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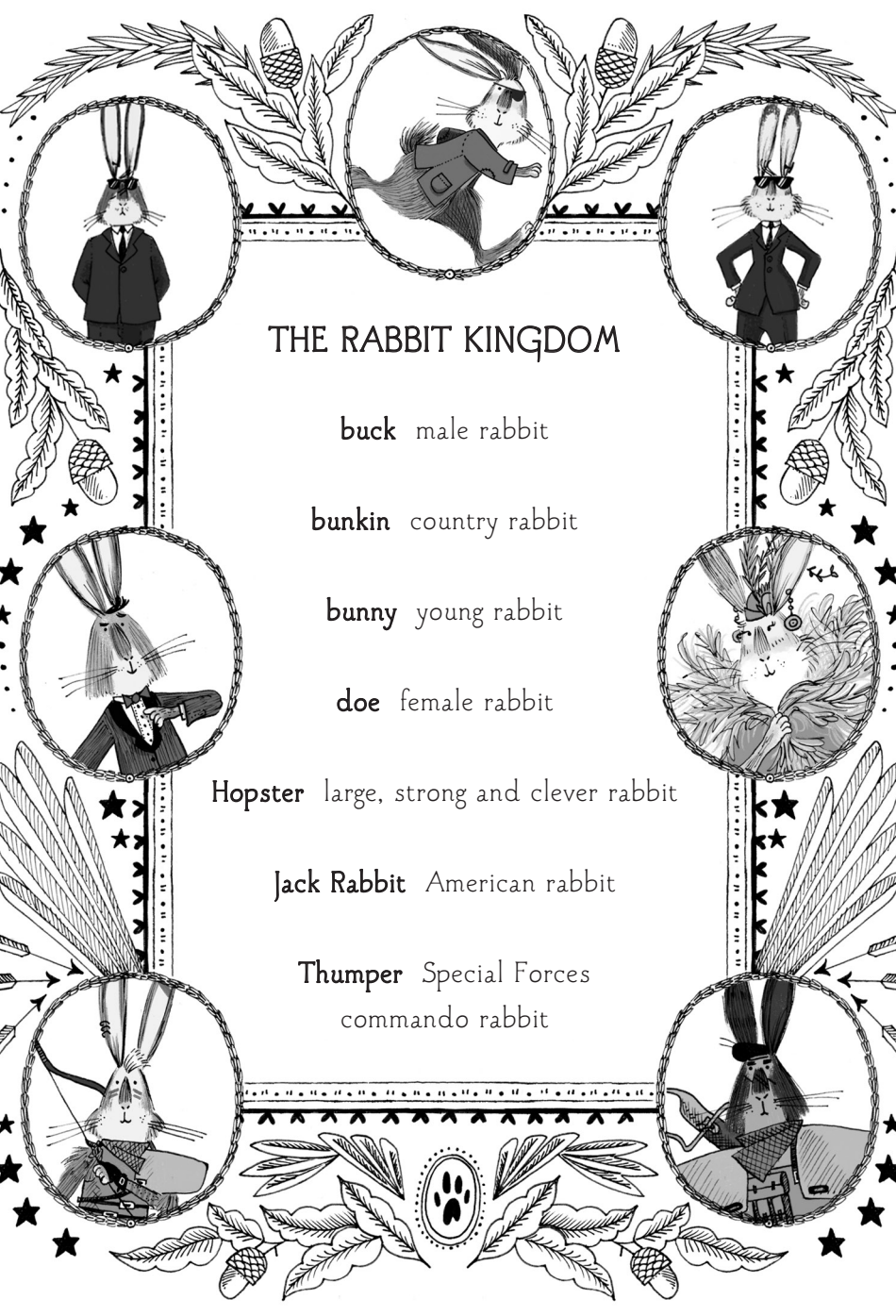
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THE RABBIT KINGDOM
buck male rabbit
bunkin country rabbit
bunny young rabbit
doe female rabbit
Hopster large, strong and clever rabbit
Jack Rabbit American rabbit
Thumper Special Forces commando rabbit



CHAPTER ONE

It was six weeks since Shylo Tawny-Tail had left the small country farm he called home and set off on his mission to find the Royal Rabbits of London; six *long* weeks. Two rabbits in the countryside were missing him terribly. By some stroke of luck, they were about to find each other . . .

Horatio, the old, wise rabbit, was sitting in his shabby armchair, reading a newspaper he had 'borrowed' from the dustbin outside Farmer Ploughman's cottage. His burrow was warm because it was summer and the

scent of sweet grass and pine wafted down the tunnel from the forest above. But Horatio was lonely.

At times like these, he thought of Shylo. The small bunny used to visit Horatio to hear stories from Rabbit folklore. Here, in this burrow, Shylo had enjoyed learning about the Great Rabbit Empire of the past and the secret order of Royal Rabbits who still lived under Buckingham Palace and protected the Royal Family, and Horatio had loved teaching him. Then came the discovery of a plot to harm the Queen by a gang of super-rats called Ratzis, and Horatio had sent Shylo to London. His mission? To warn those Royal Rabbits and help them foil the plot.

Horatio had long suspected that, although Shylo was a weak and feeble bunkin with a squint, he had a brave heart. And the small bunny had become a hero just as Horatio had known he would.

The old buck sighed and tried to concentrate on the

newspaper, but, without the prospect of a visit from Shylo, he felt heavy of heart and strangely restless.

Just then, Horatio heard the light scamper of hesitant paws coming down the tunnel towards his burrow. He lowered his paper and narrowed his eyes.

'Who twitches there?' Horatio growled, rose from his chair and put his paw on his walking stick drawing out the secret sword that was hidden inside it. Horatio had once been a Royal Rabbit, and had only just escaped the Pack of snarling corgis - losing half an ear and earning many scars in the process. Now, on this quiet farm a long way from London, he was always ready and vigilant.

He sniffed the air. It didn't smell of dog but rabbit.

The scampering grew louder and then stopped in the mouth of Horatio's burrow. There came a soft thumping noise, for rabbits thump their hind paw politely when they arrive somewhere. 'Excuse me,'





murred a gentle, female voice. 'I'm looking for Horatio.' Then a small, anxious brown doe hopped into the light.

Horatio slid the blade back into his walking stick and looked at her curiously. She had big tawny eyes, a long, elegant nose and large ears. Horatio had seen those ears before. 'You must be Shylo's mother,' he said.

As the doe took in Horatio, her big tawny eyes grew bigger still. He was an enormous buck, quite different from the country rabbits she was used to. One of his ears looked as if it had been bitten off, he was missing one hind paw and his front left paw was wrapped in a bandage. The leaders of the Warren said that Horatio was mad and dangerous, and Mrs Tawny-Tail could see why they were afraid of him, but *she* wasn't. If he was a friend of Shylo's, she knew she had no reason to fear him.



'Please, take a seat,' he said returning to his chair, his voice no longer a growl but a soft murr. 'I now know where Shylo gets his bravery from. It is a very brave rabbit who ventures to my side of the forest.' He grinned and his eyes twinkled behind his glasses.

Mrs Tawny-Tail felt a little less frightened. She lolloped across the floor to the armchair opposite Horatio's and sat down.

'Shylo is not very brave,' she said and smiled tenderly at the thought of her clumsy, awkward bunny. 'I believed he'd been eaten by rats, but then I received a short note from him and this.' She put her paw in the pocket of her cardigan and pulled out a medal. The gold disc shone richly in the lamplight and Horatio could see clearly the special symbol of the Royal Rabbits - a crown with a pair of rabbit ears sticking out of the middle. 'I discovered Shylo's diary hidden beneath the mattress. That's how I found you.'

She glanced at the old buck shyly. 'It seems my son is especially fond of *you.*'

Horatio reached out and took the medal. He studied it closely.

'I was hoping you would tell me what it means,' she added.

Horatio removed his glasses. He looked at Mrs Tawny-Tail and saw the hope in her big, sad eyes. 'My dear Mrs Tawny-Tail,' he murred kindly, 'this is the Order of the Royal Rabbits of London.'

Mrs Tawny-Tail gasped. She had heard of the legendary Royal Rabbits, but hadn't believed they existed any more. 'But how is that possible?'

'Because Shylo is a brave and clever bunny,' Horatio murred. 'I sent him to London to warn the Royal Rabbits of a plot to harm the Queen and he succeeded where many would have failed. Not only did he help foil the plot, but he was also invited to join their



secret order. You have reason to be very proud of your son,' he said.

'My Shylo? A Royal Rabbit?' she repeated in amazement.

'Indeed.' Horatio handed back the medal. His face grew serious. 'But you must keep this knowledge secret,' he warned.

Mrs Tawny-Tail nodded. 'I'll tell no one.' She gazed at the medal and Horatio could see the pride gleaming in her eyes. 'Shylo loved coming here and listening to stories of the Great Rabbit Empire,' she murred softly. 'He's always been curious about the world. While my other children like to rag about, playing games, Shylo just wanted to read and learn.' Her gaze strayed to the bookshelves. 'No wonder he liked to come here.'

'Shylo has been a rewarding pupil,' Horatio mused.

'I wonder, would it trouble you to tell me a little about the Great Rabbit Empire and the Royal Rabbits

of London? That would help me understand what Shylo is doing in London, and,' she murred in a shy voice, 'help me feel close to him.'

'It would be a pleasure,' said Horatio, pushing himself up from his chair with energy he had not felt since Shylo had last come to visit. He hobbled to the bookshelf and took down a large book. 'It's all in here,' he said, his nose twitching with satisfaction at the smell of old paper and leather. 'I'll share it with you, just like I shared it with Shylo.'

He sat and opened the book on his knee, then he smiled at Mrs Tawny-Tail, a smile that held within it the joy of reading, the love of history and the delight at having company at last.

'Life is an adventure,' he said, opening the first page. 'Anything in the world is possible - by will and by luck, a moist carrot, a wet nose and a slice of mad courage! Let us begin.'

