TREE THING

Also by Piers Torday

The Last Wild
The Dark Wild
The Wild Beyond
There May Be a Castle
The Lost Magician
The Frozen Sea
The Wild Before
Midnight Treasure
Wolf Crown

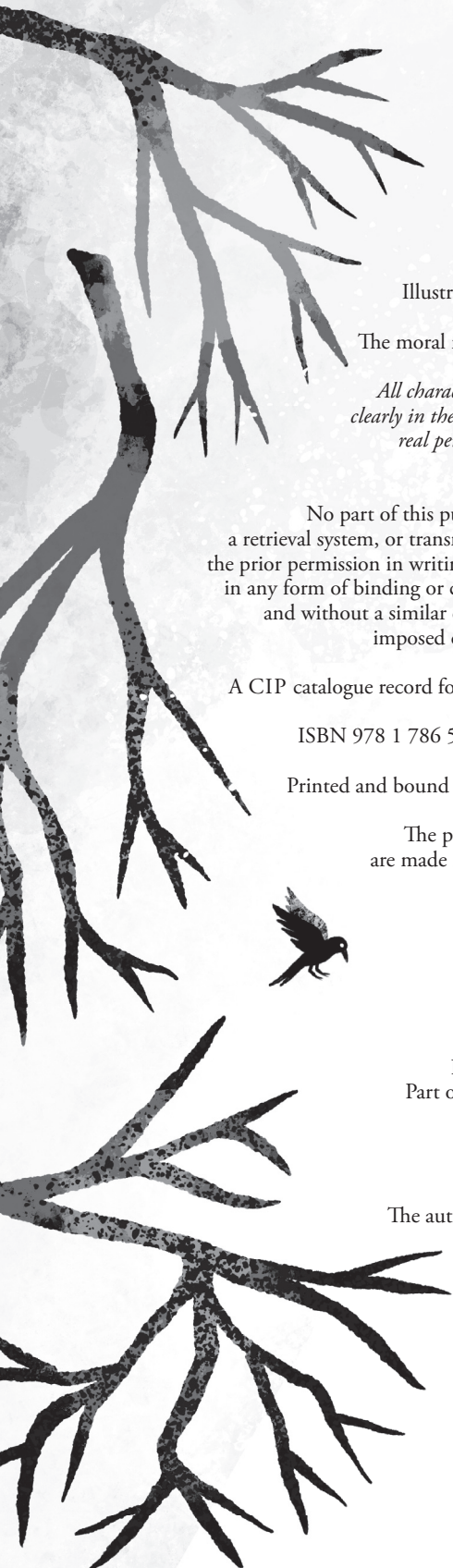
With Paul Torday
The Death of an Owl

Plays
The Box of Delights
Christmas Carol – A Fairy Tale

PIERS TORDAY

Illustrated by Matthew Taylor Wilson

Quercus



QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2026
by Hodder & Stoughton Limited

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 978 1 786 54148 2 WTS ISBN 978 1 786 54272 4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The paper and board used in this book
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Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C104740
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Quercus Children's Books
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland,
8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3,
Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie)

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

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For Felix, who grows

A TREE THAT GROWS

This is how the story begins. How the story *always* begins.

Once, in a faraway land, a green thing grew out of the ground.

First, a head appeared, with leaves for hair and knots for eyes. Then came a trunk for a body, stretching towards the sky. Finally, branch arms reached over the ground, and two bunches of twig fingers flexed, feeling the air.

This creature was neither tree nor human, but somewhere in between.

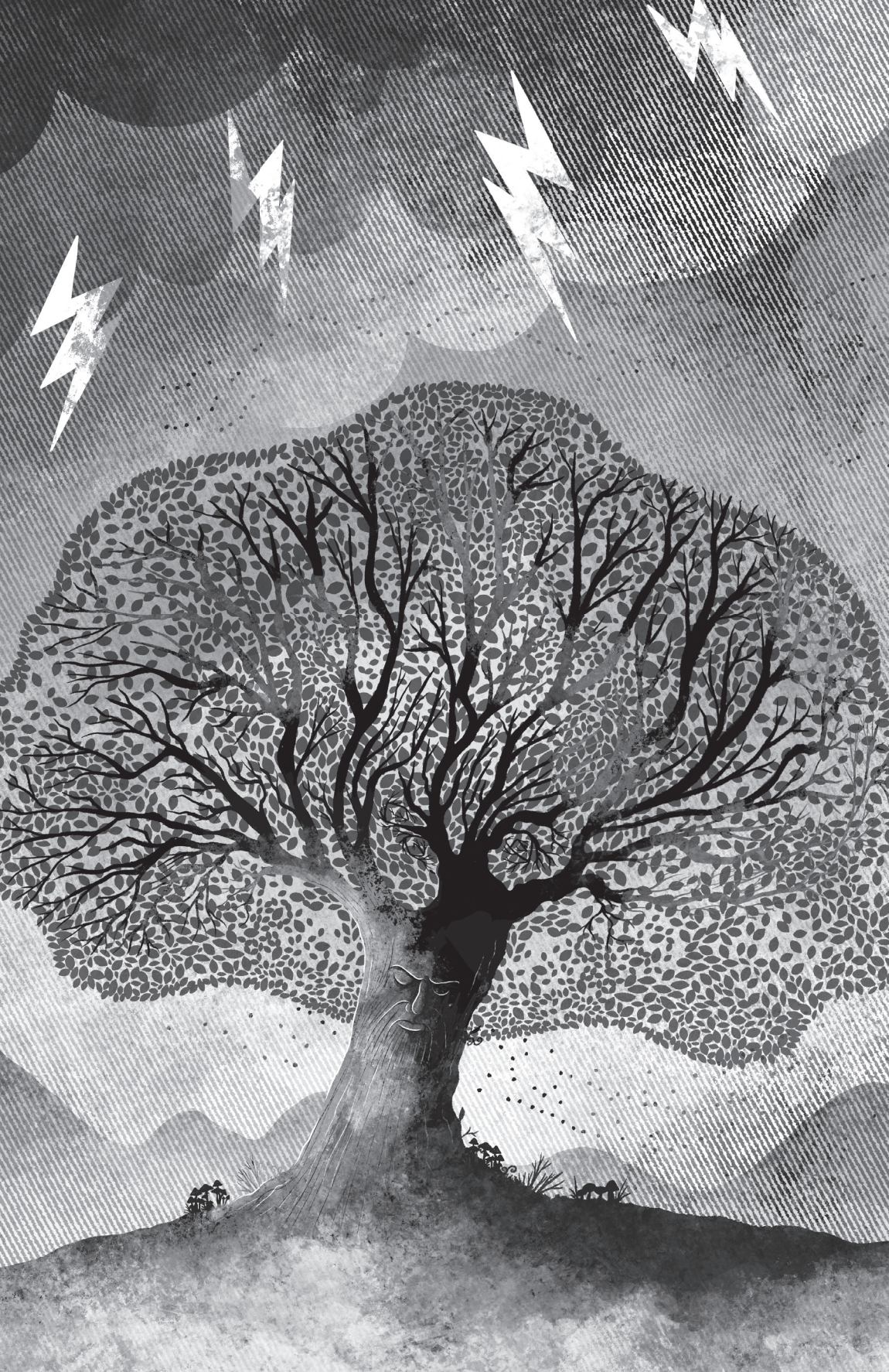
They were a **Tree** . . . *Thing*, and a breeze drifted through their leaves with a soft moan, making their first word.

"Grow."

A single drop of water fell from the sky that became a shower, bubbling over their trunk into the soil below. Their crown of leaves spread into a canopy, and their soft skin hardened into tough bark.

Next came the bright sun, shining through the Tree Thing's boughs.

They stretched higher and higher until they could see their whole world. An empty plain, spotted with patches of moss. Nothing else grew; no one else came.



The stars above danced as the sun set, night after night.

Tree Thing stood tall, but they were all alone.

"Who will I talk to?" breathed their leaves. "Who will keep me company?"

They stood alone for days, weeks and months until one night, dark clouds gathered on the horizon. A thunderstorm pounded towards Tree Thing like a wild tiger roaring in fury, that clawed flashes of lightning out of the sky, but still – Tree Thing stood tall and strong.

"Ha!" said Tree Thing's leaves as the wind shook them. "Call yourself a storm? You can't even make me sway!"

Then the storm snapped back, ripping off one of their branches, which crashed to the damp ground.

Later, when the wind and rain had passed, Tree Thing saw that their fallen branch had rotted. They were about to hurl it into the air when they noticed something was growing in the blackened wood: a mushroom, soft and pale brown.

"Hello, little mushroom," said Tree Thing. "Will you talk to me?"

But the mushroom did not reply, and instead, another one appeared. More and more

kept popping up until the branch glowed with a pale light. That night was not as lonely, with the mushrooms' gentle gleam in the dark.

When the sun rose, Tree Thing looked straight away at their new friends.

"Good morning," they began, and then stopped – half the mushrooms had gone!

Those that remained were full of holes and bite marks. And, chewing one, right as Tree Thing stared at it, was a shiny black beetle with two large pincers.

"You ate my mushrooms!" rattled Tree Thing's leaves in the morning breeze.

"But there is nothing else to eat," said the beetle. "And they are so delicious, it would be rude not to."

"They were mine!"

"Strange way to say hello," said the beetle, ripping another mushroom in half.

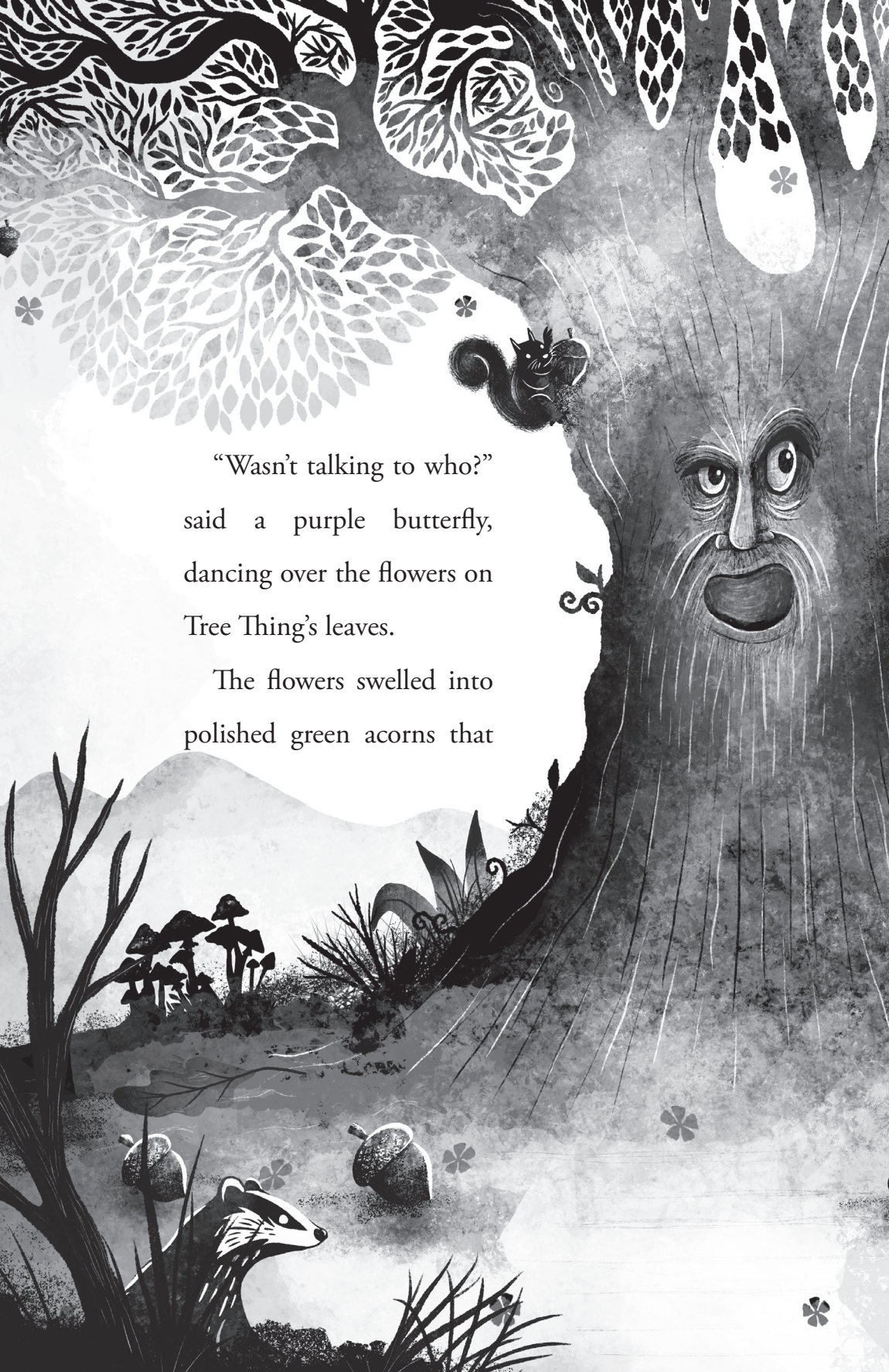
Before Tree Thing could reply, a woodpecker dived out of nowhere with a flash of colour and grabbed the beetle in her beak.

"Thanks! I was starving," said the woodpecker.

"Where did you come from?" asked Tree Thing.

"From the caves in the mountains beyond," said a family of bats, making their roost in the hole left by the branch.

"I wasn't talking to you!" said Tree Thing.



"Wasn't talking to who?" said a purple butterfly, dancing over the flowers on Tree Thing's leaves.

The flowers swelled into polished green acorns that

dropped and dropped, till they covered the floor of Tree Thing's glade. Badgers lumbered from the shadows to feed on them, followed by swooping jays and leaping squirrels.

"I will never be alone again," Tree Thing's leaves trembled. "I give so much to so many."

Then the winds grew colder, fiercer and sharper, blowing in snow over Tree Thing's roots, dripping icicles from their branches.

And one night, they blew in a new visitor: a rider on a tall, green horse, who clutched in his hand a blazing torch. The Rider wore a wide-brimmed hat covering his face in shadow and a cloak of rippling velvet, the colour of moss.

Winter gales had stripped Tree Thing bare, but their dark twigs still shook.

"Welcome, stranger," they shivered. "All are welcome here. What do you need?"

But the Rider didn't reply, tying the horse to one of Tree Thing's branches as if he hadn't heard. Then he waved his torch, scattering the beetles back into their log and the squirrels up the trunk to their hole.

"Perfect," said the Rider. "Come on, everybody!"

Men, women and children stepped out of the darkness; their faces were drawn, and they were thin, wrapped up in heavy coats and furs against the cold.

"Welcome, new friends!" cried Tree Thing.

The Rider stuck his torch in the snowy ground. And from his cape, he produced something sharp and glittering.

An axe.

He held it up for the people, crying, "Nothing has ever grown here until now. You are facing the cruellest frost you have ever known – this is a sign!"

The crowd nodded, rubbing their hands and stamping their feet to stay warm.

"You have frozen for weeks with nothing to eat," said the Rider, "Now the gods have given you this tree. It will provide wood to burn in

your stoves and nuts to eat!"

"Plenty of game, too," added a woman with a knife stuffed in her belt. "Perfect for my pot."

"So, why are we waiting?" said a boy, jumping up and down with impatience.

The Rider spun on his heel and turned towards Tree Thing, wielding his axe high in the air, where it caught the torchlight and gleamed.

"What are you doing?" gasped the bare branches, and the bats shuddered in their hole at the sight of the blade. The badgers curled up even tighter underground at the sound of the stranger's footsteps overhead.

WHACK! The Rider slammed his axe through a low branch.

CHOP! CHOP! Blow by blow, he hacked it off.

SLICE! SLICE! SLICE! The Rider divided the fallen bough into logs.

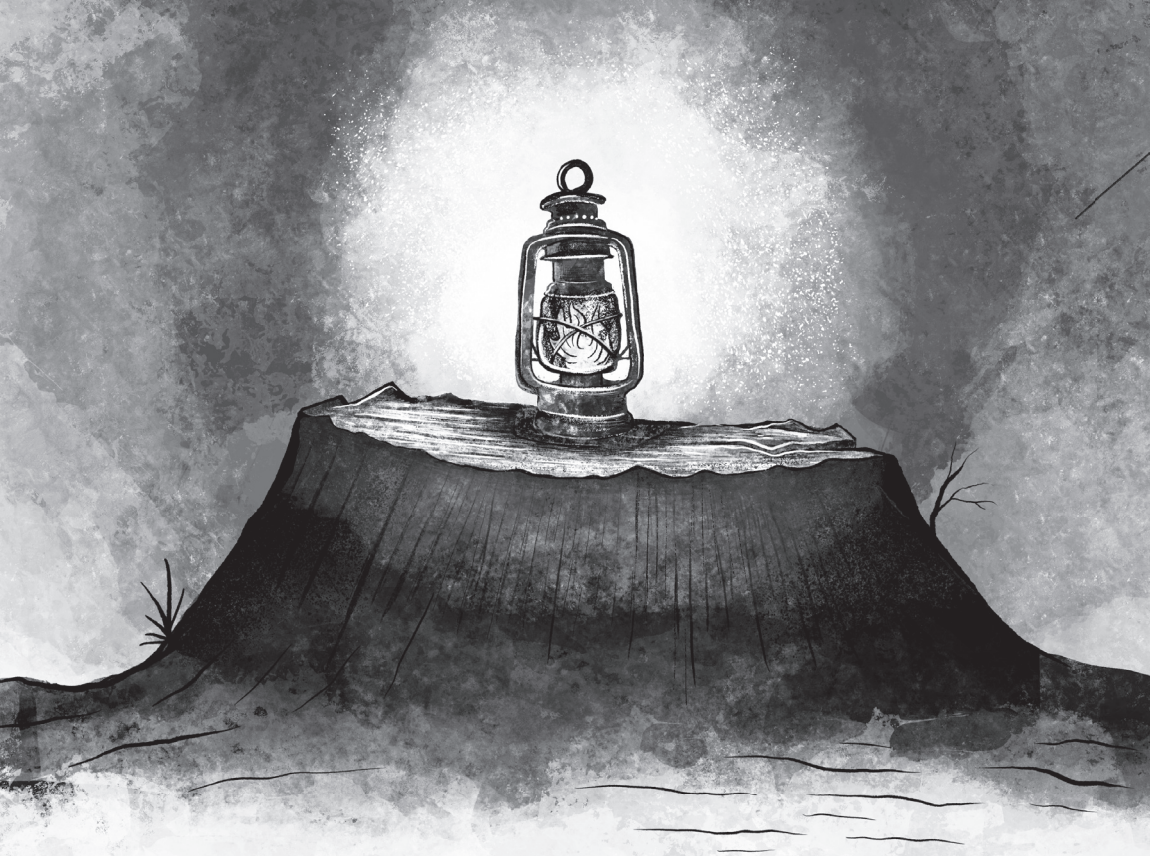
"Can you see the freshness, friends? Can you sense the goodness? This is what we need!" he yelled, holding up a piece of wood. "You will never be cold again!"

All the people rushed towards Tree Thing.

They put up ladders and slung ropes over branches to haul themselves to the top. Then they got busy with axes, saws and clippers. The grassy floor beneath piled up with logs, dead leaves and twigs as Tree Thing grew thinner and shorter by the hour.

Soon their leafy hair had disappeared, and only ragged stumps remained where once mighty limbs had sprouted. By midnight, only the bare, limbless trunk of Tree Thing was left. Tears of sap trickled from their eyes, and they could no longer speak.

The Rider scowled and shone his lantern over the stump. “What about this? Your rivals in the neighbouring city might take it. Do you want that?”



Everyone jeered, shaking their heads.

"As you wish," said the Rider, putting his torch to Tree Thing's remains. "Same old story. It always is!"

The dry wood went up in a blaze, burning until it was black. Its fire danced over the twigs, acorns and shavings on the ground until the clearing became one giant bonfire.

All the people got on their horses or walked alongside, laden with freshly chopped wood. The burning glade warmed them as they trekked home through the night. They did not look back.

As they neared their village, someone said, "Where is the Rider?"

He and his horse had vanished into the shadows.

"Was he from here anyway?" said someone else. "I never saw him before. What did he mean by 'the same old story'?"

"What does it matter?" said another. "Look what he's done for us!"

No one mentioned him again for a very long time after that.

But they would, one day.

The fire crackled the whole night in Tree Thing's glade, scorching what remained to a charred crisp.

Nothing survived.

Apart from a single jay, flashing pink into the air with a shriek. She had been hiding behind a rock, waiting for the flames to subside.

The bird dived into the smouldering embers – her feathers singed, her claws smoked and her beak steamed – but she didn't care. Moments later, she soared back into the sky, scorched but alive. Clamped in her beak as she flew away was a single blackened acorn,

the only one to survive the fire.

And as the morning broke, the acorn caught the early rays and flashed with the power of the sun.