

TRUE HEROES  
STAND TALL

WHATEVER  
THEIR SIZE



THE  
THING  
ABOUT  
GIANTS

CHRISTOPHER GALVIN

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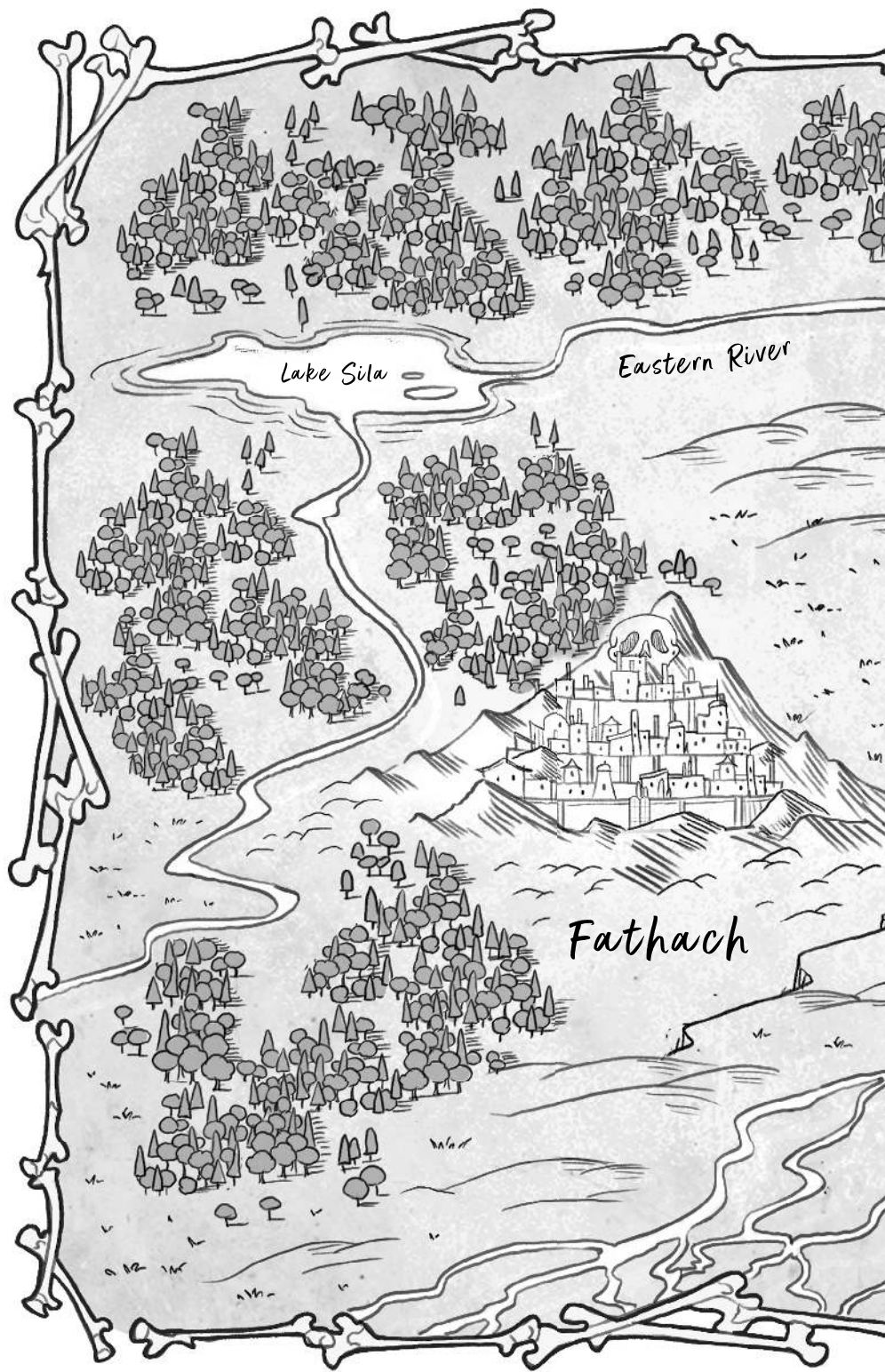
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Lake Sila

Eastern River

Fathach



Croghan Falls

Under Hill

Valley of Healing

Rock Quarry

*To Dad, who is missed.*

*To Mum, who is loved.*

*To Lynn, who is the true heart of Giants.*

# THE THING ABOUT GIANTS IS...

Giants are like people. They come in all shapes and sizes. There are small giants and tall giants, round giants and thin giants. Some are nice and some are nasty, some like running and jumping, others love a good snooze.

But the terrible thing about giants, the most awful, unimaginable thing about them is: humans don't see them as people. They see them as huge, staggering, destructive oafs with just one valuable commodity.

Half a century ago, the founders of our city discovered an important use for these enormous creatures. And so, they created the Factory, where, to this very day, humans continue to take what they consider to be the only good thing about giants.

Their bones.







## CHAPTER ONE

“With one swipe of his terrible claws,  
the dreaded giant king Athos collected  
the village children, and gobbled them whole.”

*One Giant Leap: The True Story of Michael Dandridge*  
by George Dandridge

“Are you sure this is safe, Goga?”

Corman tugged at his satchel strap. It had snagged itself in a tree branch and it took him a few nervous tries before it finally broke free. They had already walked many miles through the thick and dense forest, each step taking them further away from the safety of home.

“It’s not too far now.” Corman’s father showed him the stone tablet in his grasp. Carved into it was a map of the forest, the surrounding hills, winding rivers and deep valleys. A crude drawing of a skull sat in its

centre, a warning to avoid that area at all costs. His goga tapped on the right side of the map, indicating where they were headed. “We just have to be brave for a little while longer.”

Corman puffed out his chest. If he acted brave, perhaps he would feel it too.

“Just keep your eyes and ears open, and at the first sign of trouble, we’ll do as we practised.”

Corman didn’t want trouble. He wanted to be home, with his moga and Clova and Misneach – safe, secure and cosy. He knew, however, they could not return home without what they had come for.

Beams of gentle light filtered down between the canopy of trees. He squinted up at the white lantern hanging in the dark blue ceiling, a perfect circle. Little specks of light sparkled all around it.

*That’s not a lantern, he corrected himself. It’s called the moon. The ceiling is the sky, and those small lights are stars.*

Corman didn’t think he could ever get used to a place like this. The ground beneath his hairy toes was soft and sort of bouncy, nothing like the familiar hard, solid ground of home. The air was fresh and cool, the smell of the trees strangely sweet. It tickled his nose, and he was continuously scratching it. Why couldn’t it smell like Under Hill? He missed that earthy

tang in the air, that slight aftertaste of mould. Now *that* had character.

The moon shone much brighter than the fireflies of home. The *other* lantern in the sky, the sun, was said to be brighter still. Corman quickened his pace. He did not want to be here when the dawn arrived.

The leaves of a nearby oak tree rustled, and he froze.

Something within hooted, then exploded out of the tree.

“Goga!” Corman stumbled backwards, frantically waving it off. “It’s them, it’s *them!*”

“No, Corman.” His father steadied him. “It’s not. Look again.”

Corman blew out a long deep breath as he peered at the creature now nestled in another tree. It was the size of his smallest toenail, with wide round eyes and was covered in white feathers.

“Is it a bird?” he guessed, remembering the flying creatures that were drawn as M-shaped squiggles on his wall back home.

“A bird.” His goga nodded. “And if I’m not mistaken, an owl.”

The owl hooted as if to say his guess was correct.

“Thank Athos for that,” Corman sighed. “I thought it was...”

“You’ll *know* if it is them,” his father replied. “But try not to worry. We would hear them before we see them. We’d have time to hide.”

Corman brushed his fingers against his hood. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that. As they continued walking, he heard more rustling, chirping and hooting in the trees and bushes.

“We’re getting closer.” His goga sounded confident.

*Good,* Corman thought. *I can’t stay up here much longer.*

Finally, the ground dipped beneath them and, following a gentle slope, they reached the floor of a long and winding valley. The trees here were more colourful than any they had seen so far. But that was the secret after all. This valley was special; the trees were teeming with healthy leaves, the bushes overflowed with ripe berries, and the long grass was a flickering, vibrant green.

“Is this... Is this the Valley of Healing?”

His father nodded as he inspected each tree, glancing at the brush. “It has been an age since I was here. These are *exactly* what we need.”

Here was the reason they had braved the Upside: *juritear*. Healing herbs, berries, leaves and bark – much-needed medicine that did not grow anywhere else. The

leaves and herbs would be ground into a fine powder and mixed with water. This special drink was a well-known cure for those with high fevers. The tree bark, when mashed into a paste, was an effective remedy for treating cuts and bruises. The berries – well, those were just tasty snacks! Once they had collected enough *jurtear* to restock their dwindling supplies back home, they would return, and help those in need.

Corman felt his face break into a smile as they got to work, collecting as much *jurtear* as possible. His goga, being the taller of the two, pulled bark and branches from the tops of the trees. Corman worked on the bushes near by, careful to discard anything not freshly bloomed, as he gathered herbs and munched on a berry or two. Both filled their satchels.

“Good work, Corman, very good work.”

His father’s encouragement spurred him on to collect more.

“Did Moga ever come here?” he asked.

“Not in a long time.” His goga touched the small blue semicircle inked on his left arm. “But she did love coming here, despite the dangers. This is the place that inspired many of the songs she sings to you and Clova.”

“Like ‘Pick the Berries!’” Corman said, bursting into song. “*Pick the berries, pick the berries, pick the berries free.*”

*Pick the berries, pick the berries, bring them home to me.*"

Moga's songs were always filled with hope and joy. He couldn't wait to get home and be wrapped up in the comfort of her voice again.

"One of my favourites," his goga chuckled, as he joined in.

They sang "Pick the Berries" over and over as they worked. Soon, their satchels overflowed with *jurtear*. Corman smiled, relieved their task was coming to an end.

*Ker-ack.*

The strange noise made them stop mid-song. A furry creature, much larger than the owl, stepped out into the glade.

"Goga?" Corman had no reference for what he was looking at, no drawings at home that resembled this hoofed creature. But whatever this was, he thought it was beautiful.

"My goodness, I believe that's a deer," his father answered as the animal cautiously approached them. "Grab some blades of grass, let's see if she'll eat them."

Hesitantly, Corman crouched down, and pulled a huge clump of grass from the ground. His hands shook with nervous excitement as he clumsily offered it to the deer.

The animal peered into his palm, and tentatively sniffed. Her head snapped forward and she took a mouthful of grass. Corman watched in awe as the deer ate. He beamed at his father, who returned his smile.

Something in the ground behind the deer flashed red. Leaving her for a moment, Corman pushed the dirt aside, revealing a host of small blinking red lights, deep in the earth.

“Goga...” he said, and got no further, when a dreadful sound made his mouth go dry.

*Whump!*

His ears prickled.

*Whump! Whump!*

His eyes widened.

*Whump! Whump! Whump!*

The deer bolted, disappearing into the brush.

“Goga, what is it? What is that noise?” He saw his own fear reflected in his father’s eyes.

“Giant... Giant... Giant hunters – they’re coming!” He grabbed Corman by the arm and ducked beneath the cover of the trees. They both pulled up their hoods.

Giant hunters. The two words Corman, the Under Hill giant, dreaded to hear. His claws trembled, his snout sniffled, and a cold horrible shiver ran down his long thick spine.

His goga held him close, his coal-like eyes firm and resolute.

“Hold still, wait for them to pass overhead. Once they’re gone, we will make our escape.”

*Whump! Whump! Whump! Whump!*

The horrible noise hovered above them. Corman clamped his hands over his ears as sleek shadows flickered overhead. The treetops swayed in their presence. He dared a peek up and gasped at the sight.

Two large, round, ugly birds lurked high above the trees. These birds were nothing like the owl Corman had seen earlier. They were much larger, the size of his father’s fists, and had no feathers. They were covered in a shiny black substance, and their wings whirred angrily on their backs. He knew these were no ordinary birds – that inside, they held the most terrifying creatures in all existence: humans.

Sharp beams of light shone down, and he dropped his gaze. He shouldn’t have looked up. What if they had seen him? But, much to Corman’s relief, the metal birds slowly moved on, their terrible whumping sounds fading, the spotlights searching further and further away.

“Let’s go,” his father urged him, and, crouching low, they swiftly climbed up out of the valley. “Home is this way.”

Home. What a relief to hear that word. Corman had had enough of the Upside to last him a lifetime.

But then the *whump whump* noise came crashing down around them, as more metal birds emerged from the clouds above. Corman heard an eerie whistling sound.

He looked up just in time to see that the sky was full of spears, hurtling towards them.



## CHAPTER TWO

“We giants lived in relative peace, but that all changed when the humans arrived.”

*A Collected History of Giantkind, Scroll Six,*  
Author Unknown (presumed caught by hunters)

*Jacq Dyer was falling.*

*She tumbled through a never-ending darkness. She tried to scream, but there was no sound in this endless void. She swirled and twirled, and was thrown upside down and right way up, her flailing limbs completely useless.*

*In the blink of an eye, her perspective changed, and she was no longer falling. No, it was much worse: she watched her mum fall instead, powerless to do anything. The darkness lifted, revealing a forest. Her mum hurtled towards the trees, rows and rows of branches snapping like hungry teeth.*

*“Bluebird!” Her mum’s hand stretched out, her eyes pleading, desperate to be saved.*

*Mother and daughter strained to reach each other, their fingertips centimetres apart. With one final lunge, Jacq grabbed for her outstretched hand – and missed.*

*“No! Mum!” she screamed as her mother disappeared beneath the treetops.*

Jacq snapped awake, covered in sweat, still calling out for her mum. She did not come rushing in to comfort her. If she had, Jacq would know she was still dreaming.

She turned on her bedside lamp and grabbed the silver locket lying beside it. Painted on the front was a tiny bluebird in flight. The familiar click it made as she opened it helped calm her. She stared at the two pictures inside. One was a photo of her mum, smiling at the camera; the other, a photo of Jacq and her parents, grinning like idiots. The locket had been a present for Jacq’s eleventh birthday. Neither of them knew then that this locket would be the last gift her mother would ever give her.

Jacq closed it gently and placed it back down on the table. With an angry puff, she blew a curl of blue hair out of her eyes and threw off her blanket. She wiped away rogue tears from her cheeks, as the midnight sounds of the city crept in through her bedroom

window. She hopped out of bed and wandered over to the window where she pulled up the blind, revealing the gleaming city of Fathach.

The city slept. The banks, shops and markets were closed. Narrow streets were dark, save for the glow of a bone lantern here or there. The city's power plant, which straddled the Eastern River, radiated a constant low hum that sounded like snoring. Much further away, the farming areas rested – acres of tilled earth, growing corn, and sleeping cows.

Each area of Fathach had been built on separate tiers. To Jacq, these resembled gigantic steps, etched into the side of the mountain. At the very bottom, far beyond the farming areas, stood a long wide wall. It stretched from one end of the city to the other and was built to protect humans from the very large dangers that lurked within the forest. Two tall and narrow gates split the wall at its centre. Jacq had never been through those gates. They were guarded at all times. She wondered now, as she often did, what it would be like to step through, and be on the outside.

To see the world beyond the wall.

Jacq looked up at the huge, skull-shaped building that perched like a crown at the city's summit. The Factory was a constant reminder of the only way anyone

ever left the city. Nobody went *through* those gates. *Over* them, well, that was another story...

What made Jacq's view of the city particularly galling today was the overabundance of decoration that littered the streets, with posters, bunting and flags hanging from every available corner. This week marked the fiftieth anniversary of Founders' Day, when Fathach was first established. It was to be a week-long celebration of giant hunting, culminating in an extravagant parade, with marching bands, floats and life-like mechanical giants. A wide platform had been constructed in the main shopping plaza, where the city's most important people would give long-winded speeches and applaud the parade as it marched by.

She sighed as she picked up her backpack, which lay beneath the window. It was full of knick-knacks, computer parts, pencils, a small torch, wires, a pair of fluffy socks, a half-eaten packet of crisps, her tool kit and, the latest prize in her collection, a yellow two-way radio. She had found a pair of them, old and broken, at a jumble sale not long ago. When she managed to fix them, there was only one person she wanted to share them with.

Jacq leaned against the wall as she flicked on the radio, which made a satisfying crackling noise.

She pressed down on a green button, and said in a fake deep voice, “Joe, are you there? It is I, your worst nightmare! Mwahahahaha!”

No reply came from the radio.

“Joe, it’s me, wake up!”

From the radio, a faint irritated voice replied, “Of course it’s you, who else would it be? What time is it?”

“Just after twelve,” Jacq said.

Joe Dandridge, the voice on the other end, gave an exasperated and very tired sigh.

“Couldn’t sleep again?”

“No,” she said.

“Another nightmare?”

In her mind’s eye, Jacq saw her mum falling. She snapped her eyes shut and when she opened them once more, everything was back to normal.

“Yeah.”

She imagined Joe, sitting up in his bed, rubbing sleep out of his eyes, his bed hair looking like he had just been electrocuted. They had met when they started school, and over time had become the best of friends. Then, when they turned twelve, they’d been selected for a very different type of education. One that was set to begin the next morning.

“Sorry for waking you,” she said. She always felt bad about that, just never enough to stop calling him late at night. “I ... y’know...”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “I know, this week is going to be ... interesting.”

Jacq nodded. Founders’ Day was the least of her problems. The start of the celebrations was to be marked by the induction of new recruits into the Factory. She and Joe were among a small, exclusive list of children set to join the hallowed ranks of giant hunters.

“I just... I don’t want this, Joe, I don’t want to be a hunter,” she said. “Dad insists it’s the right thing to do. If Mum was here, she’d ... she’d...”

“She’d at least listen,” he said.

Jacq’s mum had been the only one who’d really listened to her concerns, but she had never been able to give her an explanation that felt right.

She sniffed as she held back tears, and turned her gaze out to the city once more.

Every important aspect of Fathach, in one shape or another, was created from giant bone. Skulls were used for large domed buildings; ribs made for strong durable bridges. The apartment Jacq and her dad lived in was constructed from the thigh bones of a mountain giant, a close relative of the terrible giant king Athos.

Jacq had always been uncomfortable with this knowledge. There was something about it that seemed cruel, even if giants *were* monstrous beasts. But the consensus among the people of Fathach was that giant bone was crucial to the city's survival, and that hunters were the lifeblood – the heroes – of their world.

“All eyes will be on us tomorrow, Joe,” Jacq sighed. She heard Joe tut in annoyance.

“Well, Dad can't make it to the induction,” he said. “*He's* got a city to run, don't you know. A mayor's work is never done. Mum will be there, though.”

“I hear Rickman will give a speech,” Jacq said.

“Attention, attention, citizens of Fathach,” Joe said in a clipped tone. “For your safety and your security, laughter and jokes are strictly prohibited. Please leave your sense of humour at the gate.”

Joe always did an uncanny impression of Doctor Eleanor Rickman, the director of the Factory. Jacq laughed picturing her: the awkward way she stood, her fingers tapping with impatience when anyone tried to engage her in conversation. Rickman always wore her short red hair slicked back and was rarely seen without her trademark dark red sunglasses. The only things she cared about were the Factory, and the hunt. Rickman's father was among the first humans to discover the

secrets of giant bones. She seemed determined to carry on that legacy.

“I heard there’s going to be an announcement or a surprise or something like that,” Jacq said as she struggled to get her laughter under control.

“What do you think it will be?” Joe asked. “I wouldn’t mind an ice-cream van.”

“I don’t think it’ll be *that*, but it’s supposed to be something very special. That’s what Dad said anyway. He seemed pleased about it. He said I’d like it too.”

“Oh?” Joe sounded disappointed. “Doesn’t sound like an ice-cream van, then. Will he be there? Your dad?”

“I... I don’t know,” Jacq said. “Maybe?”

Simon Dyer, legendary giant hunter, was so wrapped up in giant hunting that she’d be surprised if he did show up. Like Rickman, he buried himself in his work. He’d been that way ever since they lost her mum.

“Jacq? Are you still there?”

She realized she had fallen silent.

“Oh! Yeah, I’m here. Sorry for keeping you up,” Jacq said. “I’ll let you go.”

“You sure?” Joe sounded like he was halfway to dreamland already.

“Yeah, I’ll see you bright and early in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Jacq. Hope you get back to sleep OK.”

“Goodnight, Joe.”

*Click.*

She turned the radio off, and let it slip back into her backpack. Then she lay down in bed and curled up into a ball, her head a whirl of fears, doubts and worries. Eventually, Jacq fell asleep again, and fortunately, she had no more dreams that night.