



Prologue

In the Five Realms, even the loneliest places have their secrets.

There is a good one, a dark one, hidden at the edge of the Icebark Forest, in the realm known as Hulstland.

Once a long strip of nothing – a mish-mashed mess of plains, swamps, forests and woodland – Hulstland was stitched together, long ago, by a rabbit called Cinder.

He started off as a chieftain, then became a king, then an emperor.

He gathered all the rabbit tribes and breeds and told them they belonged to him. Everyone from the Merel River to the edge of the Ice Wastes. And just to make a point, he built a wall across the top of the kingdom to keep them all in (and those scary Ice-Waste rabbits out).

The Cinder Wall has crumbled now – just a few broken battlements poking out of the snow. And next to it, the forest.

Not a green, thriving, rooty throng of tendrils and leaves like Grimheart. A cold, bare-branched thing, with ground as hard as iron, and thick, hoary frost covering the trees.

That is where the name Icebark comes from, and it is a harsh, unfriendly place.

The odd crow flaps between the branches. Small, skinny, white-furred foxes dart here and there, sniffing out shrews and mice under the crusts of dead leaves, interrupting their sweet sleeps with a horrible *crunch* and *chomp*.

But the secret . . .

At the forest's edge, where the trees are thin and straggly, is a tower.

Squat and stocky, it sits upon a hill, surrounded by toppled heaps of stone that might once have been buildings. Smudges of soot cover everything. The blackened outlines of old roofs jut upwards, the empty holes of windows and doorways gape. Whatever was once here, it was burnt and smashed to rubble a long, long time ago.

All except the tower itself. Whoever built it, built it well. The walls are thick, the mortar strong. There are four windows at the top, one on each side, all with a carved eye above, staring out over the lifeless forest and the plains beyond.

There are few rabbits that live this far north, but they all know of the place. *Evil-eye*, they call it. *Deathwatch*. *Doomgate*. They say it is the entrance to the Land Beyond, or the place death itself stares over the world, looking for rabbits whose time is up.

It is not somewhere you would like to visit, and definitely not a place anyone would choose to live. No wonder it has been smashed and abandoned, left to crumble and rot.

Except it hasn't. Not quite. Because just now, amongst the chill shadows of the tower itself, there



is a spark. A flash of light gleaming out of the gaping windows. It quickly blooms and flickers.

A fire. Someone has lit a fire. Which means the tower *isn't* empty. Whoever built it, lived in it, watched from it all those years ago . . .

. . . they are back.