



MERCHANT  
*of* ALYSS

THOMAS  
LOCKE

LEGENDS OF THE REALM

LEGENDS OF THE REALM • BOOK 2

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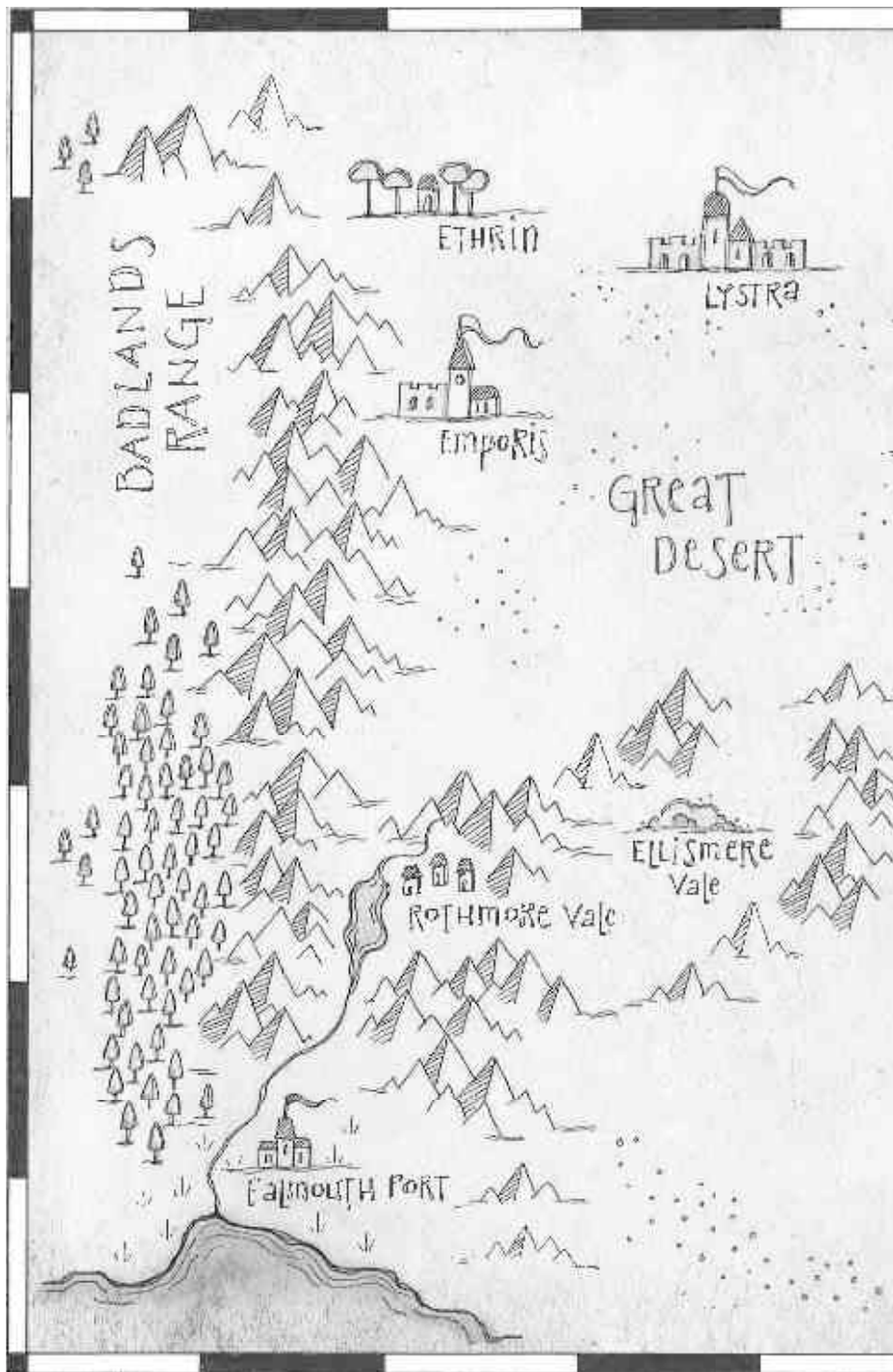
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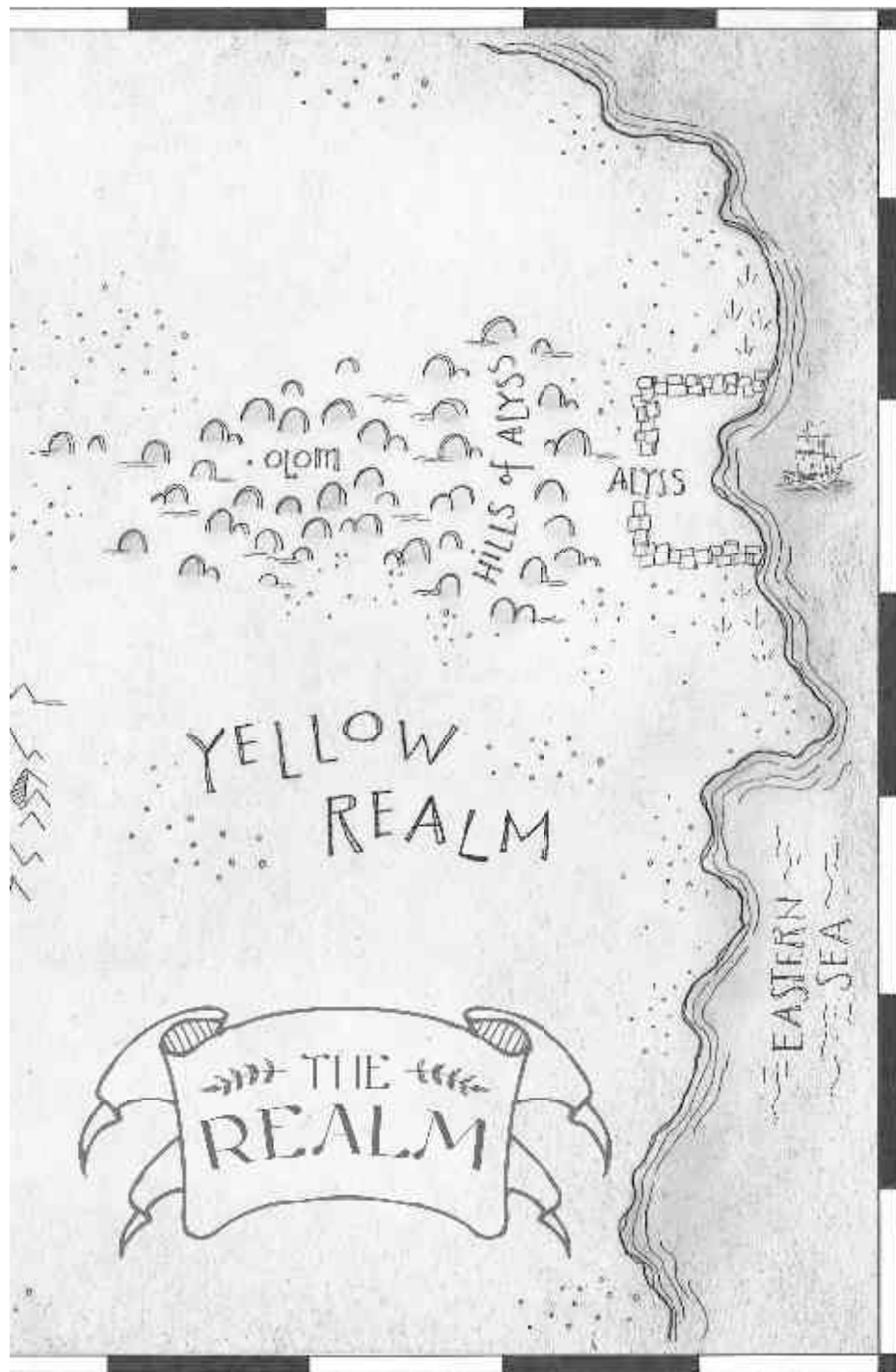
This book is dedicated to

Phyllis Tickle

Wise Counselor, Dear Friend



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# 1

Falmouth Port was gripped by a late winter storm. Upon the battlements, the cold bit like nature's acid. The broad stone passage that rimmed the city wall was made treacherous by fresh ice. The soldiers on duty endured long hours and searched silent roads. The avenue leading from Falmouth's main gate to the northern highway was empty. The wind seemed determined to drive the sleet straight through the night watch. After every circuit, they slipped inside the tower room for a mug of brew heated on their central fire. Which meant only one soldier noticed the solitary man that hour before dawn. At least, when the night was over and the guard was forced to endure the earl's harsh questions, he was fairly certain the lone traveler had been a man.

The stranger halted by the blacksmith stables. His back was to the distant vales and the lonely route leading to Emporis, the city at the edge of the known world. His cloak shivered



and rippled, but otherwise the tempest did not touch him. He seemed to study the gates and towers intensely, though the lone soldier could not be certain, for the traveler's face remained hidden beneath a cowl.

The soldier's unease mounted and twice he called for his mates, but the wind clawed the words away. The guard was young and courageous and known for his artistry with blade and bow. But the longer he stood there, the more his belly was gnawed by something he could not name. He gripped his sword's pommel and forced himself not to flee.

Finally the cloaked figure broke off his inspection and turned down a side lane. The soldier felt his chest unlock. He watched the empty road for a time, until his best mate clapped him on the shoulder and told him to go warm himself by the fire. But the young soldier knew he was obliged to take a dreaded move.

Gingerly he descended the icy stairs and pounded upon the door at the tower's base. "Officer of the watch!" He heard nothing in response save the wind's constant howl, so he pushed open the door and entered the tower's lower chamber. "Begging your pardon, my lady."

Captain Meda had been knighted by the earl following the Battle of Emporis. She had a well-earned reputation as a fierce brawler with a fiery temper. She was sprawled on the cot, her weapons heaped upon the watch table. All but the long knife in her hand. "What is it?"

"Thought I saw something, ma'am."

"Either you saw or you didn't. That's your duty. Not to think. Try again."

“A lone stranger. He stood at the point where the Emporis road meets the smithy’s stables. Watched us for a good long time.”

Meda swung her feet to the floor. “Is he there now?”

“No, my lady. He turned away.” He fidgeted, fearing a good old lashing for what sounded feeble now, here in the warmth and safety of the officer’s ready room.

But Meda seemed to find nothing amiss in his report. “No one else noticed?”

“I was the lone guard by the west tower. The gate is sealed, and the storm . . .” He shrugged. “Perhaps it was nothing, Captain.”

“Your name. Corporal Alembord, is it not? Recently arrived from . . .”

“Havering. Yes, ma’am. With the last ship.”

“Just in time for winter.” She offered a tight smile, meant to reassure. “Now tell me why you felt this deserved my attention.”

“Something about the man made me clench up tight as a fist. And . . .”

“Go on, Corporal. Speak your mind.”

“The cloak he wore wasn’t touched by the wind. He stood facing straight into the storm, but the cowl that covered his head . . .”

Alembord halted as the captain leapt from the bed. The snarl on her face caused him to take an involuntary step backwards, ramming into the door.

Meda demanded, “What was the cloak’s color?”

“Couldn’t say, Captain. Not in this storm. The torches

lining the road were all doused. All I could see was his silhouette.”

She reached for the scabbard and belted it to her waist. “Where did he go?”

“Down the side lane.” This time, when the snarl reappeared, he knew he was right to have come. “Toward the emissary’s home.”

“Twenty men, Corporal. Armed and in the forecourt. Three minutes.” She flung open the door. “Who is the wizard on duty?”

“Wizard? Ma’am, we’re ordered to have nothing to do with that lot down in the palace cellars—”

His words were cut off by a blast that dwarfed the storm and shook the palace. Alembord and the captain were both flung onto the flagstones.

Meda scrambled to her feet and leapt through the door. “Alarm! Sound the alarm!”

Alembord forced his limbs to obey his addled brain. He struggled into the palace forecourt and used his sword’sommel to pound the brass gong. Another blast ripped the darkness, illuminating the troops who scrambled and slithered across the icy stones. Alembord managed to hold to his feet, though he quailed at the sight of sleet turned to flying rubies by the illumination. He rang the alarm as lightning flashed red as the dawn he feared would never come.



The road leading to the forest was empty, which was hardly a surprise, for it meandered past frozen corrals and empty

stables and unoccupied hovels. When the crimson mage of Emporis had been defeated a year and a half earlier, the wild border clans had returned to their valley fiefdoms, but only after swearing fealty to Bayard, Earl of Oberon and Lord of Falmouth Port. Some claimed Bayard was also the rightful king of all the realm. But they did so softly, even here in the heart of Oberon's land, for throughout the rest of the human realm such words carried a death sentence.

The traveler stopped a second time where the emissary's grove met the lane. This would hardly be cause for notice, were it not for the hour and the storm. All the city's dwellers paused here from time to time. Many made it a destination when courting or simply filling an idle hour. Legends were recounted here, about green-skinned people that emerged from the forest and secretly planted the trees. About battles that ravaged the land with forces not seen for over a thousand years. About the man who dwelled in the unseen house within the supernatural glade. None denied the fact that magic had been applied, even though the obscure sciences were officially forbidden throughout the realm. But here, in this place, the power of enchantment rose in silent defiance to all such human laws.

Between the emissary's grove and the western forest stretched a vast expanse of stumps and knee-high new growth. Over the previous decade, the woodland had been cut back three hundred paces by the refugees. Clansmen who had managed to escape the crimson rider's wrath had cut the forest to erect crude huts. The emissary's grove had been planted just seventeen months earlier, the same season when

the badland refugees returned to their vales and sought to rebuild their lives. Yet the glade that began where the traveler stood was already taller than the city gates, with trunks thick as a warrior's girth. Some who stopped here claimed they could actually hear the trees grow. On this night, however, the only sounds were the shrieking wind, a distant shutter pounding against an empty window, and ice cracking on tree limbs as they danced.

A narrow lane of white stones weaved through the emissary's grove. The stones were another marvel, as none had ever seen the like before. Some claimed they were a gift from the Ashanta, a telepathic race few had ever glimpsed. The Ashanta were said to fashion their fabled cities from these very same stones, which led to much conjecture over what this meant, being laid as a path through a glade all knew to be enchanted. The softly glowing lane curved twice as it passed through the trees, so that the emissary's home and its surrounding gardens remained unseen.

The stranger stood there for a time, long enough for anyone else to freeze solid. Yet he seemed as untouched by the tempest as the emissary's glade. The tall trees blocking the stranger from the home moved less than the traveler's cloak. Were it possible, it might have seemed that the trees watched him intently. Waiting to see what he might do next.

The traveler started forward.

Instantly the trees bowed inward, lacing their branches together.

The traveler backed away. The trees now blocked the lane with a shield of bare winter limbs, woven tight as a wicker wall.

The traveler snarled a curse and opened his cloak. Attached to his belt in the same manner that another might carry a sword was a wand carved with a multitude of symbols and topped by a glass orb the size of a thumbnail.

The wizard raised the wand above his head, aimed the tiny orb at the glade, and droned a few words, enough to light the orb and the woven limbs with a crimson fire.

The branches trembled as the force sought to wrench them apart. But the trees revealed their own power as they resisted the command and the blast and the shaking of the earth. Instead, when the tremors and the fierce red lightning ended, the remaining trees drew together more tightly still.

The wizard roared a spell with such fury his words emerged in a writhing spew of fire. The verbal onslaught joined with the orb, which burned now with a blinding ruby light. The power crackled and hissed through the air before blasting into the grove. The earth shook more violently still with the second spell's power.

The first line of trees was demolished. The sleet was tainted by the bitter taste of magical ash. Not even the stumps remained. The nearest empty hovels were also flattened by the backlash.

But beyond this new destruction, the trees appeared more tightly woven than before. Thirty paces deep the grove stretched, every tree now a living guardian. Intent upon sacrificing life for duty.

Again the wizard raged his volcanic spell. Again the lightning blasted. Another line of trees was reduced to flames that hissed and vanished.

The wizard started to unleash another detonation. Then he realized that the glade was now on the move.

Trees to his left and right ripped their roots free of the frozen earth. They moved with the sullen grace of Ancients. The earth shivered from the impact of their gnarled limbs striking the frozen ground. They encircled the spot where the traveler stood, closing off his escape.

Then they started in. Now they were the ones on attack.

The wizard lifted his wand high over his head. He shouted words not heard in a thousand years. The tempest plucked at him, shredding the cloak and then the mage into a million crimson flecks.

The wizard and his wand were gone. The sentinel trees swatted at the swirling mist, but they might as well have sought to halt the sleet.

The trees remained as they were for a time. But when shouts arose from where the forest lane joined the highway, they clumped and they marched and they rejoined the glade.

When the first grey glimmer of daylight forced its way through the tempest, the human soldiers and palace courtiers who gathered by the emissary's white-stone lane could find no sign of anything amiss. Even the ash was gone.