

The **LAST** **FIREHAWK**

The Ember Stone

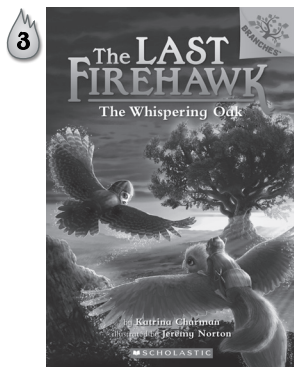
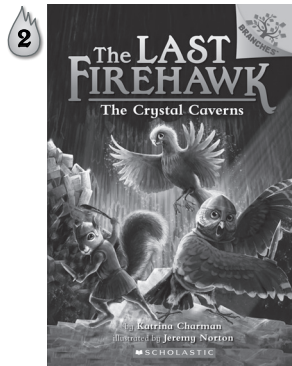
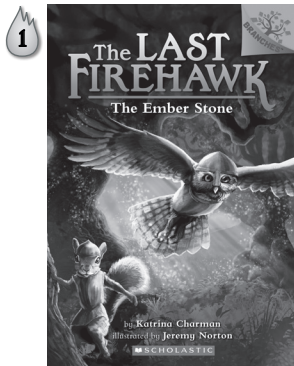


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The LAST FIREHAWK

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For Maddie, Piper, and Riley. —KC

Thank you to my parents, who showed me the value of art. —JN

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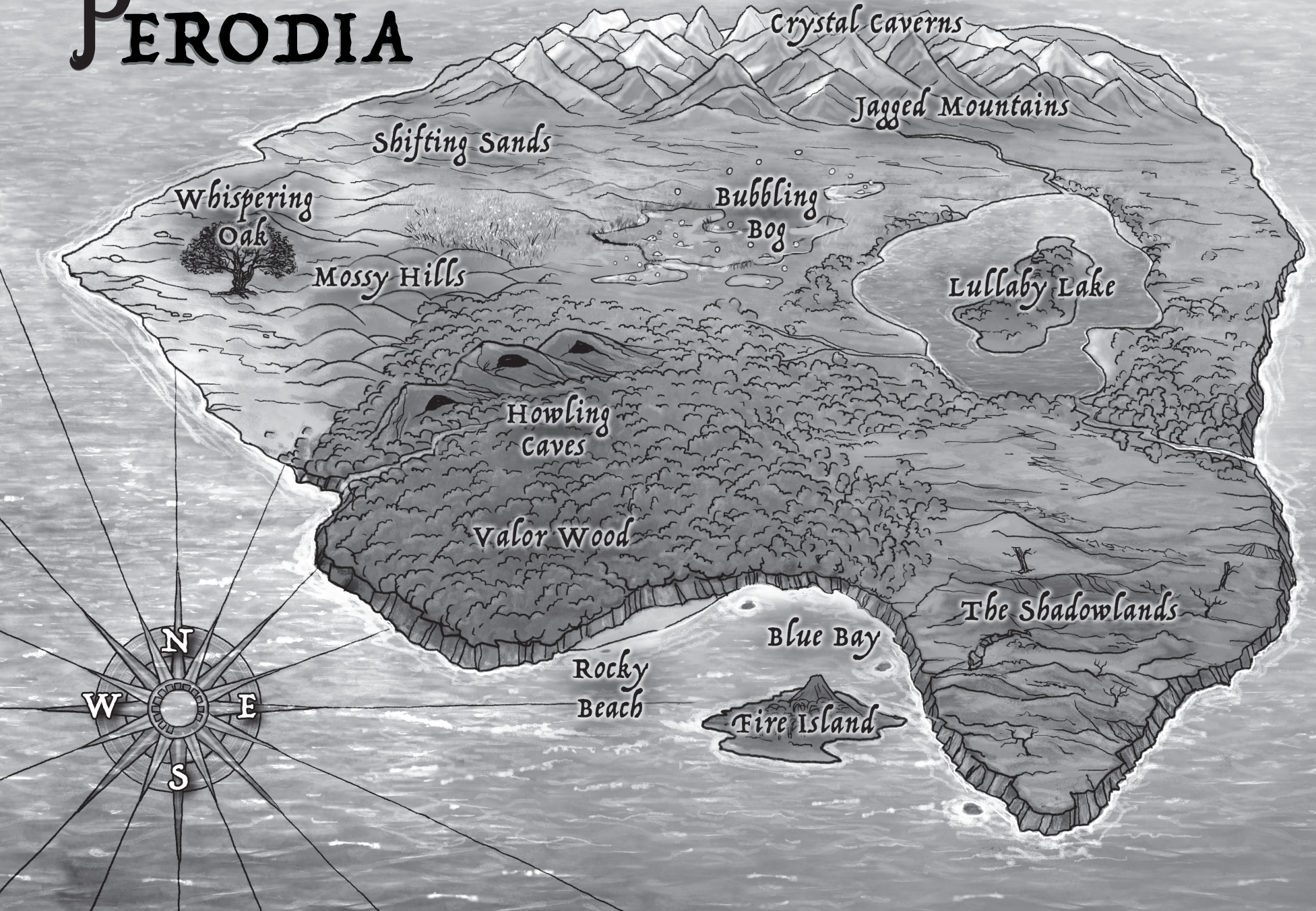
INTRODUCTION

In the enchanted land of Perodia, lies Valor Wood—a forest filled with magic and light. There, a wise old owl named Grey leads the Owls of Valor. These brave warriors protect the many creatures of the wood. But a darkness is spreading across Perodia, and the forest’s magic and light are fading away . . .

A powerful old vulture called Thorn controls The Shadow—a dark magic. He is using it to destroy Perodia and the homes of all who live there. Rivers are drying up. Trees are losing their leaves. Thorn will not stop until Perodia is destroyed.

Tag, a small barn owl, dreams of becoming an Owl of Valor. He wants to protect his forest. He wants to fight Thorn and his army of spies. But Tag needs more than just courage and bravery. Only the brightest magic can beat the darkness.

PERODIA





TRAINING TIME

TA-RAAAA! A horn sounded through Valor Wood.

Tag watched as owls of all sizes swooped down from the trees.

Training time! Tag thought, excitement bubbling in his tummy.

He hopped off his branch to join a group of young owls.

Maximus, the captain of the Owls of Valor, stood in the center of camp.



“You are all here to learn how to fight,” Maximus announced. “As you know, our magical forest is in danger. Only the bravest warriors can protect it. And only the bravest warriors will become Owls of Valor.”

Tag puffed up his chest. He wanted to become an Owl of Valor more than anything.

“Choose your weapons!” Maximus yelled. His voice had one setting: Very Loud.

The weapons were lined up. Tag stood beside a bow and arrow—too tall. Next, he lifted a sword—too heavy. He picked up a shiny dagger—it was just right.



Tag chose the smallest shield—it was as big as he was!

I may be small now, but I won't give up until I'm strong enough to hold the biggest shield, Tag thought.

All day, Maximus showed the young owls how to duck and dive. Tag attacked tree trunks with the dagger. His wings got weaker as he struggled to hold the heavy shield.

SCREE-EEE! Suddenly, Grey flew down to land beside Maximus. His bright yellow eyes sparkled with magic.

The owls gathered around in silence, waiting for their leader to speak.



“All animals are now forbidden to go near the Howling Caves!” Grey said.

Tag raised his shaky wing. “But . . . why?” he asked. The caves were his favorite place to explore.

“The caves are too dangerous,” Grey warned. He waved a wing and an image appeared beside his head.



Tiger bats! thought Tag.

The tiger bats' huge, orange eyes glowed. Their long, sharp beaks snapped at the air.

"Thorn's army of tiger bats has been seen near the caves," Grey said. He waved his wing again and a dark cloud appeared. In its center was the tiger bats' master, Thorn.

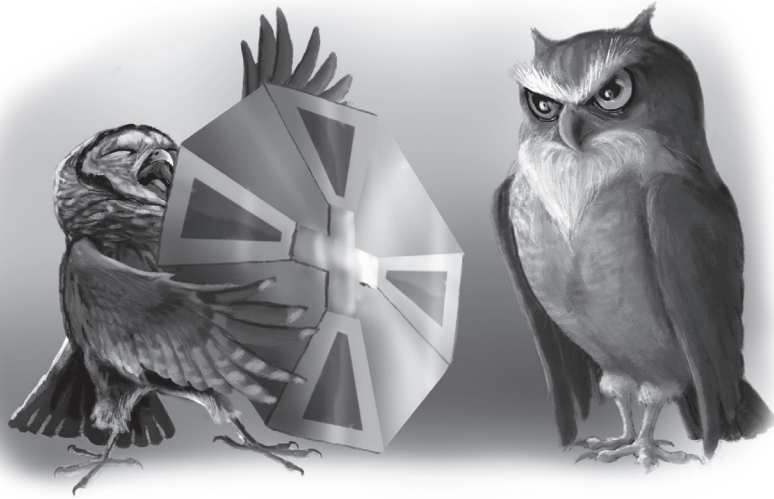
Tag shivered. The old and powerful vulture would stop at nothing to destroy Valor Wood.



Grey's magical cloud disappeared. He stretched out his huge wings and flew off.

"Back to training!" Maximus yelled. "Find a partner!"

The owls quickly paired up, leaving a large, brown owl named Bod for Tag to work with. Tag held up his shield and stood as tall as he could while Bod looked him up and down.



The shield slipped from Tag's tired wing. It clattered to the ground.

Bod laughed. "You'll never be an Owl of Valor! You can't even hold a shield!"

Tag felt his face burn.

They practiced until Tag could barely hold his dagger.

"That's enough for today!" Maximus shouted.

Tag looked at Bod. *I may not be big and strong, Tag thought, but I am brave enough to be an Owl of Valor. I'll find a way to prove it!*



AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY

Tag stomped through the woods on his way home.

He heard a rustle nearby. Someone . . . or *something* was watching. Tag picked up a stick. Footsteps scritch and scratched through the dry leaves.

Closer. Closer. Until . . .