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SMALL WONDER

IF YOU HAVE ONE CHANCE, MAKE IT COUNT.

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SMALL WONDER

ROSS MONTGOMERY

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WALKER
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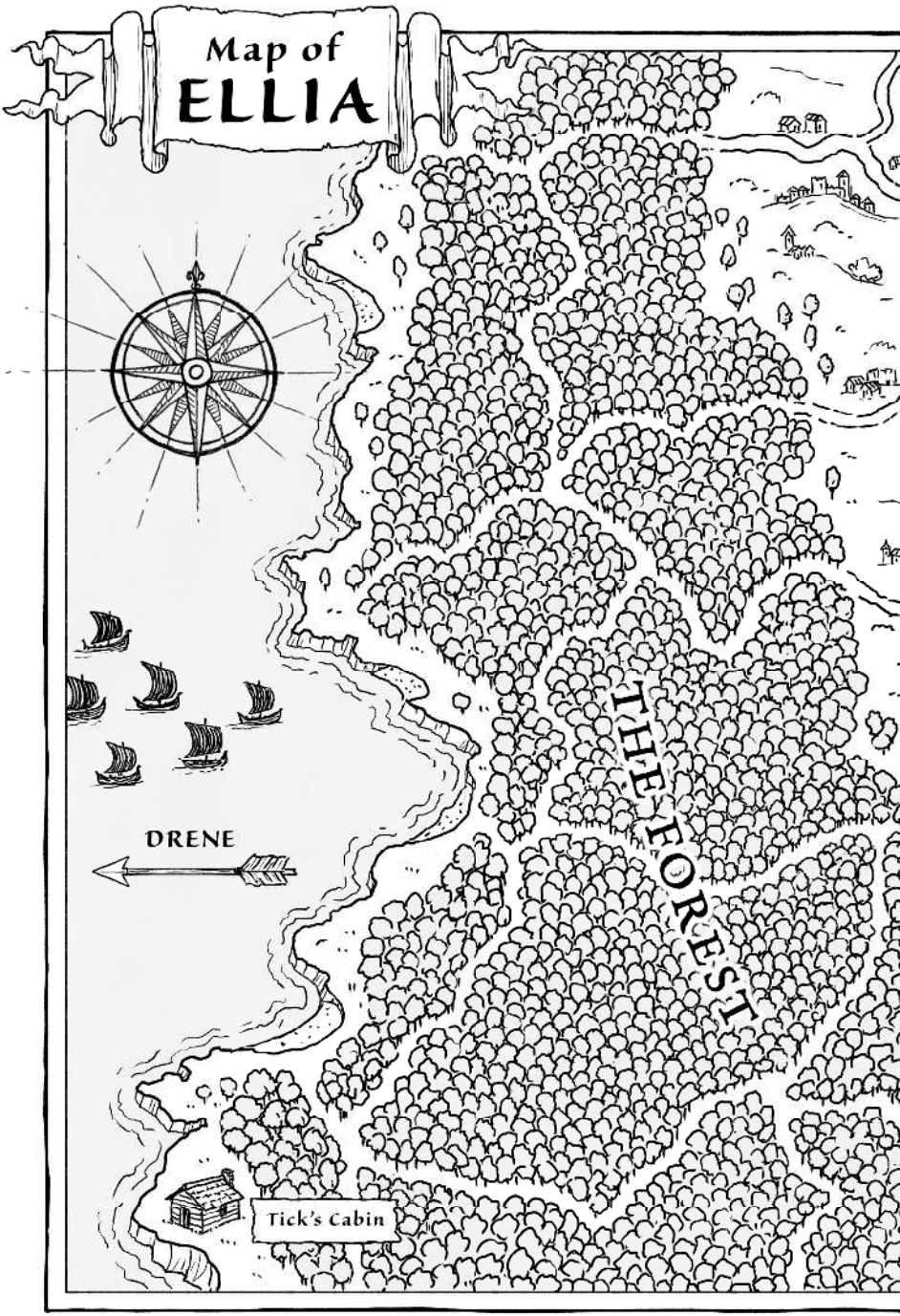
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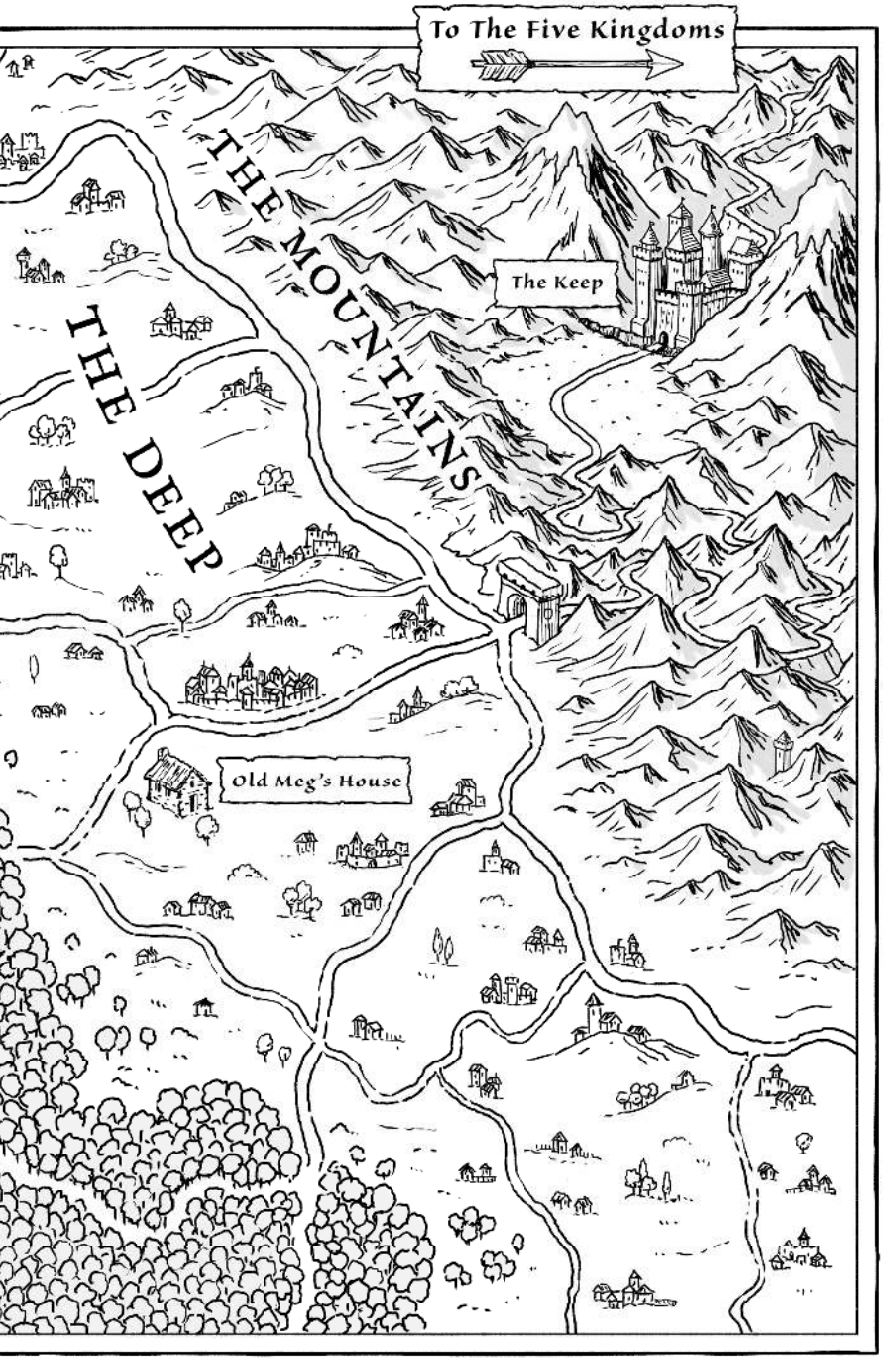
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Map of
ELLIA
THE FOREST
DRENE
Tick's Cabin


To The Five Kingdoms
THE MOUNTAINS
The Keep
THE DEEP
Old Meg's House

THE CABIN

1
TICK

"Food … water … firewood…"

Tick made his way through the forest, gathering dead branches into his arms. The pile was almost too heavy for him to carry, but you needed a lot of wood to last through winter in Ellia, and it needed time to dry out first or it wouldn't burn properly. Tick kept going, muttering to himself.

"*Then* we have to fix the shutters … then we have to tar the roof…"

Something shoved itself against his back, so hard that Tick nearly dropped the firewood. He spun around, glaring. "Pebble! Do you mind?"

Pebble was Tick's horse: a dappled grey mare, sixteen hands high with long white forelocks and tail. She was

almost twenty years old now – past her prime, but you'd never know it. Pebble noticed *everything.* Right now, she was nudging Tick's back hard enough to bruise him while stamping her hooves, as if to say, *It's important.*

Tick followed her gaze and groaned. Leaf was skipping around a tree, singing at the top of his lungs.

"Leaf!" snapped Tick. "You're supposed to be helping."

"I *am* helping," said Leaf, waving a small twig.

Tick bristled with irritation. Leaf might be his little brother, but as far as Tick was concerned, the connection ended there. Tick liked working; Leaf liked playing. Tick liked making things; Leaf liked breaking them. Tick was ten; Leaf wasn't five yet. They didn't even look alike. Tick was lean and dark, while Leaf had long blond curls that almost touched his shoulders.

"We don't have time for this," Tick muttered. "Winter's almost here. Once the snowstorms come down from the mountains, there's no telling how bad it'll get. Remember, never mess with snow. *One tiny flake is nothing, but enough together can…*"

The remembered words came so easily that he didn't

even realize he was saying them at first. He stopped, frozen in the act of picking up more firewood.

"…*enough together can kill you*."

They were Grandfather's words. One of his favourite sayings. He had hundreds of them, one for any situation Tick cared to name.

They were all that was left of Grandfather now. His gentle silences – the safe, warm cradle of his voice – they were gone, too.

Tick took a moment to catch his breath, winded by sadness. Then he pulled his shoulders back and stood up straight.

"So … so we have to be *prepared.* It'll be our first winter without Grandfather, remember? We're on our own." He placed the branches on Pebble's saddle, tying them tightly in place with old rope. "That means we have to work harder than ever. We have to be brave. We have to be grown up."

The next words were right there, on the tip of his tongue, but Tick knew he wouldn't be able to say them without crying. *We have to make him proud.*

Tick would have given anything to make Grandfather

proud. He had taught Tick everything he knew about living in the forest – how to make traps, how to spot poisonous berries, how to find shelter. Grandfather had built the cabin with his own two hands on the farthest point of the Ellian coast, miles away from anyone else. Sometimes, they'd go months without seeing another person. It had made the forest seem even emptier, since Grandfather had died.

"Come on," Tick sighed. "Let's get back to the cabin. We need to pickle the last of the fruit."

Leaf didn't reply. He wasn't even listening. He was gazing beyond the trees, towards the sea.

"Leaf! Did you hear me?" Tick snapped. "I said—"

"What's that?" said Leaf.

Tick was about to snap again – but then he looked up, and his thoughts were instantly swept away, like a handful of dust in a single breath.

The forest where they stood ran along the edge of a shingle beach lapped with green waves. The Ellian Sea stretched out before them, right to the horizon. You could see for miles out here. Sometimes, on a clear day, Tick could see all the way to the kingdom of Drene.

But he couldn't see it now. All he saw were black sails that stained the horizon from edge to edge.

The last piece of firewood fell from his hand. He understood immediately what he was looking at. It was an armada: thousands of warships, heading this way.

The Drene were coming.

Grandfather had told Tick everything he needed to know about the Drene – their bloodthirsty Emperor, their war machines, their black-clad horsemen that swept through kingdoms like a long wave of death. They had tried to invade Ellia many times before, but they'd never succeeded. Once winter came down from the mountains, they were always driven back across the ocean. Even so, Grandfather had always left a bag of emergency provisions by the cabin door. Water, flints, a bow and arrow, spare clothes, a knife. *Just in case*, he would say.

And now, it had happened. The Drenish army was invading.

Tick stared at the dark line on the horizon. The food, the wood, the cabin … it was all meaningless now. Within days – *hours,* if the wind kept up – those warships

would land on the coast, and the beaches of Ellia would be flooded with thousands of Drenish soldiers, archers, horsemen and more. Grandfather had told Tick exactly what would happen next. The army would spend a week preparing at the coast, then they would push through the kingdom, village by village, burning everything that stood in their way. Nothing would be spared – nothing would be left. There was no way to hide, no way to fight them. All Tick could do was run.

"Tick?" Leaf spoke again, an edge of nervousness creeping into his voice. "What *is* that?"

Tick didn't have time to explain. He had to go to the cabin and get the bag, now. "Leaf – don't move. Pebble, take care of him."

Pebble whinnied, as if to say, *At your service.* Tick shoved the reins into his brother's hand – Leaf's eyes were massive now, wide and frightened. "T-Tick? Where are you going?"

Tick was already racing through the forest. He had to do what Grandfather had told him. Find the bag, fill it with as many jars of food as he could carry, and run.

And make sure you do it fast. Make sure no one sees you.

Tick had never understood why Grandfather was so worried about that. Who on earth would see them out here, so far from the nearest village? Soon, he'd have the bag, and then he'd be galloping out of the forest as fast as Pebble could carry them. He could already make out the cabin, peeking through the last of the trees ahead…

He skidded to a stop, grabbing a tree trunk to steady himself. He only just managed to hold in the cry of shock before it burst from his throat.

There was someone standing outside the cabin.

2
HUNTER

Aside from Leaf, it was the first person that Tick had seen in weeks. A man, clad in black from head to toe. He was turned away, peering through the window so that Tick couldn't see his face … but he *could* see the bow slung over his shoulder. The quiver of jagged arrows on his back, catching the sunlight on their tips.

The curved dagger that he drew from his belt with a black-gloved hand.

Tick stood, paralysed. It was a bandit – it had to be. They always turned up around winter, once food was scarce. Grandfather had even given Tick his old sword, the handle worn smooth but the blade still razor-sharp, in case one of them tried to break into the cabin – but

Tick had left it in his bedroom. Why hadn't he brought it with him? *Stupid, stupid!*

There was a sudden shriek from the sky – automatically, Tick crouched down in the ferns. A dark shape was circling the trees above: a hawk, swift and deadly, sharp as flint. The stranger sheathed his dagger and held out a gloved hand, and the bird instantly swooped down to meet it. Tick could see a roll of paper tied to its leg.

With a cold swell of horror, Tick understood who this man really was. He wasn't a bandit after all.

He was a Hunter.

"When the Drene invade," Grandfather had told him once, "they won't just send over an army. They'll send over their deadliest assassins first. *Hunters,* they call them."

"Why?" Tick had asked.

"To clear the path," Grandfather had said darkly. "A single Hunter can slaughter a village while it sleeps. They move between shadows and kill in silence. They don't even wear armour – it only slows them down. They work alone, using trained hawks to send messages

back and forth to the Drenish Emperor, so he can tell them exactly what to do."

Tick shuddered. For some reason, the thought of the hawk had been the worst part, worse even than the shadows. Grandfather had drawn a picture for Tick there and then, of a man dressed in black from head to toe. Every part of him was sharp: the arrows at his back, the blade at his belt, the beak of the hooded bird on his shoulder.

"Learn how to spot them, Small Wonder, and learn well," Grandfather had said. "If you ever see a Hunter, don't try to be brave or clever. Don't try to hide – you can't. Just *run.* Understand?"

Tick's heart pounded. Here was a real-life Drenish Hunter, not thirty feet away. He watched the man in black reach into his pocket and bring out a string of raw, dripping meat. The hawk tore it to shreds while the Hunter untied the paper scroll on its leg and swiftly scanned the contents. Then he nodded, scribbled a few words at the bottom, retied it to the hawk's leg and flung the bird back into the sky. The hawk gave a final bone-chilling scream and flew off over the trees. Then

the Hunter pulled out his dagger, opened the cabin door and slipped inside, silent as darkness.

The scream was still frozen in Tick's throat. The Hunter was in his cabin. There was no way he could get the emergency bag now. All he could do was what Grandfather had told him to do, and run.

Tick straightened up and made his way silently back through the forest, his mind on fire. He found Leaf and Pebble standing where he'd left them. Leaf looked even smaller than usual, fiddling nervously with the reins.

"We're going," said Tick.

He grabbed the bundle of branches tied to Pebble's side and threw them to the ground with a clatter. They didn't need firewood now; they needed to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the Hunter.

"Going?" Leaf repeated, blinking up at him. "Going where?"

"Away. Right now."

Leaf was completely thrown. "But … my toys."

"It doesn't matter. You have to leave them."

Leaf looked like he was about to burst into tears. "But … but—"

"*No.*" Tick cut him off. "No crying, Leaf. You have to be brave. Bow down, Pebble."

At once, Pebble knelt on her front legs. It was the first trick that Grandfather had ever taught her, and she was brilliant at it. She bucked her head, as if to say, *Yes, I know, I am clever.*

Tick picked up Leaf and heaved him onto the saddle. It was a special one that Grandfather had made, with two seats: one at the back for himself, and a smaller one at the front for Tick, so that he could teach him how to ride. Grandfather had never had time to teach Leaf, though: the little boy had never ridden Pebble faster than a trot. Tick really needed a second set of training straps for him – but they were back at the cabin, along with everything else. Food, water … and that was just for starters. Apart from Pebble and the clothes on their backs, they had nothing. Tick began to mentally list all the things they didn't have. *A flint, a compass, a gourd, a knife…*

He froze. He had just remembered where he could find a knife. "Wait here."

Leaf grabbed his sleeve – clearly, his brother didn't want to be left alone again. "T-Tick?"

Wordlessly, Tick pulled his arm free and walked away. Beside them was a willow tree, its fronds shifting gently in the wind. He pushed his way between them. There, hidden within the sanctuary of the branches, was a small wooden cross. Tick knelt down beside it, a fingertip tracing the letters that he'd carved himself.

GRANDFATHER

Grandfather had always loved this tree. It was where wild clematis grew – old man's beard, it was called around here. Grandfather had joked that it suited an old man like him perfectly. The tree was peaceful, too: Grandfather had always been peaceful. Even when he'd breathed his final breath, he'd looked so much like he was having a Sunday nap that Tick had almost tried to wake him again.

The memory came from nowhere, too fast for Tick to stop it. Grandfather in his favourite chair, holding Tick's hand, gazing into his eyes for the last time.

Remember what I taught you, Small Wonder.

Small Wonder. That was what Grandfather had

always called him, though Tick had never understood it. He didn't like being called small. Now, he would have given anything to hear Grandfather say it again. He missed him so much it was like a gut ache.

Take care of Leaf. Take care of Pebble. I've done all I can. The rest is up to you.

Tick picked up the item at the base of the cross: Grandfather's old clip-knife. He balanced its weight in his hand. Taking the knife felt like a crime – it belonged to Grandfather as much as his voice, his eyes, his soft grey hair. But Tick needed it now. If he had a knife, he could hunt. If he could hunt, they could eat.

Grandfather had taught Tick everything he knew about hunting. He'd shown Tick how to sharpen his arrows, how to follow his prey, how to skin his kill. But more importantly, he had shown Tick how to hold his nerve. How to wait until the deer was right in his sights before releasing the arrow.

"Remember, Small Wonder, you've only got one chance," Grandfather had said. "You have to make it count."

He finally understood what all the training had

been about. *This* was what Grandfather had really been preparing him for. Not to make the cabin perfect, but to leave it behind, if he had to. To abandon everything that he knew, everything that he loved … to survive. He clasped the knife and closed his eyes. "I'll make it count. I'll look after Leaf and Pebble, just like you asked. I promise."

"*Tick?*"

Beyond the tree, Leaf was whimpering again. Tick dashed an angry fist across his eyes. He wanted to cry, but he couldn't. He had to be like Grandfather now. He had to be brave. He pocketed the knife and pushed his way back through the willow branches. Leaf sat waiting on Pebble's back, still wide-eyed. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Tick. "Let's go."

He took Pebble's reins and marched from the willow as fast as he could, scanning the trees for any sign of the Hunter. Tick knew every inch of this area. The path that led out of the forest wasn't far off. Once they were on that, he could risk bringing Pebble to a gallop without injuring herself. Then they could be safely on their way to…

But he never had the chance to finish the thought. There was a sudden snort right beside them and Tick spun around with fright – and there was a black horse, hooves circling the air as it came crashing down on him.

3
HORSE

Tick leapt away in blind terror. The black coat, the black saddle … *the Hunter!*

Then he noticed that the saddle was empty and saw the black reins, knotted around a tree. He gasped with relief. The Hunter had left the horse beside the path, so that he could make his way to the cabin on foot. Tick had simply startled it. Pebble snorted with anger and pawed the air, but Tick held her back. The Hunter could return at any moment. "No, girl. Bow down."

Pebble shook her head haughtily but did as she was told, lowering herself to let Tick clamber on. Tick turned from the black horse to climb on Pebble's back…

And stopped. He turned around, his eyes locking on the bag that hung from the Hunter's saddle.

Pebble whinnied and shook her head, as if to say, *You can't be serious.*

"Shhh," said Tick.

The Hunter would be carrying everything a person needed to survive. Warm clothes. Water. Flints. Everything Tick needed, but didn't have.

He glanced behind him. If he was going to do it, he had to do it now. This could be their only chance. He dropped the reins and stepped towards the Hunter's horse.

"Tick?" Leaf whispered.

Tick ignored him. He knew how to behave around horses. He kept in its eyeline and stayed well away from its back legs, no sudden movements. The horse raised its head as he approached – Tick held out a hand to allow the horse to smell him. It snuffled its velvety nose over Tick's skin, then quickly lost interest. Tick ran his hand along its muscular neck and down its body, so it knew exactly where he was at all times, slowly making his way to the bag that hung from the saddle.

It was a dark thing made of dirty leather, too high up for Tick to look inside. He'd have to guess at the

items it held by touch alone. He undid the buckle and felt around inside. Cold metal, rough hide, sheets of crackling paper – *lots* of paper, in fact. His hand closed around a smooth, cold pouch tucked at the bottom. Flints? He poked a finger inside the pouch and gagged at the sudden, revolting wetness. It was the bag of entrails for the hawk.

"Tick?" Leaf whispered again. "Tick, I don't like this."

"*Shh!*" said Tick, without looking round.

He kept searching, more frantically now. The sheets of paper kept getting in the way. Moaning with frustration, he pulled out a handful and stuffed it into his pocket. That would make it easier to scrabble around the bag. He went back in and kept searching. The gnarled stump of a pencil, the tight, dry grit of a whetstone, something long and cold and—

Yes. Tick pulled out a thin cylinder with a carved black wooden handle, beautifully made, and held it up to the light. A lighting flint – *fire.* He could have cried for joy.

Suddenly, something slammed hard into his back.

Tick spun around. Pebble had leapt forward and head-butted him, so abruptly that the black horse reared up in shock. Leaf was clinging to Pebble's neck in fear. "*Pebble, no!*" Tick hissed.

Pebble's head was low and her ears were flat, as though she'd spotted a snake in the long grass. Tick followed her gaze – and felt the blood drain from his body.

The Hunter was walking through the trees towards them.

Tick didn't think. He scrambled onto Pebble and brought her to a gallop before he'd even put his feet in the stirrups, so fast that he nearly fell off her back. But he didn't dare slow down, not now. He had to get away before the Hunter saw them. Tick clamped a hand over Leaf's mouth to stop him from crying and clutched him close. He took a final glance over his shoulder as Pebble careered round the corner of the path, *knowing* that he would see the tip of a barbed arrow come slicing through the air towards them…

But there was no arrow. The Hunter wasn't even following. It was hard for Tick to tell exactly what

he was doing – he was too far away, and Pebble was galloping too fast – but for a moment, Tick imagined that the Hunter was staring into the forest after them, the beams of his gaze as tight and steady as a hawk's fixing on its prey.

It was a long time before Pebble stopped galloping. She normally obeyed every command that Tick gave her, but this time nothing would make her slow down. Tick was flung from side to side like a kite in a hurricane: it was all he could do to hold Leaf with one hand and the reins with the other, his jaw clamped shut to stop him from biting his tongue.

Pebble came to a skidding stop at a dusty crossroads in the trees. A pack of wild ponies were grazing at the centre – they scattered into the ferns the moment she thundered towards them. Tick clambered shakily off her back, his heart pounding. Pebble's flanks were foaming with sweat, and her breath came out in snorts. He'd had no idea that she could run so fast. "Easy, girl. *Easy…*"

Leaf, meanwhile, was sobbing. He let it all out in one big gasp and then howled, frightening the birds from

a nearby tree who flew off in a loud clap of feathers. Tick lifted his brother down. "Shhh, shhh, shhh. It's OK. Stop crying."

"H-h-home," Leaf was sobbing. "I – want – to go – *home*."

Tick felt those words like a knife to the ribs. There was no going home, not now. For a moment, he felt like crying himself. But he couldn't. He'd made Grandfather a promise.

"Leaf, listen to me."

Leaf stared back, his cheeks bright red and wet with tears. Tick knelt down to his brother's height, pushed his long blond hair away from his eyes. "Did you see that man, in the forest?"

Leaf shuddered. "I *hated* him."

Tick nodded. "That man is called a Hunter. He's a bad man. *Very* bad. And there are going to be lots more people like him soon. If we go home now, they'll find us. So we have to go somewhere else instead. Somewhere they can't follow. Somewhere safe."

"Where?" asked Leaf.

Tick remembered asking Grandfather that same

question, back when he wasn't much older than Leaf. He remembered that night like it was yesterday. The hum of the fire – the sound of snow gently settling on the roof. He remembered everything that Grandfather had said to him, word for word. It was time to pass it on.

"Do you see those mountains?" said Tick.

He turned Leaf around, pointing up through the trees. There, to the East, was a line of mountains. In the centre stood two peaks, taller than the rest, gleaming side by side in the morning sun.

"They're called the Guides," said Tick. "They're the two tallest mountains in all of Ellia. No matter where you go, you can always see them. Right now, every single person in the kingdom is heading there as fast as they can. *That's* where we're going, too."

"Why?" said Leaf.

Tick smiled. He had asked Grandfather the exact same question.

"Because of what's built at the bottom of them. Because it's the only place left in the whole entire kingdom that's still safe."

Leaf gazed up at him, his eyes wide. Tick kept

going, repeating the very same words that Grandfather had uttered, all those years ago.

"Because we're going to King's Keep."

4
KEEP

"King's Keep," Leaf echoed faintly, trying out the sound of the words.

Tick nodded. "It's a castle in the mountains, built by Good King Avery. He was the best ruler that Ellia has ever known. The best it will *ever* know. He built it so that no matter what happened, his people would always be safe."

They were Grandfather's words, all of them. Tick kept going, lost in the memory.

"The entrance to the Keep stretches between the Guides, from one mountain to the other. There's no other way through it, around it, or over it. The only way inside is over a drawbridge that crosses a deep gulf – and once that drawbridge lifts, the Keep is *unbreachable.*

That means no one can get inside."

Tick had never seen King's Keep for himself. But Grandfather had spoken about it so vividly that Tick felt like the legendary castle was right there before him, sparkling in golden sunlight.

"That's why everyone is going there," said Tick. "Once we're inside King's Keep, the Drene won't be able to get to us. The last time they invaded, they barely scratched the stones before winter sent them scurrying back across the ocean!"

"Drene?" said Leaf, confused.

Tick had forgotten himself for a moment. Leaf didn't know about any of this yet. "They're the bad people. We have to get to the Keep before they catch up with us."

Leaf wiped his eyes with the back of a hand. "How?"

Tick turned back to the Guides, and recited the words that Grandfather had made him learn by heart, so that he would never forget the way:

"*Three moons through the Forest,*
Two moons through the Deep,
One moon through the Mountains
To the safety of the Keep."

He let the words hang in the air. He remembered it all: Grandfather's careful voice, the smell of his pipe smoke, his smile when Tick got the words right for the first time. For a moment, he almost felt as if he was still there.

"I need a wee," said Leaf.

Tick scowled. Leaf always ruined everything. "Go in the trees."

Leaf scrambled off the dusty path and Tick was left alone with Pebble. She had finally calmed down and was nuzzling him for comfort. He ran a hand down her nose.

"What do you reckon, girl?" He sighed. "Do you think we can make it?"

They had six days of hard riding ahead of them, from one end of the kingdom to the other. First, they'd have to leave the forest: now that Ellia had been invaded, the knights who patrolled the roads would have fled for the Keep. That meant the bandits would be out in force, stealing whatever they liked. Then, two days across the Deep – the lush green valley at the centre of the kingdom where most Ellians lived. By now, news

would have spread about the invasion: everyone would be abandoning their farms and homes to get to the Keep in time. Then finally, a whole day climbing through the mountains. And they'd have to be quick about it, too, because on the seventh day, the soldiers at the Keep would raise the drawbridge and close the gates for good.

Tick withered with despair. It was hopeless – impossible. Winter was almost here: glancing up, he could see that the tips of the Guides were caked with snow. By the time they made it to the mountain road, the drifts could already be knee-deep. But there was no other way: no other choice. Either they reached the Keep in a week, or they were dead.

Leaf was now stumbling back, trying and failing to tie up his shorts. "What's that?" he said, pointing.

Tick glanced over his shoulder. The ponies had started to trot back out of the ferns and over the crossroads. "Wild ponies. They're everywhere in this forest."

"No, *that*," said Leaf, lowering his finger. "In your pocket."

Tick frowned, confused, then felt the blood drain

from his face. With a trembling hand, he reached down and slowly pulled out a handful of parchment from his pocket.

The Hunter's papers. The ones he had taken from the saddlebag. He'd forgotten to put them back. "No – *no*!"

Tick broke into a cold sweat. The papers were covered in black ink, spelling out words in thin, spidery handwriting. Tick had no idea what they said – they were written in Drenish – but he knew who had written them. They were letters from the Drenish Emperor himself, giving orders. There was no way that the Hunter wouldn't notice them missing. When he saw that they were gone, he'd come looking for them.

"Tick?" asked Leaf. "What's wrong?"

White-hot panic coursed through Tick's body. He made to fling away the letters, but stopped himself – what was he thinking? He *couldn't* leave them here. Hunters were expert trackers. When the Hunter found the scattered letters, he'd *know* that Tick had come this way. Tick might as well leave a signpost for him to follow.

Careful, Small Wonder. Watch where you're treading.

He glanced at the ground. Sure enough, their marks were everywhere. His footprints – Leaf's footprints, stumbling to the trees – Pebble's hoofprints leading back the way they had come. A perfect trail for a Hunter to follow.

Grandfather hadn't just taught Tick how to shoot a bow and arrow: he'd taught him how to hide, too. How to rub his skin with forest sage to cover his scent. How to breathe through his nose so animals wouldn't notice the smell of his breath. How to spot the signs that animals left – prints, broken twigs, dropped hair – so that he could track them. Only now, Tick was the one being hunted.

If you want to hide in the forest, you have to become the forest. You're the earth. You're the bracken. You're the air that barely stirs the trees.

Tick's glance followed the trail of Pebble's hooves in the dust. They led to the middle of the crossroads where she was busy snuffling with the wild ponies. The road beneath them was covered in a mess of hoofprints.

The thought came to Tick in an instant. "Leaf – do what I do, now."

He charged at the horses, waving his arms and shouting. Leaf giggled and did the same, running and shrieking at the top of his lungs. Pebble was wise enough to stay put, but the wild ponies scattered in panic. Tick kept going, driving them in different directions. Two fled down one branch of the crossroads – three took the next road – the rest raced into the forest, trampling down the ferns and bracken.

Tick grabbed Leaf and lifted him clear off the ground. "Pebble, bow down!"

Pebble trotted over and knelt so that Tick could place Leaf on the saddle and clamber up behind him. When she stood up again, Tick was high enough to reach a young branch of the nearest tree. He tore it off, taking care not to make the break too obvious. "OK, girl. Backwards. Steady now."

He'd taught her this trick years ago. Pebble lowered her head and slowly, hoof by hoof, stepped backwards into the forest. As she did, Tick reached down with the branch and carefully swept their footprints from the dust.

That's it, Small Wonder. The air that barely stirs the trees.

Tick glanced back up and beamed in triumph. The crossroads looked even better than he'd hoped. Thanks to the scattered ponies, there were dozens of different hoofmarks running off in a dozen different directions. There was no way to work out which ones belonged to Pebble. "See, Leaf? The bad man can't follow us now."

Leaf scowled and blew a raspberry. "Go away, Hunter."

Tick snorted, but his confidence was rapidly vanishing. Their journey had just become even more difficult. It would take longer to get through the forest, now they couldn't use the roads. They would have to move slowly too, and carefully, covering up their tracks as they went and hiding their camp each night so that the Hunter wouldn't find them. They still had no water, no food – not enough clothes to see them through their journey.

But what choice did they have, if they wanted to survive?

Tick turned Pebble from the path and held Leaf tight against his chest. Then, steering clear of low branches and any muddy ground that might reveal their path,

they picked their way through the trees towards those two distant mountains, draped in clouds, that were now their one and only chance.



THE FOREST

5
BANDITS

They rode all day. Tick took care with every step they made, frequently switching direction so that they never followed an obvious route. Pebble might be a big horse, but she was nimble as anything, responding to the slightest press of the knees or twitch of the reins.

"That's it," said Tick. "Good girl, Pebble."

He scratched her head fondly. She'd been Grandfather's horse since before Tick was born. She'd always been there, longer than Tick could even remember. Grandfather said that when he first bought her, she was a tiny dappled foal, "no bigger than a wee pebble". She'd grown bigger over time, of course, *much* bigger – but by then, the name had stuck. Grandfather had silly names for everything.

Tick smiled. That was how he'd ended up with *his* name, too. Grandfather said that when Tick was just a baby, he refused to sleep unless he was swaddled up and strapped to Pebble's back in the stable.

"What a sight you were, Small Wonder – sound asleep and tucked up tight, stuck on that horse like a tick!"

The memory was like a warm shaft of sunlight, cutting through the trees. Tick's heart ached to remember a time when things were good, when things were easy, when things were…

"I need a wee," said Leaf.

Tick groaned. So much for the memory. "You *just* went!"

"I need it again," said Leaf, wriggling.

Tick sighed. "What's wrong with you? Why do you need to go so much?"

Leaf fussed at the reins. "I'm *scared.*"

Tick felt a pang of guilt. Of course Leaf was scared – he'd just left behind everything he knew at a moment's notice. He glanced around. They were surely miles into the forest now – they could risk leaving some prints. "Bow down, Pebble."

He climbed down and lifted Leaf to the ground, watching the boy scramble gratefully to the nearest tree. Tick felt a flicker of concern. Soon, his brother was going to need more than the toilet. When night fell, it was going to get cold, and they had nothing to keep them warm except the clothes they were wearing. They'd need food, too. Tick had been searching all day for something to forage – berries, nuts, mushrooms, even acorns – but the land here was scrappy and parched. He gazed around desperately, hoping for a miracle…

And saw one, peeking through distant trees.

They had just reached another stretch of the forest road: there was an overturned wagon with a canvas top lying on its side in the middle of it, boxes spilling out. The horses had fled their harnesses – or been stolen – and the riders were long gone, too. Bandits must have run the wagon off the road, stolen what they wanted and left the rest. Grandfather had said that most wagons on the forest road got set upon by bandits nowadays. That's why he'd built the cabin deep in the forest, where no one could ever find it.

Tick stared. He'd wanted to completely avoid the

roads. After all, that's where the Hunter would most likely travel. But there could be anything in those boxes. Fresh clothes. Water. *Food.*

Tick took the knife from his pocket and silently unclipped it. Pebble nudged him with her head, as if to say, *Really? You're doing this AGAIN?*

"Wait here," said Tick, ignoring her. "Don't move."

He crept to the point where the cover of trees ended. Then slowly, ever so slowly, he poked his head into the road. It was silent and deserted. He made his way towards the wagon, glancing around with every step. He nudged the broken crates aside with his foot. There wasn't much, but sure enough, he could see some old clothes and jars of…

Two feet, landing softly in the dust behind him.

"Stop right there, sonny. Not another step."

Tick spun around … and looked straight into the eyes of a lean, dirty man, his clothes covered with twigs and leaves to act as camouflage amongst the trees.

Tick understood at once what was happening. A *bandit.* It was a trap. The man had been hiding in the branches above him, waiting for someone to approach

the wagon so that he could rob them. Tick raised his knife and stepped back … straight into the arms of the second bandit, who'd just dropped down behind him. Tick glanced round. It was a girl, barely a few years older than he was.

"Got 'im!" she said, gripping his arms tight.

"Nice one, Pluck," said the first bandit. He held out his palm. "Now hand over the knife, sonny. Let's not be silly."

Tick couldn't let them have Grandfather's knife. He fought with all his might, but it was hopeless – Pluck was bigger and stronger than he was.

"Be quick, Barrett," she said. "He might have others with him!"

Barrett sneered, brown teeth bared. "Who – *him?* He's a stray! I don't see anyone coming for him, do—"

Pebble exploded out of the bushes beside them, whinnying with rage. Tick watched as she launched herself at Barrett like a storm, her teeth snapping and her iron-shod hooves driving him down to the ground. Pluck let go of Tick in shock and drew her own knife, slashing wildly at Pebble, but Tick's horse dodged

the blade effortlessly. She dipped her head low and flew forward, slamming Pluck into the bushes with a devastating blow.

Tick stood in the road, stunned, his mouth hanging open. Pluck fled into the trees, and Barrett was back on his feet, sprinting down the road while Pebble tore after him, bucking with fury.

"*We'll be back!*" Barrett cried over his shoulder. "*Mark my words, you little maggot! That horse can't protect you for ever!*"

Tick ran to Pebble, grabbing her reins to stop her from following them. She stamped and whinnied and reared back, as if to say, *That's right! And stay back!*

"Pebble," said Tick. "That was … *amazing*."

Pebble nudged him with her velvety nose and whickered, as if to say, *You're welcome.*

He gazed at her in disbelief. He had no idea that Pebble could fight like that – she had always seemed like a gentle giant to him. Where on earth had she learned to do it?

"*Tiiiick?*"

Leaf's voice came threading out of the ferns, small

and frightened. Tick shook himself back into reality. The bandits could return at any moment. He had to take what he needed and get away, fast. "I'm coming, Leaf! Don't move."

He crawled inside the overturned wagon. The best goods had already been ransacked, but he still found plenty of useful things. A thick woollen blanket, a leather gourd, a tin plate, half a sack of fine oatmeal. He grabbed a satchel and stuffed them all inside, then raced back into the ferns, drenched in sweat and proudly holding up the satchel. "Look, Leaf – food!"

"Plums?" said Leaf hopefully.

Tick shook his head. "Just oatmeal."

Leaf scowled. "I want *plums.*"

Tick felt the exhilaration drain out of him. He'd just risked his life, and all Leaf cared about was treats. At least he still had Pebble. No matter what happened, he knew that she could protect them. He patted her flank as she trotted up beside him. "Well done, girl."

He ran his hands over her coat, noticing as if for the first time the faint marks that were there. He had never thought about them much before: they'd always just

been a part of Pebble, like her long white forelocks and speckled hide. He didn't think they *meant* anything. But now he looked again, those marks almost looked like … battle scars.

He gazed into her eyes, past those long eyelashes, and wondered what Pebble would tell him if she could speak. If she would tell him where those scars came from: how she had fought those bandits like a prize war-horse. But for once, no unspoken message seemed to pass through the air between them. If Pebble knew the answers, then she was keeping them a secret.

6
CAMP

The sun was low in the sky when Tick finally found a place to stop for the night. A copse of ancient trees standing in a circle, their branches bowed to form a covering overhead. There was a small tree nearby for Leaf to play in – better yet, a stream just a short walk away. Pebble drank from it while Tick picked her hooves and then brushed her down with the old tools he kept in her saddlebag.

"There you go, girl. Nice and clean."

Tick was ready to collapse after such a long day – but the truth was, he liked focusing on every hoof and brush stroke, making sure that each task was done properly. He had promised Grandfather that he would look after Pebble. And she'd looked after him, hadn't she?