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Derek Keilty

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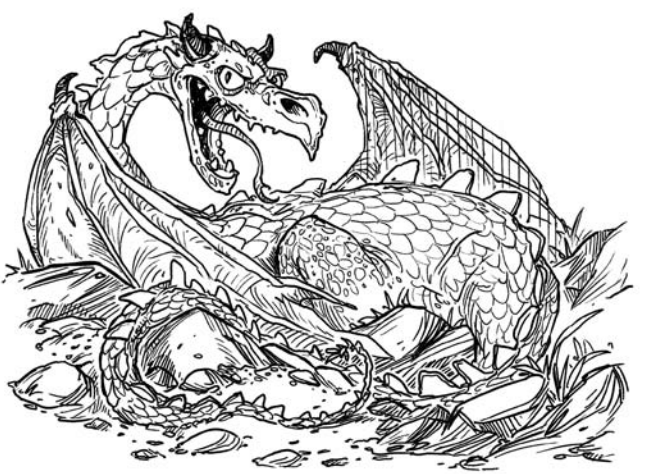
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WILL GALLOWS

& THE THUNDER DRAGON'S ROAR



DEREK KEILTY

ILLUSTRATED BY JONNY DUDDLE

Andersen Press • London

To my daughters,
Sarah-Jane and Rebekah

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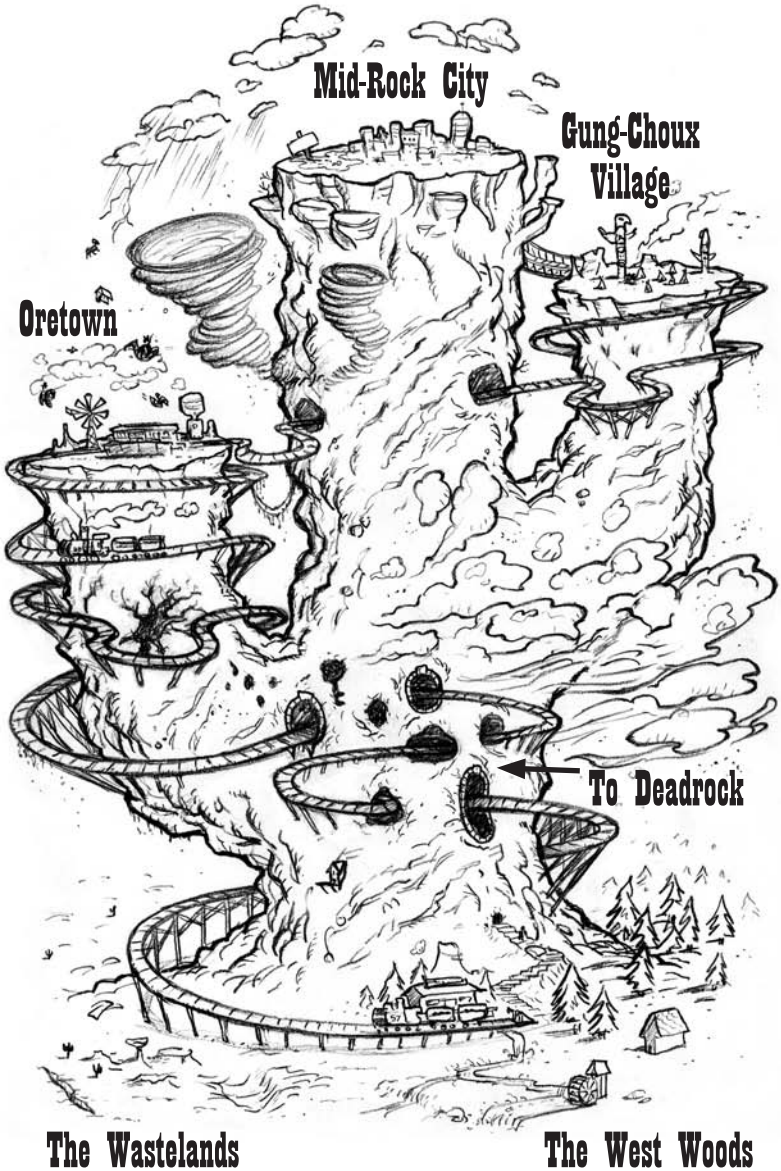
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★ THE GREAT WEST ROCK ★



CHAPTER ONE

★

Dangerous Ground

It was a chilly afternoon but Yenene, my grandma, sat by the broken window in her rocking chair. It was the same place she'd been sitting when Jez and I had visited her last week – it was as though she hadn't moved. Over her shoulders she wore a black shawl, and her silky grey hair hung down to her waist. Dark, troubled eyes stared out from wizened, yellowish-green skin, rough as ogre hide.

'Told you not to be looking in so often,' she croaked.

I took off my hat, straightening the feather that stuck out from the side of the crown. 'Yup, you did, Grandma. And I told *you* I'll keep returning till you see sense and leave with me.'

'It's too dangerous for you to keep coming back

here, Will; there are big rock quakes every day now.'

'Exactly, Grandma, so all the more reason why it's time you were leaving. A broken window *this* week, what will it be *next* week? The roof caving in?'

She sighed, kicking back on the rocking chair that creaked like a pair of old sky-cowboy boots. 'Quakes'll blow over, you wait an' see.'

'You know that's not going to happen, Grandma. It's been six months since the High Sherriff said we *all* had to evacuate the western arm, and the quakes have only been getting worse. Pretty soon the whole arm's going to break away into the Wastelands, and if you don't come with me now, you'll be falling down there along with it.'

Grandma pulled her shawl tighter. 'Stuff and nonsense, boy. You listen to too many stories. I'm an elf, and Phoenix Creek's my home – and no high sheriff's going to order this elf to leave it. I'm telling you, like I've told you before, I'm not budging. High sheriff's making a lot of fuss over nothing.'

'It's not a lot of fuss, Grandma. All that illegal gold-mining's weakened the heart of the rock. Engineers say there's nothing they can do to save it. I know how you feel, I'm an elf too—'

'Half-elf,' she corrected me.

'All right, I'm a half-elf, but I love this place just as much as you do, Grandma. Broke my heart to leave. But it just ain't safe to stay here any longer. You're the last living soul left here, Grandma, an' time's running out.'

But by now I knew I was wasting my breath. Her mouth was set, and she was rocking back and forth humming to herself like she'd forgotten I was even there. It was the same argument we'd been having for months and I felt like we were going round in circles.



'You hungry, ma'am? I'll make us some lunch,' a voice called from the kitchen. My friend Jez poked her head into the room. She'd obviously been listening and thought it was time to step in as I was getting nowhere with Grandma. 'I brought some stew; made it myself from an old dwarf recipe. Ma used to make it all the time. And I got some of that chokecherry pie you like,' she said, unpacking the basket of food she'd carried in with her.

Jez and I had met a year before when she'd helped me track down the man who murdered my pa. Jez was good in a fight and, apart from my horse Moonshine, she was the best friend I had on the whole of the Great West Rock. She worked in the fort kitchen in Mid-Rock City and usually gathered up as much food as she could when she knew we were visiting my grandma.

'You don't have to fuss with bringing so much, Jez,' Grandma smiled. 'It's very kind of you, though, cos I ain't got the heart to bake pies any more.'

'I like fussin'. Besides, with all the stores closed down in Oretown, there's nowhere for you to buy food.'

'Yes, what *have* you been eating?' I asked.

'I'm gettin' by just fine. Been on this rock for a long time, way before there was any stores parcelin' up food

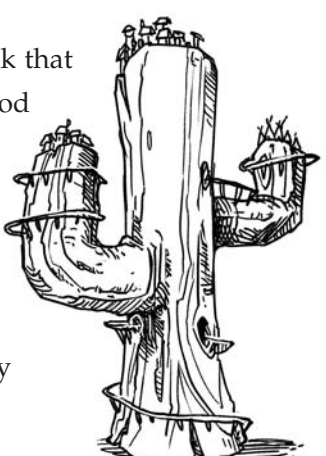
they charge far too much money for. Tyrone an' you might've moved all the cattle and horses out east but you didn't pull up the vegetables or cut down the apple trees.'

But Grandma didn't look like she was getting by. She was thinner every time we visited.

'What if the roof *does* come down on top of you during a night quake, then what?'

Yenene directed a skinny arm through the air. 'This part of the ranch house is holding together just fine; testament to your pa's fine building work.' Pa had built most of Phoenix Creek with his bare hands, and he'd constructed it well, although like most of the buildings on the western arm, the quakes were starting to take their toll.

The ornament of the West Rock that Pa had carved out of a hunk of wood sat on a table by the fireplace and I lifted it up. I was always blown away by its detail: shaped like a cactus, two arms sprouted from the thick central trunk. On their flat tops my father had painstakingly carved little towns and villages:



Oretown on the western arm, Mid-Rock City on the trunk and Gung-Choux Village on the eastern arm. He'd even carved the rail track, coiling like a clattersnake all around the outside of the rock. I clasped my hand over the western arm as a chill slithered up my neck. The West Rock looked kind of crazy and lopsided without it.

The wind blew up dust and grit, which gusted inside the broken window Yenene sat by.

'Barn's nearly finished at the new ranch, Grandma. Tyrone and the others are doing a great job,' I commented. The new ranch on the eastern arm covered only half the area of Phoenix Creek but it was still a working ranch and we'd moved over a good herd of cattle and a corral full of horses. Tyrone, the foreman, and I, along with a few other farm hands, were responsible for the day-to-day running of the place.

'Oh.' She began rocking faster, and the chair and floorboards creaked louder.

'We've thought about calling it Phoenix Rise, in memory of this old place,' I told her. 'Tyrone is gonna cut a board to go up over the arch entrance but we wanted to ask you first.'

'Call it what you like, it's your ranch now.'

Yep, this was definitely shaping up to be a repeat of our last visit, with me talking about the new ranch and Yenene digging her heels in. And, just like the last time, I felt my face redden in frustration.

'It's your ranch too, Grandma; your cattle, your horses. You should be there. It isn't the same without you.'

She shook her head. 'I'm not moving, Will, I've told you. All this'll blow over soon enough and then folk will start movin' back to Oretown and the ranch lands. Some might even run into trouble getting their land back.'

'And what if it doesn't blow over?'

'Will,' she said, stroking my hand, 'it ain't like I've gone totally nuts. I keep my horse saddled when there's a spell of big quakes, so if it did get really bad I'd just fly off. Quit worrying about me, Grandson. I'm where I want to be.'

'When it gets really bad, you won't have time to fly off, Grandma. Besides, you could get hurt during the quake, or the horse could get injured or spooked and fly off, or . . .'

Jez brought lunch over and I stopped what I was saying. Grandma wasn't listening. She was too busy



looking at the beef and vegetable stew and chokecherry pie.

She ate it all hungrily. It was probably the first decent thing she'd eaten all week.

After a long silence Yenene grinned. 'Is Chief Red Feather still hoppin' a war dance over human folk stealin' his land?' She gestured to the *Dugtown Times* I'd brought her last time we'd visited. There'd been a front-page story all about the new settlers, of which I was one, and the land allocation near Gung-Choux Village.

'Uncle Crazy Wolf says the chief's none too happy 'bout the way some of the new settlers been acting, not sticking to the boundaries agreed in the land treaties,' I said.

It was a bit of a squeeze getting everyone from the western arm to settle on the eastern arm, and tempers had been fraying.

'I ain't surprised. Human settlers and native elves never did see eye to eye – apart from your ma and pa, of course.' I was what was sometimes referred to as a half-breed, although I hated that name. Made me feel like I didn't properly belong anywhere. My mother was

an elf, but she died when I was a baby, and my pa was human. About the bravest, most honourable human that ever lived.

'I'm just glad not to be a part of it,' continued Yenene. 'Chief's sure got his work cut out now with a whole bunch o' ranchers showin' up on his doorstep.'

We'd almost finished eating when I heard the sound of a horse approaching. I looked through the broken window and saw Moonshine and Jez's horse stamp their hooves and neigh. A winged horse was trotting towards the ranch, mounted by a man wearing a neat blue and yellow uniform, a cap with a crossed-sabre emblem, and carrying both rifle and sabre – a sky cavalryman!

The sky cavalry are an army of brave soldiers under the command of the high sheriff, the ruler of the West Rock, who fly on highly trained winged horses. They are based in a fort in Mid-Rock City.

'Soldier's coming,' I reported.

'Ain't he got nothin' better to do? He was here not that long ago,' Yenene grumbled.

Dismounting, the soldier tied up his horse alongside Moonshine then strode into the ranch house.