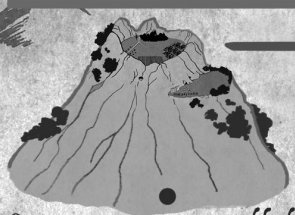
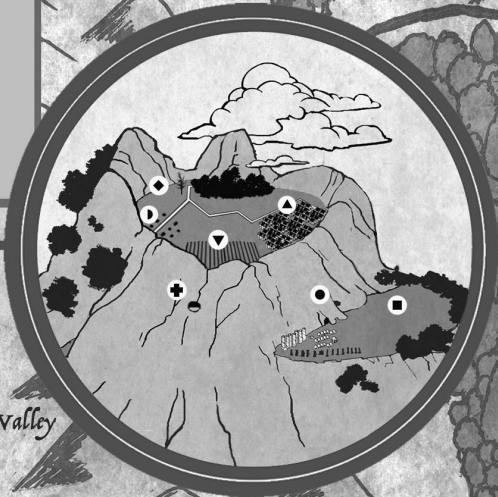


- ▷ Village Green
- ▼ Community Garden
- ◆ Helmer's Tree
- ▲ Village
- Caves
- Plateau
- + Maggie's Porch




 Rockback Valley
Cloud Mountain


 Halfwind Citadel

To Jupiter's Crossing

Chapter One

A MISSION

Picket Longreader moved through the fog, uncertain which way to turn. He was careful to be quiet. The enemy might be lurking just beyond the bank of mist ahead.

He hoped they were.

Picket could only faintly make out the swish and tap of his companion's deft steps. Smalls, the prince, was with him. And Picket was with the prince, heart and soul.

The fear was there, familiar and clear. Picket inhaled, acknowledging its presence while at the same time assigning it a place of service. It would have to sharpen his mind. Fear would not, could not, be his master. Not today. There was too much at stake.

His parents needed him. His brother, Jacks, needed him. Picket hoped this was his chance to free some, or all, of them. If any were still alive. He swallowed hard and hurried on.

After another minute, he sensed that the prince had stopped moving. He felt a touch through the fog. Smalls appeared beside him, out of the mist, a worried look on

his face. He bent close to Picket's ear and whispered, "This is a perfect place to keep slaves for their mine: deep in this valley, near the river, in the foothills of the High Bleaks. But we should have heard them long ago. I haven't heard one shout or the rattle of a single chain. Have you?"

"Nothing," Picket answered. He was worried that Smalls would want to stop, to return to the main force a mile back, where Lord Victor Blackstar and Captain Helmer waited with a regiment of soldiers capable of liberating the slaves they'd been assured were here. "I want to go on."

"I'm not sure that makes a lot of tactical sense," Smalls said.

Picket knew he was right. Especially with the prince himself present. But Smalls had insisted on personally accompanying his friend on this mission. He said that honor demanded it. Now that they were here, Picket didn't want to turn back.

"It's my family," Picket said, a catch in his voice. He thought of Heather, his sister and closest friend. He remembered the hopeful look on her face when she said goodbye to him a few days before. "Heather's counting on us." They *had* to be here.

Smalls nodded reluctantly. "We can't do this alone, Picket," he said. "We observe. We report back. We're only scouting. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Highness," Picket said, bowing his head quickly.



They moved forward, Smalls rubbing at his eyes. Picket considered for a moment the weight that must press on his friend. Smalls had been revealed as Jupiter's heir, had triumphed in a strategic battle, and now served as the open leader of the cause and an object of hope to rabbits across Natalia. Saving the prince, as Picket had done so heroically at Jupiter's Crossing, had been easy compared to the task before Smalls now.

A resistance to unite. An impossible foe to conquer. A kingdom to win.

The Lords of Prey were great birds, an ancient alliance of raptors that had haunted the rabbits of Natalia since Whitson Mariner first touched land with his wandering community. From their home in the High Bleaks, they had frequently attacked rabbits throughout the Great Wood, and beyond. Whitson's heirs all fought them, but only King Jupiter had truly driven them back.

Jupiter's heroic victories had ushered in an era of flourishing unlike any in history. But that golden age ended when he was betrayed by Garten Longtreader, Picket and Heather's uncle, and delivered over to Morbin Blackhawk. King Jupiter was killed and the kingdom was lost. Morbin and his Lords of Prey, allied with wicked wolves under the command of Redeye Garlackson, burned and fouled vast swaths of the Great Wood.

Some rabbits gave in to the new order, but many more went into hiding or joined the secret citadels, an uneasy alliance against Morbin's forces. King Jupiter's heir, revealed

to be Heather and Picket's friend Smalls, achieved a crucial victory at Jupiter's Crossing. But the task remained enormous and the cause fragile. Visions of the Mended Wood sometimes felt like a hopeless, happy dream, destined to be dashed to ashes in an awful waking moment.

The fog hung thick and the ground fell away as Picket and Smalls descended from the foothills into the rocky valley below. They could now hear running water. Picket saw white fog before and above him, dark stone beneath his feet. Apart from a whispering wind, the faint water flow, and their footsteps, it was quiet. Too quiet.

Picket was just about to suggest that they head back and report when he heard a faint thrashing borne along on the wind. He couldn't tell where it came from. Picket expected Smalls to stop, but the prince moved forward, quickening his pace. Picket followed.

Smalls reached for his sword, and Picket drew his own. He hadn't used it in earnest since he flew over Jupiter's Crossing and put an end to Redeye Garlackson. He was ready to use it again, if he had to, to free his family from their cruel captors.

The fog began to clear, and Picket caught a glimpse of what they had been hearing. A river. More shapes were coming into view, but Smalls pointed urgently to the back of a small wooden hovel. They dived behind it as the fog thinned.

Smalls motioned for Picket to wait while he peered around the corner of the beat-up shed. The prince looked

long and hard while Picket leaned against the brittle wall, his sword at the ready. Smalls finally turned back, a puzzled expression on his face. He shook his head. There was nothing moving. He nodded to the other corner of the shed.

Picket slid into position and slowly edged an eye beyond the wooden wall. Hopeful only moments before, he now watched as curtains of mist rose and fell in the strengthening wind and the scene was revealed. He saw a soot-stained hillside cave, apparently an abandoned mine. He saw the river, a rotting dock propped on its rocky bank, and a large collection of hovels like the one they hid behind. Nothing else. No one else. The mining camp, a riverside collection of dingy broken-down sheds, appeared deserted.

He frowned, and Smalls sighed. Picket felt his excitement and battle dread drain away, turned to bitter disappointment. He felt hollow, suddenly weak and cold. He hated the idea of returning to Heather with nothing and seeing her face when he told her he had failed to bring their family back. His muttering moan was lost in the wind.

Then another sound came, loud, urgent, and angry, arresting his reverie and sending a wild surge of panic through his body. Smalls cried out as Picket spun around and looked up.

Three massive birds of prey swooped down on them, talons flashing, hideous shrieks pouring from their razor beaks.

Chapter Two

THE CHASE

Picket froze for a moment, but Smalls never hesitated. He broke through the fragile wall of the hovel, dragging Picket inside just as the foremost bird struck, slicing past in a terrifying flight. The two other raptors landed behind and tore into the shed with their talons. But Smalls and Picket were already barreling out the front door and running for their lives along the stony bank.

“Stay sharp!” Smalls shouted. Picket scanned the shoreline as his feet pounded the ground, his vision bouncing in the wild panic of their flight. No boats. No signs of life. Nothing but this endless row of broken-down sheds. They raced past the mine site, choosing not to enter and risk being trapped.

Picket glanced back, fearful of the frenzied shrieks and beating wings that grew louder and louder. The birds were airborne again, bearing down on the two fleeing rabbits. Picket felt as vulnerable as he ever had. Terror filled him, and he ran harder, catching up with Smalls, whose wide eyes darted all around as he sped on.

They weaved between buildings to elude the pursuit. Most were small hovels like those they had first encountered, but occasionally they hurried past a larger, longer, sturdier building. They ran hard, a thin sliver of hope pushing them on. Backward glances told Picket their weaving escape was buying precious time but wouldn't save them. One of the birds had gone aloft, calling out to the others, who pursued them along the ground, flying expertly between the sheds, gaining on the rabbits every second.

"They're on us!" Picket said.

"Follow me!" Smalls shouted. Instead of dodging around the next building in their path—one of the large, longer ones—Smalls plowed into it, once again breaking through the wooden wall. Picket followed, crashing through behind Smalls, and the two rabbits rolled onto the wide floor among shards of wood. The nearest bird beat his wings in a halt outside and clawed at them through the broken wall. The hole wasn't large enough for the bird to enter, but Picket felt a vicious slash across his back as he rolled into the first of many wooden support columns. He turned and drew his sword, and both rabbits slashed wildly at the flashing talons.

The rest of the wall was shredded in seconds by the three attacking raptors, and soon their enemies were inside. What had seemed a large room became a death trap as the massive birds filled it, breaking everything in pursuit of the two rabbits. Picket's ears rang with their horrible shrieks, their frenzied advance making strategy impossible.

Picket jumped back, staggered up, ran, and stumbled backward. Several columns lined the middle of the building, and the birds smashed through them as they came. Picket swung wildly with his sword, never knowing what he might be striking. He ended up on his back near the far wall, pain and wild rage a fire in his mind as he watched a raptor coil and strike, tearing through a third column in his race to finish Picket off forever.

Picket found his feet and dived backward, through the far door, rolling onto the hard stone as the building collapsed on the attacking birds, sending a plume of dust and debris into the air and momentarily obscuring the enemy.

Picket searched frantically for Smalls. When he saw him only a few feet from the wreckage, he hurried toward him. The strong young rabbit had come through some-how. Picket gasped with relief. Smalls struggled to stand and picked up his sword, his weary arm dragging the tip along the stones. Picket reached for his own sword, but it wasn't there. He turned to face the rubble alongside the prince.

The dust cloud settled, and the only sounds were the gasping breaths of the two battered rabbits. They inhaled, bending, trying to recover and make sense of their escape. An eerie silence filled the valley. Finally, Picket smiled.

“Your Highness, that was—” he began. But he was cut short when the ground shook, the rubble rumbled, and a bird's head appeared through the debris. With a terrific leap the raptor broke free of the ruined building, scattering

tattered sections of the wreckage. Shaking his wide wings, he rose above the rabbits with a horrifying screech.

Picket's eyes widened, and a cry died in his throat. Terrified, he glanced at Smalls. Smalls set his feet, raised his sword, and gave a defiant shout.