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About the Author

Kieran Larwood has loved fantasy stories since reading *The Hobbit* as a boy. He graduated from Southampton University with a degree in English Literature and then worked as a Reception class teacher for fifteen years. He has just about recovered. He now writes full-time although, if anybody was watching, they might think he just daydreams a lot and drinks too much coffee.

About the Illustrator

David Wyatt lives in Devon. He has illustrated many novels but is also much admired for his concept and character work. He has illustrated tales by a number of high-profile fantasy authors such as Diana Wynne Jones, Terry Pratchett, Philip Pullman and J. R. R. Tolkien.

The Five Realms series

The Legend of Podkin One-Ear
The Gift of Dark Hollow
The Beasts of Grimheart

Uki and the Outcasts
Uki and the Swamp Spirit

The Five Realms

Uki and the Swamp Spirit

Kieran Larwood

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID WYATT

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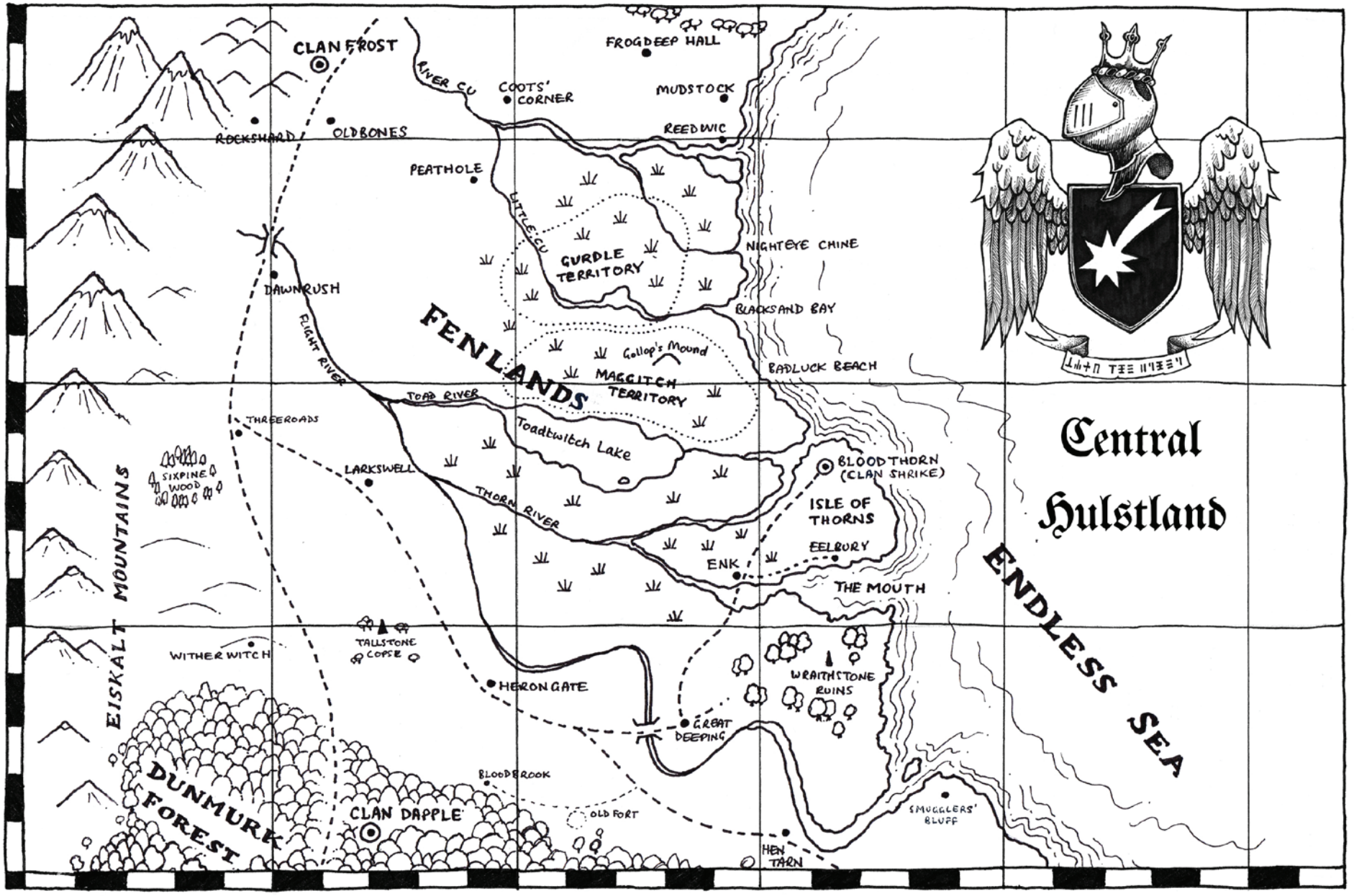
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Prologue

The buzzard leaps from his perch on the barren treetop and heaves himself into the sky with *whooshing* beats of his wings. He catches a thermal at the edge of the forest and rides it upwards, circling, drifting like a plank of wood on a lazy ocean current.

Down below is a scrubland of matted grass where the trees end – a good source of mice and voles. His needle-sharp eyes jump here and there, hunting for signs of twitches and scurries. He daydreams of furry treats, full of hot blood and meat.

Gliding, watching, he passes over the tumbles of

stone things. Normally cold and empty, they have an aura he doesn't like. A death-feeling. Somewhere to keep away from. There's never any prey there, anyway. Not even a scrawny mouse.

So he's surprised to see rabbits. Five of them, running around the ruins.

Despite the chill it gives his feathers, he circles lower, watching the figures as they dash about. Somewhere, deep in the back of his ancient bird-memories, he remembers rabbits as food. It makes his talons prickle and he flexes them . . . but that was many thousands of years ago. These are man-rabbits. Not the fluffy little parcels of lunch from the days of his fathers and mothers before. These ones walk on two legs. They have flying claws that can *swish* up at you, even if you're in the air. They shout and throw stones if you get too near. Dangerous, unpredictable creatures.

Still, sometimes they drop things you can eat. Or, even better, they fight each other and leave dead ones on the ground. Then, if you're quick, you can swoop down and snatch a juicy eyeball or tongue before they chase you off.

The buzzard circles some more, just in case one of the rabbits drops dead.

He has no such luck. Three of them hide behind piles of bricks and start yelling, firing off their claws at something in the old tower. The other two run away from the cold, stone place to where there are some giant rats, tied up behind a cluster of bramble bushes. They jump on their backs and ride off; one to the south, the other east, across the mountains.

The buzzard follows them, drifting above, hoping something tasty might drop from a pack or satchel. But nothing does, and soon the man-rabbits are gone.

There is nothing to eat here, and all that shouting has scared the prey away.

Stupid, noisy creatures. The buzzard beats its wings, skims the clouds and heads off over the forest, in hopes of a squirrel or two for lunch.

Chapter One

The Night-Sparrow

'Are they still there?'

Jori puts an eye to the gap in the rubble and is rewarded by the *zing* of an arrow. It smacks against the stonework with a bang, sending up sparks and making her jerk back inside the tower.

'Yes, Rue,' she says. 'I think it's safe to say they are.'

The little rabbit sighs. They have been stuck inside the ruins of Doomgate, the old Endwatch tower, all day now. They had thought the place deserted when they arrived, but a band of armed

Endwatch agents were occupying it, and now have them trapped inside the stone hulk. There is no way to escape without being shot. Which meant hours of silence, with nothing to do except watch a patch of sunlight move across the dusty floor.

The bard is still standing by the collection of parchment prophecies on the wall, tugging his beard and looking worried. Jori, the scarred ex-assassin in her patched armour, has searched the whole place from top to bottom several times, looking for a route out. Rue has counted the pale white tendrils of sun-starved plants creeping up the walls. He has drawn patterns and spirals in the gritty dirt on the floor; had a nap or two, curled in his cloak; played a pretend game of Neekball with some rocks for jerboas and a curled-up pillbug for the ball. He has even quietly sung a few songs to his little sparrow as it hopped about its cage.

Being trapped by enemies is extremely *boring.*

'I'm going to search the library again, before it gets dark,' says Jori. 'There might be an opening I've missed. Coming, Rue?'

Rue shakes his head. He's been down there once,

but something about that dim, musty place gives him the creeps. Softly glowing mushrooms cover the far wall, where damp has got in. There are stacks of crumbling scrolls and parchment everywhere. All those ancient stories, all that ghostly knowledge of centuries past, silent and mouldering . . .

'Can we eat soon?' he asks. 'My tummy is rumbling.'

'When I get back,' says Jori. She takes a candle and heads over to the open trapdoor, lighting the wick with a flint. She pauses to check the silver-capped bottle of dusk potion on her belt before climbing down the ladder.

Over by the wall, the bard is still deep in thought. Rue thinks about asking him a question or two, but decides against it. Instead he listens to the bumps and scrapes of Jori searching below, keeping one eye on the gap in the rubble in case an Endwatch rabbit with a bow or spear should suddenly pop through. He always feels much safer when Jori is right beside him. Who wouldn't, with one of the best fighters in the Five Realms as their bodyguard?

Eventually she comes back, shaking her head

and looking glum. 'Nothing,' she says. 'No way out except this hole in the rubble, here.'

'So we really are absolutely, completely, properly trapped,' says Rue.

'I'm afraid so. Let's take our minds off it with some dinner.'

Rummaging in the packs, Jori brings out a hunk of flatbread and a handful of pumpkin seeds. She shares it into three piles.

'We'd better ration the food,' she says. 'We don't know how long we'll be stuck here.'

'Master?' Rue calls to the bard, who replies with a grunt. 'Master, will you come and eat?'

Still tugging his beard, the bard wanders over. He perches on a toppled piece of stonework and picks up his pile of bread and seeds. Rue watches the bard eat as he nibbles at his own handful, waiting for him to say something, but he doesn't. He looks as worried as Rue has seen him, since becoming his apprentice last spring.

The tiny dinner is soon gone. Rue saves some seeds to feed the little sparrow in its cage.

'Better give that bird a few more.' The bard finally

breaks his silence. ‘We’ll be needing him to take a message to Gant back in Melt.’

Rue remembers the kindly Foxguard agent they had stayed with. ‘Now?’ he asks. The thought of the little bird leaving makes him sad. Its cheerful fluttering has been the only thing comforting him all day.

‘Soon,’ says the bard. ‘When it’s dark. Don’t want those villains shooting it down. Then we really will be trapped.’

‘Will Gant send help?’ Rue asks. ‘How long before they arrive?’

‘That depends on how fast the bird is,’ says Jori. She pours a pile of seeds into its cage. ‘If it flies all night, it might make it there by morning. Then if Gant sends Jaxom and his jerboas right away, they could get here with two days’ hard riding.’

‘I’d say it’s going to be at least three,’ says the bard. ‘He’ll have to find Jaxom, maybe get some more armed rabbits to come with him. And we need him to raise the Foxguard first. The Endwatch must be stopped. That’s more important.’

‘Is this about what they’re going to do to Podkin?’

Rue has been *itching* to ask all day. ‘You said he was hiding in Thornwood, but that can’t be true. Thornwood is *my* warren, and I’ve never seen him.’

‘You didn’t see him because he didn’t want to be seen,’ says the bard. ‘But he was there all the same.’

‘You mean I’ve actually been near the real, actual, living, *actual* Podkin One-Ear? The hero who defeated the Gorm? The legend who collected the Goddess’s Gifts?’

‘All your life,’ says the bard. For the first time that long, long day he smiles.

‘But who is he? The fat doorman? Mistletoe the cook? One of my father’s servants?’

‘Nobody you would have noticed,’ says the bard. ‘Just an old longbeard, sitting by the fire.’

‘An old rabbit? Is that all?’ Rue can hardly believe it. ‘But how can *Podkin* not be noticed? Doesn’t greatness shine out of his eyes? Can’t you hear the power when he speaks? Doesn’t he . . . *smell* like a legend?’

The bard chuckles. ‘He’s just an ordinary rabbit, like the rest of us, I’m afraid. When you’re as old as us, nothing shines out of your eyes any more.

And you don't smell of anything much except old turnips.'

'But if he's just an elderly, harmless rabbit, why do the Endwatch want to kill him? How do they even know about him? Aren't they part of *Uki*'s story? Podkin's enemies were the Gorm . . .'

The bard's green eyes glint with tears, and Rue remembers that Podkin is the bard's brother, and he must be worried about him. 'It's all part of the same tale,' says the bard. 'And to understand you have to hear it all. Then you will know the danger we face.'

'Well, then,' says Rue, with the glee of a hunter who has just sprung his trap, 'what are we waiting for? I want to hear about how Uki captured the other spirits. Which one came after Valkus? And what does it all have to do with Podkin?'

'Later, later,' says the bard. 'Let's get this sparrow flying, and then see if we can survive until morning. I bet those Endwatch scum try something in the night.'

'We will have to set a watch,' says Jori. She rummages in her pack and brings out a little wooden box. Inside is ink, a pen and some thin slivers of parchment. 'Get your message written now, though.

The quicker we send the bird, the quicker help might come.'

The bard takes some parchment and begins to write on it in minute letters. Rue peers over his shoulder, trying to read them, but they are in Hulst runes rather than Ogham. He has no idea what they say. Hopefully something along the lines of: WE ARE ABOUT TO DIE. SEND HELP IMMEDIATELY. AN ARMY WOULD BE GOOD. HURRY, HURRY, HURRY.

The bard rolls the parchment into a tiny scroll and then fishes the sparrow from its cage and holds it gently while Jori ties the message to its leg. Then they pop it back for a feast of pumpkin seeds and wait for night to fall.

*

The dark comes quickly in this part of the world. Soon the ruined tower room is pitch-black, with a chill that seeps up from the floor and crawls into your bones. Somehow, they resist the urge to light a fire, or even a candle. Rue cuddles up next to the bard for warmth, the sparrow's cage on his lap. He wishes he had wings too, so he could fly away from this cold, lonely place.

‘I reckon it’s dark enough,’ says Jori. She is perched on the rubble pile that blocks the doorway, peering out through the hole at the top. ‘The Endwatch have lit a fire somewhere. Probably cooking dinner and keeping warm. The glare will make it harder for them to see.’

‘Could we slip out too, do you think?’ Rue asks. ‘Jori could take her dusk potion and chop them all to pieces in the dark.’

‘I appreciate your confidence in me,’ says Jori, with a little smile. ‘But it would be too risky. They might not see a tiny sparrow, but they’ll definitely see us. Not to mention hear us breaking our way through these bricks. And I might be fast with the potion, but I’m not faster than an arrow.’

‘It’s something we might have to consider, though,’ says the bard. ‘Once our food and water are gone.’

There’s a moment of silence as they all ponder that terrible thought. Then the bard takes the sparrow cage from Rue and gently lifts the bird out.

‘Goodbye, little one,’ Rue whispers. ‘And good luck.’

‘Good luck indeed,’ says the bard. He passes the bird to Jori, who gently raises it to the gap in the rubble with cupped hands. With a last peek to make sure the Endwatch are still busy, she lets the bird fly.

They all hold their breath as it flutters upwards, waiting for an arrow to come streaking and smash it into a puff of feathers.

None does, thank the Goddess, and soon the little bird is lost in the darkness.

The bard lets out his breath in a whoosh. ‘Clarion’s bongos, that was tense. Now, do you think we can build ourselves a fire? There’s enough bits of old table and bench in here to burn.’

Working together, they build a small ring of stones and fill it with wood and kindling. It burns well, and although it makes the room smoky, the light and warmth are very welcome.

‘I’ll take first watch,’ says Jori. ‘I’ll wake you in a few hours.’

The bard nods and rolls himself up in his cloak. Rue is about to protest and ask for a story, but discovers that his eyes are extremely heavy. All the

terror and worry of the day has worn him out, and soon he is falling asleep too, listening to the crackle of the fire and pretending he is home at Thornwood, playing a game of fox paw with Podkin himself.

*

The smell of toasted bread and blackberry tea wakes him, and for a moment Rue thinks his mother is about to call him for breakfast. He jumps up, ready to fight his many brothers for a portion, only to find he is still in the dingy tower room, the air thick with smoke and the gleam of dawn sunlight streaking through the rubble-choked doorway.

Jori is at the fireside, pouring tea from a copper kettle into three clay cups. She smiles when she sees him wake, and places his tea beside him. The bard is sitting on the heap of broken bricks and timber that used to be the entrance, peering out of the hole at the top.

'Those mangy dog-weasels are up and about,' he mutters. 'I can see their campfire smoking.'

As if in answer, a voice shouts from outside. 'Enjoy your breakfast! It might be your last! We have more rabbits on the way. You don't stand a chance!'

'That's funny,' the bard shouts back. 'While you lot were twiddling your ears and snoozing, we sent a sparrow for help. There'll be a whole platoon of angry Foxguard here before you know it. Then we'll see how tough you are!'

The Endwatch let fly an arrow, which pings off the stone doorway. Then there is silence.

'That's got the wind up them,' the bard chuckles. 'They won't be so cocky now.'

'Probably shouldn't have told them about the sparrow,' says Jori. 'Now they'll be on their guard.'

The bard's ears droop. 'Sorry,' he says. 'Didn't think of that.'

'Are more Endwatch really coming?' Rue asks. 'Will they get here before Jaxom does?'

'Morning, Rue,' says the bard. He clambers down from the doorway and walks over to ruffle the young rabbit's ears. 'Don't you worry. They were just trying to scare us.'

Jori nods. 'Yes, don't worry. I don't expect there's more than those five Endwatchers in the whole of Hulstland.'

'And if there are any others, they wouldn't waste

their time trying to get us. Not when there are more important carrots to peel.'

'Podkin, you mean?' Rue sips his tea. It's warm and sweet, but it doesn't stop the chill that has crept through him in the night. His paws shake as he holds the cup.

'Yes,' says the bard. He watches Rue with worried eyes for a long moment. 'Listen, little one, you don't need to be so scared. Everything is going to be all right. We'll be out of here before you know it, and I've told Gant to warn the rest of the Foxguard. They'll be able to protect Podkin and everyone in Thornwood warren. Besides, your father and his warriors will be more than a match for the Endwatch. I'd like to see anyone get past Hubert the Broad when his fur is ruffled.'

'But we could be here for *days*,' says Rue. He is overcome with a wave of homesickness, stronger than any he has felt since leaving last spring. The dreams of his mother, the talk of Thornwood . . . suddenly it is all too much and his eyes fill with tears. 'I want to go *home*. I want my mother,' he sobs.

The bard reaches across and pulls him into a hug.

They sit for a while, quietly rocking back and forth as the fire crackles and the smoke swirls in the sunlight.

'I tell you what,' says the bard. 'We've got a lot of time on our paws. Why don't I tell you the rest of Uki's story? That should take your mind off things.'

'Yes, please,' says Rue, from somewhere in the folds of the bard's cloak.

'Good idea,' says Jori. 'I'd especially like to hear about his brave and heroic companion. She was the best part of the tale.'

'You mean Kree, the little plains rabbit?' says the bard, knowing full well she meant herself, and then chuckles as Jori throws a chunk of toasted bread at him.

With Rue still snuggled up in his cloak, the bard clears his throat and begins to speak . . .