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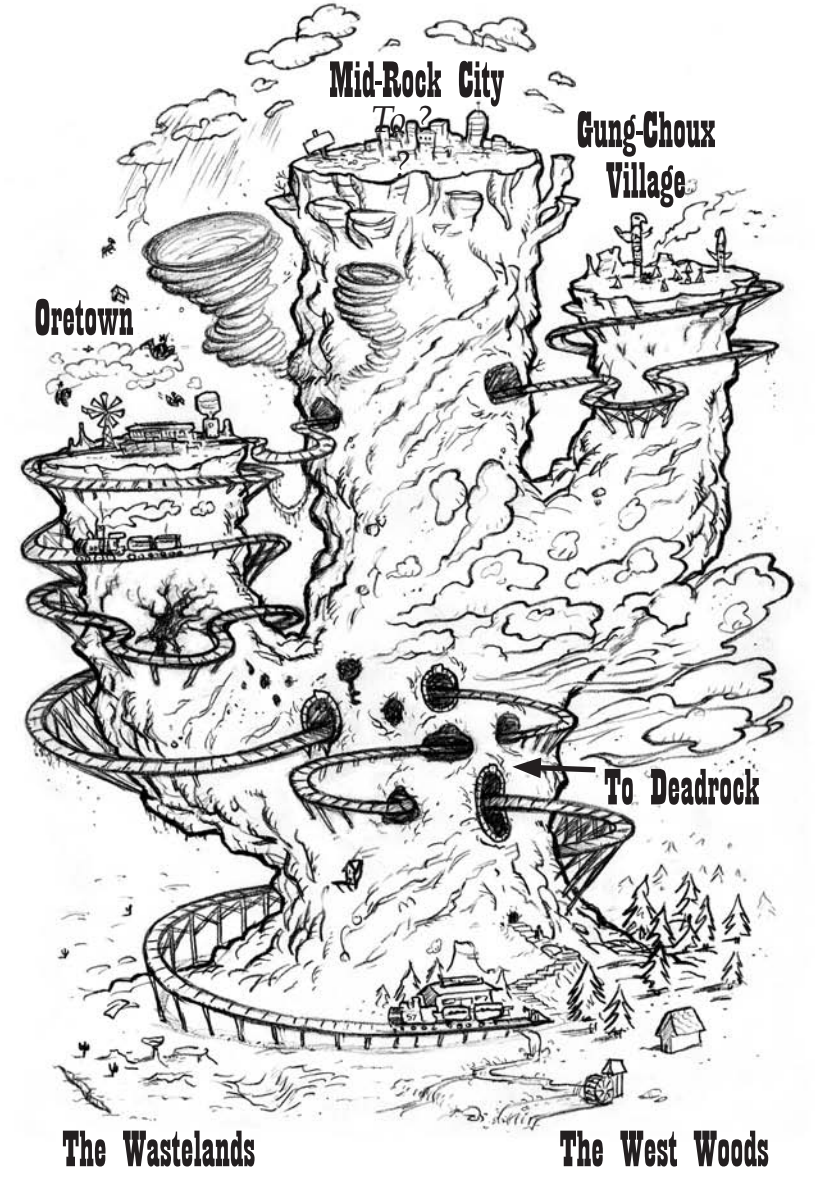
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To my wife, Elaine,
with love



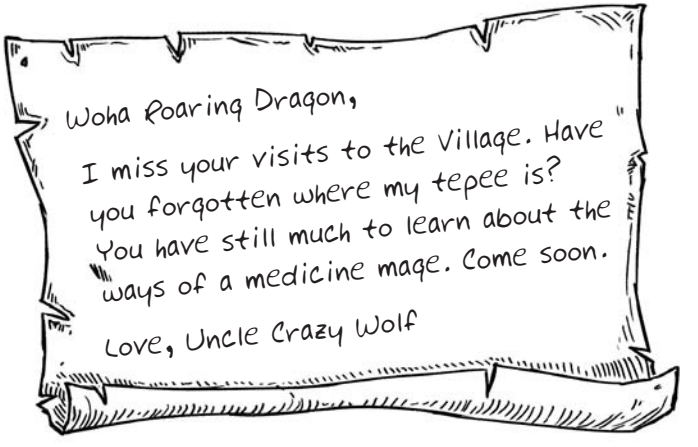
★ THE ORIGINAL GREAT WEST ROCK ★



CHAPTER ONE

★

Magic in the Stable



Folding the letter, I tucked it into my shirt pocket, then, heaving a sigh, I entered the stable.

'Where are we going, Will?' my horse Moonshine asked eagerly as I walked into her stall on Phoenix Heights, our ranch.



'We're going nowhere, Shy,' I replied, patting her on the nose which, like the rest of her, was pale as a wraith. 'Except to brand those new calves out by Silver Brook.'

Moonshine is a mute-winged windhorse and my best friend on the whole of the West Rock. Most folk don't like the idea of talking to animals. But I am half elf – my pa was human and my mother was a green-skinned elf – and elf folk have a bond with all creatures. Critter chatter, as it's known on the rock, comes as naturally to me as herding cattle. But today even Shy couldn't cheer me up.

'Wow, your face is even longer than mine. What's wrong, Will?'

'Got another letter from Uncle Crazy Wolf asking when I'm gonna visit Gung-Choux Village.'



'Great! When are we going?' she nudged me with her nose.

'That's just it, we're not. Grandma says there's still way too much work to be done on the ranch.' Yenene, my grandma, was stubborn as a mine pony, and there was no arguing to be had with her. 'It's so frustrating, Shy,' I went on. 'Grandma wants me to go brand calves when what I really want to do is visit my uncle and get practising my elf magic.'

'Can't you practise here?'

'With all the extra chores of the ranch I got no time. And I want to learn *new* stuff not just keep going over the same few things I can recall.'

Phoenix Heights was our third ranch. The first, Phoenix Creek, had been destroyed when part of the Great West Rock collapsed due to years of illegal mining. Yenene and I, and many others, lost our homes when the whole of the western arm broke off the rest of the rock and fell into the Wastelands below (the West Rock had at one time resembled an enormous cactus but now it didn't look like anything much). Our second ranch, Phoenix Rise, was over on the eastern arm, but we'd sold it when we moved up here to the mid-rock four months ago. We'd sold it cos Yenene said it was too small. At the time Moonshine had joked, 'Phoenix

Creek, Phoenix Rise, Phoenix Heights – pretty soon we're gonna run outta Phoenixes!'

Moonshine's saddle was sitting on the rack. Opening a pouch in it I found a small container of elf face paint. I sighed again as I looked at it. Some brave I'd turned out to be. Before we moved I'd been initiated into the Gung-Choux tribe – my great-uncle's tribe. I was even given an elf-brave name – Roaring Dragon. But it seemed like no sooner had I become part of the tribe than I'd abandoned them, along with my studies of elf medicine magic. And elf magic was something you needed to keep practising to perfect.

'Looks like Roaring Dragon won't be doing much roaring. I won't be needing face paint for quite a while – maybe never.'

But I couldn't resist. I smeared a thin red and yellow stripe – the colours of an elf brave – on my cheeks.

'What about those magic books I used to see you reading, couldn't you learn new stuff from them?' Shy tried to encourage me.

'Yeah, if I could find them. But I haven't seen those books for weeks now. I'm pretty sure Grandma has hidden them cos she doesn't want me learning elf

magic. In fact, I'm certain she moved us all the way up here just so I wouldn't be as close to Gung-Choux Village and Uncle Crazy Wolf.'

'Remind me again why she hates it so much?'

I sighed. 'She says elf magic has a dangerous, dark side – but she ain't told me any more than that. There's definitely something she's keeping to herself.'

Even though Yenene felt so strongly about magic, the stable walls were decorated with old elf artefacts: a drum, a decorative peace pipe and a painted rock-buffalo skull that when I was little made the hairs on my neck stand up. My pa used to take it down and chase after me, scaring me with it, until we'd both collapse on the barn floor laughing. Pa had been a deputy sheriff till he was treacherously murdered by his own boss, the former crooked sheriff of Oretown. It still made me real angry just thinking about it.

Next to the old artefacts hung my bow and a quiver full of arrows. I took them down. 'I was getting so good at arrow bending too.'

I raised my bow, aiming the arrow to miss the pillar in the middle of the stable. The idea was to use elf magic to focus on the arrow as it flew, and, with the power of

magic, bend it in midair to hit the target (useful if your enemy or prey moved very quickly). But I was far too rusty and the arrow shot straighter than a rifle barrel, disappearing into a dark corner at the back of the stable.

Moonshine shot me a hopeful grin. 'It was close.'

I sighed. 'It was miles away.'

'Try again,' Moonshine urged, trotting over to remove another arrow from the quiver with her teeth.

'It's no use, Shy. I've forgotten it all.'

'Try again,' Moonshine mumbled through the arrow shaft, and I chuckled taking it from her teeth.



Then I heard a strange noise coming from the back of the stable, something like snapping twigs, coupled with a low growling sound. A louder spitting noise followed and pieces of arrow shaft were suddenly catapulted through the air, landing on the ground near my feet. I froze, feeling my heart gallop inside my chest.

'Who's there?' I called into the darkness.

'*Mmmmmmmrrrrrrggggaaabbula!*'

Moonshine gave a nervous snort and backed up. 'Sounds like a whip-tail goblin sneak thief.'

I wasn't sure. 'Don't think so, not unless he's got a bad case of indigestion. No, I've heard that growling sound before.' My mind raced back to a time I'd stood in a dark creepy cave in the heart of the underground city of Deadrock. A chill ran down my spine as suddenly I had a pretty good idea what the intruder might be.

'I think it's a wraith!'

Moonshine's ears shot up. 'Did you just say *a wraith*?'

I nodded, feeling my heart race like a steam train on full throttle.

'Like the wraiths that live in Deadrock?'

'Yup they—'

Before I could say another word, the huge apparition of a horned beast with long pointy fangs and clawed hands and feet glowed in front of me, shimmering like a ghost. A wraith is a ghost-like, undead creature that haunts desolate places. And this one was even more terrifying than the wraith I'd seen before! The collapse of the western arm had released a lot of them from their rocky homes, shaking them out like lice from a sky-cowboy's pants.

'It *is* a wraith; big one too.'

Moonshine gasped. 'Oh, great! Now just tell me why it had to come into *my* stable – there are loads o' stables round here!'

My legs felt wobblier than one of my grandma's chokecherry jellies. My instinct was to mount Moonshine, ride through the door and fly off, but the wraith would most likely follow us outside, maybe even attack the other ranch hands or Grandma.

For the moment the wraith was just assessing us from its dark corner.

'We gotta think fast, Shy. Wraiths can suck out your soul and leave you like the walking dead!'

Moonshine shivered. 'OK, way too much

information. What are we gonna do?'

I spotted Grandma's Wynchester Demon Shot rifle – the only weapon capable of snuffing out a ghost or wraith – on the stable wall and dropped my bow. But I couldn't reach it, and even if I could, the wraith was in the way. Deciding it had nothing to fear from a boy and his horse, the thing moved slowly out of the gloom.

'I need that demon shot, Shy!' I hissed.

'How in the world we gonna get it?'

'Well, there is something I could try to buy us some time. You can bind wraiths and demons, sort of freeze them. Uncle Crazy Wolf taught me.'

'Do it!' she cried.

The wraith fixed me with a ghostly glare.

I grabbed the rope from Moonshine's saddle and began looping it into a lasso. A normal lasso would just pass clean through the spirit, but with the right spell this rope could take on magical properties. I just had to get it right.

The wraith moved closer, growling now.

'I can't remember the spell properly. Spirits alive, I can't remember it!'

'Great,' said Moonshine. 'If we get out of here I'm