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SOPHIE ANDERSON
USBORNE
MAGPIE GIRL
ROWAN FOXWOOD



THE TALE OF LAVENDER WILD

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To my Sweetheart

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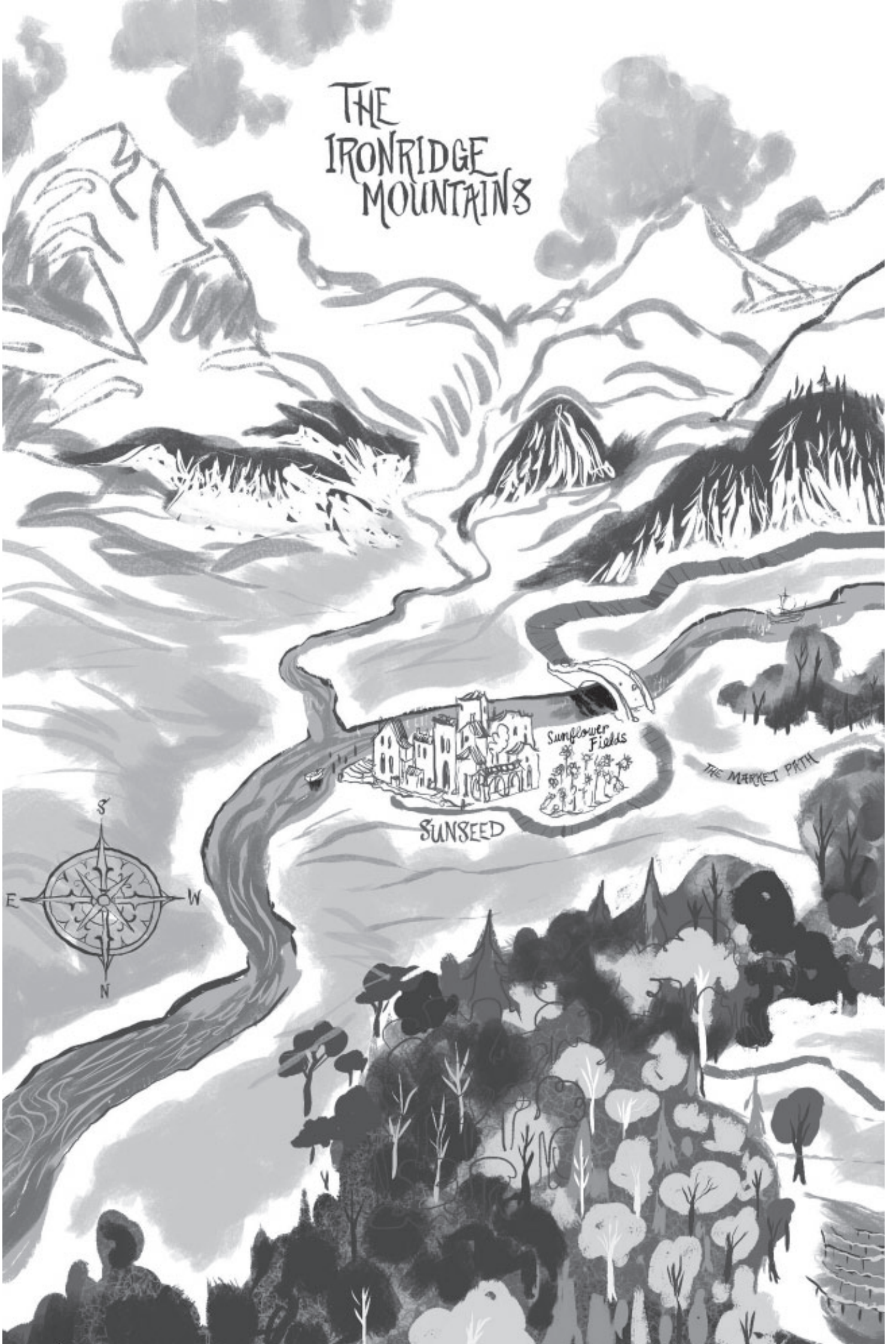


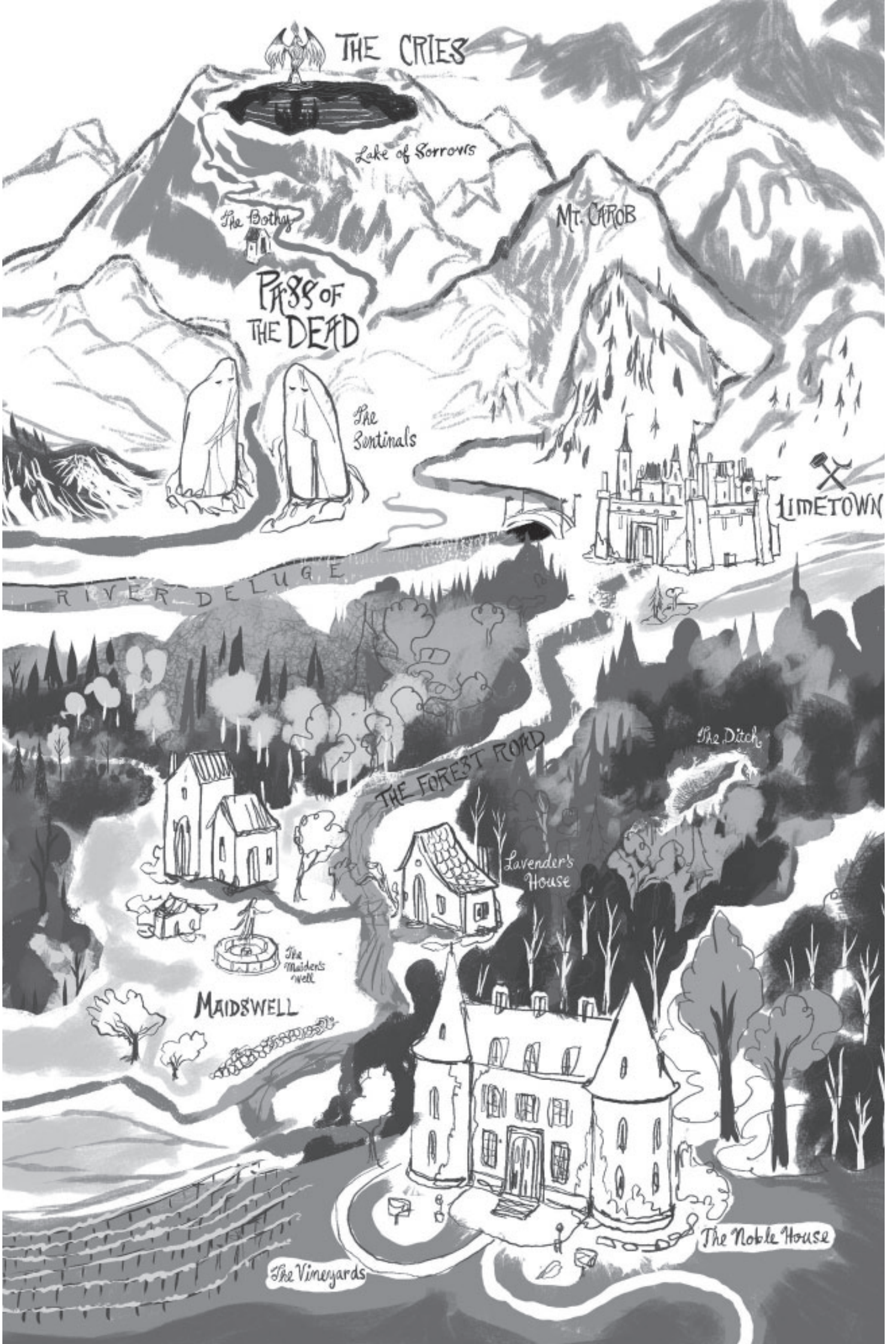


The Tale of Lavender Wild

ROWAN FOXWOOD

USBORNE


THE IRONRIDGE MOUNTAINS
Sunflower Fields
THE MARKET PATH
SUNSEED
S
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W
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THE CRIES
Lake of Sorrows
The Bothy
Mt. CARROB
PASS OF THE DEAD
The Sentinals
LIMETOWN
RIVER DELUGE
The Ditch
THE FOREST ROAD
Lavender's House
The Maiden's Well
MAIDSWELL
The Noble House
The Vineyards



PROLOGUE

There was something important she had to do. Lavender hunched, her arms knotted over her stomach. Her insides felt like they'd been hollowed out.

Taking another shaky step, her knees rattled beneath her. The trees above seemed to swim, swishing and swaying as her head spun. Lavender was so hungry, and so tired, and *oh*…but that mossy nook among the tree roots looked so comfy. She could curl into it, like a sleepy squirrel, and rest a while…

But there was something important she had to do. It pressed, like a building scream, in her chest. She had to—

What? She couldn't remember. The thought slipped away like a sly fish through the clouds of her exhaustion.

Lavender's legs turned to jelly, and she sank to the floor,

hot tears budding in her powder-blue eyes as she tried to grasp at that memory – at *any* memory.

What am I doing here? Where is here?

She didn't know. She didn't know anything. Only that it was getting dark again, and her knees were bloody, and she was so hungry, and so very alone.

A cackle made her look up and she saw a magpie on a branch above her head. It stared at her, head cocked, and Lavender had the strangest sense it had come to help.

The soft thump of a walking stick against the earth made her turn. There was an old woman coming through the trees towards her, back bent and face as wrinkled as a washcloth. Relief crashed through Lavender.

The old woman stopped, her blue eyes bright as gems. "Oh, my dear," she said in a sweet, lilting voice, reaching down a hand. "Are you lost?"

Lavender burst into tears and fell into the old woman's arms.

ROYAL DECREE

His Majesty the High King,
Ruler of the Four Cardinal Continents
hereby decrees that the parents and guardians of lost children should appeal to:

Mother Nest
The Magpie Queen & Deity of the Lost

to help find lost children. Mother Nest can be contacted by letter, addressed by name and thrown into the wind.

Citizens are reminded that children who remain lost for too long are at risk of forgetting themselves and turning into magpies.

DON'T DELAY, SEND YOUR LETTER TODAY!

This decree comes under the advisement of
ANISE STAR
His Majesty's Royal Heartseer
of the Newly Appointed Department of
Daemons & Deities

Do not Dismiss the Past, for it is the Foundation of the Future



THE DAILY MAELSTROM

THE MAGPIE-CHILDREN: EXPOSED

Magpie, Magpie, nursery to nest
No mother waiting for you, no bed in which to rest…

Last week, our faithful readers were left stunned following the sudden, miraculous return of a dozen missing children. The children, all between the ages of four and eight, shared the same fantastical tale.

We spoke with Lavender Wild, who disappeared from her home in Redvine, a rural region of Vineland, four months ago, during the Longsun festival.

"I was lost for days, and began to forget things," claims Lavender. "Mother Nest found me and brought me to a big, moving house where there were other lost children!"

The "Mother Nest" of Lavender's story is the fabled Deity of the Lost, sometimes known as the Magpie Queen. Readers may be familiar with her from the old nursery rhyme that warns children not to wander too far, or Mother Nest may turn them into magpies.

"It wasn't like that at all," Lavender now claims. "She didn't transform us, it just happened. Being lost makes you forget things, you know? I couldn't remember who I was, and then I couldn't really remember what I was. Being a bird was fun, so I sort of just changed into one. Everything was magical and we could all change whenever we wanted!" Having said this, Lavender then admitted, "After a while, the other children stopped changing back though and became birds for good. That was a bit lonely. But more children arrived, and Mother Nest was so nice to us all!"

If this story didn't sound incredible enough, when asked how she and the other children made it home, Lavender claimed: "I don't remember! Funny that, isn't it? While I was with Mother Nest I forgot everything about home, but since being home, it feels like I'm forgetting everything about Mother Nest! I think there was a boy with a mandolin. He played something really sad. Next I remember, I was home with Papa!"

If you, dear reader, have doubts about these tall tales, you would not be alone. Despite others claiming Lavender's story offers iron-clad proof that magic is real, this humble reporter suspects the girl has been brain-washed by years of superstitious, rural living.

Of course, while one might forgive a child

mistaking dreams for reality, we at the *Maelstrom* were left stunned by the High King's unexpected decree that parents should *contact* Mother Nest to find other missing children. This follows the sudden appointment of the High King's new Heartseer, Anise Star, a supposed expert in daemons and deities.

Dear readers, if our own High King has bought into this fantasy, what does it mean for us? Has the age of foolishness and superstition begun? Will schools be teaching myths and legends as historical fact? Will we be forced to worship every deity ever invented, and cower at the mention of the bogeymen and monsters of fairy tale? Will we be abandoning science for magic?

This humble reporter doesn't know and can only worry about the future state of this great kingdom. What about you, dear reader?

Do you believe in magic?



CHAPTER ONE

FIVE YEARS LATER

House martins bickered a lot. It was one of the first discoveries Lavender made, along with the fact that martins, like most garden birds, didn't like it when she talked to them. They'd go quiet and puff up their feathers, until they were round as balls.

Lavender suspected she confused them. She was a human, after all, a "Wingless" as they liked to call her. The Wingless weren't supposed to speak *bird*. Even so, Lavender liked to listen. Which was why she was stretched across the tiles of the stable roof, baked hot by the sun, her shawl draped over her shoulders. The martins were twittering on the other side, where they'd nested in the beams. The spring chicks were fledging and their parents were gently trying to nudge them out of the nest.

"Move, move," the mother said.

"Food?" cheeped a small voice.

"No food," the mother chirped with exasperation. "Move."

"Food!" the chick insisted.

"*Fly*. Find food. Move!"

"Scared," the little chick said softly. And then added in a hopeful tone, "Food?"

Lavender stifled a giggle. From below her, she heard the thump of footsteps and then Papa was shouting up.

"Lavender!"

She spotted him standing at the base of the stable. He was dressed well, in his beige waistcoat and high trousers, his usual leather apron nowhere in sight. Lavender noticed that he'd brushed his brown hair back and that his thick moustache gleamed slightly, as if it had been oiled. He cupped his strong, chapped hands to his mouth and called up to her again, a thin sheen of sweat shining on his sun-wrinkled brow.

"Come down from there!" His eyebrows were knotted over anxious blue eyes, bright against the naturally tan brown of his skin.

Lavender slid down the tiles, her feet scrabbling for purchase on the old, crumbly stone wall. About halfway down, she let go, landing in the soft grass with a huff. Papa groaned.

"One of these days you're going to break your ankles!"

"It's not that high." Lavender patted down her skirts. Papa groaned again.

"You're filthy, little flower." He brushed a spiderweb from the sleeve of her blouse and tugged at her cuff. "Your feathers are showing."

Lavender immediately pulled her sleeves down over the prickle of baby feathers that had begun to sprout along her forearm. The ones closest to the elbow were dark, with a green and blue sheen, while the small feathers on the back of her wrist were white, with black tips. Magpie feathers.

When she'd first returned home, Lavender hadn't minded having feathers – in fact, she'd rather liked it. They were beautiful, and magical, and *different*. And yet everyone in the village would go quiet whenever they saw them, and Papa would wince, like seeing them stung. They were a terrible reminder to him of the time she was missing, and yet Lavender hadn't really realized the feathers were something to be ashamed of until she'd shown everyone at school.

The children had pointed and shrieked and poked at her, giddy with disgust. And then a boy grabbed a fistful of her feathers and tugged them out. It had stung so badly, Lavender's eyes had watered. He had thrown her beautiful feathers onto the ground with a gleeful cry.

"Gross – they're real!"

"I told you they were!" Lavender had shoved him. *"And it's not gross!"*

"Yes, it is – girls aren't supposed to have feathers! It's not normal. You must still be a bird. Magpie-girl!"

Somehow those mocking words had hurt even more. She had kept her feathers hidden ever since.

"Sorry, Papa," Lavender whispered. While the long, thick feathers on her shoulders and back were too hard to reach and too painful to pull, she had plucked out the ones on her arms only a few days ago. But then she'd had a *flying* dream – one of the ones where she was a bird, soaring away through the sky. The feathers always grew back after a flying dream.

"You don't have to apologize, little flower." Papa's expression was pinched, but he forced a smile. "Come. We're due up at the Noble house."

It was Lavender's turn to groan. Papa was a master joiner and carpenter and did all sorts of work for Lord and Lady Noble, from repairs to crafting fine furniture. This year, Lord Noble had commissioned a huge new bed. Papa had spent weeks on it and was finally delivering it today.

"Do I have to go?" Lavender whined. "I'll just be waiting around."

"I'm sure you and Kit can find something fun to do

while I finish."

Lavender pulled a face. "Kit Noble is allergic to fun."

Papa sighed deeply. "I wish I understood this falling out you've had. The pair of you used to be inseparable." A real smile spread over his face. "Why, I still remember the summer you spent pretending to be knights. Champions of the Maiden's Well, you called yourselves."

"Papa…" Lavender squirmed. "That was *years* ago."

"You guarded the village fountain… No village fountain has been as well guarded since."

"*Papa!*"

Papa put up his hands. "It just breaks my heart. You were such good friends."

Lavender shrugged. It wasn't her fault Kit had grown up to be so serious and stuffy. "Does that mean you'll let me stay home?" she wheedled one last time, but she already knew it was useless. Papa didn't like to be away from her for long. For some reason he seemed to think she needed constant supervision.

It's almost like I went missing for four months and he's scared I'll disappear again if he blinks too long, Lavender thought.

"Go tidy yourself up." Papa gave her a little shove. "I'll get the cart."

Grumbling, Lavender crossed the courtyard to their house.

It was a squat, rectangular building, with rough, white-stone walls, a russet roof and red bricks around the windows, in the style of the region. There were three bedrooms, a kitchen and a large living space. Once, the house had been full, but both of her grandparents had passed, and her own mother, Violet Wild, had left when Lavender was a baby, so it was just Papa and Lavender now.

Her bedroom was dark and cool as she stepped into it. Papa had pulled the shutters half-closed to keep out the heat, slim beams of light casting over the collage of maps that were pinned to every wall. Lavender gave them a wistful look.

The whole wide world is right there, and we're off to the Noble house…again.

Sighing, Lavender shucked off her shawl and changed her blouse, patting down her tiered skirt until the dust stopped blooming off it. Satisfied, she turned to the mirror to tackle her hair. There was a lot of it. Reaching all the way to her thighs, it poured over her in a thick, curling ocean of black, as wild as a thicket. Lavender grabbed fistfuls and began to wrestle it into a plait, as hefty as a bell rope. Papa had given up trying to make her do her hair nicely every day, but he always insisted she get it under control when they visited the Noble house.

"Lavender!" Papa called.

"Coming!"

Hair done, Lavender grabbed her shawl and threw it back over her shoulders, despite the heat. Her grandmaman had sewn it for her before she died. It was made of a soft, blue wool, with a collage of shiny green, black and white silk stitched into the shape of wings.

Lavender wore it like armour.

Papa had brought the cart around and fastened the horses, Bay and Chestnut, to it by the time Lavender came out. The back of the cart was already loaded and beneath a sheet of rough wool, Lavender could make out the shape of a ginormous headboard.

Just how big is this bed? Lavender gawked. No wonder Papa had to assemble it at the house – there was no way it was getting through the door, except in pieces.

"Ready?" Papa sat upright, the reins in hand.

Lavender hesitated, sudden longing tugging through her. "Papa, could we go somewhere after you've delivered the bed?"

Papa looked surprised. "Go where?"

Anywhere, she wanted to say. *On an adventure. Somewhere new.*

But there was no point. "Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter." She pulled herself into the cart and slouched back as Papa clucked the horses onward.



Papa had never been adventurous – in fact, he was the complete opposite. While Lavender dreamed of great expeditions to discover new and exciting lands, Papa's perfect world was calm, quiet and repetitive, everything in its place. Which was probably why he liked living here so much.

The village of Maidswell hadn't changed in a century. It was actually more of a hamlet than a village, settled in a shallow valley north of the Ironridge Mountains, with a forest to the south, and a single road cutting through. The houses were outnumbered by fields of barley and wheat, and the vineyards that grew on the gentle waves of the surrounding hills. The Redvine region was *full* of vineyards, so not even those were particularly interesting. In fact, the only thing of note in Maidswell was their local deity, "The Maiden", but nobody had seen her in decades. Her sacred well fed the waters of the village fountain – the same fountain Lavender and Kit had once guarded for a whole summer.

As their cart rattled up the street, Lavender caught the fresh smell of baking bread. It was wafting out from the kitchen window of the Bramble house, the blue shutters thrown open to let in the air. As they passed, Madam

Bramble leaned out, her golden-brown face turned beet-red with the heat.

"Master Wild, Lavender! Off to the Noble house?"

"Good morning, Madam." Papa tipped his hat. "How's the baking?"

"Just put in the baguettes! I'll save you a couple, shall I?"

"That would be lovely."

They didn't really have any shops in Maidswell. You had to go to the next town over for things like post, or clothes, or books – but the Brambles had a bread-oven which they used for everyone, the Cockles sold fresh vegetables out of their garden and Madam Nebby sometimes gave out eggs. Even Lord Noble shared his spoils, whenever he went hunting.

Papa began to count out some coins but Madam Bramble waved it away.

"Oh no, no! We still owe you for that repair last week," she said. "Speaking of, do you—"

She didn't get the chance to finish as the shutters on the house next door were suddenly thrown open. Madam Nebby stuck out her head. "Master Wild!" she squawked, gesturing with a gnarled hand. "Up at last, I see. I hope you've brought those woodchips you promised for my chicken coop!"

Madam Bramble rolled her dough-brown eyes and

retreated into her house. “See you later,” she whispered, jerking her head in Madam Nebby’s direction. “And good luck.”

Lavender giggled even as Papa forced himself to keep a straight face. No one really liked Madam Nebby, which was fine, since Madam Nebby liked no one. She was a mean old busybody and was constantly pecking at people over silly things, like the height of their hedges, or the colour of their shutters, or what time they got up in the morning. She bullied Papa in particular, because he was too nice to fight back.

“Good morning, Madam Nebby,” Papa said, pulling up to her window. “Yes, I have the woodchips.” He grabbed a small crate from beneath the cart seat and offered it up.

“No, no,” Madam Nebby pulled away, “my back’s too frail to be carrying that about. Bring it to the garden and lay it down into the coop for me.”

Papa hesitated, eyes darting to the road. Lavender knew he wanted to get on. If it had been up to her, she’d have put the box back into the cart and ridden off, but Papa was far too polite.

“Of course. I’ll be right back, Lavender.”

Hitching the crate up, he jumped down from the cart and hefted his way around the house, out of sight. Lavender huffed, resting her chin in one hand. From the corner of her eye she watched Madam Nebby lean out of the window

again, the old woman's mouth pinched and puckered, like she was sucking on something sour. It made her look like one of her chickens.

"There was a buzzard flying around my chickens the other day," Madam Nebby said. "Now they're all hiding in the coop, scared to death."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Lavender politely.

"Save your apologies – I know you're responsible. You set that bird on my girls because I told you off last week."

"What? No, I didn't!" Lavender sat up straight.

"Don't be coy!" Madam Nebby snapped. "I saw that buzzard hanging about your house not a day before! And we all know you can talk to them!"

Lavender sighed. She had only ever told Papa and Grandmaman about her strange powers, but in a village this small, secrets never kept. Lavender had been caught clucking at chickens and cooing at doves enough times not to bother denying it. Everyone knew she had a way with birds, just like they knew about her *other* ability.

Magpies were famously good at finding lost things and Lavender still had the knack. Whether it be a button or a garden rake, whenever anyone misplaced anything, Lavender could always find it.

Despite all this being an open secret, people in the village didn't usually discuss it.

"It's a small magic," her grandmaman had once explained. *"Small magics are as fragile as dandelion fluff – one hard blow and they'll disappear. That's why, when we talk about them, we whisper."*

Apparently Madam Nebby was done whispering.

"Honestly, it's shameful, the way you keep going on!" Madam Nebby snapped. "You're a young lady now, it's high time you started acting like one. All this…*magpie nonsense*!" Madam Nebby sniffed. "The sooner you stop nattering away to birds and flapping about in that ridiculous shawl, the sooner you can return to normal!"

Anger flared in Lavender's stomach. No one *else* complained about her "magpie nonsense", at least not to her face. "I'm quite happy as I am, actually," she said.

"Well you shouldn't be!" Madam Nebby harrumphed. "What girl your age wants to be covered in feathers? The very thought of it… Revolting!"

Lavender's skin crawled and she tugged at the cuffs of her sleeves, even though nothing was showing.

Madam Nebby's eyes flashed with victory, seeing Lavender squirm. "You get it from your mother, of course."

Here we go. Lavender's jaw clenched, because *of course* Madam Nebby would find a way to turn the subject to Violet Wild – she always did. *Though what my mother has to do with my feathers is anyone's guess!*

"I warned your father when he first brought your mother home," Madam Nebby said, as she'd done a hundred times before. "*Coastal girls* are far too flighty – get all these notions, watching ships come and go. 'She'll leave you within the year,' I told him. 'Women like that don't settle!' and I was right! She was a cuckoo – flew in, disrupted the nest, and then left your heartbroken father to raise her greedy little chick himself!"

Lavender didn't bother arguing – there was no point when Madam Nebby got started. Besides, she was *right*. Violet had abandoned them, and Papa was the only one who'd been surprised. Lavender knew it had hurt him deeply.

"And now here you are, a runaway, just like her." Madam Nebby shook her head. "One of these days you are going to break your poor father's heart entirely."

Lavender would have said something very rude in that moment, were it not for the fact that so many words came to mind at once, they jammed halfway to her mouth. "I am not—" she managed to choke out, but got no further.

"All the other magpie-children returned to normal. They were happy to be home. But *you* remained feathered, because you weren't. Don't deny it!" Madam Nebby held up a finger as Lavender sucked in a breath. "I know about your maps – how you pore over them, like you're planning some great expedition. Gaze hungrily at every cart and car

that passes through, like you might bundle yourself into the back and see how far it gets you. Hah – if those feathers on you worked, I think you'd have flown away already! In fact, I think a part of you wishes you'd stayed lost entirely."

It took all of Lavender's willpower not to reach up and close Madam Nebby's shutters straight in her face. "And I think you should—"

"All done!" The happy cry came from around the house, as Papa stepped out from behind the corner, the empty crate tucked beneath his arm. "Did you need anything else, Madam Nebby?"

Madam Nebby narrowed her eyes, as if Papa were up to mischief. "That'll be all," she said, and shot Lavender a look. "I will expect better from you in future."

She pulled the shutters closed before any more could be said. Lavender glared, so angry it felt like she was steaming. The cart jostled as Papa climbed in.

"What was she telling you off for this time?" he asked, a slight smile in his words.

Lavender didn't answer for a second. "She thinks I set a buzzard on her chickens."

"Did you?"

"No!"

"Then there's no need to worry." Papa clucked his tongue, urging the horses on.

"Right." Lavender settled back onto the bench as the cart rattled forward, Papa's arm wrapping around her shoulders. Beneath her sleeves, her feathers itched.