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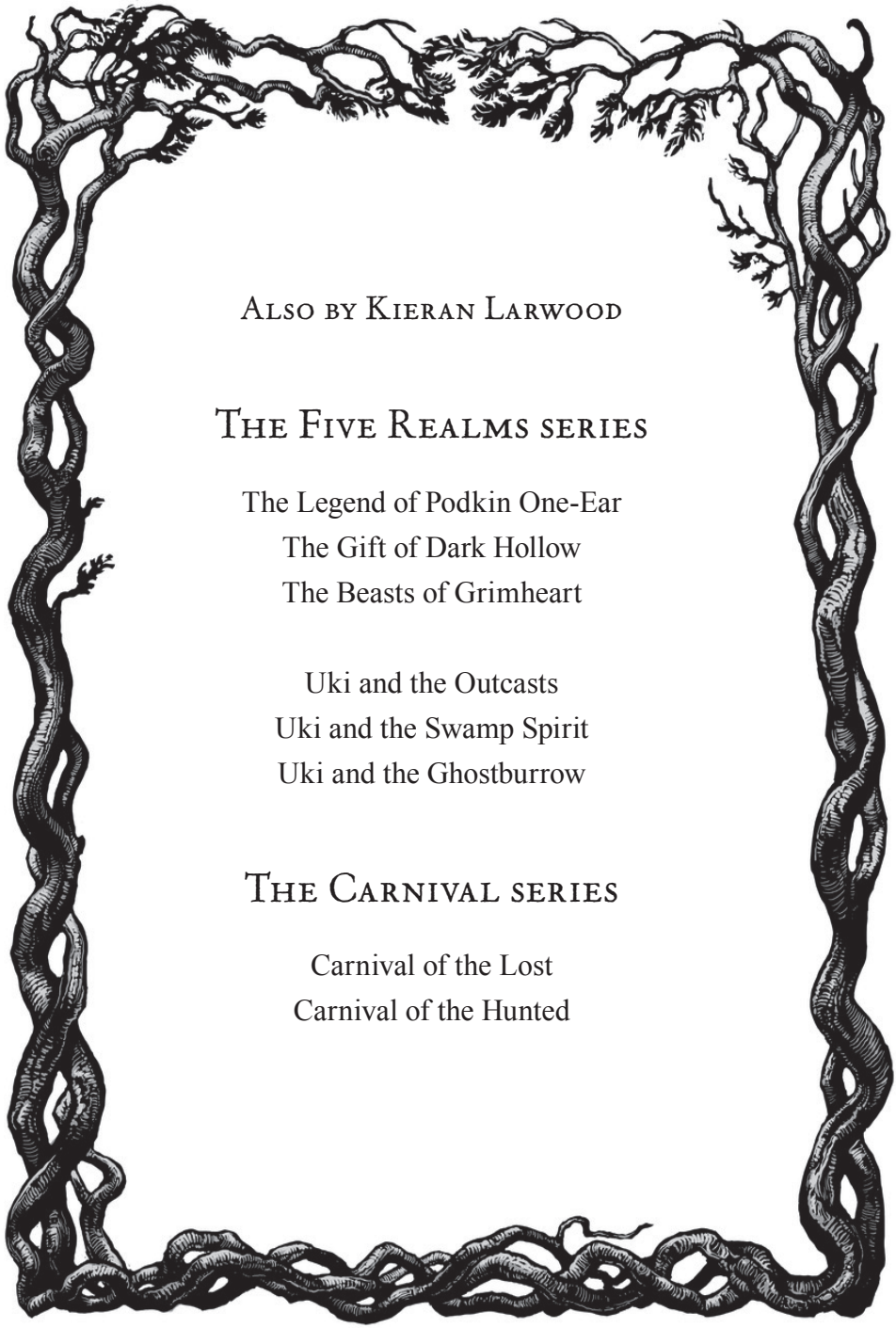
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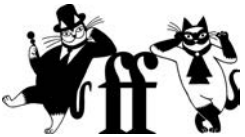
Carnival of the Lost
Carnival of the Hunted



KIERAN LARWOOD

Illustrated by Chris Wormell

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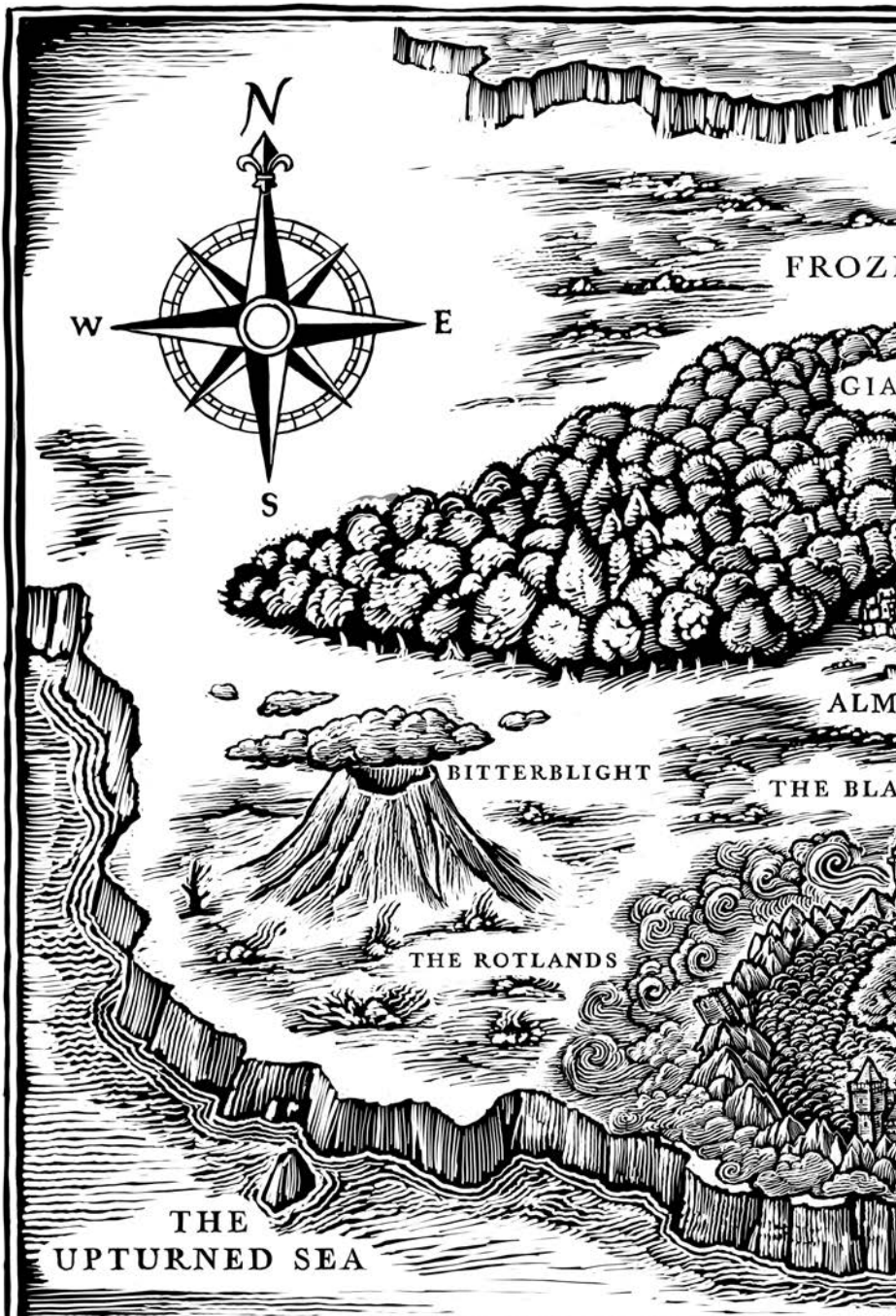
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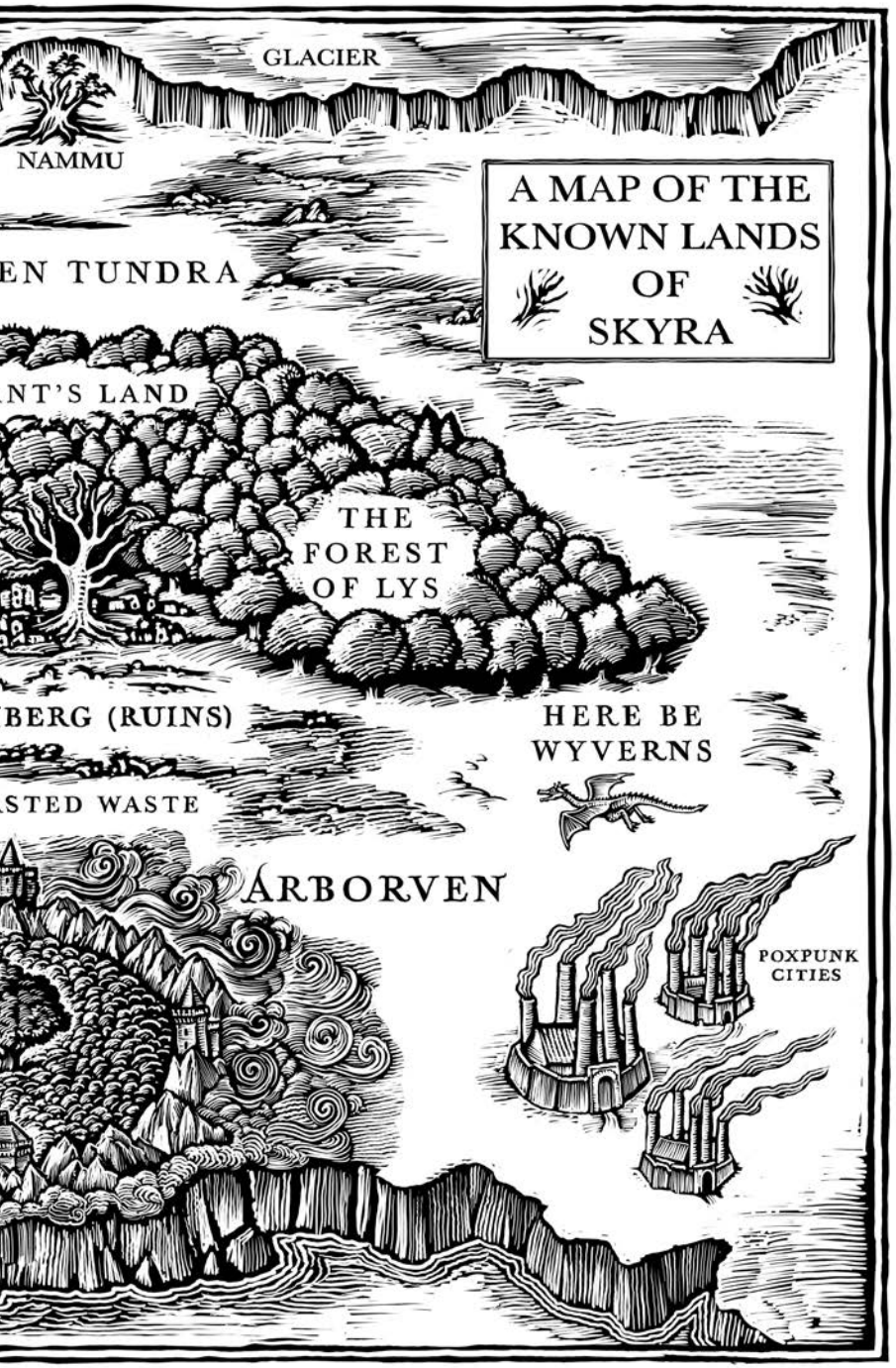


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For my parents




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NT'S LAND
THE FOREST OF LYS
BERG (RUINS)
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ARBORVEN
POXPUNK CITIES



I

'All magic begins with the Tree.'

The Book of Undren

There was a mountain.

Not a pointed, snow-capped peak like the one you've just imagined.

No. More a solid slab of rock. A giant volcanic loaf, pushing up out of the ground, its top cloaked in mist. Millions of years old, hundreds of feet high. Hard as iron, smooth as glass, unforgiving as death.

And halfway up it, on a ledge no wider than the palm of your hand, stood two figures. Woman and girl: mother and daughter, even, judging by their matching

green eyes, copper-brown skin and shoulder-length tangles of hair, matted and braided into warriors' locks.

Above them, the rockface yawned away to the summit, somewhere in the candyfloss mess of clouds. Below them was a fall on to knife-edge shards of broken stone. A long fall: one in which you would have plenty of time to think of how you were about to burst open like a rotten tomato, and exactly how much it was going to hurt.

There were no ropes or ladders to show how they had come to be there, standing side by side on that tiny wrinkle of rock. The mountain face was silky smooth all around: impossible to even think about climbing.

Yet there they stood, toes curled over the edge, backs pressed against the stone, the girl with her head bowed, nodding as if being given a lesson, the mother gesturing with her hands, making them swoop and turn through the air.

'Are you ready?' the mother said, reaching back to grasp the hood of the fur cloak she wore.

'Of course,' said the girl with a shrug that meant she probably wasn't but was trying hard to fake it.

'Then let's go.'

The mother pulled her hood over her head, revealing the ears and nose of a russet-furred fox. The rest of the cloak fell over her shoulders: a strange mix of scales and feathers, as if the skins of several animals had been stitched together.

Then, as the cloak covered her body, there was a changing. A *folding*, as the outline of her human body shifted and shrank, wrapping itself in the animal hide and becoming something other.

One minute, an adult woman stood on the ledge, the next there was a griffyx. An ancient creature – long lost to the world except in myths – it looked like a mix of fox, dragon and eagle. Head and snout of fur, body of scales, feathered wings and a thick brush of a tail.

The creature paused for a heartbeat, staring at her daughter with those same green, flashing eyes her human form had owned. A brief nod of the head, and then the mother griffyx spread its wings and dived from the ledge, plummeting downwards, becoming a speck in the time it took to blink.

'For Tree's sake,' muttered the girl, watching the winged beast disappear. 'I'll never catch her now.'

Ignoring the wind that threatened to whip her off the narrow ledge, the girl pulled her own cloak up

and over her head, feeling her body tingle and ripple with magic energy as it spoke to the animal skin and remade itself.

Even as her bones were melding into paws, even as she felt the wings come alive on her back, she pushed herself off the rockface, out into nothingness where she hung for an instant, waiting for gravity to grab hold of her and snatch her back to earth.

Her wings snapped out, caught the air and sliced it, and she sailed after her mother, off into the open sky.

*

'Come on, Liska! Keep up!'

Her mother's voice came back to her, whipped by the wind, making it hard to hear.

Liska was a hundred metres or so behind, just close enough to watch the ruffling feathers in her mother's wings, noting how they tilted just so, keeping her soaring as she searched out the currents of warm air that would give her lift. Close enough to see the glowing bands of the stripes that blazed on her forelegs.

Shapewalkers like Liska and her mother were gifted the marks of gleaming colour for great deeds of courage and heroism. Liska hadn't earned a single one yet, but oh, how she longed to. Seven at least, like

her mother. Possibly ten or more, if only she could find enough epic adventures to grant them . . .

'Stay focused! You're daydreaming again!'

Liska flipped back to reality with a yelp, realising she had flown into a patch of cold air. She lost height rapidly, had to flap her wings with fast, swooshing beats to stay aloft. The effort pulled at her muscles, making her strain and growl.

'You've lost the thermal! Bank to your left!'

'I'm . . . trying . . .' Liska muttered through gritted teeth as she battled back up to proper height. The warmer air began to rush under her wings, helping her rise until she was level with her mother again. She shook her head. Flying was *hard* . . .

'That's better,' her mother called. 'Now bring it around. We're going to head for the Undrentree.'

The distant form of her mother turned, soaring in a gentle curve and beginning to sink gradually lower. Liska raised her left wing, dipped to the right and tried to follow.

Below them lay a circular basin three miles wide, ringed by the towering granite Shield Mountains. A scoop of earth filled from one edge to the other with a flowing sea of green leaves. Tree upon tree clustered

together, and in amongst the branches peeped the glow from thousands of lights. Strings of lanterns, candles in windows, street lamps and flickering torches. The place was home to a throng of people; a city among the forest. Arborven.

In the centre stood the Undrentree.

Even though she had seen it thousands of times, it still filled Liska with wonder.

Almost as tall as the mountains that enclosed the valley, it dwarfed everything around it. Its thundering great branches spread out like open arms covered in sprays of jade leaves that rose high enough to touch the clouds.

From this distance it tricked your eye, looking like any ordinary tree just a few metres away. That was until you noticed there were walls and roofs of buildings all over it. And not just huts or shacks, either. Temples with turrets and steeples. Whole villages of three-storey houses running along branches. Bridges of rope and plank wider than any highway strung between them. Castles and mansions built amongst the roots. And scurrying everywhere, the flea-sized specks of figures that were hundreds upon hundreds of people.

The thing was monumental. God-sized.

Surrounding it, in a ring, was the first of the city circles. A round string of oak trees that belonged to the group of magic users known as arbomancers. Giant, gnarled trunks holding houses of dark wood with roofs narrowed into the steepest of points. Most honoured, most respected, this tribe lived closest to the tree which gave them their powers.

Around that was the second circle: the bushy, round-leaved hazel trees of the stormsingers. They lived high in the branches, in spherical houses like teardrops covered in silver pennants that fluttered in the breeze.

Then came the barkmages, the sapsmiths and the mossherders, with circles of rowan, birch and elm that stretched the city right up to the steep sides of the mountain walls. Each with their own styles of building, from craggy huts that seemed formed from the trunks themselves, to six-storey towers that swayed like the trees around them, decorated with streamers of shaggy lichen and sprays of coloured moss.

Liska stared down at it all as she passed above.

She saw flocks of forest birds fluttering everywhere, searching out spots for roosting. Bats had begun to whirl above the branches, snapping up the juicy moths that were attracted to all the glowing lanterns. Squirrels

sat at the doorways of tiny houses that had been built especially for them, cleaning their tails and staring down at the bustling world around them with bright, beady eyes.

Liska marvelled at its order, at the way it all worked in harmony. The Undrentree gave its magic to the wizards of Arborven, and they used it to tend the trees, the wildlife and keep the city thriving. Each thing helped the other to survive. Balance and partnership.

Although it wasn't perfect, she knew.

The farther away from the tree you lived, the less magic you had. The poor mossherders were considered weak and worthless by the mages who lived near the Undrentree, and the sapsmiths weren't much better. They in turn were jealous of the arbomancers and stormsingers. Like a family with several children, petty arguments and squabbles were common.

*

Relaxing, feeling the air tickle through her pin feathers, Liska looked up from the spread of flowing leaves below, staring out towards the ring of granite mountains that surrounded Arborven.

They were crowned by a halo of thick white mist, but she knew there was a world out there. Beyond.

A scary one though.

The Blasted Waste to the north, packed with fire-breathing wyverns who liked to snack on flame-grilled humans for breakfast. The Poxpunk tribes to the east, with their smoke-choked cities of metal and junk. And to the west . . .

. . . she didn't want to think about that.

Instead, her eye caught the silhouettes of more shapewalkers out flying patrols along the mountain ranges. Warriors wearing the form of long-dead beasts. *Her* people.

She could just about make out the shape of the Noon Fort, nestled on the northern wall. That was where she and her family lived, along with the other griffyxes and the manticores. There was a squad of these doing manoeuvres in the distance: lion manes flowing and eagle wings soaring, with those brutal scorpion tails trailing behind.

Root-chewing manticores, Liska cursed. *Always thinking they're better than us griffyxes. Just because they're five times our size.*

She turned her head away, looking off to the right where some other shapewalkers – these ones from the Stormfort to the east – circled way up above.

She could see the curved beaks of griffins, with their clawed paws and cats' tails. And was that a peryton amongst them – a winged deer with a grand spread of antlers?

All these creatures must once have been as common here as the foxes and squirrels. Liska tried to imagine the valley as it was then, packed with roaring beasts. Wild ones that weren't just humans wearing their forgotten shapes.

At least the Undrentree remembers them, she thought. The sacred tree had changed the furs and skins that the first shapewalkers brought to it, so the legend went, turning them into copies of the mythical beasts that once filled the skies. And then the skins were handed down through the families, given to the youngest when they were ready for their bonding ceremony.

Seems such a long time ago now. Liska cast her mind back to when she had received her skin, after her ceremonial bath in oil from the tree. How the magic had sung through every pore in her body. How the cloak she wore became a part of her. A second skin, another piece of—

'Watch it, Liska!' her mother shouted back to her. Daydreaming once more, she had drifted off course,

heading out over the west of the city instead of around towards the towering bulk of the Undrentree.

Liska growled under her breath and swung about, swooping down to brush the tops of the highest trees with her paws. They were over the second circle now, the home of the stormsingers. She could see the outlines of their houses through the leaves, the glimmer of lanterns and candles shining up at her.

As she passed one especially tall tree, she noticed a pod had been built in its topmost branches. A round bulb of wood, it was just big enough for a child's bedroom and there, sure enough, was a little face peering out across the treetops.

The mages in the city below looked down on the shapewalkers, Liska knew. Even though they protected them from all the outside threats. Even though they risked their lives fighting off wyverns and everything else. They weren't treated as part of Arborven. They were lower than mossherders. Creatures less than human. Beasts from scary tales told to children at bedtime.

Well, let's see if I can change that, shall we? Liska hardly ever came down to the city, so she was determined to make this visit count.

She swung closer to the bedroom window, making

sure she was spotted, and was rewarded by a gasp of surprise. Keen to show off her flying skills, and to prove that shapewalkers weren't all scary monsters, she flipped her wings around in what she hoped would be an impressive barrel roll.

Except her rear paw caught on a stray branch and she wobbled badly, crashing into the foliage for a moment before struggling free in an explosion of leaves and twigs. Instead of gasps from the child's bed-pod, she heard howls of laughter, making her blush hard under her fur.

'For Tree's sake, Liska, can't you concentrate for even a moment?' Her mother. Again.

Maybe it was the animal side of Liska, maybe it was just because she didn't like being told what to do, but something snapped inside her then. She felt a bubble of rebellion surge up and take her over. With a fierce snarl on her lips, she decided to show her mother that she knew *perfectly well* how to fly properly no matter how much trouble it would land her in.

Beating hard to build up speed, she climbed almost vertically until her mother was a gliding shadow sixty metres below.

Then she pointed her nose downwards, folded her

wings into her body and went into a dive, picking up speed as she plummeted like an arrow, like a furry javelin thrown by an angry giant.

The air screamed past her face, whipping her fox ears back and washing her with the thick scent of bark, moss and leaves from the forest.

The trees zoomed up towards her, threatening to swallow her up. She zipped past her mother, made her yelp in surprise, and then jabbed out her wings just in time to stop herself colliding with the forest.

She was still speeding like a bolt of lightning, and she shot away over the treetops. Somewhere behind, her mother was shouting, but she was too fast and far away to hear. The Undrentree was right in front of her now and nothing could stop her.

It had been a moment's decision, made in a blink. A single instant that would change the entire course of her life. But right then, hammering across the forest city, she had no idea about any of that.

Liska threw back her fox head and barked with laughter.

*

As she neared the Undrentree, Liska pricked her ears and focused her eyes upon the enormous branches.

Alongside the mages, there were other inhabitants of Arborven, ones that she always sought a glimpse of whenever she had a chance to visit the city: the treekeepers.

There were only a dozen of them and their job was to speak the will of the tree, to guide the quarrelling tribes that grew and tended the city. In a way, Liska supposed, they were the rulers of Arborven itself.

They lived in the Undrentree – on it and under it – in wooden buildings that towered above all the other structures, with rooms the size of barns and roofs like small mountains.

Just like the shapewalkers, they had been changed by magic. They had once been human mages – although Liska found that hard to believe – before being chosen by the Undrentree. Now their bodies had been turned to living wood, blending with the trees themselves to become a mixture of plant and human. Their faces peering out from the bark and grain like moving carvings.

Three times taller than an adult person, they had hair of moss and creepers and limbs of gnarled branches. They were almost as old as the tree and moved with slow creaking steps; spoke with measured, booming

voices. Everything about them oozed power. The magic in their scent made Liska's animal senses tingle, filling her nose with electric zaps, as if she had just inhaled a nest of tiny fire ants.

She had spotted Edda, the leader, before. And Twiga, Taproot and Aspen. She had always wanted to see Craggit though. She had heard he was half the size of the others, twisted and covered in moss thicker than hair.

As she curved her flightpath around the Undrentree, she kept an eye on the house-covered branches, on the walkways and rope ladders that sprawled everywhere like spiders' webs.

She saw arbomancers casting hexes on limbs and leaves to make them grow into new platforms and paths. They drew patterns of green light that hung in the air. They sang songs in the language of root and twig.

Hanging in baskets from the highest branches, mossherders coaxed lichen into swirling patterns. Their long hair and flowing beards, as green and shaggy as the moss they summoned, waved in the evening breeze.

Further down the tree, sapsmiths were draining amber-coloured liquid from taps set into the bark. They

poured it into vats and buckets, down pipes and chutes that led to the factories and breweries below, where it would be used to make potions and syrups, mead and ale. They left a cloud of sweet, sticky scent in the air that gummed up Liska's whiskers as she sailed through.

Everywhere there were crowds of tiny figures going about their business, but no sign at all of the hulking treekeepers.

Round the outside of the tree she flew, passing over the colossal roots as they grew over one another in endless twining layers. Where temples, libraries and workshops balanced among them in clusters. She saw the arbomancer Academy, the printing workshops of the stormsinger scribes, the hanging gardens of the mossherders . . . sights and wonders everywhere she looked.

Further still, she came to Undren Square – a wide open space between the smallest roots and the beginning of the first tree circle that was used for gatherings and ceremonies.

Night was beginning to draw on and it was mostly empty now. Just a few figures clustered at the edge. Two mages and . . . was that a treekeeper with them?

Liska flew closer, gliding down until she was ten metres or so from the ground. She flew under the

lowest of the tree's branches, where it was dark and cool. Clusters of hanging lanterns – each one larger than her own bedroom at home – cast pools of warm, yellow light on the forest floor and the air was thick with the spicy scent of magic.

It *was* a treekeeper! With long, thick legs, gnarled and carved with spirals. With an ivy beard that almost reached the ground. Strings of green glowing runes ran up and down its arms, matching the gleam of its deep-set eyes. Magic poured out around it in an aura that Liska could almost see, almost *taste*.

It looked like Edda – the oldest, most important of the Keepers. Liska recognised him from brief glimpses she had caught before.

Gliding silently, she drifted closer, circling around to try and see what was so important that Edda himself had come down from his palace on the tree.

As she passed around the edge of the square, she could see Edda stooping downwards, talking to a man in long, sweeping robes of black and silver. An arbomancer. An important one, judging by the amount of symbols embroidered on his cloak. He was waving his hands wildly and snatches of a raised voice drifted towards Liska's sharp, fox ears.

Someone was daring to shout at a treekeeper? She had to get closer. She had to find out more.

Tilting her primary feathers a fraction higher, she tightened the circle she was flying in, bringing her closer to the figures at the square's edge. With luck, they would be too involved with their argument to notice her sliding by, lost in the shadows of the Undrentree's lower branches.

As Liska came around, she could see Edda in more detail. His face looked human, trapped inside the wooden statue of his body. Although there were bark-like whorls and bumps all over his skin. His eyes glowed from deep pools of shadow under his mossy brows, and she spotted the brush of a squirrel, scurrying around in his beard.

The arbomancer was still yelling, and now she could pick up some of the words.

'. . . foolish not to try! What else are we to do? Wait for the rot to reach the Undrentree? Let the minions of Bitterblight walk right into our city and destroy everything we have created?'

The rot. Liska couldn't stop a snarl slipping from her mouth.

That was what lurked to the west of the mountains.

The greatest threat of all that the city faced. There, amongst the blackened, drained soil, was another tree: sister of the one that nurtured all of Arborven. *Bitterblight.* Nobody had ever seen it, or at least lived to tell the tale. But legends described it as a dark, shapeless thing. A void of emptiness more like a hole in the universe than a tree. Jagged scratches instead of branches. Black, flapping streaks of *nothing* instead of leaves. A stinking, toxic thing – opposite to the Undrentree in every way.

It killed instead of cared; destroyed instead of created. Its roots drained energy from the world, spewing it out again in the form of grey fungus and seeping, living oil. Poisons that spread ever outwards, hungry to reach the Undrentree itself and suck it dry.

Edda moved his head from side to side in a slow, ponderous shake. When he spoke, his voice creaked like branches rubbing together in the wind. It echoed as if it had travelled up from roots lost deep under the ground.

'The power of the shadow tree cannot be harnessed. It is not for us to touch. Our law forbids it. Any creature who tries to use or control it will be destroyed by it in the end. This is known. This has always been known.'

The robed arbomancer shook his head. Liska had arced round behind Edda now and could see the mage's face. Pale skin, bald head. Dark eyes that flashed with anger.

'But nobody has even tried! My research shows that it might be possible. That the rot from Bitterblight can be channelled . . . used . . . made to work for us, even! Wouldn't it be worth an attempt at least? Imagine if we no longer had to worry about the Undrentree being killed off? What if we controlled its armies and were able to use them against the wyverns and the Poxpunks?'

Liska could see the back of Edda's head beginning another of its slow shakes as she sailed past. She had time for one last look down at the group before her orbit took her back out over the square. She was surprised to notice someone else was present. A silent, dark shape who stood some way off, half hidden in a pool of shade.

Peering into the gathering shadows, she tried to catch a glimpse of the third figure. If it hadn't been for her sharpened griffyx senses she might not have been able to see anything in the gloom, but as it was she picked out the slender wiry shape of a woman. Dressed in leather armour, with short spiky hair,

she was leaning on a barbed spear, appearing to be very casual – bored, even – but Liska could see her needle eyes watching every move that Edda and the arbomancer made.

Looking closer, Liska noticed some kind of scar on her face. It twisted down from her mouth to her throat, puckering the skin in what looked like the trails of claw marks.

Leather armour. Spear. Scars. She didn't seem like any kind of mage Liska had ever seen. And she definitely wasn't a shapewalker.

But she held herself with the same kind of quiet confidence. That of a skilled warrior. Muscles ready to spring at the slightest danger. Twitching, looking for threats and weaknesses. What was someone like that doing here at the Undrentree? A place that was supposed to be sacred and peaceful?

Intrigued, Liska leant harder into her turn, trying to come around for a better look.

As she did so, the woman looked up. Had she sensed Liska there? Had her passage through the air made some kind of noise?

It didn't matter. The woman had seen her now. Those sharp, predator's eyes locked on Liska and

the pose of their owner changed instantly. A fighting stance, the spear gripped and ready to launch, to strike Liska from the sky.

By pure instinct, Liska drove her wings down, sending herself up high out of range. But, with her eyes locked on the dangerous figure below, she forgot completely that she was flying beneath the boughs of a gigantic tree. She had a sudden sense of a very large and solid object in front of her, and then there was a crunching *smack* as her head met hard, unmoving wood.

Sparks danced in front of Liska's eyes and her whole body jarred. Dazed, she expected to begin the long tumble to the ground, but instead she felt her back paws being gripped tight.

Head spinning, she found herself swinging *up* through the air rather than down. Dangling by her feet she thrashed her head around, frantic to see what had snared her. Up, up, up she went, until part of the tree came into view. A branch, draped in creepers, patterned with moss and . . . was it carved into a man-like shape? Were those arms? A head? *Eyes?*

'Hello, tiny shapewalker.' A thrumming, timeless voice echoed through her dazed head. 'Did I hurt you?'

Liska, upside down still, stared into the glowing eyes of a treekeeper. Her nose filled with the scent of bark, living wood and musty age.

Of all the places to crash in the whole of Arborven she had chosen the one that would get her into the most trouble possible.

Another sound met Liska's ears, a distant one that was growing steadily closer. One which she recognised instantly, this time.

It was the sound of her mother yelling with rage as she flew towards her.