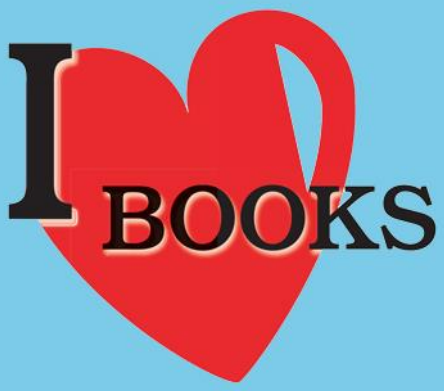

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Opening extract from

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Chapter One

A Bard for Bramblemas

Crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch. The sound of heavy footsteps, trudging through knee-deep snow, echoes through the night's silence.

A thick white blanket covers the wide slopes of the band of hills known as the Razorback downs. Moonlight dances over it, glinting here and there in drifts of sparkles, as if someone has sprinkled the whole scene with diamond dust.

It is perfect – untouched except for one spidery line of tracks leading down from the hills towards the frosted woodland beneath.

Crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch go the footsteps of the track-maker. He is hunched and weary, using a tall staff to help him through the snow. He might have been an old man, if it hadn't been many hundreds of moons since men trod these lands. Move closer and instead you will see he is a rabbit, walking upright in the way men once did, his ears hidden beneath the hood of a heavy leather cloak, fierce eyes peering out at the wintry midnight world.

The thick fur on his face and arms is dyed with blue swirls and patterns, which marks him out as a bard. A travelling, storytelling rabbit. A wanderer with nothing on his back but a set of travel-worn clothes and a head stuffed full of tales and yarns: old, new, broken and mended. Just about every story you ever heard, and many more yet to be told.

Don't worry about him being out in the cold on such a wintry night. His trade will see him welcomed in any warren. That is the tradition and the law throughout all of the Five Realms of Lanica, and woe betide anyone who doesn't keep it.

Crunch, crunch. Crunch, crunch. His breath steams out behind him as he forces his way

through the snow. Listen closer and you can hear him mumbling curses with each hard-fought step. Closer still and you can hear the strings of wooden beads around his neck clicking and clacking. The bone trinkets and pouches around his belt knocking and niggling.

He marches with a purpose, as if he has someplace to be and he is already late. But where is there for him to go? There is nothing but snow and trees from here all the way to the horizon. Until, of course, you remember that he's a rabbit. Rabbits live underground, in warrens and burrows: warm and safe, out of the winter ice and frost.

And that is indeed where he is heading. Into the woods and through the trees until he stops before a pair of huge entrance doors, set into the side of a little hill. Behind them is Thornwood Warren, and there had better be a warm welcome for him, or there will be serious trouble.

Boom, boom, boom! He smacks the end of his staff against the oak and waits for an answer.

Back when rabbits were small, twitchy, terrified things, warrens were little more than a collection of

holes and tunnels in the ground. Now, in this new age, they are something different altogether: there are entire villages and cities built under the earth, completely out of sight.

The bard knew that behind those wooden doors would be nest-burrows and market-burrows, workshops, temples, libraries, larders, pantries and a dozen kitchens to feed them all. There would be soldiers and healers, servants, cooks, smiths, weavers, tailors, potters and painters. Old rabbits, young rabbits, poor rabbits and noble rabbits. All walks of life hidden away in cosy, torch-lit, underground houses; all arranged around every warren's hub: the longburrow, a great feasting hall with a huge fireplace, rows of tables and nearly always music. Music, noise and merriness – that is what rabbits love. Especially tonight, for this was Bramblemas Eve: the night on which the winter solstice was celebrated with a special feast, and the promise of presents in the morning, left behind by the mysterious Midwinter Rabbit.

And stories of course. Special stories, told by a visiting bard – that is, if he ever got inside the place.

Boom, boom, boom! He smacks the doors again and is about to do so a third time when he hears a muffled voice on the other side.

'All right, all right, keep your ears on, I'm coming!' There are more words about stupid people being outside on this kind of night, but luckily the heavy wood absorbs most of those. Finally, the doors creak open, spilling golden torchlight on to the snow, and the face of a burly soldier-rabbit pokes out.

'Who in the Goddess's name are you?' he says, glaring at the stranger. Underneath the hood, the pale green eyes glare back.

'Is that any way to treat a bard, come to tell tales on the Eve of Bramblemas? Is that how the old ways are kept here at Thornwood?'

Even though the soldier-rabbit is the size of a small armour-clad mountain, something about the bard makes him tremble a little. 'Sorry, sir,' he says, and pushes the door open further with his shoulder. 'Come in and share our hearth on this Middlewinter night . . .'

'*Mid*winter, turnip-head,' corrects the bard, stepping into the torchlight and the warmth. The

warren doors close behind him, and he shakes the snow from his cloak with a shudder. 'Now. Which way to the fireside?' And he strides off down the paved entrance hall as if he has been here a hundred times before.

'What's a Midwinter Turnip-head then?' mumbles the puzzled guard, before turning to trot after him.

*

Just as every warren is carefully built around the longburrow at its centre, the rabbits inside are organised around their chieftain. He is the leader of the tribe, just as his father was before him, and his son will be after. Between him and his wife, all the warren decisions are made, all the arguments settled and all the feasts and festivals organised.

In Thornwood, the chieftain is Hubert the Broad. A great big-bellied lop rabbit, with brown and white patched fur, ears down to his knees and a stomach you could build a house on. He is currently sitting on his throne at the head of the feasting table, a bramble crown on his head and his great piebald stomach bursting the seams of his tunic. He is singing a merry song about the Midwinter Rabbit getting stuck in his

burrow, while all the little rabbits sit laughing at his feet. When he sees the bard enter, he stops, stands and raises his drinking horn in salute.

'Welcome, bard!' he shouts, in a voice that shakes earth from the ceiling. 'Welcome, on Bramblemas Eve!'

'That's more like it,' mutters the bard, shrugging off his leather cloak. He keeps his hood on, but the light from the fire still shows off the swirls and whorls of blue patterns dyed into the fur on his bare arms.

'We thought you weren't coming,' says Hubert. 'But Bramblemas Eve is full of surprises. Will you sing for your supper?'

The bard chuckles. 'My voice is too old and cracked for singing.' He takes a seat by the fireside and warms his hands. 'But I might be persuaded to tell a tale or two.'

'Bring this man some food! Quick, sharp,' Hubert shouts, flicking his ears at his cupbearers. They scurry off and return moments later with a bowl of buttery turnip soup and a platter of cornbread. The bard tucks into it like a rabbit starved and, finishing it, wipes his mouth with the back of his paw.

‘I suppose that deserves a tale,’ he says. ‘What would you like to hear?’

The little rabbits swarm to his feet, all crying out at once. ‘Beobunny!’ ‘The Fisher Rabbit!’ ‘Podkin One-Ear!’

‘Did I hear someone mention Podkin One-Ear?’ says the bard, settling further into his chair. ‘Podkin the Horned King? The Moonstrider? Podkin of the magic knife?’ When the little ones nod their heads and shriek with excitement, he folds his painted arms and tugs at his beard.

‘I do know some tales of that one, but they will be different from those *you* have heard. Nothing about shooting fire from his eyes or wrestling giant rabbits with bare hands. Nothing like that at all.’

‘What kind of tales, bard?’ ‘Why are they different?’ ‘Why won’t there be fiery eyes and giants?’

‘They’re different,’ he says, ‘because they are *true*. And because fiery eyes don’t exist anywhere except in fairy tales and the heads of silly young rabbits.’ The bard waves a hand for silence, and then he begins.

Chapter Two

The Worst Bramblemas Ever

The Gorm. First, you need to know about *them*.

Nowadays, thank the Goddess, they are nothing but a bad memory. Something to scare the little ones with at night. But back when your grandparents were young, rabbits lived in constant fear of their strange riders, of the screeching of metal in the night and the echoing of their terrifying war-horns.

The Gorm.

Nobody knows exactly how they came to exist, only that they were first seen in a little warren called

Sandywell, up in northern Enderby, where the Red River meets the sea.

A meek little tribe of rabbits lived there. Grey-furred sable bunnies that liked fishing, sailing and building boats. They never caused any trouble, and nobody paid them much attention. Until, one day – everything changed.

Some say there was something in the river that got into their veins. Some say they tunnelled too far down and came across something cursed and poisonous. Others say it was the work of witches. Whatever the reason, they stopped being the Sandywell greys overnight, and turned into something else. Something evil and unnatural.

First the warren changed – just a little at first – until eventually great spikes of jutting metal burst out of it, sticking up into the air like poison porcupine quills, and the land around became blackened and scorched. The waters of the Red River turned black and noxious as they ran past. Animals that lived in the woods and waters either died or became warped and ruined. Folk started calling the warren Splinterholm and stayed well away. But that didn't help them.