ROWAN FOXWOOD

HEART SEER

The Tale of ANISE STAR

USBORNE

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The Tale of ANISE STAR

"A lyrical tale bursting with magical adventure. Anise's journey will enchant readers."

Radiya Hafiza, author of Rumaysa: A Fairytale

"An absolute gem of a story! Magic shimmers up from every page in Foxwood's stellar tale filled with high stakes and heart-warming daemons."

Siobhan McDermott, author of Paper Dragons

"Exciting, magical and wonderfully warm-hearted. Anise and Wolf transported me wholly from the very first page and I loved adventuring with them on their marvellous quest."

Sophie Kirtley, author of The Wild Way Home

"*Heartseer* is like the Pokémon of pagan folklore… Foxwood is the most exciting new voice in children's fantasy."

Hamish Steele, creator of DeadEndia

"*Heartseer* has a *Spirited Away* meets *Northern Lights* vibe and is bursting with things that fill the soul… A truly special book, the kind that only comes along once in a blue moon."

Loris Owen, author of the Eartha Quicksmith series

To Dad,
Writing a book is like magic – it takes belief.
Thank you for believing in me.

First published in the UK in 2024 by Usborne Publishing Limited, Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Limited, Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg, Deutschland VK Nr. 17560

Text © Rowan Foxwood, 2024

Cover and internal illustrations by Katarzyna Doszla © Usborne Publishing, 2024

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781803707372 JFMAMJJ SOND /24 8051/1

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.

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Map of Deerland
Glass Cove
Glengteen
Bridge
Glenashtree
Great Wood
Ferry route
Portsmoke
Golden Peak
Low Hills
White Wood
Red Bear
Hidden Glade Mountains
Bear Hill
White Coast
The Capital
Seapass
Newbridge
Red Delta
Low Haven
Riverside
River Copper
Fox Wood
Saltspray
Rock Crook
Red Ridges
Porthaven
Folk Wood
Goat Reach
White Dunes
W
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N
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CHAPTER ONE

There were daemons in the garden. Anise peered from the corner of the kitchen window and watched as they skittered across the lawn towards the rose bushes. There were a dozen of them, each no larger than a boot, with faces mottled like tree bark, and thick, bushy beards tangled with leaves and twigs. Shrub-goblins – a gardener's nightmare.

"Quick, quick!" one squeaked. *Leader* – Anise recognized him by his stiff red hat, pointed and wrapped in ivy leaves.

Shrub-goblins had been eating the roses in Anise's garden all her life. When her mother, Laurel, was alive, they'd never approached during the day, but in the last two years they'd grown bolder. Anise didn't mind. As any good

Heartseer knew, daemons always returned a favour, however unwillingly. If you caught a shrub-goblin in the act, it would tell you secrets, like where to pick the best mushrooms, or when the snow was coming, or which berries made the best paints. You just had to watch out for their teeth.

The leaves on Anise's apple tree had turned to crisp amber, and with winter on the horizon, favours would come in handy. And so Anise had laid her trap, making a big show of leaving the house, only to sneak in through the back window, and take up her vigil. Sure enough, they'd come.

"Quick, quick!" Leader waved his stout arms. He sounded like he was conducting an evacuation, rather than a rose-heist. "Formation!"

Anise watched gleefully as the shrub-goblins climbed onto one another's shoulders, forming a tower. They snatched the roses as they went, passing them down in a line.

Slowly Anise unlatched the window, holding her breath. The shrub-goblins' pyramid grew, Leader clambering to the top. With glittering, greedy eyes, he reached for a large, pink rose, took it by the stem, and with a small twist, plucked it.

Anise struck. Throwing the window open, she leaned out with a triumphant, "Aha!"

The tower of shrub-goblins staggered and collapsed. They scattered across the lawn, screeching like panicked chickens.

"Wolf!" Anise called.

Several of the shrub-goblins reached the treeline of the forest, but got no further. From between the trunks a pale smoke flickered, and then a humungous grey and white dog, larger than a cow, materialized and came bounding out. The shrub-goblins shrieked and ran back towards the house. The monstrous dog darted between them, herding them into the centre of the lawn. They formed a clump, hissing and spitting.

Anise climbed out the window, the hem of her skirt catching on the rose bush. She tore it free. "I knew it! Back for my roses!"

"Beastly girl! Awful girl! You tricked us!" Leader spat.

"Can I eat a few?" a deep voice rumbled, and the shrub-goblins cowered as the large dog peeled his lips back in a grin.

"Stop it, Wolf," Anise said.

Wolf's tail swished from side to side in huge sweeping motions. It was a heavy sound, like someone waving a tree branch. White smoke curled off his back and tail, swirling mysteriously. He huffed, and sat on his haunches, shrinking to the size of a wolfhound.

"Lovely girl," Leader crooned, holding his hat in his spidery fingers. "The lovely girl wouldn't set her monster on us…?"

"Of course not. Here." Anise picked up one of the roses the shrub-goblins had dropped. She could *feel* their hunger – their focus narrowed in on the pale pink flower as she presented it to Leader. He accepted, eyes narrowed.

"You can keep the roses you've picked." Anise sat cross-legged on the grass. Dew soaked into her skirt, cold against her bare legs, but she didn't mind. "In return, I'd like a few favours."

Leader glowered. "We have done her many favours, but the beastly girl demands more!"

Anise ignored him, counting the stolen flowers. "Let's see, that's five roses." She pretended not to see the sixth rose Leader had clearly stuffed into his hat. "So five favours owed. That's fair, don't you think?"

"Injustice!" Leader cried. "Beastly girl!"

"Beastly girl!" the others chorused.

"Oh?" Anise gave a theatrical sigh. "Well, then I suppose I'll just have to throw all these sumptuous, tasty roses into the fire." She reached to pluck the flower out of Leader's hands. He gripped it tightly to his chest.

"Lovely girl," his tone eased, "clever girl – why waste them? They cannot go back on the bush. We will take

them for you. As a favour."

"That's not a favour to me, seeing as you picked them," Anise said firmly.

Leader's face scrunched up like a raisin. "The beastly girl tricked us!"

"All right, four favours then?" Anise said. "Consider the fifth rose a gift."

"Gift? *Gift?*" This only outraged Leader even more. "We'll take no gifts from the beastly girl! We'll not be indebted! Five roses, five favours! And the monster is not to chase us!" He pointed accusingly at Wolf, who bared his teeth again.

"If little shrub-monkeys don't want to be chased, they should stay away," he rumbled.

"All right, Leader," Anise agreed. "I'll come and claim my favours sometime soon. Enjoy your roses."

"Beastly girl! Tyrant! May your house fall down!" The shrub-goblins scrabbled off towards the treeline, howling insults as they went. Anise waved.

"Just one – you could've let me eat *one*." Wolf huffed. His mouth didn't move when he spoke, the words simply appearing in Anise's mind, as if they couldn't be bothered to go in through her ears.

"I don't feed you that badly, do I?" Anise scratched him behind the ear.

Wolf's tongue lolled out of his mouth, but he said nothing.

Anise glanced up to the house. At over three hundred years old, crooked and crumbling, it *did* look one healthy breeze away from toppling over. It had been extended over the years, the haphazard mixture of red brick, black slate, white stone and wooden beams earning the building its name – Patchwork House.

Anise loved every inch of it. Yes, the roof leaked in fourteen places, the blue paint on the shutters was badly peeling, and the top floor sloped so badly the furniture slid away overnight and had to be readjusted every morning, but it was home.

From behind them came the ring of a bicycle bell, and Anise turned to see Mr Hare pulling up along the path. He was a tall beansprout of a man, with a long face, dark skin and a pencil-thin moustache.

"Hallo," Mr Hare called.

"Good morning!" Anise leaped to her feet. Mr Hare dismounted from his mud-spattered bicycle. Anise had to tip her head back to look at him. Even at thirteen she was small for her age, with bony wrists and ankles, and a pointed face. Her skin, usually tawny, had been deepened to burnished bronze by the harvest sun, and she had a constellation of ochre freckles cast across her cheeks and nose.

"You finally changed the sign!" Mr Hare said, nodding to the periwinkle blue placard on the front gate. In large, carefully painted letters, it read:

Anise Star
HEARTSEER
Helping Daemons and Humans
live together in harmony.

"It was about time," Anise said. It had taken her two years to summon the courage to paint over her mother's name. "Any letters for me?"

"Just the one." Mr Hare reached into his sagging bag. Anise's house, so deep in the White Woods, was always the last on his mail route. "From Mr Babbitt."

"Mr Babbitt?" A volcano began to simmer in her stomach as Anise took the thick, creamy white envelope. What now? Another cut in her monthly allowance? Unexpected bills? Some awful new rule? Anise swallowed.

Sleek, well-groomed and feline, Mr Babbitt, or the "Bank Cat" as Anise's mother had called him, ran the local bank in Bridge. He'd been a frequent visitor, when Laurel was still alive, often speaking to her about "business opportunities" and "finances". Laurel had always sent him packing. *"I wouldn't trust that man with a button,"* she told Anise.

After Laurel died, however, Anise had fallen into Mr Babbitt's "care", and he had made her life miserable. Anything of value Anise owned had been taken. Mr Babbitt spoke of bills and investment, saying the monthly allowance her brother, Sage, sent back from the Capital, barely covered her expenses. When Anise had asked if she could manage her accounts herself, Mr Babbitt had told her she was too young and stupid to understand them.

"Don't know why he bothered paying for postage, seeing as he has a car now," Mr Hare said, bringing Anise's attention back to the letter. "He could have just driven down to see you."

"Mr Babbitt has a car?" Anise had only ever seen pictures of them in the newspaper.

"Yes – had it delivered from the Capital last week. No one's allowed anywhere near it."

Anise wasn't surprised. Mr Babbitt had caught her painting in the garden once, and now wouldn't let her in his office until he'd done a meticulous check to make sure she didn't have a spot of paint on her. She could already imagine what the car looked like – a big, white body, polished and gleaming like marble, bug-eyed headlights staring out of silver frames, with a sparkling metal grate grinning at passers-by.

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring you gladder tidings," Mr

Hare said gently. "I'm sure Sage will write soon. Speaking of," he beamed, "his apprenticeship is almost over, isn't it?"

Instantly, Anise's worries ballooned away. "Yes, he finishes next month!"

"I think the mayor wants to hold a welcome home party for him." Mr Hare smoothed his fingers over his moustache. "That brother of yours is the closest thing to a celebrity we have – winning that inventors' competition and getting a scholarship from His Majesty, the High King himself. And at fifteen, no less!" Mr Hare whistled.

Anise tried for a smile. When Sage had won his apprenticeship, they'd all celebrated. It meant he could study at the University, under the kingdom's best inventors, and develop his own ideas; the ones his schoolteachers had called *lofty* and *unrealistic*.

The High King's representatives hadn't thought so. They had listened very intently to Sage's excited ideas about high-speed cars, underwater boats and *flying machines*, and had said he was *exactly* the sort of person they wanted at the University. Sage was even paid for his contribution and work…but there was a *lot* of work. The scholarship meant Sage had to complete three years of service to the High King before he could come home. What had seemed like an open door at the time, had turned out to be a golden cage.

"After so long in the Capital," Mr Hare went on, oblivious, "little old Bridge will probably seem slow and backward to him!"

Anise laughed. "Never."

In every letter he wrote, Sage always asked after Bridge. The pair spent pages talking about all the things they used to do together: they spoke about spring picnics under the blossoms, of warm hot chocolates by the fire in winter, of beating the Shadow-Larks to the best blackberries in autumn, and of their midnight escapades on midsummer, when they'd go listen to the Roving Pesky sing. Well, *Anise* would listen; Sage had stopped being able to really hear daemons when he was about ten, but it hadn't mattered. He loved Bridge and the White Wood as much as she did.

The last time Sage had been home had been for their mother's funeral. The High King had given him a measly fortnight of leave, before he'd been forced to return to work.

"It isn't enough time!" Anise had cried, as Sage hugged her goodbye.

"Most employers only give three days," he'd said, smiling despite the deep, indigo bags under his eyes. *"I'll be home soon, Anise. I promise."*

It had been two years since that day. Two years since she'd seen him. Two years under Mr Babbitt's miserable

care. But the nightmare was almost over. Soon, Sage would be free of his obligation to the High King and would come home. Life would return to normal at last.

"You won't find any treats in there, Wolf," Mr Hare suddenly said. "I'll bring you something next time."

Wolf pulled his nose out from where he'd been snuffling Mr Hare's mailbag. "That's what he said last time."

"You said that last time," Anise translated. Almost nobody in the town could hear Wolf, and most thought he was just a regular dog. Anise didn't care to correct them. Daemon-dogs were usually wild things that haunted moors and forests. Perpetually hungry, they would attack livestock and chase travellers in the night, but if you were brave enough to feed one, they would join your household as a loyal guard dog for ever.

"Next time, I promise." Mr Hare put his hand on his chest. "Now, if I may, Anise, I'm not just here to deliver your mail."

Anise pepped up. "You're not?"

He smiled wide and produced a silver coin from his pocket. "My wife and I were debating a question on daemons, and we knew you were the only one to ask!" He offered her the coin. "So, if you please, I would like to consult our local Heartseer."