

THE FIVE REALMS SERIES

The Legend of Podkin One-Ear

The Gift of Dark Hollow

The Beasts of Grimheart

Uki and the Outcasts

THE FIVE REALMS

— UKI —

AND THE

OUTCASTS

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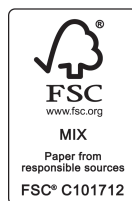
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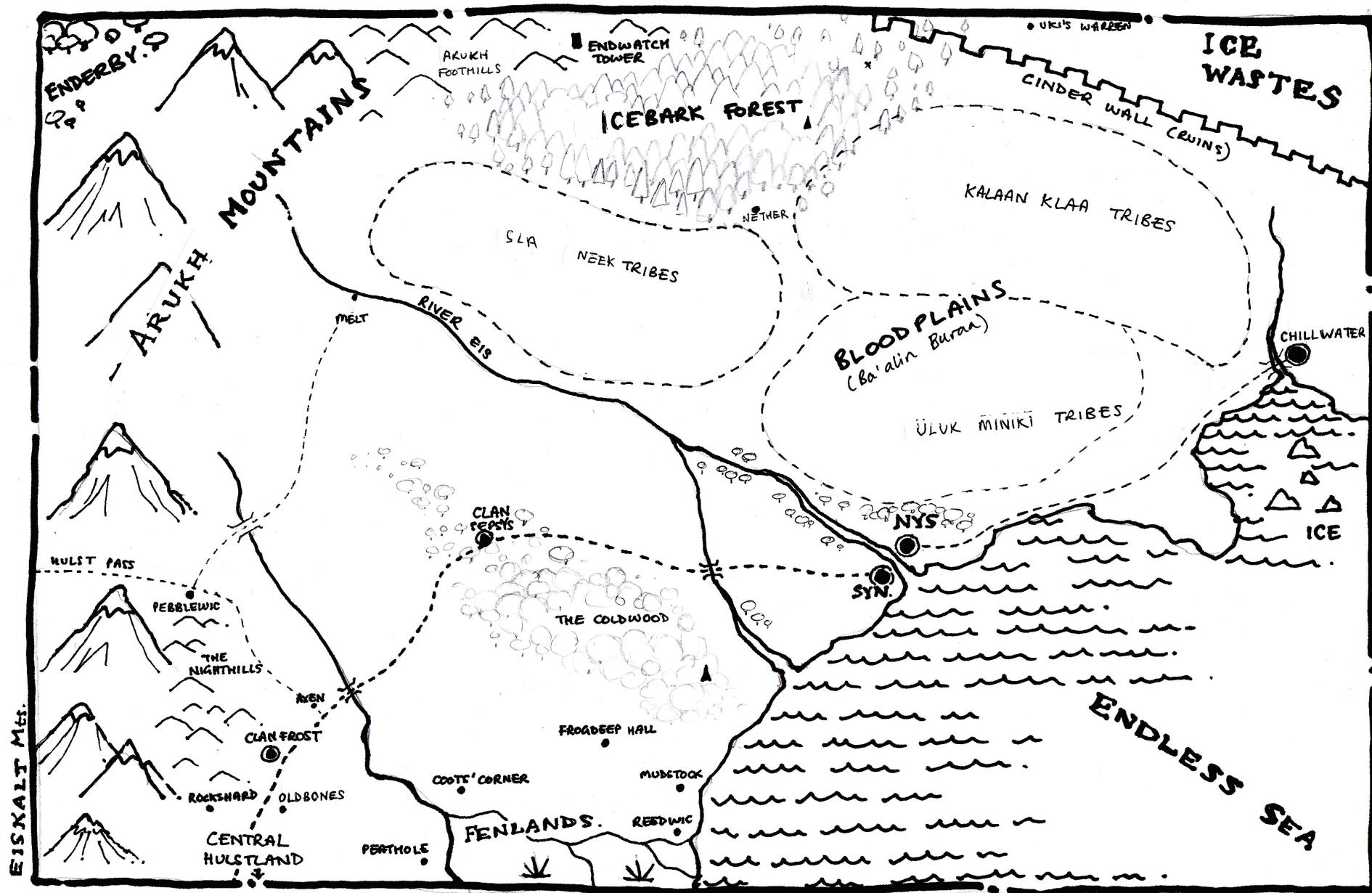
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Dedication to come

NORTHERN HULSTLAND



▲ Ancient ruins



Prologue

In the Five Realms, even the loneliest places have their secrets.

There is a good one, a dark one, hidden at the edge of the Icebark Forest, in the realm known as Hulstland.

Once a long strip of nothing – a mish-mashed mess of plains, swamps, forests and woodland – Hulstland was stitched together, long ago, by a rabbit called Cinder.

He started off as a chieftain, then became a king, then an emperor.

He gathered all the rabbit tribes and breeds and told them they belonged to him. Everyone from the Merel River to the edge of the Ice Wastes. And just to make a point, he built a wall across the top of the kingdom to keep them all in (and those scary Ice-Waste rabbits out).

The Cinder Wall has crumbled now – just a few broken battlements poking out of the snow. And next to it, the forest.

Not a green, thriving, rooty throng of tendrils and leaves like Grimheart. A cold, bare-branched thing, with ground as hard as iron, and thick, hoary frost covering the trees.

That is where the name Icebark comes from, and it is a harsh, unfriendly place.

The odd crow flaps between the branches. Small, skinny, white-furred foxes dart here and there, sniffing out shrews and mice under the crusts of dead leaves, interrupting their sweet sleeps with a horrible *crunch* and *chomp*.

But the secret . . .

At the forest's edge, where the trees are thin and straggly, is a tower.

Squat and stocky, it sits upon a hill, surrounded by toppled heaps of stone that might once have been buildings. Smudges of soot cover everything. The blackened outlines of old roofs jut upwards, the empty holes of windows and doorways gape. Whatever was once here, it was burnt and smashed to rubble a long, long time ago.

All except the tower itself. Whoever built it, built it well. The walls are thick, the mortar strong. There are four windows at the top, one on each side, all with a carved eye above, staring out over the lifeless forest and the plains beyond.

There are few rabbits that live this far north, but they all know of the place. *Evil-eye*, they call it. *Deathwatch*. *Doomgate*. They say it is the entrance to the Land Beyond, or the place death itself stares over the world, looking for rabbits whose time is up.

It is not somewhere you would like to visit, and definitely not a place anyone would choose to live. No wonder it has been smashed and abandoned, left to crumble and rot.

Except it hasn't. Not quite. Because just now, amongst the chill shadows of the tower itself, there



is a spark. A flash of light gleaming out of the gaping windows. It quickly blooms and flickers.

A fire. Someone has lit a fire. Which means the tower *isn't* empty. Whoever built it, lived in it, watched from it all those years ago . . .

. . . they are back.



CHAPTER ONE

A Strange Game of Fox Paw

It is the first time Rue has seen mountains. So far, the tallest things in his small world have been the Razorback Downs and walking along the top of them always made him feel tiny. Like an ant crawling over an enormous rock.

Mountains, though . . . they are something else.

They look big from a distance, but then they just keep getting bigger and *bigger*. By the time he reaches the feet of them, his little neck is aching from craning upwards. His tongue is dried out from gaping.

‘Close that mouth before something flies into it,’ the bard says.

‘But they’re so *big!*’ Rue replies. Up and up and up they tower: craggy lumps of rock reaching up into the clouds. If he felt like an ant before, now he was even tinier. A speck of a speck: the smallest grain of sand on a beach.

All that stone teetering over him makes him feel dizzy. ‘Might they fall down?’ he asks.

The bard laughs. ‘They haven’t moved for millions of years. I don’t think they’re going to budge now.’ He points with the end of his staff. ‘That range on the left are the Arukhs. Them on the right are the Eiskalt Mountains. We’re going through the pass between.’

They had left Spinestone a few weeks ago. With nowhere in particular to go (and with nobody wanting to kill him) the bard had taken them on a gentle amble, over the downs into Gotland and along the edge of the forest. They’d stopped at a couple of warrens for a meal or two in return for a tale. The skies had been clear, the days long and sun-filled. Everything was peaceful.

And then one morning the bard had suddenly stopped walking. He’d stood and tugged at his beard.

‘You know what I fancy?’ he’d said. ‘Some Hulstland ale.’

And with that, they had set a course for the narrow pass where the two mountain ranges met.

Several other travellers are on the road with them. There are tinkers and pedlars, even a family of brindle rabbits, tramping on past, stooping under the weight of their overflowing rucksacks. Two or three carts trundle by, towed by teams of giant rats. In return for some rude limericks, the bard manages to get them a lift and they ride all the way through the pass, huge cliffs and ridges of striped rocks closing in on either side of them. The cart jolts and bumps through potholes and over scattered lumps of flint, and by the time they come to a stop at a little trading town, both Rue and the bard are covered with bruises.

‘Welcome to Hulstland,’ says the bard as they hop down from the wagon.

Rue looks around at the little cluster of stone and wood buildings, nestled on the side of a foothill. He doesn’t appear to be very impressed.

‘I thought you said things were grander here?’ he says, frowning. ‘Where are the cities and the statues? And what are those square things on the hillside?’

The bard sighs. ‘Things *are* grander, further in. This is just a little trading town on the edge of the Empire. Pebblewic, if I remember rightly. Those “square things” are the rabbits’ houses. I think one of them might even be a tavern . . .’

‘Houses?’ Rue says. ‘You mean they don’t live in warrens, like normal rabbits?’

‘Look at the ground,’ says the bard, poking it with his staff. ‘It’s granite and flint, peppered with a tiny sprinkle of soil and grass. You can’t tunnel into that. Not without muscles like boulders and the patience of a glacier. In this part of Hulstland, the rabbits build houses to live in. Just like the Ancients did.’

Evening is beginning to close in, the sky blushing orange on the horizon. With thoughts of ale tankards and roasted beetroots, they make their way into the town.

One of the buildings is indeed a tavern, although it’s really more of a barn that happens to sell ale and food. The tables are rough planks of wood, balanced

between lumps of rock. Wooden crates serve as chairs and the floor is a sticky mix of mud, sawdust and spilt beer.

‘What’s that *smell*?’ Rue asks, clamping a paw over his nose as they make their way to an empty table.

‘That’s how taverns are supposed to smell,’ says the bard. ‘At least ones in tiny little two-rat towns like this.’ They choose a spot by the fire, where the wood smoke overpowers the stink a bit. ‘You’ll get used to it. Although maybe you shouldn’t tell your parents that I brought you here. Or remember any of the language you hear being used. In fact, probably best you close your eyes and pretend you’re somewhere else. Drinking dens aren’t really a place for young rabbits.’

A hunched old bartender stomps over to take their order. Soon the bard has a clay mug of ale on the table before him and Rue a bowl of vegetable soup (or rather, a bowl of water that has had a turnip briefly waved over it). It’s not exactly gourmet cooking, but after their long cart ride, anything is welcome.

‘Do the rabbits here speak a different language?’ Rue asks, in between spoonfuls of soup.

‘No, they speak Lanic,’ says the bard. ‘That was one of the Emperor’s rules when he brought all the different kingdoms of Hulstland together.’

‘Will you be telling a tale, then? To pay for the meal?’

The bard shakes his head, then fishes his purse from his belt. While he is rummaging around amongst the different currencies and assorted trinkets inside, Rue clears his throat.

‘Then perhaps . . . I mean, seeing as you aren’t . . . maybe *I* could perform something?’

The bard pauses in his coin search to give Rue a stare from beneath his brows. ‘Trust me,’ he says, ‘you don’t want *this* place to be your first gig.’ He pulls out a few copper coins and lays them on the table, each one marked with the face of a very serious-looking rabbit.

‘When you’re ready, Rue, we’ll find you somewhere perfect,’ he says, noting the disappointed look on his apprentice’s face. ‘There’s no need to rush, though. Right place, right time. As *I* learnt at Golden Brook.’

He takes a long swallow of his ale, then wrinkles

his nose. It isn’t quite the delight he’d been hoping for all the way from Gotland.

‘So,’ says Rue, pushing his bowl of turnip-scented water aside with a sigh. ‘If neither of us is telling a tale for *them*’ – he points to the three or four drunken rabbits slouched over the other tables – ‘perhaps you could tell one for me? Maybe one about you and your famous brother Podkin?’

‘Hush!’ says the bard. ‘You know that’s supposed to be a secret!’

‘Sorry,’ says Rue, with a wince. ‘But you said that the story wasn’t over. You said that you all had more adventures. I just want to hear them! Please?’

‘And *you* said – in fact, you swore it on your ears – that you would only bother me about Podkin stories once every three days. Have you any idea how long it’s been since you last asked me?’

‘Three days?’ Rue says, hopefully.

‘Fifteen minutes, Rue,’ says the bard. ‘You asked just as the cart was pulling in. And you’ve been asking ever since we got on the thing this morning. I *knew* it was going to be like this as soon as Sythica let the rabbit out of the burrow.’

‘But I love hearing about it! And you were actually *there*! Do you have any idea how amazing that is?’

‘A little,’ says the bard, rolling his eyes. ‘Quiet, now. Somebody’s coming over.’

Rue turns to see a cloaked, hooded rabbit, making its way between the tables towards them. He catches a glimpse of brown fur, a braid of long hair, shot with grey. Quick brown eyes, darting left and right, even though their owner is trying to move as casually as possible. Could it be danger? An attack from another assassin? Rue holds his breath and grips the edge of the table.

‘Well met,’ says the stranger as she pulls up a crate.

‘Indeed,’ says the bard, with a cautious nod.

‘Fancy a game of fox paw?’ the stranger asks.

The bard’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second, then he nods again. ‘I have my own dice.’

‘As do I,’ says the stranger. Both rabbits then reach into pockets to pull out little cloth bags. The bard tips his up first, spilling three bone dice on to the table. The stranger does the same. Her dice

are wooden but Rue’s clever eyes spot something strange. The numbers on the faces are different styles, but the fox-paw symbols match. And they aren’t the usual type of paws: the centre pad on all of them is a little spiral, unlike any other set of dice he has seen.

The matching dice are some kind of sign between the two rabbits. Rue notices them relax a little, but now the bard’s ears are twitching with curiosity.

‘Nikku?’ he says, reaching a paw out to the strange rabbit. ‘Of the Foxguard?’

‘Yes,’ the rabbit replies, clasping his wrist. ‘Good to see you, Wulf.’

‘How did you know I was coming?’

‘I have eyes on the pass. You were spotted riding in on a cart.’

‘I’m guessing you aren’t here for a chat,’ says the bard, leaning closer and lowering his voice.

‘I’m afraid not,’ Nikku whispers. ‘I was going to send a sparrow to you anyway, but here you are. Kether works in mysterious ways.’ She pauses to touch three fingers to her forehead, and the bard copies the gesture.

‘Is it the Endwatch?’ The bard asks. ‘Has there been news?’

‘There has,’ Nikku says. ‘I don’t have the details, only that the alarm’s been raised. Something’s happening in the north.’

‘North? In the cities? At the wall?’ The bard reaches out to grab Nikku’s arm. ‘Not the tower?’

‘I don’t know. I got a sparrow from our agent in the town of Melt. It’s a little river shanty two days from here. I’ve sent word out to everyone we have in Hulstland but you should still head there in the morning and see what’s going on. I was about to go myself but now you’re here . . . I can arrange a ride on a trade wagon for you. You’ll need to speak to Gant. He runs a store there. He’s the one who raised the alarm.’

The bard lets out a puff of air and sits back on his crate. His brow is furrowed and his green eyes flash. *Whatever this business is, Rue thinks, it’s serious.* He can feel the questions starting to bubble up inside him, but something tells him to wait until this Nikku rabbit has gone.

‘Very well,’ says the bard. ‘We leave in the morning.’

‘I’ll make arrangements,’ says Nikku. ‘There’s an inn three doors down the road where you can stay. And don’t eat anything else from this place. Not unless you want to spend the next three days pooing water.’

With that she scoops up her dice and leaves, giving Rue a quick wink as she passes. Rue waits until she has left the tavern before grabbing hold of the bard’s cloak and unloading questions into his face.

‘Who was she? What were those funny paws on the dice? Why is there an agent? What’s the Endwatch? Who is Kether? What’s going on? Is it dangerous? Are we in danger? Are we? Are we?’

‘Enough!’ the bard shouts. Some of the drunken rabbits raise bleary eyes to glare over at them, which makes the bard feel very uncomfortable. ‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Let’s go find somewhere to sleep for the night. I’ll tell you all about it then.’

*

The inn is a lot better than the tavern had been. Not as cosy as a burrow, but it has stone walls, a thatched roof and fireplaces in every room. The one Rue and

the bard rent has two straw-stuffed mattresses and a little window that looks out on to the mountains.

As soon as they are inside, Rue jumps on to his bed and sits cross-legged, waiting for the bard to start talking. ‘Well?’ he says. ‘We’ve found somewhere to sleep. You said you’d tell me all about it.’

The bard sighs and slumps on to his mattress. ‘I did, didn’t I? That was silly of me.’

‘So, what’s this Foxguard, then? Is it secret? Why does it have agents? Are you an agent?’

‘The Foxguard . . .’ says the bard, and sighs. ‘It’s a group of rabbits and yes, I am a member. And it is a secret. It was set up a long time ago to keep an eye out for something. We have agents all over the Five Realms. We carry the dice so we can identify one another – to make sure we can be trusted.’

‘Is this Kether a part of it? Is he who you’re watching?’

The bard laughs. ‘No. Kether is the god of order and numbers. He’s who everyone in Hulstland worships. In fact, they believe he is the *only* god. They think the Goddess and the rest are just fairy tales for savages.’

‘*They don’t believe in the Goddess?*’ Rue’s eyes boggle and his mouth hangs open. How can such a thing be true?

‘Relax,’ says the bard. ‘Different folk believe in different things. It’s fine. It’s natural. It’s only when they start telling others they’re wrong and decide to have a war about it that there’s a problem.’

Rue blinks for a moment as he digests this. Then the questions start again. ‘The Endwatch, then. What’s that? Is it something bad? Like the Gorm?’

‘Mmm.’ The bard tugs at his beard. ‘The Endwatch *is* bad. Different from the Gorm, but just as evil. It’s complicated, though. It would involve telling quite a long tale . . .’

‘A tale?’ Rue folds his arms and smiles like a rabbit who has just rolled three fives in a game of fox paw. ‘Well, we’re going on a two-day journey tomorrow. The perfect chance for you to tell it.’

‘I suppose.’ The bard lies back on his mattress. ‘Although, if I tell that story, it will have to be instead of you hearing about Podkin.’

‘Really?’ Rue’s voice is suddenly not quite so smug. ‘Can’t I have both?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ says the bard. ‘It’s a long story. An important one. Although it is part of Podkin’s tale as well, in a way. It takes place a year or so after the Battle of Sparrowfast, while Podkin is busy training and taking care of his Gifts.’

‘Is it exciting?’ Rue asks. ‘Is there danger and villains and fighting?’

‘Yes, yes, yes and yes,’ says the bard.

‘And are there heroes? Will I like them as much as Podkin, Paz and Pook?’

‘Maybe not Pook,’ says the bard. ‘He’s extra special. But I’m sure you will like them. We live in a world full of stories you know. It would be boring only to hear about the same characters over and over, wouldn’t it?’

‘Is it a real-life story?’ Rue asks. ‘Will there be actual characters who pop up at the end of our journey to surprise me, like Sythica? And you?’

‘Well,’ the bard tugs at his beard again. ‘I admit there seems to be a pattern of that happening. But I can’t promise anything.’

‘Very well, then,’ says Rue. ‘I would like to know everything about the Endwatch. *Everything*.’ He emphasises the last word with a glare at the bard.

‘Excellent,’ says the bard. ‘It’s probably a good idea for you to know about him. It can be the second story for your memory warren.’

‘Wait . . . him? Who’s *him*?’

‘Uki,’ says the bard. ‘Uki Patchwork. The Magpie Demon. Uki of the Two Furs.’

‘Uki? Magpie Demon? Who’s he? Why’s he called that? Is he the hero? How can someone have two furs?’

But the bard has rolled over and pulled his cloak across his face. All Rue’s questions fall on deaf ears and there is nothing else for the little rabbit to do except wait for morning and the start of a new story.