



CHAPTER FOUR

Beneath the Bluebells

Nettle realized she was holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, half expecting something monstrous to burst from the treeline. Pushing past the gnawing dread that she could be pounced on at any moment, she crept along the road.

Ahead of her was a tall wooden sign with three planks nailed to it. Pointing right was the word *Gnarlton*, while the plank signalling left read *Shiverside*. Both forest towns. The final plank pointed back towards Twigswick.

Twigswick's warning bell continued to ring out as Nettle considered her next move. The last of the morning mist swirled around her ankles as she turned on the spot, trying to decide which way to go. Fir trees stretched skyward on

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either side of the trade road. Above them, gloomy clouds refused to let through even a sliver of blue sky. The only colour came from the dandelions spotting the grass below Nettle's feet, and a curious patch of red.

Nettle's stomach lurched. It looked like a puddle of blood. Then her mind settled and her eyes focused – it was just a patch of red primroses.

Beside the flowers was a narrow path edged with jagged rocks. Rangers were rumoured to use their own special trails to move around the forest. Perhaps this was one of them?

Leaving the road, Nettle followed it to the forest's edge, where two short, skinny trees had grown across one another. She'd heard tales about the magic of the woods. It wasn't just the Spirits and ghouls you had to watch out for – the trees might have minds of their own, too. Had the bent trunks in front of her grown into an X on purpose? Was it a warning not to enter?

But there was no going back now. She needed to find the Wildheart Rangers. Maybe this trail would lead her to their camp? Resisting the backwards pull of her fear, Nettle ducked under the crossed trees.

As she moved to stand on the other side, her foot struck something firm. She staggered forward, then regained her balance and looked down. A root poked out over the rotten leaves.

BENEATH THE BLUEBELLS

Had the tree *tripped* her?

No. She was just being clumsy. That was it. Rubbing her ankle, Nettle thought of Fern's chipped tooth. She needed to keep her wits about her to avoid injury. She picked up a long stick from the forest floor. It would keep her stable as she walked, and she could swing it at any monsters that might jump out. Not that a stick would be much use against the claws of a ghoul or Hollow Spirit thirsting for her soul.

As Nettle searched the forest's trees for the beady red eyes of monsters, or smudges of chalk that could mean the Chalk Twins had followed her, another thought entered her mind. What if the Shadow Stalkers got to her before she found the Wildheart Rangers? They could capture her and hold her mother to ransom, demanding coin and food in exchange for Nettle's return. Or worse – force her to become a part of their band of outlaws.

There was a chance Fern was with them, but Nettle still didn't believe she'd joined the Shadow Stalkers. Her sister wanted to fight the Gloom and its monsters, not team up with them.

Gnarled trunks and tatty plants loomed over the trail as Nettle pressed forward. The world inside Dryda Forest seemed to exist in constant twilight, as though the forest was allergic to the sun and had grown warped and tangled

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to protect itself. More than once, Nettle spotted glowing golden specks following her. They looked like fireflies tricked by the dim light into thinking it was dusk, but whenever she turned to inspect them, the gold dots disappeared.

Too busy twitching at every twig snap and animal noise, it took Nettle a while to realize the clanging of Twigswick's warning bell had faded. The forest was too dense for her to hear it, or she was just too far from the town. Either way, she wondered how the Wildheart Rangers heard the bells from deep in the forest, and how they could tell the difference between the chimes of the towns.

Soon Nettle came across a wooden post with a box on top. Carved across its front were two crossed arrows with a ring of leaves around them and a seed in the centre – the Wildheart Rangers symbol. Hoping the curious box could offer a clue to the location of their camp, Nettle lifted the lid. Inside were pouches full of dried fruits, seeds, oat bars, crackers, and a note saying:

*Provisions left on the seventeenth day of spring.
Patrol Nine.*

No clue. Just emergency snacks for trail-weary travellers. Nettle counted back. The seventeenth day of spring was only two days ago, which meant the food wasn't very old.

BENEATH THE BLUEBELLS

Suddenly hungry, Nettle tucked into a palmful of dried cranberries before crunching on the oat bar. The food tasted fine, and although the sealed jar of water that had also been left was stale, it was drinkable.

Even if it didn't help direct her to the camp, the snack box was a good sign – it meant this was a Rangers' trail. If she kept following it, she might run into a patrol.

The dreary spring day turned into a bleak evening all too quickly. Nettle kept an eye out for boot tracks in the mud, or more trail boxes, but there were no more signs of Rangers. The trees' long shadows spread outwards, seeping across the forest floor like inkblots. Nettle shivered. She hadn't had a chance to grab a coat before leaving, and with the long light evenings of summer still several months away, it would be night soon.

She was considering if she should stop – rather than risk stumbling around the forest at night – when, ahead of her, the forest gave way to a series of crumbling stone walls, rekindling Nettle's hope. Was this fortress the Wildheart Rangers' camp?

A line of waist-high rock pillars stretched around the stone structure. Nettle stepped past them.

'Hello? Is anyone there?' she shouted. On the other side of a weed-tangled wall was a broken arch, half a tower and a set of stone stairs leading to nothing but air.

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Nettle's heart sank. This wasn't the Rangers' camp; these were castle ruins.

In the middle of the decrepit remains was a courtyard covered in bluebells. Above the ruins, she could see sky. The cloud cover had finally broken, revealing the first of the night's stars. Nettle leant on the broken arch and fought back tears. She felt just as afraid and alone as when she'd first snuck into the woods six years ago.

'Where are you, Fern?' she whimpered, stroking her woven bracelet. Her sister had told her to touch it whenever she was afraid, but instead of sensing Fern and feeling comforted, unease crept over Nettle. Despite their beauty, there was something unnerving about the bluebells.

A few strides in front of her was a long patch of churned-up soil. Dead bluebells drooped in a ring around its edges. As Nettle studied the mound, the soil on top stirred.

At first, only a few clods rolled away, then more and more, as if a giant mole was burrowing its way up. Nettle froze as worms and dirt covered the flowers, the smell of damp earth overpowering their floral scent.

Something white started to push its way through the mud. White twigs, roots . . .? Nettle's blood ran cold when she realized what they really were.

Bones.

BENEATH THE BLUEBELLS

A skeletal hand rose from the soil . . . then an arm . . . then a skull.

Nettle watched, frozen in horror, as the rest of the skeleton emerged from beneath the bluebells. The ribs came next, but where the spine should have connected to hip bones, instead there was another, much larger ribcage. It wasn't until four skeletal legs were stomping the dirt from their bones that Nettle understood what she was looking at.

The monster had the head, arms and torso of a human joined at the waist with the body and legs of a horse. It was the Centaur. The most terrifying and deadly of all Dryda Forest's Hollow Spirits. Elder Warren said the Spirit had enough power to harvest the souls of entire towns.

Nettle opened her mouth to call for help, but the branches of her fear tree gripped her throat, strangling her scream.

Bending one of its horse legs, the Centaur knelt to pull a quiver full of long, sinister-looking black arrows from the ground. Crouched down, its empty eye sockets were level with Nettle's head. She tensed. Could the Spirit see her without any eyes?

The snap of bone echoed around the glade as the Centaur's jaw unhinged. It didn't need eyes to see Nettle, or vocal cords to let out a blood-curdling roar.

The Spirit's angry bellow shook Nettle out of her terrified

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trance. With the grace of a frightened rabbit, she dropped her stick and ran.

The crack of hoofs beating on stone echoed off the ancient walls as Nettle fled through the maze of crumbling ruins. The chaotic thudding sounded like a heart pounding in her ears. She was being chased by a monster, just like in her nightmares – only this time, she wouldn't wake up safe in her bed.

Too panicked to think more than one step ahead, she found herself running up the staircase to nowhere. Her boots skidded to a stop as she arrived at the last step with nothing but air in front of her.

The Centaur came to a halt, its front hoofs on the bottom stair and its arms holding its bow. With its bowstring taut, the monster aimed at Nettle, black arrow ready to shoot.

Nettle's legs felt like they might crumble to dust beneath her. This was it. Perhaps her nightmares had been a warning all along – foretelling what would happen to her if she was ever foolish enough to step into the woods again.

Then something glittered in the corner of Nettle's vision. She tore her eyes from the skeleton towards a tangled bed of weeds beneath the staircase. Golden specks – like the ones she'd seen earlier – floated on top of the blanket of matted plants.

BENEATH THE BLUEBELLS

Taking a trembling breath, Nettle jumped, hoping the years of untamed growth would cushion her fall. She felt a gust of air graze the top of her head as an arrow whooshed past, and the Centaur's angry howl shook the ruins. Her landing was both soft and sharp. The bed of plants caught her, releasing a swarm of gold dots that quickly flew away, but among the leafy weeds were stinging nettles and thorns. She left a clump of brown hair behind as she tore herself free of a briar's barbs.

Darkness engulfed Nettle as she fled the castle ruins, heading for the trees. Ducking behind the first trunk that was big enough to hide her, she pressed her back into its sturdy bark.

A bright flash lit up the shadows. She peeked out to see the Centaur's front hoofs battering against a wall of rune symbols. It fired another arrow, but this one just bounced off the wall of light. The Spirit was trapped inside the ruins by the line of stone pillars.

If Nettle had been as daring as her sister, she might have made a triumphant remark to round off her escape. But Nettle wasn't bold enough to gloat. She was just relieved to be alive.

However, her relief was short-lived. She let out a high-pitched scream as a hand reached from the shadows and touched her shoulder.

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Three cloaked figures stepped out from the trees. Light from the moon slipped through the canopy of branches, illuminating the strangers – although the upper halves of their faces remained hidden beneath carved wooden masks.

The Wildheart Rangers had found her.