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## Prologue

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*A disclaimer on style:*

*Every four sections, beginning with this one, will assuredly indulge in the questionable use of footnotes in the very midst of the narrative, and sometimes quite overly so.*

*The majority of chapters, however (those which are not of the every-fourth kind) will refrain entirely from this practice, in favour instead of exploring the elongation of its exposition by other objectionable means - such as the famously avoidable run-on sentence - with liberal sprinklings of curious, nonsensical syntax and peculiar punctuations, for added and unpredictable effect. You will find quite a bit of that here, and there, and all over the place.*

*Whether the Reader is a lover or a hater of footnotery or sundry other sorts of incorrectly extended proser, they are either-way advised to expect longish yammering and wandering within, to both love and to not, amidst the rambling records of this curious plot.*

*Please approach the following pages with curiosity and optimism, or some suitable alternatives.*

*-BBB*

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Harlo the Hale Harbinger was one Hex of a hooded hero, in his time. There were naturally other hooded rats who had a thing or two which stood them out from all the rest, of course. That's how the World goes, you know - not every rat or other sort of mortal thing is created altogether equal - some apparently have hoods, for example - but every one is created to be something more than they started out as being, certainly.

Harlo was created to be a *True, Known Hero*, as it happens. And as is so often true of True, Known Heroes, Harlo hadn't known at all that this was true of himself, until he had to choose to be one, or else otherwise not. The choice had been his, to make on the spot. And he had, and now here we are. There wouldn't have been a story otherwise. Or at least, not this one, his.

For this to have happened - for Harlo to have chosen to be the True, Harbinger, Hooded Hero that he had become, he had to first believe that this was possible at all - even for a single moment, just one. Belief doesn't need much of a window, you know, to get its foot squarely in your doorjamb. Then it's all over for you, and also begun: you've managed to see, and cannot un-see, the Hero that you might, some Soondaii, become.

Maybe. There's always that *maybe*; the choice still has to be one's own, to make or not. Otherwise, there was no choice at all.

What kind of Harbinger was Harlo, anyhow? At first, not one of any sort. It took him walking into a town on the Very Verge of Despair - and on exactly the right wrong afternoon - bearing not much noteworthy news, to earn that title, fair and square. Then he became the best one: The Greatest Harbinger Ever Known.<sup>1</sup>

The Folk of Foggy Hollows (the town on the Very Verge, of which I speak), never needed more news, back then. It was a town quite known already for having had too much of that: more news. When the Great Change began creeping from the North and West, in the Year of the Nought, across the nameless plains of ill omen, and toward the Very Verge of Despair - beyond which by a mere stone's throw, the tiny town of Foggy Hollows squatly sat, awaiting that Final, Great Boot to drop (the Boot here, being mostly metaphor, mostly) - the townsfolk wearily reacted with a practiced and

collective sigh. *Wonderful*, they all thought, and not for the first time - *here comes some more news*.

Shops closed (possibly for good, again), people hammered extra boards across their shuttered windows (the town's old Window Boarder always doing well, in spite of occasional spells of relative calm), and visitors were ominously told, once more, they had *best leave, before it was too late*. That's the kind of place Foggy Hollows was. The name too, really, should have been a clear clue.

To *those* Folk, at least, news had only ever arrived as one sort alone: the very bad sort. Harbingers, therefore, were welcomed in that same light, for who would ever want one showing up, anyway, when news was known to never, ever be good?

There was a sign at the bridge outside of town, in fact, which read: **No more news required - Harbingers need not approach**. None there had thought for a moment that news might be anything other than wholly unwelcome, is what I mean to convey.

But then Harlo the Hooded Rat arrived, ignoring the sign (being unable to read at the time), and got busy being the Hero he had been created to be, by delivering a short and unremarkable prophecy, which we'll get to eventually.

And now I am getting far too ahead of things, here. I am not the right teller for this tale any more, and it is no longer for me to decide when we get there, just how, or what for.

That is all for Maevis B. Morgan to bring herself around to doing, in all the ways that Maevis goes about doing stories, which are entirely her own.

You'll meet Maeve in a short moment, now. I must depart; I have been asked to bear witness to the starting of other tales in other places, and I am already running several hundred words late.

I hope you enjoy following the entangled tales of Maevis Morgan and Harlo the Hooded Harbining Rat as much as I have enjoyed bearing witness to

them, so far as they've come.

-F.J.H.

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1. The Very Verge of Despair is a place in the Allegoriian Isles. It is a region bordering the vast, nameless plains of ill omen.<sup>3</sup> It separates this plain from the Realms of Folk.<sup>4</sup> It is located somewhere on the Isle of Nought.<sup>5</sup> This is where the Great Change had chosen to make its presence known, in the year approaching that of which we speak.<sup>6</sup>
2. Which is where our story starts, departs, and returns to, now and then. ↩
3. It is customary in some places of the Isles to not give places of ill omen any name at all - especially a capitalized one. You have to understand the level of superstition one encounters in a world where there very clearly *is* magic nearly everywhere. Nothing makes a lot of sense, but sometimes it makes just enough.
4. Which is where the Folk live. People, and any species People eventually deemed (by People) to be sufficiently People-like, and worthy of being called so, and so on.
5. Where the Nought is rumoured to have begun to be so insatiably spun. More on this phenomenon at some much later time - we are destined to need to deal with it at some future point. So say the Prophecies.
6. The Great Change is an event of Worlds-altering relevance, which began as a rather sudden encroachment of the Seas, on the border regions of the Realms of Folk, which brought with it no small amount of trouble - including, as you might surmise of a world filled with dungeons and subterranean labyrinths and entire kingdoms of caverns, no small number of un-Folklike refugees of previously unsettling disposition. The Great Change was not at the time considered anything Great, by nearly anyone at all.<sup>7</sup>
7. Except, of course, for the Chaos Warlocks. Chaos Warlocks always love when things go thoroughly sideways, it seems. ↩