against him. Would they ever be friends again? He'd already upset Doe yesterday with his sharp words: *It's not Doe I want*. It wasn't true. He wanted her friendship. Needed it, now more than ever.

Foxwood banged on Doe's door, making the circle of autumn flowers that decorated it shed their seeds. As Ma Fevermint opened the door, her eyes darted from Ethon to Foxwood Flint and back again. Ethon could see realisation blossoming in her eyes: a Greenoak lad, willingly helping this arrogant outsider, intent on bringing them all ruin! She pressed her lips into a savage white line. Head bowed, Ethon stepped inside. The main room of the cottage was cool and shadowed and smelled of green. Doe sat by the cold fire, hugging her knees. Beside her, Paws arched her back and hissed at the intruders. Ignoring them both, Foxwood announced, "I see you have a fine orchard, madam. We'll count the fruit trees and measure the land. But first, I wish to see my apprentice."

Ma Fevermint gestured to the little door that led to the upper floor. Foxwood lifted the latch and climbed the stairs two at a time, calling Dearson's name.

Ma Fevermint turned on Ethon. "You would take a stranger's side against your own people, and do his bidding?"

"He offered me silver. We have none," Ethon said simply.

Doe buried her face in her hands. "That's my fault," she whispered.

Ethon understood immediately that Doe did not feel betrayed, like Fen; she felt responsible. He was not sure which was worse. Ethon crouched by Doe's side. "You saved my Pa from prison!"

Ma Fevermint pulled him away. "I do not wish to remember that day," she said with a shudder. "And I do not wish to welcome a *turn-cloak* into my home. Go and dig up some more honey-root," she ordered Doe. "Dale will need the fire-milk treatment for many more dawns yet."

So it was Dale now, rather than Dearson, Ethon thought bitterly as Doe fled.

Doe's mother shoved Ethon towards the door. "And you can go and count my fruit trees, if that's what you are here for. Count every apple, every pip if it pleases you!" she cried.

Foxwood clattered back into the room. "My apprentice does well, thanks to you," he said warmly and gave Ma Fevermint a little bow.

Ma Fevermint shot Ethon a sly look. "My daughter takes care of him too," she said. "And we both enjoy hearing his stories of the city and the sea." Her voice softened. "Dale has travelled far for one so young."

Ethon flushed. No wonder Doe was impressed. He had never even crossed the Dawnbright River. Would he ever see the sea? It was, he realised suddenly, the thing he wanted most in the world, apart from Pa and Birda's wellbeing. And it was about as likely to happen as Ma Kilter baking him a honey-cake. He scowled at his boots.

"Show me the orchard," Foxwood commanded, the charming smile gone.

Soon Ethon's hand ached from making marks on the scroll; there were far more trees in the Fevermint orchard than he'd realised. As they reached the far end, the ground sloped away. From here, they could see all the way down to the Dawnbright River. It was choppy today. Waves scudded from bank to bank in anxious ripples. Right in the middle of the river White Rock stuck up like a big proud thumb. The landmark was so familiar to Ethon that he barely noticed it, but Foxwood seemed transfixed, watching as the waves crashed against its chalky sides.

"There's a saying about that rock, sir," Ethon said. "A prophecy: *when White Rock turns black, it is a sign of sorrow. In the darkness, something precious has been lost.* Nobody knows what it means. Not even Old Hareld."

But Foxwood's thoughts were far away. "That rock reminds me of a sculpture in the City of Stars," he said.

"What's a sculpture?" Ethon asked, feeling like Birda.

"It is when someone carves a piece of stone to make it look like something else. A man, for instance," Foxwood explained.

Ethon frowned. He could imagine why a stonemason like Doe's pa would carve stones for making buildings – but using their precious time and tools to making a model of a person? It was the strangest idea. All the same, he longed to see it: a man made of stone...

"The statue is of me," Foxwood went on. "The Starborn commissioned it after I returned from a great victory. The Battle of Burning Sun, it was called,

because it took place in a land where the day's heat is as fierce as a forge. Not like here," he said, shivering.

Turning back towards the orchard, Foxwood stopped to stare at the blackened arms of the raven's wing tree that marked the entrance to the Fevermint's wild garden. Half expecting to see a shred of green cloth clinging to its sinister branches, Ethon tightened his fists. One day, Grody Hollowtree would pay!

The wild garden looked dead, useless. But by the first blossom, it would be buzzing with green life once again... and the most valuable herbs. A cold thought slithered into Ethon's mind. If the Fevermints' need for silver was not so pressing after all, why had Doe accused Pa of scaremongering? He shook the thought away. How could he doubt Doe, the sweetest, most loyal of friends? He stood silently as Foxwood Flint gazed around him. Foxwood would certainly want Ethon to count the treasures in the wild garden... if he knew what he was seeing.

Ethon stayed silent.

"Nothing here," Foxwood decided. "We're finished."

Ethon nodded humbly.

Foxwood yawned. "I am ready for a pie. You may go home. We start again tomorrow at dawn."

Without even bidding Ethon *go well*, he took the Spearhead Scroll and strode away.

Ethon set off too, eager to see Birda and Pa. But something made him look back and there, staring from the attic room window of Doe's cottage, was Foxwood Flint's apprentice. He must have seen everything; had he guessed that Ethon had concealed valuable assets from his employer? If Foxwood were to find out... Ethon shuddered. But Dearson held a finger to his lips. He wouldn't tell. Trying to ignore the lump in his throat, Ethon gave a quick bow, turned on his heel and headed for home.

Before he'd even reached the top of the path, Birda was dashing towards him with Chestnut bounding at her heels. "You're here!" she shouted and flung her arms around his waist.

"I am, little barleycorn," Ethon agreed, laughing.

Birda drew back, sniffing. “Plums?” she gasped.

Ethon knelt and stroked Chestnut’s silky head. “Not today.” He could not meet Birda’s eyes.

“Maybe tomorrow?” Birda asked, skipping inside.

“I’ll do my best,” Ethon promised.

Pa struggled to his feet and opened his arms to Ethon. “How did it go today, son? I hope Foxwood Flint treated you well – and treated our neighbours with respect.”

Feeling how Pa’s frail arms trembled, Ethon helped him back to his mattress. The raw red rings around Pa’s ankles had, he noticed, faded to pink. Best of all, Pa’s voice was calm and his eyes were steady.

“You’re back,” said Ethon shyly.

“I was never far away,” Pa replied quietly. “Not this time.”

Ethon stared, confused. Was Pa trying to say that he had not taken heart’s ease after all? But he’d been distraught when he burst into the Showing, wild-eyed and shaking. The accusation he’d made against Grody Hollowtree was true, of course, but that hardly explained Pa’s wild state – or his absence. There must be something else, something that Pa was not telling him. Before he could ask, Birda stamped her foot and burst out, “Stop whispering. You’re making Chestnut cross!”

Ethon lifted Birda onto his lap and started to tell them about his first day in Foxwood Flint’s service. Birda made him describe Ma Kilter’s carpet again and again. Was it mostly red, or mostly green, or mostly blue? Was it as bright as the Castleborn’s robe? And why would you put something so beautiful *on the floor*? Ethon’s head started to ache. He reached for some water and nibbled the hunk of bread they’d saved for him. It was odd to feel full. He did not mention the mortifying contents of Ma Kilter’s trunk or the way Ma Rattlebone refused to meet his eye. And, instead of describing the way Foxwood’s cruel grip on Pa Willow made him gasp with pain, he told them about the honourable battles Foxwood had led, with Warrior his most loyal companion. Like Fen used to be. Ethon slumped, exhausted.

“It is my turn to tell you a tale now,” Pa said, tucking them both up. “And Birda shall choose.” He held out the leather bag. No-one knew how old their

story beads were, not even Pa. And no-one knew who had carved the pictures on them, or if some had been broken or lost or swapped. But they all knew Birda's favourite and how good she was at finding it. Now, she felt in the bag with clever fingers and, her face all innocence, passed a disc to Pa. Grabbing Poppety, she stuck her thumb in her mouth and closed her eyes. Chestnut settled at Pa's feet, one ear lifted.

"There was once a small but very brave squirrel," Pa began.

But Ethon was already asleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Soursigh

Usually, it was the scatterbirds' chirpy song that woke Ethon. But today when he awoke it was barely light. There was no dawn chorus, Ethon realised, but there was a stench in the air strong enough to wake a sleeping giant.

"What's that horrid smell?" Birda held her hair across her face. "And where's Pa?"

"I don't know," Ethon said, trying not to retch.

His stomach lurched as he saw that Pa's bed was indeed empty. Pa was still weak and in pain; he could not have gone far. But still anxiety nagged, edged with the anger that never seemed far behind. How could Pa abscond again, knowing the trouble it had caused last time?

Ethon bent to comfort Chestnut, who crept around the cottage with his tail low, then hurried outside. There was no sign of Pa. Ethon marched back inside, settled Birda with a cup of fresh water and promised that he would be back soon. He ran down the path towards Pa Willow's cottage. Perhaps he would know the cause of the smell. Perhaps he would know where Pa was, too. The smell seemed stronger the further Ethon ran. His stomach lurched and, unable to stop himself, he dropped to his knees and threw up. With so little food inside him, it hurt. Ethon spat the revolting taste of vomit from his mouth and charged on, holding his nose.

Pa Willow was standing under the beech trees, stroking the strangers' horses to reassure them. He was deep in conversation with Old Hareld. Ethon's heart lifted. With his seventy summers, the village Elder had seen, heard – and smelled – just about everything. He would know what to do. And best of all, Pa was with them. Ethon, still feeling shaky from being sick, relaxed a little. Pa and the others were all holding cloths to their faces and breathing in deeply.

"Goog gawnrise," Ethon mumbled, still holding his nose. "Whassat awful smell?"

Pa Willow dipped a rag in a bucket of reddish-brown liquid, wrung it out and handed it to Ethon. "Breathe through this. It's clay-berry juice," he explained. "It makes the smell bearable, at least for a while. Night-mint leaves are better – we'll just have to hope Ma Fevermint has plenty."

Ethon took the rag. "But what is it?" he repeated.

"We'd better tell him," Pa said.

The Ethon's mouth grew dry. "What's going on?"

"It is Soursigh," Old Hareld said, his face grim. "Come to ruin our harvest with her poisonous breath."

"But Soursigh is tiny!" Ethon said. "That little creature could not harm a whole village."

The men stared at him. Pa frowned and drew Ethon aside. "Are you feeling unwell, son?" he said. "You know the legend just as we all do. Soursigh is huge. Enormous. Think of the size of The Offering."

Ethon rubbed his face. How could he explain his Soursigh theory without admitting he had taken one fish too many from the Dawnbright River? And suppose he wasn't even right? Like everyone in Greenoak, he'd grown up hearing about great river serpent whose skin was so thick that no dagger could pierce it. She had no cause to harm people so long as she was left in peace. But once, long ago, a reckless young soldier with a new blade to try out and a reputation to forge heard about the monster. He bet his best friend that he could kill Soursigh, but he only succeeded in enraging her. And, while he escaped with his life, his good friend was killed. As a warning to the whole community, the serpent destroyed the harvest with her poisonous breath. Devastated by grief and shame, the young soldier renounced violence. But he was banished from his community all the same. Just eighteen summers old, he went to live as a hermit in the hills. His hair turned white overnight. Over time, rumours spread that he was a wise man in disguise. Nearby villagers started asking his advice. Eventually, nourished by their faith in him, the young soldier did become wise. He helped people resolve their disputes and live calmly together, and he found peace himself. Some said that he still lived, but no-one could say where.

And The Offering, faithfully set out each day by Ma Kilter, was the price the village must pay to stay safe.

Ethon turned to Old Hareld: “But Soursigh has never harmed our harvest before. Why now? And how can we stop her?”

“Perhaps the stranger provoked her. He is arrogant enough,” Pa Willow said, rubbing his shoulder.

“There is no way to stop Soursigh once roused,” Old Hareld said. “No sword can slay her, and nothing can protect our crops. The oak-ale hops must be gathered this very day and we will need every man, woman and child for the task.”

“But can’t we even try? Foxwood says his sword is the strongest and the sharpest ever forged,” Ethon argued. “He’s never lost a battle, he told me so himself – ”

Old Hareld interrupted, his voice sharper than Ethon had ever heard it: “No! Violence is not the answer. We must gather the harvest early, save what we can, and beseech the Silver Lady to drive Soursigh away. It is decided.”

“But,” Ethon began.

Pa laid a hand on his shoulder. “Do not argue with our Elder, son. Go and fetch Birda. The harvesting must start right now.”

Ethon opened his mouth then closed it again. He spun round and strode away.

“And not a word to Foxwood Flint!” Old Hareld called after him. “He is a stranger here – someone we neither know nor trust. This matter does not concern him.”

Ethon picked up a stick and slashed at the bushes. How dare they treat him like a child – a child who could not be trusted! How dare Pa act like a father now? And how dare Old Hareld speak of Foxwood Flint so dismissively? He was Ethon’s employer – his only hope. Without him, they would starve! Ethon sliced at an overhanging branch. A chunk of wood crashed to the ground, sending a hidden crop of hazelnuts bouncing along the ground. As Ethon scrambled to collect them, a hard truth formed in his mind: sometimes attack was the only way to achieve the things you wanted, whether it was food for the table or glory in battle. Defying Old Hareld was unthinkable, of course: even Big Fen Ironturner, who was twice the old man’s size, would not dare to do such a thing. Ethon would not tell Foxwood the story of Soursigh.

But someone would.

Ma Kilter most probably, or Hanny Claypotter. They both loved stirring things up.

And Foxwood Flint loved a fight.

By the time the sun had risen, everyone was gathered round Ironsong. Ma Fevermint and Doe were handing out large, soft night-mint leaves. Ethon held his to his face, grateful for the relief it brought from the indescribable stench of Soursigh. Hanny was larking around with hers, holding it over her head like a shawl. Ethon grinned, despite everything. Birda jumped up and down by his side, her eyes bright at the prospect of joining in with the harvest for the first time. The task must be done with all speed. Every mother who could be spared must help, Old Hareld announced, along with every child who could be trusted with a sharp implement.

Mead Ironturner was bawling, refusing his mother's comfort. "How come Birda is allowed to do harvesting and I'm not," he howled. "She only has seven summers and I have eight!"

"Birda is used to sharp tools. You'll be more help at home, my dearling," Ma Ironturner said, jiggling baby Seth.

"No – you'll make me look after *him*!" Mead yelled. He ran away and bumped straight into Foxwood Flint. Foxwood, play-acting, drew his sword. Mead screamed and ran back to his mother.

"For shame – frightening little children like that," Ma Fevermint tutted.

Ethon caught Fen's eye. Mead was a pest; he would get no sympathy from them. Fen smiled. Then, realising his mistake, he turned away. Ethon shredded his night-mint leaf. Fen was clearly still angry. Now Ethon was angry too. Working for Foxwood Flint was his only choice. Why could Fen not see that?

Foxwood strode up to Old Hareld, swishing his blade. "I have heard the tale of Soursigh," he said.

Hanny smirked.

“I can see that you are preparing to bring in the harvest at all speed,” Foxwood continued. “That is a wise move. But I propose another. I am a soldier, not a scribe. And my blade is the finest in all the land. I will rid you of the beast!”

“Do not trouble yourself, sir,” Old Hareld said. “You have work for the Starborn to complete, do you not? You said yourself, you are here to count, not to kill. In any case, it is not possible.”

“I was talking about people, not serpents,” said Foxwood smoothly. “And of course it is possible, since no creature is a match for my sword. I need a guide. There will be a fist full of silver in return – and of course, you’ll be helping your whole community. What nobler act could there be?” he said. He smiled, his eyes alight with charm – and a challenge. “Who will volunteer?”

Ma Ironturner was by Fen’s side in an instant, wagging her finger in his face. “Don’t you dare.”

“What’s a volunteer?” Birda asked.

No-one was listening: Pa made to grab Ethon and Old Hareld stepped in front of him, but Ethon was too quick for them. Planting his feet wide, he bowed before Foxwood Flint.

“Excellent,” said the stranger.

They touched hands, and it was done.

Fen crossed his arms, his face dark with fury.

Ethon looked away.

Old Hareld yelled at the villagers: “Do not stand gawping – we have a harvest to bring in before Soursigh destroys it!” Beard bouncing and robes flapping, the old man marched across the Round towards Cropper’s Meadow where the oak-ale hops stretched in russet-coloured rows as neat as plaits. Everyone followed, carrying knives, scythes and baskets. Everyone except Pa. He shoed Birda ahead and watched until she was safely swinging on Doe’s hand. Then he turned to Ethon. “I cannot stop you, son, now that you have touched hands on it. But I can give you this. And this time, I insist. It will protect you where I cannot.” He looped Ma’s stone pendant over Ethon’s head. And before Ethon could argue – or even say goodbye – Pa walked away.

“Rifts can be healed,” Foxwood remarked crisply. “Serpents, however, cannot; not once they’ve met my sword! Show me the quickest way to the river.”

“But what about the bait?” Ethon asked.

Foxwood raised one eyebrow. “Did I forget to mention? *You* are the bait,” he said.

Ethon froze. No wonder Pa and Old Hareld were so angry with him. No amount of silver was worth such a stupid risk. What had he done?

Foxwood slapped his thigh and guffawed. “My friends in the City of Stars would pay good silver just to see your expression,” he said. “Your job is to show me the way, not get eaten alive. I am, however, prepared to sacrifice the joint of meat intended for my dinner – laced with this.” He took a clay jar from his pocket and held it up between finger and thumb. Ethon recognised the Fevermint symbol, a circle of flowers, stamped into its surface. “The herbalist says that this will make the meat irresistible to Soursigh,” Foxwood said. “And once she is lured close, my blade will do the rest.” He grinned and patted the hilt of his sword.

“I know a short cut,” said Ethon.

“Excellent!” Foxwood clapped Ethon’s shoulder.

The comradely gesture filled Ethon with pride. He shoved back his shoulders and led the way. As they jumped over Pa Willow’s style and entered the woods, Foxwood grabbed a stick and slashed at the ferns that covered the ground, as if cutting down enemies. Ethon knew every leaf of the forest, every stick and stem; Foxwood did not. *Leading is harder than iron in winter*, Old Hareld had once told him. But that wasn’t always true, Ethon decided as he headed towards the river. For some, following was harder.

Even at this distance, surrounded by an army of trees, they could hear the wild thrashing of water. Something was beating the river with terrifying power. Ethon’s confidence dripped away as he pictured the real Soursigh – the vast monster from the cave, not the miniature beast he’d caught by mistake – writhing in furious circles. According to the legend, its tail was as heavy as six oxen and as strong as one hundred men.

As they left the cover of the woods, an eerie silence fell. Was Soursigh exhausted – or was she waiting for them? Ethon’s skin prickled and his palms felt damp. He had never felt so alert – or so afraid – as he and Foxwood picked their way through the reeds and past the clumps of spiky knife-balm. He gripped

Ma's stone pendant. It felt warm, solid and comforting, a little lump of love. Ahead, White Rock gleamed like a block of ice in the middle of the water. Where the river curved round to the left, Ethon could see Fogger's Leap. The great stone plinth jutted out twenty paces, high above the water. It was said that its dark underside hid a secret tunnel, allowing the Fogger himself to slip up and down river unseen, ready to wreak havoc and misery. But that was long ago, before the Silver Lady rose, banishing the Fogger forever. Now the hollow beneath Fogger's Leap was home only to frogs and bats.

Ethon tiptoed along the riverbank towards the secret hideout. Built stick by stick, summer by summer, it was Fen's pride and joy. Packed with moss, it blended so well into the tall green reeds that no-one other than Ethon or Fen had ever found it. Ethon paused. Fen was his best friend. He had never imagined he would share their secret place with anyone else. The thought was as bleak as a dark winter day. He'd been quick to question Fen's loyalty. But what about his own? What sort of friend was he?

Foxwood Flint was in no mood for hesitation. "Hurry up!" he ordered. Crouching, Foxwood pushed Ethon inside the shelter and held out the bag and his knife. "Prepare the bait."

Ethon cut a slit into the meat and poured the contents of the potion-jar into the heart of the joint. The liquid oozed like honey and smelled delicious. Ethon's hands shook and he spilled some. Desperately hungry, he was about to lick his fingers when Foxwood grabbed his wrist. "No! Do not taste it, unless you want a particularly nasty case of bowel-blast," he warned, sloshing water from his flagon over Ethon's hand and scrubbing at it with the bait-bag.

Splash.

Splash.

SPLASH.

Soursigh was on the move again.

Foxwood crouched to peer through Fen's carefully-crafted eye hole. Mist drifted over the water's surface. As soon as it cleared a little, Foxwood pointed to a wide, flat stone half submerged in the lapping water. "Quickly. Put it there."

Clutching the bait, Ethon tried not to tremble. Soursigh was a river creature, but they were at the very edge here. Who knew how far from the

water its jaws could reach? But there was no going back. Ethon clenched his teeth, and crept out of the shelter. How many paces until he reached the flat stone? Twelve, he judged. He set off down the shingle. Every footstep seemed to crunch on the pebbles more sharply than the last and the roar of his heartbeat was louder in his ears than the crashing of water. The riverbank sloped away unexpectedly and, skidding, Ethon fell onto his backside.

“Careful, boy,” Foxwood Flint shouted.

Ethon lobbed the bait onto the flat stone and, with fear pulsing in his veins, scrambled back up the slope.

“Faster!” Foxwood ordered.

Ethon reached the reeds. He was almost safe! Then he noticed the look on Foxwood Flint’s face and, with aching slowness, he turned to look back. Ethon gasped, for White Rock was not white any more. It jutted from the water like a column of iron. The old prophecy came to him: *When White Rock turns black, it is a sign of sorrow. In the darkness, something precious has been lost.* Then Ethon realised that the rock was not changed, but engulfed, gripped by heavy black coils. At the tip of the rock, a pointy tail flickered. The coils started to move and ripples spread across the surface of the river. Soursigh was swimming right towards him! But the waves mesmerised him and Ethon froze.

Foxwood, leaping from the hideout, lunged to grab Ethon and hauled him back into the hideout. “I didn’t realise you *wanted* to be the bait!” Foxwood’s sword was drawn and his eyes were bright with anticipation. He was not angry, Ethon realised – he was excited.

“The brute has smelled the bait,” Foxwood whispered as they looked through the peep-hole. Ethon gasped. Soursigh was truly enormous, with a head the size of a cartwheel and pupils like giant pips in its big red eyes. Its fleshy lips stretched over row upon row of pointed teeth, just like the horrible worm he’d thrown down the old well.

But bigger.

A thousand times bigger.

And Ethon knew he’d been definitely, absolutely wrong.

Beside him, Foxwood tensed as the serpent nudged the bait with its snout. The fearsome mouth opened wide. But instead of feeding, the creature

lay down its head. To Ethon's amazement a huge tear slipped down its cheek. Then a wild, wretched howling began. Ethon heard pain, not anger; sorrow, not threat. Where had he heard that sound before? It was like goat-song, he realised: the tragic sound of a mother yearning for her baby.

Something precious lost.

The worm in the well.

Soursigh's baby.

The truth flooded over him like a cold shower. He grabbed Foxwood's sword arm. "We don't need to kill Soursigh," he whispered urgently. "We just need to give it its baby back. I accidentally caught it. I didn't mean to. Well, I *did* mean to, but I threw it down the well and now it's trapped," he gabbled.

Foxwood shook his arm free. "Ridiculous!"

"It's the truth – come with me and I'll show you where Soursigh's baby is. Once she has it back, she'll leave us in peace and the harvest will be saved!" Ethon was already crawling out of the shelter.

"Come back!" Foxwood commanded.

Ethon stopped, confused.

Foxwood wrapped both hands around the hilt of his sword, holding it like a giant dagger. "I promised – and promised *publicly* – that I would kill Soursigh," he said. "And kill it I shall. I will deal with you later."

Foxwood Flint burst from the hideout and lunged towards the weeping serpent. And then he roared with rage, for the river lay flat as an empty belly. With no more than a gash from Foxwood's blade on the tip of her tail, Soursigh was gone.

Chapter Fifteen

Everything is Broken

Foxwood half-marched, half-dragged Ethon back to Greenoak, cursing violently and inventively the whole way. Ethon was, he discovered, a toad-hearted turn-cloak, a scummy little scavenger, a sheep-brained muck-scrabbler and as worthless as a pile of stinking fish bones. Even the Silver Lady would not bother herself with one who clearly lacked any sense of honour. Teeth chattering, legs trembling and his arm hurting where Foxwood held it, Ethon looked up to the sky. Please be there, he begged silently. An army of stars sparkled coldly. Banks of cloud loomed and grumbled, shoved by an angry night wind. And then, very high up and far away, Ethon glimpsed a slim and shining curve. *You're wrong*, he muttered fiercely at Foxwood under his breath. Oblivious, Foxwood stamped onwards until they reached Ironsong. The village was deserted. The harvest, or as much as the villagers had managed of it, would have been finished hours ago before darkness fell. Everyone would be at home, in bed, exhausted with the hard physical labour. Ethon longed for his own bed and blanket, his own Pa.

Pa, who would never treat Ethon cruelly.

Pa, who would never put pride before compassion.

Unlike Foxwood Flint, whose bruised ego mattered far more than a mother's happiness. Soursigh could not help being a monster. It was Foxwood who was behaving like a monster, Ethon thought furiously, as Foxwood shoved him into the Round Room. Save for a few ratty scavengers, night-eyed lizards and the bats that roosted high in the rafters, the Round Room was empty too. Foxwood sat at the head of the table, stroking the furs that lined the great oak chair, as if enjoying a moment's ease. But his eyes glittered and jaw was hard.

Ethon, standing before him like a prisoner, shivered.

"I thought I could trust you," Foxwood said. "We had an agreement. A bond, some might call it. I thought I had your loyalty."

“You did. You do,” Ethon kept his eyes and his voice low. “But I had to do the right thing.”

“And who are you to judge what is right and what is wrong? Are you the son of a Castleborn, perhaps, just playing at being the son of a mizzle-man?” Foxwood’s words dripped like icy water.

Ethon squared his shoulders. “My Pa is not a mizzle-man! He’s troubled sometimes, but he’s wise and kind and good. I didn’t mean to let you down,” he finished, but Foxwood jumped to his feet and started to shout.

“Of course you did!” he roared, thumping the table with both hands. “You knew exactly what you were doing. Disobeying me. Making me break my word and look a fool. Who knows when Soursigh will return?”

“Tomorrow,” Ethon said steadily.

“You presume to know more than I do?” Foxwood looked genuinely shocked.

Ethon took a deep breath. There was no way back now: the only way was forwards.

“Soursigh will return tomorrow,” he said. “When we fetch her baby out of the old well and take it to the river’s edge, she will smell its scent and she will come. I think she recognised it on me – that’s what drew her to us. Not the bait.”

Foxwood stepped closer and started circling. “And you claim some special knowledge of the beast?”

Ethon trembled but he could not give up now. “It’s my fault they were separated. I want to stop her pain.”

“Ah – pain. Now there is an interesting idea,” Foxwood drawled. He stopped prowling and gripped Ethon’s shoulders.

Ethon closed his eyes and tensed his whole body. But no blow landed. Instead, he felt something burn along his collarbone. Foxwood ripped the stone pendant from Ethon’s neck and held it aloft. “This strange lump means a great deal to you, does it not? I’ve noticed how you hold it as if it’s a rare jewel. Just as your father did.”

“Give it back!” Ethon leapt, but could not reach.

“You have broken my trust, boy,” Foxwood said coldly. “I value it highly, and I do not give it easily. So now, in return, I shall break something that matters to you.”

“Please – no!” Ethon yelled.

But it was too late. Foxwood hurled the pendant against the great stone fireplace.

Crack.

Ethon folded forwards as if Foxwood had punched him in the stomach.

The roosting bats, shocked by the sudden sharp noise, swooped squeaking from the high beams. “Evil webbed weasels! Get away from me!” Foxwood shouted, waving his arms in panic and rushing towards the door. As he yanked it open, the great oak door creaked as if in pain. Foxwood slammed it shut with the force of thunder and stamped into the night.

It was the pain in his jaw that woke him. Ethon’s tears had soaked through the straw matting and a scuttlebug, startled awake by the unexpected drenching, had retaliated by stinging his chin. Ethon brushed it away with his sleeve, forgetting it would only make the irritation worse. He sat up and rubbed his jaw and then his eyes. The Round Room was as black as a cave, the shutters tight against the night air. He could feel a cold puff of wind, which meant the door must be open a little, but there was not enough light to see the walls, never mind the great hearth. But that was where he would find the pendant, or what remained of it: and find it he must. Then he would take it home to Pa, even though seeing his one, precious reminder of Ma destroyed would surely break his father’s heart. And possibly send him into the woods for good. Forcing down the lump of sadness and guilt that swelled in his throat, Ethon edged forwards, feeling his way by holding on to the table. His eyes started to adjust to the blackness. It was cold as well as dark, for there was no fire in the hearth. But there was, he realised with a shock, a flickering light just outside the door. Someone was coming. Foxwood was harsh, but not petty. Surely he had not come back to gloat?

“Who is it?” Ethon croaked. He cleared his throat. Whoever it was, they would not discover that he’d been crying.

“Who’s there?” he repeated.

The door creaked and Doe cried out, “Ethon, you’re safe! Your Pa is beside himself – I mean, he’s been so worried about you,” she finished carefully. “The stranger is in such a rage that no-one has dared ask him what happened, not even Dale. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Why?” Ethon made his way towards the little flame. Despite everything, he smiled.

“It’s Ma Willow. Her birthing pains have started,” Doe explained. “Ma’s gone to help. Your Pa was out searching for you, so Birda is sleeping at our cottage. I knew you’d worry if you got home and found it empty.”

“May the Silver Lady light the baby’s way,” Ethon said.

“And bring Ma Willow safely to the dawn,” Doe said.

In the darkness Ethon pressed his hands to his heart, where his own Ma lived.

A moment passed.

“Shall we go?” Doe said.

“There’s something I must find first.” Ethon could see the outline of the great hearth in the light of Doe’s lamp. He strode towards it, crouched and scabbled in the straw.

“It might be easier to look in daytime,” Doe said, but she held the lamp up for him anyway.

“No. It cannot wait.”

Ethon’s fingers grew sore and his body prickled with sweat as he searched backwards and forwards, round and round. Eventually there was only one place left to look: inside the great hearth itself. Despite the spidery webs that cloaked his hands, and the ashes that puffed up in choking clouds, Ethon searched every dip and crevice.

Nothing.

Slumping in exhaustion, he yelped as he felt something small and hard under his knee. Scooping it up, he recognised the smooth rounded surface at once. He’d found it! Part of it, anyway: the broken edges were sharp as flint.

“Do you want this bit too?” Doe held out her hand to show him a matching, broken stone. Her face was comically smeared with soot. Dry leaves from the day’s harvesting stuck to her hair. But in the lamplight, her wide brown eyes shone. A scuttle-bug settled on Doe’s shoulder, pincers ready. Ethon brushed it away.

Everything stopped.

“Aren’t you going to take it?” Doe said.

Blinking, Ethon took the broken stone from her. Ethon placed the two pieces together and, to his surprise, they fitted easily: it must have been a clean break. But Ma’s pendant would never be properly whole again. Ethon’s shoulders slumped and he let the pieces fall open.

Doe held the lamp closer. She stroked the surface of one of the stone halves. “It’s so pretty,” she said. “Why did you throw it away?”

Ethon looked again and gasped. In each half of the pendant lay the impression of a feather – as if carved by a tiny, gifted hand.

“Ma couldn’t have known it was there,” Ethon said slowly. “And nor could Pa. It’s been hidden away, trapped inside the whole time.”

Doe touched his arm. “And now it’s free,” she said.

Hidden... trapped... free.

“I must go!” Ethon cried. “I must go and free the worm!” He stopped and raked his hands through his hair. Doe knew nothing about the worm in the well. How could he tell her that Soursigh’s bid to ruin the harvest was his fault?

“What worm? What are you talking about, Ethon?” Doe said.

The door creaked. Ethon spun round, fists raised.

“It’s alright,” said a familiar voice. “You can fight me later, after you’ve thanked me for bringing this.” Fen strode in with a torch in one hand and a coil of rope in the other. “Let’s hope it is long enough to reach the bottom of the old well.”

Ethon lowered his fists. “But how... how did you know?” he began.

“Ma told me how Foxwood Flint had returned from the river without you, in a towering rage,” Fen said. “I thought you might have fallen off Fogger’s Leap... or found the wrong end of the stranger’s sword. Neither would have surprised me,” he added with his old grin. “So I went looking for you. And that’s

when I came across Foxwood, yelling down the old well about killing Soursigh, baby or no baby. Pa thought he'd just had too much oak-ale, and carted him off to Old Hareld's place to sleep it off. But I started to wonder about that thing you caught."

Ethon fiddled with his cuff. "It's all my fault," he said in a low voice. "I caught it by accident, the day of Ironsong. And I threw it down the old well. Soursigh just wants her baby back. That's why she's threatened our harvest."

"Then we'd better be quick," said Doe. "I'll go and get a basket and some drowsy-herbs. You can carry the torch," she added kindly.

Fen mock punched Ethon's arm. "Think you can manage that, twigs-for-arms?"

Ethon gave him a shove. "One day, I'll be as strong as you," he said.

"I know, I know," Fen said. "You just need a few more pies."

Promising to meet them at the old goat shelter, Doe dashed off to fetch the basket and herbs. Watching her small lamp bobbing as she ran, Ethon felt his eyes prickle. Doe never pointed out his mistakes, never blamed him. She simply helped. Ethon rubbed his nose. Then, sharing the torchlight, he and Fen crept away. It was a still and silent night. Every sound echoed across the empty Round. Far away in Low Wood an owl hooted, making them jump. They bundled into their old den and propped the torch safely in one corner. Fen was astonished when Ethon showed him the stone feather. "It is a little cracked, perhaps. But then, so are you!"

Doe crawled in, pushing a basket in front of her. "It's big enough for you, Ethon," she said. "And here's the drowsy-herb. You just need to make sure the worm eats it." She held out a soggy bag. "It's lullabait," Doe explained. Then, sitting back on her heels, she pointed through a hole in the roof at the starry sky. "Look. The sky is clear tonight, that's a good sign. I can see the Sleeping Bear. And there's the Five Fishes."

Ethon searched for Great Barleycorn, his favourite constellation. Close by, as always, Little Barleycorn twinkled. He took a deep breath. "Let's go," he said and they all crept out and headed for the old well.

The Silver Lady slid from behind the trees and sailed out into the open sky, bathing the old well in creamy light. A moth hovered over its round black

mouth and drifted down into the darkness. Ethon gulped: very soon, he'd be following it, and he had no wings to help him escape if it all went wrong. Fen checked that all the knots holding the basket were tight, then looped the rope around a tree trunk. Ethon glanced at Doe to see if she'd noticed Fen's muscles.

She had.

Ethon yanked the rope. "Lucky for you I haven't had the chance to eat those pies yet," he muttered.

Fen flexed his forearms. "And lucky for you I'm an Ironturner. Hop in."

His face grim, Ethon climbed into the basket and sat down, knees drawn up in front of him. "I'll pull on the rope once to say everything is fine, two to go lower and three if I want you to pull me up," he said.

"Certainly, sir," Fen said with a bow.

Doe handed Ethon the lullabait. "Be careful," she whispered.

Ethon patted her hand and immediately regretted it. Doe wasn't a small child or a puppy! He gave the rope two vicious tugs.

"Lower me down," he said.

Chapter Sixteen

The Worm in the Well

Normally, when Ethon and Fen were out adventuring it involved climbing – trees, rocks, walls – and the advice that had saved him from broken bones on many an occasion was *don't look down*. This time Ethon chanted, quietly but fiercely: *don't look up*. He sat as still as possible, but still found himself swinging round and round, bumping against the cold slimy walls of the well. His fingers grew numb from gripping the rope.

Down he went.

Down.

Down.

Everything was black. The air was so cold his lungs hurt. How far down would he have to go? And then, with a shock that made him yelp, he felt it on his toes: water!

“Ethon! Are you alright?” came Doe’s frantic tiny voice.

Ethon pulled once on the rope. He dangled the lullabait over the side of the basket and listened hard. Was that the sound of movement – of something swimming up through the icy black water? He held his breath. Still nothing. Ethon dunked the lullabait right into the water. A heaving, rushing sound filled the narrow space and the horrible Soursigh stench filled Ethon’s nostrils. Like mother, like baby! Why hadn’t he bought some night-mint? Unable to stop himself, Ethon retched. The basket swung madly as he heaved. The water below him slapped and surged. Trembling, Ethon gulped down panic. What if he got tipped out? He could swim, but for how long down here in the dark, with the vicious worm attacking him? Then he heard a fearsome slurping sound.

It was the sound of nightmares; but it was also the sound of hope.

The worm was biting.

But Ethon was still holding the lullabait – and he must not let go. Ethon’s arm wrenched and he cried out in pain. Surely the worm could not have become

that much heavier, that much stronger, in just a few days? A horrible thought came to him: who knew how quickly a baby Soursigh turned into an adult? And here he was, invading its space, throwing up into its watery prison. Inviting revenge...

Far above Ethon heard Doe's voice again, tiny but clear. And this time she was singing. Of course: the lullabait would be more powerful with a melody to accompany it. It was a song Ethon had sung to Birda many times when she was hurt or upset. One which Ma had sung to him many times, too. A small slice of light shimmered on the dark water: somewhere high above, the Silver Lady shone. Ethon felt for the stone feather in his pocket, closed his eyes and started to sing too:

*Calm is the meadow and calm is the day
Evening beckons as gentle as hay
Safe in your blanket and safe in my arms
Nothing will ever bring harm, my sweet
Nothing will ever bring harm.*

Soursigh's baby writhed, but more slowly. Gradually it stilled: the lullabait was working! Ethon reached down and hauled the drowsy creature into the basket. It was the weight of a small log. It had grown *a lot*. Ethon yanked three times on the rope: *pull me up, now!* Nothing happened. He tried again. Why was Fen not responding? Twisted his neck, he looked up and saw only blackness. There was a thud and a scream. The basket fell from under him and Ethon dropped like a stone into the water. Weedy things tangled in his hands and a sudden image of Grody Hollowtree's gloating face filled his head. Would he drown here, with that sneering face the last thing he'd ever picture?

No. Never!

Ethon kicked with all his strength. He felt cold air on his face and gulped in a great breath before sinking again. He shoved his feet out, found the wall and braced himself almost flat with his shoulders. Something nudged his back: the worm! The creature was floating sleepily, Ethon realised. But how long would the lulling potion last? If the creature awoke, he would be powerless to stop it

escaping... or attacking. He twisted over, grabbed the worm by the end of its tail and – there was nothing for it – shoved it inside his tunic. The feel of its cold, slimy skin made him shudder. But this was no time to for squeamishness. With his other hand, he felt for the rope and managed to loop it around his elbow. Ethon edged upwards, first with his toes and then with his shoulders. His feet slipped and slithered and every muscle ached with effort. The top of the old well was far, far above him.

He closed his eyes.

Don't look up.

They'd agreed that shouting was to be avoided, since even at this late hour you never knew who might be creeping about. But what alternative did he have?

"Pull me up!" Ethon roared. "Pull me up now!"

Just as a foggy blackness started to blur his eyes, Ethon felt the rope go taut. He yanked as hard as he could: one, two three.

And then he was rising, slowly, steadily.

Up.

"What took you so long?" he croaked as a strong pair of hands hauled him to safety.

"The Silver Lady guided me here. And just in time, I think," said Pa.

Ethon stared, speechless. There was Fen, slumped against a tree trunk, with Doe kneeling beside him. And there, with his hands stretched out ready to take the weight from Ethon, was Pa. Pulling the drowsy worm from his tunic, Ethon put it down in a puddle and threw his arms around his father. As they hugged, the two halves of the stone feather clinked in his pocket.

He must confess.

"There's something I have to tell you," he said.

"I have already guessed," Pa said, carefully lifting the worm into a bucket and scooping puddle-water over it. "I imagine this creature belongs in the river with its mother? The resemblance is striking." His face was so gentle, so full of understanding that Ethon could not bring himself to inflict hurt.

So he just nodded.

“Fen just suddenly slumped and I couldn’t hold you by myself. I let go of the rope. I didn’t know he was allergic to drowsy-herb,” Doe said. Her voice wobbled.

Ethon knelt and put his arm around her. No embarrassing patting this time, just a simple hug. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Even an experienced herbalist could not have known that,” Pa added kindly.

Catching Ethon’s eye, Pa gestured towards to river. Ethon was cold to his bones and his hands were raw from rope burn. But none of that mattered: his friends were safe, and the little prisoner was alive.

“My Pa will look after you,” he told them. “I’m going to the river to finish what I started.”

“Wait! I’m coming too.” Doe jumped to her feet.

Ethon shook his head. “No. It’s too dangerous for – ” Ethon stopped and turned away.

Doe folded her arms. “I hope you’re not going to say it’s too dangerous *for a girl.*”

“I wouldn’t let Fen come either, even if he was well enough,” Ethon retorted.

“And who says it’s up to you?” Doe grabbed the bucket and ran towards Low Meadow.

Astonished, Ethon pelted after her. “Wait – you don’t know the way!” he called, as gently as he could.

“Then you’d better show me,” Doe’s voice floated back through the night air.

Ethon ran faster.

Catching Doe up, Ethon found his stride and they took turns carrying the bucket. The worm seemed sleepy and Low Meadow was beautiful under the light of the Silver Lady. Its grasses flowed like water in the soft night breeze. Doe ran beside him, perfectly in step. Despite his frozen, sodden clothes and sore hands, Ethon felt peaceful. “Soon, you’ll be with your mother again,” he told the worm. “And all will be well.” As if in reply, the creature twitched. There was a loud farting sound and a putrid smell filled the air.

“Ugh!” Doe burst into laughter and shoved the basket into Ethon’s arms. “I’ve changed my mind. It’s all yours.”

As they neared the river, they fell silent. White Rock stood pale and proud in the middle of the Dawnbright River. No black coils glistened there. Ethon had the strong sense that Soursigh, her maternal instincts more powerful than a thousand oxen, was nearby. His heart skittered. Inside the bucket, the baby serpent was waking. It reared up, teeth snapping. Doe jumped, stifling a squeal. Ethon yelped and held the bucket at arm’s length. They were still twenty paces away from the water’s edge – even Big Fen Ironturner could not throw something this heavy that far. In one slick twist, the worm slithered out of the bucket and onto the ground. It writhed angrily but uselessly. Ethon and Doe leapt back to avoid its teeth.

“This bit I *am* doing alone,” Ethon said. Doe just stood, speechless, and Ethon realised why: she had never seen the worm before – or Soursigh. The sight was enough to petrify anyone.

“Doe, please don’t come any closer,” he begged. “Not because you’re a girl or anything but because I – oh, I can’t explain. Just hide!”

Doe shook her head.

Ethon grabbed the worm by the end of its tail. Holding it at arm’s length, he sprinted towards the river. He flung his arm back ready to hurl the creature into the water when Doe yelled, “No – you’ll hurt it!”

Two paces from the edge Ethon skidded to a halt. The worm, properly awake now, writhed and snapped. Doe guided Ethon’s arm lower and lower until he could gently drop the creature into the water. It shot away. Out in the river, a plume of water shot up and, with it, the glossy black head of Soursigh. A great keening sound filled the air. Ethon and Doe stood open-mouthed as huge silver tears slid from the serpent’s eyes and plopped into the river. A small, sleek body hurtled towards Soursigh’s shining flank and was engulfed in tender coils. There was silence for a moment as mother and baby, snout to snout, rediscovered each other. Soursigh sniffed her baby, then turned her fearsome gaze towards Ethon. She sniffed again and Ethon froze. He’d put the worm inside his tunic, right next to his skin. The smell of human boy would be all over it! He turned to Doe and saw the same realisation blossom in her eyes. Soursigh

lifted her tail and slammed it down into the water, sending a huge wave racing towards the riverbank. The water seemed alive, a wild wet monster coming to get them. Grabbing Doe's hand, Ethon spun round and crashed through the reeds towards the safety of the woods. Suppose the water grabbed them and dragged them back to the river, where vengeful Soursigh lay in wait? A great cloak of water smashed overhead, flinging them both to the ground. Ethon gripped Doe's hand as tightly as he could while flailing for something to grab onto. His hands slipped from wet roots and the reeds were not strong enough. He banged into a fallen log and the rough bark caught his tunic. Ethon straddled the huge log and grabbed Doe by the waist, holding her tight. The noise from the river was like a storm: the crashing of water and howling of wind as Soursigh twisted and shrieked. And then the water fell away. Silence, apart from the thumping of Ethon's heart and the gasping of Doe's breath.

"Are you alright?" Ethon croaked.

Her teeth chattering, Doe nodded.

Guiding her carefully, Ethon slid down. Realising that the half-buried log was hollow, he motioned to Doe and they crawled inside. It was dirty and dark, but it was dry – and they were safe. Sitting awkwardly as far away from Doe as possible in the confined space, Ethon tried to rub some warmth back into his cold, wet body. It was useless. Doe's face was muddy and her hair full of twigs. She was trembling.

"I'm scared," she whispered.

Ethon scooted over and gave her a hug. It felt easy now, and natural.

"We're safe now. Soursigh and her baby are far away downriver," he said firmly.

"It's not that. I can't go home like this. And I'm scared of what my mother's going to say when she finds out I'm not in my bed."

"We'll dry out here for a bit. And we'll make sure she doesn't find out," Ethon promised. He shivered at the thought of Ma Fevermint's anger.

"I'm so tired," Doe yawned. She curled up like a mouse. Ethon wished he had a blanket to lay over her. But the best he could do was gather up some dry leaves and pat them around her. Doe's breathing sank into a steady rhythm. Ethon curled near her, hoping he didn't stink too much of worm, but he couldn't get comfy. He batted away an inquisitive family of hammer-wigs, who clearly

thought that his hair was some kind of nest. The stone feather dug into his hip. Ethon reached for it and pressed the two halves together. They slotted perfectly, like two hands joining. The stone was smooth and warm, as comforting as a fresh bread roll. Peace settled over him. He and Doe would rest here, just for a while.

He would think of a way to smuggle Doe back inside her cottage before her mother saw her.

Then he would go home.

And this time, he would tell Pa everything.

Chapter Seventeen

A New Beginning

It was a gentle dawn. The sky was washed pale pink but the sun was in no hurry to rise today, and even the scatterbirds' morning song was muted. It was only when a hungry scuttle-bug nipped Ethon's ear woke that he woke. Sitting up, he banged his head on the curve of the log. He swore, flicking insects from his hair and neck.

"My mother was right," Doe said. "You are a bad influence." She smiled and a flood of confusing emotions washed over Ethon. He scrunched up his eyes and shook his head, trying to make sense of it all. How could he possibly be sitting inside a hollow log with Doe, both of them covered in mud and leaves? And why did his head feel all fuzzy when she smiled like that?

Doe crawled outside. "We must go. I have to get home before Ma wakes up."

A branch cracked. Suddenly Ethon was wide awake and remembered why they'd sheltered here. "Wait!" He stopped still and listened, alert as a fox. The only sounds he could hear were the calm rustling of autumn settling in the woods and the distant running of some deer.

The air smelled fresh and clean.

Soursigh was gone and their harvest would be safe.

"We did it." Relief throbbed in his empty belly as he and Doe trudged for home, their legs stiff and their clothes still wet. Pa would be waiting for him, desperate to know that he was safe; Birda would, he hoped, still be at Doe's cottage, sleeping peacefully and unaware of the night's drama. And Fen... would he have recovered? Doe scrambled over Pa Willow's stile. Ethon vaulted it, hoping Doe would notice. But she was staring ahead and Ethon soon realised why when a tiny cry wafted towards him. Baby Willow had arrived – and Ma Fevermint would be there, paying no attention to Doe's whereabouts at all!

Happy murmurings told them that all was well. Grinning, they tiptoed past.
Saved by a baby!

Doe whispered, "Stay well," and ran towards her cottage at the far end of the village.

"Go well," Ethon whispered, and turned for home.

A snow-lark tumbled and swooped, perfectly white against the rosy sky. Sunlight bathed the dungeon's pointed roof and Even Viper's Wood seemed less dark and sinister than usual. Suddenly aware that he was very, very hungry, Ethon reached the stony path. Without warning, his energy gave out and, thirty strides from home, he slumped to his knees. All he wanted to do was lie down. Something friendly and furry nudged its way into his arms, nose wet and tail wagging a welcome. Chestnut licked Ethon's chin and barked.

The cottage door burst open. "You're home!" Pa helped Ethon inside. "Is Doe safe too?"

Too tired now to speak, Ethon just nodded. Pa wrapped him in a blanket, tended the fire and laid out an astonishing spread of food: honey from Ma Rattlebone's bees and bread from Ma Kilter. "Whatever you did in Foxwood's service, it seems you earned our neighbours' gratitude," Pa said.

Eating his fill was the greatest of joys, Ethon decided as he munched. When had he last tasted honey? Chestnut gnawed a bone while Pa layered his cloak over Ethon, swearing that he himself was not cold. Deciding for once not to argue, Ethon snuggled into it. Being cared for felt good, and the familiar scent of Pa's cloak gave him strength. Ethon took the stone feather from his pocket. The two halves fell open in his palm. In daylight, it looked even more beautiful.

But it was broken and it could never be mended.

Ethon took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Pa. Ma's pendant is broken. And it's all my fault."

Pa started to weave his fingers. Ethon tried to swallow but could not. Chestnut stopped gnawing. And then Pa spoke. "You are not careless, son. Not with things that matter. Look how carefully you look after Birda – and me. If the pendant is broken, then it must be for a good reason. Tell me what happened."

Pa's eyes were steady. Ethon could not detect a single tear. He leaned into Pa and hid his face. "I can't... but you're not... I thought you'd be..." he stuttered.

"Angry?"

"Upset," Ethon whispered.

"And that would be worse, I suppose."

Ethon nodded.

Pa drew Ethon close and stroked his hair. They sat quietly until their breath flowed in an even pattern, slow and safe, together. "Tell me, son," said Pa.

So Ethon did.

"Your instincts were right," Pa said when Ethon had finished. "Soursigh only threatened our harvest because her baby was trapped here in Greenoak. Killing her would mean keeping them apart forever. That is cruel and it is wrong. Like Foxwood Flint's pride."

"But sometimes it is right to fight, isn't it?" Ethon asked.

"To protect those we love, or stand up for those who cannot defend themselves – yes. To seek glory? No," Pa said. He sounded so calm, so confident, so certain.

"You're back," Ethon said shyly.

"I was never far away, son, not this time," said Pa.

"No heart's ease?"

"None, I promise," said Pa. "I was exhausted from my night in the woods, and terrified that I would arrive too late to stop Grody Hollowtree's wicked plan. My fears were justified," he finished sadly.

"Ma Kilter has some heart's ease," Ethon said. "She keeps it in her flourshed. Do you think she takes it?"

"No. I think she hides it, to stop others taking it," Pa replied slowly.

"But why?"

"Because she cares," Pa said. "About us. About me."

Ethon sat up and stared at Pa. "But she hates us! She calls you terrible names –"

Pa nibbled his lip. "That is because she is in pain," he said at last. "Ma Kilter is a widow, as you know. After we lost your ma, she wanted to become

your new ma. I turned her down, despite her wealth. That was many summers ago. She has never forgiven me. But she still cares. That, I think, is why she is angry all the time.”

“And the pendant?” Ethon said in a small voice.

Pa traced the delicate feather imprints with his finger. “Shall I tell you what I see?” he said. “I see something rare and beautiful and unexpected – a new beginning. I believe it is the start of freedom from grief. And I have you to thank for it.”

Relief flooded through Ethon. He felt warmer, lighter. Pa would be healed and the shadow of grief would have to search elsewhere for its prey.

But Foxwood’s anger was still raw.

And they still had no silver.

“How will we eat this Wintertide?” Ethon whispered.

“We must persuade Foxwood Flint to pay you for the work you did for him,” Pa said.

“But he’s so angry. He said I betrayed him.”

“You put compassion before pride – that is another way of looking at it,” Pa pointed out.

“I think Foxwood values pride more.”

“Then we must find a way to restore it.”

Ethon sighed. How could that be done? He noticed Poppety sitting by the wall. She looked horribly real. But she was just a hideous imitation, made from sticks and linen and fluff. A pretend person and a monstrous one at that.

Ethon sat upright. “We can make a pretend Soursigh! And we’ll pretend it’s dead, too. We’ll show it to everyone and then we’ll make it disappear – we’ll burn it or drown it or something – and everyone will believe it. Even Foxwood Flint!” Ethon jumped to his feet and started to pace. “We’ll need lots of help. It has to look real.”

“Pa Willow could make a frame from his reeds,” said Pa, his eyes alight. “Then we can cover it with some of Pa Rattlebone’s black cloth. We’ll use shards of bone for the teeth and jar lids for eyes – Pa Claypotter is bound to have some spare. Birda can paint the eyeballs, she’s easily the best at that. Then we just

need to drench the whole thing with blood and make it stink. Ma Fevermint is bound to have the right potion!”

“She won’t help. She hates me,” Ethon said, picturing Doe’s mother’s furious eyes as she’d branded him a turn-cloak and ordered Doe, *Stay away from that Larksong boy!*

Chestnut whined. There was a knock at the door. And there in front of Ethon, as if summoned by his very words, stood Ma Fevermint.

“Good dawnrise, Wren,” said Pa. “May we offer you a cup of water?”

“Fair morning,” Doe’s mother replied. “A drink would be most welcome.”

“Birda is with Doe, making a gift for baby Willow, who arrived last night,” Ma Fevermint said pleasantly as Pa poured her water.

“That is welcome news, indeed,” Pa said warmly.

Ethon could not help but smirk.

“Your threshold is neat. You should be proud,” Ma Fevermint continued, as Pa fetched her water.

“Um, thank you,” Ethon mumbled, unsure if he had heard correctly.

Chestnut brushed his tail on the floor. Ma Fevermint settled herself on Birda’s fire-stool. “I am glad Birda is not here, because there is something I must say and it is not for such young ears.” She took a deep breath. “Doe has told me everything. I was horrified, of course, when I discovered that she was involved. But then she explained not just *what* you did but *why* you did it: to bring a mother back her baby. There can be no nobler cause. The Larksong name has long been shadowed by certain... misfortunes... but these are not of your making. As the Silver Lady is my guide, I believe I have misjudged you, Ethon Larksong. And I want to make amends.”

Ma Fevermint smiled at him. Actually *smiled*.

Ethon had the terrible feeling that he was about to clap or giggle or disgrace himself in some other childish way.

But Pa said smoothly. “That is generous of you, Wren, and cannot have been easy to say. I am proud of my son for exactly those reasons. And as it happens, there is a way you could help us.”

He explained their plan.

“I can make a potion that smells like a rotting carcass – knife-wort, boiled three times,” Ma Fevermint said. “The entire village will bear witness to the dead monster. And, if I know Old Hareld, he’ll announce a feast in Foxwood Flint’s honour. Nothing could make a man prouder than that – even a man like Foxwood Flint.”

“Do you mean it?” Ethon held Ma Fevermint’s gaze. “You’ll really help me?”

Doe’s mother held out her hands. “You have my word,” she said.

Embarrassed, Ethon took them.

And the deal was done.

Chapter Eighteen

Smoke on the Water

Pa was right: grateful for the way Ethon had covertly helped them when Foxwood came counting, everyone agreed to help him in return. Not Ma Kilter or Hanny Claypotter or Mead, though. None of them could be trusted, Ethon decided, and must not know of the great plan. He gave Birda some of Foxwood's charcoal and now she sat cross-legged on Fogger's Leap, her Soursigh drawing finished. Every detail, down to the last sharp tooth, was clear to see.

"Big curvy curves and a sharp tail and enormous round red eyes," Birda said with relish, pointing to each of the features Ethon had described. The drawing would be easy for everyone to follow and, once their work was complete, they would simply wash it away. No give-away trace of their plan would remain.

Big Fen Ironturner shook his head in wonder at the picture. "You have a rare skill, Birda."

"Well done, little barleycorn," Ethon said.

Pa gave Birda a hug.

Chestnut, wagging frantically, dashed from one side of Fogger's Leap to the other, exploring all the materials that were piled up.

Pa Willow held up a bunch of strong, pliable reeds. "We'll use these for the frame. I'll need help, though."

Larken and Ethon joined him and he showed them how to bend the longest reeds to make a shape like a giant caterpillar.

Ma Fevermint stirred a vat of oily liquid over the fire that Fen had lit. "This will make the black cloth look like thick and shiny, like Soursigh's hide – and once I've boiled it one more time, it will really stink."

Doe upended the sack that Ethon had filled with bone shards from Ma Kilter's bone pile and, helped by Birda, she set about finding the longest, sharpest ones. Doe looked as clean as ever in a fresh dress, but there was a stray

twig caught in her plait, Ethon noticed with a smile. Fen, who swore he was completely better, helped his pa construct a wooden raft for the monster to sit on. Ethon's heart lifted with every hammer blow. The plan was perfect, and now it was taking shape! Soon it was time to daub the monster's frame with the boiled knife-wort. It dried quickly in the cool breeze and, with everyone helping stretch it over Pa Willow's framework, the monster's body was soon finished. Once the head was added, Ethon lifted Birda up so she could paint the slits of Soursigh's pupils on the red clay plates they'd used for her eyes. Pa made holes in the shards of bone Birda had chosen, and threaded them together.

"A necklace of teeth!" Birda exclaimed in delight as Pa tied it into place.

Everything was in place. Larken was practising firing arrows, since his role would be to cut the creature loose by severing its mooring rope when Ethon gave the word.

Now, they just needed to tether their monster in the shallows beneath Fogger's Leap. It was dark enough there to hide any flaws. And it was close enough to the river to ensure that the fake Soursigh could be set adrift the moment everyone was convinced that she was real – and dead.

"There's another reason why it has to be at Fogger's Leap," Ethon told Fen as they rolled her to the edge of Fogger's Leap. "Foxwood Flint is scared of bats. When Doe screams, and we set the monster free, they'll come flying out. He won't want to hang around!"

"And he certainly won't want everyone knowing he's afraid," Fen grinned.

There was one thing left to do.

"Time for the blood," Ma Fevermint announced. She let Birda give the pot of sticky, dark red goo a final stir and handed her a brush made from grasses tied to a stick.

Birda drew on a livid gash that gleamed like a fresh wound on the monster's tail. The effect was so realistic that they all fell silent. Chestnut whimpered. Crouching to comfort him, Ethon shivered, picturing Foxwood's bloodthirsty rage as he slashed at the real Soursigh. Suppose he was not fooled by pretend Soursigh? Suppose his pride could not be restored? Suppose, after everything, he still refused to pay Ethon?

Doe knelt at Ethon's side and stroked Chestnut's ears. "It will work. I've been practising my scream," she said.

They shared a smile.

Fen coughed. "Time to lower her down," he said.

And with Big Fen Ironturner's enormous strength, Pa Rattlebone's chains and everyone shouting instructions, the monster sank into place.

It was noon, and the entire village was gathered around Ironsong. Ethon, legs planted wide, stood on a wooden trestle table that had been dragged into place by Big Fen Ironturner. All eyes were on Ethon but, for once, he felt no shame, no anger, no fear. He felt as strong and steady as an oak tree. Ethon caught the sound of Birda's laughter and Chestnut's playful bark. From the depths of the crowd he heard Seth's familiar teething cry. Pa stood with his Big Fen Ironturner, chatting peacefully. Fen held an unlit torch in one hand and, with the other, restrained Mead, who was squirming in a fever of anticipation.

Foxwood Flint stood, arms folded, a little apart from the crowd. Doe stood between her mother and someone with shiny, floppy hair and broad shoulders clad in a pure white shirt: Dale Dearson. Ethon nibbled his thumbnail. What was he doing here? Wasn't he supposed to be in bed still, recovering?

Old Hareld coughed. Ethon pushed Dearson to the back of his mind. "A promise," he began, "Is a precious and valuable thing."

"Not as precious as a bowl of goat stew when your child's belly is hollow," one of the women shouted.

"And not as precious as a cuddle from Hanny Claypotter!" yelled one of the older lads. Larken flushed and bit his lip.

"There are *children* present," complained Ma Kilter above the villagers' laughter. "And Hanny is good girl underneath it all."

Pa Claypotter shrugged, "I do my best with her. It's not easy trying to be a Ma as well as a Pa."

"Not easy at all. You do very well, Hewan," Ma Kilter said, as if that decided the matter.

A smile flickered across Pa Claypotter's lined and ruddy face but the crowd continued to murmur; clearly, opinion was divided on the matter of Hanny. Ethon opened his mouth but saw Old Hareld shake his head: *wait*. So Ethon held back till the crowd settled and he had their attention again.

"A promise well-kept is more satisfying than even the tastiest stew," he said, tactfully steering away from the topic of Hanny's cuddles, which were the subject of much brave joking amongst the boys of Greenoak.

"Well said, Ethon," Old Hareld said loudly.

Applause followed.

Ethon grinned.

He was starting to enjoy this.

"As you all know, Foxwood Flint promised to rid us of Soursigh so our harvest would be safe. Can anyone smell the stench?" he asked the crowd.

"No," they replied.

"That's because Foxwood kept that promise with a fatal wound! Today, we will see the body of the slain monster – all of us, with our very own eyes!" Ethon punched the air, exhilarated by his sudden talent for rhetoric.

The moment did not last.

"Not that proof is needed, of course," Foxwood drawled. "My word is, after all, proof enough, is it not?"

Ethon flushed. "Er yes, yes of course it is," he stammered.

It was Mead who saved the day, tearing himself from Fen's grip and bawling, "But I want to see the dead monster!"

The crowd erupted, stamping and whooping. Only one stayed quiet: Old Hareld simply closed his fists. For an astonished moment Ethon thought he was angry – but then he saw that the old man was miming. Seize the moment!

Ethon flung his arms wide. "And so you shall!" he yelled.

The crowd roared in approval. As soon as the noise died away Ethon lowered his voice, drawing them in, and said: "Soursigh suffered a great wound to her tail – a *fatal* wound – inflicted by our honoured visitor, Foxwood Flint. She used her last drop of strength to slither into the shallows under Fogger's Leap. There she lies, stone dead and stinking. I have seen her with my own eyes – and now it's your turn. If you're as brave as young Mead here, follow me!"

Ethon jumped down from the table and, forcing himself to look forwards and not back, marched past the old well and onwards towards Low Meadow. His neighbours would follow – but would Foxwood? Only when Fen caught him up and whispered, *the big fish took the bait*, could Ethon calm his thumping heart. Doe was only a few steps behind, swinging Birda’s hand. Chestnut scampered ahead and Pa matched Ethon stride for stride. As they walked through the woods, dappled sunshine sprinkled the villagers with the last real warmth they would feel for many days. Gradually the crowd thinned out into a long snake, the boldest at the front and the nervous or protective ones at the back. As the ground grew steeper, everyone started to walk in single file and the excited chatter of children ebbed away. Above them, a flock of flutterwings soared, chirping a warning to other forest-dwellers: what was this huge, noisy, unfamiliar thing with hundreds of legs? Had it come to steal their berries or, worse, their young?

As they left the woods and neared the marshes, Ethon stopped. He turned to face the crowd. “We are almost at Fogger’s Leap. The body of the monster lies beneath. Can you smell it?”

“It’s disgusting!” yelled Mead in delight. “Worse than bat droppings and pig splatter mixed together!”

For once, Ethon was grateful for Mead’s big mouth. “Much worse,” he agreed. “Now – a warning. Anyone who fears the sight of blood should stay back. And so should anyone of six summers or less.”

Birda elbowed Mead. “I’ve got *seven* summers, so *I* can see the monster,” she boasted.

Mead shoved her. “So what? I’ve got *eight* summers, twig legs!”

Birda pushed him harder. Mead fell sprawling in a patch of mud.

“Big baby apple face! Stinky hog’s bottom!” Birda yelled.

Mead jumped to his feet, grabbed Birda’s arm and pinched her hard. She flushed but refused to cry. Chestnut snapped at Mead’s ankles, his tunic, his fingers, anything he could reach. It was only when Foxwood distracted the puppy by throwing a stick for him to chase, grabbed one child in each hand and separated them that the procession could continue.

“I see your sister has your spirit,” he said to Ethon.

“Brave as a bear,” Ethon agreed.

“It was not a compliment,” Foxwood sniffed. “Aggression is disgraceful in a girl.”

“What’s aggression?” Birda asked.

“It’s when you stand up for yourself,” said Ethon. “Like you did just now.”

“Of course I did. I’m not a chicken!” Birda sprinted ahead.

“Chickens should stay inside, where they are safe,” Foxwood said, watching Birda run, outpacing Mead by a horse’s length.

Speed could keep you safe too, Ethon thought.

“We’re here,” said Doe.

The marsh-grass was a sour shade of green with a sheen like sweat. Mist lay over the bog. There was no birdsong here, not even the quivering of a mouse.

Ma Fevermint shivered.

“Take my arm,” Dearson said, offering one arm to her and the other to Doe. Ma Fevermint smiled up at him, but Doe stepped aside.

“Thank you, but I’m not afraid,” she said.

Ethon smiled as he remembered how, just days ago, he’d questioned whether anyone as gentle as Doe could be brave, too. He was in no doubt about that now.

A mixture of emotions sweep across Dearson’s face: admiration, surprise, disappointment. But, ever gallant, he inclined he head, straightened his back and escorted Doe’s mother onwards. Ethon found himself feeling very slightly sorry for Dearson. But the feeling did not last long.

Fen, who’d been busy striking flints to make a flame, decided it was time to take control. “Everybody in!” he announced.

The villagers, seemingly stunned by the sudden commanding air of not only Ethon Larksong, but now the blacksmith’s son, too, stepped forwards obediently.

“This way, sir.” With Fen on his right, Doe to his left and Birda’s hand curled in his, Ethon gestured for Foxwood Flint to walk beneath Fogger’s Leap. His heart thumped with a mixture of excitement and terror.

Fen lit the torch and the fiery light brought the great black shape of the monster to life. The gush of blood that Birda had painted seemed to drip from its tail into the water. Mead, rushing forwards to touch the beast, held up his hands and gazed in gleeful terror at his sticky palms. "Look – it's all bleeding and dead!" he yelled.

Even though they'd been carefully primed, the fake serpent looked so big, so fearsome and so real that the crowd gasped. Fen hurled the torch and the pretend Soursigh burst into flames. Now, just as planned, Larken would fire his arrow and sever the hidden rope that tethered the beast. And Larken never missed! Ethon waited a second, and then another. The flames roared, but the monster stayed put. Where was Larken? Fen, his eyes round with alarm, pointed upwards, to where Larken was positioned with his bow and arrows. Hanny was sitting on a low branch, swinging her legs and twirling her plait and there before her, mesmerised, stood Larken. Hanny reached forward, pulled him close and whispered in his ear. Larken blushed and nodded. He had clearly lost all track of time and purpose.

"We have to cut that rope somehow!" Ethon's heart was hammering.

"I haven't got a knife," Fen replied frantically.

"But I have." Doe was there beside them, holding out a little blade.

Ethon grabbed it, shoved the handle between his teeth and leapt into the water. The smoke stung his eyes as he swam, using every ounce of strength, towards the back of the raft. The moment his fingers felt the roughness of the rope, he tore the knife from his mouth and started hacking. The knife was small. Would its blade be strong enough? The monster lurched with each blow but refused to part from its mooring. Ethon started sawing instead and suddenly – SNAP! The rope burst. The river's current gripped the underside of the raft and the burning monster hurtled out onto the open water. As the flames caught hold of its ribs, they split open with an enormous crack. Right on cue, Doe screamed. And the bats, furious at being disturbed, rushed from beneath Fogger's Leap in a great black swarm. The reaction was instant and more authentic that Ethon had dared to hope: his neighbours ducked and cowered and shrieked and whimpered. Birda and the other children ran screaming. But Foxwood ran faster. He reached the marshes first, staggering and stumbling and dragging his

hands through his hair. Ethon was half shocked and half delighted to see that Foxwood's knees were actually shaking.

"It's alright," Birda told him kindly. "They won't hurt you."

Grabbing her under the arms, Ethon swung her aside. "I hardly think Foxwood Flint is afraid of a few bats!" he said loudly.

Fen burst out laughing, as if it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. Ma Fevermint, overwhelmed by relief, joined in. Dearson laughed too. His laugh was warm, with no hint of malice, and it lit up his handsome face. Doe smiled up at him. Ethon, who was wet to the bone, kicked a fallen branch, forgetting that his foot hadn't healed fully. He swore with pain.

Foxwood stared at him, taking in the fact that he was soaked.

Ethon flushed. "I, er, fell in," he said.

Foxwood narrowed his eyes, turned away and tousled Birda's head. "I am afraid of nothing, little one," he said grandly and strode off.

"He was, though," Birda began, frowning.

Old Hareld took her hands. "Truth and wisdom are like a nut and its shell. Sometimes, truth must stay hidden, protected by wisdom. Or to put it another way, shush." He produced a handful of sweet chestnuts from his pocket. Birda crammed them into her mouth. Old Hareld straightened his creaking knees, clambered onto a rock, and called everyone to gather round. Behind him, a dark mass drifted downriver, carrying away the vile smell of rotting monster. All that was left was smoke on the water.

"Soursigh is dead," Old Hareld announced, "Foxwood Flint has rid us of this great threat, just as he vowed. The harvest is safe and all is well. We will celebrate with a feast and Foxwood will be guest of honour!"

Ethon and Pa shared a smile: Ma Fevermint had been right.

Birda jumped up and down. "A feast, a feast!" Forgetting to be cross with Mead, she pulled him into a circle of children, dancing faster and faster.

Larken scrambled down from Fogger's Leap, his face stricken. He stood miserably before Ethon, unable to find words.

"It's alright. I'm a good swimmer," Ethon said. "And I got to use this." He held out Doe's knife. It must, he guessed, usually be used for harvesting herbs. But somehow it felt as if it belonged in his hand. Perhaps this was how Foxwood

felt when he held his sword. Ethon risked glancing at Foxwood who stood rigidly, smoothing the already-perfect cloth of his snowy white sleeve. Beneath his eye a muscle twitched.

“Perhaps you would lead us back to Greenoak, sir?” Old Hareld said. “We are eager to start the preparations.”

“I think that honour belongs to Ethon,” Foxwood replied, courteous but cold.

“As you wish.” Old Hareld bowed.

Ethon bowed too. A piece of black river weed slithered from his hair and landed with a plop at his feet. He heard Hanny sniggering. Aware that he dripped with every step and stank of bat droppings, Ethon abandoned all hope of dignity. But dignity didn't matter: the plan had worked! With Chestnut bounding at his heels, he turned and led the way.

Chapter Nineteen

Three Bags Full

Ethon's veins, already pumping with victory, pulsed even faster as he reached Cropper's Meadow and saw the miraculous sight before him: the harvesting was almost done. Dozens of rows of oak-ale bushes sat naked in the weak sunshine. The hops yet to be harvested waved lazily in the breeze, their berries fat and healthy now that they were free from Soursigh's poisonous breath. Harvest-baskets, some crammed with golden leaves and others with purple berries, were stacked neatly. Soon, they would be carried to the Great Store where the berries would be crushed for their precious juice and the leaves dried, crushed and powdered. Ethon pictured barrel after barrel of oak-ale lining the walls of the Round Room. As Ethon reached Ironsong Chestnut, sleepy now after the day's excitement, whined. As Ethon crouched to lift him, a shadow fell over them both. Recognising the shiny boots and the long dagger handle, Ethon gulped. But there was another pair of boots, too, just as shiny but smaller and slimmer. Cradling Chestnut, Ethon stood up to face Foxwood and Dearson.

"I have changed my mind. Here is your silver." Foxwood held out three leather bags, fat as apples. "You may count it, of course, but I think you will find it is the sum we agreed for your work. Dearson is extremely accurate."

Ethon gaped. Could the monster plan have really have worked this well? Was it being guest of honour at the feast that had made Foxwood change his mind? But as the weight of the bags settled in his cupped palms, Ethon forgot all about the reasons why. It didn't matter. It didn't matter at all, because now they could make the family contribution to the Cold Coffin. They would have food for the whole winter! A huge grin spread across his face.

"That is silver well earned, Ethon," Dale Dearson said. "You are a credit to your family and your neighbours. And to my master too, of course."

Ethon's mouth dropped open. Was there no end to this boy's graciousness? Was he, in fact, perfect?

“Er, thank you,” he muttered at last, aware that his response sounded forced and sulky, an ugly contrast to Dearson’s generosity of spirit.

Dearson bowed and limped towards his horse, tethered to Pa Willow’s fence. The walk to and from Fogger’s Leap had exhausted him: his legs trembled and his back was slightly bent, giving him the appearance of a very young old man or possibly a very old young man: Ethon could not decide which. Summer’s Curse was clearly unwilling to release Dearson from her poisonous yellow talons just yet. He would not regain his strength till springtime, just as Ma Fevermint had predicted.

Dearson’s grey mare whinnied as he approached. He laid his cheek against her neck and closed his eyes. Ma Willow came bustling out, laundry dripping in her hands. Tied across her chest in a linen sling, his tiny pink face just visible, was her newborn son. Dearson gave a deep bow and peeped at the baby. From the glow that lit Ma Willow’s tired face, Ethon knew he’d paid the baby a compliment of the sort that mothers seemed to value above silver. Despite his evident fatigue, Dearson took the laundry from the Ma Willow and started to drape it over the drying-bushes. Ma Willow patted his arm and went back inside. At this rate, she’ll be naming the baby after him, Ethon thought sourly.

Foxwood watched the little scene with his eyes narrowed. “It is a pity Dearson is too weak to ride,” he remarked. “A pity for me and for the boy equally, since he can no longer work as my apprentice.”

Ethon felt ashamed. Dearson was sick and weak and now he was losing his position. He had done nothing to deserve any of it and yet he showed no trace of bitterness. Before he knew what he was doing, Ethon started to speak: “He could stay here in Greenoak. I know he’s not from the village but everyone likes him. He could help Pa Willow... or maybe Ma Kilter. She’s always complaining about how hard she works.”

Foxwood raised one eyebrow. “Perhaps he could stay on at Doe’s cottage and learn about herbal remedies from her mother?” he suggested.

“No,” Ethon replied. “Not there. They definitely don’t need his help.”

Foxwood smiled. “Calm down, boy. No need to get your feathers in a flummox. Dearson is to spend the winter with his uncle’s family, teaching his

young cousins to fletch arrows, prepare flints and polish blades. All tasks that one can do sitting down. It is fortunate that his cousins are all boys," he added drily.

Ethon pictured Dearson, sitting on a stool instead of a horse, spending his days with a gaggle of small children, while Foxwood galloped from village to village, adventure shining in his eyes as he carried out the Starborn's work. The mission was of the highest importance, starting as it did with orders from the City of Stars itself and ending with those tiny, vital marks that marched in mesmerising columns across the Spearhead Scroll, as neat as the rows of hops on Cropper's Meadow. And Foxwood's apprentice would miss it all. Ethon scuffed the ground with his toe. Confusingly, he felt sorry for Dearson.

"In your place, I would forget all about another's misfortune, and instead relish my own extraordinary good luck," Foxwood said.

Ethon stared at him, puzzled, but before Foxwood could continue, Pa Willow strode up to them and flung his arm around Ethon's shoulders. "Forgive me, but I must interrupt," he said, sounding not at all sorry. "Ma Willow and I want to ask Ethon a very important question, and it cannot wait."

Before Foxwood could protest, Pa Willow was marching Ethon past the steaming laundry tubs, over the neat threshold of the cottage and straight into Ma Willow's waiting arms. Chestnut, still snuggled against Ethon's chest, snuffled happily at the warmth of her embrace.

"It was Dale who gave us the idea. I don't know why we didn't think of it before," Ma Willow said, her voice a warm mumble in Ethon's hair.

"We wanted to ask you first, though," Pa Willow began. "Before we announce it at the feast. In case you object."

"But he won't object," Ma Willow added anxiously. "Ethon knows when a gesture speaks of honour, does he not?"

Pa Willow gripped Ethon's arms. "We want to name our son after you, lad," said Pa Willow.

"That is alright, isn't it?" Ma Willow said, pleating her apron with nervous fingers.

Ethon knew he could never speak with Dearson's elegant turn of phrase; he could not find any words at all to express how deeply touched he was.

So he simply said yes, and went home.

Back at the cottage, with Pa tending the fire and Chestnut snoring, Ethon felt wrapped in peace. Birda was playing with Poppety. Thanks to Ma Fevermint, a thick herby soup bubbled in the cooking pot. Bread sat ready beside their bowls. In the firelight, the cottage walls glowed with warmth. Even the spiteful draughts that usually nipped through the gaps between the stones had decided to tease somewhere else. Ethon tried to juggle with the three coin-bags but they were too heavy. He smiled so hard his face ached.

“Come down, Poppety, it’s not safe up there!” Birda was standing on tiptoe on her fire-stool, gazing in horrified glee at Poppety who, plonked astride Birda’s cloak-peg, was sliding slowly sideways.

“Why did you put her up there, if you didn’t want her to fall?” Ethon said, puzzled.

“We’re playing stone cutters and Poppety is being Pa Fevermint having his accident,” she said.

“What accident?” Ethon shared an anxious look with Pa.

“It’s not *real*,” Birda explained. “We’re just pretending. Doe said it didn’t happen in the end.” She rubbed her eyes.

Ethon pulled her onto his lap. “But Doe’s pa and brothers are far away. How could she know about it?”

“Doe did what that nasty man said,” Birda explained with a yawn. “So he made the accident go away.”

“What man?” Ethon asked, but he already knew the answer.

Grody Hollowtree.

Doe had tried to tell him, but her mother had pulled her away before she could finish, and Ethon had not wanted to raise the subject again. *I had to accuse your Pa*, Doe had said, and now he understood why. It wasn’t about silver: it was blackmail.

Poppety fell to the floor. Stuffing gushed from her body and ghostly fluff drifted towards the fire. Birda scooped Poppety up and dangled her by one arm. “She’s burst.”

“I will fix her for you, little barleycorn,” Pa said as he ladled out their soup.

But Birda pushed Poppety away and reached for her bowl. "I'm hungry," she said. "Poppety can wait."

I can't, Ethon thought.

I can't wait to see Doe and tell her that now, I truly understand.

Chapter Twenty

Secrets at the Feast

By dusk they were ready for the celebrations; Birda had even brushed her hair. But Pa was refusing to come. "Take Birda and Chestnut, and go on without me. I feel a little feverish tonight," he said, fiddling with his beard and refusing to meet Ethon's eye. "I may join you later."

Ethon checked Pa's ankles for signs of infection, but the skin was healing a shiny pink. Perhaps Pa was simply feeling anxious and needed to rest. He arranged Pa's blanket neatly over his knees and filled a cup of fresh water for him.

"Poppety will stay with you," Birda said, tucking her in beside him. "She doesn't like noisy crowds. And she's not hungry. But I am."

So was Ethon. Even this far from the feasting field they could smell food cooking. His stomach rumbled. "I'll bring back as many leftovers as I can carry," he promised Pa as they left.

The village was deserted, since everyone was gathered on the Feasting Field. The wide expanse of grass lay beyond Criminal Hill. Every village festival was held here since, with no trees for a hundred paces in any direction, it was the perfect spot for lighting a fire. As they approached, Ethon saw that the pile of bones for tonight's celebrations was already smouldering. Smoke drifted into the evening sky like a pale waving arm, beckoning gracefully. A huddle of children shuffled forwards. One of the boys broke away from the group and poked a stick into the fire. A flame burst out with a hiss and a crackle, almost licking his hand. The boy jumped back, laughing, as his friends shrieked in terrified admiration.

Ethon tore the stick from the child's grasp and pulled him away from the fire. "Don't you know that's dangerous?"

Mead Ironturner wrenched his arm free. "Let go! I was only playing."

"Only showing off, more like." Fen cuffed his little brother's head. "It's lucky for you that Pa didn't see. Respect the flame or feel the pain, remember?"

As if summoned, Big Fen Ironturner came striding out of the gloom and his deep voice boomed across the field. "Where are my boys?"

"I'm right here, Pa!" Smirking, Mead raced towards his father, who swept him up and sat him on his shoulders.

"Spoilt as a wet harvest," Fen muttered. "I'd better go." He hesitated then gave Ethon a swift pat on the arm. "Whatever happens tonight, Foxwood Flint leaves tomorrow. Then everything will be normal again. Well, normal except for you being puppy-eyed with love." Dodging Ethon's punch, Fen went to join his family.

Ethon turned away from the bone-fire and looked across to the Honour Chair, placed at the head of the two long rows of trestle tables. Foxwood Flint sat upright, chin raised, as proud as a Castleborn. A man outwardly calm, but packed as tight with anger as the bone-fire was packed with smoulder-leaf. And who could blame him? Foxwood Flint had been forced to accept the role of honoured guest, when he believed that no honour had been involved. But Ethon had done what Pa has always taught him: it was the right thing, he was sure... almost sure. Right and wrong seemed to mingle and drift like smoke, impossible to grasp.

Ethon felt a small warm hand slide into his. "When will the singing start? Who's calling the swallow? Mead says that Old Hareld has chosen Doe." Birda snuggled close. In the firelight, her pale hair shone. For once, her thin cheeks seemed to glow with health, apple-bright. Sometimes, even an illusion could bring comfort. Especially when it came in the shape of a loving little person scrambling into his lap.

Ethon pretended to weep. "You're always talking about Doe. I think you like her better than you like me."

Birda giggled. Ethon settled her comfortably in the crook of his arm and leaned down to stroke Chestnut's head. He was only a puppy, and he had form when it came to reacting to loud noises: who knew how he'd behave when the entire village started to stamp and clap and sing?

The bone-fire was properly alive now, bright and crackling. Earthy scents filled the air. On the far side of the Round, someone was tapping out a rhythm on a goatskin drum. Ethon could hear the familiar jumble of female voices laughing and lulling, goading and gossiping. He thought he heard Ma Fevermint calling Doe's name. It was easy to recognise Ma Ironturner's warm laugh and Hanny

Claypotter's cackle. As the fire grew brighter, the crowd grew quieter, overawed by the dazzling sight. Old Hareld, the Feast Pipe in his hand, walked into the middle of the space, his bent, skinny frame outlined against the fire like a gnarled and leafless tree. Suddenly, Ethon thought of the night he met Ma Kilter by the lightning tree in Viper's Wood. He shivered, recalling her taunts. Then he set his jaw. Pa had been wild and tormented that night, but now he was his real self again, calm and kind. The stone feather had filled his heart with hope, instead of sadness. The shadow of grief had passed by. Ethon hugged Birda. "Warm enough, little barleycorn?" he whispered.

Birda nodded. "But I wish Pa was here," she said. "He's missing all the fun."

"He needs to rest," Ethon replied, trying to ignore the fact that Pa had looked quite well, and distinctly guilty.

Old Hareld had finished polishing the pipe. He was ready at last. He turned to face the crowd and blew a long, deep note. Everyone began to sing. Birda knew the words to Fogger's Lament off by heart, and even the youngest children could hum its tune and clap its rhythm. The familiar melody flowed back and forth across the open space as the women sang their lines and the men answered.

Ethon slid Birda from his lap and they joined the crowd as the men, women and children of Greenoak draw together and, holding hands, formed a circle. Taught by parents and neighbours, brothers and sisters, everyone knew its meaning. Ethon remembered Pa explaining it to him, many summers ago, after a group of older boys led by Hanny's eldest brother had frightened him sleepless with tales of the Fogger's evil tricks.

We make the shape of the Silver Lady

Powerful and serene

And so protect our village

From the Fogger's grip unseen.

We make the shape, we make the shape

We make the shape together

And so we'll walk in silver light

Safe and strong together

Safe and strong

Safe and strong

Safe and strong forever!

Only when the last note sounded, high and pure as a swallow's call, could the celebrations begin. It was an honour bestowed on one of the village girls in recognition of her family's contribution to the great feast: two fat geese, at the very least. But it was indeed Doe Fevermint who climbed the Swallow Steps and sang the sweet, high, final notes of Fogger's Lament. To his horror, Ethon's eyes filled. How had he not known her voice was so beautiful? The silence that followed seemed impossible to break. Then a child bawled, "I'm hungry!" The crowd burst into laughter. Chestnut ran in circles, barking. Torches were lit, illuminating the riches piled onto the long tables: hunks of bread and big bowls of chestnut stew, steaming pies and mounds of shining berries. Apples and pears and plums, arranged like the petals of a flower, surrounded an entire pig's head, ghastly and pink. A group of children crept close, gleefully daring each other to touch it. Taking Birda's hand, Ethon whistled for Chestnut, and headed straight for the pies.

The feasting continued until the musicians started to fall asleep and the bonfire crumbled to a glowing mound of ash. Families were chatting sleepily. Larken Rattlebone, still unused to oak ale, was lying flat out, groaning. From time to time he burst into a tuneless song about a cruel lover. Hanny and her sisters were alternately egging him on and laughing fit to burst. Doe placed a blanket over Larken and gently rolled him onto his side.

"Wishing he was sweet on you, herby-girl?" Hanny teased as Doe walked back to her ma.

Doe looked levelly at her. "Don't mock him. He's kind," she said.

"I weren't mocking *him*," Hanny said.

Ethon lobbed a squashed plum at Hanny's head then ducked out of sight. Hanny spun round, forgetting to taunt Doe, and started blaming each of her sisters in turn. Doe flashed a smile at Ethon. Larken was sick again. Only when Ma Rattlebone bustled up to care for Larken did Doe join Ethon.

Together they watched the glowing fire and listened to the contented murmurs and bursts of song. With Birda snuggled against him and Doe smiling shyly beside him, Ethon felt a moment of pure happiness. They chatted about the feast and the music and then, after a pause, Doe said softly, "It was blackmail."

"I know," said Ethon.

And together they laughed quietly as Ethon told her about Birda's stone-cutting game and its tragic results for Poppety.

Suddenly, from the shadows behind the food-tables, a drum pattern began. Ethon recognised its eight evenly-spaced beats:

One-to-speak-and-all-to-lis-ten

It was a familiar sound at village meetings, designed to ensure that everyone had the chance to speak uninterrupted. But it didn't belong at a feast. Ethon looked around, puzzled and beside him, Birda awoke. When Ethon saw that it was Pa holding the drum, he leapt to his feet. But before he could reach him, Pa had climbed onto a bench, pushing back his hair with shaking hands. Had the fever grown suddenly, overtaken him, stripped away his senses? Worse, was he in his right mind but prepared to risk another charge of scaremongering? Ethon's chest tightened as if grabbed by an iron fist, but he could only watch as Pa planted his feet wide and spread out his arms. Ethon slumped onto the grass and buried his head in his hands. Even Birda's hand creeping into his did not help. "Why's Pa standing on that table?" Birda asked.

"Attention seeking." Ma Kilter had sidled up and was gathering her cloak around her, as if to protect herself. Her face was pale as ash against the deep red cloth. She would, Ethon feared, haunt his dreams. If he had to witness yet more humiliation for Pa, he would not do it under Ma Kilter's unfriendly gaze. Ethon turned his back on her.

Pa started to speak.

"Friends," Pa began. "I have made many mistakes. I have on occasion left my senses in the forest. I have set a poor example to my children. I do not make excuses, for there can be none. All I can say is that the pain of my loss – my Elin, my dearling – has proved a burden too heavy for me to bear at times."

Pa paused and looked across at Ma Kilter. "Some people need more time than others to heal after a wound has been inflicted," he said gently.

Ma Kilter stiffened and flushed.

"For my weakness, I am sorry," Pa went on. "But I am not a scaremonger – and I am not a liar."

Pa looked across at the hushed crowd and at Foxwood Flint, who was sitting forward in the Honour Chair, a frown cutting into his brow.

Taking a deep breath Pa continued: "I saw the Trademaker in Low Wood that night – the night before The Showing. The shadow of grief had been stalking me but I was determined to stay as far away from heart's ease as I could. I entered the forest and walked east, in the direction of Mulberry Manor. I walked from dusk until dead of night, a thousand paces on from the milestone. Then I saw a little flame – a fire – a camp. And I heard voices speaking of Greenoak! I crept closer. There were two men, one huge and dressed in green, the other short, with bandy legs and a barrel belly. The smaller man seemed to be in charge; he did most of the talking. It was only when his companion – Crookle bait, his name was – raised a toast to them 'fleecing every villager this side of the Manor' that I understood what I was hearing. These men intended to cheat us all! I sat awake for hours, determined to find out everything I could. But eventually I must have fallen asleep. And when I awoke, it was long past dawnrise. Fearing I would be too late, I ran back to Greenoak. When I confronted the Trademaker at The Showing, I was in a state of exhaustion. And those who cried mizzle-man were mistaken."

"But you cannot prove it. Why should we believe you?" Ma Kilter said.

"Trust matters more than evidence. Is it not so?" said Old Hareld

"Everything Pa says is true!" Ethon leapt to his feet. "I heard Grody Hollowtree too, on the way back from Trade. I did have evidence but I, er, I lost it," he finished lamely.

Foxwood Flint burst from his seat and confronted Ethon. "What did you say, boy?"

"It – it got burned," Ethon stammered.

Fen broke away from his family and stood shoulder to shoulder with Ethon. "I can vouch for it, sir," he said. "It was cloth from Blackbull Crookle bait's tunic. We found it on the way back from Trade and we used it to make a torch."

“Not that bit – the Trademaker’s name,” Foxwood said.

“Grody Hollowtree,” Ethon said, confused.

Foxwood balled his fists and, for a bewildering moment, Ethon thought he was about to hit him. But Foxwood slammed his fist into his palm and strode back to his seat.

Big Fen rested a massive hand on each of their shoulders. “My son is as true as a flame,” he said. “Ethon Larksong has my trust – and Edor Larksong, too.”

Ma Fevermint rose. “And mine.”

Doe jumped up too. “And mine!”

“We’re naming our firstborn after the Larksong boy – if that isn’t a sign of trust I’ll weave a basket backwards!” Pa Willow cried.

Hands shot up all along the row: the Ironturners, the Rattlebones, the Claypotters. Soon, every hand in Greenoak was raised in support of Pa.

Except one.

It was Pa Claypotter who turned to Ma Kilter and said, “Come, Laurel. It is time to let go of old hurts and look to the future. See what... alternatives it might hold.” Lines wreathed his ruddy cheeks as he smiled at her.

Ma Kilter tossed her head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“He means he likes you!” Birda yelled out.

Hanny almost fell off her stool laughing and everyone joined in. Ethon just stared. Then, astonishingly, Ma Kilter smiled too, revealing unexpected dimples, and slowly raised her hand.

The drum started to thud again. This time it was Foxwood Flint who has something to say. “Tonight I speak not of Soursigh, but of another threat – and one which I also vow to conquer,” he announced. “Grody Hollowtree is indeed a cheat. His greed will, if left unchecked, bring hardship to you all, and to many others too. I give you my word that I will find and punish that sorry excuse for a man. And I will ensure that an honest Trademaker comes here for Early Trade. And as you know,” he finished, looking at Ethon. “I am a man who honours his word.”

After a stunned pause, the villagers cheered.

Old Hareld held the drum aloft, banging it hard. Eventually, he was heard and the old man stood up and turned to Foxwood. “We thank you, sir,” he said. “Truly, our gratitude is as broad as Wide Water. But, as Elder here, it is my duty to ask

your motivation, as well as praise your intention. So I must ask: why do you take on such a task, for a community you barely know?"

Foxwood shoved his thumbs into his belt. Ethon noticed that a muscle below his eye was twitching.

Before Foxwood could speak, Pa did so.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he said gently.

"I must," Foxwood replied.

"But why?" Old Hareld asked, looking from one man to the other.

Ethon stared at Foxwood, suddenly remembering something Pa had said, something about Grody's black hair and high cheekbones, a strange and disturbing similarity...

"Because Grody Hollowtree is my brother," said Foxwood Flint.

Old Hareld sat down with a thump. "But your name, your position, your manners – how can this be?"

"We are half-brothers," Foxwood explained. "We have the same mother, but different fathers. All equally high born, of course," he added quickly. "Grody is the elder, but believes I have been favoured. From boyhood, we took different paths. He took to trade, and I to the battlefield. Until the Starborn called me back."

"We are all capable of taking the wrong path in life and making mistakes... terrible mistakes, sometimes. You would see your own flesh and blood punished?" Old Hareld said quietly.

"Without question," said Foxwood Flint. "He must follow a straight path, or face the consequences – just like any other man."

"Then we accept your offer," Old Hareld said.

Foxwood Flint held out his hand and the old man clasped it.

"No touch, no deal," Birda whispered.

Ethon grinned. "Now where did you learn that?"

"Poppety tells me things," Birda said.

Ethon ruffled her hair. "I hope she tells you how clever you are."

"She doesn't. Actually, she's quite mean." Birda said thoughtfully.

Chestnut lifted his hackles and growled. I bet he'd like to chew that hideous doll to pieces, Ethon thought. He stroked Chestnut's head.

“Everyone’s going home now. I’ll go and fetch Pa,” he said, leaving Birda and Chestnut to play.

But Foxwood Flint blocked his way. “I want a word with you,” he said.

Ethon gulped. What had he done wrong this time?

Foxwood placed his arm over Ethon’s shoulders and propelled him away from the feast, only stopping when they were out of earshot of the last few revellers.

“You remind me of myself as a boy,” he said. “Brave, bold and clever, too; that trick you played on me down at Fogger’s Leap is one I’ll never forget. At first I was angry. But then I saw how you’d gained the support and loyalty of your entire village. You are reckless and impulsive, and far too keen to fight when you lack both skill and judgement. One day, you will be a great leader. Although you are too soft-hearted,” he added, gripping Ethon by the shoulders and staring into his eyes, as if searching for all the other possible flaws in his character and finding plenty. “But we’ll put that down to certain influences.”

Ethon knew at once he meant Pa. He tightened his fists.

Foxwood continued smoothly: “Spending so much time looking after your sister, I mean. Once you’re properly in my employ, you’ll toughen up soon enough.”

Properly in my employ? Ethon shook his head; perhaps a scuttlebug had crawled into his ear, for certainly he must have misheard. He thumped his ear.

“What are you doing?” Foxwood planted his feet wide in that now-familiar pose: he was losing patience. “I have decided to bestow upon you a rare honour, Ethon Larksong,” he said. “I tried to tell you yesterday – but Pa Willow was intent on making you a better offer,” he said drily. “I wish to appoint you as my new apprentice.”

“Me?” Ethon squeaked.

“You,” Foxwood agreed.

Aware that he was gawping like a startled sheep, Ethon could not move, could not speak. His mind was racing as fast as his heart. Imagine how much silver he would earn – enough to keep Birda and Pa fed all wintertide – and imagine the adventure! As Foxwood’s apprentice, he would learn all about counting and scrolling. He’d go to the City of Stars and see with his own eyes its soaring towers and gleaming castle, its great harbour and magnificent ships. He would see the sea!

But it would mean leaving everyone behind. Pa and Birda and Fen and Doe...

Dimly, Ethon realised that Foxwood was still talking.

“You’ll have to learn to ride, of course. And you’ll have to say your goodbyes quickly. We leave tomorrow. That is, if you accept my offer?”

Ethon straightened his shoulders and found his voice. “I am honoured to accept, sir,” he said. “I will not disappoint you. You have my word.”

Foxwood raised one eyebrow. “By the Silver Lady, you are beginning to sound as gracious as Dearson. I see I have made an excellent choice.”

A grin split Ethon’s face. “Can I go and tell Pa?” he said.

“The sooner the better,” Foxwood said crisply. “We leave at first light.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Silvermist

Birda, Chestnut, Poppety and Pa were sitting in a row. Bowls of eggy mess sat untouched in Pa and Birda's laps. Chestnut, looking faintly guilty, licked an empty bowl. He'd grown, Ethon realised: his legs were longer and his belly was starting to fill out. The scars on his nose and neck were healing, too. But his expression was trusting as ever. Poppety looked smug, but Ethon no longer cared. He had a feeling that by the time he returned, she would be no more than a bundle of smelly old sacking, abandoned. The idea brought a smile to his face.

Pa gave Ethon his bowl. "This is for you. I have already eaten, as you can see." He stroked Chestnut's head.

Ethon started to eat. The food was deliciously savoury and delicately flavoured with fresh herbs. He could taste Ma Willow's motherly kindness in every mouthful. Her baby son – Little Ethon – would never be short of either food or love.

"I can't eat," Birda announced, thrusting her bowl into Pa's hands. "I can't eat because I'm sad and I'm sad because you're going away!" She bunched her fists and burst into noisy tears. "Poppety says you can't go!" Birda threw herself onto her mattress, curled herself into a ball and wept. Chestnut licked her salty cheek.

Ethon wrapped his arms around Birda. "It's true that I am leaving," he said. "But only for a while. I have the chance to earn enough silver to keep us all fed and warm for a long, long time. I don't want to leave you, little barleycorn, but I must. I promise I will come back. And I want you to promise me something, too."

Birda wiped her nose on her sleeve. "What?"

"I want you to look after Chestnut. After all, he's officially yours now."

Birda sat up straight.

"You did once say you always wanted a goat, though... so maybe I should swap him," Ethon teased.

Birda pulled away and glared at Ethon. "You can't," she told him. "He's mine."

“Indeed he is. And I think it’s time you took him outside to play,” Pa said. “It’s not properly light yet, so make sure you stay on the path.”

“But the path is boring – ” Birda began. Then, as both Pa and Ethon folded their arms, she sighed, grabbed Poppety and skipped outside, calling Chestnut after her.

Ethon smiled at Pa. “She’s right. The path *is* boring. But it is safe.”

“And the path you are about to take is not.” Pa rubbed his temples.

“I am ready for it,” Ethon replied.

“I will not let you go without this,” Pa said, holding something out to Ethon. The two halves of the stone feather had been bound together with the finest thread. Now they fitted so tightly that it was almost impossible to see the crack. “I no longer need it, and you do.”

Ethon opened his mouth to argue then shut it again. Pa’s words were true. He looped the precious pendant over his head and tucked it inside the neck of his tunic. The stone was warm from resting against Pa’s skin. And it meant that Ma would always be with him. Two halves of a whole. He would never take it off.

Wordlessly, he hugged Pa tight.

It was Pa who drew away first, handing Ethon his bundle. Sunlight danced on the walls. Ethon must not keep his new employer waiting.

“Stay well, Pa,” he said. Morning light, drifting through the doorway, shone on the pink scars on Pa’s ankles. “Make sure you rest until you are properly healed.”

“You sound just like Ma Fevermint,” Pa said with a faint smile. “Go well, my boy.”

Ethon, hearing the tears in Pa’s voice, could not look at his face. He took a deep breath. Like sealing a wound with a flame, leaving home was a task best done quickly. Squaring his shoulders, he turned and strode outside.

Birda and Chestnut were sitting together on a log. “Can we come and wave you off?” Birda said in small voice.

“Of course, little barleycorn.” Ethon held out his hand and pulled Birda to her feet. His eyes prickled. Sniffing, he bent to stroke Chestnut. “No barking at Warrior,” he told him. “You might get kicked.” Chestnut nuzzled Ethon’s palm as if to reassure him. “Best dog,” Ethon whispered.

“What’s the other horse called?” Birda asked. “The grey one. We called him Snowcloud but what’s his real name?”

“I don’t know,” Ethon realised. “Why don’t you run down to Doe’s house and ask Dearson? Then meet me at Ironsong.”

Ethon stopped at Pa Willow’s cottage and Birda and Chestnut raced off. Watching Birda’s milky blonde hair flying out behind her, and hearing her voice ringing out, Ethon felt a lump in his throat. Birda was so fierce but so fragile. How could he leave her? Forcing himself to look away, he saw the Willows’ baby lying in his crib under a tree. Soon, the baby would be gurgling and smiling and reaching for the leaves with little fat hands. Perhaps one day he, too, would leave Greenoak and all his family and friends. Or perhaps he would find that, when it came to it, he could not.

Ma Willow set down her washing and came over to greet him.

“Go well, dearling,” she said. “And don’t you be worrying about Pa and Birda. They’ll be as strong and bonny as this little man by the time you come home. I promise.”

As usual when faced with kindness, Ethon could not find the right words. Muttering “Stay well,” he bent to stroke the baby’s downy head, then turned and walked away.

As he passed by the bread oven and the Claypotters’ tumbledown cottage, Ethon was relieved to see that no-one was about. He would rather eat nettles than be forced to say a polite goodbye to Ma Kilter, who would be certain to spoil his departure with some snide remark. And Hanny would be sure to embarrass him with an emotional farewell. She might even try to cuddle him. The thought of it – and, even worse, of Foxwood witnessing it – made his face burn. The sky was properly light now; if he was to see Fen and Doe before he left, he must hurry. Thankful to be heading away from his worst neighbours and towards his best friends, Ethon broke into a run.

Fen was waiting for him outside the forge, with Steadfast in his hand. He held it out to Ethon. “If you are really going, I want you to take this with you,” he said.

Ethon felt delight flood through him as he held the beautiful stave, its worn glossy surface perfectly smooth. He felt stronger, somehow, and braver. But Steadfast belonged to the Ironturner family.

He gave it back to Fen. "Steadfast belongs here with you."

Fen scuffed the ground with his toe. "You belong here too," he told Ethon.

A silence stretched between them, taut as the linen pegged out to dry in Low Meadow. There would be few days left now for the great squares of fabric to take shape; few days before the ice-winds began to blow, signalling Wintertide. Soon the mountain, the meadow and the village itself would be wrapped in the dangerous hush of snow. If Birda and Pa were to survive, he must leave with Foxwood Flint. If only Fen could come too!

"I wish," Ethon began. He stopped, knowing his wish was impossible. He wished that Fen could share this adventure as they'd shared everything, every new day, every old game, every triumph and trouble since they were three summers old.

But Foxwood only needed one apprentice.

"I will come back," Ethon said fiercely.

"Like a dose of Summer's Curse," Fen said, breaking the tension with a grin. He crossed his eyes and mock-choked.

Ethon shoved him. Fen soon had him in a headlock but Ethon, surprised by his own strength, fought free.

"Talking of Summer's Curse," he said. "I want you to keep an eye on Dearson until his uncle comes to collect him. I actually like him, but if you see him getting too friendly with Doe, well, you know what to do."

"I'll set Mead on him." Fen nodded wisely. "He'll wear him out faster than any sickness ever could. And I'll be spared having to keep an eye on my little brother. It's a perfect arrangement," he added thoughtfully. "Maybe I'll just see what I can do to set things off..."

"It's lucky I trust you," Ethon said.

"Yes," Fen agreed. To Ethon's surprise, he thrust Steadfast back into his hands. "And just in case you need some extra luck, I am *lending* you this. Refusing it would be an insult to the entire Ironturner family. Including Mead. And you definitely don't want to get on the wrong side of him."

Fen spun round, called a swift, "Go well, brother," over his shoulder and marched back inside. The door swung shut and Ethon was alone.

"Stay well, brother," Ethon whispered, turning away from the forge.

He had one more goodbye to say.

Doe was waiting for him at Twisted Twice, just as she had promised. Rosy fruit nestled in its branches: easily the best crop in the orchard. Ethon coughed gently, not wanting to startle Doe, since the slightest cry would bring her mother running. Ma Fevermint's attitude towards him had softened, but it would harden like iron in cold water if she caught them alone together. As Doe turned to face him Ethon saw that she had tucked tiny white flowers into her hair.

"You're here," she said, and smiled.

Ethon's goodbye speech flew from his mind.

"I – I'm, well, I'm..." he stuttered. He stopped and tried again. "I'm coming back! I don't know when exactly, but I *will* come back. And you'll be here, and I'll be here, so we'll be together, you and me and, um..." his words tangled themselves into a knot. Ethon kicked the tree trunk and winced.

Doe touched his arm. "There's something I want to give you," she said, glancing towards her mother's windows. "But I must be quick."

Ethon cheered up. "Whatever it is, I hoped it will be lighter to carry than Steadfast," he said.

"Lighter than a petal," Doe promised. She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "Go well, Ethon," she said softly. Without waiting for his reply, she ran inside.

Ethon slumped against Twisted Twice. Had it really happened? Had Doe Fevermint, the prettiest girl in all of Greenoak, the kindest, bravest and – he was sure – the best of all girls everywhere, given him an actual kiss? He pressed his fingers to his face as if he could hold the sweet feeling there forever.

A creak and a splash startled him: Ma Fevermint was throwing out the night's slops. Ethon held his breath. If she looked over, she'd be sure to see him. He watched, frozen, as Doe's mother marched down the path and drew a knife from her pocket. Ethon gripped Steadfast, but still he shook. Ma Fevermint would stop at nothing to protect Doe. It was, Ethon realised, exactly the way he felt about Birda and Pa. Ma Fevermint stretched out her arm. The knife flashed. Then, with expert

efficiency, she sliced the last spray of flowers from the boughs of summersweet that arched over the garden gate. She sniffed them, nodded approvingly and went back inside. The door creaked shut and the bolt slammed.

Ethon glanced up at Dearson's attic window. The boy gazed out like a prisoner. Was there once again a yellow tinge to his pale skin? Ethon rubbed away the horrid guilty feeling that made his neck suddenly cold. He had done nothing to bring about Dearson's misfortune, and could do nothing to help him. He bowed. Dearson nodded, then mimed a sleeping motion and disappeared from view. A cockerel crowed; it was time to go. With Steadfast over one shoulder, Ethon strode through the orchard and headed towards the Round, whistling. Scatterbirds pecked in the dust and, deep in the trees, a wood pigeon cooed. Two copper butterflies flew by. Ethon counted his blessings as he walked: a hearty meal in his stomach, the stone feather close to his heart and Steadfast in his hand. A kiss on his cheek – and now a sign of luck fluttering right before his eyes! What more could he want?

As Ethon walked up to Ironsong, he saw that a small crowd had gathered. Pa Rattlebone was crouching to admire Chestnut, patiently listening as Birda listed the puppy's many admirable qualities. Larken stood back awkwardly scuffing the dust. And there was Ma Kilter, unmistakable in her cherry-red cloak. Ethon's mouth went dry. Then he heard Hanny's giggle and his heart dropped still further.

Dearson's grey horse stood calmly, saddled and ready beside Warrior. To Ethon's astonishment, he saw that Foxwood had his arm around Old Hareld's shoulders. The old man was clasping Foxwood's hand as if they were brothers.

"Good dawnrise," Ethon said cautiously, feeling that he was interrupting.

"Fair morning," Old Hareld replied. His eyes sparkled like a child's and even his bent back seemed a little straighter.

Foxwood turned to greet Ethon. "I see you are ready. Excellent," he said. "You can put your bundle in the saddle bag, and strap that stave across behind it. It is fine quality," he added generously.

Ethon blinked. What could have put Foxwood Flint in such a good mood?

Birda grabbed Ethon's sleeve and, squeaking with excitement, pulled him towards the grey mare. "She's called Misty!"

"Gently, little one," Old Hareld told her. "Horses startle easily."

“It’s short for Silvermist,” Birda whispered loudly.

The horse pricked her ears and whinnied. Foxwood stroked her nose. “Misty is a well-mannered creature; Dearson trained her well. But she’s fearless, too, and gallops like racing water. You and Dearson are about the same height. She is an ideal mount for you,” he told Ethon. “Now, you just need to learn to ride.” Foxwood spoke as if it were as easy as whittling a stick. Smiling, he pointed to the iron stirrup that hung from Misty’s saddle. Ethon smiled back. Foxwood’s confidence was catching. Which was just as well, as his heart was skittering. He put his foot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. To his surprise, it felt easy and natural: not so very different from sitting on a high branch, and he and Fen were good at that. He could, he realised with glee, look down on Ma Kilter. Ethon sat up straight and looked right at her. Then, before he had time to slide his foot into the other stirrup, Chestnut barked and Misty sidestepped. Ethon lunged forwards and grabbed the horse’s mane. He lay sprawled, half in the saddle and half out. It was Foxwood, grabbing Ethon by the back of his tunic and hauling him upright, who saved him from tumbling into the dust.

Ma Kilter sniggered. “Still got plenty to learn, I see,” she said.

“And me – I’m going to be an apprentice too!” Hanny announced, flipping her plait over her shoulder and strutting forwards. “You’re not the only clever one, Ethon.”

Ethon stared in shock. What possible use could Foxwood Flint have for Hanny Claypotter? Her skills with clay were slapdash and she was so childish it was hard to believe she had fifteen summers. She would irritate him in every possible way.

Hanny pulled a loaf of bread from her apron and tore it in two. “I got strong hands, you see,” she said and burst into raucous laughter.

“An important attribute for a bread-maker,” Old Hareld said smoothly. “Ma Kilter cannot manage alone any longer.”

“I’ll soon whip her into shape,” Ma Kilter said, slapping Hanny’s arm.

Hanny scowled and stuck her bottom lip out.

“Good luck,” Ethon said, meaning it.

“You too, Lanky-legs,” Hanny called, as Ma Kilter pulled her away.

Pa Rattlebone called Birda over. "Larken wants to make a special necklace. He's collected lots of shells, but he doesn't know how to make it look pretty. Will you come and help?"

Birda's face lit up. "Of course I will. I'm a nexpert," she told him.

Ethon caught Pa Rattlebone's eye. With such kind neighbours, he need not fear for Birda's wellbeing.

Birda rested her head on Ethon's leg and he leaned down to stroke her hair. "Stay well, little barleycorn."

Birda planted a kiss on his hand then raced away from the Round with Chestnut bounding beside her.

Larken smiled shyly and gave Ethon a thumbs up. Why he wanted to impress Hanny, who delighted in mocking him, Ethon could not fathom. Perhaps it was the oak-ale.

"You have strange customs in these parts," Foxwood mused. "Girls becoming apprentices? We would never allow such a thing in the City of Stars."

"Perhaps you also have much to learn," Old Hareld said mildly.

"Be careful, soldier," Foxwood warned.

Old Hareld bowed.

Ethon frowned. Perhaps he had misheard, for surely Foxwood meant to say Elder.

Old Hareld grasped Misty's reins. "Learn all you can, and keep your fists in your pockets," he told Ethon. His eyes were bright and, for a horrible moment, Ethon thought they might spill over. "Do you promise?"

Ethon traced drew the shape of the Silver Lady on Misty's shoulder.

Satisfied, Old Hareld stood back.

"Time to go," Foxwood announced. He swung himself into Warrior's saddle and checked that the Spearhead Scroll was secured. With Misty tethered behind, Foxwood Flint urged his horse to walk on. "Stay well, good people," he called.

"Go well," said Old Hareld. "And may the Silver Lady light your way."

Accompanied by the soft clop of hooves and the fresh autumn breeze, leaving Greenoak was a great deal easier than Ethon had feared. Looking ahead, he saw the High Road milestone. He had never passed it before, since it marked the edge of the village. Not only was the High Road out of bounds, it was in clear view

of The Round and anyone who happened to be crossing it. Now, he could take to the road without fear of the consequences – and discover all that lay beyond. In fact, it was his duty to do so – and he would be paid handsomely for it. Perhaps he would even see the sea! A grin spread over his face.

“We’ll rest overnight at Mulberry Manor,” Foxwood said. “The Castleborn has offered me his hospitality. I believe the two of you have already met,” he added drily. “And we will reach the City of Stars by dusk tomorrow. Then your training will really begin – starting with horsemanship. Does that please you, Ethon Larksong?”

Ethon nodded. Then, remembering that Foxwood could not see him, since Misty was following Warrior, he said quickly, “Yes, sir.”

“Your job is to help me with the Great Counting Mission,” Foxwood went on. “We have much ground to cover, many villages still on our list. But when the job is done, who knows? Perhaps we’ll make a soldier of you.”

“You called Old Hareld *soldier*,” Ethon said, hardly realising that he was speaking his thoughts aloud. “Why?”

“Because of Soursigh,” Foxwood replied impatiently. “You know the story. A young soldier got his friend killed when he tried to slay the beast and was cast out of his village. Eventually he became a wise man – an Elder. But once a soldier, always a soldier, I say.”

Ethon’s mouth dropped open. Misty, sensing that this gangling new rider was about to lose his balance again, stopped abruptly. Foxwood turned around in his saddle, took one look at Ethon’s face and offered him a flagon. “You look as if you need a man’s drink,” he said.

Ethon took a gulp. The ale was rich, bitter and very strong; no wonder Larken was having trouble getting used to it. Ethon pictured the barrel that stood in the Round Room. He’d served so many people from it at Old Hareld’s mild command, listened spellbound to a thousand fireside stories, and, more recently, waited impatiently for the old man’s tales to end so he and Fen could run back to the woods. Old Hareld was so frail and bent – could he really once have been as strong and upright as Foxwood Flint? Did a warrior’s heart still beat somewhere inside his skinny old chest? And how was it possible to keep a secret so big, for so long?

“Onwards,” Foxwood said, snapping his fingers.

Ethon handed back the flagon. He stroked Misty’s neck, feeling her powerful muscles and sensing her generous spirit. He held the stone feather between his finger and thumb: so comfortingly heavy, and always warm. Ma’s voice whispered somewhere deep inside his heart. *Go well, son.* Ethon nudged Misty with his knees, feeling the very beginnings of a rider’s skill, and looked at the road ahead.

“Onwards,” he said.

The end

Appendix One

Synopsis of *The Stone Feather*

ETHON LARKSONG, 13, knows that even his kindest neighbours are losing patience with his beloved father, PA. Once a respected storyteller known for his wonderful singing voice, Pa has never recovered from MA's death giving birth to Ethon's little sister BIRDA. Desperate to escape from the shadow of grief, which swoops without warning, Pa is suspected of seeking comfort in forbidden heart's ease mushrooms. The timing is catastrophic, since it coincides with the family's final opportunity to arrange a Trade to see them through the coming winter.

When Pa bursts into Trade and accuses powerful middleman GRODY HOLLOWTREE of cheating, Ethon is furious, ashamed and, with Grody now refusing to represent them, desperate. He is forced to risk the old, dangerous way to Trade. His friends help: the girl he likes, DOE FEVERMINT, offers support despite her protective mother's disapproval, and his best friend FEN IRONTURNER insists on coming with him.

At Trade Ethon discovers a talent for selling – and also that Grody is indeed a cheat. Ashamed that he did not believe his father, Ethon returns home ready to make amends and persuade their neighbours that Pa told the truth. But he's too late: Pa has been arrested for scaremongering. To Ethon's horror and disbelief, the accuser is Doe.

At Pa's trial, the judge is impressed by Ethon's passionate defence of both Pa and Doe, who Ethon realises has been coerced. He grants Ethon the right to catch three fish from his private river – a highly unusual and symbolic act of faith.

When one fish escapes, hungry Ethon hooks a fourth – a sinister worm. He hears the village alarm and flings the creature down the well as he races home to help.

He finds a posse of men led by charismatic stranger FOXWOOD FLINT who terrifies Ethon's neighbours when he storms into the village, on a mission to count every pig, pot and plough so that new taxes can be levied.

But after his apprentice falls seriously ill, Foxwood needs help. Seeing a way to support his family, Ethon offers to work for the outsider even though he risks losing his community's trust forever – and a serious rift with Fen.

But Ethon is smart: he helps his neighbours while still technically doing Foxwood's bidding, earning their gratitude. He also secretly admires macho Foxwood who seems to be all that his own beloved but fragile Pa is not – and whose talk of lands far from Greenoak fuels Ethon's innate yearning for adventure. A bond starts to grow.

So, deep in the well, does the worm. It grows strong enough to call for its mother, SOURSIGH, who comes searching. Her breath threatens to destroy the harvest and Foxwood, eager to abandon administrative work, vows publicly to slay the monster. When Ethon offers his support, Pa gives him his precious stone pendant, his only reminder of Ma, for protection.

But when the moment to kill comes, Ethon realises that Soursigh is a giant version of the baby he threw down the well. She means them no harm: she just wants her baby back. Ethon has been too busy supporting his family to properly grieve for his Ma. Now he is suddenly and powerfully aware of his own loss, and determined to protect even this repellent creature from such pain.

Foxwood refuses to show mercy and, in a defining moment where he chooses Pa's compassion over Foxwood's machismo, Ethon defies him and lets Soursigh

escape. Furious and betrayed, Foxwood violently breaks the stone pendant, knowing how much it means to Ethon.

With Doe's help, distraught Ethon finds the broken pieces and discovers the impression of a feather set into each half. Pa's reaction is even more astonishing: he sees in the destruction a sign of hope. Through suffering, something beautiful and new has been revealed.

With help from Fen, whose loyalty is stronger than his anger, and from Doe who bravely defies her mother, Ethon rescues the baby serpent from the well and, despite immense danger, restores it to its mother.

Now, he must restore Foxwood's pride. Ethon creates a 'model monster' - an illusion that allows the villagers to believe that Soursigh is dead. He is helped by his friends and, unexpectedly, by deeply maternal Ma Fevermint.

Foxwood is able to save face publicly and a feast is announced in his honour. Worldly Foxwood sees straight through the scheme but is impressed by Ethon's ability to gain the support of his community. He's clearly a natural leader, like Foxwood himself.

At the feast, Pa once again makes an entrance but this time everyone listens when he explains how he overheard Grody in the forest plotting to cheat the village. Ethon supports his father and they are believed.

Foxwood makes another public promise: to find Grody and punish him. But first he must continue his counting mission across the land, and for that he needs an apprentice.

Knowing that he is choosing not only silver but also the adventure he craves, Ethon accepts the offer with his friends' support, Pa's blessing, and his mother's most precious gift: one half of the stone feather to keep with him forever.

Appendix Two

The Lambton Worm legend and lyrics

The legend

John Lambton, an heir of the Lambton Estate, County Durham was a rebellious character who missed church one Sunday to go fishing in the River Wear. In many versions of the story he receives warnings from an old man that no good can come from missing church. John Lambton does not catch anything until the time the service finishes, at which point he fishes out a small eel or snake-like creature. At this point the old man returns, although in some versions it is a different character. John declares that he has caught the devil and decides to dispose of his catch by throwing it down a nearby well. The old man then issues further warnings about the nature of the beast. John forgets about the creature and grows up. As a penance for his rebellious early years he joins the crusades. Eventually the worm grows extremely large and the well becomes poisonous. The villagers notice livestock going missing and discover that the fully-grown worm has emerged from the well and coiled itself around a local hill, often thought to be Penshaw Hill, on which the Penshaw Monument now stands.

The worm terrorises the nearby villages, eating sheep, preventing cows from producing milk and snatching small children. It then heads towards Lambton Castle where Lambton's aged father manages to sedate the creature in what becomes a daily ritual of offering it the milk of nine good cows, twenty gallons, or a filled wooden/stone trough.

A number of brave villagers try to kill the beast but are quickly dispatched. When a chunk is cut off the worm it simply reattaches the missing piece. Visiting knights also try to assault the beast but none survive. When annoyed, the worm uproots trees by coiling its tail around them. It then creates devastation by waving around the uprooted trees like a club.

After seven years John Lambton returns from the crusades to find his father's estates almost destitute because of the worm. He decides to fight it but first seeks the guidance of a wise woman or 'witch' near Durham. The witch hardens John's resolve to kill the beast by explaining his responsibility for the worm. She tells him to cover his armour in spearheads and fight the worm in the River Wear, where it now spends its

days wrapped around a great rock. The witch also tells John that after killing the worm he must then kill the first living thing he sees, or else his family will be cursed for nine generations and will not die in their beds.

John prepares his armour according to the witch's instructions and arranges with his father that when he has killed the worm, he will sound his hunting horn three times. On this signal his father is to release his favourite hound so that it will run to John, who can then kill the dog and thus avoid the curse.

John Lambton fights the worm by the river. The worm tries to crush him, wrapping him in its coils, but it cuts itself on his armour's spikes. As pieces of the worm are chopped off they are washed away by the river preventing the worm from healing itself. Eventually the worm is dead and John sounds his hunting horn three times.

Unfortunately, John's father is so excited that the beast is dead that he forgets to release the hound and rushes out to congratulate his son. John cannot bear to kill his father and so, after they meet, the hound is released and dutifully dispatched. But it is too late and nine generations of Lambtons are cursed so they shall not die peacefully in their beds.

The lyrics

The story was made into a folk song written in 1867 by C. M. Leumane. It passed into oral tradition and has several variants. In the version I am familiar with, the line “He waddn’t fash to carry’d hyem” is replaced with “He couldn’t be fashed tae carry it hyem” – meaning, he could not be bothered to carry it home. It is most effective when sung in a Geordie accent but there are several words such as “thowt” (thought) “heuk” (hook), “gannins” (goings on) and “hoyed” (threw) that may mystify anyone unfamiliar with the dialect.

One Sunday morn young Lambton went
A-fishing in the Wear
He caught a fish upon his heuk
He thowt looked very queer.
But what a kind of fish it was
Young Lambton couldn’t tell
He waddn’t fash tea carry it hyem

So he hoyed it doon a well.

Chorus (sung between each verse):

Whisht lads, haad yer gobs

I'll tell yous all an awful story

Whisht lads, haad yer gobs

I'll tell ya boot the worm.

Now Lambton felt inclined te gan
And fight in foreign wars
He joined a troop of knights that cared
For neither wounds nor scars
Off he went to Palestine
Where queer things him befell
And very soon forgot about
The queer worm doon the well.

But the awful worm it grewed and grewed
It grewed te an awful size
With great big teeth, a great big gob
And great big goggly eyes.
And when at neet he crawled about
Te pick up bits of news
If he felt dry upon the road
He'd milk a dozen coos.

This fearful worm would often feed
On calves and lambs and sheep
And swally little bairns alive
As they lay down te sleep.
And when he'd eaten all he could
And he had had his fill
He crawled away and lapped his tail
Ten times round Penshaw Hill.

The news of this most awful worm
And his queer gannins on
Soon crossed the seas and reached the ears
Of brave and bold Sir John
So hyem he came and caught the beast
And cut him in two halves
And that soon stopped in him eating bairns
And sheep and lambs and calves.

So now ye know how all the folks
On both sides of the Wear
Lost lots of sheep and lots of sleep
And lived in mortal fear.
So let's have one for brave Sir John
That kept the bairns frae harm
Saved coos and calves by makin' halves
Of the famous Lambton Worm.

Appendix Three

Participating in conferences as part of my doctoral journey

In their call for papers, the organisers of ‘Time, Space and Place’ at Central Michigan University stressed that they were keen to feature interdisciplinary research. In the event, it turned out that almost all the speakers were historians, whereas I am a creative writer inspired by real events from the past. It also transpired that the other speakers were all at an advanced stage in their doctoral research; and that the word ‘graduate’ in the conference description, which had indicated to me (and to my supervisors) that this would be an appropriate environment for my first experience of sharing my research at an academic conference, in fact reflected the fact that it was being organised by a (lone) graduate. The organisation of the conference left much to be desired, and the period leading up to the event became a stressful time in my doctoral journey, but it was still a wonderful opportunity for which I was grateful to receive both moral and financial support from the Humanities department.



An exciting time, but not the warmest welcome

My work was well received by the academics present: I was pleased to receive positive comments including ‘When can I buy the book?’ which was a wonderful vote of confidence, alongside a suggestion that I might like to look at the Redwall Abbey series by Brian Jacques, set in the imaginary environment of Mossflower country, and which feature a line drawn map. Several additional trains of thought arose from this conference, which I shared with my primary supervisor Rebecca Smith.¹⁹⁵

- Researching any actual ‘carpet page’ style maps or designs that may exist in children’s books
- Looking at how and where maps exist outside the ‘carpet page space’ (such as on front covers and as separate forms like the *Madeline* special edition pop up Paris map)
- Considering how/if children recognise and understand the clues that maps offer through presentational style (e.g. how ‘safe’ will the story be?). What happens if they don’t pick up on these clues? Are there other ways to deliver these signals?
- Think more about borders and what these mean
- Think about ownership of spaces
- Read *Picturing the Book of Nature* by Sachiko Kusukawa
- Consider the work of Joseph Campbell on myths within literature

Conscious of the need to set boundaries around my research, and concentrate on finishing the first draft of *The Stone Feather* as a priority, I decided to set these aspects aside until a later stage. A year on, I can now look back on it with a smile – and, having since presented another paper at the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) 2016 conference, where every aspect was arranged in a smooth and timely way, I have regained my confidence in conferences! At the NAWE conference I presented a paper entitled ‘Carpets of Green’ – the original name of my project. The programme explained that I would be discussing:

How do maps work in children’s books? Why, for instance, are they almost always presented before the start of the story? By offering clues about the ‘story world’, do they help children develop important skills, such as the ability to make predictions? And, by encouraging a deeper engagement with the story to come, do they echo an important aspect of historical manuscript design? This paper explores the role of maps in children’s literature through the prism of Anglo Saxon design, which Lee is investigating for a Creative Writing PhD alongside writing a novel for children inspired by the Domesday Book, and creating hand-drawn original maps.

¹⁹⁵ Email to Rebecca Smith, 25 April 2016

I was paired with writer and PhD researcher Jennie Bailey, who ran a workshop entitled ‘Everyday Magic and Mythical Maps’. I found this so enjoyable and relevant to my work that I published a blog post about it.¹⁹⁶ As a writer with a highly visual approach, I can see how the images I published alongside this piece reflect the fact that I enjoyed a far warmer and more engaging experience:



An inspiring conference in Stratford upon Avon

¹⁹⁶ ‘The Magic of Maps’ blog post at < <http://www.kateleeauthor.co.uk/> > [Accessed 29 November 2016]

Appendix Four

Experimenting with narrative layers

These notes, made in November 2014, show my creative response to the idea of ‘going off the straight and narrow’ and developing a non-linear approach to writing *The Stone Feather*. The ‘modern voice trial’ prose that follows is an attempt to bring these ideas to life – one that I quickly realised did not work because the contemporary protagonist’s brisk, slightly knowing voice jarred both stylistically and artistically with the gentler, third person approach I have taken with Ethon’s story.

Three layers of narrative:

Diary entry, contemporary. Written in short, informal, natural first person. It starts with ‘the opening’. Eleanor, the young, bookish narrator, is overwhelmed with loss after her father’s death. Her mother is working three jobs, desperate for them not to lose their home. Eleanor finds the illustrated manuscript in the (miniature?) trunk that her father left her, but which was always kept locked. The manuscript is a timely distraction, giving Eleanor something to focus on. As she deciphers its meaning and gets to know its rhythms, she finds solace. This universal theme of healing is reflected in Ethon’s story. The final and deepest comfort is that she discovers a note, letter (or manuscript?) written by her father, tucked away, wrapped around an unusual, ancient-looking pendant – expressing his love for her. The theme of the unbreakable bonds of love is also reflected in Ethon’s story. NB doesn’t have to be diary entry style, could just contemporary first person?

Ballad, presented as an illustrated manuscript, rich with paratexts – a lyric poem, giving a late medieval impression. This element acts as a later capturing of Ethon’s story, handed down the generations, which has now been recorded in writing. A scroll? The ballad seems to tell a tale of something that really happened, but is in itself a creative artefact: it is telling the story of a story. Using elements such as rhyme, verse, a refrain, strong images and a melody. Borrowing medieval literary conventions and devices, such as setting the scene, playfulness and irreverent humour. Possibly using the AABB

pattern (ref Medieval Lyrics) as in *The Lambton Worm* – an echo/connection that feels right.

Ethon's story – linear, set in a time/place inspired by Norman England, hundreds of years before the illustrated manuscript was made. Set out in conventional chapters, but interwoven with the other two strands so we step back and forth in time. The pages themselves are sprinkled with visual elements, and this narrative includes maps, recipes, remedies, song lyrics and 'playground rhymes'.

NB Is this all getting too complicated? Is the balance of darkness and light too gloomy/heavy?

Modern voice trial – January 2015:

I was meant to find it.

I know that the moment I rest the worn old suitcase on my knees. The brown leather is scuffed and cracked and shiny at the edges, like Dad's favourite old sandals. *Shabby chic*, he'd say, winking at me and pretending not to notice Mum raising her eyes to the sky. She used to be famous for her eyes, my mum. Properly famous. I remember freaking out the first time I saw her face on the side of a bus, her pupils the size of planets, ringed with terrifying blue. Now the only time Mum's eyes sparkle is when she wants to cry, but won't. Apparently, it's a terrible thing for a child to see a parent cry. Worse watching them gulp it all back, if you ask me. Not that anyone does. Even though I am kind of an expert. And I don't feel remotely like a child. I rub away a sniff and refocus on the little suitcase. It's about the same size as my overnight case, which is hard silver plastic with wheels and a pull-up handle. But the suitcase is rectangular, like a big flat shoebox. The leather is a dry leaf-brown but, under the straps, you can see that it was once a cheerful chestnut colour. Suddenly, sharply, I picture Dad's crinkly hair. I lift the little suitcase and breathe in. *Suppose it smells of him?* I hear the squeak of the letterbox and the thud of post landing on the hall floor. My heart shudders. I pull the suitcase upright and slide my finger across the lock. It's thick with dust. Underneath, the metal is black. Is that the colour brass goes when no-one's bothered to polish it? I don't know. Every surface gleams in our house, whatever it's made of. But anyway, it doesn't matter. There's only one thing that matters now.

The key.

It's lying beside me on my white duvet cover, sharp and dark like a little wound. I snatch it up. It is heavier than it looks, a storybook key with pirate teeth. Tiny swirls decorate the handle, which is about the size of a wedding ring, squashed out of shape. I push it into the opening. It clicks when I try to turn it. I hear Dad's voice in my head. *Gently does it.* At first gently doesn't do it. But I never thought this was going to be easy, and I have a plan. I reach over to my bedside table and dip a paintbrush into Mum's bottle of rose-scented bath oil. She refuses to throw it away even though the liquid inside has developed a weird sugary crust. She never actually said I could use it. Probably because I never actually asked. I shake the bottle hard, sending brown crystals floating like bubbles in the syrupy liquid. I drip oil into the lock and tilt the suitcase from side to side. Inside, something slides with a shushing sound. Holding my breath, I try the lock again. And after a few more wiggles, the key turns.

I open the lid.

I wasn't meant to find it.

It was stuffed right at the back of the understairs cupboard, behind a stack of plastic boxes all labelled in Mum's neat handwriting. I was looking for the one with our winter bedding in, because Mum likes to put all the summer things away the moment the first leaf falls, even if it's still thirty degrees outside. Which, to be fair, it wasn't. It was cold and windy, with sideways rain battering the windows, so I was glad to be inside pottering. I'd been trying to find inspiration for this term's art project, which had the theme 'something old, something new' but I couldn't think of anything. The only alternative was chemistry homework. Even changing beds was a welcome escape from that.

I'd checked every box but there was no sign of the bedding. I was about to give up when I saw a corner of grubby orange cloth. There's nothing dirty in our house, *ever*. I pushed the boxes aside and discovered a bundle of old fabric with a strange, slippery feel. The pattern, huge tangerine and yellow flowers on a lime green background, was nothing like the subtle linen checks that Mum chooses. It had a gathered frill at the top studded with white plastic hooks: curtains. Maybe they belonged to Grandma? There's

hardly any space in her retirement flat. The material had a retro look; a *vintage* look. I hauled the bundle out, and that's when I discovered it wasn't only curtains. It was a parcel, of sorts. And inside was something that looked *really* old.

I didn't know then that it was his.

As soon as Mum came in from work, I pulled her into the kitchen to show her my finds. I'd heaped it all on the spotless tiled floor, knowing she'd be horrified if anything of dubious cleanliness found its way onto the worktop. "I was looking for stuff for my art project. This is perfect," I said, fiddling with the handle of the suitcase. "What's in it?"

Panic flared in her eyes, but she kept her voice calm. "Nothing. They're just dirty old things that I should have thrown away a long time ago. I can't imagine why I didn't. Put it all back, please."

"But," I began.

Mum never shouts. But she came pretty close to it then. "No, Eleanor. Put it back!"

So I did.

But I could not forget about the things I'd found, and it had nothing to do with my art project. 'A long time ago' was code for 'when your Dad died'. Those crazy curtains weren't his. But I was sure the suitcase was. And I knew it wasn't empty.

All I needed was the key.

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2. Creative practice, inspiration and literary theory
3. Medievalism, manuscripts, culture and setting
4. Maps, measuring and literary cartography

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Note: I have consciously not included Terry Pratchett's Discworld and Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy because my focus is middle grade fiction for children aged 8-12 rather than older children or young adults and my background and expertise as a writer is in picture books and chapter books for younger children.