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The Dreamsnatcher

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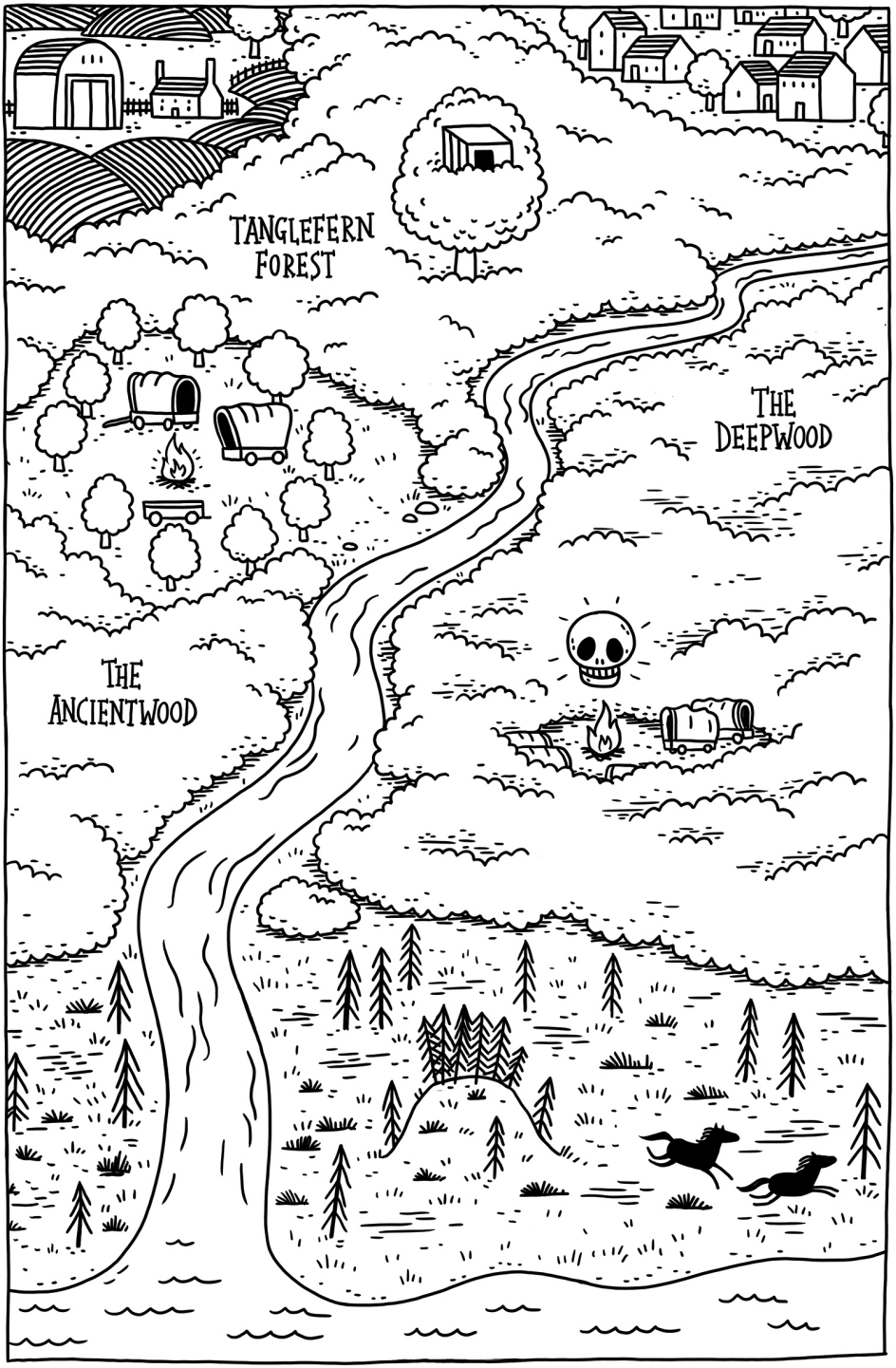
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The Dream snatcher

Abi Elphinstone

SIMON AND SCHUSTER


TANGLEFERN
FOREST
THE
DEEPWOOD
THE
ANCIENTWOOD

Prologue

There are footprints in the snow, sunken marks picked out by the moonlight. They weave a path through the forest, round the ring of ancient oak trees and on towards the wooden hut. But there they stop, and the smoke curling out of the chimney is the only sign that anyone is inside.

Seven cloaked figures sit round a table, their hoods pulled up despite the fire crackling in the grate. At first, they whisper together, their voices low and guarded. And then the whispers fade, heads drop and lips curl back. A chant begins. There are no words, just grunted sounds scratching at the back of throats.

One of the figures pushes back her hood and long grey hair falls about her shoulders.

'Not this!' she cries. 'You said it wouldn't be this . . .' She shakes her head and makes as if to stand. 'I – I won't do it. It's not right!'

But the others surround her, closing in like hungry shadows. They force the old woman towards the fire and,

though her legs scrabble beneath her and her arms grope for the table, the flames loom closer.

'Not my hands!' she sobs. 'Please, no!'

But the flames are already licking her knuckles, shrivelling her skin black. She shrieks in agony, again and again, but the others only grip her harder, joining together in a crooning chant:

'A curse we seek, we call it near,
To brand this hag who turned in fear.
Follow her close, all through her life,
Let her never escape our curse full of strife.'

The old woman falls to the floor, whimpering, but even she cannot stop the charcoal mark that seeps through the skin on her forehead. She rocks back and forth, cradling what is left of her hands.

The other figures turn back to the table and, when they are seated, repeat their wordless chant; it gathers pace, throbbing with a rhythm all of its own, and then shadows twist up from behind each figure, swelling in the air to form a cloud of darkness.

The figure at the head of the table stands, beckoning the darkness closer with long, thin fingers. It settles in the outstretched hands, a black shape shifting up and down, as if breathing gently. The figure withdraws a hand, reaching inside its cloak for a small glass bottle. Flicking the lid back, the figure tips the clear liquid into the darkness. The shape

shudders, then there is a brittle sound like frost crunching underfoot and the darkness hardens into something long and black.

The figure draws back its hood and in its hand is a shard of black ice. 'So it begins,' the figure says.

And, from somewhere deep in the forest, an owl hoots and snow starts to fall.

Chapter 1
Trespassing

Ten years later

Moll woke with a start, her eyes wide, her body drenched in sweat. She spun round on her hands and knees. Her bed, her wagon, the camp: gone. She was alone in the forest with the darkness and it swelled around her like misted ink.

Heart thudding, she waited for her eyes to adjust. Brambles twisted up around her, closing over her head, curling round her back. Moll tensed. To get inside the bramble tunnel, where the forest was knotted and wild, she must have run past the Sacred Oaks, climbed over the sprawling creepers, then crawled through the undergrowth. Not difficult for Moll usually, but – her heart raced faster as she realised – she'd made this journey *in her sleep*.

She scrambled back down the prickly tunnel – away from the darkness, away from where the nightmare had taken her. Brambles tore at her skin and thorns sank into her bare feet, but she struggled on. The nightmare – the one that came for

her every night with the drum and the rattle and the masked figures – was growing stronger. It had pulled her out of bed before now, but Oak, the head of her camp, had always found her, always brought her home. Until tonight. A bramble snagged Moll's long dark hair and yanked her backwards. She twisted free and blundered on.

'It's over,' she panted into the night. 'The nightmare's not real . . .'

But the sound of the drum and the rattle was still pulsing inside her, roaring like an untamed animal. She burst out of the tunnel, gasping for air, her feet scored with cuts. The forest around her was still, a tangle of moonlit trees. Barely drawing breath, Moll bounded over the creepers and darted between the ferns – back towards the safety of her camp.

And then a shiver crept down her spine as she remembered. She stopped suddenly. On any other night she would have been safe there. But tonight was different. How could she have fallen asleep? Tonight was the night she had planned to break her promise to Oak and that meant 'safe' was the last thing she'd be.

She snatched a glance around her, beating back her fear. Somehow her nightmare had lured her from the camp without waking the watch and now she was exactly where she wanted to be – just moments from the river boundary she'd promised Oak she would never cross.

Moll hugged her cotton nightdress to her. She wouldn't be beaten by her nightmare, by something that wasn't even

real. She ducked beneath a yew tree and gave the trunk a sharp punch.

'I'm needing protection tonight, tree spirit, and a bit of that pig-headedness Oak says is bubbling away inside me. None of this falling asleep and wandering off into brambles or who knows what. I've got a plan to carry out. You hear me?'

A breeze sifted through the ivy, brushing Moll's skin like a whisper. Taking a deep breath, she turned and ran. Back towards the river.

And that's when she heard it.

A noise threading through the trees towards her. A low, rolling sound, only metres away, like an engine throbbing deep in the bowels of the earth.

'*Brrrooooooo*.'

A smile flickered across Moll's face. She wasn't alone now.

'Gryff,' she panted, leaping over a tree stump and squinting into the undergrowth. She couldn't see anything. But she knew he was there, racing along just metres from her – silently, like a faster, stronger shadow. Then she spotted him, springing out from behind the cluster of alder trees that lined the banks of the river.

Gryff was large, even for a wildcat, with a muscular body and long banded legs. His coat was thick and grey with jet-black stripes and his tail long and bushy – ringed with perfect bands of black – and ending in a blunt tip.

Moll skidded to a halt before him, gasping for breath. She crouched down, level with Gryff, and gazed into his eyes.

They were yellowish green and large, like her own, but with vertical pupils. Wild pupils.

'It's all right, Gryff. It's all right . . .'

Gryff's hackles rose and he arched his back. '*Urrrrrrrrr*.' He was so close to Moll the growl felt like it rumbled inside her body.

She fiddled with a stick by her foot, then looked up. 'I'm crossing that river, Gryff. Skull's camp have been raiding our clearing for too long. They've taken chickens, dogs, firewood . . . And now they've gone and thieved a horse! And not any old horse. They've stolen Jinx – *my* cob.'

Gryff didn't move, didn't even blink. Moll wanted to reach out and touch him, to stroke his thick, soft fur. But there were rules, even in the wild, and she wasn't about to go breaking them.

'*Never touch a wildcat; they're the only animals that can't be tamed*,' Oak had told her when Gryff first appeared at the camp.

No one knew where he'd come from. The wildcat just showed up one day, as animals sometimes did. Oak had said there were no wildcats left in the southern part of the country. But he was wrong.

Gryff had showed himself to Moll first, out of everyone in the camp, and not even the Elders could explain the bond that had grown between them over the years. It was with Moll that Gryff ran through the forest and it was Moll that he seemed to trust and even understand. No one else.

'*He probably doesn't feel threatened by you because you're so*

small, not much bigger than him really,' her best friend Siddy had said.

But Moll didn't think it was that. Not really.

She tossed her waist-length hair over her shoulder and huffed impatiently. Gryff flinched, backing away several steps. Moll dipped her head, an apology for the sudden movement. Communication with Gryff had to be slow, measured and calm – everything Moll was not.

She rested her elbows on her knees and looked deep into Gryff's eyes. 'The Ancientwood here belongs to us, Gryff; Skull's camp aren't frightening us away by thieving and I'm going to let them know it. They've got the Deepwood and that's where they should stay!' She looked towards the river and her face darkened. 'And besides this'll show them back at camp that I'm no *half* gypsy.' Moll narrowed her green eyes – eyes that were almost the same colour as Gryff's, but that marked her out as different from the rest of the dark-eyed gypsies in the camp, and had earned her snide comments in the past that she'd never forget. 'This'll show them,' she muttered.

Gryff didn't move, but his claws sprang out from beneath him and sliced into the earth.

Don't go, he seemed to say. *The Deepwood's not safe*.

Tanglefern Forest was vast, with some trees so old and tangled that few had passed beneath their branches. But there were places you went and places you didn't. The Ancientwood in the north of the forest was safe: there was the glade of brilliant spring bluebells and yews beyond Oak's

camp, then a grove of crab-apple trees, and beyond that, after the forest, the farm itself and Tipplebury village. But south . . . Well, south was another place altogether. So she'd heard. The Deepwood was rumoured to be full of shady trees and rotting undergrowth and, when it ended, the heathland, with it sinking bogs and soggy marshes, began.

But south was where Moll had to go if she wanted to get Jinx back.

Gryff was growling now, his warning deep and throaty. Moll scrunched up her nose and hurried to the riverbank. Only yesterday Oak had said that one day he'd get his revenge on Skull. Well, to Moll that was a sign, possibly even an order, for her to cross the boundary and make things right – as quickly as possible. She grabbed the catapult she'd hidden in the hollow of an alder the day before, then clutched at the chain around her neck. Every person in the camp had a different talisman to bring them luck, and hanging from Moll's chain were two boxing fists joined at the wrist. Her initials had been engraved on them: MP – Molly Pecksniff. She gripped themtightly – for further protection against evil spirits and bad luck – then slipped into the gurgling river.

The cold nipped at her ankles, but she stooped to pick up a pebble; no point carrying a catapult if she didn't have a stone . . .

'*PAAAAH!*'

Gryff was behind her on the riverbank, bracing and stamping his forelegs. And he was spitting now, which was never a good sign.

‘It’s rude to spit, Gryff,’ Moll said. ‘I don’t go spitting at you when you’re off hunting in the dead of night.’

Gryff cocked his head, considering. Then he hissed and spat again.

Moll clung to a branch for support, then she edged further into the river. The stones beneath her feet were slippery and she stumbled forward. She whispered a quick prayer to the water spirit who she’d heard could twist up whirlpools and conjure rapids against those who stomped in her river for no good reason. Then Moll carried on, bracing her legs against the current, feeling a path through the stones with the soles of her feet.

She looked up. She was nearing the banks of the Deepwood now, closer to Skull’s camp than she’d ever been. Fumbling for her catapult and swallowing back the thud of her heart, she waded on.