

LEGENDS OF THE REALM • BOOK 3

THE
GOLDEN
VIAL



THOMAS
LOCKE


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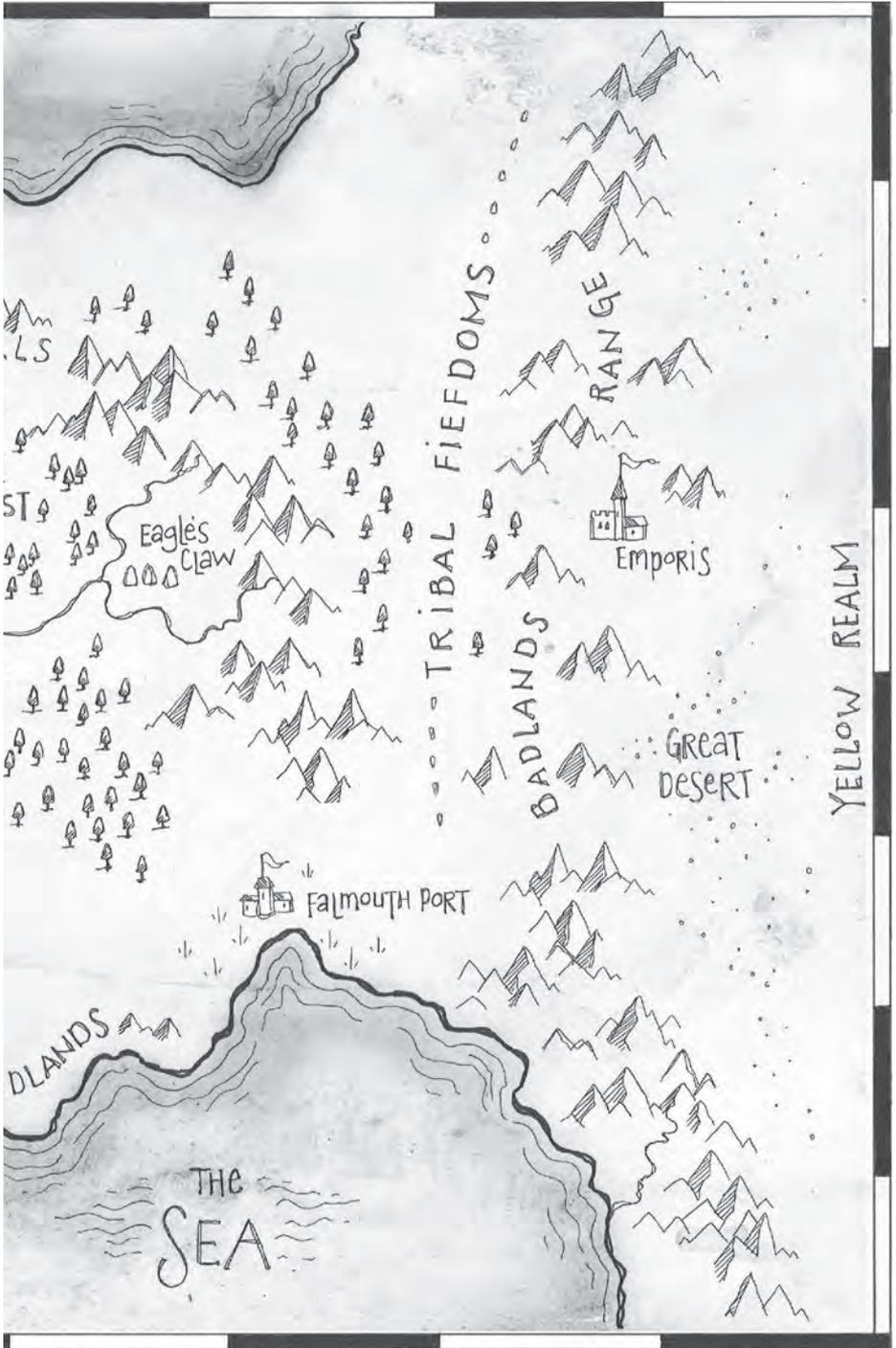
This book is dedicated to

Dr. Pei Lun Zhang

A dear friend and gifted healer



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Almost everyone in the village of Honor called Dally a fortunate young woman. She had, after all, survived the fire that had robbed her of home and parents and three brothers. For years Dally heard her family's cries echo through her darkest dreams. But she had not known that nightmare for over a month now. Not since the woman had started visiting her in the night.

These new experiences were no mere dreams. Dally had known from the very first moment that the woman was real, and her name was Shona.

What was more, Shona was coming for her.

Dally was three days shy of her eighteenth birthday. Which meant she was a full year away from an end to Norvin's guardianship. Not that she minded working in the mayor's kitchen. Serving under his wife Krim, however, was another matter entirely. The big-boned woman had managed to run off every serving girl they'd employed. No family in the Three

Valleys would allow their daughter to come work in this house. Dally did not know how she could endure another month with Krim, much less a year.

Krim had not always been so. When Dally had first arrived, the mayor's wife had been gruff and stern, yet loving in her own manner. But Krim had steadily become intolerable, driven to grim harshness by the shadows that now surrounded the Three Valleys. The problem was, Dally had no living relative and no money and nowhere else to go. Their region had been sealed off from the rest of the world for almost two years now. Not even news was getting through anymore. Dally had once considered the Three Valleys to be the finest place on earth. Now it was simply a cage.

Krim's screech rang through the kitchen window. "Scamp! Wastrel! Where are you hiding! There are cows to milk and butter to churn, and I'll not be feeding any urchin who sneaks from her chores!"

Dally crouched behind the pen holding the newest litter of wolfhounds. Norvin loved the dogs and treated them like his children. Krim tolerated them because they brought in more gold than the mayor's crops, though Norvin's fields were some of the finest in the Three Valleys region. The wolfhounds had always been fiercely loyal to Dally, minding her long before they learned Norvin's commands. Dally's ability to communicate with them had grown steadily over the four and a half years she had lived in what once had served as Krim's garden shed.

Norvin claimed this particular litter was the finest he had ever raised, for all eight of the dogs possessed a white streak

from snout to tail. It was said their silver fur indicated strength and loyalty and intelligence. All Dally could say for certain was, her secret bond had never been as strong as with this litter. But the dogs were fully grown now, waist high and trained and ready to be sold. Dally's heart cracked every time she thought of losing her most precious friends.

She tucked herself into the shadowed corner where the pen met the garden wall, shut her eyes, and looked through the dogs' eyes. She watched Krim shout and stomp about the yard, then retreat into the house, where she banged pots and yelled at the walls. These days, Krim was never happier than when she could scourge someone with her tongue.

Using her secret gift, Dally reached for the wolfhound whose power of smell was strongest, and sniffed the air. The dogs had a particular way of testing for distant odors. They did not inhale like humans. Instead, they sniffed once, twice, three times, tucking the wind into various pouches behind their nostrils and inside their cheeks.

There. Norvin was in the village hall. Honor's mayor was with elders who often visited their home and spent time with the dogs. Others, though, carried scents she had never known before. Which meant this particular gathering was of leaders from the entire Three Valleys. Dally quailed at the prospect of interrupting such a meeting. But she had no choice.

She checked once more to be certain Krim was turned away from the kitchen window. Then, quick as a flash, she rose and scaled the wall.

Dally scampered up the village's central lane. The adults of Honor might call her fortunate, but many village children

picked on her mercilessly. To her dismay, she saw the three young girls who considered her the ideal target point in her direction, and knew they'd be off to tell Krim where she was. Which only made her run faster still.

When she arrived at the village hall, the reins of three dozen horses were tied to the front posts. From within the hall, voices rose in strident anger or fear or worry, or all three.

Then from far down the lane rose Krim's furious screech. "*Dally!* You will come here *now!*"

She wished she had thought to rebraid her hair while hiding behind the dogs' pen. Now it was too late. She licked her hands and pulled the wayward strands from her forehead. She straightened her dress but did not bother to dust herself off. Dirt caked her legs up to her knees. A bit of dust on her dress would hardly be noticed.

She took a deep breath and climbed the three front stairs. "Dally! Girl, you better—"

Dally knocked once, loud as she could. Then she opened the door and stepped inside.

The council members were seated in a circle. Norvin frowned at the interruption and said, "Dally, this is not—"

"I have a message for you and everyone else who is gathered here," she declared.

Norvin had formerly been a cheerful man, full of great good humor. Even with all his valley now faced, Norvin's manner remained as gentle as his wife's was strident. But there were many reasons for Honor's leader to fret these days, and few occasions to smile. The creases on his face were new and deep. "Lass, it must wait—"

“An army is coming,” Dally announced. “Led by a lady.”

Krim’s footsteps thundered up the stairs and she powered into the room. She was a heavysset woman who nowadays barreled her way through any opposition. But whatever she was about to say was halted by the sight of every elder in the hall standing and gaping at the girl by the entrance.

Dally went on, “The lady asks for the use of the fields bordering the river. She knows this will ruin your crops, and she is willing to pay.”

One of the strangers demanded, “Is this some form of jest?”

“Dally has been with us since her family died in a fire over four years back,” Norvin replied. “Not once in all this time have I ever known her to joke about anything.”

The oldest member of their clan demanded, “How do you know of this woman?”

“We’ve been speaking together for over a month now,” Dally replied.

Krim demanded, “And precisely why am I only hearing about this now?”

“Krim,” her husband said.

“Well, I ask you, husband—”

“Krim.” When his wife went silent, Norvin asked, “She comes in dreams?”

“Not really dreams,” Dally replied. “She comes just before dawn, and we talk, and then she leaves.”

“A witch,” one of the strangers muttered.

“A queen,” Dally corrected. “Her name is Shona.”

The oldest of the women seated in the circle gasped.

Norvin demanded, “What is it?”

“Yagel often spoke of this one.”

“The forest tinker?” A greybeard snorted. “Not to me he didn’t.”

“Because you called him addled and wouldn’t offer the man a tin of cold water, much less listen to his news. You’ve been doing your best to stay blind to everything that’s been happening.” The woman turned back to Norvin and continued, “When the shadow-beasts began closing in—”

“We don’t speak of them here,” the greybeard said sharply.

“And it’s because we pretend they’re not out there that we’ve lost contact with the realm! We must do battle against the fiends, I say!”

“Elders, please.” Norvin gestured for calm. He asked the old lady, “So the tinker spoke of this woman?”

“Queen Shona, the first of her name,” the woman said. “Crowned by Bayard, the last of the Oberons. He knelt before her, offered fealty, and renounced any claim to the throne.”

“Bayard’s over in Falmouth Port,” the greybeard replied. But his earlier derision was gone now, lost to the curiousness of a young woman speaking of news from distant lands. “All the way over by the badlands.”

“And yet Dally here claims an army has crossed the realm and is coming to Three Valleys,” Norvin said. He studied Dally, then asked, “So this lady comes to you in the night and speaks with you.”

“Clear as you and me.” Dally hesitated, then decided they needed to hear the rest. “Except for today. This time she spoke while I was feeding the dogs.”

“What, just now?”

“That’s why I burst in like I did. I was to deliver you an urgent message. The lady knows of our troubles and she will offer us help. She says to tell you she can’t promise to make all our problems vanish. But she can make things better than they are now. And she will do her best to keep us safe.”

The valley’s elders pondered for a time, then Norvin asked, “Was there anything else, lass?”

“Just one thing,” Dally replied. “She arrives at dawn.”