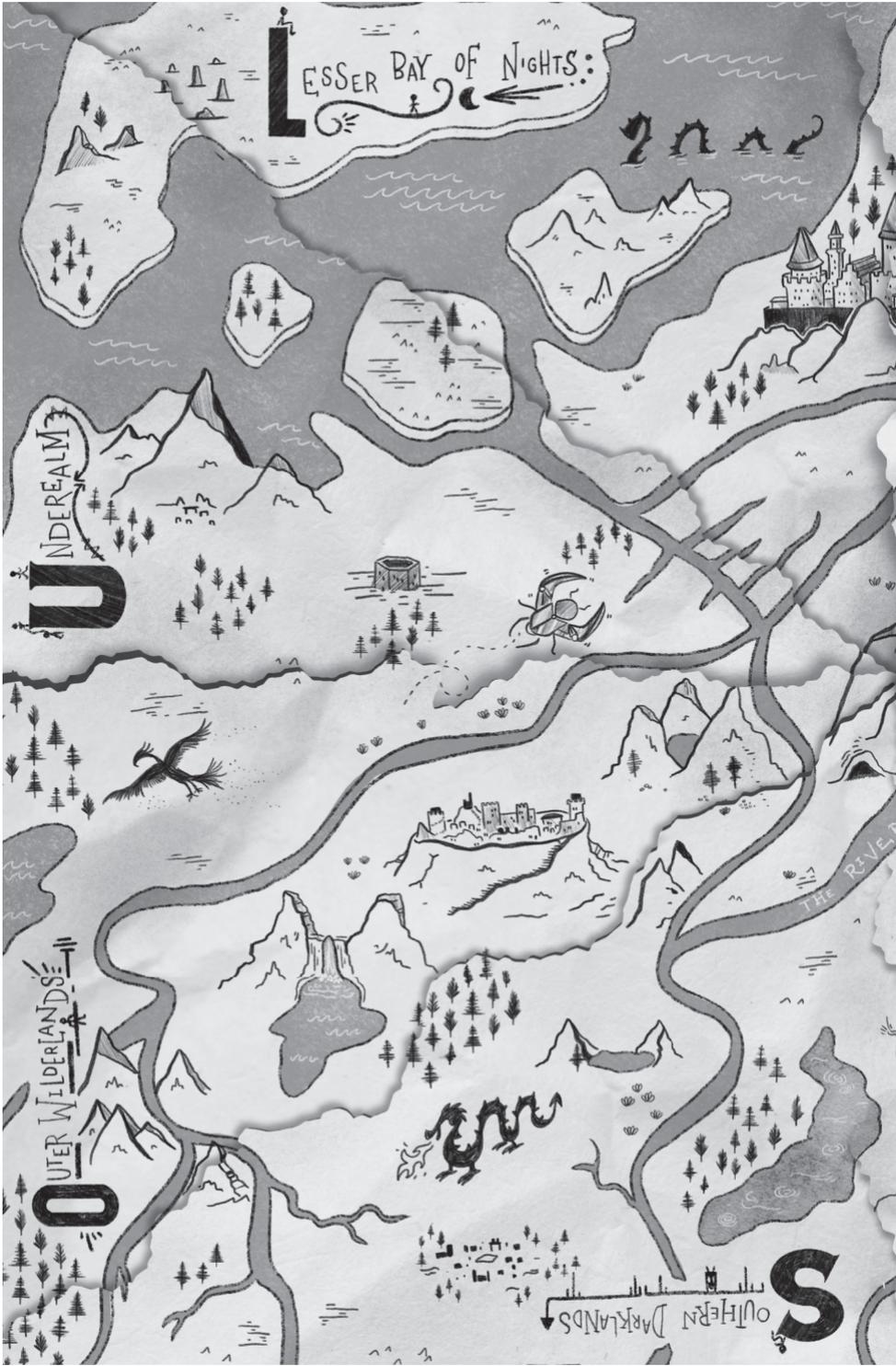


THE
LOST
SOUL
ATLAS



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LOTHIAN



LESSER BAY OF NIGHTS:

UNDERREALM

OUTER WILDERLANDS

SOUTHERN DARKLANDS

THE RIVER

LOWER HINTERLANDS

UPPER ISLES

SUNKEN DESERT

ROPCS of ID





Prologue

The Beginning

In the beginning, the Gods were bored. There was nothing to do any more. They had made their world and their creatures. They had played and built things and flooded things and dried things. And now they were bored.

The souls of the people weren't bored. They had memories to hold on to and stories to tell. They had loved ones to watch over and places to haunt. They quite enjoyed being dead.

But Gods can be jealous beasts, for why should people have all the fun?

And so the Gods decreed that when souls arrived in the Afterlife, they would enter a state of blissful unknowing. They would forget their time on earth. Memories were banished to the edges of the Afterlife.

And so it was.

It was the God of Winter Mornings who suggested they should all try a memory or two. Just to see what the fuss was about . . . The memories entered their beings, fed them smells and sights and sounds and feelings. For

a small time, the Gods existed purely within those small snatches of life. But once tried, the Gods wanted more. They wanted bigger, stronger memories. Memories to make them feel . . . alive.

The Gods took matters into their own hands. With just a flick of their heavenly fingers, they could create all the memories they needed. Destruction was rained down upon on the earth. Wars were waged. Walls were built. The earth was mined and torn and sundered. Seas rose and fires ravaged. Everything got a little hotter. Memories got a lot stronger. Souls arrived more quickly. Their memories hoarded more readily. The Gods feasted.

And so, it was.



Chapter 1

The End

And so, it was. This was it. The end. Twig couldn't look at those eyes. Or the arm aiming. It didn't tremble, that arm. Not even a bit. Neither did Twig. 'Go on. Do it then. I dare you.'

And the whole world exploded.



Wherever he was, it was dark. Deep dark. The thick, heavy dark that claws at your throat and scratches at your eyes. The kind of dark that picks you up and tosses you around and holds you close and whispers promises and pulls you apart. And just as Twig no longer knew if he even still existed, a neon sign burst into life and stilled him in its light.

WELCOME TO THE AFTERLIFE!

'Oh.'

That was the only word he could think of for quite some time.

The sign was broken. It made that fizzing, static sound that a loose connection makes, and the bulbs behind some of the letters flickered, spat and gave up. Without the bulbs, the sign now read

WE COME TO LIFE!

Twig shuddered and gave the sign a cautious poke. A whole string of lights blossomed around him, glittering and twinkling along the edges of an old cobblestoned path that stretched and twisted into the darkness. They made Twig think of the time they had all wrapped fairy lights along the graves between the shacks and bought fish and chips and—

*And the crows dive in for the chips and
'Here's to us! We're the Beasts of the City
Wilds!' and we all race to the top of the
gargoyle tomb so we can look out over
everything that's ours . . .*

The memory was like a snatch of dream, refusing to stand still. The more Twig tried to grab hold, the more his thoughts dimmed and fuzzed at the edges. He rubbed at his arms and wished he was in more than just his shorts and T-shirt. It wasn't the warmth he wanted, but the security of being wrapped tight. He peered into the dark stretching from the path. It was a forest, Twig

decided, a very thick, very dark, very foresty forest. Every so often, a branch would shuffle in the breeze and a leaf would catch in the twinkle of the lights. Twig imagined he could hear the rustle of branches being pushed aside, the snuffle of something lurking.

His head throbbed. What was it that had happened, exactly? He reached around to rub the pain from the back of his head and his hand came away bloodied. There had been something . . . It was silver and pointing and he'd known how dangerous it was, to be pointed at like that with . . . what was it? Twig could remember the laugh, cold and iced and hollow, that had sent shivers down his spine. The eyes he couldn't look at. The *clap. clap. clap.*

Another light fizzed into life, its bright red arrow pointing forward. 'OK. This way it is,' Twig said out loud, and was surprised by the dullness of his voice. Like he was being quietened. Everything seemed quietened. Even his footsteps along the path were just the whisper of a step.

There were more signs now. Twig slowed to read each one and to touch the letters. He liked the feel of something real and solid under his fingertips.

**BE WELCOMED AT OUR WELCOME
CENTRE! 2 MILES**

KEEP TO THE PATH!

YOU ARE SAFE AND HAPPY!

GOLDEN GATES AHEAD!

LEAVE YOUR TROUBLES BEHIND!

EVERYTHING IS FINE!

STAY ON THE PATH!

**EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE DROP-OFF POINT
– ALL BAGS TO BE LEFT HERE**

FOREST TRAIL CLOSED – ENTRY PROHIBITED

DO NOT FEED THE BANSHEES

IT IS ALL SO LOVELY HERE. JUST PERFECT.

Some signs were nailed on to wooden stumps, others lit in bright lights like the signs down the High Street and casinos where Twig and the Beasts would scout for dropped coins and open pockets—

*‘Watch it!’ and hands are reaching and
someone is yelling and the coppers are
pointing and . . .*

But the memory was like seeing something underwater, all vague and choppy and not quite there.

It made him a bit panicky, not being able to remember, but as soon as he thought that, another feeling washed over him, whispering through his mind, *Everything is so lovely here. Keep walking. You have nothing to worry about.*

‘I have nothing to worry about,’ Twig said, and kept walking. The further he walked, the lighter the sky became, like he was walking his way to morning. He focused on walking towards the light, and with each step, he felt his spirits lift, as if the light from the sky was seeping inside him. By the time he reached the **WELCOME CENTRE – 1.5 MILES** sign, it seemed that nothing really mattered any more. Even the forest didn’t seem so sinister. Twig paused to admire the brilliant swirling green of a leaf, fallen on the path, and watched as a line of tiny stick-figure people weaved their way across the cobbled stones and into the forest. They were like little drawings come to life. They hummed a happy sort of tune as they walked, and each one carried an assortment of bits and pieces on its head or back. Buttons, a ring, an ancient-looking bell. One had tied a string to an old rusted **MEETING SPOT** sign and was heaving it along the ground, inching its way slowly forward. The smallest of the figures turned to Twig and waved a little stick-figure wave. The kind of wave one gives an old friend.

That was when the *thing* saw Twig. Flying overhead, a darkened patch against the light blue of the sky. It had

been looking for the boy. Searching. And now it had him in its sights, it would not lose him again. It circled, closer and closer. And just as Twig started to walk again along the path, the thing clicked its beak and swooped.



Chapter 2

After Life

The thing dropped from the sky, landing hard and sharp on Twig's shoulder.

Twig yelled, grabbing at the thing and flinging it away. It clattered to the path in an explosion of bones, and the stick figures wailed and ran in every direction.

Twig's breath came in short, sharp gasps. Had he killed it? Whatever *it* was? Could something even *be* killed in the Afterlife? And what was a boned *thing* doing attacking him when everything was so lovely and . . . and . . . oh.

The bones began to shake. Wobbling and wriggling. Dragging themselves along the ground. Piecing their bits back together. One. Bone. At. A. Time. First came the clawed foot bones. Then the legs. Then all eight rib bones clattered together at once. Then the curved neck, and the particularly sharp beak, and finally the bones of both wings clicked together, screwed their skull firmly in place, then folded themselves rather angrily across their chest. Twig found himself trapped in the glare of a

skeleton bird. If a skeleton can be said to glare, which, Twig decided, it definitely could.

‘Well, now,’ the bird said, one clawed foot tapping in displeasure. ‘That wasn’t the kind of warm greetin’ I was expectin’. It’s lucky for you I’m not one to hold grudges, me.’ The skeleton hopped closer to Twig. ‘But I’m well glad I found you. I thought I’d gone and lost you, didn’t I? What’d you go and leave the Meetin’ Spot for? Didn’t you read the sign? It’s a spot for *meetin’*. The clue is in the name, see? I mean, I know I was a little on the late side, like, but it was only a minute, five at most, ten maybe, but re-aaaa-lly!’

‘Sorry. I didn’t see a sign at the meeting spot.’ Twig glanced at where the stick figures had dragged the rusty sign into the shadows.

‘Anywhatsit, all’s well that ends well. Now, where was we? Oh yes. I’m your Guardian. Krruk’s the name and how de do and shake hands and we’ll be home for break-fast.’

‘Hi, Krruk.’

‘No. Krruk. Krruk. Copy me now. Krruk.’

‘Krruk.’

‘Kr . . . never mind. That will do. I tell you now, you are lucky you got me. I’m the best Guardian of the lot, I am. You won’t remember all those times durin’ your alive years that you saw a raven guidin’ you through the trials and tribulations of livin’ because of the Forgettin’ that happens once you’re . . . well . . . dead, like. But, if

I do say, I was quite magnificent.’ The raven nodded at Twig and twirled proudly. ‘And it was probably me them times when you thought it was a crow lookin’ over you and all, because people are always gettin’ us confused, don’t ask me why, we don’t even look similar.’

Twig looked at the skeleton bobbing up and down. ‘So it was your job to keep me . . . alive?’

‘Exactly!’

‘But, I’m . . . dead, right?’

‘That you are. Oh. Right. Well. I see what you’re gettin’ at.’ The raven hopped awkwardly from foot to foot. ‘But what it is is, the mortal world can get more than a tad bo-rin’, you know. It’s all so teeeeeeedious. I was well bored. Was you bored? I figured you was bored . . .’ He looked at Twig, then pulled a black feather out from the empty space between his ribs. ‘Here. Have a feather. Raven’s feathers are good luck, you know. That should make you happy. Anywhatsit, yous are in a much better place here. Once we walk through them Golden Gates you’ll see. There’s a train. And gardens. And lots of people playin’ bridge. I hear they’ve yoga on a Tuesday too.’ The raven glanced at Twig. ‘And congratulations on the dyin’. Not many people die well nowadays but yours was a good ’n.’

‘Was it? I can’t really remember . . .’ His thoughts were all so thick and sludgy . . . there was—

‘Go on.’

and—

*That arm. And that laugh. And those eyes.
Someone is whispering to run. Run rabbit,
run rabbit, run run run. But running is so
very tiring. Everything is so very tiring.
There is only one thing left to say.
'Do it then.'*

The niggles of memory faded. 'Why can't I remember? I want to remem—'

'Oh now. Don't be daft. That life is done and dusted. No one remembers a thing here. By order of the decreewhatsit. Complete and blissful unknowin' – that's what's waitin' for you once you pass through them Golden Gates. You won't even know you've anythin' to remember in a bit. Isn't that great? Never have to worry about a thing.'

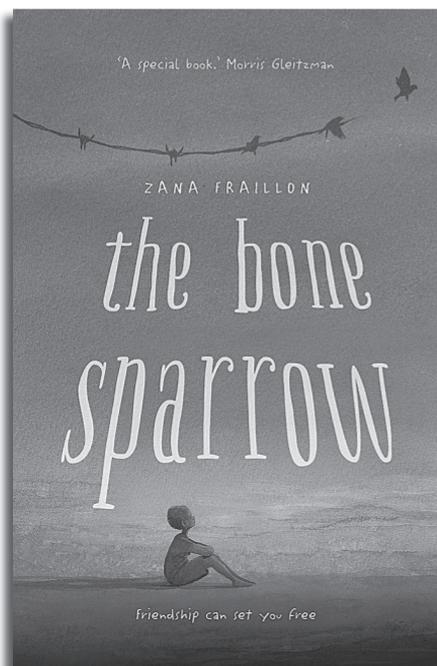
Twig didn't think that sounded great at all. It sounded . . . devastating. The loss tugged at his chest. Knowing that he had once felt something that he would never feel again. All those things that made him who he was . . .

He let out a small sigh, full of longing and sadness and want. The sigh was so small his Guardian didn't even hear it. But the wind picked it up, cradled it, bustled it higher and higher, then released it over the tops of the trees where it drifted gently into the forest below.

The creature dwelling in the shadows of the forest heard the sigh and nodded. She pulled the black hood over her head. 'The boy,' she hissed, and her clawed

hands clapped and clasped at the bones scattered on the forest floor. 'The boy is here,' she whispered, and the forest erupted into howls.

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