
ANTONIA MAXWELL
TERRA ELECTRICA
THE GUARDIANS OF THE NORTH

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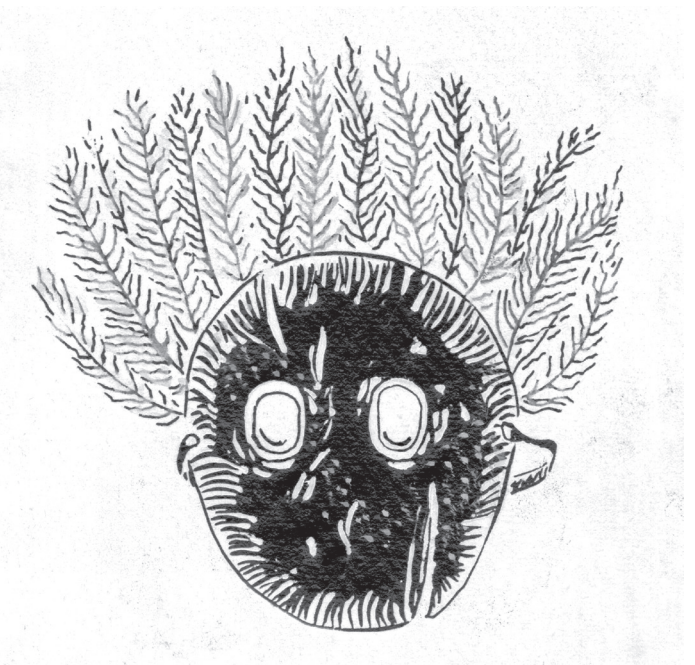
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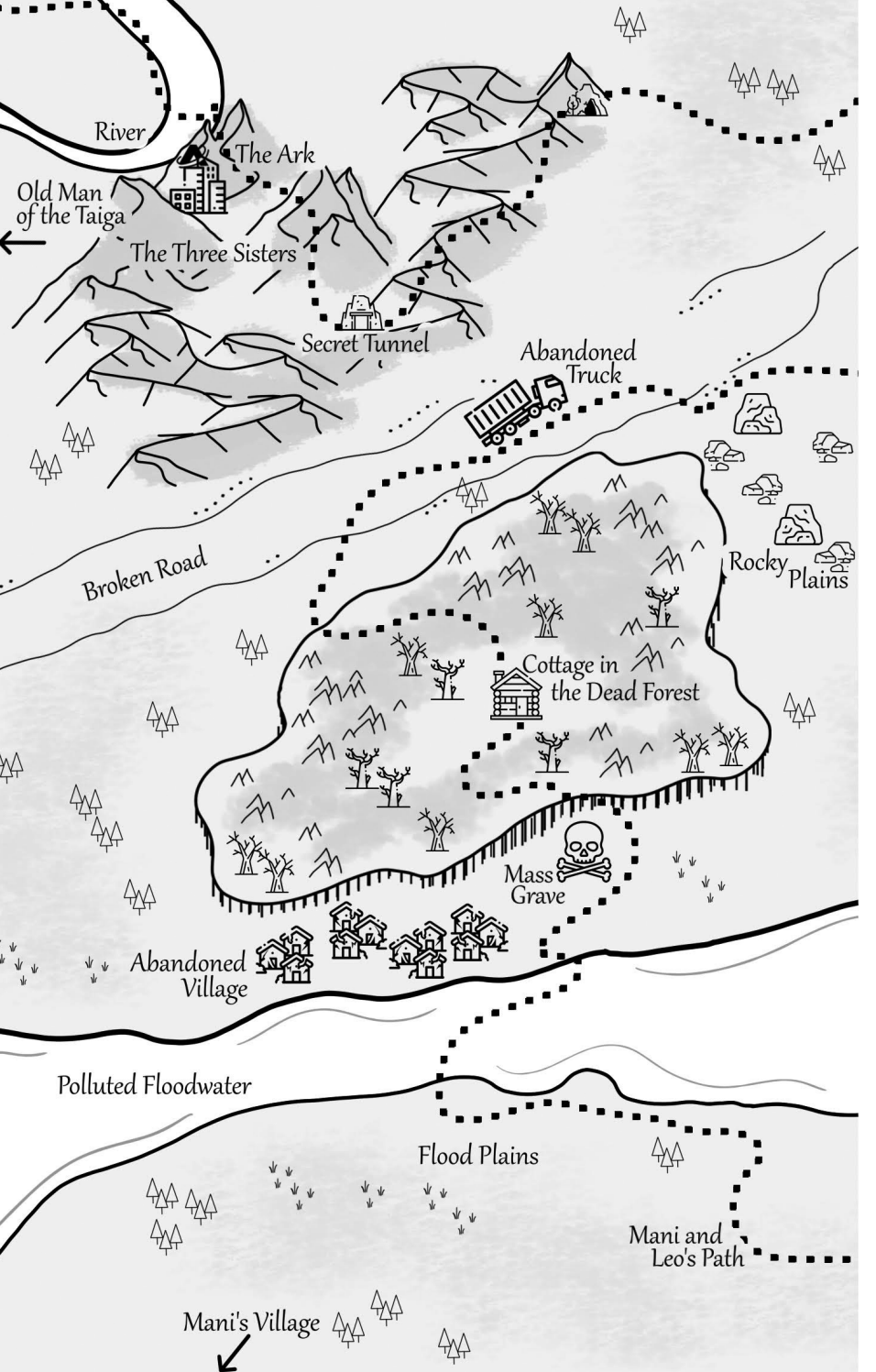
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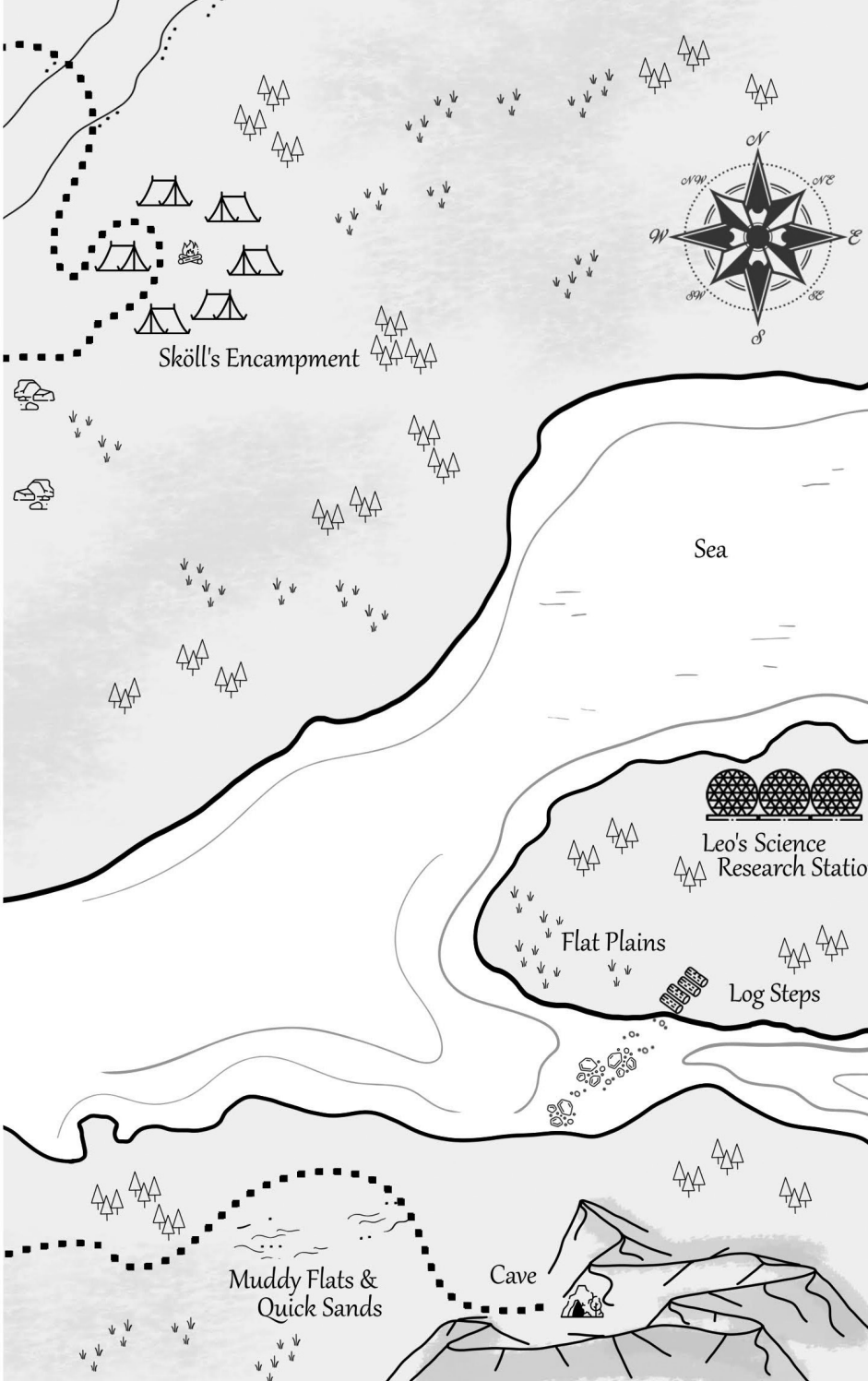
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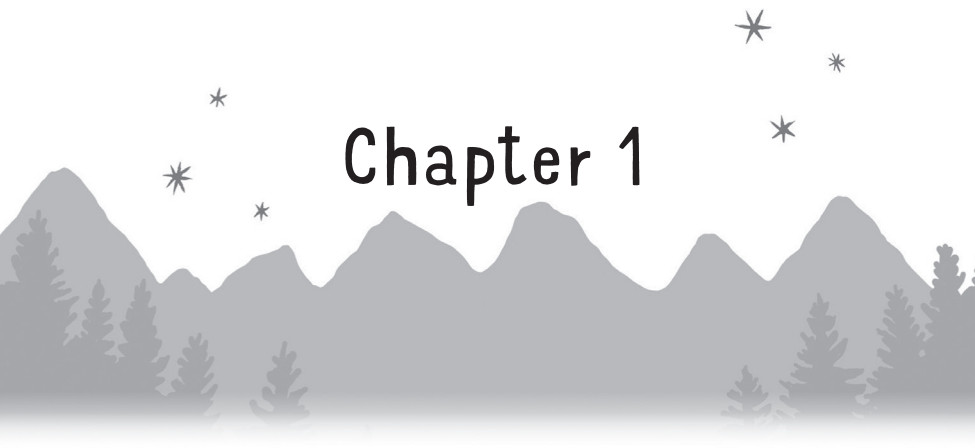
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For Maia, Finn, and Theo




River
The Ark
Old Man of the Taiga
The Three Sisters
Secret Tunnel
Abandoned Truck
Broken Road
Rocky Plains
Cottage in the Dead Forest
Mass Grave
Abandoned Village
Polluted Floodwater
Flood Plains
Mani and Leo's Path
Mani's Village


N
NW
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S
Sköll's Encampment
Sea
Leo's Science
Research Statio
Flat Plains
Log Steps
Muddy Flats &
Quick Sands
Cave



Chapter 1

Ouch. It hurt. When Mani tried to pinch the flame, the way her father did, it was hot, and stung. Her father could extinguish the candle with his big flat thumb and finger in a single resolute *pfffssst*. But, when Mani tried it, the flame flickered around her fingers and wouldn't go out.

Today Mani wished more than ever that her father would return.

She blew the candle out as usual, and even that took a few puffs. She was getting weaker from hunger each day. But out it must go—too much had burned down already. She wouldn't light it again till tomorrow. A thumb-width of candlelight a day—that was all she was allowed.

Her father had set out the rules before he left. There were always rules. Each time, before Mani lit the candle, she marked a thumb-width first by pressing a nick into the wax with her fingernail. When it burned down to the

mark—out it went. That was it—because they had to make it last if they were to survive. Mani never disobeyed her father.

She watched the curl of grey smoke rise through the darkness to the top of the cave and inhaled the peppery charcoal smell. Perhaps she didn't need the candlelight today anyway. The moon outside was high and bright and illuminated the craggy walls of the cave. In any case, the orange flame threw flickering shadows against the wall, and made dark forms that Mani half recognized from her dreams. And they worried her. So, in some ways, it was better with it out.

The moon, her mother would have said. *The moon will show you the way*. And that thought right now made her feel less alone.

But it couldn't take away the hunger. Because one thing Mani knew more than anything else—she had never *ever* felt hunger like this before. It was like her growling, howling stomach had moved to her head and was giving her wild crazy dreams of breaking free from the safety of the cave and going to find food.

Ever since her father had left, Mani had been living alone in the cave. The polar night had descended, and the sun had dipped below the horizon where it would stay for a whole month. Mani had got used to the dark, although she didn't like to think about it too much. There were some things that helped—and now, in the blackness, came the soft slow beat of enormous wings, followed by a gentle yip and wheeze.

Yip-yip-wee-oooh, yip-yip-wee-oooh.

The short-eared owl came to rest on the ledge at the entrance to the cave. It arrived at the same time every day. And at the same time every day, Mani took one of the small pieces of chalkstone her father had given her and dragged it down the wall (just as her father had shown her) next to the other marks. The sun might have disappeared, but the owl's routine never changed. Mani counted the marks again. Twenty-nine. This was how many days her father had been gone. He'd said it would take four days to reach fresh ground, and he would return straight away. He'd promised. But he still hadn't come back. And Mani *must not leave the cave*. This is what he'd said. He hadn't given a reason why. He never gave reasons. But Mani knew better than to question him. Nobody ever challenged her father. Everybody listened to him, bowing—flinching—under his leadership that had kept the village safe for all those years.

Each day, Mani sat waiting obediently for him to return. But how much longer could she wait? The hunger hurt, like a wild cat was inside her stomach, punching and clawing.

Before he left, her father had also told her that, when the owl came to the cave, as it did every day, it was time to eat. *Do not forget to eat and drink.* And so, as if her father was there giving her the command, Mani now crawled to the back wall of the cave, feeling her way along the rough ground, and picked up the last jar of *rak-rak* they had stored there. Pickled rat—it was all they had. She sat

on the soft sealskin in the centre of the cave and, in the darkness, stuffed the sour chunks into her mouth. She was hungry and didn't care what it tasted like anymore. In any case, there wasn't anything else to eat.

That would change when her father returned. He'd promised. Mani wondered what he would bring. Probably fresh seal—he always brought seal, even though it was rare now—and sweet berries. And perhaps he would have been to the trading post and exchanged precious seal oil and skin for biscuits and chocolate. And maybe he would have caught fresh fish—pink salmon and tender shellfish. Mani closed her eyes and imagined she was eating mouthfuls of the warm fish soup that her mother used to make. She swallowed the thought with a gulp, along with the half-chewed pickled rat, and wiped her eyes.

For now, she had no choice but to keep on waiting.