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A Voice in The Dark – [Re]Constructing Josey Knight: Narrative, Time, and Memory in This Hollow Vale

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A Voice in The Dark – [Re]Constructing Josey Knight: Narrative, Time, and Memory in *This Hollow Vale*

Peter Simpson
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Novel and accompanying exegesis submitted to the University of
Huddersfield in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted: January 2022

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Rationale for Extended Wordcount

The word count for the creative component of this alternative format thesis is 121,135 words (not including title page, dedications, and contents page as per submission rubric). The University guidance for an alternative format thesis is that it would not normally exceed 80,000 words. *This Hollow Vale* is an epic fantasy novel the writing of which has entailed substantial worldbuilding, the creation of a large cast of characters inhabiting multiple temporalities, the establishing of various distinct regional cultures, and the realisation of a complex allegorical plotline. The canvas required to bring these constituent parts together organically demands the longer form of novel typically seen in this genre (in familiar works such as Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* (2015), Tolkien's *The Fellowship of The Ring* (1954), *The Name of The Wind* (2007) by Patrick Rothfus, Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2016), among many others). To compensate for this weighting, I have made every effort to keep the critical component of the thesis towards the lower side of the 15-25K word limit recommended in the university guidelines.

Peter Simpson

Abstract

This Hollow Vale is an epic dementia fantasy that explores the nexus between time and narrative, music and memory, and identity and consciousness, in a creative attempt to represent the interior life of a protagonist with Alzheimer's disease. The novel reflects a growing contemporary fascination with the narrativisation of dementia, fuelled by constant media interest and burgeoning individual and societal experience of the syndrome. Nevertheless, despite the fact that there are now many cultural texts featuring dementia – including successful fictional representations across a wide range of genres, the use of epic fantasy in *This Hollow Vale* makes it distinctive, perhaps even unique. The novel draws attention to the plight of those living with a dementia diagnosis by presenting a mature female protagonist (a former opera singer) seemingly silenced by Alzheimer's. *This Hollow Vale* opens with 70-year-old Dame Josephine (Josey) Knight clinging to life in a nursing home, isolated by her dementia and largely forgotten by family and friends. When fire engulfs her room, death seems inevitable. Inexplicably, however, Josey sidesteps this fate and finds herself translated into a parallel world (the Vale of the title), a dystopia where music is outlawed, and singing is considered a dark art. On waking in The Vale, it seems Josey possesses strange powers linked to her voice that cause those she encounters to believe that she's the reincarnation of a saint. Josey becomes a figurehead for The Vale's rebel movement, and her adventures while trying to find her way back home form the greater part of the novel. In two sections, the accompanying exegesis considers how the fantasy novel has been employed to effect this representation. It focusses on a key aspect of the narrativisation process – the use of time – before going on to offer a comparison between the way characters with dementia are represented in *This Hollow Vale*, and in three other novels featuring protagonists with similar diagnoses: *Turn of Mind* by Alice LaPlante, *Elizabeth is Missing* by Emma Healey, and Naomi Krüger's *May*. Far from being an inappropriate vehicle for the exploration of radical or ethically complex issues (such as those faced by someone living with Alzheimer's), the fantasy genre not only provides opportunity for the temporal experimentation which has been central to this interpretation of the subjectivity of dementia, but more importantly, it also offers an imaginative platform from which the stifling conventions of ageing and illness in our society can be challenged. In a time of mass upheaval and moral uncertainty, where the vital function of elderhood seems to have been lost, and when our response to diseases such as Alzheimer's often calls into question our understanding of what it means to be human, it has never been more important to actively engage in re-imagining dementia. *This Hollow Vale* sets out to show this process at work, and by exploring the intricate consciousness and undeniable humanity of a protagonist with dementia we are asked to pause and reflect on our own consciousness and humanity, a request that is as crucial as it is timely.

Acknowledgements

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Peter Simpson

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This Hollow Vale

A Novel

Mavis Simpson
1934-2021

This Hollow Vale

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**We live in a constellation
Of patches and of pitches,
Not in a single world,
In things said well in music,
On the piano, and in speech,
As in a page of poetry --
Thinkers without final thoughts
In an always incipient cosmos[...]**

—Wallace Stevens, July Mountain, 1955

Prologue

High in the canopy of an ancient ash, hawk watches the upturned face of the dale in the slack minutes before dawn. Eyes like hammers take in the empty car park, punch across the deserted lawns, and hunt away down the fellside beyond the boundary walls of the big house. Around her, the air is saturated with song, yet she remains silent. Let blackbird, thrush, and lark sing themselves hoarse; hers is an older music by far, long in beak and claw when glaciers still covered this valley. She carries no tune, knows no stories, makes no loud boasts, and drags nothing into the present moment save her intimate knowledge of life and death; yet here is the true bard of Scardale, nonetheless. And when morning finally breaks around her, she rises to meet it, her blacksmith wings beating the sky blue, shrieking into the void like a banshee.

“My mother used to say that I came out of the womb singing.

Of course, Margaret was a serial liar and religious fantasist who already had her hands full with three boys and an alcoholic Finnish husband, so I can’t vouch for her truthfulness. On the other hand, I did join the school choir at Holy Name when I was seven, sing ‘Trasna na dTonnta’ at the Irish centre on St Patrick’s Day when I was nine, and perform Schubert’s ‘Ave Maria’ for the bishop at St Anne’s Cathedral at the age of twelve – three pillars of progress as a young singer that are, thankfully, a matter of public record. And I guess if I’m still around in my 90s, I’ll be croaking out ‘Caro mio ben’ to anyone that will listen [...]

Colleagues talk all the time about their love of singing; they make it sound romantic and aspirational – like a fondness for fine wine, or a passion for interior decorating.

For me it’s not like that.

I don’t sing because I want to, I sing because I need to. It’s a compulsion. Like drugs or drink. And what’s strange and wonderful about my addiction is that on those rare occasions when I manage to sing myself someplace else ... I can take you with me.

That's my gift.

When I was in my twenties, I used to think that singing was an escape from real life, but now I'm pretty sure it's the other way around: singing's all there is. Until I open my mouth, I'm no-one. But when you hear this pair of lungs, these lips, this larynx, and this heart sing ... then you've truly met me."

[Levin, P., (1999), *Dame Josey – A Knight at the Opera*, London: Random House, p7.]

About Josephine Knight, DBE

Blessed with a warm lyric voice, soprano Josephine Knight – born in 1948 in Leeds, West Yorkshire to Irish/Finnish parents – rose from working-class poverty to become a global superstar. At the height of her operatic career, she shared the stage with household names such as Plácido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti and Kiri Te Kanawa. In 1993 she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's birthday honours list for services to opera.

Chapter 1 – Scardale Grange

In the first rays of the morning sun, Scardale Grange looked serene. White-washed limestone walls and deep-set windows made the place seem as if it belonged exactly where it was, hunkered in high over Scardale, as much a feature of the landscape as the sheep that grazed on the shoulders of the dale or the river that wound about its feet. The house stood alone in tiered gardens and pastureland that tumbled away down a steep fell, until they met and merged with Forestry Commission plantations near the valley bottom. Though extended twice — once in the 1860s by a gentleman farmer with a young family, and again in 2000 when the present owners decided to substantially transform the property by building a new west wing — the Grange still managed to look more like a country seat than a nursing home; and despite its deceptive size it had never been described as sprawling, soulless or impersonal by those that came knocking at the heavy oak front door. On the contrary, the house gave the impression of hidden depths, of secrets nurtured and of loss borne without complaint.

Emerging from the scented gloom of closely planted pine trees, the valley levelled off and a path threaded its way out into a flood meadow where indigo-blue eyelets of field scabious and bright yellow cowslips nodded sagely in the breeze. A seasoned hiker could make the journey on foot from top to bottom of the dale in less than two hours, but for the Grange's elderly inmates, an expedition of such magnitude was unthinkable. Their ordered lives ended at the white wrought-iron gates and many of them — with nothing but the rhythmic pulse of three square meals a day, the babble of daytime television, and the blandishments of the medicine trolley against which to measure their existence — had retreated inside themselves to such a degree that they remained blissfully ignorant of the splendour of their surroundings. And if they knew little of the topography of the valley beyond the manicured lawns of the Grange itself, of the events that shaped the lives of their fellow human beings outside Scardale they knew even less.

On the far side of the meadow a single-track road ran parallel to the river that lent the dale its name. Hearing the gentle murmur of water and the play of wind in the meadow-grass, it was hard to imagine the place in the grip of winter. Nevertheless, winter in Scardale was hard:

the fast-flowing River Scar flooded every year, and the tiny ribbon of road by the side of the meadow was, as a result, often impassable. When snow came it settled in heavy drifts, like a blanket of marble, burying everything for miles around. Severe weather meant that the valley could be cut off from the rest of the county for days at a time, providing busy sons and daughters, for whom the existence of an ageing relative in the nursing home was an unwelcome distraction, with an excuse for postponing their visits still further. Though a fire roared in the sitting room hearth every day, and modern central heating kept the windows free of frost on all but the coldest nights, it was true that the enforced seclusion of January and February in Scardale gave way only reluctantly to the gentler touch of Spring, and each year some of the Grange's older residents would leave the institution's warm embrace to return to the bosom of their families one last time. Their obituaries would be read at dinner and the respectful silence that greeted this ritual was eloquent testimony to a deep understanding of the nature of loss among those left behind.

Safe now in high summer, however, Scardale spoke only of life. The tangled counterpoint of birdsong, the thrum of insects, the call of sheep grazing the fells, and above all an abiding greenness, made the place feel as if there was no grief that could not be comforted and no confusion that could not be eased by a brief sojourn there. In fact, anyone taking the sweet road out of the dale and glancing up at the Grange might be forgiven for harbouring envy – that most venal of emotions – against the inhabitants of such a tranquil sanctuary.

“Good morning! And who've we got here?”

The door to the Grange's ground-floor medical room closed behind a young woman in a blue uniform topped off with a white hijab. It was precisely one minute to eight when Meena parked Josey's wheelchair in front of the doctor's desk, next to a shiny new stand-mounted sphygmomanometer. She flicked the brakes on with her foot and stood dutifully behind her charge. Light filled the space from three long, frosted sash-windows that looked out onto the

lawns, and the combined effect of sunlight, fluorescent spots, and brilliant-white walls – aided by the new iMac on the desk and the lingering smell of disinfectant from the 5am steam-clean – made the medical room feel like the bridge of an antiseptic starship.

Dr Regina Armitage was an apt captain for such a vessel, there being a whiff of antiseptic about her, too. As a locum in the North Yorkshire area, she was often on the rota when Scardale Grange called seeking someone to cover for Dr Bennett, their caring yet frail house physician. Regina was regarded as a safe pair of hands by the local GP partnerships that employed her. She was well spoken and she did things by the book; she was never late, was well informed about her patients (where possible), and she usually did precisely what was asked of her. Whereas Dr Bennett's clinics might overrun by a couple of hours, and extra patients be crammed like sardines into the schedule when the need arose, Regina's always ran like a Swiss watch: on bad days they finished bang on time, but when the planets were aligned, they invariably ended five minutes early. Now that her breakfast sherry was wearing off, Regina could feel her face flushing under the fluorescent spots. She didn't turn around but tried instead to coax the Grange's new patient profile system into life on the computer.

"This is Josephine Knight, doctor!"

"I don't have her med notes," Regina grumbled, staring at the screen, "and why isn't she on the patient list for today?"

"She's definitely in the system," said Meena, puzzled, "Josey's been here years. She's having problems with her donepezil dosage. Dr Bennett said he wanted to do some new bloods and to review her prescription, but he only made the decision yesterday evening. He told me to bring her down first thing this morning and he'd fit her in."

"And is Dr Bennett here to see this extra patient?" Regina asked.

Meena shook her head.

"He must have left a note on Josey's file though," she said.

Regina was unimpressed. 'No paperwork, no patient' was her usual motto. Besides, for some reason her head was thumping and the thought of phlebotomy before 9am wasn't appealing. Finally, she swivelled to face them, opening a pack of Mentos and popping one into her mouth.

“Do we really need to do this now?”

“Well ... Josey hasn’t had her breakfast yet and we didn’t dress her because Dr Bennett said the blood test needed doing straight away after an overnight fast,” Meena replied, calmly. “If it can be done, now’s a good time to do it.”

Regina rolled her eyes.

“If I had a pound for every time an inhouse doctor has muddied the waters,” she sighed, spinning round to face the desk again. With her back to Josey and Meena, she began tapping a memo to the Grange CEO (cc'd to Dr Graham Bennett), entitled ‘Dangerous precedents’. “Come back in 10 minutes,” she said, over her shoulder.

“Are you sure?” Meena replied.

“Of course. I’ll look for the note from Dr Bennett in the online profile. Go and have a cup of tea!”

Meena checked Josey’s dressing gown was wrapped around her and eased her feet down from the footrests to the floor.

“I’ll be back in about ten minutes then,” she said, leaving for the staff canteen.

Josey sat in the white room, thinking white thoughts. It was as if her head was wreathed in fog. Only the vague feeling of indignity seemed to offer a comment on her experience. She had no idea where she was.

She was hungry.

She was tired.

She was in her dressing gown.

Still asleep.

Blown away from myself like pollen.

No staying power, see.

It starts without warning.

Singing faint to my left. A child adding harmony with her mouth full.

Modal. Misty mountain music accompanied by the jangle of a harness and the creak of boots.

And now I'm flying towards them, wings beating. Ar shiúl leis na síoga...swallow-high, soaring through the ragged edges of clouds. And everything's clear again, as if seeing was only ever about opening your eyes. I blink and a vast, snow-capped mountain valley unwraps itself around me. Forest on all sides, like Switzerland like The Rockies like those shangri las you read about; I circle over a summer pasture full of flowers, long grass, fast streams, slow pulse. Way way below, a man leads a donkey down a dirt track. He's wearing a padded jacket and carrying an orange nylon daysack, like a visitor from the 1970s. There's a girl riding on the donkey behind him, brown hair and pale, round face, eating a sandwich. Cheese and onion.

Welcome to The Vale

These are my musicians.

These are my freefolk.

I call out two or three times to let them know I'm here, and the girl even looks up. But what can she see? What is there left of me? She calls to the man and he stops. They stand and talk together, eyeing the blue sky, while the donkey breakfasts.

It's like being in that place! You know the one? Where going under the water's impossible whatever you do. I can't get down beside them, and they can't fly up to me. Yet I feel as if I already know where they're heading. He's collecting folk songs and she ... she's his daughter. Bright as a button. Magical musical child. They're crossing into the next valley. Poor thing ... the mum's as-good-as-dead already.

I feel tears running into my feathers as the travellers set off again down the path.

*'Sé do bheatha, a bhean ba léanmhar
do bé ár gcreach tú bheith i ngéibhinn*

*do dhúiche bhreá i seilbh meirleach
's tú díolta leis na Gallaibh.*

*Óró, sé do bheatha bhaile
óró, sé do bheatha bhaile
óró, sé do bheatha bhaile
anois ar theacht an tsamhraidh...*

I can't keep up with them ... however fast I fly they slide away from me faster. Their voices fading, breaking up like static on Madge's old valve set in Burchett Place. And the white mist closes in, leaching the colour out of the morning.

How are you feeling Josephine?

And I feel

And I feel

Josephine?

Like Eve dragged out of Eden.

It was only when Regina finally acknowledged her presence that the haze around Josey began to recede.

“How are you feeling, Josephine?”

Josey kept perfectly still, watching the mole above Regina's lip move as she spoke.

“I've found your notes. We're going to check your blood pressure and take some samples so that your medication can be fine-tuned.”

Regina pulled over the blood pressure station and attached an inflatable cuff to Josey's

arm.

“I don't have a qualified nurse to help me this morning, so this might take a bit longer than usual,” she said.

Regina pressed the button on the control pad and the cuff swelled, growing tighter as air was pumped in.

“That hurts!” Josey said, flatly.

“It can feel a bit tight, but it’s only for a short while,” Regina replied.

The cuff was already deflating as she took the reading and recorded it on the new patient card she’d started for Josey.

“Well to be honest, that doesn't seem too bad to me,” she said. “Let's do the blood test.”

“Can I have a cup of tea?” Josey said.

“We’ll get you a cup of tea when we’ve finished here, Josephine,” Regina said, smartly.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet either,” Josey said.

Regina didn't respond but continued gathering the equipment she needed. She arranged six sterile collection bottles, tied a rubber tourniquet she’d discovered in Bennett’s bottom drawer on her patient’s arm, four finger-widths above the elbow, and vigorously applied hand-sanitizing gel. Then she swabbed the area of the vein with an alcohol prep pad and brought up the needle. At that moment she encountered the unsettling green of Josey’s eyes, watching her.

“Your hands are shaking!” Josey said, after a moment.

“No they’re not,” Regina countered, even as a quick glance confirmed the accuracy of her patient’s observation. “Your eyes are probably dry, Josephine; remember – you've only just woken up!” she added.

“There's nothing wrong with my eyes,” Josey said. “I want to go home.”

Determined to get the job done, Regina crouched down and grasped Josey’s arm.

“We’re nearly finished,” she said, raising the needle once more. But this time Josey pulled away, and when the good doctor tried to force the issue, Josey resisted, hauling her forearm back towards her own chest. Nonplussed, Regina let the old woman’s arm go, and its sudden release caused Josey’s elbow to swing around, connecting squarely with the locum’s face. Regina spun away in shock, blood pouring from her nose, and the needle skittered from her grasp across the floor tiles.

“I don’t fucking believe it!” she screeched.

Meena was just returning to the medical room to collect Josey when she heard Dr Armitage’s voice. She ran to the door and pulled it open. Both doctor and patient looked genuinely relieved to see her. Regina’s face was covered in blood, as if she’d been bare-knuckle boxing, while Josey’s right arm was turning purple thanks to the forgotten tourniquet. For a moment, Meena stood transfixed in the doorway, unsure of what to do.

“There’s been an accident,” Regina said miserably, holding her nose with one blood-stained hand as she tried to remove the tourniquet from Josey’s arm with the other. “Josephine had an episode of very challenging behaviour while I was trying to take her blood. I think you should get her back to her room as soon as possible.”

Regina slumped down in the chair by the desk, as if she’d just finished 24 hours in A&E. She pulled a handful of tissues from the dispenser and tried to stem the red tide.

The clock on the wall showed exactly ten minutes past eight as Meena flipped off the brakes on Josey’s chair and maneuvered her towards the door.

“Should I report this to Marjorie?” she asked, holding the door open with her heel.

“No, don’t worry!” Regina said, almost jovial now as her mind began to race ahead. “It wasn’t intentional. I’ll tell Marjorie myself and put a note in Mrs Knight’s file. There’s no harm done!”

She smiled and turned to Josey, trying to salvage something from the encounter.

“The blood will have to be taken another day when you’re calmer, Josephine!”

Meena pushed the wheelchair out of the room and was about to set off down the corridor when Josey craned her head round and shouted back at the top of her lungs.

“It’s *Dame* Josephine!”

The spring-loaded door shut behind them with a click, like the safety cap on a medicine bottle.

Josephine Knight, DBE. was one of Scardale’s most famous residents. She made it to the

top as an opera singer when live performance credentials still counted for something, and she managed to stay there for nearly 30 years. Until Alzheimer's found her. The disease entered her head like a magpie and, with infinite care, began whittling away at the things she valued most. With her own consent, her family had lodged her here in 2013, a month before the death of her husband.

Today was Josey's wedding anniversary. She had asked (and left notarised instructions to dispel any doubt) to be dressed smartly and decked out in her jewellery on the anniversary of her marriage. Staff still acceded to this request, principally because it was the one petition on Josey's account; the only thing that she had ever demanded in a place where the demands of others were loud and frequent. Nonetheless, it wasn't just that Josey's instructions were easy to fulfil – that alone wouldn't have ensured her annual transformation on this one luminous day – no ... it was Josey herself, sometimes full of song, sometimes slack-jawed and silent, who inspired a fierce loyalty in the nurses and support staff that cared for her. She may not have known what day it was, but she was watched over by her carers as if she were a queen. When she could talk, they listened to her unlikely tales of dukes and divas, Met. galas and recording contracts; and when she couldn't ... they spoke up for her, as if she were only resting her voice and might return to the stage at any moment. And if the sullen silences were growing more frequent, it seemed that the regard of her unfathomable green eyes and the flash of an occasional puzzled smile, flickering, cloud-like, across the stretched parchment of her face, were still enough for the ladies and gentlemen with whom she now lunched.

Stacked precariously on the bedside table in a smart private room in the older east wing of the Grange, dog-eared copies of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Wizard of Earthsea*, along with a graffitied library hardback *Dune*, awaited the mistress's return like loyal retainers. They shared the tabletop with a bottle of expensive cognac and a hard-working Marantz mini system, which even now was playing Mozart to the empty room. On the opposite side of the bed, photographs crowded an antique dresser: a younger Josey on stage at Covent Garden, red hair tied back carelessly; Josey as *Floria Tosca*; Josey as *Gilda*; Josey as *Violetta*; Josey smiling broadly at concerts, at christenings, degree ceremonies, birthdays, music festivals and vintage steam rallies; sometimes hugging children, sometimes captured mid-song. Often, she shared the frame with a broad-shouldered man whose beard only partially hid a powerful jawline which

might have been too stern had it not been for kind eyes that softened the overall impression. This was her Samuel, late and much-lamented. Here was Josey in voluminous skirts and skinny jeans, Josey at work and Josey resting. Josey serious and Josey playful – in fact, the photos cried contentment to the rafters. A cynic might have commented on the fact that, offstage, Josey was hardly ever photographed alone. This was because others routinely pursued her. There were always performances to discuss, rehearsals to attend, friends to entertain, and children to love. She existed comfortably at the centre of a close network of colleagues, family and friends, providing a natural mesh of warm regard that had given her the support she needed to face the world on her own terms – and in return she had poured out her love and her voice on those around her as if both were infinite commodities.

How ironic then, that in her perilous twilight Josey Knight's loneliness was profound. She had struck up unlikely friendships with the Grange's Head Cook and one of the east wing cleaners when she had first arrived, and these attachments persisted against the odds. Nevertheless, most relationships at the Grange were inevitably cut short by ill-health, dementia, or death. And while her youngest daughter, Rebecca, still made the trip up from London every two weeks to sit and weep by her bedside with a bottle of Lucozade and a bunch of grapes, regular visits from the rest of the family had started to tail off after Sam's death, when her Alzheimer's had really started to take hold. The clock on the far side of the dresser kept perfect time, but Josey's life was no longer built from seconds, minutes, and hours. She had fled the world of weights and measures, and instead her days were constructed from the winter sunlight that flashed onto her face through the bars of the Venetian blind, the sudden cold bite of early spring evenings, the patter of summer rain on the window casement and the pungent smell of rotting foliage outside in autumn.

The Grange's kitchen was a grand affair.

It occupied two large high-ceilinged rooms on the ground floor and was kitted out with every imaginable appliance and utensil, every broiler, skillet and stew pot needed to satisfy

hungry souls seven days a week, three-hundred and sixty-five days a year. Nevertheless, mouth-watering aromas and mullioned windows aside, people seldom sought the kitchen out unless they had business there. It was presided over by a head cook whose foul mouth and fouler temper were only partially eclipsed by her remarkable culinary skills. Janice Trufit ran her fiefdom of scrubbed stainless steel and white enamel like a benevolent gulag kapo – sharing recipes, helping with preparation, but always ready to stomp down hard on anyone who threatened its smooth running.

This morning was different, however. Magic FM billowed out from the old Roberts on top of the meat fridge and love was in the air. Placid, absorbed, perhaps even happy ... Janice was baking. With her unruly black hair stuffed into a net and her tattoos hidden underneath fresh whites (save for a lone dragon that spiralled around her neck as if looking for a way out), it seemed like the real cook had slipped away into another dimension leaving her more virtuous doppelgänger behind; she hadn't shouted for an hour – hadn't sworn for nearly two. Enjoying the unexpected respite, her kitchen staff prepped the evening meal in a state of near bliss. Working at the other end of the kitchen, Janice's laconic assistant, Dave, was swift to sense the way the wind blew. He decided to trim sails accordingly while things were still set fair.

"Jan?"

"Yep."

"Is it ok if I leave the bread until tomorrow?"

"Uh-huh."

"Lamb's gonna take a while to prep that's all. I'll come in and do it early morning."

"Uh-huh."

Dave glanced across the room, allowing a smile to trickle down his face as he saw her handiwork, revolving slowly on a display stand. Four bands of sublime chiffon sponge, layered with blackberry preserve and coated with buttercream, finished with a white chocolate glaze – enough to make Caligula blush. Janice might be a borderline sociopath, but she could cook.

"Who's it for?" he asked, as she emerged from her prep station, yawning and stretching her arms to either side like a newly-hatched dragonfly.

"Josey Knight."

"Ah ... the east wing diva!" Dave grinned. "You still read to her?"

Janice nodded.

“Let me guess ... Tolstoy? No – Mills & Boon!

“Neither,” she said, witheringly.

“Go on then ...”

“Tolkien.”

Dave pulled a face.

“What’s wrong with Tolkien?”

“All that wizard and hobbit shit ...!”

Janice sighed, pulling off the hairnet and unleashing a riot of dark curls, “She was writing her own book when she first came. A pocket universe. Had all the characters worked out. Funny thing is Dave, even with Alzheimer’s Josey’s still got more upstairs than you!”

Dave shrugged as if conceding the point and gestured at the cake with the knife he was holding, “You want me to take it up?”

Janice shook her head.

“I’ll take it to the dayroom later.”

As she turned away, her eyes locked on the blade in Dave’s hand and the mercury in the kitchen barometer began to rise.

“Is that my Nesmuk?”

Dave stared at the knife as if it was suddenly too hot to handle. He’d taken it from the steriliser at lunchtime and hadn’t even registered that it was Jan’s.

“I-I’m not sure,” he stammered. Janice stalked over and snatched it away, leaving a bright red smear across her floured apron.

“I want the bread prepped and in the freezer before you leave today,” she said, moving towards the door. “And next time you’re butchering something – leave my fucking sushi knife alone!”

Rumours of a love-in in the kitchen had, it seemed, been greatly exaggerated.

A squat, powerful woman with a blond crew cut made her way along one of the carpeted

corridors on the first floor of the Grange's east wing. She walked with the easy gait of someone completely at home in their surroundings. In one hand she held a large plastic bucket containing cloths, bin liners, bleach, polish, air freshener, and a single white carnation. An Amazon package was tucked precariously under the other arm and she dragged an industrial-size Numatic vacuum-cleaner in her wake.

"All right Paul?" she nodded, smiling as she passed a bald-headed man in striped pyjamas shuffling in the opposite direction. "Don't forget to take your post, love. It's Wednesday!"

He blushed, "I shall nae." A toothless grin spread across his face as he disappeared through the spring-loaded fire doors.

Eileen Mahoney's worry lines often caused people to assume that she was older than her fifty-two years. Outside Scardale, a lifetime of loss had left her crushed and bitter, staining her outlook a permanent grey. At work, however, she was a different creature: a confection of light and air, possessed of an unquenchable cheerfulness that overcame all obstacles. If day-to-day existence at home in Embsay was Eileen's Calvary, then Scardale Grange was the cooling balm that made resurrection possible. No job was too dirty or too tricky for her, no inmate unreachable.

Half-way along the corridor, she stopped outside an unnumbered door and knocked. A scrap of paper with 'Brian Salmon BSc – Night Manager' scrawled across it in biro had been blu-tacked onto the wall next to the door frame. Eileen sighed and knocked again. No reply. Brian fucking Salmon! He could pick up his own mail next time! She set down everything except the package on the carpet and tried the door handle. To her surprise, the door swung open and she walked inside intending to place the box on the desk and leave as quickly as she'd entered. But as the door shut behind her with a barely-perceptible click, she found herself rooted to the spot. The room was cold, dark, and reeked of lavender – and as she groped for the light switch, she had the strangest sensation that she was being watched. Rattled, she finally managed to flip the light on and a pallid wash from the 40-watt bulb brought her face-to-face with Jesus, captured mid-scream on a large crucifix hung in the middle of the right-hand wall. Around the messiah, arranged in a neat grid from the top of the skirting boards to just below the ceiling, keys of every shape and size dangled from brass hooks. An image of teeth set in a gaping mouth slid

unbidden into Eileen's head and she had to pinch herself hard to chase it away. Even a cursory glance suggested that there must be a key here for every door in Scardale Grange – and maybe a couple more besides. Why couldn't he use the keysafe on each landing like everyone else? Eileen stifled an irrational urge to take the keys downstairs and throw them into the incinerator. Instead, she opened the blinds, letting sunshine pour into the room. When the place was awash with light, she set Salmon's package carefully on his desk and strode out into the corridor, pausing only to retrieve bucket and vacuum cleaner before heading off in the direction of the stairs. The door to Salmon's office remained wide open, sun spilling out into the corridor like a blessing.

Fifteen minutes and one strong cup of tea later, Eileen was at the other end of the building and up one floor. She hammered on the door of Room 9, as if seeking sanctuary.

“Josey, it's me! Eileen!”

Abandoning the vacuum cleaner just inside the door, she took a pair of yellow marigolds out of her pocket and began to pull them on as she entered the room.

“Hello lovely! No radio this morning?” she asked. Josey didn't reply but sat pale and sullen in her chair by the window.

For the next half an hour Eileen busied herself cleaning and polishing surfaces, dusting photographs, changing bed sheets, filling pillowcases, and wiping windows. As she worked, she talked of the world beyond the valley; visits to Leeds to see her son in Armley gaol, shopping at Skipton market, burning biscuits the previous afternoon. And all the while, Josey sat staring at the angled blinds. It wasn't that Eileen was unaware of Josey's deteriorating condition and her mood swings, rather she refused to let them change the way she dealt with her friend. Eileen had cleaned Josey's room for nearly five years now and she and the cook had been Josey's only daily non-medical visitors for the last two. No matter how lost Josey seemed to the world at large, Eileen always felt that the two of them understood each other.

When she'd finished plumping up the last pillow, Eileen plugged in the Numatic and switched on. The socket sparked indignantly and a deep mechanical howl filled the room, shattering the companionable quiet.

“Sorry, love! A minute and I'm done.”

Finally, with the place sparkling, it was time for Eileen to go.

“Happy anniversary!” she said as she pinned the white carnation on Josey’s lapel. “Dave in the kitchen kept it for me till I got to your room. I never forget, love.” She planted a kiss on Josey’s forehead, and then gathered up cloths and polish into the bucket.

“Nurse’ll be along later to take you down to’t dayroom. You remember Janice that reads to you? She’s made a chocolate cake. Make sure you get a piece Josey, or those bastards downstairs’ll finish it for you – you know what they’re like!” Eileen opened the door, lingering on the threshold. “Enjoy yourself love. I’ll look in again before I go.” With a sharp tug on the vacuum cleaner and a final wave to Josey, she left the room. The heavy Numatic followed obediently, like a chastened serpent.

A thick silence fell after Eileen’s departure, punctuated only by the ticking of the clock on the dresser and the muffled sounds of life going on elsewhere in the Grange – a lawnmower tackling the grass on one of the lower tiers; the wails of a desolate inmate close-by. Sun sliced through the blinds, striking the flecked gold in the background of a postcard-sized print of the Madonna and child by Masaccio, framed on the wall, making it seem as if the portrait was on fire. Josey blinked as a spider made its way across her cheek and up into the shelter of her hair, trailing gossamer threads among the curls it found there. That single eye-movement, coupled with the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her chest, were the only clues that the well-dressed lady with the green eyes was still among those who clung to life in the white house at the head of the valley.

Chapter 2 – Salmon

The insistent high-pitched whine of a dental drill filled the waiting room at Harold Slingsby's Skipton practice, lending a raw edge to the nervousness of those waiting for treatment.

Receptionist Liz smiled at a woman with short hair who was trying to distract the toddler at her feet with lego bricks.

“Shouldn't be long now, Mrs. Williams. Andrew'll be next.”

A series of muffled shrieks escaped from the treatment room and one of the two men leafing through back-issues of *Woman* magazine stood up as if his name had been called out. He looked green and ready to walk, and it wasn't even nine o'clock.

“Everything okay?” Liz smiled apologetically. The man checked his watch and sat down again, nodding his head.

Liz had worked in reception for Slingsby longer than she cared to remember and prided herself on her ability to get along with patients and staff no matter what. Having said that, even she had to admit that some of Slingsby's private patients were a little ... eccentric. The guy she'd slotted in at short notice this morning was a case-in-point: always last minute, always early morning, always paid cash up-front to be seen privately. He'd been to the practice twice before, telling her the first time that he needed treatment without anaesthetic as he was allergic to both lidocaine and articaine. She'd felt sorry for him and arranged a meeting with Mr. Slingsby and the dental nurse. Next thing she knew, he'd arrived an hour before surgery one Friday morning, just as she was opening the shutters. Ten minutes later, Slingsby's BMW pulled into the car park, and he began treating the man straight away. By the time the nurse arrived, they'd finished. It wasn't as if he was rude or aggressive either – on the contrary, he'd always been unfailingly polite to Liz – It was just that there was something about him. Something off-key.

The drill started up again and this time Liz stepped in.

“Cup of tea, anybody?”

Slingsby's patient was sweating, and the sour mash-up of perspiration, burnt enamel and lavender cologne made the dentist's eyes water. Nevertheless, he was in high spirits. Working

quickly in the centre of the white-tiled treatment room, he'd nearly finished his first cash-in-hand of the day. He selected an inspection mirror from among an assortment of dental probes, prods and scalpels arranged neatly on the work surface by his side and turned round again to inspect his handiwork.

"Just a little deeper," he murmured, tucking the mirror into the pocket of his white plastic apron, and pressing a steel pedal on the floor. The drill sprang to life and Slingsby set it burrowing away like a terrier, ignoring the cording of tendons in his patient's neck. After three long minutes, the dentist's latex-clad fingers fished something from the man's mouth. He removed the saliva ejector, straightened up, and shut down the drill.

The patient's head was held in position by an unorthodox restraining apparatus attached to the headrest, while an expandable Whitehead gag kept the mouth open, gaping absurdly like a gargoyle. Slingsby reached round the back of the chair and released the restraint, removing the gag from the patient's mouth at the same time.

"Would you like to rinse?"

The man nodded vigorously, shoulder-length brown hair framing an otherwise unremarkable waxy face, drenched in sweat. As the dentist moved away to mix some mouthwash, he tossed a small, hard object into a kidney dish on the work surface. The discarded molar clinked as it landed, coming to rest, thickset and glistening, against the shiny steel. When the solution was ready Slingsby handed the man a glass and a wad of tissue to wipe the blood from his chin.

"Something for the pain?" Slingsby asked, removing his gloves. "Ibuprofen? Diclofenac? It's on the house!" He was building a nest-egg and couldn't afford the luxury of guilt at this stage in his career, but still ... he was no sadist. To his amazement, only minutes after losing a perfectly good tooth – extracted without anaesthetic – the man was beaming at him, brown eyes devouring drill, dentist, and treatment room in one hungry glance.

"No thank you," he said, in a voice so excruciatingly normal, that for a moment, Slingsby was at a loss. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went to pick up the man's coat. There was only so much you could do – even for a private patient. He shook the man's hand as he ushered him out.

"I think there's a form for you to sign. Liz'll have it ready in reception. See you next

time!”

At the desk, Liz pushed the waiver towards the man and handed him a pen. Tall and angular, he dabbed at his mouth with a bloody handkerchief. She supposed his speech was a little slurred, but otherwise, he seemed remarkably unaffected by Mr. Slingsby’s attentions. He signed the form with a flourish and gave her a £5 contribution for the waiting-room tea & coffee fund before leaving. As he walked out of the door, Liz noticed that the keys fastened at his waist jangled with every step, like spurs. She glanced down at the signature on the document in front of her:

‘Brian Salmon’.

There’s one to avoid, she told herself.

Bach filled Room 9 until it overflowed.

Josey’s favourite piece leaked under the door, along the corridor, and into the other rooms on the second floor, where her neighbours found themselves swaying, tapping their feet, or reading the same line over again in *Saga*, without any good reason.

Since she’d arrived back from lunch, Josey had been immersed in *The Goldberg Variations*, and her obligato humming offered a crazy counterpoint to the fluid precision of the concert grand in the recording. For nearly fifty minutes she had been surfing wave after wave of glorious sound. As the piece drew to a close there was a knock at the door and Eileen Mahoney’s head appeared, floating disconcertingly in the gap between door and frame.

“Afternoon Josey!”

Josey’s eyes shifted and flickered as if resetting date and time ... and then they locked shut.

“I’m asleep,” she croaked.

“It’s Eileen! Just thought I’d look in and say goodbye ...”

“Goodbye then!”

Eileen smiled and walked into the room.

“Nice to see you too!” she said. “You feeling a bit better? Becky’s here.”

“Who?”

“Rebecca. Your daughter! She helped me put the clean sheets away in the airing cupboard downstairs and then we walked up from reception together. She’s come to visit.”

Eileen motioned to an insubstantial figure waiting in the corridor outside, “Come in, love! She’s looking better than she did this morning. She didn’t say a word when I cleaned her room.”

The music had finished, and Josey was back in Scardale. She remembered that she liked Eileen.

“I met him,” she said conspiratorially, as if continuing a conversation they’d been having only moments earlier. “He came to hear me sing in Montreal.”

Eileen turned back from the door.

“He brought me flowers!” Josey added.

“Who we talking about?” Eileen asked.

“Glenn Gould.”

“And is he dishy?”

For some reason the question made Josey laugh. And as her belly surrendered to the convulsions, she began to cough and splutter. Suddenly, up came the shepherd’s pie and the brioche-and-butter pudding from lunchtime, along with copious quantities of banana-flavoured Fresubin, all down the front of her jacket-and-blouse combo ... swamping the white carnation. Without a word, Eileen scrambled for the wet wipes in the top drawer of the dresser and got straight to work cleaning up the mess. After a moment, she handed Josey a glass of water from the bedside table and held the older woman’s head as she took a drink.

“I’ll get you a new top out and we’ll throw these to wash, eh?”

When Josey could breathe properly again, she looked up at Eileen with a wicked grin.

“Of course he’s not dishy *now*,” she said, blowing her nose, “he’s dead!”

“What are we going to do with you?” Eileen remarked, shaking her head. She opened the door wide and a slim woman with a pale, round face and wavy auburn hair stood framed in the doorway behind her. She clutched a bottle of Lucozade and a bunch of Waitrose grapes in a white-knuckled embrace, and from the look of her eyes – eyes so brown they were almost black – it was clear that she’d been crying.

“Hello mama!” she said.

Sam’s at work.

Becky’s crying, so I take her downstairs.

We watch the sunrise together; trees and fences returning from obscurity, sky brightening. I sing some Irish thing from my mother – la-la-la-ing mostly – and Rebecca listens, dark eyes open ... mapping my face. I make porridge for myself and she drinks a full bottle of milk before settling down and falling asleep in the pram.

High tide arrives at 7:00am; Annie and Jonathan cascade into the kitchen for breakfast ... thirty minutes talk and tears, punctuated by popped rice. Then a kiss and our Annie’s gone, racing down Jubilee Mount to make the bell, with her best friend Yvonne in tow. Jonathan’s not happy about his sandals. I crammed them onto his feet while he was eating, and he’s not having it. He’s kicked both of them off and now the left one has vanished. I make a note to myself to ask Sam if he’ll take him to Clarks in town to have his feet measured. A quarter of an hour and a jeremiad of lamentation later, the missing sandal is unearthed and we can finally set off in the direction of Jonathan’s nursery – mother soft-soaping to smooth the way, boy scuffing footwear, and younger sister strangely silent in her pram, no doubt unimpressed by the company she’s forced to keep. When we drop Jonathan off, he switches from moaning about his sandals to playing intently with a box of stickle bricks, easing us out of his mind without any noticeable gear-change. Left to our own devices, Becky and I drift back home round half-past nine. The day yawns and stretches out on the rug in front of us, each hour a perfect simulacrum of the one that preceded it.

I start to unravel right there in the watery sunlight. ‘You’re not just your voice!’ I tell myself. But it’s been nine months. Nine long months since I left the circus.

No performances.

No recitals.

No concerts.

No rehearsals.

No fittings.

No coaching.

No diary sessions.

I open the piano lid and run my thumb absently along the worn edge of a key. Haven't even seen Bryn for a warm-up since last month and my voice is starting to feel sluggish and thick – like double cream before it turns. I'm supposed to be singing 'Gilda' at The Grand in November: my comeback! Right now, I couldn't make it happen in my own bathroom ... I sound like a crow. As if to offer evidence of impending vocal doom, I cough up a gobbet of phlegm and head into the kitchen to hawk it out. As I open the hot tap to rid the world of its sticky mass, I have to admit, I'm tired. Tired of taking time out. Tired of sleepless nights. Tired of motherhood. I pick up the score of 'Rigoletto' and open it at page twenty-three, 'Caro nome...'. I'm halfway through the aria before I hear her.

Becky's keening like a wounded animal – a sound so unlike any I've ever heard her make that it horrifies me. I run over and pick her up, taking in the eyes screwed shut against the light and the crystal tears caught on jet-black lashes. Her forehead is burning hot, and when I put her down on the settee in the gloom of the house, she lays there glassy-eyed and motionless.

Annie and Jonathan are with neighbours, and my mother's counting rosary beads in Our Lady of Lourdes on Burley Road by the time Sam and I are ushered into the Ward Sister's office at Seacroft Hospital later that day.

Meningitis.

The look on the woman's face says it all – though I can't really concentrate and don't respond to

her kindness. She takes my hand instead.

“There’s still a chance, Mrs Knight. Your family doctor was quick off the mark and the consultant here is fantastic.” She looks straight at me, “Don’t give up!”

Sam is unspeakably sad.

His jaw works away, but he says nothing, leaving me to parcel out our gratitude instead. A junior nurse oversees our costume change – helping us into green gowns, matching gloves, and facemasks, before allowing us inside the drowned room where they’re barrier-nursing my youngest daughter.

I look around, nervously. At first, I can’t even see her. But then I spot a dab of white, away on the left, lodged deep inside a cavernous metal cot – like a tiny pearl enclosed in an oyster shell of polished steel. Tubes sprout from her mouth and nose, a drip is lodged in one arm, and there’s a gangrenous tinge to her skin that makes her look like the changeling child of some elf king. Sam reaches for me, eyes already dead behind his mask, shaking his head – he can’t stay.

He’s sorry.

I’m sorry too.

I walk over to the cot and a nurse signals that I shouldn’t come any closer. I smile, nodding my understanding, before ignoring her and reaching for Becky’s hand.

Just before tea-time, the gates of the Grange opened to admit a dark-green Triumph Spitfire. The car hardly slowed down for the cattle grid at the entrance and once through the Grange’s metal gullet, it roared off around the side of the old east wing in the direction of the staff car park. Tyres spattered gravel and the driver seemed barely in control as he careened past a forlorn ‘5mph’ sign. The Spitfire slid to a stop against the car park barrier and the driver’s-side window descended in three angry surges. A delicate hand reached out to prod the keypad and the barrier rose in response. With the way open, the car lurched forward again into the inner courtyard, coming to an abrupt halt next to a large grey dumpster in the far corner of the parking

lot. A pair of polished brogues emerged into the sunlight, striking sparks as they met the concrete. The car door slammed shut and the shoes beat a savage tattoo all the way across the courtyard, accompanied by the ludicrous tintinnabulation of bunched metal.

Brian Salmon was late.

He was also extremely annoyed.

This couldn't immediately be gauged by a casual encounter with his bland features, but the constant rifling movement of the fingers of his right hand – as if strumming an invisible lyre – betrayed him. Gripping his MacBook he plunged into the Grange, and as he walked he began to reflect on the perils of the journey he'd just endured. He'd fallen asleep after lunch, something he never usually did, and hadn't woken up until 30 minutes before the monthly manager's meeting at the Grange was due to start. His mouth had been throbbing in sync with his heartbeat, and as he let the dizziness pass after hauling himself to his feet, he knew the afternoon was going to be challenging. Driving like a maniac to get to Scardale, he'd fallen foul of roadworks, rush-hour traffic, and the local constabulary. Now, on top of it all, he needed to perform flawlessly; to give a presentation of such pre-eminence that it would sway the other managers and convince them of the efficacy of the changes he was proposing to their narrow lives. Problem was ... he wasn't sure he was up to it today, and a setback at work was the last thing he needed right now. His mother had once called him 'a stick to thrash the world with' and – not for the first time – as he cracked across the hard-wearing carpet, he felt her words propelling him forward. Someone would have to pay – it was simple really: he would borrow the calm he required to get through the meeting from his own precious reserves and claim reimbursement from the Grange later. Dan, the old security guard, looked up from his desk with a loose smile.

"Afternoon Mr. Salmon."

Salmon's dark eyes washed over the older man like meltwater, and for a moment it seemed to Dan as if the normally affable Night Manager was about to leap the Formica between them and beat him senseless.

"Mr. Salmon?"

Salmon heard himself respond – upbeat and jovial.

"Sorry, Daniel! Miles away! Wife OK?"

"Yes thanks, sir. Out of the woods now!"

“At last! Some good news, eh?” Salmon threw a mock salute at the guard and continued through the double doors to the right of the desk. “Give her my best!”

He marched on, navigating a warren of ground floor corridors until he came to another door. Salmon ignored the digital keypad and selected a thick Yale Magnum from the randomly chiming selection at his belt. Turning the key, he opened the door and crossed the rubicon into the executive heart of the Grange. Beyond this barrier the decor suddenly changed. Institutional carpet gave way to expensive textured stone floor-tiles, the walls were corporate beige rather than the mantis-green found in patient-access areas, and tastefully recessed halogen spotlights replaced hardworking linear LEDs. Salmon’s brogues announced his arrival in the new world. He stopped outside a large white door and paused, collecting himself. This was G46, the Management meeting room, and inside, Janice the Head Cook was holding forth. As he waited for the right moment to enter, Salmon closed his eyes. His waxy features relaxed and the frown that had been threatening to hijack his face disappeared. It was replaced by a suggestion of openness and the merest hint of a smile. The Cook came to a natural break and Salmon’s dark eyes opened slowly, like a cat’s. Only the relentless strumming of the fingers of his right hand suggested that any of the earlier tension remained.

Salmon walked into the meeting room firing off a salvo of apologies, and while Grange CEO Marjorie Ackermann made a show of checking her watch, he was already halfway across the room, calculating exactly how much he needed to do to win them all back.

“We started without you Brian,” Marjorie said, flatly. “Half-an-hour ago!”

“I know. Quite right too!” Salmon smiled back, taking out his laptop and powering-up. “A65 was horrendous. Accident, traffic cops ... you name it! I put my foot down after Settle, but you know what it’s like: tiny roads – too many cars. Unreserved apologies to everyone.”

A few of the others around the table nodded their understanding and Salmon seized the moment. “Listen ... I took shift data from Marjorie’s secretary after our last session, and I’ve worked out new costings for the night-shift team and overhauled the shift patterns for everyone else whilst I was at it.” There was a murmur of approval as the news sank in. Salmon handed out paper copies of the new rota. “Obviously, this is just a draft and I’ll need your feedback before we try running the whole thing on Shiftboard. It might not work – but if it does, I think it’s going

to help integrate Agency workers and core staff, and maybe shave something off our individual budgets as well.”

Across the table, someone started a slow handclap. “Thanks very much, Brian!” Janice’s sarcastic voice threatened the rapprochement.

“What did I miss?” Salmon asked, ignoring the Cook.

“Janice was talking us through this month's kitchen spend. She’s got a new local guy for beef and has offered to find an independent veg supplier as well – instead of Hobbs’ in Ripon,” Marjorie filled in.

“That’s wonderful,” Brian looked across at the Cook. She returned his gaze without blinking.

“I’m sure Brian’s spreadsheets are going to be more interesting than my kitchen--”

A broad smile broke across Salmon’s pasty face. He bit down the urge to snatch up a sharp pencil from the table-top and push it into the Cook’s eye. Instead, he made a great show of forbearance – shaking his head as he sat down, as if he found her behaviour incomprehensible.

“Enough, you two!” Marjorie moved nimbly to smooth the feathers of her volatile kitchen supremo. God knows, their monthly meetings were long enough already without wasting time bickering. “Janice – I need to hear more about these suppliers and we still have to look through the September menus together,” Marjorie sighed and gestured with her hand as if to return the floor to the Cook. “We’ll move on to Brian’s PowerPoint when you’ve finished.”

After two hours of reports, PowerPoint presentations and Gantt charts, the Grange’s management meeting was almost done and those present had moved on to lighter topics. Salmon’s suggestions had carried the day, and everybody was in good spirits. Everybody, that is, except Janice – who seemed to languish under her own personal cloud. Don Chantry, the Head Groundsman, mentioned that the Grange’s gardeners had sent roses to the Richmond Show for the first time and won a prize. As a result, *The Dalesman* wanted to run a feature on the Grange’s gardens in the magazine’s August edition. Marjorie was thrilled – it was the kind of positive free exposure that sent her into raptures.

“Round of applause for the ladies and gentlemen outside!” she said, beaming at Chantry.

All the managers joined in, glad to find an uncontentious topic on which to bring the session to a close. They'd begun to get up, pulling on jackets and packing papers away, when Jan rapped the side of her glass with a spoon to get their attention.

"Before we finish, I think we should raise a glass to Josey Knight. It's her wedding anniversary today."

Once again, this was safe territory and even George Braithwaite, the Grange's accountant (a man who had never had a generous impulse in his life), grasped an empty cup and sloshed in some cold coffee to respond.

"I took cake and a card to the dayroom from all of us," Janice added. She smiled hesitantly, paused and was about to propose a toast when Salmon stood up instead and raised his glass.

"To our very own diva. Happy anniversary, Dame Josey!"

"HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!" the table roared back.

As soon as the meeting was over, Marjorie buttonholed Salmon at the door. Eventually, only Janice remained in her chair ... a study in cold fury. She didn't move a muscle, but if looks could kill, then the Night Manager would almost certainly have been dead and buried.

"[...]At that moment Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud he smote the bridge before him. The staff broke asunder and fell from his hand. A blinding sheet of white flame sprang up. The bridge cracked. Right at the Balrog's feet it broke, and the stone upon which it stood crashed into the gulf, while the rest remained, poised, quivering like a tongue of rock thrust out into emptiness.

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard's knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. 'Fly, you fools!' he cried, and was gone."

Janice slapped the battered copy of *The Lord of the Rings* shut between her hands and slid it back onto the bedside table beside the bottle of cognac and the two shot glasses.

"Radio?" she called to Josey over her shoulder.

There was no reply, but she switched it on anyway, and a ripple of Chopin lapped across the space between them.

“You remember he's not really dead, don't you J?” she asked.

Josey Knight, now dressed comfortably in jogging pants and a sweatshirt, with a silk scarf from Aspinall's dangling loosely about her neck, gave a curt nod. A tear rolled along her nose, launching itself into oblivion.

Janice took a tissue from the box on the floor by her feet and handed it to her companion, who proceeded to fold it methodically, before stuffing it up the sleeve of her sweatshirt, like a trainee magician. Janice collected another tissue and stood up.

“May I?” she said.

Josey nodded again and the cook dabbed gently at her friend's bleary eyes.

“Gandalf's much tougher than he looks,” she said. “He comes back again three chapters later – new clothes, new hat – as if he was never away! A bit like--”

“Jesus?” Josey offered.

“Not who I was thinking of to be honest ... but I guess he'll do,” said Janice, opening the cognac and pouring them both a shot.

“Happy Sam-and-J day!”

The evening sun gilded the world outside as it sank and they watched its progress together, lost in thought. As usual, the cook replayed the various encounters she had had during the day and found herself wanting in each one. Despite the intervening hours, she was still smarting over the way she had been treated at the management meeting, and as she looked at the bucolic scene beyond the window, she could think only of placing her hands around the Night Manager's pale throat and squeezing the life out of him.

“Have you met Brian Salmon?” she asked. Josey smiled and turned the green lamps of her eyes towards her companion.

“He's only been here two fucking minutes, but every time I meet him, I want to kill the bastard!” Janice spat. She told Josey about the sensation of hearing a rushing sound, like white noise, whenever Salmon was near, and how clumsy and stupid he made her feel in front of her colleagues.

They sat in armchairs by the window, and as the cook spoke, Josey stared at her tattoos, fascinated by the beasts, the exotic flowers and the strange texts that seemed to negotiate their way across her friend's body. While Janice was in mid-flow, Josey reached across and took her hand.

"I wish Sam was here – don't you?"

Janice fell silent, her venom spent.

"You're right J," she said, after a moment, "enough about Scardale Grange!"

They continued to hold hands as the sky outside turned crimson, and the rich tones of Sibelius's Piano Quintet swept the room off its feet.

"We need a cigarette!" Josey suggested, brightly. The music had ended, and the radio presenter was killing time before the news.

Janice shook her head.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she said.

"A homemade one," Josey continued, "they're good for the voice!"

Janice raised an eyebrow as she looked across at the older woman. Josey began retying her scarf.

"Alright then anniversary girl! I'll need to bring my stuff up though, and we'll have to open a window as well."

Five minutes later she was back, tobacco and Rizlas in hand. Josey applauded as the cook wrestled with the security bolts on the window. After three attempts, she managed to haul the sash open and the heady perfume of summer poured into the room.

"Fresh air's also good for your voice," Josey observed, helpfully. "Renata Tebaldi used to go to the Dolomites every year for the clean air. I loved her singing."

Shaking her head, Janice rolled cigarettes for the two of them and was about to pass one over when she saw her friend's hand in the air.

"What now?" she asked, mystified. "You look like a schoolkid with a question, Josey!"

Josey didn't speak but kept prodding and poking the empty space above her head as if it were full of holes. Looking up, it dawned on Janice – the smoke detector!

"Nice one!" she said as she pushed her chair underneath the little plastic box. "Whatever you do, don't tell Brian bloody Salmon!"

Climbing up, she twisted the cover from the unit and removed the 9-volt battery. Back by the window, Janice flicked the wheel of a cheap plastic lighter, touched the flame to the end of Josey's cigarette, and sucked the fire inside. She watched the tobacco burn.

"There you go, Lady J," she said, handing the rollup to Josey.

Wreathed in sweet smoke, they sat back surveying the grounds from the open window, like gangsters. Josey hummed quietly along with the radio, sound and smoke spiralling out of her nostrils simultaneously.

After struggling heroically for a further twenty minutes, Janice's natural low tolerance for Radio 3 finally got the better of her.

"What about some real music?" she asked.

"Please?" said Josey.

"What about some real music ... *please!*" Janice said, smiling.

The opera singer shrugged her shoulders magnanimously and Janice jumped up like a teenager. She switched off the radio and began sorting through the playlists on her iPhone. The next moment, Mariah Carey's voice filled the room.

'There's a hero

If you look inside your heart ...'

When the track ended, Janice tapped Josey on the arm.

"Now that's what I call a voice!" she said.

"I know you do," Josey replied.

"Well ... what do *you* think?"

"Bloody awful!"

Laughter from Room 9 echoed around the upper lawns and blended in with the whisper of the breeze and the rustle of leaves, diluting like a homeopathic cure, until it was absorbed at last into the deep soundscape of the dale.

The sun was almost down and the moon already climbing the sky when Janice finally made her way to the car park. She felt absurdly light, and as she fired the engine of her Ford Fiesta, she grinned to herself; *maybe things weren't so bad after all*. The headlights cut through the mist by the Grange's white gates like blades through calico, and far away in the West, towards Skipton and Gargrave, the day's last hurrah filled the sky with hope.

Behind the cook, however, night had fallen over Scardale Grange like a shroud.

Chapter 3 – Nightshift

Salmon's office was dark.

No clock ticked.

No screen blinked.

No spider crawled. Cradled in the inky blackness, the room was neither here nor there ... it teetered always on the margins – sometimes a chapel, sometimes a charnel house.

Over by the shuttered window, a denser lavender-scented murk provided the only indication that the room was occupied. Brian Salmon sat upright in the chair by the desk, eyes closed, and hands tented in front of him. He'd enjoyed the dentist and had forgotten about work until it was almost too late. Never mind! He'd turned the day around and sculpted it as he wanted in the end. Tearing a strip off the kitchen bitch had been an unexpected bonus. Tonight, he would extract payment-in-full from the Grange for his trouble, and by breakfast tomorrow the books would be balanced again.

It was 11:00pm and the house had settled down for the night. Across the premises cameras whirled and turned in their lonely orbits, capturing empty corridors and quiet stairwells – a nurse here, a carer there – and relaying the data back to a central viewing hub on the ground floor. The two men employed to sit in front of the constantly shifting screens were personal appointees of Salmon and answered only to him. They thought nothing of his earlier request to test cameras in three zones and had no idea that cameras 5 & 6 – at either end of the east wing second floor – were now showing a pre-recorded loop instead of real-time data from that zone, or that the loop itself was being recorded back into the system as if happening in real time. And so, like some quantum puzzle, for one hour the corridor both existed ... and didn't exist. Anything happening there, though it might occupy the same time and space, was pure fantasy when measured against the precisely recorded and minutely observed data piped onto the screens in Salmon's viewing hub.

Retired maths teacher, Mary Evans, lay in bed in Room 4 – a large bunch of freesia in a vase on her bedside table. Beautiful and fragrant though the flowers were, they failed to mask the stale smell of urine that permeated the room. In the dim glow of the night-light, however, Mary seemed untroubled. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically, and she slept the sleep of the just. There had been a time during her stay at the Grange when she had found it almost impossible to sleep. Physical changes occurring in her brain as a result of her dementia had left her open to night terrors and hallucinations, and these filled her with such dread that she would often become unmanageable, fleeing her carers to embark on nocturnal walking trips that became the talk of the Grange. Now, fragile, incontinent, and unable to communicate, doctors had prescribed her trazodone and Mary was quiet ... at least on the outside.

Just after 11:15pm, a key slicked into the lock of the door to Mary's room. The handle sank and the door opened a sliver, just enough to allow a shadow to slip through into the gloom furthest away from the night-light's reach. The door closed silently, and, after a moment, a figure materialised at the foot of the bed and moved towards the sleeper.

At twenty-five minutes to midnight, the Night Manager sauntered on down the corridor – for all the world like a seasoned health professional keeping watch over those in his care. He slowed down outside Josey Knight's room and paused reverently, as if reading the med notes on the left-hand door frame. Then, abruptly, he vanished – opening the door and disappearing inside Room 9 in one swift, fluid motion, leaving no ripple behind to show where he had stood only moments before.

A tongue of flame in a dark place illuminates even as it devours, and many things became clearer in the immediate aftermath of the blaze that sprang to life in Josey's room late that night: the fact that the ageing sprinkler system in the east wing was woefully inadequate; the fact that the previous check on electrical outlets across the building had been carried out in what might, at best, be termed a 'slapdash' manner; the fact that untreated nylon drapes still adorned the

windows of more than a quarter of all private rooms at the Grange; the fact that the battery had been removed from the smoke alarm in Josey's room without triggering a safety warning of any kind, and of course, the fact that without the heroic intervention of the Night Manager, one of the Grange's most vulnerable residents would have been left to burn like a witch in a room that was a fire trap.

Yet for all its destructive power, the first five minutes of the inferno were understated – even secretive. It was almost as if the flames sought reassurance before divulging their whereabouts. Only the sharp tang of burning plastic, as the lamp plug in the socket near Josey's bed started to melt, served as a reminder of the unseen forces at play in the room. Shoulders wrapped in a dressing gown against the sudden night-time chill, Josey slept on, bathed in lamplight that accentuated the bloom of a purple bruise near her left eye. Closer inspection also revealed a swelling on her bottom lip and red marks on her neck. A fall perhaps? Or maybe the well-meaning but clumsy care of someone unfamiliar with her condition? No matter. Waking or sleeping, in pain or near nirvana, Josey remained unreadable.

Without warning, the fire finally found its voice and a ghostly sibilance inhabited every corner of the chamber. The hiss of evaporating moisture rose to a shriek as droplets of water in the wall-cavities superheated. Immediately above the bedside table the wall bellied-out like the canvas of a galleon under full sail, while Josey's reading lamp flickered, fizzed and winked out with a pistol crack. The room waited – breathless, alive, rife with possibility, until a pioneering tongue of orange-green flame leapt into existence above the socket. It licked its way slowly up the painted wallpaper towards the ceiling, pushing back the shadows as it did so. Then another, and another appeared; with flames crowding around the window and the wooden mounting starting to change colour, the drapes burst into a blazing mess; smouldering debris fell on the carpet and ignited anew; and the top of the dresser became a riot of yellows, oranges, pinks and reds as Josey's photographs gave themselves to the pyre. In no-time-at-all a whole lifetime of memories were gone – flame became fire, and fire became red-hot furnace. A window shattered and the inrush of oxygen caused the fire to roar like a beast. Josey lay adamant at the centre of the turmoil. Then abruptly, as if answering the fire's challenge, Josey's eyes snapped open and she began to scream.

KNIGHT, Samuel James (CBE) – sadly passed away in Wharfedale General Hospital (N.Yorks.) on September 12th, 2013, at the age of 70, after suffering a heart attack. Much loved husband, father and grandfather, Samuel is survived by his wife of 40 years, opera singer Dame Josephine Knight, by his devoted daughters, Anne and Rebecca, and by his loving son Jonathan. His wisdom, warmth, and wit will be sorely missed. Funeral will take place at Parish Church of St. John-the-Evangelist, Hampstead, on Friday September 20th at 10am; followed by private cremation at Golder's Green Crematorium, Hoop Lane at 11:30am. Family flowers only. All enquiries to daughter Anne Devonshire MP: 0745 29509XX

sam

dead sam

sam's dead

our annie tells me when we come in, so it must be true. i'm writing everything down now. he's been waiting for us in a wooden box on a conveyor belt, like a prize on sale-of-the-century. i ask annie what happens next and she holds a finger to her lips. honestly, anybody would think i was a five-year-old. you're my daughter, not the other bloody way round i tell her. the man at the front in the black dress talks about sam as if they were old friends. i've never seen him before...but there again, i don't know anybody else here either. only annie, jonathan and rebecca, and they're very sad, poor loves.

something bad must have happened, something really bad. they're good kids though, they don't want me to worry. nobody tells you things if they think you'll worry. when we stand up to sing the lord's my shepherd, becky and annie both hold hands with me and it goes quite well. hardly anybody else sings with us though, which is a shame because crimond is a great tune. i can hear the organ but i can't see anyone playing, so i ask becky and she says it's

pre-recorded. isn't that typical? jonathan reads out one of sam's poems and by the last line he's in tears, and i'm crying too. but they won't let me go across to him.

i wish sam was here.

why isn't sam here?

i ask annie and she puts her face very close to mine until we're looking into each other's eyes and she says daddy's gone, mum! he's dead. please don't ask again. i'm not sure what to say because it's so hard to hold the thoughts together for long enough to examine them. i decide i'll never talk to annie again. when it's time for the wooden box to go through the curtains, the speakers play a mahler song. a lovely voice. someone i've not heard before.

who's singing? i turn to our annie.

who do you think? she says.

i don't know, i reply (because i really don't).

it's you, mum!

it's you.

the box disappears inch by inch and i disappear along with it.

you think i'm cold because i'm shivering,

but inside everything's burning,

everything's on fire.

It's dark.

There's music.

And I'm singing.

*Non la sospiri la nostra casetta
che tutta ascosa nel verde ci aspetta?
Nido a noi sacro, ignoto al mondo inter,
pien d'amore e di mister?*

I know the words.

Tosca.

*Al tuo fianco sentire
per le silenziose
stellate ombre, salir
le voci delle cose! ...
Dai boschi e dai roveti,
dall'arse erbe, dall'imo
dei franti sepolcreti
odorosi di timo,
la notte escon bisbigli
di minuscoli amori
e perfidi consigli
che ammolliscono i cuori.*

*A worm moves somewhere deep in the pit of my stomach, hungry for worlds. I hide as he chokes the music
dead, rising coil after coil, floor-by-floor; flowing up the vertebrae until I forget myself utterly.*

I am only Josey's endless terror.

Yet raw fear – crackling and hissing like static – has a rhythm and a score all its own. I listen to this bone-jazz and follow its pulse, and suddenly ... suddenly I'm chasing his tail, screaming headlong through veins and arteries, down dendrites and axons, leaping neuron-to-neuron, closer and closer until I can smell him. And biting down hard through his scale and slough, I taste his iron blood.

The stage is reset and now there's a silver ring on my finger.

You're in blue, which suits you; colour of the slippers Sam used to wear, colour of the door of our house in Hyde Park, colour of my first party dress ... and I'm sure I know you. You kiss my hair and I corkscrew back but still can't see your face.

Verona?

Spoletto?

Wexford maybe.

The white wool rug on the stone flags in front of us has a spiral pattern running through it, from the extreme edge to the very centre. The pattern is livid with movement, constantly shifting, alive; and the weave seems to possess a brilliance all of its own. I think the rug belongs to me – everything about it is familiar. I think I might have been involved in its construction, but the memory's buried deep. There's a huge sheaf of papers, stacked and bound in leather, on a desk nearby to my right.

A book.

You straighten and stretch your arms above your head, silver ring flashing, before sitting down at the desk and hefting the book open at the final page. Your hand drifts down to rest lightly on the thick paper and a strange keening sound permeates the room. When you raise it again, your palm print has appeared on the page, burnt in among the fibres. It unlocks something inside me and I remember. Music wells up into my throat like undigested gouts of time; moments rolled and layered, crammed and

compressed – a geology of sound ... a resinous amber past. Immediately a deeper music begins, pouring into the space in wave after sonorous wave. Flowers spring up across the floor around you. Vine shoots appear and wind fantastically about the legs of the table. The vine blooms and fruits – grapes swell and burst. An oak tree seeds and explodes into growth, displacing the solid stone as if it were gauze and opening the roof to the sky above. Meadow grass grows, withers and fades, and grows again. All nature seems cradled between these four walls. I look back across the room and I find your eyes for the first time. It's like the flick of a light switch. I know you. I know your names. And you know mine.

“Becky ... Alma! It's me!”

Tears scald my cheeks. I call your name again and a primal chord thunders out, shaking the foundations of the room. In its wake, flames detonate around the walls consuming everything in their path – trees, flowers, vines, grass, and people – until the room has become a kiln. An oven. A refiner's fire. And when the flames die away, there's nothing left of us.

Like strange words on a page, we're translated.

Chapter 4 – Wildfire

Legend has it that when Josephine Singer returned to The Vale it was as if Spring had come early to the land. Flowers blossomed where she stood, fountains sprang from the hard rock and wolves, emerging from the Empty Quarter, offered her the warmth of their bodies to keep away the cold at night. It's also said that her people rose up, as one, to defend her and throw off the dark tyranny of the College, and that she walked unopposed into the splendour of Central Hall to claim her birthright, ears ringing with the cheers of politicians and mages from every corner of The Vale. This is, of course, horseshit.

There's so much you don't know that the telling almost defeats me. Truth? I could give you all the truth I possess about Josephine Singer and you'd still go wandering around the holy sites – Tivalhas, Lachan, College Green, and the rest – buying shiny trinkets and searching for a saint. For the record, Josey was no saint ... no warrior either. She came into the land alone and had to learn her worth like any child, despite the years hanging heavy around her neck. I know because I was by her side and saw it with my own eyes. So ... let's have no talk of heroes – it will make a change, no? If I'm to begin the task at all, I must drag you back with me, down skeleton roads and along the muddied paths of memory, to a hermitage on the edge of the Southern Wilds, on the eve of my fourteenth birthday.

Winter.

It was deepest winter.

Cold enough to kill at night. Cold enough to freeze blood in the morning ... and the old man, cantankerous bastard that he was, lived alone above the snowline. In those dark days, my father Yanic still sang – despite every prohibition of College and Council. Papa kept the vigils, ate no meat, drank no milk and instead of striking matches from the new factory down the valley in Dormin, he would sing our fires to life in the old way. I suppose it seems strange now, but for his faith, his independent voice and his thirst for knowledge, my father had a price on his head

outside the Five Valleys. He never allowed it to change the way we lived, but sometimes he must have wearied of the constant vigilance. Teacher by trade and wanderer by inclination, Yanic's favourite pastime was collecting songs among the freefolk. With donkey and chapbooks in tow, he was a familiar sight criss-crossing the valleys most weekends when the lower passes were open – sitting on a farmer's doorstep transcribing old lullabies, or else listening to rustic cures for rheumatism from the ancient hillsmen that gathered around him like iron filings to a lodestone whenever he appeared. In summer, I'd often accompany him on these 'scientific' excursions away from Lachan, enjoying the flowers, the freedom and the food that would undoubtedly come our way. Pale face, brown hair and eyes so brown they were almost black – I was, by all accounts, an unremarkable child, save in one respect: I only had to hear a tune once, and it was mine forever. Yanic made use of this skill and there were very few songs from the highlands that we didn't know between us. And as he was in possession of a good singing voice – and I could also hold a tune – we were regularly invited to sing for our supper. For this reason, though I cannot now remember the sound of my own mother's voice (who died bringing me into this world), I can still recall drinking songs in twenty different dialects and bless a wedding bed as well as any hedge-witch. So that was my father: a man filled with light and music – may the Founder grant him peace.

As winter's hold on the deep valleys and high places of the Southern Wilds tightened, our trips became fewer and the necessities of life became more important. Food, fuel, fresh water, fodder for horses, donkeys, sheep, and goats; these were the things that exercised our minds. I would have been happy to stay at home in Lachan until the thaw, keeping warm of an evening, playing with my cousins and learning how to sing fire into the heart of a pile of dry kindling, but my father had other ideas. Yanic insisted on visiting his old singing teacher at least once a week. The man dwelt just below the Nomrech Ridge in a remote cave cut out of the sheer basalt. Friends and family despaired, and my mother's sister, Valerie, threatened to disown my father, pointing out that if it was dangerous for *anyone* to make the journey at this time of year, to take a child up there was an act of recklessness we would all live to regret. Nevertheless, come the day, we'd don our walking gear – thick socks, jumpers, gloves, hats, overcoats and boots – and set off before sunrise, taking rough stove bread, yoghurt, eggs and firewood up the trail in our ni-pacs. We'd bring back the old man's foul-smelling ointments and medicinal salves wrapped in birch

bark to sell to the villagers. On good days above the treeline, it was so bright that the whole world seemed cut from crystal, a paradise of sculpted ice and powdered snow. On bad days, however, we cheated death only through my father's craft. His chant kept us warm, guided our feet and raised our spirits as we climbed – banshee wind clawing at our faces and snow removing all trace of our passage. Responding to my sullen face and fearful mutterings, Yanic would run a length of rope under my arms and tie the other end around his waist. Joined in this way we'd travel the last few miles up to the lower ridge, stumbling along in the maw of the storm.

We called the hermit 'Vanhin', though his real name was Stefan. The word means 'eldest' in Lachanin, and to see the man was to understand the sobriquet. Still powerful and vital despite being older than even my father could tell, his great gnarled hands with their tattooed knuckles and the matted shock of filthy grey hair that snaked down his back (held in abeyance by a thick copper torc) always put me in mind of an ancient tree. Papa told me that Vanhin had been a renowned mage and thinker in his day and was still on the College's 'most wanted' list, but I didn't believe a word of it. The notion that someone who dressed in rags and never washed could be a great thinker seemed absurd to me. Nevertheless, the man was certainly old and strange, that much even a 13-year-old iconoclast could fathom. For example, he always knew when we were nearby, and would wait for us by the icefield below the hermitage, his prodigal smile warming the frosted air. After clasping Yanic to him, he would hoist me up to eye-level with one hand, like a bag of flour. I always bridled at this peremptory inspection and fought his iron grip with all my might, but it made no difference; he would only release me when he had finished chanting his blessing. I am old now myself and have heard many voices since, but I swear to you, I have never heard a voice like his. The hermit's oktavist rumble was incomprehensible and terrifying at first hearing, filling the air like the grinding of tectonic plates. And even in his decrepitude, it contained such command that I felt his words touch the core of my being. With the notes still colonizing the space between us, he would stride away towards the hermitage where, once inside, he would brew pine-needle tea in a huge black kettle, coax the fire to roaring life and settle down to hear my father's news. After this, he would request a song-or-two to while away the hours till sleep. From time to time, he would stare at me as I sang, and the interrogation from those disconcerting slate-grey eyes made me long for the easy interactions of home. It was as if he dared me to engage him in conversation, which, to my shame, I seldom did. I had no real

concept of his power, nor his true nature – how could I? I only knew that I disliked him intensely and resented the fact that I was forced to leave a warm hearth and pleasant friends to climb up to his eyrie and sit at his feet with my father.

The evening before my fourteenth birthday started out clear and cold. We arrived below the hermitage after an uneventful trek, mostly in watery sunshine, but Vanhin was nowhere to be seen. My father shouted his name and sang a finding – but there was no sign of him. While the absence was unusual, neither of us was unduly worried; the old man knew his way around the Nomrech Ridge better than anyone else alive. I ate a piece of hard goat's cheese from his portion, thinking it served him right for not meeting us. As darkness fell, however, papa walked a little way down the icefield to see if there were any tracks. I remained where I was, staring at the velvet sky, stamping my feet, and trying to count the stars. By the time Yanic returned my teeth were chattering like hail on a tin roof.

"We'll cut a snow shelter if the old man doesn't come soon," he said, as if proposing nothing more taxing than retrieving a slice of cake from a well-stocked larder.

"I want to go home," I replied – a wormlet of fear already beginning to uncoil in the pit of my stomach. Yanic took out a flask of apple brandy from his pack, gave me a hug and handed me a measuring cup full to the brim.

"Drink it all, sunshine," he said.

As the liquid burned its way down my throat, I was about to tell him what a shitty idea it had been to come up here and how I was looking forward to my birthday and didn't want to die just yet, when far above us in the Southern skies, a single silver star broke free of its mooring and began to fall, its blazing tail drawing a line across the heavens, until it disappeared beyond the Nomrech Ridge.

"Papa," I whispered, awestruck, "did you see that?" My father nodded. He was as stunned as I, and for a moment – despite the numbing cold – we both stood open-mouthed, staring at the night sky. We were still contemplating the void when we became aware that we were no longer alone on the icefield.

"Well met, Yanic Lachani!" an unmistakable voice rumbled out of the darkness nearby. Papa wheeled round, as the hermit limped into the moonlight, leaning heavily on a huge ash

staff.

“Stefan!” my father called out, relieved. “What happened to you?”

“Much,” came the reply.

Then nothing else, save for directions barked out at regular intervals. I tried to peer behind me, but the hermit’s form was wreathed in shadow, as if he contrived not to be seen. After about fifteen or twenty minutes of walking, we arrived at a familiar rock wall and the old man suddenly appeared at my shoulder, scaring the wits out of me. I stifled a shriek and was about to give Vanhin a piece of my mind when papa caught my eye and put his finger to his lips. The hermit placed both palms on the rock and leaned in at an angle to kiss its smooth surface. He spoke a single syllable and with a resounding crack the rock split from top to bottom, rolling inwards on unseen hinges. The conjuring left a gap that we were able to walk through. Behind us, the door closed and, in an instant, we had exchanged the savagery of the mountainside for the safety of the hermitage.

Yanic busied himself with the fire in the main room and I sat on the rug, watching the old man out of the corner of my eye. He was slumped in a huge wooden chair, eyes shut, breath arriving in ragged gulps. A fit of coughing shook his giant frame and when he wiped his mouth, I saw blood on the cloth. My father poured him a brandy.

“They almost had me,” the hermit’s basso profundo rippled through the room. “Tonight, of all nights. And with so much still to do.”

“They?”

“Sivan ... The College.”

The colour drained from my father’s face as he filled his own glass and sat down on the stone flags across from his teacher. The old man continued, his voice roiling the air like approaching thunder. “Three men and a woman. Adepts. They surprised me crossing the Nedray and closed with weapons I haven’t met before.” He paused, lapsing into a prolonged bout of coughing. When it subsided, he looked up, “New science, Yanic,” he said. “Such lessons are always painful. They had no fear!”

“Are we lost?” Papa seemed moved almost to tears.

“You misunderstand me, boy – I am wounded, not mastered.” The hermit stared at my father as if the question had been an insult. “Four adepts crossed the Nedray and there they

remain, drinking its icy waters. They had nothing from me but death. Yet I am spent and must now rest.” Yanic told him about the star we’d seen fall earlier and this seemed to rally his mood greatly. “There are other powers abroad tonight beyond the College’s comprehension! I sense our help will be needed up on the Ridge before dawn.”

I listened to them talk, my father’s light baritone counterpointed against the unsettling subterranean trituration of the hermit. Nevertheless, I couldn’t grasp what we Five Valleys folk had to do with the splendour and power of the College? Why would professional assassins bother an old man like Vanhin? And how did he get down to the Nedray river (and back) in a single day? None of it made sense. I was still mulling over these questions when my father sprang up and started pulling his boots back on.

“Where we going, papa?” I asked. “It’s too late to get back down now, we’ll have to wait until morning. We can have medicine sent up for Vanhin from the village.”

“You’re staying here,” he replied.

“I am not,” I countered, standing with my back to the fire. The room was draughty, and pockets of intense cold seemed to haunt the farthest shadowy corners beyond the fire’s reach. “I don’t know what you need to do outside in the dark but if *you’re* going, then so am I!” He was about to lay down the law when the old man surprised us both by bursting into paroxysms of wheezing laughter. He groaned as the spasms of mirth pinched his cracked ribs.

“Take her, Yanic!” he said, still smiling. “It’s right she should go – nor would she heed you in any case. Climb up to Miriam’s Beacon, and whatever you find there ... bring it back. You have my blessing!”

We left him stitching the wounds in his gut, singing binding spells and mumbling to himself in the dull glow of the fire. I didn’t want to offend papa, but I thought Vanhin had clearly lost his mind. There again, as we left the protection of the hermitage’s thick walls and made for the top of the ridge, I wasn’t at all sure of my father’s sanity either.

A full moon illuminated the snowscape as we trudged up the old pilgrim track towards the summit. Lower down, the climbing had been difficult in places, but here everything opened

out. As long as the weather held, I felt I might even live to see the next day. We were labouring up the final rise before the summit beacon when I heard a single spine-chilling howl ring out across the ice. It was answered moments later by another feral cry, this time from a little farther off. Then silence. Papa came close and put his arm around me.

“Wolves papa,” I said.

Yanic nodded and crouched down in the snow halfway up the rise to begin a shielding spell. I felt the weight of subtle frequencies as he worked to shift and bend the light around us so we couldn’t be seen by any but the most curious eyes. He needed to add a wind charm to keep the breeze in our faces and started the low chant to fix it in place. Just then, another howl split the air, this time nearer – then two more. Others answered now from every compass point. I walked a rope’s length away from my father’s casting to the top of the ridge and peered off towards the beacon knoll. It seemed as if a whole pack of timber wolves were circling around the way-shrine at the centre of the beacon, their lithe grey-white forms slipping in and out of view. At first I thought somebody had left an animal carcass as an offering on the central stone, yet as my eyes found the distance, I realised with sudden horror that it was the body of a human being. Events thereafter followed on so fast that they are fused together in my recollection, like fossilized vertebrae. Staring at the slumped figure on the knoll, I saw the pack leader come near and nip at a naked foot, drawing blood. Gaining courage, the others closed in and a second wolf came forward, jumping up onto the stone. I don’t know what possessed me, but by then I was already out in the open, running full tilt towards the beacon. Looking up in astonishment, papa saw that I’d broken cover and began bellowing my name. Abandoning the shield he’d just crafted, he plunged over the ridge and lurched after me. It’s difficult at this remove to remember exactly the feeling, but as I rushed forward, shouting and waving my arms, trying to distract the wolves from their meal, I had a sense of being poured out like molten iron into a channel already carved for me. When I was still around two rope-lengths away, however, three of the pack peeled off and turned in my direction – driven, no doubt, by the prospect of so much easy meat in mid-winter. Realising my folly, I shuddered to a halt in the snow, and in a moment of perfect clarity I began to sing the Founder’s Prayer, so certain I was that my end had come.

It was as I raised my face towards the approaching wolves that I saw the naked figure at the centre of the beacon rise. It was a woman – no longer young – with alabaster skin and

ringlets of silver hair. As she sat up, I could see she was bleeding badly from a ragged laceration in her throat, her white moth hands fluttered around the wound. And then abruptly, it started.

A scream.

Something so elemental that it brought with it a shaking of the very ground beneath our feet. The sound expanded to fill the whole night and contained such pain, such suffering and such raw power that the breath was forced from my lungs, and it was all I could do to protect the fragile spark of my own life from the brutal blast. Unable to move, I watched in terrified fascination as the woman reached out and embraced the pack leader. Her face ignited into a mess of white flame, which then ran along the fuse of her arms and spread across the creature's thick winter coat. Inches from her open mouth, its muzzle began to blister, blacken and fall away – flayed to the bone by the sheer impact of her voice. A latticework of the same incandescent energy radiated out from the beacon across the top of the ridge, connecting each beast, until the entire pack was ablaze. At the centre of the way-shrine, the woman burned brightest of all, as if her whole body was clad in white-hot lava; and the ridge around us was lit up momentarily with the brightness of a fallen star.

Chapter 5 – Rude Awakening

At some point, I must have regained consciousness and walked up to the beacon. Yanic found me there, shivering and cradling the woman's head in my lap. Tears of relief ran down his face as he sank to his knees and embraced me. I saw his lips move but couldn't catch what he said. Slowly, it dawned on me that, save for the hammering of my heart and a persistent ringing that filled my head, the world around me was silent. This realisation roused me from torpor and I tried to tell papa, but he motioned for me to save my breath – indicating that his own ears were in a similar condition.

“You hurt?” he mouthed. I rolled my eyes, looking down and stroking the woman's tangled hair half-heartedly in response. Gently, he took hold of my chin and turned my face back towards him.

“Are you hurt?”

“I'm fine, papa. Honestly,” I said.

He removed the flask of apple brandy from the inner pocket of his coat and stood over me until I took a drink. Then bending near the woman, he placed two fingers on her wrist. Her pulse was faint, yet she was still alive. Papa held her left hand in his, and the heavy silver band on her ring finger caught the cold moonlight. He watched her shallow breathing for a minute, then gently took the weight of her head from my lap. He pointed at his pack.

“Find her something warm, Alma!”

I stood up awkwardly, my legs feeling as if they belonged to someone else. Setting the flask down on the central stone of the shrine, I reached for papa's ni-pac. He'd had the good sense to bring extra clothing, a battered medkit and our foil survival blanket when we'd set out from Lachan that morning. I removed everything and laid it out on the stone next to the flask, while papa carefully examined the woman's wounded throat. He sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose while a cloud of breath frosted around him like pipe smoke. Leaning over, he took a cotton shirt and tore it into wide strips before helping me push her arms into the worn quilted overcoat we kept for emergencies. I removed a small jar of turmeric paste from the medkit and laid it at my father's side, then, catching up a pair of thick woollen socks, I wrestled them onto her feet. It took longer than I intended, mainly because I didn't want to aggravate the

puncture wound on the sole of her right foot. Meanwhile, Yanic placed his hands over her torn flesh and began humming a complex pattern of low frequencies. Gradually, he gave more air to the spell and as his steady chant vibrated around the shrine, I looked about me in the gloom – a surge of euphoria at still being alive staving off the worst of the brutal cold. The wolves had been incinerated where they stood, and all that remained of the encounter at the beacon were twelve piles of ash on bare rock. Whether she knew it or not, the mysterious mage had saved my life.

A carpet of delicate snowflakes was already covering the ash by the time my father brought his chant to a close. He spread the yellow orange paste thickly across the woman's throat and tied cotton strips around the wound.

“That will have to do for now!” he mouthed, stretching and blowing on his cramped fingers as he stood up. I began packing everything away again. “I’ve slowed the bleeding but we need to get her down to the hermitage.”

“Who is she, papa?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied, making sure I could read his lips, “but I think Vanhin does.”

Aware that the lightshow on Miriam’s Beacon must have been visible for miles around, perhaps even down as far as the towns and villages beyond the Five Valleys, Yanic kicked at the piles of ash and then brushed fresh snow over everything. Remote as this spot was, we both knew that it wouldn’t be long before others sought it out. He was most careful to erase all traces of blood from the way-shrine, and when he had finished the task, he smiled tightly, reaching for his ni-pac.

“Time to go,” he said, tucking a stray lock of hair back inside my hat and gesturing the way down from the summit ridge. I shouldered both ni-pacs and papa reached down and picked the old woman up, bundled in the survival blanket ready for the descent. She weighed nothing – a bird or a baby might have weighed as much – but I’m certain papa felt that he held all our hope in his hands as we moved off into the slanting snow.

We arrived below the ridge just before dawn, tottering across the icefield towards the hermitage bearing our strange burden. We were beyond exhaustion and would have collapsed

long before had the two of us not joined our voices together, singing the entire way back. Nevertheless, while my ears had stopped ringing, I was dead on my feet and almost walked straight into Vanhin, who was waiting for us, motionless in the snow.

It's true that my memory is no longer what it was – but neither tiredness nor age can dim the recollection of that return. Vanhin took the woman from my father's arms with infinite care and then strode off as if the devil himself was in pursuit, leaving us to trudge along like golems in his wake. By the time we reached the door-in-the-rock, he was already inside. Out on the icefield, everything was opaque and formless. Yet light and life spilled like honey from the hermitage, and Yanic and I crept forward cautiously, not knowing what to expect.

Though I had visited Vanhin's refuge many times, I had never seen it thus – so full of sound and warmth. Neither had I explored its rooms or thought about its purpose. On the contrary, it had always seemed the meanest sort of place: cold, remote and perilous. Now the interior was illuminated with a thousand points of crystalline light set into the stone itself, and delicate rills of melody complemented the deep frequencies that washed through the entire complex of halls and chambers. Waves of sound filled the familiar main room near the entrance and flowed away down corridors that led far back into the living rock. I gaped like an idiot at the size of the place. I had glimpsed one room previously and, in my naivety, supposed it to be the entirety of the hermit's domain. Now, as the shadows receded, I saw ancient figures beckoning on the walls of the corridors and dazzling mosaic patterns set into the floors. It was as if Vanhin had brought the place to life for our visitor, whereas previously it had slept. Yet the transformation of the hermitage was as nothing alongside the transformation of its keeper. Earlier the old man had been coated in grime and dressed in rags like an itinerant shepherd, now he shone like a temple bell. He'd washed his face and his hair was oiled and plaited, falling away down his back in a silken rope. Dressed in a clean blue cotton robe and thick sheepskin waistcoat, he caught up Yanic and I in a bearhug that threatened to crush the life out of us. There was something else too, something about the resolve in those grey eyes, that electrified everything. It was as if the arrival of the woman at the beacon had brought water to a thirsty land, laving the wilderness around the old man's heart. I couldn't have been more surprised by the turn of events if the Founder herself had arrived and insisted on reading me a bedtime story. If Vanhin still felt pain from the hurts he'd received earlier, I couldn't tell. Singing all the while,

he motioned us to follow him down a corridor that snaked away on the left. We walked in single file past murals depicting the lives of the Singers, and then up a flight of worn stairs at the other end. The old man's singular voice echoed and re-echoed, restating fundamentals, picking out harmonic and inharmonic partials, and setting the mountain ringing as if it were one vast resonating chamber. At the top of the stairs we reached the threshold of a large circular room – at the centre of which, the beacon woman lay covered in blankets on an oak-frame bed. I noted the almost imperceptible rise-and-fall of her chest and was reassured that at least she still lived. Papa grasped my hand and as we entered the chamber, the hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention and my tiredness fell away. A vast symphony of sound greeted us, and it seemed that the roof of the chamber was open to the sky, though I felt no cold.

Behold the Singer! the hermit's contrabass broke like sudden thunder inside my head. ***As Miriam was the door, so I am the lock, and you Alma Lachanilta are the key.*** I was so dumbfounded by his abrupt switch to psi that I nearly fell onto the bed. Only the last-minute intervention of the old man's iron hand saved me. Yet the fact that he had referred to the woman as 'The Singer' and suggested I had a role to play in her life, had already etched his words forever in my remembrance.

By the time I had my breath back – and full use of my own mind – Yanic had already begun chanting. I took a deep breath and joined in. We sang seed syllables, such as were often derided as nursery doggerel by students of the College at that time. There in the Singer's chamber, however, I felt the throb of power in each utterance. The hermit seemed to be sculpting frequencies, concentrating them in the centre of the room. And as I added my own voice to the nexus of sound contained there, there was an almighty detonation – as if a cannon had been fired – and above the bed a glowing ball of light appeared, the colour of summer grass. Vanhin stepped nearer and stretched out his hands until they enclosed the hovering sphere. Then, with one hand still touching the ball, he brought the other close to the woman's ruined throat. I gasped as a searing green flame jumped from his open palm and settled on her skin. I'll never know how long we stood transfixed, Papa and I, watching the ragged wound close in front of our eyes. But when it was over, there was only the faintest mark on her neck to show the labour. The last I remember of that longest day in my short life, was the sight of the old man kneeling by the side of her bed in the soft light of a single oil lamp, singing the Founder's Prayer.

Nearer to me than my heartsong
 And dearer than my own breath,
 Guide me on the path,
 O giver of life

And when the way is darkest
 Make strong my voice against the storm
 And bless me with right judgement
 For the choices I must make

Journeying to the still centre
 Where the soul finds comfort,
 Let me strive always to sing
 The deep perfection of your love

Until we meet face-to-face
 And all our searchings cease,
 Refined in your healing fire
 And cradled in your peace

I woke to the smell of cooked food.

Fried eggs. Bread. Pine-needle tea.

And being a great eater, the fact that my nose predicted breakfast was already enough to make the day seem bright. Unfortunately, when I tried to sit up, I discovered that every bone in my body ached. I couldn't for the life of me remember where I was. It was obvious that I hadn't made my own sleeping arrangements. Somebody had laid me down fully clothed on a sheepskin rug in front of the huge, banked fire and simply piled blankets on top of me – more a burial than

a bed-making.

“Papa?” I called out, experimentally.

Looking around, I recognised the hermit’s enormous chair, and the events of the previous day began to fall back into place; the attack on Vanhin, the journey to Miriam’s Beacon, the wolves, the healing in the hermitage. My first thought was for the Singer – I needed to know if she had survived our ministrations. I got to my feet and was about to call out again when Vanhin appeared, clothed in his usual assortment of rags and carrying a heavily laden breakfast tray. He looked as grimy and inscrutable as ever, and I began to think that maybe I’d dreamed the whole thing.

“Good morning, daughter of song!” his cavernous voice bounced off the stone floor of the entrance room. “How do you feel?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “How’s the lady?” I eyed the hermit suspiciously.

“She sleeps.” He put the tray down on the table and reached into the pocket of his jacket. “I have something for you Alma Lachanilta.” He took out a small leather pouch closed at the top with a gut drawstring and handed it to me.

“What’s this for?”

“It’s a long time since Vanhin spent time with children – and yet he is not so changed that he forgets the practice of giving gifts. Today is the first of Twelfthmonth, is it not? Your birthday!”

My jaw dropped. It was true: I was fourteen years old. I had waited so long for midwinter to come round and here was my birthday arrived at last, and I’d managed to forget all about it. I nodded and held out the leather pouch, smiling.

“Thank you,” I said.

Papa entered the room with towels, dry socks and a mysterious bundle wrapped in an oilcloth.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” he called.

I undid the drawstring and upended the pouch, and an unadorned silver ring fell into my palm. It was simple and beautiful. And despite looking as if it had been made for a larger hand, when I slipped it onto my finger, it fit as if it had been crafted especially for me.

“That’s a fine gift,” Yanic observed quietly.

“So it is, my son. And richly deserved where given!” the hermit replied. “There is much to say about your present Alma, but for now, all I ask is that you do not remove it from your finger without good cause.”

This seemed such unnecessary advice that I almost told the old man so, however, at the last moment I remembered my manners and held my tongue.

“Of course not, Vanhin,” I said. “I’m not a child!” This amused him to the point of laughter, so I tried to change the subject. “What else is there to know about the ring?”

“We will sit together and discuss the matter soon enough, little one,” he rumbled, taking bread and yoghurt from the tray and scooping up a piece of omelette en route. He sat back in his chair eating noisily, while Yanic handed me the bundle he’d been carrying.

“Happy Birthday, sunshine!”

I unwrapped the oilcloth to reveal a small, sharp knife with a polished bone handle. I’d been asking for a blade of my own for as long as I could remember.

“Papa! It’s wonderful! How did you manage to get it here without me seeing it?”

Wreathed in smiles, Yanic merely tapped the side of his nose.

“That would be telling!” he said, walking over to his ni-pac. “But I think you might also need this.” He opened a compartment in the base of the bag and took out a new leather sheath, which he then threw over. I caught it and put my knife to sleep inside. Then I ran full tilt and jumped into his arms – and for some reason I burst into tears.

Later that morning, before we departed for Lachan, Vanhin led me along the painted corridor and up the stairs to visit the Singer’s chamber. In front of the doorway the old man sang a rapid sequence of tones that were beyond my ability to follow or interpret. Nevertheless, I felt the chant in my gut and had to concentrate hard so as not to lose my breakfast on the stone flags in front of us. In response to the hermit’s unsettling rasp, an unseen barrier was suddenly removed and we walked into the chamber. My eyes skipped straight to the bed in the centre of the room and rested on the slight form swaddled in blankets there.

“Shouldn’t we wake her?” I asked. The old man shook his head.

“The Singer sleeps deeply. I doubt whether you or I could reach her. Some wounds heal Alma, but she is still frail and her passage to The Vale may yet prove to be too much for her to bear.” He straightened the covers around the woman’s shoulders. “She will wake when she’s

ready.”

“Where did she come from?” I demanded. “And how did she get here?” Since the hermit was being unnaturally forthcoming, I thought to ride my luck and find out as much as I could before the floodgates closed once more. “Did she really fall from the sky?”

“Does it matter?” he asked, grey eyes glittering.

I thought about it carefully. There was no denying what I had seen up at the shrine; there was also no denying the connection I felt to the ailing woman in the bed. I reached out to touch the hand that lay balled into a fist on the topmost blanket in front of me and I looked Vanhin straight in the eye.

“No ... I don’t suppose it does!”

Papa and I left the hermitage, loaded down with salves and medicines. And like two tiny royal ants crossing a wilderness of palace marble, we traversed the icefield and set off down the mountain in the direction of Lachan. My mind drifted as we trudged along, and the old Noyrish thaw-song my father was humming seemed to cavort between us on the path like a living thing. It made me restless for Spring and change. And as I listened, I couldn’t help thinking of the lands beyond the Five Valleys – places that existed for me only as exotic names on papa’s hand-drawn maps and in the tales of itinerant summer workers: Redach, Yirahan and Dozha, dropping like pearls down the east coast; the awe-inspiring stone poetry of Central College, the marshes and freshwater fens of Meshak, and, shimmering in the north, the great Kasivari desert. So much world to see ... so much life, so much colour; and yet there I was, living in monochrome for fully half the year, hemmed in on all sides by snow-capped peaks. I resolved that if I could accrue any slight skill in chanting in the future, I should use it to escape the Southern winter and explore the country from end to end – preferably winding up somewhere hot! Such are the dreams of impressionable girls from the highlands. If I had had more sense, I would have been careful what I wished for.

It snowed the whole return journey. And though no trouble befell us, we had to walk

gingerly on the steeper sections of the trail until we came within a mile or so of Lachan. We reached the village, cold and wet, in late evening – navigating the old rope-bridge that led to our cabin in full darkness. I nodded greetings to the few neighbours and acquaintances we encountered along the way, and after a close call on the black ice by the vegetable patch, at last we stood outside our own front door. Papa murmured the kitchen stove to life as we entered and helped me pull off my sopping boots. With our coats fanned out drying on hooks, papa drew me to him. I shivered in my stockinged-feet, and we peered into each other's faces, like two old soldiers meeting at a border-crossing. Papa inhaled massively and puffed out his squirrel cheeks, before releasing the pent-up breath in a steady stream that lifted my fringe.

“Well, Alma,” he said, grinning from ear to ear, “what shall we do for your birthday next year?”

After a hot bath, Yanic made us both a drink and we sat watching the flames dance in the stove. Birthday notes from cousins Sami and Jur had been pushed under the door while we were gone, and though I knew I couldn't mention the Singer, I smiled at the thought of telling them about breakfast with Vanhin and showing them my new knife. Unconsciously, I turned the band of silver on my right hand and realised that here was another gift that would need some explanation. Though Sami was a year older than me, we were quite close. ‘Magpie eyes’ Valerie had nicknamed her, and with good reason ... for she took a keen interest in all things that glittered, and, as far as she was concerned, no item of jewellery was ever worn by accident. Sami was bound to notice the ring on my finger, even if no one else did. I mentioned it to Yanic, and he suggested we tell Aunt Val that the ring had belonged to mama ... a fat lie, but easier to manage than any version of the truth we could muster. The rest of my time on the Nomrech Ridge would have to remain necessarily vague. If anyone asked, we had spent the evening talking with the old teacher and gone to bed early after the manner of mountain folk everywhere; next morning we'd helped him pack medicines for selling and then after a simple breakfast, we'd set off back down the mountain. We had seen and heard nothing. Nothing at all. You see... taking supplies up to a crazy old man at the top of a mountain in the depths of Winter is one thing – seeing falling stars, consulting magicians, and consorting with long-dead saints is quite another.

‘Lachan by moonlight’ is the name of a famous mural made for Josey which now covers one side of the foyer in Central Hall. In the foreground, a graceful stone bridge arches over the fast-flowing Lach, behind which a beautiful villa – bathed in silver light – is picked out in delicate brushstrokes. The play of the water, the elegant mosaics, the fluency of the marble structure and the breath-taking image of Josey herself, singing to the stars, mark the work out as a masterpiece. Why do I mention it here? Only because I’d love nothing more than to conjure up for you an idyll of the village as it was back then; serenade you through its tree-lined boulevards, stand you a glass of Old Rot in its quaint half-timbered inn. But the sharp truth of the matter is that there were no inns, no boulevards, and no villas in my Lachan. It was – and always had been – a frontier settlement. When not frozen solid or covered in snow, its streets could best be described as an uneasy, malodorous truce between quagmire and sewer. And far from recalling the spacious villas and boulevards of the College itself, the rag-tag assemblage of houses, cabins, crofts and caves clinging to Lachan’s improbable gradients rather suggested the whimsical distribution of some exotic species of fungi. Viewed up-close in the most ferocious Twelfthmonth for a generation, the patched cabins and lean-to hovels reflected only crushing poverty and tenacity against the odds. The College rarely sent its officers this far south to dispense lowland justice – but harsh and uncompromising as it was, our highland version served us just as well. We Lachani were horse- and sheep-folk, hunters, trappers, loggers, skimmers, miners and metalworkers, with nothing to bind us together but hardship, a common dialect, and a love of song that bordered on obsession ... but the spirit of the place back then was something to experience. And if the College had not tried to beat it out of us, the story of Josephine Singer’s rebellion might have been very different.

Two weeks passed and I had consigned the events of my birthday to the bookshelf of memory. School started and there were lessons to attend, friends to meet with and games to play. Each morning, while it was still dark, I would knock on Aunt Val's door and summon forth my cousins. Bundled up against the cold, they would accompany me on the improbable route to

school. First, a rope bridge across the Lach (one of many, in varying states of repair). Followed by a skittering jog down Skinner's Row and an ill-advised shortcut through Kolle's yard – his bullmastiff bitch barking the whole time. Then a sudden sliding right-hand turn, across the powdered snow of the songmeadow (a paradise of Alpine flowers in summer – in winter, the site of epic snowball confrontations), and finally, a jump over the footbridge that spanned Atvug Beck. Such meanderings brought us hard-by a large, two-storey building, freshly painted in white and green. This was our school.

After lessons finished for the day, we would retrace our steps – considerably more slowly it must be said – and if my father wasn't with us, my cousin Jur, already tall for his thirteen years, would insist on a detour to feed the working beasts stabled in the paddock near the village's lower boundary stone. I can still see him now, running ahead in the gloom, hollering like a maniac, while Sami and I followed, complaining bitterly that we'd miss the honey cakes and goat's milk waiting at my aunt's place if we didn't get a move on.

It was on one of these visits to the horses at the end of a normal school day that a College patrol arrived to teach us all a lesson in humility. Papa had taken the afternoon off school to go and see Vanhin and I was supposed to stay with my cousins for the weekend. It was an old beacon day, and Aunt Val had mentioned the possibility of lighting a fire outside later that evening and we were all looking forward to it. As if mirroring our mood, cloudless skies offered a treasury of early-evening stars that seemed to light our way as we raced one another to the cave near the boundary stone where the fodder was kept. We followed our usual byzantine path to the large paddock and stables, where the land had been cleared to provide open acreage for the horses and ponies that worked the forests, mines and fields around the village. The animals – most of them wrapped in blankets against the cold – stood huddled in groups on the steep scrub, their breath steaming. In another hour, Zalman and his sour-faced father, Vont, would bring them in for the night, but for now they were ours. We had dragged half a small bale of hay over to the paddock and were ferrying handfuls of the sweet-smelling grass to each group, our moon shadows making a crazy dumbshow across the uneven snow-covered ground, when our world changed forever.

The animals noticed the noise long before we did and began to whinny, tossing their heads from side to side. Mana, the large draught stallion reared up, teeth bared. We froze,

listening intently. A faint keening sound could be heard on the edge of the breeze ... like a thousand angry hornets massing in the far distance. Then came the whiff of bitoomin. My stomach jumped – something Yanic had said about the black rock only the other day.

“What’s that smell?” Jur asked, frowning and wrinkling his nose.

I shrugged my shoulders unhelpfully. “We could go as far as the crags and look down the trail – we might see something from there,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

The other two nodded and we melted away from the paddock. Over the fence, we walked till we reached the limestone pavement that marked the top of an outcrop known as Symond’s Step. Here, on a clear day, you could see straight down the Dormin trail as far as the eastern edge of Linn Forest, twenty miles away. Sami arrived at the crag first and looked out over the edge. She motioned for us to crouch down as a wedge of bright lights was moving up the trail towards us. The vehicles must have been 10 or 15 miles away, though the clear night made them seem nearer. With the wind full in our faces, the mechanical whine grew louder and the tang of bitoomin was unmistakable. Just then, my father’s words came back to me – black rock was used by the College for fuel.

“It’s a College patrol,” I said, setting off back the way we’d come.

“Come on Alma! You can’t tell that from right up here,” Jur spat before continuing. “It might just be traders for all you know!”

I stopped and turned around.

“Might be actors,” Sami added, hopefully, “or jugglers.”

“In mid-winter?” I shook my head and looked out at the approaching lights. I was as certain as I’d ever been about anything. “They’re College. We should go back and tell Val.”

“And what if you’re wrong? Getting everybody worked up about a couple of carpet merchants!” Jur sounded almost sympathetic.

“I’m not!”

Sami had been quiet but now she jumped up and turned to face the two of us, “Vont’s got a farglass at the stables. I can be back with it quicker than either of you ... that’s if we really want to know who’s coming up the trail.”

Less than ten-minutes later, she returned with an ancient brass-bound farglass that looked as if it might have belonged to the Founder herself.

“Does it still work?” asked Jur.

“Of course it bloody works! You can either see something through it or you can’t – idiot,” his sister replied, handing him the glass. Jur pointed the brass casing at the trail and looked through the eyepiece. His left hand dropped to his side and after another minute he handed the farglass to me without saying a word. At first there was nothing – then I caught the bright lamps on the nearest vehicle and my heart leapt into my mouth. I had no vocabulary then to describe the half-track iron monsters churning up the trail, dragging their heavy fuel sleds and belching out thick black smoke. I tried to guess how many adepts might be in each – six, seven, eight maybe? With weapons? No social visit, then. They would probably set up a base at Lachan, as any further exploration of the steep Ridge had to be made on foot. And their purpose? It had to be the lightshow up on Miriam’s Beacon. This was what a College fact-finding party looked like.

We ran for a solid half hour without stopping until we arrived back in the centre of Lachan, breathless and barely coherent. We told everybody we could find that the patrol was on its way; from Kolle the skinner to the village speaker, Lysanna. By the time the snowtrax rolled into the lower village, everybody I knew was outside waiting for them – dogs barking, babies crying, and men cursing.

I held Val’s hand as the adepts climbed out of their transporters. I counted forty armed personnel, but knew that there were more still to disembark. A young man with officer’s insignia on his arm employed a burst of psi without warning. It was a display of power calculated to impress, and made his questions seem to come from inside our own heads.

Men and women of Lachan, loyal servants of the College – greetings! Our patrol has been dispatched to investigate dangerous frequencies recently detected in this area! Songmistress Sivan would like to make sure all her subjects in the Five Valleys are safe within the strong embrace of the state. Anybody wishing to make a statement or talk to a patrol member can do so now, or in private at any time during our stay. All information will be treated confidentially, and I have been instructed to inform you that we have brought extra winter fuel and new technology for those patriots who wish to discuss the things they have seen and heard in detail.

A couple of villagers buckled at the knees with the sensation and a man fainted behind me, but otherwise no one else moved. The hiss and spit of engines cooling offered the only response.

Have you visited the high peaks recently? Perhaps you know of someone that came over into the Nomrech Valley via one of the mountain passes?

Did you see or hear anything unusual in the Nomrech area over the last fortnight ... strangers, bright lights, unusual sounds?

Are you aware of the whereabouts of a hermit or healer rumoured to live up above the snowline locally? We intend the man no harm. The College seeks only to question him on your behalf.

A silence so absolute fell on the crowd that it became palpable. Eventually, stared down by every man, woman, child and dog in Lachan, the officer returned to his patrol and the spell was broken.

The wife of one of the metalworkers – I forget her name now – shouted across, “Now you can all fuck off back down to Dormin!”

“Piss on your questions!”, Jonty the dogman added to a raft of nods from those nearby.

Somebody else, in broad Lachanin, asked for his huge cock to be remembered to the Songmistress when the patrol returned home. This drew laughter from the villagers, but I noticed that some of the adepts unclipped weapons from their holsters in response. Kolle the skinner must have seen it too, for he strode forward to defuse the situation. Kolle was a bear of a man and we were all a little in awe of him. He had a famously short temper, but he also possessed a keen mind and a great heart – and there were many families (including my own) who had been helped by Kolle’s money and his business sense. So when the skinner advanced, instinctively people quietened down and fell in line behind him. He walked up close to the snowtrax and in a loud voice welcomed the patrol to the village with perfect courtesy. Even though this was Lysanna’s job, it was well done and there were murmurs of approval from the assembled throng. What happened next was so unexpected, that we all were shamed by our lack of readiness.

A high-ranking officer, the commander of the patrol, climbed down from his snowtrak. Long-legged and whiplash thin, he slowly, deliberately removed his helmet and visor – pulling out an earpiece attachment at the same time. An unruly mop of white hair fell about his shoulders and an impassive white face turned to the crowd. Hair and skin, however, were merely blank pages upon which a most singular pair of eyes had been set, burning like crimson coals. The man stared balefully at us, clearly irritated that nobody had answered his officer’s questions and that

the Songmistress's virtue had been impugned. Hands clasped behind his back, the commander approached Kolle. We assumed he would rant and rave, perhaps tear a strip off our man for the behaviour of the mob, maybe even impose some punitive sanctions, before accepting the welcome offered and organising a billet for his patrol at our expense. Instead, the bastard jacked about and punched Kolle full in the face. The skinner didn't go down – though perhaps it would have been better for him if he had. Shaking his head, he pitched forward and went for the albino, closing two huge arms around the man's waist and lifting him clean off the floor. Three of the patrol closed in immediately and began to beat Kolle with the butts of their cannons, for all the world as if clubbing a seal. Eventually, the skinner's arms fell away from the tall officer and he slumped forward on the snow, blood pouring from his head. They took hold of his arms, pulling him up and holding him there, while the muzzles of every weapon were turned on us. The commander spoke a grinding mechanical Lachanin using an inflection and frequency that made my hands shake and spots dance in front of my eyes. Though his voice never rose above a whisper, his words burned like acid into the minds of all those assembled.

My name is Callax – Morton Callax – and I am charged with investigating reports of rebel activity on the Nomrech Ridge two weeks past. Understand this: my patrol will stay here tonight and after climbing the mountain tomorrow, we'll come back this way to pick up our vehicles. If anybody remembers anything that might be useful to my investigation they should speak out.

He surveyed the crowd.

Take a good look at my face. I'd like you all to remember me.

With one gloved hand he lifted up Kolle's head by the hair.

You'll remember me, won't you my friend?

Moments later, I watched in stunned silence as Callax jammed his left thumb straight into Kolle's eye-socket, gouging out the skinner's eyeball with a casual indifference that caused me to faint into Aunt Val's arms.

It wasn't until we were far away from the Five Valleys that I was able to piece together

from papa exactly what happened up at the hermitage that evening. Exhausted after his climb, Yanic had been charged with keeping an eye on the Singer, and for hours he'd kept himself awake humming old Kasivari tunes he'd learned the previous winter. Their strange modal harmonies filled the air with wistful longing, echoing and re-echoing around the hermitage's mazy basalt interior. Despite his best intentions, however, his eyelids began to droop, and he had just dozed off in his chair when he thought he heard someone call out his name nearby.

Knife in hand, he jumped to his feet, and at the same moment – to his amazement – I appeared in the doorway of the chamber, silver band blazing. Entering the room, I walked through Vanhin's powerful wards as if they'd never been set. Papa reached out for me as I passed, but I plunged straight through his body like a wraith, freezing his bones to the marrow. Torn between fear and awe, he watched as I carried on towards the Singer's bed. I paid him no further heed, but arriving by her side, I bent over and clasped her cold hand in mine. Yanic said I spoke to her, but my words were lost, for as the plain bands of silver on our middle fingers touched there was a thunderous tearing sound, as if the bones of the earth were suddenly being wrenched from the very rock beneath us, and a shockwave ran down to the root of the mountain and back, splitting open the floor of the chamber with massive force and breaking forever the ancient spellseal of the place. Aftershocks battered the refuge in waves, and papa was tossed across the room like a pinecone as the whole Nomrech Ridge shifted and settled about him. Landing awkwardly, he cracked his head and sank into darkness. When he came round, I was gone ... and the world had tilted on its axis.

Josey, however, was wide awake.

The Singer's eyes – a fathomless green – were fixed on some distant point. She sat up in bed, fingers turning the glowing band on her right hand. Her voice, fragile still, yet clear and heavy with emotion, rang around the shattered room,

“Remember me ...” she said, as if to admonish the boiling air around her and the unquiet stones beneath her feet, “... remember me!”



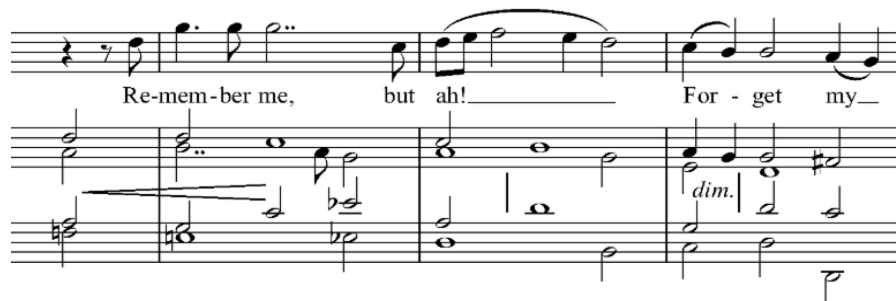
"[...] Glyndebourne's a strange place.

Part country estate, part opera house, part society gathering; the first time I attended the festival I absolutely hated it. As a working-class girl from Leeds, I couldn't see anyone else like me on those manicured lawns, and the impression I took away was one of toffs dressed to the nines, more interested in drinking champagne than listening to my friend Claudine sing her Pamina. Fortunately, subsequent visits have taught me to see things differently. The truth is that the Festival attracts some of the most committed and informed audiences anywhere in the opera world. And if you ask singers, they'll readily tell you how much they enjoy singing there.

My own debut at Glyndebourne came when I was already a young mother (Annie and Grandma Margaret were backstage cheering me on), singing the part of Dido in Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*. The opera focuses on the tragic relationship between legendary hero Aeneas and Dido, Queen of Carthage. Dido offers shelter to Aeneas and his crew when he's shipwrecked on his way to Italy, and inevitably the two fall in love. However, a wicked sorceress seeks to destroy Carthage and needs to split up the lovers for her plan to work. She sends a servant who pretends to be a messenger of the gods, reminding Aeneas of his duty to go to Italy. Aeneas is convinced and tells Dido he must leave, and though he subsequently changes his mind and is prepared to defy the gods to stay by her side, Dido insists he go to meet his destiny. Crushed by his absence, she sings 'Dido's Lament', before dying of a broken heart, centre stage.

Back then, my Aeneas was the lovely John Childs, and soprano Sharon Armitage, one of my best friends from the Royal College, sang Belinda. Thus, the cast felt very much like family...and I think the performance reflected that [...] As a result, the production was a great success, and I'm told the original live recording is now a collector's item! I really should ask the Christies for a copy! [...]"

[Tipperton. G.J., (2000), *Glyndebourne: Seasons of Song*, London: John Murray, p65.]





The curtain falls and the house lights go up.

Applause thunders around the auditorium, but you're still trying to coax yourself to breathe again. The makeup has run on your eyes and the heavy emotional output of the final aria has left you shaking like a leaf in a storm.

Dido remains dead to the world.

The Sorceress brings you a glass of water, and then, thankfully, Aeneas comes over to help you up.

"That was amazing, darling!" he mouths. "Did you see the guy from 'The Observer' in the front row?"

You shake your head, not back in East Sussex quite yet.

"He was in tears...he was weeping!"

There's a flurry of kisses and hugs as the cast gets ready for the curtain call. Chorus and minor characters take their bows as arranged, while you lean your forehead against the cool, smooth brick backstage. Your mum appears in the wings with little Annie.

"She's not sat still for one moment, Josephine. Won't listen to a word I say!" your mum says, gravely. "It's a blessing you brought things to a close out there when you did – I think the man next to us wanted to throttle her." Madge smiles, taking some of the sting out of her words. It's the nearest she'll come to telling you how proud she is.

Annie leaps into your arms.

"Hello mummy! What happens to you now you're dead?"

"Everybody cheers," you tell her.

"Is that because you died like a real dead person?"

Even if you could think of something to say, you don't have time to answer because the stage manager has begun your countdown. There's a roar as Aeneas steps out for his solo bow.

And then a hiatus.

A minor hitch with the video equipment.

The audience chant your name.

Josey!

Josey!

Josey!

Finally, the stage manager nods, and you step out into the glare. You turn centre stage and curtsy, and when you straighten up you see the audience are out of their seats.

Meanwhile, there's a flurry of activity in the wings and suddenly someone backstage hands an enormous bouquet of flowers to little Annie, shepherding her towards you. Your daughter makes her Glyndebourne debut the next moment in a white taffeta dress and ballet pumps. She runs on stage and gets a bigger round of applause than you did.

"Do you want me to take that?" you whisper in her perfect ear, nodding at the flowers and reaching out a hand.

"No, mummy," she says, holding your gaze, "they're mine!"

For a moment, looking into the empty blue firmament of her eyes, you shiver at the hunger you see there. Then, scooping up daughter and floral bouquet in one, you wrap your arms around the world, blowing a kiss to the audience and joining the cast for the full company bow.

Chapter 6 – Cold comfort

We were on our way back to Auntie Val's cabin when the earthquake struck.

As Val pushed Sami, Jur and I into the familiar yard, the ground beneath our feet began to pitch and buck insanely. Sami screamed, and all around us the shouts and cries of neighbours mingled with the grinding convulsions of the mountain. With no better option in view, Val steered us towards the storage cave at the rear of the yard. Crawling on all fours, we were only a rope's length away from the flimsy door when it became impossible to go any further. With a spasm like a dying leviathan, the earth hoyed and shook us until we lay tangled together in the dirt, fearing the worst.

Meanwhile, the College patrol had retreated to their machines. Only Callax stood outside, white hair wild around his face, unmoved as a yawning fissure opened in front of him. He called out orders in deafening psi and the patrol responded, climbing down from their transporters, and kneeling in a rough circle around him. With their commander anchoring the ensemble, they raised a brutal chant – a steely melding of power that umbrellaed out from the ring of singers. And though it lacked finesse of any kind, I could see the faint lines of force glowing as they knitted together in the thin mountain air, forming a protective mesh around the steaming vehicles and their occupants. Young as I was, I understood only too well that our College overlords were leaving us to fend for ourselves.

Stranded halfway across the yard, we watched the precarious rope bridges suspended across the Lach gorge dance, tear, and snap free of their moorings. Then, as the tremors began to subside, they were replaced by a new terror. A blast of cold air flayed the village, accompanied by a deafening roar from further up the mountainside. Those of us born-and-bred in the Five Valleys knew it meant only one thing.

“Avalanche!” Val shouted out at the top of her voice.

Breaking the inertia, Jur jumped up and weaved across the yard, shouting at us to follow. He kicked open the door to the storage cave and threw himself inside. Minutes later, we were together in the darkness. I took in the scent of pine, damp earth and naked fear in that tiny space, opened my arms wide and began to chant the only protection spell I had from my father. To my surprise, Val joined in and I felt the cracked walls become denser and firmer as we merged our

voices. My heart was pounding with the strain of lending strength to the structure, but neither Val nor I stopped the chant for a moment. With a sound like thunder, a juggernaut of ice and snow hit the tree line above Lachan, and in the space of one sharp breath, twenty hectares of forest were flattened. Trees were uprooted and tossed aside like matchsticks, rocks were ground to powder, and the topography of the area was changed forever. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the appalling noise outside ceased, our chant faltered and died on our lips, and an eerie quiet fell over the Nomrech Valley.

By the Founder's grace, the snowslide had stopped dead in the depression above the village. To me it seemed miraculous that we were all still drawing breath, and though I had no memory then of my spirit-form, or any notion of events up at the hermitage, I felt I knew with absolute certainty why the mountain had shifted on its foundations and who had intervened to save us. We were no longer caught in mindless catastrophe ... as far as I was concerned, this was the beginning of our liberation. Without thinking, I spoke straight from the heart.

"She's awake! The Singer's awake--"

Mortified by my big mouth, I bit down hard on my lip, drawing blood. Jur had his eye on the door and wasn't paying the slightest attention, thank god. But Sami and Aunt Val eyed me strangely.

"What did you say?" asked Sami.

"Nothing," I replied, staring at the compacted dirt on the floor of the cave.

Without removing her gaze, Val dabbed at my mouth with her apron and smoothed over the awkward moment.

"Come on," she said, "let's go!"

Val's cabin had survived intact, but everywhere the sobs and screams of the injured and bereaved punctuated the darkness. I helped Val tend to Jeanice, her next-door neighbour, who was bleeding from an ugly head wound. Yet, despite the suffering all around us, I couldn't stop thinking about papa, Vanhin, and the Singer up there on the ridge. And while we followed Val to the cabin, I told myself that they were alive and well, and tried to imagine how I was going to get word to them without attracting attention. They needed to know about the patrol on our doorstep and the likelihood of a visit from Callax. With my mind still elsewhere, Sami and I opened the cabin doors and lit lamps in the windows to guide those villagers that needed somewhere to stay.

Many were wounded or had been made homeless, and more than a few had lost their lives in the cataclysm. It wasn't long before people started gathering in Val's kitchen, and soon the place was full, with a further twenty or thirty milling around in the cold night air outside. Everybody had a story, and every time a dazed survivor staggered into the yard, or a stretcher-bearer laid down their load near the gate, we would listen to another perspective on the horror we had shared. Vont had been killed falling into a sinkhole; Kolle's wife and child died when their cabin was hurled sideways into the gorge. The skinner himself was still alive, despite falling 20ft and landing heavily on a limestone ridge. He had been pulled to safety by a member of the patrol and now lay broken and silent in Val's bed, empty eye-socket raw and gaping, while cruel guilt ate away at his mind.

A cheer went up as Lysanna limped towards the cabin, hugging each of us like long-lost kin. She was filthy, having been buried alive outside her own front door, yet we made way for her as if she were an empress, and she threaded through the assembled Lachani elders – head held high – to sit with Val at the top of the kitchen table. Some of the older men set a potjiekos of water to boil in the centre of the yard, and there they made pine-needle tea, sweetened with a full bowl of birch-syrup ... and everyone that tasted it remembered the welcome sweetness long after the last drop had been drained. We children also played our part, running messages between those out searching for survivors and those back at Val's cabin compiling the grim tally of lost and found. I'd just returned from a fruitless trip to a cabin that was no longer standing at the northern edge of the village, when the hubbub of conversation stopped abruptly, and the crowd parted to let a female patrol officer through. She carried an unopened medkit which she placed on the table as a peace-offering, but as she relayed Callax's orders in a flat monotone, she kept her eyes fixed on the floor. It seemed that the area directly around Lachan was to be sealed for the night with a perimeter guard mounted by the patrol ... to ensure our 'safety'.

"I'm assuming we'll be allowed to pass through in the morning to continue searching for loved ones, or to tend livestock?" Lysanna asked, pointedly. The officer looked up at the old woman and held her eye before responding.

"I'm afraid no-one will be allowed to leave the immediate area of the village until the commander's investigations are complete."

Val started to protest, but the woman raised a hand,

“We understand that the events of this evening will have caused much suffering throughout the Nomrech Valley and beyond. Therefore, Commander Callax has been in close contact with the College and a state of emergency has been declared, giving him the power of direct rule here in the Five Valleys for as long as it’s needed. Another patrol has been mandated to come up to Lachan with supplies and medicines, and will arrive sometime over the next seven days. Their orders are to stay in the area to help recovery and re-education, and they will be charged with establishing a permanent communications base here in Lachan.” There was an audible gasp at this from those around the table. Yet there was more to come.

“Until their arrival, a curfew will be observed from sundown to sunrise each day, starting tomorrow. Food and supplies will be rationed, and all social, legal and administrative issues will be referred to members of the College for approval.”

One of the men who worked a small lead mine below the village stood up and stalked around the table towards the officer, “You can’t just keep us here! I need to check on my family ... I need to know if I’m fucking ruined--!”

One moment it seemed as if he was about to shake the woman by the shoulders, the next, he was kneeling on the tiled floor clutching his throat, with a thin trickle of blood-and-mucous snaking down his face. She hadn’t moved a muscle – merely cleared her throat and tossed a low-frequency pitch cluster in his direction.

Sensing a change in the mood of the table, the officer made to leave. At the door she turned, “We are always prepared to listen to grievances presented in the proper manner. Officers of the College will be available all day tomorrow to discuss how best we can help you through this crisis. Your suggestions are welcome, and you should know that your wellbeing is at the heart of everything we do.”

There was a moment’s lull as the adept left the cabin, and then everybody started talking – some raging with indignation, some suggesting we should take the opportunity to work with the College, most just bewildered by the speed and scale of events.

As that long midwinter night stretched on, the conversation gradually turned to other things. We pieced together what had taken place in the valley and accounted for those who were missing. I cried out when I saw my father’s name on the list pinned to Val’s door. He’d been marked down as ‘missing, presumed dead’ in my aunt’s neat hand. Somehow, seeing the words

on the page shook me more than all the upheaval in the valley. I couldn't understand why she hadn't said something to me before setting it there for everybody to see, and, quick to anger as always, I forced my way through the crowd of villagers towards the kitchen to take it up with her personally. My cousins were asleep, tucked up in blankets on the kitchen floor, but Val was deep in discussion and, try as I might, I couldn't catch her eye. My annoyance fizzled out almost as soon as it had arisen and I drifted back outside, praying that papa was safe and that my gut-feeling about the Singer was true. I needed to find a way to get up to the hermitage and warn Vanhin, or at least contrive a message of some kind, but I was loath to leave Aunt Val and wasn't even sure I could get past a College guard unaided in any case. Midnight came and I was no nearer a plan of action. I sighed and pulled my heavy quilted coat tighter about me as I looked around Val's yard. A fire still burned in the centre, and a tarpaulin stretched from the cabin to the storage cave, providing a makeshift shelter for two or three families who had pitched their tents there as the temperature began to plummet. Lamps blazed in every intact cabin on both sides of the river and a series of replacement rope bridges were already spanning the gorge, like new gut strings on an old harp.

Val tapped me gently on the shoulder as I stood looking into the fire, and I jumped back as if scalded.

"A penny for them," she said.

"Is it papa?" I blurted out.

She put a finger to her lips and, taking my hand, meandered over to the far side of the yard, near the storage cave, where the glow of the fire ended and the darkness began. In the half-light, we stopped and faced each other.

"There's no time--"

"Why didn't you--?" I saw her dark eyes fill up with tears and I broke off, heart leaping.

In a loud pantomime voice, seemingly untouched by emotion, she asked if I would go and open papa's cabin for those with nowhere else to be, looking at me intently as I answered.

"Of course, Aunty Val," I replied, pitching my voice at the same level, "I'll go and ... do it right now."

"You might feel better staying there tonight anyway – just in case there's news about your dad." She held onto my shoulders, a tear rolling down her cheek as she spoke. "I'll come

along when I've finished here and look in on you."

I nodded slowly, and as she stared into my eyes I had the strangest feeling that she was already grieving for me, memorising my face against the terror of never seeing me again.

"Do you have everything you need for the night, child?" she said, the evenness of her voice contradicting the unhinged ferocity of her expression.

"There's fuel, clothes, bedding and food. I – I think I'll be--"

"I wouldn't wait then – I'd go as soon as possible," this last phrase was said casually enough, but the look that accompanied it was charged with meaning and I finally understood what my beautiful aunt was doing: she was giving me an excuse to get away. Somehow, she knew that something important had happened up at the hermitage and had crafted an opportunity – however narrow – for me to get a head start up the mountain before the College perimeter guard sealed us in. More than that, it meant that she thought papa was still alive, and that he might even be out looking for me. My mind started to boil ... it couldn't be long before someone mentioned Yanic to the patrol – he'd had a price on his head for years. And then they would come after me. As one of Lachan's elders, Val was probably under surveillance already, but maybe they would overlook her niece ... at least until morning?

"That's what I'll do, then ..." I whispered, trying to gauge the conversation's strange emotional undertow.

Should I try to stop you? Val asked. *Should I hand you over to the College for your own safety? It would be the sensible thing to do.*

I shook my head vigorously in reply, before realising that Val had just used psi to speak to me for the first time in my life.

Or maybe I should leave Sami and Jur here and come with you myself? she suggested. *So many choices ...*

I hadn't known that anyone else in the village, other than my father, was a student of the old ways and I looked up at my aunt in amazement.

"Papa never told me ..."

She smiled, crookedly. *I know*, she said. *It's not the secrets we keep, but the truths we tell that make us who we are, Alma Lachanilta. Remember that.*

"I'm sorry," I said.

Don't be! Val closed her eyes. ***I belong here***, she said, after a long moment. ***And besides, somebody has to look after the place until you and your dad get back.***

Marshalling my thoughts, I returned her smile.

"You'll see! Everything'll be alright," I said. She enfolded me in a fierce embrace.

"You'd better go then," she said out loud, turning sharply on her heels, "before I change my mind."

She walked away slowly across the yard, stopping to share a word with the mother of one of my school friends at the door to the cabin. She didn't look back, but I knew she'd torn her heart out and left it there in the shadows to keep me company.

Lachan was deserted when I finally left the cabin I'd shared with papa all my life. I was carrying a ni-pac stuffed with everything I thought I couldn't leave behind: spare coat, new socks bread, cheese, dried meat wrapped in foil, a full bladder of water, a poem Sami had written for me about honey cake, and an unfinished spoon I'd been whittling. Over the thermal-leggings papa insisted on, I wore heavy woollen trousers, topped off with an old jumper underneath my quilted coat. I checked my knife, pulled on boots, hat, scarf, and gloves and reached out to shut the door. It was then I spotted papa's apple brandy on the kitchen shelf. I snatched it down and tucked it into the ni-pac, imagining the smile on his face when he found out.

Navigating the munted streets by moonlight, I headed for the old drovers' path that wound away along the side of the depression above the village. My plan was to move round to the west and to try and pick out an alternative route up to the ridge – one I remembered from the summer. It was shorter but involved miles of steep scrambling further up. Deep down I knew that the high paths would be impassable at this time of year, but I needed to gain elevation and get out of sight as quickly as I could. After that, I'd think of something.

There was no sign of any guard as I moved beyond the village boundary stone, but it was a clear night and the terrain was utterly transformed after the tumult of the evening. Each step I took crunched down through the fragile crust on the surface of the snow and seemed loud enough to bring the patrol running, yet the truth is I didn't see a living soul as I traversed mile after mile

of the treacherous moraine pushed up by the avalanche.

Two hours later, I seemed to be making scant progress in my quest for the hermitage. I was hot and tired, and appalled that in another hour the dawn would come. Anyone looking up the valley towards the Nomrech massif would be able to pick me out, silhouetted against the snow, unless I could gain some height and move further round the ridge. I paused to drink water and get my bearings. All the familiar paths had disappeared, and I stood at the bottom of a white cliff-face considering my next move. One of the glories of being fourteen years old, is that you assume you can always win against the odds. So, it was without much thought for the consequences, that I weighed up the time I'd save scaling the cliff instead of walking around it and started to climb. As dawn broke, I found myself two-hundred vertical feet up, on a small ledge below an ice-wall, unable to advance further and certainly unable to return the way I'd come. I looked wistfully back down the valley towards the snow-filled depression that hid Lachan from view, and I saw a matchstick figure tracking towards me across the drifts. At that distance it was impossible to say who it was, but I broke out in a cold sweat, nonetheless. I had no delusions about the commander of the College patrol, and I knew that if I was captured, he would have the full story of the Singer's arrival from me, whether I wanted to tell it or no. In sheer desperation, I took out my knife and began to cut footholds in the ice above my perilous ledge. Slowly, and without consciously acknowledging what I was doing, I pulled myself inch by inch up the cliff, mumbling prayers and swearing like a soldier. To my immense relief, about thirty feet above me, the rock face angled in and I was soon able to make better time. After an hour of driving myself onwards and upwards, the terrain levelled out and I arrived at a path of sorts – a narrow goat-track that seemed to run away horizontally, before turning up the mountain once again. I thought it seemed familiar and began to jog along it with a kind of feverish anticipation. My hands felt as if they were melting, so I pulled off my gloves and tucked them into my coat pocket. The path became steeper and steeper as it led off into the distance, and I ran on blindly, willing myself to put as much distance as I could between me and my pursuer. As I rounded a scree slope, I was totally unprepared for the gaping ravine that suddenly appeared in front of me. Unable to stop, I tumbled headlong into its maw, nose-diving fifteen feet into snow that was already moving underneath me. I thrashed my arms and legs frantically, trying to propel myself to the top of the flow, and then cupped my hands in front of my face to make a breathing

space, as papa had shown me. The next thing I remember, I was locked under the snow and the world was ink-black and deathly still.

I lay on my back facing skywards. The breath had been knocked out of me, and my arms and legs felt as if they were encased in stone, but I wasn't in pain. I swallowed the first numbing waves of panic and forced myself to breathe evenly and to think rationally about the situation. Nobody, save my matchstick pursuer, had any idea where I was, and I had to consider the strong likelihood that the interior of this cold tomb might well be the last place I would visit in The Vale.

Then I remembered the ring.

Vanhin's gift.

It had become such a part of my daily life that I'd forgotten it was on my finger. Surely, there was some force in the silver, some spellwork, some eldritch power that might be called upon to help the wearer in extremis – if not, why give it in the first place?

I let all other thoughts drain away and focused only on the cold metal band around my right middle finger. I could feel the air thinning out as I breathed in deeply, but sensed no change at all in the ring, perceiving only the darkness of my own folly. With a scream of rage, I struggled against the weight pressing down on me and discovered that I was able to move my right hand. I pulled it back towards my face and suddenly the ring was there, blazing like a newborn star, melting the ice around my head and partially blinding me in the process. I thrust the hand out in front of me and arched forward as far as I could, pushing through the packed snow, until I felt no resistance and knew my hand must be sticking out above the slide. Fresh air poured into the enlarged cavity and I sucked at it greedily, before wriggling around and jamming my shoulder against the roof to force my hand even further out into the early morning air. I spread my fingers wide and almost wept with joy when a familiar bass voice dispelled the terrible silence.

"Well met, Alma!" the hermit called out, as if we'd just bumped into each other buying bread in Lachan. A rough hand enclosed my fingers above the surface, and with a whisper of grinding chant, and a rush of air, I was pulled alive and kicking from my icy grave.

"Your father and I have been expecting you."

Half an hour later, I was stood by my father and we were squinting back down the valley, shielding our eyes against the bright sun that had broken through the clouds. Vanhin surveyed the snowscape with a farglass.

“Soldiers,” he said.

“How many?”

“Enough,” he replied, handing the farglass to my father, who scanned the valley from left to right.

“I see two armed rangers up front, and maybe thirty of the patrol spread out across the valley. Callax is with them,” he reported.

The old man collapsed the farglass and slipped it back into a pocket somewhere deep in the ensemble of rags he called a coat. When it was safely stowed, he turned back to face us.

“Our options are reduced: the enemy is rested and moving quickly; they are led by a mage of some skill; and I sense there are others among them strong in the craft.”

Both men shared a long glance.

“The tunnels then?” my father asked.

There was a pause as if Vanhin sought a better plan. Finding none, he nodded.

“The tunnels.”

After hugs and tears, the first thing I’d wanted to know was how the Singer fared. Papa told me she’d awoken the previous evening, and I admitted I had known as much by intuition down in Lachan. I explained how I was sure she was behind the village’s salvation from the avalanche, but Papa said her wits had not yet returned and she still needed help to dress and move around. Clearly, he didn’t think she was capable of saving herself, let alone Lachan ... or anywhere else for that matter. When I reminded him of what we’d both seen up at Miriam’s Beacon, however, he held his peace. As we walked, he asked me if I remembered anything about Josey’s awakening. I pointed out that it was a strange question, seeing as how he had been there and I had not! Bless my dear father that he couldn’t bring himself to tell me the whole truth about my part in Josey’s return to consciousness at that point – I’m not sure I could have

survived the terrible guilt if he had.

In return, I updated papa about everything that had happened since he left the village the previous dawn. When I finished he was quiet for a long time. Then he kissed me on the forehead and put his arm through mine. It was only when I looked up at him as we trudged along the track behind the hermit that I realised his eyes were wet with tears that froze even as they fell.

It had been Vanhin's counsel to stop and check on my pursuers. He had told us there would be more than one member of the patrol on our trail – and now the farglass had confirmed it.

“So it begins, Yanic!”

“So it begins!” my father smiled back. If he'd been in any doubt about our course of action after what I'd told him of events down at the village, he'd set them aside. “I wish the rising had started at another time and in some other place,” he continued, “but if we must fight the Singer's cause here and now on this hill, then I'm by your side, Stefan. How long do we have?”

“In two hours, they will be standing where we are now,” Vanhin peered back down the mountainside. “Though I can gain us another hour, perhaps even more,” he said.

“How?”

“Like this,” the wizard's eyes glinted.

He breathed in and out slowly, and then released a low-frequency melodic tag from his larynx, something strong enough to distort the air around him momentarily, as if a heat haze covered his face. As he finished the tag, he raised his right foot, and like a demigod stamped his boot down once. Immediately, a piece of rock-and-ice the size of a snowtrak sheared off the side of the cliff and fell towards the armed patrol. It set off a series of small snowslides that erupted over the slopes, gaining momentum as they descended. The old man didn't even bother to stay and watch.

“Come,” he growled, “we must prepare the Singer for a long and difficult journey.” He took my hand as we strode away. “The job of leading her will fall to you, Alma, and it will not be easy. Take what rest you can when we arrive at the hermitage, for by midday we must be ready to leave.”

After consulting with papa, Vanhin insisted on using a spell to apparate the three of us up to the door of the refuge. And so it was, after a disorienting blast of powerful chant, that I finally stood outside the hermitage once more, exhausted and in need of the one thing I couldn't have – a good night's sleep.

From the moment we crossed the threshold, the condition of the refuge left me reeling. The rock door – once a symbol of all that seemed powerful and magical about the place – was cracked from corner to corner. Vanhin walked past it without a second glance, but I stood there gaping until Yanic took me gently by the arm.

“The state of Vanhin's front door is the least of our worries!” he said.

Inside was even worse. The walls were shot through with cracks and fissures, and the smooth stone of the floor was rucked and pitted with faults and scars. I ran along the painted corridors – noting that not one of the ancient murals had survived intact – and up the stairs towards the Singer's chamber. Josey sat on her bed at the shattered epicentre of the valley's troubles, staring at the door. And while the room broke my heart (one half of it was a foot higher than the other, and with a series of gaps between the two halves that were wide enough to conceal a dragon), all I could see were Josey's green eyes, deep enough to drown in. I jumped across to the bed and took her hand.

“Hello my Lady,” I whispered. “My name's Alma!”

“Good afternoon, Dame Josephine. Thanks for coming in at such short notice, I know how busy you are!”

I'm still clutching the bluebells our Becky gave me when I visited her in A&E this lunchtime. I think she stole them from another patient, but I could be wrong. Something happened at College this

morning that left her needing stitches in her arm, but Becky won't tell me anything. They want to keep her in tonight for observation and then she'll have a psychiatric evaluation with the consultant first thing tomorrow ...

Dr Iestyn Wallace, Acting Head of Piano Studies at the Royal College of Music, ushers me into his office, his eyes working the corridor outside to check if we've been spotted together. He closes the door and shows me to an overstuffed Chesterfield. There's a coffee table nearby with a large Sony TV/DVD combo sitting in the middle of it. Wallace removes an ivory piano key from his jacket pocket and sets it on the table between us.

"Do sit down," he says

Wallace is a renowned Chopin specialist and a restaurant critic for the Evening Standard. He's also a world-class dick. We were contemporaries in London as students and have never seen eye to eye on any topic I can remember, so I'm not expecting this meeting to buck the trend. I sink deep into the Chesterfield.

"I've just been to see Becky at Charing Cross Hospital. What the hell's going on?"

"There's something I'd like to show you."

Wallace perches on the edge of the table next to the broken piano key and presses play on the DVD machine. A fixed security camera shot fills the screen, showing a Steinway with the casing removed to reveal the keyboard and action-frame. A young woman with close-cropped blue hair walks abruptly into camera.

It's Becky.

She sits at the piano and plays a few bars of Liszt, then reaches out of shot to take something heavy from a bag at her side. Standing, she pushes the piano stool back and now I see she's carrying a hammer.

Drop-forged steel head.

Short fibreglass handle.

Calmly, almost casually at first, she sets about the piano's varnished exterior. Then she turns her

attention to the keyboard. Fragments of dark, satin-polished veneer and thin slivers of ivory fly as her hand rises and falls.

*Wood splinters,
iron sparks, and
high-tensile
strings
snap.*

And suddenly Becky's covered in blood – a cut on her arm from a broken string. Suddenly, Wallace's office is too small for this drama. There's not enough air in here. The video has no soundtrack, but my ears ring all the same; and I start to flinch involuntarily with each jolting impact ... as if somehow the blows are aimed at me.

"It goes on like that for some time," Wallace says, reaching over and switching off the TV. "Security couldn't get in at first because Rebecca had locked the door on the inside. They had to break it down."

I reach into my bag for a cigarette, forgetting that I've given up.

"I just came off the phone with the Head of Trustees: they don't want to press charges Josephine ... but I'm sure you understand – there must be consequences after something like this. If it was just the piano, you could replace it and everybody would be happy ..."

Wallace is getting into his stride now.

"... but her name's been in front of the trustees on so many occasions over the last three years, that this may well be the straw that breaks the camel's back."

He looks down at a sheet of paper in his lap as if to remind himself of my daughter's extensive list of misdemeanours.

"There was the relationship with her theory tutor in her first year—"

“Finished before it started,” I interject. “I’m surprised you bring that up again, Iestyn. I seem to remember receiving a personal apology from the Director of College for the ‘error in emotional judgement’ shown by a member of his staff.”

Wallace continues as if he hasn’t heard.

“Then there was her repeated failure to turn up for timetabled tuition. And, most worryingly, her use of recreational drugs on college premises, an offence that carries a penalty of immediate expulsion, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

He pauses, and I consider the cost of slapping his smug face.

“Rebecca is one of the most talented young pianists I’ve ever met. Her scholarship here was awarded on pure merit, and her musicality and technical prowess are not in question – but I really think we’ve done as much as we reasonably can for her and I’d be neglecting my duty to the College and her fellow students if I didn’t say that I think the time has come for us to part company.”

“You mean you’re throwing her out?” I ask.

“I’d prefer it if Rebecca left of her own accord.”

“You know she doesn’t respond well to stress,” I say, “yet, as far as I can see, you’ve had her doing more accompanying, more assessed recitals and more concerts around town than almost any other student in College. No wonder she’s lost the plot! You loved her when she was Young Musician of the Year, but the moment she can’t face walking out there onto the platform, you don’t want to know.”

“Come on Josephine! That’s not fair! The girl was found smoking cannabis in the practice rooms and now she’s brought a dangerous weapon into College and ruined a vintage Steinway grand. She clearly needs help that we can’t give! What would you do in my place?”

“A formal warning and the chance to graduate at the end of the year would be much more ‘helpful’ than opening the back door and kicking her out.”

Wallace stands, signalling the end of the audience.

“I’ve considered the matter carefully – taking your high profile and Rebecca’s undeniable talent into account – and I’m certain that it would be better for all concerned if she let it be known that she’s

leaving us to pursue private studies in the very near future.”

I haul myself out of the Chesterfield, sliding the broken piano key from the table.

“References won’t be a problem, and we can be very discreet about the reasons for her departure – though I’m sure there’ll be no shortage of teachers willing to take her on!”

“What if I refuse to let her drop out?”

“Well that would be ... unfortunate. There’s always the Independent Appeals process, but it’s long-winded and it could be very damaging to Rebecca ... and to you. Imagine if that video got into the wrong hands ...?” he sighs, shaking his head.

“I see,” I say.

“I knew we’d be able to sort something out between us, Josephine!”

He moves smoothly to the door which he opens for me, and then stands there beaming, as if we’ve just planned a rosy future for Becky together. Ignoring the handshake, I lean in close, noticing for the first time that he and I are the same height. I smile and wave the finger of broken ivory in his face.

“I’ll go now Iestyn ... but if I read anything about my daughter in the papers and trace it back to you, I’ll be in here again. And you’ll be eating this fucking thing for breakfast!”

We were putting together a ni-pac for Josey when papa told me that the ancient spellseal of the hermitage had been broken the moment she had opened her eyes. That meant that the inherent power of the place, commingled with the Singer’s fey energy, could now be sensed by any trained adept that happened to be passing. In fact, the longer we stayed there, the more likely we were to be discovered. He also said that yesterday’s earthquake, and the avalanche that followed close on its heels, had been born in that very chamber. I dropped the ni-pac, and a carefully wrapped round of goat’s cheese rolled away across the slanting floor.

“Papa! Are you saying the Singer is responsible for what happened at the village? For

Kolle's wife and his baby girl, for the Andersens, for Vont ... for all those poor people who--"

"No, Alma," he said with calm certainty, "she isn't able to take that kind of responsibility for herself yet: it's Vanhin and I, and yes ... perhaps even you as well, who must share fault with the Founder for saving her, keeping her alive and for allowing her to unleash the power she possesses without restraint."

I was speechless, but papa continued.

"The loss of our friends will only have meaning if we can protect the Singer and help her to recover fully. Do you understand, lovely?"

I nodded my head, but we finished packing in silence, and afterwards I lay down on the Singer's bed beside Josey and closed my eyes, exhausted by the push-and-pull of it all.

By the time I awoke, Vanhin was in the chamber, and an assortment of bags, tents, and ni-pacs lay around us on the ruined marble floor. Papa and Vanhin were ready to leave but I needed to help Josey into her travel gear first, so I asked them to wait outside.

I was lacing up her heavy leather boots when they returned. I noticed straight away that if I helped her stand, she would continue to stand unaided; and if I guided her forward to walk, she would walk until I stopped her ... but otherwise she needed somebody to initiate action or she would simply shut down. As I pulled my own coat and boots on and shouldered a ni-pac-and-tent bundle, I wondered just how we were going to cope.

"What about these tunnels, then?" I asked, more brightly than I felt.

Vanhin pulled the three of us near him and in his unsettling sub-tectonic drawl, outlined his escape plan – which seemed to consist of escape for Josey, papa, and I ... and not much escape for him, so far as I could see.

"This place was built for Miriam Singer, more than a millennium ago," he said. "There are other refuges hidden across The Vale, but they were not given into my care as this one was. There is a passage, known only to the Lady Miriam and myself, that leads from the hermitage, down through the heart of the mountain and out underground across the middle valley, surfacing under the eaves of the Linn Forest. I have used it many times to come and go unseen. After yesterday, I cannot say what state the tunnel will be in, nor can I come with you to offer my assistance. But the fact remains that this is your best chance of leaving the Nomrech Valley undetected."

The hermit turned to my father.

“Yanic, you will lead the Singer through the tunnels and bring her safe to the other side, if it can be done at all.”

And then he looked at me.

“Your job is the most difficult Alma Lachanilta, for you will be needed night and day to keep the Singer from harm, and to guide and counsel her. Where the Singer’s health and well-being are concerned, I put you in charge. Do you accept the responsibility?”

“Of course I accept,” I snapped.

Vanhin laid a tattooed hand on my shoulder and I felt a tingling sensation, as if hundreds of small needles were pricking my flesh.

“Very well then,” he said, “it is decided. I will wait until you are safely underground, and then I will pull down the broken shell of the refuge behind you, and block access to the passage with spell and stone.”

As if by instinct, papa and I moved either side of Josey.

“Once I shut the door you will be on your own. I will stay on the ridge and try and lead the patrol a merry chase when they gain the summit. I’ll also see if I can find out what the College is planning for our friends down in Lachan. And if we survive our separate endeavours, we should look to meet up at the Hinab pass in six days’ time. From there we’ll head for Tivalhas where, god-willing, we’ll be able to rest – for a short while at least.”

Papa had told me once that the old man’s family came from the village of Tivalhas and still held land and property there. It seemed that the Singer would be as safe in that close-knit community as anywhere else, until we could regroup and consider our plans more carefully.

Vanhin turned and bowed to Josey.

“My Lady forgive us our crude welcome and our headlong flight into darkness. I believe you’ll be safe in the hands of my friends here, and I hope to see you again.” He kissed the silver ring on her right hand and then stepped back. I set a ni-pac on her shoulders, which she bore without complaint, while papa sang fire into the end of a yew rod.

With papa lighting the way, Vanhin bid us follow him through a curtained alcove at the other side of the Singer’s chamber and down a glittering crystal corridor, as cracked and derelict now as everywhere else, but still beautiful in the reflected torchlight. We arrived at a wooden

door, thick with inscriptions which I felt I might have understood if I could have spared them more than a cursory glance. The hermit sang an unlocking and the door swung open. A blast of hot air greeted us, and as we looked down, we saw that the first ten steps that led into the gloom had crumbled to powder. The old man turned back into the hermitage and disappeared, re-emerging five minutes later bearing a ladder and a long coil of nylon rope. The first, he set on the door jamb and fed into the tunnel till it reached the next complete step, the second, he handed to my father.

“I think you will need both before the day is out. Now we must bid each other farewell,” Vanhin said. He sang a blessing as he watched us enter the passage, his impossible voice echoing and re-echoing around the broken stone at the mouth of the tunnel.

Papa asked me to go down the ladder first with the torch, then he tied the rope underneath Josey's arms and, between the two of us, we guided, cajoled, manhandled and finally lowered the most powerful woman in The Vale into the dancing shadows. As we set off down the lower steps, we heard Vanhin's words, as if from another world.

“Six days! Look for me at Hinab!”

Then the door above us swung shut and we were alone in the torchlight.

Chapter 7 – Tivalhas Rising

As the crow flies, Tivalhas is only sixty miles away from Lachan. As the ant crawls it's nearly twice that distance.

Who then can properly tell the story of those interminable hours spent underground? Who can summon up for the reader that sits safe in sunlight, the appalling darkness, the oppressive heat, the collapsed stairways and the terrifying rock falls, the cuts and bruises, the hair's-breadth escapes, and the thousand unanticipated twists-and-turns that imprint a journey on the memory?

Suffice it to say that when we emerged into the pine-scented stillness of the Linn Forest at dusk, more than twenty-four hours after entering the tunnels, I kissed the first tree I came to as if it were my saviour. And my father, who locked the tunnel cover behind us and buried the entrance, said there would have to be a demon chasing him – at the very least – before he would go underground again in this lifetime. Josey, however, met the tunnels with the complete equanimity she exhibited towards all external phenomena. She seemed to take the arguments, the wrong turns and the falls in her measured stride. It's true there was one particularly bad moment early on in the trek that shook us all. A flight of steps gave way underneath us, and our too-rapid descent through five feet of feral emptiness onto pulverised limestone in the pitch black left me in tears and saw papa dazed with mild concussion. Josey cut her knee badly, and after papa had cleaned and treated the wound she refused to stand up. I like to think it was in protest at our selection of an escape route that seemed to offer more opportunities for painful death than a direct engagement with the enemy. That was a low point ... but beyond those early setbacks, we began to triumph over obstacles together, answering every question asked of us by the difficult road. The Singer walked when we walked, ate when we ate, rested when we rested – and I was proud of her. More than that, the longer we were together, the more I started to feel that Josey and I understood each other. Small things at first – glances, hand squeezes; then sudden smiles and mirrored expressions; finally, as we were trudging the last few miles in the tunnel, I almost fell over when I heard her humming a short phrase. The tune was foreign to me, yet not unpleasant. Elated, I ran forward to get papa, but by the time he arrived with the torch, Josey was already as silent and expressionless as the stones under our feet, and no amount of capering or

gurning on my part could bring back the moment.

After donning our cold-weather gear we staggered on for an excruciating hour or two, moving silently among the trees like ghosts on a thin carpet of pine-needles and powdery snow, until papa thought we were far enough away from the forest edge to make camp. We drank pine-needle tea sweetened with honey around a small cooking fire, too tired even to talk. And as soon as we were safe in our tent, I made sure Josey was covered and the three of us sank into the deep, untroubled sleep of those who have truly earned the right to rest.

The four-and-a-half days up to the pass were difficult and dangerous but given their proximity to our hellish journey through the centre of the mountain, I remember feeling almost happy at the idea of hiking outdoors. The first three days were spent under tree cover, as we walked through the trackless forest. Always papa angled us towards the far side of the valley, singing findings whenever his sense of geography failed him. And while our spirits were high, our provisions were running low, and meat was a distant memory by the time we left the protection of the trees and pushed up towards Hinab.

The last day before crossing over dawned painfully bright and cold. Papa was conscious that, after being hidden so well by the forest canopy, we were suddenly the only dark, moving objects on an otherwise static, white canvas. He started getting us to crouch down when large flocks of birds passed overhead, and to throw stones at crows if any came too close. When I asked him if he was okay, he told me that the College employed adepts who could exercise control over animals and birds, and that creatures weren't always what they seemed. I smiled encouragingly at him, but didn't really believe what he was saying, at least not until much later that same year when I saw the evidence with my own eyes. But I'm getting ahead of myself ...

At midday we stopped climbing. It was freezing cold and we were now far above the snowline. I handed round the last of the bread and was coaxing slices from a block of hard cheese, when I looked up at Josey and saw her teeth chattering. I walked over to her and gave her the food along with a hug for good measure.

"I wish I had a hot drink to give you," I said.

Josey raised an eyebrow, as if to say, 'You should have thought it through better then,

shouldn't you?!'

I was about to ask papa if we could use the last of our scavenged fuel to heat up water for Josey, when I stumbled over my ni-pac and all three of us heard the clink of glass. I remembered the apple brandy ...

"Ah now ... that's good stuff," papa said, sighing as he drained his cup. Josey was already on second helpings, and as I watched her drink, I saw that her teeth had stopped their castanet rattle. I raised my drinking bowl to her and took a sip, tracing the liquor's fiery passage down my throat.

"I might set up a distillery when I retire," papa mused. "What do you think of that, my Lady? I'd only need a small state pension from you!" He laughed as he turned towards her.

Josey eyed him for a minute, as if he were a termite under her heel. And then she stuck her tongue out at him.

Papa stood there dumbfounded, as the Singer of The Vale limped away slowly up the steep trail. Not only was it the first time she had initiated movement independently, it was also the first time she had acknowledged my father's existence.

We met Vanhin at the apex of the Hinab pass, at the end of a crystal-clear afternoon on the sixth day out from the hermitage. Clad in rags, he was festooned with baggage, shouldering the largest ni-pac I'd ever seen and leaning heavily on a staff. After embracing my father and I, he took Josey's hand and kissed it, looking into her eyes and murmuring a brief incantation. She regarded him with absolute indifference and no flicker of communication passed between them – or at least, none that I could sense. There was no time for celebration, however, we simply continued over into the high snowfields of the Abash Valley, like automatons. Congratulations and travellers' tales could wait – they would have to.

The sky was a deep cerulean, and on every side mile-after-mile of empty rock and snow stretched away to the edge of sight. As darkness came, the remote beauty of the winter valley was hidden, and the temperature fell cruelly. Exhausted, we battled on, picking our way past

wind-blasted ice sculptures that seemed to begrudge our passage. And despite the fact that we had escaped the Nomrech Ridge in the teeth of an armed patrol, survived earthquake and avalanche, shepherded Josey on foot for nearly seventy miles through the Southern Highlands, and made it to the gap through the mountains to meet up with the old wizard (whose own path to the rendezvous had been far from straightforward) – it still felt like failure. It was as if there was some other power abroad in the air that evening, seeking to sap our strength and take our legs from underneath us. Rising to the challenge, it was the old man who gave us the backbone to continue. With a mixture of Lachani songs and his own wry humour, ground out in that extraordinary voice, he drove us down from the exposed summit of the pass until, truthfully, we could have gone no further ... not even if Paholainen himself had come to feast on our souls.

Yanic asked me to help Josey over to the cover of a small bluff so the wind that had arisen might bite us a little less.

“Vanhin is raising a storm to hide our tracks,” he shouted. “Try and keep her out of the worst of it; we need to make camp here, or we’ll not see the morning!” He handed me a survival blanket which I threw around Josey, and then he and Vanhin set about cutting and shaping the snow nearby with their knives, sweat pouring from their faces as they worked.

They hacked the snow into blocks, which they then set down in a large paraboloid, around four metres across at its widest point. Soon, the outline in the snow became a wall, and the next time I blinked, the wall had leapt up to become a curious-looking shelter – a snowhouse, hugging the ground in front of us like some ancient monument. With a swiftness that no one save the hermit expected, a storm broke over the snowfields, and as the first fat snowflakes fell, Yanic carried Josey over to the sunken entrance in the lee of the structure and pushed her inside. He repeated the procedure with me, and in the gloom of the lamplit interior, he set us both on a raised ice-ledge away from the door and covered us with every blanket and thermal foil we had, and then he sat in the centre of the icy floor with kindling and the few stunted logs we possessed and sang a tongue of bright flame into the wood. When the hermit’s massive frame finally squeezed through the small entrance and into the snowhouse, dragging our ni-pacs behind him, he joined my father in the centre of the shelter. Master and pupil chanted fire together far into the night to keep us alive, chasing shadows away and thawing out our frozen hearts.

For two whole days Vanhin’s storm raged outside; the wind howled like a hungry spirit

and treacherous snowdrifts blanked out every sign of our passage through the Hinab, shielding us from all but the Founder's eyes. And if we had been followed through the maelstrom, well then the tracker who possessed such skill deserved to find us.

Josey and I slept much of the time, waking occasionally to be fed spiced ginger soup by Yanic and to piss in the small connected second chamber Vanhin had dug and lined with fresh snow for the purpose. As night fell on the second day, I awoke feeling more-or-less refreshed. Two lamps threw dancing light around the crystalline walls, picking out the figure of Vanhin hunched close over the embers of the fire – his breathing slow and measured. Even from the other side of the room, I could feel power flowing out from him and imagined unheard frequencies doing battle with the elements outside. I sat up and checked on Josey, still warm under the covers. She was also awake, eyeing me quizzically.

“What's wrong?” I asked, returning her frank gaze, “You hungry?”

Josey stretched out her hand and brushed my face. I reached down into my ni-pac and brought out an apple, wrinkled but still good, and I cut it into pieces for her with my birthday knife. I watched as she ate – apple in both hands, mouth moving slowly, economically – like a squirrel with a nut.

“You've woken up at last Alma,” Yanic said, entering the central snowhouse from the adjoining chamber. “I was beginning to think you two wanted to stay here for the rest of your lives!” He smiled at Josey and I and added a pine twig to the glowing coals. The fresh smell permeated the room and we sat watching it dry out and burst into flame.

“What happens now?” I asked.

Papa handed me a strip of dried meat, though he took none for himself.

“What do you think?” he replied.

“Get ourselves down the mountain,” I said, with my mouth full, “quickly as possible?”

“You're not wrong!”

“Does that mean ... more walking?”

Papa let the question hang there, rooting around in his ni-pac for another apple, which he started to polish. The prospect of walking on swollen feet that hadn't been removed from boots for a week didn't fill me with joy, and so I spoke up.

“What on earth is the point of all this magic if we still have to walk ourselves to death? If

it can't take us places just by clicking our fingers; if it can't stop us from catching a bloody cold? And if it can't make the Lady right? We might as well bow our heads and go and work in the College factories down in Dormin – at least there we'd be warm!"

"Are you sure that's what you want?" the hermit's voice surfaced from the depths of his reverie and rolled around the interior of the snowhouse. "How do you know that 'magic' isn't all that's preventing you and those you love from being captured and dragged back to the lowlands in chains right now?"

I looked down at my feet, sulking, but I wasn't prepared to leave the battlefield just yet.

"You're right, I don't know! But in all papa's stories the Singer simply arrives and puts things back the way they should be. And the wizards fight their battles and then ... it's over," I paused, gulping air like a drowning fish, "the winner gets the glory and the loser gets what's coming to him. Here we are with a great mage and the Singer of The Vale herself and we're all still freezing together in a shitty snowhouse on a mountainside in the middle of nowhere!"

Papa had raised his eyebrows when I said 'freezing together', but he seemed genuinely offended by my calling his shelter a 'shitty snowhouse'. Nevertheless, he held his tongue. Vanhin, on the other hand, rose up onto his knees and thrust a hand abruptly into the centre of the hot coals. As he did so, his throat emitted a low scraping sound, like someone dragging a metal bar across a sheet of ice, and then heat began to radiate from him in waves, flooding the enclosed space. Soon the snowhouse became a sweat lodge, the air heavy and difficult to breathe.

"How much heat do you need, Alma Lachanilta?" the hermit asked.

I groped for Josey's hand to reassure her and sat inspecting her palm, like a fortune-teller. Just when I felt I could stand it no longer and was about to pass out, the old man removed his fingers from the fire, and immediately the heat faded from the chamber and the air cleared. Seeing my thunderous face, he threw back his head and started to laugh in deep metallic draughts. At first I wanted to take my knife and bury it deep in the wizard's back, but his laughter was so infectious after days of nervous tension, that I was soon rocking to-and-fro in hysterics instead. Yanic grinned and pointed at Josey. The Singer was smiling, head on one side, as if watching children play. After a while, our guffaws died away and Vanhin added the last log to the fire before turning to face us.

"I think it's time to begin your education."

“Now?” I said, completely wrong-footed.

“Of course ... why not? The storm outside has another hour of force left before it will be spent; it is one half-hour after midnight and we are all wide awake, thanks to you sharing your timely observations on the limitations of the power you hold by birth – but about which you seem to know very little.”

I muttered an apology, reddening in the shadows.

“Bring the Singer closer,” Vanhin suggested.

I led Josey nearer the fire, where Vanhin had spread a thick waterproof horse-blanket. As she sat down next to me, I wrapped a thermal foil around her shoulders and pulled her sleeping blanket over her legs. The shelter was silent, save for the whisper and crack of the fire. Vanhin remained wreathed in thought, his eyes rolled up inside his head, and his tongue lolling out of his mouth like a gargoyle. I reflected on the fact that two months earlier I would have been terrified ... now I was merely curious. Here at last was something that might be worth hearing.

What is ‘The Vale’? Do you know its nature? the mage asked without preamble.

“Ummm ... we belong here?” I ventured, looking at papa for encouragement. “The Vale belongs to the people and so we should all be able to sing fire, bring rain, and honour the Founder – like we used to ... whatever the College says.”

True enough, said the old man. ***“But there’s more to the question than that.”***

“The Vale’s a place of music--” I offered.

The Vale IS a place of music! And everything here has a voice. The Vale’s stones chatter, its rivers laugh, its trees talk, and its people sing.

I shifted on my bony backside, trying to find a more comfortable position, and the wizard’s head travelled minutely in my direction.

At the dawn of time the Founder set The Vale ringing, and all that we are, all that we have been, and all that we might yet be, is the consequence of that first music. Our world serenades us, Alma – but who now is listening? he intoned, the whites of his eyes flickering to reveal the slate grey of his normal sight. He gazed at me for a moment, and then continued, speaking out loud now. His voice unleashed in that space was overwhelming, and thus I dipped in-and-out of my first chanting lesson, entranced instead by the overtones and partials that danced through every subterranean phrase he uttered, undermining the seriousness of his words

like jesters at a solemn feast.

“Before Miriam Singer was betrayed, for millennia beyond recall, our children took in the skills needed for such tricks as you think constitute ‘magic’ with their mother’s milk. All that is now the province of adepts and mages, was once considered *elementary*.”

I began to protest that the lesson was already too difficult for me, but the old man continued regardless.

“The world vibrates – and we vibrate along with it. Every bird and beast, every person, place, and thing in creation possesses a unique note ... a vibration; the adept who knows the secret of these vibrations can control the world around them – from the snowflakes that whirl about this hovel, to the weapons of warriors, and even the minds of kings. But before you can set out to fathom the frequencies of those you wish to win over, you must be sure of your own pitch and key. For while the power of music knows no bounds, human understanding is limited. This is the first lesson, Alma: you must come to know yourself!”

Stealing a glance at Josey, I saw that she was asleep. I smiled, envious of her ability to be both present and absent at the same time ... and wished that I too could disappear. Vanhin began rolling back the floor blankets, revealing the compacted ice underneath. He talked as he worked.

“You had some questions, did you not?” he said. “You were keen to know why we can’t fly down to the College and install the Singer in her rightful place, and why I can’t restore her wits with a click of my fingers, and why the exercising of power seems so difficult for those who are supposedly so powerful? Am I right?”

I closed my eyes to avoid the interrogation.

The problem with magic, Alma Lachanilta, is that there’s always a price. Every spell ever cast, every chant given up has consequences, and not just for the singer, but also for the subject, and for the world in which the song is sung.

I wanted you to feel this law at work for yourself and so I have placed seeds in the frozen ground at your feet. The game is simply to try and make them grow without passing out from the effort!

I looked at the patch of bare ice and then up at Vanhin’s huge grinning face. I couldn’t believe he was serious. To cause something to grow in the paralysed earth around us seemed no small task for a novice.

"I'll do it if papa does it too," I said.

"He's already begun!" replied the mage.

Papa's lips moved silently as he focused intently on the uncovered ground.

"What about the Singer?" I tried a last throw of the dice.

"The Lady will do as she pleases, no?" he said.

Staring at my socks again, I found myself missing Aunt Val and wondered how Sami and Jur were faring under curfew in Lachan. I would have given up my place at the Singer's side in a heartbeat to sit once again in Val's kitchen, eating honey cake and drinking tea without a care in the world. Instead, I remembered her words about the importance of truth, and raised my head till I encountered the old man's wolfish grey eyes.

"How do I start?"

You must clear your mind and become the cold earth. The seed I planted for you has a song you will recognise.

I closed my eyes and sank my awareness down through the ice into the frozen soil beneath. If I hadn't experienced the terror of the flight from Lachan, if I hadn't been buried under the cold snow myself, I would perhaps have broken and begged the old man to let me go from my lesson; but the dark earth held no power over me and I allowed my mind to roam without fear.

Four seeds are locked in the dark, each one imbued with the infinite possibilities of growth, the wizard continued. ***If you listen carefully enough you will find what you seek.***

At that moment, a crazed tapestry of vibration wove itself into my consciousness and, unable to hold onto my own purpose, I fell out of the trance. Beautiful and golden, my father's voice filled the shelter, and when I opened my eyes, I saw a graceful snowdrop growing out of the ice at Yanic's feet. He smiled wanly at Vanhin, before collapsing back onto the blanket behind him, gasping as if he had run a marathon. Abruptly, I became aware of the old man's eyes boring into me, and I fled back into the lesson trance rather than face their pitiless glare. Once again, I sank down into the chill earth and let its slow sounds wash over me. I hadn't noticed how

weak I was, but during the next half hour I found myself longing for sleep the way poets long for their lovers. I was about to give in to the sweetest slumber, when at last I heard the seed – a stuttering low frequency – calling out to me. By instinct I reproduced the same pitch inside my head, and as I sang, I felt a corridor open up between myself and the tiny packet of life struggling in the ice beneath me. I poured my energy down that corridor, coaxing cells to multiply, warming the earth, and pushing the seed to germinate against nature and season – until a thin green fuse forced its way out into the half-light. Sweat ran into my eyes and my heart hammered like an army of blacksmiths ... but the smile on my face spoke volumes.

I cannot be sure if I ever actually regained consciousness that night – the old man told me I did not – but I possess another memory from that first lesson, one that persisted into waking and unsettled me for days afterwards. I was floating, looking down on the four of us from above: my father and I asleep on the horse blankets, Josey and the wizard cross-legged and upright by the smouldering coals. A single bean-shoot, the length of a man's finger, had broken through the ground at my feet, while next to it, the glistening white bell and bright green stem of a snowdrop whispered rumours of Spring. There was no trace of effort on the old man's face – nor any indication that he had expended even a scintilla of power, yet between the wizard and the fire a rose bush bloomed crimson, rising three feet out of the ice and filling the shelter with the rich ruby scent of summer.

Nothing grew in front of Josey, but she was awake, and her eyes burned like emeralds as they watched the mage with a steady unblinking regard. And set in the vast constellation of the old man's face, his grey gaze seemed to return the compliment with what I could only describe as barely disguised enmity.

I used to love telling the kids stories ...

'Once upon a time, an old pedlar wanted to unlock a door at the bottom of a tower that was best left shut. Here are the green keys he brought with him:

a bean sprout

a snowdrop

a rose bush

He grew them side-by-side in a patch of frozen earth under the full moon. In midwinter.'

I'm pretty sure it's just a dream.

Or a fairytale.

Or maybe it's both.

Anyway, I'm in a small room made of snow and it's cold enough that my breath steams like a locomotive. My father's sitting on my right. He's bigger than I remember, and the nose is all wrong ... but the eyes still have it.

And the fists.

'Kaaos' and 'Järjestys'. From The Chemic across to St Mark's and back up past Quarry Mount as far as the Ridge, me and my brothers were safe because nobody touched Tommi Korhonen's family ... apart from Tommi Korhonen.

There again, he also reminds me of a Russian bass I used to date before I met Sam. A defector – long dark hair and turtleneck jumpers – if only I could remember his name. He used to share Belomorkanal's backstage at the Garden while we were rehearsing. Solti brought him over. I'm almost certain it's the same bloke, but now we're on opposite sides. I don't like the way he's looking at me, so I stare back just to show I've got him in my sights ... and we wait patiently for the headshot like two old snipers in Stalingrad.

Next morning, after a mean breakfast of dried fruit and a few mouthfuls of water, we broke our high-altitude camp and continued down into the Abhash Valley.

Nobody mentioned the previous night, and when papa had shaken me awake in the cold just before dawn, there had been no trace of green shoots, snowdrops, or roses anywhere inside the shelter. With Josey and I bundled outside in our quilted coats, Papa and Vanhin proceeded to destroy the snowhouse and rake over the ground where it had stood. When they had finished, the site looked as if two great bears had fought each other to a standstill there, while all around the world was mist-shrouded and silent. I shivered involuntarily as I helped my companion shoulder her ni-pac; we were all so insignificant up there – ‘at the mercy of the mountain’, my father had said as we left Nomrech. However, I believed that the mighty storm the wizard had called had covered our tracks completely, for during the first three hours of the long trek down to Tivalhas, we laboured through snowdrifts themselves the size of small hills – or at least that’s how it felt to me at the time. Vanhin produced snowshoes for Josey and I from his ni-pac and they turned out to be a godsend, despite the strange gait they forced upon us. Wearing them, we made reasonable progress – reasonable at least for a girl who should have been in school learning her maths, and a seventy-year-old woman who should have been at home with her grandchildren.

We arrived, mid-morning, at a ghostly plateau which papa said was a beautiful place in summer, full of rare flowers and the hum of bees. Vanhin insisted we all wrap scarves around our heads, like Kasivari warriors, leaving only a tiny slit for our eyes. When I asked him why, he rumbled something about small children asking too many questions for their own good and stalked off across the virgin snow. With the sun well above Abhash’s eastern flank, the reason for the old man’s caution soon became clear – the featureless, undulating nature of the plateau and the angle of the light on the terrain around us, meant that there was simply no relief from the sun’s reflected glare. Within a short time, I would have been quite happy to sew up my eyelids for the rest of the day, for it seemed the whole plateau danced and shimmered in a fiery white light that threatened to blind us all.

Josey began to flag as we reached the middle of the plateau, and after she’d fallen twice in rapid succession, I insisted that we stop and rest. Papa brought water and was pouring us each a measure of apple brandy when the old man came striding back.

“We can only stay here a short while,” he growled.

“Why?” I asked, more from frustration at being chivvied along than from any desire for a detailed explanation. “What’s wrong with this spot?”

“We’re too exposed!” came the curt reply. “And if you cannot see that for yourself, Alma Lachanilta, then perhaps your head has suffered more than your eyes in this bright wilderness!”

“My head’s fine, thank you,” I said, stiffly, “it’s just that the Singer seems tired and unhappy, and I worry about her.”

Josey was peering at the sky through the slit in her scarf, her head panning from side-to-side as if searching the horizon for an incoming spear.

“It’s possible that the Lady has more sense than any of us in her careful watch,” Vanhin commented, wryly.

As if to atone for his earlier abruptness, he extended a huge hand to haul me to my feet. We both helped Josey up and, with Papa at the rear, we pushed on. The hermit stayed beside us, and to be fair, he seemed to set a slower pace. As we walked, I decided to risk engaging him in conversation.

“How did I do?” I asked.

Vanhin pretended not to understand.

“... the lesson?” I tried again.

There was a long silence, filled only with the crunch and scuff of boots on snow.

“Better than many ... worse than some,” came the eventual cryptic reply.

“I can improve,” I said.

Smiling in his wolfish way, he eyed me as we walked. “I know,” he said. “I fashioned the seeds to allow you to experience a little of the joy of creation ... and to feel the exhaustion that comes after such labour.”

The memory of the green shoot forcing its way above the ground was still fresh enough that I grinned, despite myself. However, it seemed the wizard was only warming to his task.

“Yet true creation is the hardest undertaking for a mage ... and it never happens the same way twice. You were tired and fell blissfully asleep after the lesson, but the green life you birthed was wide awake! You recall I mentioned that it is not only the adept that pays a price for magic, but also her subject and the world at large.”

The smile froze on my face as I remembered my friends in Lachan, and bile rose in my empty stomach.

“Don’t worry child,” the old man roiled, “the responsibility for last night’s lesson was

mine – and you need no help from me to imagine what catastrophe can occur when consequence is ignored!”

I nodded in response, my heart ready to break.

“Nevertheless, the distinction is important. Knowing how to accomplish something, and having the power to act on that knowledge, is not the same as understanding and accepting the repercussions for what we do. The mage must think through every angle, try every throw of the dice before he utters a sound.”

Josey and I had come to a halt, and Vanhin addressed us both.

“What does it matter if I think I have the power to send rain to Norbek? Norbek may need rain – it’s true! But if I sing rain over Norbek, might I not cause drought in Tivalhas? And what of Dormin, Lachan, and the plains beyond? What about *their* needs?”

I said nothing and was about to burst into tears when I felt the wizard’s heavy hand on my shoulder.

Silence is often the beginning of wisdom, Alma, he said, softly.

By lunchtime we had crossed the plateau and arrived at the place where the young Nedray emerges, energized, from its underground source and tumbles nearly two-thousand feet into the valley below, over a succession of limestone pavements known locally as ‘The Golden Ladder’. Now, in the middle of winter, albeit with bright sunshine on our backs, all seven falls were frozen solid and the river hung suspended for the season, draped around us in countless flowing forms. We removed our snowshoes and re-tied our packs while Yanic and Vanhin discussed the route down. A rough path led by the side of the waterfall to a flight of stairs that looked as if they had been cut into the stone before the first song was sung. No-one doubted that the steps were treacherous, but to find a safer way into the lower valley would take time that Vanhin felt we didn’t have. It was a risk – yet given our failing strength, our scant provisions, and the amount of daylight remaining, it was probably one worth taking. After breaking our teeth on oatcakes papa had discovered in the secret compartment of his ni-pac, we began our descent.

That's where the enemy found us, half-an-hour later, moving slowly in single-file down the icebound steps. We were attacked out of a clear blue sky – not by any College adept or faithless highlander, but by a servant of the dark lord himself. A demon with wings, but like no other flying thing I had ever seen; not even Vanhin knew from which hellish pit the creature had crawled. At the last minute, I yanked Josey face down onto the frozen limestone as it fell upon us. Part reptile, part bird, its leathery brown skin reeked of corruption – as if the flesh underneath already belonged in the grave even as the wings allowed it to soar amongst the living. Feathered hind-legs ended in the claws of a vulture – filthy, yet razor-sharp. But worse by far was its face: like that of a child not long out of the womb. And the voice ... the voice was honey-sweet, dripping with poison and promise:

... why not throw yourself from the cliff...

... stab the old woman...

... use your power against your father...

... everything you wish for will be yours.

Unable to resist, I reached out – knife in hand – towards Josey, but the moment I touched her the torment of the demon's voice was somehow muted and my mind cleared. The Singer's breathing never changed, nor did her expression, but she wrapped me in her arms as if our roles were reversed. I had no doubt that Josey had sensed the creature's coming earlier in the morning, and in turn, the demon had singled her out on its first pass. If I had not flattened us both against the cold stone, those claws, like abattoir knives, would have torn flesh from bone and snatched her from the rock face; instead, they merely shredded her ni-pac as if it were gossamer, laying the contents open to the sunshine, before the creature wheeled away. It circled around to attack a second time and I saw the old man launch himself from the rock stairs some fifty feet above us and scythe towards the demon inside a ball of blue light. There was the flash of a concealed blade as Vanhin drew near the abomination and the creature's lower jaw was severed from its head with a sickening wet snap. At the same moment, two huge black arrows – fired from below – lodged deep in the creature's dark heart, and with a deafening scream it sank out of sight. A minute later, Josey and I were back on our feet, just as papa came crashing up the glassy steps, chanting all the while, a war charm wound ready in his left hand and a knife clutched in his right. I had never seen him so angry.

“I thought I’d lost you,” he gasped, as he allowed the power to fade from his clenched fist. He held me close for a long moment and then sank down on the step, hands shaking.

“I need a bloody drink,” he said.

I pulled the flask of brandy from his ni-pac and sat next to him as he drained its contents, the Singer standing serene on the sheerest edge of the precipice the whole while.

After a time, I checked Josey to see she was unhurt, then retrieved the contents of her ruined pack and set them neatly on the ground nearby to be shared among the rest of us. When I turned round, I saw papa leaning over the frozen waterfall, calling out the hermit’s name. Looking down for myself, I saw Vanhin climbing the stairs towards us, two at a time. He was bleeding from his head but smiling as if he’d just been told the Founder wanted to marry him. In his hand, he held the two long black arrows.

“We are fortunate!” his *basso profundo* voice rolled up to us.

I failed to see how an attack that had nearly cost the Singer’s life – and my sanity – could be construed as being ‘fortunate’ but waited to hear more.

“Friends await us at the bottom of the steps!”

“Kasivar?” papa asked.

The old man nodded, “If these arrows are anything to go by.”

It was difficult to imagine the bow that had shot the heavy blackwood shafts. The arrows were easily three feet long, each tipped with a silver head and covered in delicately carved glyphs – the work of many hours. I could feel death singing in them as surely as if the archers who had fired them were chanting in my ears.

“How can you be sure that the people who shot these arrows are friendly?”

Papa embraced the wizard as he reached the top of the second fall, then turned to me.

“Because the people who shot these arrows are Kasivari,” he said. “Only they can produce such prodigious feats of marksmanship, and only they possess arrows that can choose whether or not to strike a target.”

“But the great desert is thousands of miles away,” I said, indignant in my flawless logic, “and you told me that the tribes have been hunted almost to extinction--”

Vanhin motioned for me to be silent.

He nodded at Josey and the three of us watched, incredulous, as the Singer set off alone

down 'The Golden Ladder', humming as she went.

Sam's in London ... you know this because it's written on your hand in biro.

He's asked the cook to keep an eye on you.

You like Janice.

She listens. She tries to understand.

She connected with you straightaway after you arrived at the Grange, and since then, the two of you have talked together often, but this is the first time you've been outside the corridors of the big house, and it feels odd ... as if you're breaking rules. You tell Janice this and she says not to worry – Marjorie knows. She's even brought an outdoor wheelchair to the sun-terrace to pick you up.

Janice straps you into the chair and the two of you make your way down through the Grange's tiered gardens, chatting and singing all the while like old friends, until you arrive near the boundary wall on the lowest tier, just where the cultivated land meets the open fellside. Janice makes you feel as if the two of you could carry on down the valley and away across the river. She's a peculiar mixture of hard and soft, and the fantastic creatures, the skulls, the flowers, and the words that cover her body seem rife with meaning in the dappled sunlight.

In a patch of deep shade, the cook turns the chair round and pushes you a short way up the path, ready for the return journey.

"I'm going to have to stop a minute for a rest Mrs Knight," she says. "I'm knackered!"

You smile.

"Call me Josey."

Janice snaps the brake on and straightens to drink some water, staring away up the hill; but the

spring-loaded brake lever doesn't catch properly, and the wheelchair begins to free-roll backwards towards the wall with you strapped inside.

"Janice?" you call out.

"Fuck!"

The cook turns and dives in the same instant, like a dancer at full stretch. She catches hold of the chair and brings it to an abrupt halt.

"You okay Mrs Knight?" she gasps, "I'm so sorry!"

The chair has slewed round and you're facing the wall, heart pounding despite the beta-blockers.

"I'm okay," you say.

Janice spins you back sideways on, smashes the brake lever down with her boot and chocks both rear wheels with stones.

"What a fucking idiot!"

She's angry with herself, but you've already forgotten the sensation of careering backwards and are looking instead at her hand. It's covered in blood from a deep cut across the palm and her thumb is sitting at a strange angle to the rest of her fingers.

Janice wipes the sweat from her forehead and sits down next to you on a tree stump.

"I think you should still call me Josey," you say.

She nods, despondent.

"Don't we need to get back up to the house?"

"By teatime," she says. "I didn't bring my mobile either or we could've called the office. I could run up and get somebody to come back and help me push. But it's gonna take twenty minutes both ways and I shouldn't leave you alone, Josey. They'll probably sack me for negligence now, anyway – on top of everything else. And quite right too!"

Janice places the heel of her left hand over her eyes.

"What are we going to do?" you ask.

She sighs.

“Give me a minute and I’ll figure something out,” she says.

Meanwhile, you’ve had enough of sitting so you loosen the straps, climb out of the wheelchair, and do a few stretches to get your circulation going. When you’re ready, you turn round to the cook.

“Shall we go?” you say, holding your hand out.

Janice looks up and her mouth falls open.

“You can walk?”

“Of course I can bloody walk!” you say.

You help her to her feet, and the two of you start moving slowly back up the path towards the big house. You’ve only been on your way for a minute when Janice starts to laugh, despite the pain in her hand. And once she’s started, she can’t stop. She laughs so hard that she has to crouch down, one knee to the ground, tears in her eyes.

“Should I bring the chair?” you ask.

The question finishes Janice off. She sits down in the middle of the path in her checked kitchen trousers, howling like a wolf.

We made it to the foot of the frozen waterfall in darkness and the old man went on ahead, saying that he would rendezvous with our new friends. However, there was no sign of any welcoming-party, and I was beginning to harbour suspicions about allies who were prepared to help us defeat a demon but balked at sticking around to lend a hand in the equally desperate fight against hunger and exhaustion. I knew we’d run out of food earlier, and though papa and Vanhin seemed unconcerned, I was hungry enough to consider eating pinecones – if only I could have found some.

“Papa!”

Yanic looked around with his usual smile.

“What is it, lovely?” he asked.

“It’s the Singer ... she’s starving,” I said.

“How do you know?”

I laid my arm on Josey’s shoulder and brought her to a standstill by my side.

“Because the last thing we both ate was a lousy oatcake at lunchtime, and our guides seem to have forgotten that even saints need to eat!” Sighing, I took Josey’s hand and we set off once more. “I’m also quite hungry myself,” I added, as we passed papa. He grinned, broadly.

“Please tell the Lady that we hope to make camp in another hour or so, when we’re safely under the eaves of Wander’s Holt,” he replied. “We’ll eat then!”

We lumbered on into the lower Abhash Valley, and after about ten minutes I could hold back no longer and resumed my litany.

“These bowmen ...?” I asked.

“What about them?” Papa drew alongside Josey and I.

“What if they were bluffing when they helped us before, and now they’re waiting for us under the trees with sharp knives?” I said, eyeing the shadows around us.

This made papa laugh out loud.

“There are two things you need to know about the Kasivari, Alma,” he said. “One – apart from the bow and a single arrow, they don’t carry weapons. Two – they never lie.”

Though still snowbound, it was certainly warmer below the waterfall and the terrain was easier. And whether it was from extreme tiredness or some charm of my father’s, a sense of well-being gradually began to offset my hunger. With Vanhin scouting ahead since we cleared ‘The Golden Ladder’ I felt more relaxed than I had earlier. And as it seemed we were finally nearing our campsite, I linked arms with Josey and decided to sing something to take my mind off my empty belly for the last few miles.

I sang a Lachani drinking song, which seemed to go down well (though I left out the foul words at the end to spare papa’s blushes). I was just thinking of another one, when papa drew attention to the line of conifers away to our left.

“That’s the Holt,” he said. “I think our friends are already there. Can you see the lights?”

Sure enough, as we reached the resin-scented trees, I could make out will-o-the-wisp

gleams dancing further off under the canopy.

Then came the smell of roasting meat, and for ten minutes straight Josey matched me step-for-step as we followed our luminiferous markers deeper into the fragrant wood. At last, we strode into a small clearing, framed by mature pine trees, where our tents had been set up and a cooking fire called us to sit, eat and share our stories. Hungry as I was, I stopped dead, however, when I saw the crouched figures tending the spit at Vanhin's side.

Two Kasivar warriors.

A man and a woman of roughly the same age.

Both olive-skinned, wiry, and with hair braided underneath white woollen scarves. They stood when they saw us approach, revealing the fact that, while they were dressed in warm quilted coats and padded cotton trousers against the cold, they went barefoot on the winter ground – something which didn't seem to bother them in the slightest. More striking still – there was not a finger's width of skin visible on their feet, hands, or faces that was not covered in the same sable runes – inked and carved – that we had noted on the arrows earlier in the day. I felt the craft running deep in both, veiled at present, but held in ready chant – like a blade partially drawn.

Two huge longbows stood, unstrung, next to our tent, but I could see no other weapons besides ... not even a slingshot or a penknife. I was wondering exactly how these strange warriors could help us in the fight against the College, when an extraordinary thing happened: without preamble they both knelt down at Josey's feet, kissed the earth in front of her and began to sing. Their voices were hard like flint, the pitches precise and unyielding; yet the melody was achingly beautiful. Papa had tried to teach me a Kasivar mode the previous summer as we jolted and jarred our way down the road to Dormin, yet it had proved a difficult system to master, and I had been a lazy pupil. Thus it was that night in Wander's Holt that I, who prided myself on remembering the words and melody of any tune I encountered, was soon lost in the lofty mansion of their music and afterwards could recall nothing. Yet though I only caught the gist of one phrase in twenty, the subject of their song was not hard to fathom: they sang about the return of the Singer and the fall of their enemies. Unexpectedly, the music shifted gear, and Vanhin raised his head to speak. I saw tears rolling down the old man's cheeks and I realised that he was

profoundly moved. I had little time to ponder what this meant as his powerful bass broke into my head.

Noa and Roi of the Kasivar wish to swear a blood oath to the Singer. The old man's voice was like a rough-hewn foundation stone next to the chant that swirled about us. ***They want to know if you will allow it, Alma Lachanilta!***

I tried to clear my head and forced myself to ignore the aroma of roasted meat for a little longer.

"Allow what?" I couldn't see why the Kasivari needed my approval. Then I remembered my own oath of responsibility to Josey ten days earlier in the hermitage and decided to ask some questions – it was, after all, what I was best at.

"What does such an oath mean, and what does swearing it involve?" I asked, embarrassed at my own ignorance.

A hard, ringing voice shot back.

Swearing a blood oath ties the Kasivar to a course of action. It is made with a deep song, and cannot be reversed, the woman Noa explained, flatly.

I looked at both warriors and detected only truth radiating from them.

It requires one drop of blood, Noa continued.

"The Lady's?" I asked, shocked. Noa looked on impassively as I spluttered.

You have the right to refuse this, Alma Lachanilta! But we seek only to reinforce the bond between the Singer and our people, and this oath will allow us to give her our strength at times of need and give her the power to share her counsel with us over all our wards.

"No-one's going to touch a hair on her head," I said, hotly, "even if the world depends on it. You'd better ask someone else ... perhaps Vanhin sees this differently."

The decision is not his, Noa said.

While we were talking, Josey had started drifting off towards the meat. She'd not gone three steps before she lost her footing on uneven ground and lurched over into a patch of holly at the base of one of the trees that ringed the clearing. Roi was at her side and caught her before she'd even touched the floor, helping her regain her balance. Nevertheless, a single drop of blood welled up on her cheek from the barest contact with the plant's prickly leaves. The Kasivar

reached out a finger and gently wiped it away.

Raising the tiny dot of crimson on his finger-end, he turned to me,

I will remove all trace of her blood from my finger if you ask it of me, Alma

Lachanilta.

I stared at his hand, noting the callouses and the curious runes that spiralled up the finger, but was unable to say a word. It seemed to me that the glyphs and markings on his face and hands were livider and more distinct than before, and for a moment, I thought I saw my own name carved into the man's skin. I closed my eyes and, abruptly, I felt my thoughts loosen, like milk teeth ready to fall. Then in a sudden rush of insight, I knew the right thing to do. Fate had supplied the Kasivari with the very thing they'd asked for – who was I to intervene? I took a deep breath and mumbled a quick prayer to the Founder.

“Swear the damn oath, then,” I croaked.

Roasted wild rabbit has been a favourite dish of mine ever since that night. The gods alone know how the Kasivari found rabbits in a forest ... in deep winter ... in the dark; but find them they did. Only Josey and I touched the meat, but that was fine by me. Noa and Roi had brought other supplies and so we also sat down to steamed potatoes and winter greens fried with garlic and fresh pine nuts. We ate like kings, and afterwards sang like chanters at a College wedding, until we were all filled to our own capacities.

After the meal, I sat with Papa, drifting in and out of sleep on his lap. Josey had been wrapped up and laid in the tent we shared when sleep came upon her, and I intended to join her there, but was still savouring the fire and the company, when I suddenly realised Roi was speaking about the demon we had encountered by the falls. Immediately I became alert.

... we burned the head and the heart and buried the rest to feed the land – if the land will have it.

Papa leant towards the warrior.

“Our deepest thanks to you and your sister, Roi. Do you think the demon betrayed our whereabouts to its master or to the College?”

The Kasivar shook his head.

It seems likely the creature was searching for the Singer or her agents across the high

places in the Five Valleys. Such beasts are little able to reason beyond sowing confusion and inspiring terror in their victims, unless controlled by one greater than themselves. We think this demon had been in the area since morning but only came across you on 'The Golden Ladder' by chance and chose to engage when it should have merely observed.

"I think you're right, my friend," said Vanhin, "though its master will know by now that it has not returned and will calculate that there is craft here strong enough to dispatch one of his lesser children." He stood and stretched. "The way down from the plateau will need to be watched," he suggested.

We will watch the path into Tivalhas, Lord Provost, Noa said. Nothing will enter or leave the Lower Valley without our knowledge.

Though I desperately wanted to hear more, I couldn't keep my eyes open and fell into a deep sleep. I remember nothing else of my first meeting with the Kasivari, save the comforting notion of their solidity and the smell of sage on their clothes. I still had no idea what use two unarmed warriors would be against the might of the College's mailed fist, and was thinking if all else failed, perhaps they could sing the patrols to sleep!

How little I knew then of the world ... and of the Kasivari.

We'd been walking among graceful, frosted birches and pines in Wander's Holt for nearly three-and-a-half hours the next day, when we passed the entrance to a sunken dell just off the main track. A wooden bridge led across a frozen forest stream, beyond which the rutted path tilted away out of sight. The old man had kept to the rear of our party since we left camp, letting the Kasivari scout ahead; but now he called a stop and came forward. He beckoned for papa, Josey and I to follow him across the footbridge and continued down into the shadowy gloom of the dell. The Singer's nose wrinkled at the whiff of sulphur that assailed our nostrils as we descended, and I turned round in time to catch a last glimpse of Roi, sitting cross-legged in the centre of the bridge, watching us as we slipped and slithered after the hermit.

The smell of rotten eggs was strong enough to make me gag as we descended. Josey's expression was unreadable, but I'm sure she was also wondering why we needed to endure such

a stench.

“Do we *have* to go down here?” I hissed at papa.

“It’s not that bad--” he replied.

“Not that bad? It smells as if something died ... a long time ago!”

We’d not gone much further when I began to hear running water, and soon the sound filled the space with the promise of Springtime, despite the reek. Vanhin paused a moment, releasing a tiny spellchant that fizzed and ignited into a pale flame in the palm of his hand, illuminating our surroundings.

“This place is called *Radha’s Well*,” he said, as we continued on our way. “It is named after the Fourth Singer of The Vale, a highlander and a great champion of our people against the dark.”

We reached the floor of the dell and peered around in the lambent glimmer from the old man’s werelight. There, shrouded in steam, was an ancient stone-clad shrine built on top of a thermal spring. The structure was about four-feet high, with a mildewed white marble capstone, across whose veins green algae had started to creep before even the wizard had been numbered among the living.

“The Lady Radha was born only a little further down the Valley, in the village of Miens. She dedicated this well to the local people.

I was unable to suppress a guffaw.

Some gift! I thought.

Vanhin spun round on his heel.

“Villagers from Tivalhas, Miens and further afield think the waters have healing properties, Alma,” the old man reached into my mind, *do you know otherwise?*

No, I said, sheepishly, *no I don’t*.

Then restrain your cynicism until you do, Vanhin’s eyes flashed, and I swallowed a smart riposte. *A zealot might say that the fact that a certain girl has just managed to use thoughtspeech for the first time after standing next to this ‘wretched’ shrine is ample proof of the potency of the place, no?*

Gasping for breath, I realised he was right. I had used psi without noticing – I wasn’t even sure I could repeat it. I sank down, chastened, and begged Radha’s pardon – cracking the

shallow ice in front of the shrine with penitent knees.

Papa spoke up.

“It was my idea to come here,” he offered. “I thought the waters might benefit the Lady.”

The rush of springwater was much louder now, and ignoring the mephitic vapours, I pushed my head through the steam to look inside. The light from Vanhin’s thin flame picked out flecks of gold in the sand and stones at the bottom of a stained marble trough, while thick, creamy-white mineral deposits covered the lip of the container, lolling over the side like a monstrous tongue. Water bubbled up and dispersed unceasingly, only running underground at the last by the contrivance of covered stone channels. I dipped my empty water flask in the trough and let it refill. When I brought the cup to my mouth and drank the cloudy contents, the shock was extreme: it was like drinking warm liquor with fire ants inside that jumped and fought all the way down my throat. I dipped in twice more to fill papa’s canteen and the old man’s battered leather flask. When I stood up to lead Josey round to the spring, I found her already by my side. We knelt together and I watched in amazement as she proceeded to wash her own face and hands, a task I had performed for her – albeit sporadically – our whole journey thus far. With her hair sopping wet and her eyes closed, she lowered her lips to drink and as they touched the surface of the water, it was as if the whole wellspring ignited in an explosion of light that left us all momentarily blinded. I felt Noa come crashing down into the dell, closely followed by her brother, and then heard them gasp as they slid to a halt by *Radha’s Well*. The water still glowed with the residue of the Singer’s power as if it were molten sunshine, and the whole dell was transformed. From the clean, freshly-cut white marble, to the steady pulse of warm springwater forced moment-by-moment out of the earth at our feet, the shrine looked much as it must have done when the Lady Radha first raised it from the mud five thousand years before.

We left the cover of the Holt in late-afternoon, scrambling down a steep scree-slope and traversing the fell that opened out underneath. And so it came about that at sundown on our 10th day out from the hermitage, I saw the village of Tivalhas for the first time ... a constellation of firefly lights strung out across the valley, picking up the weathered limestone exteriors of houses sunk deep into the hillside like teeth in the mouth of a slumbering giant.

Chapter 8 – The Provost

There's a song that's very popular among young zealots at the moment entitled 'Born in Tivalhas'. The lyrics tell how a whole nation was reborn in Vanhin's village that spring – narrow streets resounding with the songs of heroes, chants of power filling the air, and the Singer charming her restless band of rebel warriors ... forging them into a fighting unit and readying them to sweep down from the hills and flush out the servants of darkness from College Bounds.

It's much admired by those who never experienced the rebellion ... but the idea of Josey – who at that point had not uttered a single word beyond the phrase my father heard in the hermitage – charming anybody with her persuasive rhetoric is ridiculous. Add to that the fact that no attack on the College itself was ever planned and rehearsed in Tivalhas, and you can begin to understand why it makes me cringe when I hear the opening bars. The song doesn't even mention papa or Vanhin, and it ignores the fact that the Wander family more-or-less owned the village at the time. It's cultish crap and Josey knows it! I told the songwriter this to his face: I said that my cat knew more about Tivalhas than he did and reminded him that the first blows of the struggle had been felt in Lachan anyway. He just smiled, an indulgent, patient little smile. The kind of smile young men reserve for antagonistic old women ... like me.

Lights blazed in every doorway when we arrived in Tivalhas. Villagers thronged the streets to catch a glimpse of us walking by. They bowed their heads as we passed as if we were kings and queens just stepped out of a storybook. Snow had been cleared from the cobbles, firewood was stacked neatly at the side of each house and the whole place seemed poised and orderly, more like a military garrison anticipating a bandit attack than a frontier hamlet hemmed in by the winter.

"There's no love lost for the College here," papa said. "Tivalhas remained loyal to Miriam all these years, and the people wait for her return. They're less-than-welcoming to outsiders ... I was once chased down the main street for singing a song about the beauty of Central Hall."

Following the Kasivari, we turned right and began to ascend a narrow lane that led away eastwards.

“They seem okay to me,” I said.

“That’s probably because Vanhin’s with us. The highlanders in this valley are all related to him – he’s their landlord.”

The house lights began to thin out, but they still lit our way along the lane, like jewels against the dark sky.

“So this is where Vanhin grew up?” I asked.

It is! As unsettling as ever, the old man appeared at my shoulder to answer the question. ***These are the streets I played in as a boy and these are the people who know and love me best.***

I turned around to face him.

Does that mean we’re safe here?

If we are safe anywhere in The Vale – then we are safe in Tivalhas, he said. ***At least for a while ...***

A mother brought out a young child as we passed her cottage, and Vanhin hung back to speak to her. The rest of us continued along the lane until we came to a high wall punctuated by an ancient lych-gate and could go no further. A tangle of deep green laurel leaves covered the gate and the wall. They were worked in metal, but so cunningly wrought that they looked as if they might be plucked at any moment to form a living wreath. Two stone posts topped with carved serpents flanked the gateway, into one of which huge, rune-covered metal hinges had been sunk and then fused to the gate by some inexplicable process. The whole impression was one of impregnability and great power, sung into iron and stone. The Kasivari stopped in front of the entrance, looking up at the faded emblem of the Founder’s sun, painted on the middle panel of the lych-gable. I waited behind them – trying not to let the fact that no one had come to pay their respects to Josey annoy me.

“Should we tell the people that the Singer’s here?” I asked, giving the gate a hopeful nudge with my foot.

“No,” said papa, “not until Vanhin thinks it’s the right time.”

“Are we going inside then, or are we gonna just stand here and admire the gate?”

There is more to this gate than meets the eye, Noa replied, smiling. ***Perhaps it is worthy***

of some admiration. My Lord Provost! Will you open the way for us?

The old man strode up the lane towards us and there was a moment's grinding of tones, as if some fey musical machine were being primed for action, then the wizard's voice split into four separate parts in the most delicate way, and power washed around us. The magical key for the gate was hidden in a song so strange that I had never heard Vanhin sing anything like it before. It was full of unlikely overtones and uneven harmonies. Still singing, the wizard approached the gate and removed a plain brass key from his coat pocket. He slid it into the lock, turned it anti-clockwise and the key disappeared, melding with the mechanism. At a word from Vanhin, the gate swung open with an oiled sigh to reveal a path leading away through a tunnel of yew, and we walked inside.

We emerged into the starlit night in front of a large, low, stone building that stretched away into the darkness on both sides of us. While we were still in the disorienting gloom of the lych-gate tunnel, I had begun to hear snatches of chant. Now the source became apparent: in front of the main door of the house, men, women and children were gathered, lining either side of the shallow steps and dressed against the cold. I knew the melody they sang and was humming along with them before I was conscious of doing it. The words, though in a thick local dialect, were quite clear; it was a welcome song to the old man and to us, his honoured guests. The air crackled with the true craft as we drew level, and a thin-faced steward in a blue tunic stepped forward to greet us. He acknowledged Vanhin and addressed him formally,

“Welcome home, my Lord Provost!”

I stood beside papa.

“Why do they call him that?” I whispered. “I heard the Kasivari use the same phrase earlier.”

Papa leaned in towards me.

“Because that is what he is.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“It's a bit late for a history lesson, Alma,” papa replied, wearily.

“Never stopped you before!” I shot back.

Papa breathed in deeply, tucking hair behind my ear.

“Vanhin was Lord Provost of The Vale under the Lady Miriam. There now ... you asked,

and I have answered!”

My jaw must have dropped because papa laughed and put his arm around me.

“But the Lady Miriam died five-hundred years ago,” I blurted out, incredulous, “that would make him ... nearly six-hundred years old!”

“That’s right,” papa said, grinning. “It’s a relief to know they taught you some arithmetic at that school of yours.”

Even though I had personally witnessed the old man’s power uncloaked on several occasions, the idea that he was somehow immune to the passage of time seemed fanciful in the extreme. I was about to point this out to papa when the steward opened the door and invited us to enter. Roi and Noa seemed perfectly at ease, as always, giving up their longbows to two young boys in the hallway as they entered. I took Josey’s hand and gently led her across the threshold. As she passed Vanhin, he sang a tag of low-frequency chant, and the corridors were suffused in warm light from globes above our heads. At the same moment, like a snake shedding its skin, the old man’s clothes changed in front of our eyes. His usual tatterdemalion ensemble of rags bled one-into-the-other and transformed into a padded woollen tunic, and the wild, unkempt hair and beard were tamed and tidied with plait and torc, as papa and I had witnessed once before when we brought Josey down from Miriam’s Beacon. He began to address us all, household and guests, and I was just thinking how much more imposing he looked in his finery, when I felt his vice-like gaze come to rest on me.

A moment’s dizziness passed, and though I was still next to Josey in the entrance hall, apparently listening attentively with the others, in fact I was deaf to the outer world as Vanhin spoke directly to me in psi.

You and your father are welcome in my home, Alma. The steward knows you now and all doors will open for you should you ask it. I made to thank him, but he ignored me.

There are other matters that must be discussed between us. We both know the Singer is the greatest among us here, but for the moment I must ask you to keep her true identity hidden. She is yet weak and there will be those who flock to our cause in the coming months whom we cannot fully trust. Until the Lady comes back to herself, she will need all the guidance and protection we can provide, without the pressure and expectation of being hailed in public as the 9th of her line. She is both our greatest asset and our keenest burden.

Disapproval must have flickered across my face on hearing Josey referred to as an ‘asset’ and a ‘burden’, for the old man tried to soften the impact of his words. ***I do not talk of the Singer as if she were mere ballast, to be discarded when the way becomes difficult. She is our talisman and our sword ... but she is wholly in our care nonetheless, and we must carry her until she can decide for herself where she will go and what she will do.***

I understand, I said.

Nobody from the village will ask questions, he continued, ***but others may. For the time being ... the Lady is distant family from Redach, on the coast, and you are all wintering here with me after hearing of the trouble in Lachan. Is this satisfactory?***

I nodded.

It seemed as if the old man was about to speak further when those assembled in the hallway broke into enthusiastic applause in response to his external voice. I joined in the clapping and the moment passed.

You should rest now. We have accomplished much and deserve some respite, no?

Indeed we do, my Lord Provost, I replied, unconsciously mimicking the steward’s intonation and bowing like a hinged gate. The old man’s sense of humour was always a mystery to me – like wind moving through the grass – but something about hearing that title from my lips and watching my awkward bow drew a gale of laughter from him.

You are worth your weight in gold, Alma, he said, eyes still dancing with barely contained mirth. ***Only you could make one of the greatest titles in the land sound like a curse.***

Mortally embarrassed, I attempted an apology, but he waved it away.

From you, ‘Vanhin’ will always suffice ...

I felt his regard shift as his mind cut contact with my own, and immediately I was sucked back into the hallway. I held onto Josey like a drowning man for several long breaths as my perception changed, and when my pulse had slowed to a manageable level, I opened my eyes. The wizard was just finishing his welcome speech.

“... so rest well, my friends and remember to ask a member of the household if you need anything. Jaris will show you to your rooms. May the Founder bless us all.”

The bed I awoke in next morning could have served a family of four Lachanis quite comfortably. Snowflakes were falling outside my window and the wind howled like a tormented soul, but under Vanhin's roof I felt comfortable and safe for the first time since I'd left my aunt's cabin.

The night before I had helped Josey bathe and tucked her into a similar-sized divan on the other side of the room we shared. I'd been too exhausted afterwards to wash myself and had simply taken my boots off and jumped between the sheets. Now, I began to regret my haste. As I watched the snow swirl, counting my blessings alongside my blisters, my nose told me that after nearly two weeks of running scared through the wilderness with a heavy ni-pac on my back, not only did I feel like a mule, but I'd started to smell like one too. I levered myself up and slid my feet across the sheets, leaving smudges of dirt on the pristine bedclothes. And that was it ... suddenly I was crying my heart out – for myself, for my village, for my cousins ... for the whole messed-up world. The tears must have lasted quite a while, because when Vanhin's people came to bring breakfast for Josey and I later that morning, I was still staring disconsolately at my fingernails and chewing the ends of my matted hair.

I would have probably stayed that way until lunchtime if Noa hadn't looked in on the two of us to say goodbye. She and her brother were heading out into the maelstrom to make their way back up to the foot of 'The Golden Ladder' where they were to keep watch, as they had promised, on anyone – or anything – that tried to enter the Lower Valley.

The Kasivara bowed in front of Josey's bed.

Good morning, my Lady, she said, addressing Josey brightly. Josey slept on, not showing the slightest inclination to wake up for our visitor – or anyone else for that matter. ***Good morning, Alma Lachanilta!*** Noa turned to me with a smile, pulled up a chair, and brought the pine tea and slabs of buttered bread and honey across to the bed. She gave me a brief hug and looked at me for a long time, her dark brown eyes seeing much that others might have missed.

Roi and I go to watch the falls, we will be back after the Gathering, she said.

“‘The Gathering’?” I asked, curiosity piqued despite myself.

Lord Wander is calling a meeting of the highland families and their allies from across the Five Valleys. He plans to discuss the situation in Lachan and raise the possibility of armed

resistance against the College.

“Shit ... that’s rebellion!” I said, suddenly understanding the import of the warrior’s words.

Yes, rebellion, she replied. *I believe that is exactly what the Provost has in mind.*

“When will the meeting take place?”

That I don’t know, she said, *but I would expect it to be sometime after the great thaw. After all ... a meeting which nobody can attend is no meeting at all.*

She winked at me, and we both ended up laughing at the idea of Vanhin holding a meeting by himself in the snow. When our laughter subsided, she walked across to the sleeping Josey and straightened the bedclothes around her with a reverence I found both inspiring and, if I’m truthful, a little frightening.

While my brother and I are gone, if you or the Singer are in great need you have only to chant our true names and we will hear you, she said.

Though this was the first time I had spoken more than pleasantries to the Kasivara, I felt the encounter hadn’t come about by chance.

“Are we in danger?” I sat up, all trace of my earlier despondency evaporated.

Only inasmuch as anyone who entertains the idea of singing their own songs is in danger, she replied. *It would take an army of mages to break into this great house – but the enemy has such an army at their disposal.*

“Surely Vanhin wouldn’t allow it to happen?” I said.

The Provost is a mighty man. He is known to all Kasivari – we call him the Wolf of the South – and there is indeed nobody like him left in The Vale ... save perhaps the Songmistress and the Singer herself, the warrior paused, considering her words, *but against the evil that has taken root in the College, no one man can stand alone for long. Our hope lies in strong alliances, in friendship and in love – as much as the enemy’s lies in fostering division, fear and hatred.*

“What should I do, then?” I asked. “I trust Vanhin--”

Of course! Keep on trusting the Wolf, for he is worthy of trust! But my advice, through everything that unfolds, is to stay close to the Lady.

“I promised I would look after her – I don’t break my promises,” I said fiercely.

That is good to hear, my friend, Noa replied.

We shared a moment of quiet, each with our own thoughts. Then the warrior turned to me.

I don't know if you're interested, she said, *but on the way here I saw the steward heating bathwater for your father. Would you like me to order baths for the Lady and yourself?*

My face must have framed a response as well as any words could, because the Kasivara kissed my hand, sprang to her feet and – after bowing to Josey – disappeared out of the room. Her parting words from the corridor echoed around my head.

See you in Springtime, Alma Lachanilta!

I had only got as far as the bread and honey when there was a loud knock at the door, and a boy my own age pushed first one unfeasibly large polished-copper tub on wheels into the room, and then another.

“Lady Alma?” he asked.

“Thanks for your trouble,” I said, as the boy positioned the baths next to each bed and laid out towels and fresh bars of soap, “... and it’s Alma. Just Alma.”

“No trouble Lady Al--Miss Al ... Alma,” he said, smiling at me as he left.

The water smelled of rosemary and mint and was hot enough to boil a lobster – so I waited for a while, breathing in the fragrance.

Ah ... the glory of a good bath!

Predictably, Josey and I didn't emerge from our ablutions until after the second lunch-sitting had been called. I thought at first that I wouldn't be able to get her into the water, but after we'd been for a morning piss in the freezing tiled cubicle adjoining the bedroom, she walked straight up to her tub, climbed the steps while I held her hand and promptly fell in, soaking me as she did so. I soaped her hair and rinsed it using an empty breakfast mug, but when she reached over and took up the soap herself, I left her to it and clambered into the bliss of my own bath. We finally made it into the dining room with Yanic shepherding us along. It was as if Josey and I had taken the cover story Vanhin had suggested to heart: we walked wide-eyed through the old man's ancestral home, like country-cousins, wearing warm robes found for us (and tailored to fit)

by his household. And even now, all these years later, I can still recall that charmed feeling: sitting and eating winter goulash in the dining room with papa on one side and Josey on the other. Extraordinary wealth and boundless power mean little to me, but to be with those you love, to have a full belly, to be warm, comfortable ... and clean – these are true blessings.

Water water everywhere ...

the air's full of it, the floor's covered in it, and you're soaked in it.

Radox Pine. Heavy suds.

To tell the truth you'd have been drier in the tub with the kids. You should have said yes when Sam wanted to fit a shower in the summer ... much less bother. You look at your watch again, and you try to silence the shee voice that always whispers you'd rather be singing. You just had a fortnight in the States – surely you can afford them an hour? Some mother! But the thief inside steals five minutes from their bathtime anyway, and hums through 'Le Colibri', letting the guilt wash away as they play on regardless. It's an encore for Frankfurt next week. Ernest Chausson. You learned it on the bus back from town yesterday ... and you haven't told Bryn about it yet. But it's so beautiful it's already locked away with the other sounds you won't let go. Like Madge says, you're mad for the tunes.

Sam's downstairs with Annie – he hates it when you're learning new stuff. You break it into bits like Lego and memorize the pieces backwards, last phrase first. Drives him barmy. Nothing you stitch together like this ever makes sense to anyone else until it's finished, but the knowing's deeper. It goes into your marrow.

“Mam, you sound like a beehive!”

Johnny's suddenly suspiciously close, hands behind his back, red hair sticking out at all angles like hedgehog spines. And now he produces an old Fairy Liquid bottle and squirts cold water down your neck. Your hum becomes an operatic shriek and son runs away giggling, fingers in ears.

“Everything okay up there?”

Sam checking.

“Fine love!” you shout back.

“Was it cold, mam?”

“Bloody freezing, you little bugger!” You prize the empty bottle from Johnny's grasp and wrap his top half in a clean towel, giving his nose a tweek for good measure.

Somehow his feet are already black again.

“It's bits of fluff off the bathmat.”

You dip them in Becky's water and then dry them again. Nearly five years between these two, but sometimes it feels like less. Johnny spends more time in his head. He's a magician with numbers ... always adding, multiplying, subtracting and dividing the world. Having fought and splashed for nearly an hour, the two of them sit together on the side of the bath, Johnny counting bubbles near the plughole, and Becky picking her toenails with long, slim fingers.

“Rebecca! Leave your toes alone!”

Johnny looks up from his wild probabilities.

“I think I'm going to be a plumber when I grow up,” he says, out of the blue. “Plumbers make a lot of money ... dad said so.”

“Are you, love?”

He nods as you towel his sister's hair.

“Everything you do needs sums ... you can use power tools and gaffer tape, and you get to drive a van.”

"Sounds great," you say, without much enthusiasm.

Becky wrinkles her nose in disgust.

"You have to put your hands down the toilet! Every day!"

"You do not!" Johnny says, grinning at the awfulness of the idea, despite himself.

"You'll get poo all over you!"

This makes the two of them cackle like hyenas. You switch heads.

"And you'll probably just carry-on eating bogies when you grow up," Johnny says to his sister, "it's the only thing you're good at."

Becky stands up and eyes her brother for long cool moment.

"I'm going to play the piano," she says. "I'm going to get so good that they'll invite me on Blue Peter and they'll give me a golden badge and let me spend the day with them."

"Is that a real job, mam?" Johnny asks.

Time passed slowly in the House of Wander.

The place seemed to resist the normal flow of minutes, hours, days, and weeks that pulsed in the world beyond the laurel gates. Nevertheless, as the first signs of Spring started to appear in the Lower Abhash Valley, we had established something that almost amounted to a daily routine. Vanhin had ordered that I be formally tutored in chant, and four mornings a week were dutifully taken up with these lessons. Either papa, the steward Jaris, or the old man himself would wait for me in the atrium and then I would be drilled in producing the correct vibrations for finding and controlling common objects, or else set to identifying the simple thought patterns of creatures around us on the estate. While papa and Jaris schooled me in the rudiments of shielding, it was Vanhin that first taught me how to sing fire and water, and how to transfer heat and cold in and out of matter. I must have been an apt pupil for these studies because just after

the spring thaws had brought the music of running water back to the valley, a spate of red fever broke out in the village and papa and Vanhin asked me to accompany them to help bring relief. The three of us went door-to-door through Tivalhas, sitting with those who had succumbed and transferring the heat of their distemper until their discomfort eased.

Yet while the Wander estate became like a second home to me, I found I didn't warm to the village or the villagers themselves ... despite their courtesy, their ready thanks, and their obvious gratitude for our help. They were taciturn, dour folk; fiercely loyal to their lord and their traditions, but so grave in the way they went about their daily lives and in their devotion to the past, that they made even the most curmudgeonly Lachani elder look positively frivolous. I think I might have lost my mind if I'd been forced to stay more than the occasional night in the village. There was something about the stone houses, the gridded streets and the sheer readiness of the place that unnerved me – it felt more like a community of bees serving a hive than anything else.

Though I saw papa every day, he was busy with preparations for the Gathering. And while I managed to escape one afternoon a week to play with the other household children, by default as well as by inclination, Josey and I ended up spending much of our time together. She had started to put some weight back on her frame, and the two of us shared a love of the old man's kitchens that required no words to understand. We were always first for breakfast, and Josey had a passion for freshly-baked bread that matched my own. She sat in on all my lessons, a blank presence, only ever becoming animated when the session involved chant or song. Then she would lean forward and tap a finger in rhythm on my arm or leg, a big smile lighting up her porcelain face. The household treated her with compassion, often saving her choice morsels or sending flowers to our room. They assumed, as Vanhin had said they would, that she was a distant relative and accorded her the respect due her age and her status as a guest of the Provost. In the old man's opinion, there had been no change in Josey's cognitive ability over the winter, but I was certain that she was more active, mentally, than before. And sometimes, when I looked into those green eyes, I fancied I almost heard her calling my name from somewhere deep inside.

As for the Singer's craft, though I had witnessed the transformation of Radha's Well alongside our travel companions, and lived through the consequences of Josey's awakening, there were no subsequent examples of the application of her power. She seemed to find joy and take an interest only in simple pleasures ... food, walking, nature, song. She was, to all intents

and purposes, exactly what she appeared to be ... a frail, elderly woman; yet she was also the possessor of a wild magic which we could neither fathom nor control, a fomenter of rebellion, and the bringer of boundless change – extremes that were to prove difficult to reconcile.

Vanhin began to send out messages to the other highland villages around the Five Valleys while the passes were still shut. He used no liveried messengers or armed heralds, instead the word was carried by old friends, itinerant merchants, pedlars, lean wolfish kinsmen, and even – my father maintained – by specially trained birds and animals. Nonetheless, there were some places he insisted on visiting personally, and we became used to his sudden early morning departures and unexpected late-night returns.

It was towards the end of Thirdmonth, while the old man was still away on one such visit, that the highlanders started to arrive in Tivalhas in large numbers. Men and women, warriors and chieftains, diplomats and warmongers, patriots and rebels, the whole gamut of highland life was represented in those chosen to speak for their people. They came from across the Five Valleys ... Southmen from Airys, the mayor and the entire village council from Ladjam on the western edge of the Wilds, the harpist Sian Attar and her three sons – representing the shrine-town of Yniq in the Chuba Valley. Tattooed Noyrish clansmen who had walked an entire week to be there, sat and broke bread with rich businessmen from Dormin in the Lower Nomrech, who had paid for transfer up the valley by caterpillar and mage. Nobody could remember the last time a highland lord had called a gathering of the freefolk, but they all agreed it was long overdue.

A tent city sprang up in the beautiful meadows below Tivalhas, and the villagers who owned land there seemed only too happy to rent it out to whoever could afford to pay. For nearly a week, the highlanders made their beds among gentian, primrose, monkshood, hawksbeard, saxifrage and ragwort, and every evening, the songs of The Vale would drift over to us. These highlanders were people for whom the old ways had never really died; they thrived on vigour, wit and witchery, and all around the meadow impossible trials of strength, impromptu poetry battles, drinking bouts and fiery debates took place. Even from the safety of the Wander estate, snatches of wild chant could be heard, and the valley rang with enough spellcasting to alert an

entire College patrol to our presence.

One evening papa, Josey and I strolled down to the tents of the Yniq delegation to hear Mother Attar play. A crowd had gathered on open ground nearby, and as the rain stopped and the stars came out, a hunched old woman, wrapped in a padded jacket and scarf against the chill, came and sat in front of us without ceremony, and began to play. The music was new to me; complex and expressive, yet also light and exhilarating. It made the feet dance and the mind sing. And when I looked to see if Josey was enjoying herself, I saw her swaying along with the rhythm ... feet tapping, eyes closed. After an hour of fine playing, Attar tried valiantly to bring the session to an early finish with a famous song called ‘The Homecoming’. As she set her magical fingers to the strings, she addressed the audience.

“We’re here to add our voices to the Wolf’s cry,” she said, in a rich steady contralto that was totally at odds with her fragile appearance. “And if there is to be a reckoning, let everybody know that Yniq and the Attars stand alongside Tivalhas!”

Amid shouts of support, wolf whistles and applause, Sian plucked the opening bars of ‘The Homecoming’ and called out, “Who’ll sing the verses with me?”

I turned to papa and he shrugged his shoulders, so I stepped forward, opened my mouth and began to sing.

For these are my highlands
And this is my glen,
The songs of my valleys
Are with me again;
Wherever I wander
Wherever I roam
The music of the mountains
Summons me home ...

Four hours later I was still standing next to the harpist. The crowd had doubled in size and papa and I were singing songs that would have made Aunty Val’s hair curl.

It was far too early for a conference.

Upright in her chair, Josey still stubbornly pretended sleep, even though I'd woken her and helped her dress half-an-hour earlier when papa had knocked on the door and asked us to meet him in the atrium. Papa, Vanhin, Josey, and myself sat around a table with the rain hammering down outside. I thought about the highlanders gathered in the flower meadow and hoped they were warm and dry in their tents.

Vanhin had returned the night before, accompanied by a bedraggled band of freefolk from the Nomrech Valley. I hadn't seen any of the group to talk to, but rumour had it that there were Lachanis among them.

"The Gathering will take place in two days' time," papa said, casually.

"Can Josey and I come?" I asked.

He took a sip of tea.

"Of course you can," he replied. "Sian Attar would be disappointed if her new vocalist didn't put in an appearance!"

I rolled my eyes at him and rested my forehead on the table. Vanhin, who until now had been staring at the Singer, was suddenly energised.

"The folk in the field outside ... we must take them by the hand and lead them."

"Lead them where?" I asked.

"Into battle, Alma Lachanilta!" he said.

I had a dozen questions for the old man, but he was up and pacing round the table before I could utter a word.

"If we can push the College out of Lachan, we can retake the whole area. Of course, Sivan will respond with force – I know her of old – she can do nothing less. Devilry, manpower and machines, they have aplenty ... they will bring whole armed divisions all the way to the mountains to crush us, believing they can stamp out the flame of rebellion in a single weekend. But overconfidence was ever the Songmistress's weakness: her people do not know the territory as we do – the passes, the chasms, the hidden caves, the tunnels, the cataracts, the rivers and streams. And they fight because they have to ... not because they want to. When we raise our flag

in Lachan, let them overplay their hand and we will pipe them a jig across the highlands that they cannot answer. Fighting and running will always favour the freefolk ... and it will not be the first time Sivan Callax has underestimated a highland lord.”

“You have fought Sivan before?” I asked.

“Child ... I have been fighting her since I first set eyes on her at Miriam’s side.”

Vanhin stopped pacing.

“I--I don’t understand,” I said.

The old man turned to face Josey and I, and leaning on the edge of the table, he spoke to us of his past.

A long time ago, I served the College with some distinction: indeed, I rose to become Provost of The Vale, trusted advisor to the Lady Miriam (may the stars shine on her memory), and tutor to the young viper Sivan Callax.

In those days, Sivan was the Singer’s consort and had just been given the title of ‘Songmistress’ to ensure she was provided for after Miriam’s departure. The title was a generous gift and brought with it lands, political power and full tuition in the craft – a provision which I and others in the Lady’s court opposed ... but in the end, foolishly provided. None of us, not even Miriam herself, realised the extent of Sivan’s ambition, or her capacity for ruthlessness. I believe her relationship with the Singer was only ever a means to an end, and from the first moment she entered College Bounds as an acolyte, she had her eye on the throne of The Vale. With time, Miriam’s mind became ever more focused on spiritual matters ahead of that great festival of light we call the Passing-over, when a Singer bequeaths all her knowledge and power to her reincarnated successor. Thus it was that Sivan found herself increasingly alone – a young woman with time on her hands. I am certain it was then she fell under the spell of the dark lord, for Paholainen is ever alert to win over our fragile hearts to his cause and can appear fair should he wish it. In Sivan he found a willing and apt pupil for the terrible dissonances that are his to teach: treachery, deceit, mayhem and murder. And in him, she discovered a broad avenue for her limitless desire. In short, the Songmistress became a powerful agent for darkness at the very centre of The Vale, one which he could use to drive us all apart and push the world to the brink of ruin. Sivan it was that murdered Miriam on her

funeral pyre, thinking she could block the Singer's true reincarnation, install her own puppet, and thus take control of The Vale for herself and those she served.

On the day of Miriam's Passing-over, I was accused of plotting her murder and denounced as an enemy of the College. The Keeper of the Keys arrested me at dawn, after his adepts had killed or imprisoned most of my students. I was drugged, bound in dark spellcraft and muzzled like a rabid dog, before being taken in chains to Central Hall. Sivan told me Miriam had died weeping over my betrayal while the flesh melted on her bones, and she insisted that everything the Singers stood for would, in time, come to nought. Weary hours I struggled against their sorcery and railed against my captivity – yet to no avail. I was found guilty of treason and sentenced to internment with the understanding that death would follow ... sooner or later. In a cell buried deep underground, proofed against chant, I was hung like cured meat and brutalized until they thought my mind was as broken as my body. And perhaps for a time it was.

Ten long years I languished there, until one spring morning the Songmistress released me to roam where I would, a tattered hollow of a man – prey to every dark spirit that haunted College Bounds – and a fitting example to all those who might harbour notions of standing against the might of the College. I should have died there on the Massif, yet I did not. And ever in her hubris, Sivan underestimated my imagination ... leaving me to elevate my abhorrence for her into an insulating reverie which I drew about me like a shirt of mail. Thus, while the demons she commanded were able to wound me grievously as I wandered from place to place, they could not kill me. Eventually, they began to lose interest in my torment, allowing me to crawl away on my belly in the dirt. By my own arts I survived ... and I endured. I taught myself to walk upright again and even discovered how to hold back the passage of years, the better to plan my revenge. I escaped their watchers and, in time, returned to my homeland – where slowly, slowly, I began to rebuild myself.

I knew Miriam better than anyone else, and I was certain that she would not have despaired at the last but would have forced herself to think clearly about her predicament. This led me to study the lore surrounding Passing-over and the Singers' ordeal-by-fire, until I became convinced that Miriam had found a way to protect her reincarnation. I took to living above the snowline where the air is pure and watching for signs in the heavens that might tell

me where to look for the new Singer. And always aflame in my mind, keeping me warm through the cold nights, was one thought: that when the time came, I would strike the blow that brings the Songmistress down.

Now that chance presents itself at last.

And I am ready!

A woman in the uniform of Vanhin's household brought us water and fresh bread and set it on the table in front of us. This seemed to draw Josey from her stupor quicker than any exhortation from me.

"I believe we can hold the Five Valleys, and if I'm right ... many will flock to join us."

I began to butter bread for Josey and I, astonished by the tale I'd just heard. Vanhin eyed the Singer with a wry smile.

"There's one other thing that we have in our favour: we have the true Singer of The Vale among us. Though the College is still unaware of her presence, we must guard her now with even more care than before. If we attempt to free Lachan, then the Lady will need to be as far away as possible from the battle, to avoid discovery or capture. Therefore, I have agreed with Noa of the Kasivari that you and the Singer should go North to the desert, disguised as pilgrims. On that difficult road, you will pass near the College Cemetery, and this being the case, we would risk much to have you visit a certain tomb there."

Here papa took over, leaning forward and taking a dainty bite from my bread.

"The tomb itself is not in the main complex but sits on a hill overlooking the crematoria. It's a special place dedicated to the Lady Miriam and only whispered about among the faithful; thus, as far as we are aware, the College has no knowledge of its location or purpose. Of course, you would still be hiding in plain sight outside Sivan's front door, but Lord Wander is certain that a visit will be of great help to the Singer."

The plan was so outrageous that I couldn't decide if it was genius or the work of an absolute madman. Traditionally, Fourthmonth had always been a time of pilgrimage. In Miriam's day, thousands would set off on foot to visit the shrines of the Singers in the cemetery complex on the outskirts of College Bounds. Though pilgrims had dwindled to a fanatical handful now, the tradition of undertaking the journey persisted in places like the Southern Wilds,

Meshak and the northern desert. The old man suggested we disguise ourselves as Meshaki pilgrims for the entire journey north, and he was insistent that we embark on our spiritual quest as soon as possible after the Gathering to ensure that we were near College Bounds by the time the rebel action began.

“The College will be forced to throw everything it has at the conflict and while all eyes are directed south, a small group of pilgrims might be able to get to the shrines and beyond unnoticed,” he said.

I wasn’t feeling particularly heroic, and my memories of the trek from Lachan were fresh enough to make me dread another route march across The Vale. I told papa and Vanhin as much.

“The blisters have only just healed from our last stroll,” I said, banging on the table for emphasis, “and if the idea of the Lady and I walking alone *towards* the College is the best part of the plan, it doesn’t fill me with confidence about the rest!”

“Nobody said you had to go alone,” Vanhin countered. “I’ve already asked Noa to travel with you, and I suppose I shall have to manage without your father’s keen insights in the field as he also seems determined to join the Lady’s pilgrimage.”

Papa took my hand and pulled me to my feet, then he gently repeated the process with Josey.

“When will we go back home papa?” I sighed.

“When the rebellion succeeds,” he said, almost as a reflex. “After our visit to the shrines we’ll make our way to the northern desert, and if the rebels manage to hold on to the highlands, then Vanhin will come and join us there to plan our next move.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then there won’t be a next move to plan,” he said.

“I can’t order you to undertake this journey, Alma Lachanilta,” the old man added. “If you refuse to accompany the Singer, I will respect your decision.”

They both looked at me expectantly.

“You can stare as long as you like,” I spiked, “but I’m still not walking all that bloody way.”

“You don’t have to,” Vanhin grinned, his eyes dancing. “There’s a haulier taking finished cloth from the highlands down to the gates of the College. He leaves from Dormin at dawn in

five days' time, and the four of you are already booked passage with him north along the Great Trunk Road."

I sat down again, with a bump.

Two days later, the village square thronged with highlanders, their hobnail boots ringing on the cobbles. Everywhere the buzz of discussion and debate filled the air. Some had come ready for war ... arms and faces tattooed, body armour fastened, shield spells in place, weapons stacked. There were banners hung from trees and draped over garden walls; and drums, fifes and fiddles vied with each other as snatches of battlechant fizzed and popped overhead. And all the time the crowd continued to grow, swelled by the villagers themselves. Just as it seemed the crush of people would erupt into spontaneous violence, a familiar figure climbed up onto the telling-stone and began to speak.

"I am Stefan, son of Rhys, son of Mhari; Lord Provost of The Vale by the gift of Miriam Singer; Marshall by birth of these lands, and Lord of the House of Wander."

The old man opened his arms wide, embracing the whole of the square.

"Be welcome in Tivalhas!" he roared.

It was the second of Fourthmonth, an auspicious beacon day. And though the weather had been fresh since morning – with a raw easterly that snatched at hair and clothes – now the wind had died away to be replaced by a draught of anticipation that bit just as keenly.

"Some here call me The Wolf," the old man continued, his voice deep and guttural, as if distilled from the roots of the mountain itself, "others call me Ancient One, or Eldest ..."

The Noyrish clans started chanting 'Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!', daring the folk about them to object. The wizard allowed their raucous affirmation to echo around the square for a moment before raising his hands for quiet.

"Brothers and sisters ..."

That astonishing Oktavist voice was still buffeting the twilight, when without betraying the slightest hint of his intentions, the old man switched to psi, causing the crowd to reel as he

stole effortlessly inside their heads.

... whatever name you use, I will answer!

There must have been more than two-hundred men and women assembled there from across the Five Valleys – from Nomrech, Abhash, Noyrish, Rajach and Chuba. What's more, some of those present were considered powerful mages in their own right, and yet when Vanhin spoke – mind to mind – none could choose but to hear his words ... a feat of craft that did not pass unnoticed.

I've walked among you for generations, broken bread and supped with your fathers and grandfathers, healed your children, and kept your secrets better than you keep them yourselves.

Here he took a full minute to look around him, catching and holding individual eyes as his grey gaze swept over us like a spring tide.

But I didn't call this Gathering to drink to your health, or to sing old songs round the fire and exchange stories about our ancestors; I called it to sound an alarm, to report truthfully what I have seen and heard, and to suggest an honourable response for the freefolk. Mine cannot be words of comfort this evening, for a storm is coming, the like of which we haven't seen before ... indeed, many of us in this square tonight will not survive its onslaught. I seek, therefore, to wake up our people, to clothe them in such armour as they have to hand, and to set them marching, that we may strive yet to avoid the doom that approaches.

Not a breath of wind stirred throughout the village. Even the birds roosting in the trees around us seemed to hush their clamour, hanging on to the old man's words.

For half a millennium we have slept, my friends! And now we wake to find the world changed! Who should we blame?

I could see several of the younger, wilder highland nobles struggling without success to free themselves from Vanhin's dominating psi. His mastery of the moment was total.

When Miriam was taken from us, we watched Sivan's rise to power with perfect equanimity, drunk on our own sorrow, without once getting involved.

When diktats prohibited public meetings, demanded singers register with the state, and forbade the use of the craft ... we did nothing. When those studying chant began to be

persecuted and imprisoned from the northern desert to the foothills of Nomrech ... we did nothing. And finally, when College patrols took axes to The Vale's sacred trees for their ships, their engines and their furnaces ... we did nothing!

Our cry has ever been:

'Why should we care what the lowlanders do?'

'Let them be ... with their soft laws, their corrupt courts, and their petty squabbles! After all, when did the hand of the College ever reach this far south?' This has been our guiding philosophy, has it not? And such thoughts as these have brought us to the precipice upon which we now stand.

So ... when the Songmistress declared herself Regent we covered our ears; when she began levying taxes, building factories, and delving into the very earth beneath our feet for Sindium and black rock, we kept our mouths shut; and finally, when she outlawed song and started taking those with the greatest talent for singing and enslaving them, we closed our eyes!

Is it any surprise then, that in the hour of our greatest need we find ourselves deaf, dumb and blind as the enemy advances?

The old man suddenly released the crowd from his grasp and they immediately began to rage against him:

'How dare the old bastard speak to them like that?', 'By what right did he presume to be their leader?' and 'Who was he to set himself up as their moral compass?'

Nearby, a young redheaded mage from Rajach was shouting louder than everyone else. The cords in his neck strained as he pitched his spellvoice above the noise of the crowd.

"You presume too much, Old Wolf! We didn't walk halfway across the Wilds for a history lesson in the dirt at your feet!" he cried.

There were more than a few nods of agreement among the highlanders.

"Are we not all sons-and-daughters-of-song here?" he added, weaving through the crowd towards the telling-stone. "Perhaps Stefan, son of Rhys, raises old entitlements out of the dust and sows the seeds of fear among us this evening because he wishes the Gathering to place a crown on his shaggy head?"

The mage passed right in front of me, a good-looking, thickset and – considering where

he was directing his vitriol – a foolishly brave man.

“We need no king over us in the highlands. It is your war counsel we value Stefan Wander, not some woman’s fireside prattle--”

Enough!

The Rajachi lordling began to choke on his own words as Vanhin looked on. He collapsed to the ground, with his retinue around him reaching for their weapons.

If you will not hear history from one who has lived it ... who then will you hear it from?
the old man said. ***Do you think I have passed through hellfire and torment to quail at your whining, Tord, son of Jon?***

The old man hadn’t raised his voice, but the sheer intensity of his psi was enough to bring some of the freefolk near us to their knees.

I should flay the skin from your back for the insult.

I endured a moment of terror thinking he was going to carry out this threat right there in front of us, but instead he responded by freeing the mage. The man spat out a mouthful of blood on the cobbles, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and looked up to find Vanhin by his side. To his surprise, instead of striking him, the wizard reached out a hand and raised him to his feet.

Your father was a wiser man than you are, Tord – and it is for his sake that I show restraint.

Whether or not Vanhin intended to bring events to this juncture is debatable, but his actions demonstrated a deep knowledge and understanding of those to whom he spoke. Punishing, then forgiving his loudest critic was a masterstroke. This was highland justice – understood by all. It reinforced the old man’s strength while reassuring the highlanders that he was no despot. He started to address the crowd once more, now from the floor of the square.

“The time for burying our heads in the sand is over. The College has come to the highlands. The Songmistress’s adepts are in control of Lachan, and even as we speak, the village smarts under military curfew. Its children and elders are imprisoned, its wealth is taken, and resistance is punished by death.”

There were gasps of shock at the news, and all around the square voices were raised in indignation.

“This is not hearsay or speculation,” Vanhin shouted, “I saw it with my own eyes. I

returned from the Nomrech Valley only yesterday, having had to fight my way out. I brought with me mainly women and children snatched from a College prison just outside Lachan. They are here with us tonight to bear witness to the plight of their folk.”

At a signal from the old man, three children and two adults were led towards the telling-stone by Jaris the Steward. The crowd parted to let them through, and I immediately recognised Kolle, his gaping eye socket a suppurating assault on the senses. The skinner had lost much of his bulk and had about him the haunted look of a man pushed beyond sanity, yet I nodded respectfully nonetheless, meeting his bright crow gaze for as long as I was able. Then, looking towards the children, I almost fainted with shock when I saw my own cousin, Jur, among them. Screaming his name like a banshee, I grasped Josey’s hand and pushed and kicked my way forward until I came to him and the two of us were reunited. We held onto each other fiercely, and though we barely exchanged ten words, I knew that he had suffered much. Though his wounds had been cleaned and tended, he jumped and flinched at every new sound, clinging to me as if I were the only fixed point in a crumbling universe. Though I was desperate to know about Sami and Aunt Val, I swallowed the torrent of questions that bubbled inside me and brought Jur and Josey to stand with Vanhin’s household at the foot of the telling-stone.

“Sivan Callax rules from the centre of The Vale like a spider, poisoning all she touches. And in the shadows around her, other fouler things have crawled out to stain our days. Stories of torture, demons, desecration and dark magic are rife; some even say her albino son was fathered by Paholainen himself!”

Now there was open anger on almost every face, including my own. The old man had lit a fuse, and I believe that if he had asked us to storm the College by ourselves that night, we wouldn’t have hesitated. In less than an hour, the wizard had moulded a patchwork of unruly clans, hedge-mages, wayward highland nobles, autonomous townships and remote village councils into a fragile rebel alliance. But he hadn’t finished with them yet.

“There are those of us who believe that the time is very nearly at hand when a true Singer of The Vale will return to lead us. This may be sooner than we know ... but until that glorious day, we must be ready to defend our homes, our families and our way-of-life to the last drop of blood. If we do not rise and go to the aid of our brothers and sisters in Lachan, we will all be in shackles by the turn of the year, and it will be *our* children that the Songmistress comes to carry

away. I have only one message for you to take back to the freefolk you serve so well: we must strike hard! We must strike fast! And we must strike now! Are you with me?"

A great chorus of 'Aye!' split the night air and woke the roosting birds.

I said: are you with me?

Aye! They screamed at him again. And this time, the highlanders' response was enough to shatter windowpanes around the square.

Chapter 9 – Bones

Like a scar, Sivan's Great Trunk Road ran down the body of the country for almost one thousand brutal miles. Other cicatrices adjoined this central laceration, but it remained the deepest and darkest cut in The Vale's flesh. And we traveled all its tegumented length in the belly of a vast steam-wagon, while the highway gnawed through forests, and traversed fen and fell with equal disdain, until it arrived at the lofty plateau where the slums and shanty towns of those who served the College were situated. Continuing for another fistful of statutory miles, by sleight of hand it finally transformed into the ancient paved way known as 'the ribbon', which passed in turn through an outer defensive wall ringing College Bounds, before rising at last to meet the mighty South Gate of the College itself, some eight hundred metres above the cobalt sea.

Roland Jhansi called her 'The Dragon'.

She was his pride and joy.

One-hundred-and-fifty dry tons of piston-driven iron and steel; as tall as a house, and capable of carrying a full load at a constant 20mph for as long as the fuel and water held out. She had an automated hopper fitted between the cab and the trailer to feed the black rock straight into the boiler and, in addition to her payload of cloth, she dragged a water tank and two great wagons of fuel behind her.

Jhansi was a tall man – taller perhaps than papa – and in some other dimension he might even have been considered handsome, but his height was offset by the fact that he was also the fattest person I had ever seen. When he heaved himself up into the cab, I would consciously avoid climbing after him because I was afraid he wouldn't be able to support his own weight, or else the metal ladder on the exterior of the cab might snap its mooring in protest and pull away from The Dragon while he was making the perilous ascent, taking me with it.

Nevertheless, however ungainly Jhansi's vast bulk might have been outside the cab, once he was safely ensconced in his plush driver's seat, he became The Dragon's beating heart – delicate hands resting lightly on the steering wheel, feral intelligence processing the data from

multiple brass-bound gauges, thermostats and trip clocks. The man knew every piston, pipe, and pulley on The Dragon, and what he couldn't tell you about her operation wasn't worth knowing.

We'd first met The Dragon and her keeper at dawn three days earlier, on the outskirts of Dormin. With the help of two other highland mages, Vanhin had transported us out of the Abhash Valley down as far as the hamlet of Rishi, only ten miles short of our destination. We had all agreed that it would be less suspicious if we walked the last few miles to the meet, rather than apparating directly there. It was still dark as we trekked down into Dormin, each of us carrying ni-pacs with clothes and essential supplies for our journey. The young mage that met us outside Dormin was nervous and only waited for the briefest of moments to check we were all accounted for, before melting away into the hedgerow, leaving us on a rutted path that marked the entrance to a large field, used as a terminus for visiting merchants and their wares.

Jhansi was supervising the loading of The Dragon and I was rendered speechless (not a frequent occurrence) by the sheer size of the vehicle. Now that we were faced with climbing aboard, Vanhin's idea of hiding us there, in plain view, seemed insane. Nevertheless, despite my misgivings about our arrival attracting unwelcome attention to the Singer, Jhansi barely looked up from his inventories to register our presence. He and papa exchanged a few words and we were waived onboard without a second glance. The other hauliers and merchants assembled there at that ungodly hour were either gathered around a breakfast tent at the far end of the field, or else busy attending to their own goods and transport in the grey pre-dawn light, too preoccupied to notice us. To untrained eyes we looked every inch a family – complete with ageing grandmother, son and daughter-in-law, and a single spoiled grandchild. At Vanhin's suggestion, we had dressed inconspicuously in the loose dark blue cotton trousers and padded jackets worn by workers across The Vale. Papa had cultivated a scraggly beard that he supposed made him look distinguished, but it was Noa's disguise that was the most complete. By her craft she had altered the appearance of her skin, hiding the text that usually covered every visible inch of her body and lightening her complexion to match my own. With her long tresses braided and hidden under a hat, only her intense brown eyes contradicted the idea she was anything other than a lowland pilgrim bound for the shrines. That first time on The Dragon, she and papa had to carry Josey up the ladder to the cab between them, as the Singer refused to budge when brought

alongside the vehicle's huge wheels. We finally trundled out of the field as dawn came and headed down the pocked track until, with a grinding of gears, we reached the crushed stone and bitumin handshake of the Great Trunk Road.

The days immediately preceding our departure from Lachan had been a blur of discussions, reunions, ill-temper and tears. Kolle the skinner spoke of Aunty Val's courage in protesting the treatment of our people. He explained how she had gone on hunger strike and was now very weak. He himself had been imprisoned for stealing College rations and distributing them to his fellow Lachanis. I don't know why, but I found myself listening to the music of Kolle's voice rather than its content, and I realised that his words contained so many threads of dissonance that they could not all be true. I tried to clear my head of such doubts; nevertheless, I resolved to speak to the old man about it as soon as I could.

Jur wouldn't leave my side for a moment.

He slept on a mattress in the room with Josey and I, and the three days we had together before papa and I left were replete with stories of pride and pain. He told me of the constant questioning they had endured; how they'd been taken away and grilled about papa, Vanhin, and I, and how Val had warned them not to say anything and even taught them how to shield their minds from psi probing. For my part, I sketched our flight from Nomrech and our battle with the flying demon – but didn't mention Josey. I didn't want my cousin to have to share the burden of any more of my secrets if I could avoid it. The most difficult thing was hearing that Val had been beaten and that Sami was missing. It was enough to send me to Vanhin. I screamed at him like a witch, begging that I be allowed to search for my cousin and to cross into the Nomrech Valley with the rebels for the liberation of Lachan. He listened to me with the utmost care, before placing a giant hand on my shoulder and refusing my request.

"What would the Singer do whilst you're away," he asked. "To whom could she turn?"

Angry and frustrated, I swore at him and moved to leave, but the old man caught my shoulder again and held it fast.

“Remember your vow, Alma!” he said. “And remember this also: before our struggle is ended, Alma Lachanilta will know as much of the pain and misery of war as Stefan Wander ever did. Don't be in too much of a hurry to become a soldier, little one.”

The night before we left, Jur and I sat in the early chill of a beautiful spring evening. Birds sang around us, bees still laboured lovingly in the kitchen gardens, and the fragrance of new life was everywhere. We had finished a bottle of rhubarb wine between us, scrounged earlier from the kitchen, and we were about to go back inside as dusk fell, when Jur surprised me with a question.

“Why do you pretend the old woman in the room is a relative of ours? Who the hell is she? I've never seen her before,” he said.

I didn't reply but looked around briefly to check we were alone.

“Is her mind broken?” he continued.

There was an awkward moment between us, and when it became clear I wasn't going to respond, Jur shrugged, ducking away from the arm I tried to put around him.

“I shan't ask about her again,” he said, “but you need to know that every time Sami and I were taken in for questioning they would ask about you: did you do magic tricks? Could you sing? Could you start a fire? Did you know the hermit, and had we seen you with anybody else unusual around the ridge?”

“Jur – please, I--”

“And the first time Callax reached in to squeeze my mind was to see if I knew anything about the return of the Singer. Why is this old woman important?”

We stared at each other – the silence loud with things best left unsaid.

“I'm sorry...”

“We've all kept secrets to stay alive cousin! But if you come face to face with that albino – and I think you might – promise me you'll run.”

Jur took my hand as we walked back inside the grand house.

“I promise,” I said.

For the first fifty miles, our route ran by the side of the Nedray. Not only were there no other machines on the road – it seemed there were no other living souls in transit either. Jhansi sat in solitary splendour on his captain's chair at the front of the cab, like some fleshy obelisk, while we lesser mortals perched on an assortment of boxes, cushions, cases and rickety pull-down seating at the rear. And as I watched the beautiful wide reaches of the river slide by, I had to pinch myself to remember that it was all actually happening – Alma Lachanilta was leaving the Southern Wilds for the first time in her life.

Over the next two days, the high peaks gradually shrank, the foothills of the Five Valleys receded, and without me really noticing, the sweeping highland vistas were replaced by the gentler undulating dales and forests of Airys. Jhansi didn't like stopping for anything other than water and fuel, so while he and papa were able to piss out of windows or from the roof of the cab as we trundled along, Noa, Josey and I had to put up with the inconvenience of sharing a bucket inside, shielded by a makeshift curtain. Thankfully, food arrangements were much more egalitarian – Noa, papa and I simply took it in turns to cook whatever remained in our stores ... which, after forty-eight hours of travel, wasn't that much.

On the morning of the third day, we finally paused for breath at a refuelling depot outside the ancient shrine town of Tafas. At full speed, The Dragon made enough noise to wake the dead, so it was also a relief to rest our ears and escape the confines of the cab. I took Josey for a walk through the trees away from the road and left papa and Jhansi to tend to the truck with oil-can and spanner. Noa had slipped away even before The Dragon's wheels had come to a complete halt, saying that she intended to scout ahead further down the road, and then visit Tafas market to replenish our larder. As we strolled, I joined Josey humming a song I had learned from her during our months together in Tivalhas, and the two of us spent a happy half hour among the beech trees. Josey was very taken with the bluebells that carpeted the floor of the little wood we'd stumbled upon, and when I stopped to gather some and presented them to her in a bunch, she accepted them from me with tears in her eyes, as if she remembered the moment from somewhere else. When we got back to the depot, papa was frying eggs on the blade of a shovel, and Josey and I were only too glad to help him find them a good home. As trenchermen, however, we had met our match in Roland Jhansi, whose colossal appetite made us look like

fasting adepts. The driver shifted six eggs and as many slices of stale bread on his first pass and then cleared the pan on his second.

“Nice breakfast, highlander,” he grunted at papa, who waggled his eyebrows at the compliment.

When we’d finished eating, Papa and I eased Josey up into the cab, but Noa was nowhere to be seen. And as The Dragon’s boiler heated up ready for leaving, I had to stop myself from pacing around like a mother hen, wondering where she was.

“For goodness’ sake, don’t worry about Noa,” papa said. “If there’s anyone on this journey that can take care of themselves it’s our northern friend!”

“I’m not worried,” I lied.

Papa ruffled my hair and changed the subject.

“Do you know why the Kasivari use only psi when they speak?”

I shook my head.

“Because their voices are always engaged singing their own true name. That’s why it’s almost impossible to overpower them with the craft.”

“How do they use chant if they can’t sing out loud?”

“You’ll have to ask Noa,” papa replied.

Ten minutes later, she still hadn’t returned as The Dragon generated a full head of steam. Finally, Jhansi lugged his bulk up into the cab and gave a tug on the truck’s whistle that cut the morning air like a knife.

“We don’t wait for nobody!” he called to papa, shaking his head. “I warned you!”

“She’ll be here,” papa said.

It was only as the truck started to roll away from the depot in the direction of the Trunk Road, that Noa sprinted into view. She carried two bulging burlap sacks over her shoulders and had a brace of rabbits tied around her waist. Hauling herself up and into the cab, she beamed at Josey and I.

“Where did you get to?” I said

Tafas, she replied.

Once she was safely inside, she began to remove items from the sack one by one –

vegetables, fruit, rice, bread, tea, salt and sugar – stacking them carefully in the metal store box that doubled as a seat at the back of the cab.

“What about the rabbits?” I asked.

She looked up.

Stew, she said. **Tomorrow**.

“Whose turn is it to cook?”

Mine, she replied, ... **you’re skinning and gutting!**

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, Dame Josephine. We’re boxed in. The police won’t let anyone out of the street. I’d try going back round and coming out the other side, but everyone’s bumper-to-bumper ...”

What a fucking shambles!

Sam was right. You should have cancelled the rehearsal.

You realise the driver’s still speaking to you, but it’s as if his words come from another dimension.

They barely register.

“... I’ll call in and see if dispatch knows what’s going on.”

You nod, hearing but not hearing.

Naeem. Polite boy. You’ve ridden with him before.

Lives in Southall. Probably thinks you’re annoyed with him.

Come on Josey, explain yourself.

“My eldest daughter’s performing this evening,” you blurt out. “I said I’d be there.”

You watch his face, a composite of shadows in the rear-view mirror as he leans in to adjust the two-way radio, talking smoothly into the handset. Outside, Smith Square is crawling with police; some running, some walking, some waving at the cars, some crashing by in body armour with automatic

weapons slung over their shoulders. Normally, you'd be intrigued – you'd wind the window down, you'd ask a policeman, at the very least you'd strike up a conversation with another stranded passenger ... but it's been a long evening. Long and dismal. And you know you should be somewhere else.

Of course, the rehearsal overran.

Three merciless hours with 'Morgana' (played by a very pregnant Carmel Hecht) coughing and sneezing like a plague victim right next to you. Orchestra was too loud, there was no milk or sugar for the coffee in the break, and the tempi were either so slow they left you gasping for breath, or else so fast they broke your teeth. And now – as if being fashionably late for Annie's opening night wasn't bad enough – the fates seem determined to actually place Hampstead beyond your reach.

Suddenly, Naeem waves at you from the front seat, pointing at the handset.

"There's been a bomb-scare just round the corner at Conservative Central Office," he says.

"They've sealed the Square."

You close your eyes and take a deep breath, releasing it in a long, slow sigh that fills the car.

"Where's the nearest tube?"

"St James' Park."

You gave her your word.

Your word...

In the beginning was the Word ...

'Hello Mary. I'm the Angel Gabriel. You are highly favoured! The Lord

is with you.'

Tommi says he'll come to the Christmas play. He says he's looking forward to it and he'll shout to me from the back while I'm being an angel. Ei ongelmaa, paras tyttö! he says. Once in Royal David's City, O little town of Bethlehem, Little Donkey ... I sing all the songs to him while I'm eating my bread and mucky-fat in the mornings. Beautiful, our Josey, he says. Just beautiful! He and Madge are holding hands under the table.

And the word was with God,

'Don't be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and bear a son, and you are to call him Jesus.'

Pat and Lukas and our Declan are already in the hall. They're pulling monkey faces and trying to make me laugh (which isn't fair), so I tell Mrs O'Neil. But she just says shush Josephine. That's what she always says when I ask a question. I hold my breath and count to twenty (three times), waiting for Tommi and Madge to take their seats

And the word was God ...

'He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.'

He said he'd be there. All week he promised me.

Margaret even walked him to school.

And then, like an eel, one twist and he's gone. Quicksilver. Given her the slip. Too much temptation near the Holy Name for Tommi Korhonen.

It's when I finish singing and look up and see the empty chair next to Madge that I know my daddy's a liar. He's a bloody liar and I can't trust him.

And I'll never forgive him for it.

**The Priory School,
Hampstead**

Founder's Theatre Group
Presents
Sandy Wilson's

The Boy Friend
A musical comedy

Main cast:

Polly Browne – Anne Knight
Tony – Xander Fraser
Maisie – Natalie Donal
Bobby – Jonty Goldstein
Hortense – Emelia Sanderson
Mme Dubonnet – Clare Jones
Dulcie – Sam Bentham
Nancy – Deborah Vance
Fay – Tamara Johnson
Percival Browne – Ross Mackay
Lord Brockhurst – Julian Gowan
Lady Brockhurst – Rebecca Gowan

Performances
Mon 3rd–Thurs 6th July, 1989
7:30pm
Fri 7th July, 1989
8:00pm

By the time you hit the platform, you're already running. The lift climbs back up to Heath Street through silent treacle, but when the doors finally open it's as if somebody's just switched the sound on in your head. Buskers, traffic, evening commuters, laughter, kids; you push through it all, oblivious. It's not a question of making it to the performance now, it's a question of getting to the school before Sam and the girls leave.

"Taxi!"

The wheels of the cab crunch the gravel on the drive leading up to The Priory School. As soon as the central locking opens you thrust a fifty-pound note into the driver's hand and launch yourself into the balmy night, swimming against the tide.

People are pouring out of the Founder's Theatre and down towards the car park – cast members and their families, children, teachers, musicians, all milling around like a single organism, unwilling to leave. Suddenly, a handsome young face floats up right in front of you. Curly blonde hair, straight nose, square jaw. It's Xander, the eldest of the three Fraser boys at the school. He played 'Tony' on stage tonight opposite Annie.

"Annie was great, Mrs Knight! Did you hear the audience? They went wild!"

You smile and nod, your mind playing the angles even as you clasp his outstretched hand.

"You weren't so shabby yourself, Xander!" you say, the lie rolling easily off your tongue. "I don't suppose you know where Annie is?"

"Sure! She was with her dad in the theatre bar about five minutes ago."

"Many thanks! Give my regards to your mum ... and well done for tonight!"

You wind your way through the crowd towards the theatre building, graciously accepting congratulations and fielding greetings, catching air kisses, returning hugs, and issuing spurious invitations to 'catch up soon', until finally, when you've almost given up hope, you see Sam coming out of the main door of the theatre with Johnny and Rebecca in tow. And there, still in makeup just behind them, is Annie. She looks stunning.

A suffragette reborn.

You lock eyes.

"I messed up," you say.

Later that night we passed under the dark eaves of the terraced forest above Lake Telyn, with the world reduced to what could be glimpsed in the beam of The Dragon's headlights. I'd just finished a meagre supper of bread and cheese after gutting the rabbits and was getting Josey ready to bed down when we were jolted out of our domestic routine by the strange wheezing sound of Jhansi singing. Part drone, part mystical chant – it was like listening to air leak from a punctured squeezebox. Our driver was still something of an enigma. As far as I could work out, he hadn't slept at all since we left Dormin. Hour after hour, day after day, he sat there wide-eyed at The Dragon's helm as the world came to meet him. I conjectured that if I were in his position, I would have thrown myself under The Dragon's wheels from fatigue long ago. Thinking to ease his torment (and possibly improve the ordeal of his listeners), I took him a cup of water. He didn't answer when I asked after his health, and to be honest, I don't think he even knew I was there, so I set the cup down on the wooden dashboard.

“Doesn't he ever sleep?” I asked Noa, illuminated by a flickering candle at the back of the cab.

It's his talent, she replied. *He sings himself into The Dragon and takes some of his sustenance from the black rock and the water, even as she does.*

I was dumbfounded.

“Are you telling me The Dragon's alive?”

Not in the sense you mean, she said, *but when we're travelling, it's hard to tell where Roland Jhansi ends and The Dragon begins.*

I didn't have time to reflect on this amazing observation, as the next minute there was an almighty thud on the roof of the cab, as if a giant ripe fruit had crashed down from the interlaced boughs overhead. It was followed by a second impact, and then a third. And then ... silence.

Jhansi never took his eyes from the road but suddenly he stopped singing and moments later bellowed like a wounded bull.

“Bandits!”

There were two more sharp impacts, this time on the side of the cab, followed by an ear-

splitting crack as a window shattered on my right; and then another crack as one was put through on my left.

Jhansi shifted his bulk and reached down into a pannier by the side of the seat, taking out a hand cannon. I remember registering the distinct click of the cannon's safety catch just before two wild-looking men, dressed in rags and armed with parangs, crashed feet first into our living space.

Instinctively, I threw myself over Josey, rolling us both into the far corner of the cab and drawing my knife. Papa leapt beside us, already singing a shielding spell as the cab door behind Jhansi was wrenched open savagely. A third attacker hefted himself inside, waving a modified sound cannon at Noa, who stood impassively in the centre of the mayhem.

"Sit!" he screamed. "And tell that fat bastard to slow the rig down and pull over, or I start shooting!"

The Kasivara uttered no sound but struck with such blistering speed that afterwards I was never quite sure of what I'd seen. There, in impossibly close quarters and lit only by the candle's wild flame, she seemed to leap and float in midair as her hand – fingers held rigid – smashed the nearest attacker in the forehead, cracking his skull open like a breakfast egg. And even as the first blow landed, her foot was already connecting with the next target, splintering teeth and breaking the gunman's nose with a stomach-churning crunch. She landed and spun around, as if dancing at a party, pulling the parang from the third attacker's hand and burying it in his chest with so much force that the blade emerged from his back and pinned him against the wooden cladding of the cab interior. Retrieving the sound cannon from the floor where it had fallen, Noa tossed it to my father and then disappeared out of the open door.

"Bastards're all over us!" Jhansi spat, sweating as he coaxed every last ounce of speed out of the truck. We thundered along the Trunk Road under the trees as if pursued by the devil, gauges inching into red, pressure alarms sounding.

"Fuel wagon!" he shouted to Noa. "They're after the fuel wagon!"

We could hear the Kasivara on the roof of the cab and I was about to go to the window when a huge face appeared in the empty frame, and a fourth attacker tried to climb inside. There was a loud pop as papa fired the sound cannon at point-blank range through the window. With a jagged cry, the man fell away from the cab and smashed against a tree as The Dragon roared on.

Five minutes later, Noa swung herself back inside. She looked exactly as she had earlier that day when she'd returned from Tafas with the groceries. She hadn't even broken sweat. Only the bloody extremities of her calloused hands and bare feet told a different story, and these she wiped carefully before she set about pushing the bodies of the highwaymen out of the cab and into the night.

"How many?" Papa asked, clicking the safety catch on the sound cannon as he sat down. *Eight*, she said. *They were waiting in the trees.*

With the threat over, Jhansi allowed The Dragon to slow down to a less harrowing speed and we all took a moment to get our breath back.

"I don't know what craft you used to fight them off, lady, but Roland Jhansi owes you ...," his spring-loaded seat protested as he craned round to look at Noa, "... he owes you big time!"

We stopped to take on more fuel next morning outside the city of Serebit, in a grimy black-rock yard right next to the breath-taking beauty of Lake Telyn. Coming from the mountains, I don't think I'd ever seen that much fresh water in one place. Josey and I sat, captivated by the beauty of the lake, and I was struck by the perfect reflection it offered of the sky above us – framed with lush trees to the South and swathes of open fenland to the north – so much so that I completely forgot to wash my charge and to fill our empty water containers. We were still contemplating Telyn's tranquil mirror when papa came looking for us an hour later.

"There's a College patrol checking The Dragon," he said. "Stay here!"

The reality of our situation hit me, and I started to panic. What if they could see through Noa's disguise? What if they sensed Josey's aura?

After an endless half hour, papa returned. By which time I'd washed Josey and replenished our water supply. I searched his face to know if we needed to start running,

"They've gone," he said simply. "They asked about the broken windows and made an inventory of the cargo. Took statements about the road attack from Jhansi and me, and then away they went."

"Do you think they'll be back?" I asked.

“No. They’ve got bigger fish to fry!” he grinned. “But others will come. I think Sivan’s getting nervous. She knows something’s about to happen, so she’s watching the roads and the ports, and putting pressure on vulnerable people to tell what they know.”

Noa had helped Jhansi replace one of the shattered windows in the cab and between them they had boarded up the other two. Now as I watched her sitting in the morning sunshine, tea in her lap and eyes closed, I realised how little I knew of this woman: Kasivar born-and-bred; a warrior who had just sent eight men to meet their maker with almost indecent ease. Papa had spoken about the Kasivari as if the whole tribe was a weapon, and now I had glimpsed something of that fierce power.

“Noa!” I called from my perch on the first rung of the ladder into the cab. She opened her eyes and looked up at me, like a cat.

Alma Lachanilta! she called back.

“Can you teach me how to fight?” I asked.

No, she said. ***But I can teach you how to look and see what’s there ... it might be more useful!***

I didn’t know whether to be flattered or offended, so I chose the former. Noa stood up and walked over to the ladder. When she came level she held out a clenched fist, then opened it so I could see what was inside. There, in the centre of her palm was what seemed to be a heavy pearl.

This will be yours one day, she said, ***but there are only two ways to win it from me: you must either take it from my hand, or accurately tell me what it is you see.***

“It’s a pearl! I cried,” holding out my hand.

Is it? The Kasivara replied, laughter in her voice.

“Of course!” I shot back.

Look again.

I stared at the pearl until my eyes burned, but no insight came.

“What if I can steal it?” I asked.

Then you should most certainly keep it.

I let my hand hover over Noa’s outstretched palm. Unbelievably, the Kasivara closed her eyes. I pretended to snatch for the pearl, but at the last minute reached up and scratched my nose instead. There was no response from my friend – her palm still lay open in front of me, like a

flower. I waited for a full minute, then without warning, I made a desperate grab for the jewel, only to find Noa's palm already closed.

Keep practising, Alma! she said.

Back on the Trunk Road, we began to pull away from Lake Telyn, east towards Terezan and The Vale's agricultural heartland. From being the only vehicle on the road, we were now joined by a steady stream of goods wagons and other carriers. The majority were horse-drawn or dragged by poor unfortunates coerced into the labour, but occasionally another engine would announce its approach with a whistle blast. Jhansi would reply in kind, and the rigs would drive straight at each other, only moving over at the last minute to pass with bare inches between them.

We arrived at a merchant terminus on the outskirts of Terezan, and after he'd cleaned, checked and refuelled The Dragon, for once Jhansi insisted we stop for the night. Apparently, even *his* considerable talent for endurance had its limits. He unrolled a mattress and lay down on it next to his seat, covering his bulk with a thick blanket. In a moment he was asleep, as if someone had snuffed out a candle. Papa sang a lamp to life in the cab, and after I'd made sure Josey was washed and comfortably settled, we sat and talked together of mama, Aunt Val, and other folk we'd known back in the village, until our eyelids started to droop and our own bedrolls beckoned. Just before sleep took me, I glanced across at Noa, who sat cross-legged, her back straight against the metal frame of the cab. The Kasivara caught my eye.

Sleep well, daughter of song, she said.

It was early evening, exactly a week after leaving Dormin. We were labouring up a steep rise just south of the hilltop city of Sulvan, famous for its ruby red wines. Noa was regaling me with a story about the Lady Naomi, The Vale's 2nd Singer who was, by all accounts, a great beauty – when she stopped mid-sentence. For a moment, her eyes rolled back in her head and then she sat down sharply on the store chest.

It is begun! she said. *The Wolf moves against the College in Lachan.* Papa began to recite the Founder's Prayer.

"What's happening?" I asked.

Skirmishes at the perimeter of the village – only a distraction. My brother leads a larger force down from the ridge.

I joined papa, praying.

And when we had finished, the four of us sat together and drank apple brandy, willing the rebels to victory, as The Dragon ate up the miles that separated the true Singer of The Vale from her mortal enemies.

We didn't stop in Sulvan.

Jhansi said we had enough fuel to make it to the foothills of the College Massif, where there was a popular stop-over near an old water course, known locally as Alamar – or 'the snake's tail'. Most travellers stopped there before attempting the climb up to the plateau. Papa agreed that it made sense to get nearer to our destination, and so we plunged on – all of us slaves to the strip of bitoomin that bisected our country.

In the small hours of the morning, I awoke to the sound of The Dragon slowing down; the brakes were on, there was a sharp hiss as pressure was released from the crown, and Roland Jhansi began to curse liberally.

"Fucking squaddies blocking the road – it'll be two or three hours before we can get going again."

The rain fell in long shards like glass, and in the light of thousands of bobbing lamps, a whole army marched south down the Trunk Road in the direction of the highlands.

Jhansi had pulled over to let them past and was tugging on a filthy padded oil-jacket and a pair of waterproof trousers over huge rubber boots.

"Need to cover the black rock!" he said, with the enthusiasm of a condemned man.

"Shall I come and help?" I asked.

Jhansi thought about it – then declined my offer.

“Stay inside, girl! You can tell your father why we’re stopped if he wakes up.”

While I bristled at his condescension, I thanked the heavens that I didn’t have to venture outside in the downpour. Jhansi battled the elements alone for nearly an hour, making sure the fuel didn’t get wet, and returned in an even fouler mood than before. By that stage we were all awake – even Josey – and Noa volunteered to make tea.

And still they came.

Adepts from across The Vale, marching row after row towards a fate none of them really understood. Sometimes a special unit would pass, the men and women warm and dry inside half-track personnel transporters with great black funnels and regimental brass crowns above the boilers. They would sound their whistles as they overtook The Dragon and disappeared into the saturated night, breaking the monotony. But as the hours passed and the rain continued to fall, the war effort increasingly seemed to be resting on the shoulders of people no different to ourselves, walking hundreds of miles in the wrong direction in boots that hurt.

When the College battalions finally finished their march past, the sun was just rising. Jhansi maneuvered The Dragon back onto the Trunk Road and we drove for miles through tortured land that seemed to have been cleared only recently. The topsoil was churned and steaming as if it had been trampled by behemoths in some terrible apocalyptic battle, and everywhere the stumps of trees rose out of the earth, like mutilated fingers.

“What happened here?” I asked.

Noa looked at my father and then spoke without taking her eyes from the wilderness around us.

Since the Founder sang the world to life, this was where the Forest of Amrah began. There were as many trees here as there are stars in the sky, and at its heart was the Sacred Grove, the centre of the world, where our Singers were enthroned and cremated.

“Everybody knows about the Sacred Grove,” I said, “the trees were blessed with wisdom

and power by the Founder, and every blade of grass was the Singer's to command."

That may be true, Alma Lachanilta. But of the thousands of hectares of forest that covered these midlands, now only the Grove itself survives.

After a moment of quiet, the Kasivara began to sing a modal chant grieving for the loss of the forest. It was sparse yet powerful, and talked of the death of the land, and its return to dust. When she'd finished, nobody felt much like speaking. Only papa seemed to have something to add.

"Do you know the only reason they haven't cut down the Sacred Grove yet?

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Because Sivan Callax has her Summer Palace there!" he said. "Can you imagine it? She built her pleasure house over the heart of The Vale."

I watched as mile after mile of treeless heath limped by. My mute rage only gradually cooled into a solemn oath that if it was ever in my power to reverse this terrible wrong, then I should devote all my time and energy to see it done.

At noon the following day, we started to glimpse the foothills that marked the beginning of the College Massif. Away to the west, the land sank down into the province of Meshak, with its salt flats, marshes, and malaria; and though we were heading up into the jaws of the College, we were all secretly thankful to be leaving the defiled forest.

We arrived at The Snake's Tail as Jhansi had said we would. There we refuelled and took on water for the last time, and I watched aghast as more College troops marched down from the plateau, heading for the Southern front. Though Noa had tried to contact her brother, she had not been successful and so we had no idea of how things stood in the Five Valleys. I thought of Vanhin and the highlanders facing the force that was now on the move towards them and shivered. It was as I was praying to the Founder to keep Jur, Sami and Aunty Val safe, that I saw Josey's head whip around and her arm come across her face, as if protecting her from some terrible vision.

"What is it, my Lady?" I asked.

She scanned the sky above us, and I remembered with a sense of growing unease how she had behaved the day we encountered the flying demon in the mountains. The similarity was just

too marked to ignore, so I told papa and Noa.

We drove on through the night, beginning our ascent of the massif in earnest. The next day dawned a peerless blue, yet in the blasted heath and scrub around the road the only creatures that seemed to thrive were raptors, roosting on the bone-white branches of dead trees, or else soaring effortlessly above us on the morning thermals.

And so, dividing the hours between the three of us, our eyes were ever skyward. Eventually, however, it was the birds themselves that warned us of trouble close at hand. Josey had dropped into a vexed sleep, and I hadn't had the heart to wake her to taste the bland vegetable soup I'd prepared for lunch. It was my watch, and perched on the roof of the cab with a soup bowl, I scanned the heavens as we climbed the massif – The Dragon's gears protesting the gradient all the way. I had just drifted into a daydream about flying over Lachan in high summer, when I realised that the air above us was totally empty; no soaring vultures, no buzzards spiralling ... in fact it was devoid of birds all together. Suddenly, I experienced a feeling of such dread that I hit the cab roof and called out.

“Something's wrong!”

A moment later, Noa appeared.

What is it?

I explained my strange misgivings, and as I was speaking, I saw Noa shiver; a convulsion ran through her body that caused her disguise to rupture and the texts written into her skin to show through for the first time since we'd left the highlands.

Down from here Alma, now!

The Kasivara followed me back into the cab.

A Sentinel comes, she said, flatly, walking forward to speak to Jhansi. During our journey down from the Southern Wilds, we'd learned to let our singular driver be, and he happily reciprocated the gesture, but this was to be no normal day.

Roland, she said, speaking directly, ***we must stop for a short while – we have no choice!***

Without a word, Jhansi applied the brakes and began to release the pressure from the boiler head to help slow The Dragon down. He pulled the rig off the road near a stand of half-starved saplings that had once been almond trees. We came to a halt, and he sat motionless in his chair as the hiss and sigh of The Dragon at rest filled the air around us.

Thank you! Noa said. ***Whatever happens, please stay inside The Dragon, Roland. If we do not return to the vehicle in one hour, continue on your way as if we had left you at Alamar.***

Papa and I helped Josey out of the truck and Noa climbed out after us carrying extra clothes, a thick roll of thermal foil and two spades.

We don't have much time, she stated, matter-of-factly. ***I have felt this dread before. Paholainen sends a great one to watch the roads from the south. This Sentinel is beyond our skill to fight, but we may yet be able to hide ourselves. It sees not as we do but senses our heat and smells our fear. If we cover the Singer here under these poor trees, and then join our craft together to fashion a shield over us all, it may be that we will live to reach the College Bounds.***

We worked feverishly under Noa's direction. Papa and I dug out a shallow depression in the stony ground and when the Kasivara thought it nearly deep enough, we lined it with a spare padded jacket and then tried to persuade Josey to lie down inside. She wouldn't cooperate, of course, and when Papa tried to pick her up and carry her to the scrape of earth, she began to gasp and struggle like an eel.

Stop my friend! – said Noa. ***There must be another way.*** She had been preparing a latticework of chant but needed papa and I to help her activate it. There was no other defence to offer in the time available. Nothing was ready, and in my gut I knew with cold certainty that the Sentinel was close by.

"I have an idea!" I said.

Speak! Noa snapped.

"I must be with her inside the cover," I said. "I think it's the only way she'll go."

Do it, then! the Kasivara said.

I took Josey's arm and we walked across to the grave. I lay down sideways, and then beckoned to her to join me. She followed and sat beside me, as if humouring my strange behaviour. Finally, she lay with her head facing mine and Noa draped the thermal foil over us both. Spadefulls of sandy earth fell over us as papa and Noa worked to hide the foil from view. Then they began to chant – and when I heard the complexity of the lattice that Noa was placing over us I could only marvel at her skill ... accomplished with only two voices.

The next moment, there was a terrible cry from outside and a feeling of such sickness came over me that it was all I could do to remember to breathe. Terror, such as I had never

known in all my fourteen years, swept over me and my bladder emptied. Helpless in the dark, I felt my flesh begin to crawl as an alien intelligence, old before the world was born, sought for Josey and I in the earth ... sought but failed to find us.

Papa and Noa sang on, unwavering in their commitment, and their gloss held firm. Later, Papa described to me how a smoke-black shade with flaming eyes and monstrous leathery wings had settled on top of The Dragon like a vulture, and all around it darkness fell, blocking out the noonday sun. Yet the Sentinel was unable to taste my fear, nor could it sense the Singer's power, shielded as we were under the lattice; nevertheless, this was no mindless drudge, and the creature knew it was being duped and let out a scream that made Jhansi's ears bleed as he trembled inside the cab.

Under the foil in the boiling shadows, I felt papa's tiredness – I also felt the Kasivara continue to give of her own frequency to compensate for his decline, as if it could be done indefinitely without cost. I knew that it was only a matter of time before the foul creature that had been sent to sniff us out would perceive the shield and then all would be lost. Without thinking, I clasped Josey's right hand in mine for support, and as our fingers interlaced in the darkness the plain silver bands touched and a blinding white spark blazed. I felt power pour into Noa's shield from both of us, until it became an impenetrable wall. The creature sensed that whatever revelation might have been at hand had passed, and it screamed its impotent rage once more. Papa said he watched it take to the air, vast wings beating to raise its shadowy bulk against all the laws of nature. It circled once above The Dragon before flying away south to freeze the marrow of our highland brethren over Nomrech before sundown.

I felt the creature's presence diminish and fade until it disappeared altogether, and we were left: two singers buried together in the darkness.

A long moment passed ... then suddenly papa's hands were there, moving clods of earth, tearing open the thermal foil, and lifting me out of the ground. He did the same for Josey and very soon we were leant against The Dragon, blinking in the sunlight. I checked Josey over and she even managed a smile for me, which in the circumstances I thought heroic. Then I saw Noa slumped nearby, blood coursing from her nose and ears, and realised that papa's nose was also dripping blood.

"Are you ok?" I blurted out, heart still crashing like a drum.

“We need to work on our demon-taming skills, but otherwise ... I think we’ll mend,” papa said, helping Noa to her feet.

It took The Dragon four long hours to puff and pant the remainder of the way up the massif and arrive on the plateau. The bitumin scar of the Trunk Road healed here to become the smooth, polished-granite path known as ‘the ribbon’ – an ancient track which led all the way to Sivan’s front door.

Jhansi drove through the gates of College Bounds in high spirits. He was being paid well for taking cloth and passengers to their destinations, and now he was about to make his first delivery.

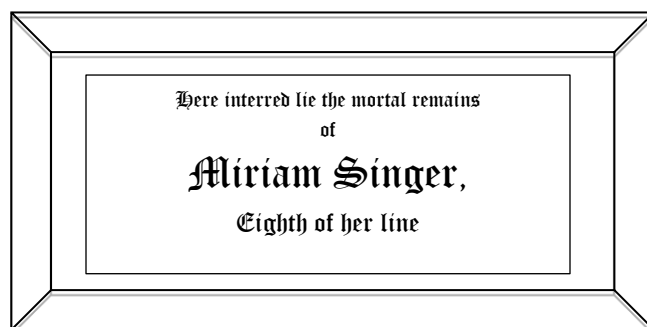
After a cursory check of the cargo and paperwork, and a talk with Jhansi and papa, the guard on the gate waved us on. Five-hundred yards further along the ribbon, Jhansi stopped by the entrance to the cemetery and we climbed out of the truck for the last time.

“Here’s where we say goodbye,” he said.

He advised us not to stay in the burial ground after dark, recommended a cheap hostel in the village outside College Bounds, and then with our blessings ringing in his ears, heaved himself back into The Dragon’s cab. He gave a blast on the whistle and we watched as she laboured away into the distance, steam billowing out behind her like balled cotton.

The cemetery covered nearly one-hundred acres of land just inside the heavy defensive wall. Its main thoroughfares were paved with marble, and tombs and mausoleums of impossible grandeur lined both sides of the solemn boulevards. Here lay a scheming provost, there a famous adventurer, and everywhere I looked, the city of the dead sang death’s final victory in iron and stone. Without rhyme or reason, broad-paved avenues, cobbled streets, lanes and sidewalks all radiated off the central way, dwindling to become paths and tracks that snaked into the undergrowth like capillaries, linking half-forgotten cul-de-sacs and abandoned statuary. After half an hour, we had already taken so many twists and turns since entering that I was sure if Noa had not been with us, we would never have made our way through the labyrinth.

Eventually we came to a sunken area, far older than the main thoroughfare where we had entered the complex. We descended a flight of crumbling stone steps and arrived in a large circular mausoleum, now overgrown and untended, but still beautiful to behold. It seemed to have been carved from one giant piece of translucent marble, or perhaps the milky stone had been cut out of the hill itself. The mausoleum held eight sealed columbariums but looked as if it hadn't been visited in years, and the four of us walked in silence until we came alongside the last of the chambers. It was so overgrown that the gold inscription was impossible to read. A nervous thrill ran through me as I pulled vegetation away from the doorway and cleared the name plate sufficiently to be able to read it:



“The tombs of the Singers!”, I murmured.

I fell to my knees, leaving Josey standing impassively by my side.

“Why are they like this?” I was almost in tears. “Are they not tended?”

For almost eight millennia, they were, the Kasivara replied. *But after Miriam’s fall, any that tried were cruelly punished for the service by Sivan, and eventually, over many lives of men, as the practice of visiting the shrines has died out, so their tending has likewise fallen away.*

“The last guardian of the mausoleum died more than a century ago,” papa continued.

“But why do you waste your tears on an empty chamber?” papa asked.

“What are you talking about?” I said, almost ready to go to war.

“The Lady Miriam's ashes never rested inside. Sivan dressed this tomb with great pomp and ceremony after Miriam’s passing, but she never found the casket containing the Lady’s ashes. It was saved by the faithful and spirited away, until now,” he was almost whispering. I

stood up and leaned forward to hear better. “Remember ... your pilgrimage isn't to this empty place, Alma – beautiful and sad though it is! We must walk on a little further until we leave the cemetery by the Midden hill, and there you'll find Miriam's last resting place.

Noa stepped forward and gave me a hug.

Alma Lachanilta, this task is for you and the Singer to undertake, she said. I can come no closer to Miriam's shrine than this, for fear of altering your fate. I will wait here at the tomb of the First Singer till you return. Be mindful that it is much more dangerous for us to be in the College Bounds after dark. If possible, I would like us to be safely on our way North again by nightfall.

She pointed to a part of the mausoleum totally obscured by lichens and overgrown with lilac, willow and blackberry, before reaching out to take Josey's hand and putting it to her lips. ***May the Founder keep you both from harm,*** she said.

Josey and I walked hand in hand up the Midden hill behind papa. The air was foul, and the flies were fouler ... but after the first hundred yards, we wound scarves about our faces and papa sang a tag that seemed to drive them away. He stopped as we crested the knoll and all three of us turned around to take in the extraordinary view back over the necropolis. Shrines, tombs, vaults and ossuaries, monuments of all shapes and sizes stretched away into the distance.

“I'll stay here and keep watch,” papa said.

“You're not coming with us either?” I asked, mortified.

Papa shook his head.

“I'm not allowed.”

“How will we find it?”

“There are only three shrines on the Midden hill,” papa said, smiling. “The one you want has a green roof.”

“And what am I supposed to do when we get there?” I asked, tipping the water bladder and washing the dust first from Josey's hands and face and then from my own.

Papa frowned and leaned forward, planting a kiss on my wet forehead.

“I don’t know, lovely,” he said.

A small, sunken building with a green cupola roof and decrepit adobe walls covered in graffiti, Miriam's shrine was the least prepossessing of all the structures we'd seen since we arrived in the cemetery. But as Josey and I walked inside, I could feel the brooding presence that inhabited the place and I wished papa had come with us.

In the centre of the single chamber, underneath the cupola, stood a padlocked iron casket set on a simple wooden pedestal. I guided Josey round until she stood, unaided, in front of the reliquary, but I had no idea what came next.

“Sorry my Lady,” I said. “Nobody told me how we’re supposed to go about asking Miriam for her help!”

On the Southern-facing side of the building there was a hole in the roof through which the evening sun slanted, creating a thick shaft of light that bisected the interior, washing over Josey and illuminating an alcove in the far wall where a worn bench had been set.

Josey placed her hands on the top of the casket and began to hum. I walked over to the bench and sat down in the sunlight, chanting a brief blessing to Miriam in gratitude for the fact that we had arrived with our limbs all accounted for, despite the best efforts of bandits and demons. I must have dozed, for I remember waking with a start. The sun had gone in, and immediately I knew that we were no longer alone in the sanctuary.

“My Lady!” I called out.

I tried to stand but found that my legs were not my own. Josey was still over by the casket, but the iron lid had melted away under her palms, and the hands I'd carefully washed before we entered were buried – wrist deep – in the mortal remains of her predecessor.

All around us, voices whispered just beyond hearing. Josey seemed to be sinking into the floor, and as the solid interior of the shrine faded away, we emerged into a forest clearing. Like petals about the heart of a rose, a vast crowd of people were gathered around a funeral pyre, where an inferno raged. Flames snapped and roared as they sucked at the air, and Josey and I

looked out in terror from the centre of the conflagration. It dawned on me that the crowd had come to watch us burn ... to watch and sing. I heard Miriam's name mentioned, and then my heart raced as eight bright points of light separated from the sea of images beyond the flames and appeared to converge on us.

I screamed, struggling against the craft that held me fast.

Approaching Josey, each light seemed to pause near her heart before disappearing inside – causing her body to jolt as if a hammer blow had landed – until finally, she held them all. I watched, powerless to help, as the Singer's belly convulsed, and her chest heaved. Suddenly, her lips peeled back, and her mouth hinged open like some grotesque serpent. A wall of noise flooded out: a riptide of clashing frequencies so strong that it tore me from my captivity and smashed me back against the alcove wall in the shrine, nearly dashing my brains out in the process. Then I heard the 9th Singer of The Vale speak for the first time.

I am Josephine Knight, she said, ***and I am awake!***

For a brief second, the whole universe seemed to fill with the sound of that name and the voices in the shrine took it up and chanted it over-and-over again. Then the building began to tremble and rock, as if made of paper. Looking up, I saw Josey on her knees on the floor with the iron box upended nearby, her eyes wet with tears. Finding myself free to move, I lurched across and hauled her to her feet, and the two of us staggered out into the sunlight, moments before the roof fell in and the four walls crumbled away to dust.

Our luck, which had held for more than a week, seemed to run out as the dust settled and the sun set over College Bounds that evening. A routine perimeter patrol, alerted by the crazy frequency activity inside the shrine, apparated directly onto the far side of the Midden hill, about two-hundred yards from where Josey and I lay. There were five of them, all adepts; four men and a thickset Meshaki officer with a shaved blond head, a woman. They wore the uniform of the College Guard and were armed with sound cannons and long metal poles that thrummed with unseen force.

Of course, they saw us immediately.

I had only just registered their uncouth voices nearby when a heavy boot crushed my face into the dirt.

“Well fuck me! Dangerous frequency activity on this dung heap and what do we find? A skinny bitch kid and a dead crone. Do you want to tell me what in the Founder’s name you’re doing here?”

“Stop talking and check her out, Paulus!” the officer barked. “Get her on her feet.”

Paulus took his boot from my face and dragged me upright by my hair, just as the others approached. He removed my knife from its sheath and ran a meter over me before turning to his superior.

“She’s clean, ma’am – no residue!” he said. “What about the corpse?”

“Do the same!” she said. “The rest of you split up – Jonas ... check round the perimeter of the hill; Digger and Marni ... you can pull down the rest of these prayer shack – get someone from the gate to send tools if you need.”

“Yes ma’am,” they replied in unison.

They were all big men, clearly used to intimidating those they dealt with – yet they jumped to do the Mashaki officer’s bidding. She looked around, taking in the smoking ruins of Miriam’s shrine.

“Don’t suppose you’ve any idea what happened?” she threw the words over her shoulder at me, like bones to a dog. I shook my head.

“We were resting on our way to the cemetery,” I offered, but she already seemed to have lost interest.

As Paulus’s heavy frame advanced on Josey, I realised intuitively that if I let him put the meter near her it would go badly for us. So I did the only thing that came to mind – I ran at him and cannoned into his legs from behind, sending him sprawling.

“That’s my grandma,” I growled, “don’t you dare touch her!”

His colleagues turned back to watch in astonishment, and then the officer began to laugh, and the rest of the patrol joined in the schadenfreude.

“I think you better do what she says, she’s got your fucking number!” the woman spat, enjoying the big man’s discomfort. A red-faced Paulus levered himself to his feet, eyeing me

with a hatred so pure I could taste it.

“Forget the scan on the old woman, just tie their hands and jump them back to the gate – if you think you can manage it,” the officer continued. “Book them into the cells under my name and I’ll see them sometime tomorrow.”

Crouching down by Josey’s side, I offered up multiple silent prayers of thanks to the Founder. When I couldn’t rouse Josey, the hulking Paulus took her pulse to confirm my fevered assertion that she still lived, then he tied her hands behind her back and slung her roughly over his shoulder like a carcass. My own hands were tied in similar fashion and he took great delight in pushing them upwards towards my shoulder-blades as we walked across the midden top, causing me as much discomfort as he dared while keeping me moving. At the far side of the hill we came to what appeared to be a waist-high pyramid of solid silver, partially sunk into the ground. I recognised it straight away as a portable resonator from papa’s descriptions. They worked in pairs, operated by a mage at one end (or both ends over longer distances), and were used to apparate people and goods from place to place.

“Touch the marker, you little bitch,” Paulus said. I leaned my knee against the cold metal, not taking my eyes off our captor. He lay a fleshy hand on top of the resonator and there was a rushing sound, like wind in the reeds. Suddenly, the world around us blurred and dissolved, only to be reconstituted moments later elsewhere. We were still touching a silver marker, but now we were inside the cavernous entry hall of a gatehouse, which was itself the size of a small village. Guards in the livery of the College milled about on every side, and an open door in the honey-coloured stone wall gave out directly onto a paved road where it seemed as if a whole battalion of heavily armed men and women were marching past in the twilight.

Paulus shrugged Josey from his shoulder and allowed her to drop to the polished stone floor at his feet, as if she were nothing more than a sack of bones.

“Two for the cells,” he addressed a stony-faced guard by the marker, dragging me away from the silver pyramid as he did so. The man opened a ledger on the desk nearby.

“Who they seeing?” he asked.

There was a hiatus while the cogs of Paulus’ primitive brain began to turn and mesh, mesh and turn.

“Keeper wants to process these two himself,” he said, after a moment.

The marker guard sucked in air sharply through his teeth, and I thought I saw a look of pity pass like an errant cloud across the man's face.

"When?"

"First thing tomorrow!"

I looked up at Paulus, and he smiled at me.

"That's not true. That's not what she said," I cried. "You're lying!"

Paulus turned to the marker guard and rolled his eyes, before touching the silver again and vanishing.

"He's lying!" I shouted. "We're supposed to see the Meshaki woman! He's a liar! Do you hear me?"

But my words were lost in the wash of sound around the hall, swallowed whole like small fry in the belly of a whale, even as they were uttered.

For better or worse ... our pilgrimage was over.

"... and as yet, she's shown little response to the antipsychotics prescribed (Haloperidol, 5mg orally 3x pd). I've asked Prof. Jhansi (visiting from KCL/Maudsley) to join the care team and, in light of Ms Knight's ongoing struggle with severe manic depression - culminating in her recent suicide attempt - we both agree that an initial two-week course of ECT, running concurrently with existing drug therapies, would be beneficial. Consent for inpatient ECT is not required under these circumstances, but I'll speak to Rebecca and her family at the earliest opportunity anyway so that treatment can begin as soon as possible ..."

Dr Adam Kolb (SpR) – Hammersmith & Fulham Psychiatry Liaison Service
Patient notes [excerpt]: Rebecca Knight (21yrs)
Under Section 3 MHA 1983

Josey Knight! Josey Knight! How on earth did you get here?

Margaret always said that being a good mother was like being a good cook: a pinch of this, two spoons of that, a drop of the other ... and it all comes together in the mixing bowl. She was wrong, silly cow. Gulled of her common sense by God. Jumped by Jesus. Sucker-punched by the saints. Cluelessly Catholic.

And now she's gone.

And it's your daughter broken on the table in front of you.

And no matter what tales you tell yourself, no matter what songs you sing ... you don't know how to fix her.

The ECT room hums like a high-functioning sociopath.

Plugged in and razor sharp.

They've administered anesthetic and muscle relaxant and, according to Kolb's upbeat pre-procedural, Becky's already away with the fairies. Even the padded electrodes on either side of her temples look curiously benign from the waiting room, like the stubs of antlers cut-to-come-back twice as pretty next year.

Surely you can relax now, Josey?

You shake your head to clear it as a thin-faced nurse fits the outsize rubber mouthguard that's meant to stop your daughter biting through her own tongue, and you realise that your heart's pounding. You splash ice-cold water on your face from the cooler and force yourself to watch the large double monitors on the wall above your head, because you promised Becky. You said you'd be with her every step of the way. Onscreen, the actors move in slow-motion, orbiting the patient like strange planets, while your mind monkeys crazily back-and-forth over Becky's life. Birth, meningitis, food, music, piano, men, drugs. After what seems like millennia, an oxygen mask begins its fractional descent over her round face

and ...

*... and suddenly you want her out of there.
Out of the humming room,
away from the machinery and the masks,
and the 800 milliamperes of direct current ...*

You rush the door.

*Yet even as you stagger forwards, out of the corner of your eye you catch the dry twitch-dance of
Becky's hands-and-feet on TV. You scream her name as the high voltage pulse is administered.
Sam's back in a breath. He throws his coffee in the bin and bars the way, enfolding you in his arms.*

*When they finally wheel her out, the staff are all smiles. You, however, are ashen-
faced and barely coherent.*

"Come on J!" Sam says. "Cheer up ..."

*You grab hold of the bed and bring it to a halt in front of you. A trail of saliva is burning a path
down from the slack caldera of Becky's mouth to pool on the starched cotton pillowcase.*

"... she's going to be fine."

Chapter 10 – The College

Clearing the edge of the massif, the first rays of the sun struck the great silver dome above Central Hall like a gong, and the whole College chimed into existence, springing out of the dark void around our cell as if it were a city of the mind – present only when conjured thus by the light.

At first, I was caught by the sheer poetry of it all, the endless corbels and cupolas, the capitals and caryatids. Everywhere I turned, towers soared, and gilded spires tilted at the sky like ancient knights at a tourney – each defying the laws of gravity with greater profligacy the closer one got to the burnished curvature of the central dome. I felt the song of the waking limestone through the cell floor, a faint echo of that first chant that had raised the city from the dust, and it thrilled my bones as the mist burned away and the high roofscape of The Vale's seething metropolis was revealed in all its meleke majesty. Usurped and befouled by demons the College may have become, but the wellspring of power that rose through the rock with the dawn each day came from deep in the land's inviolate core. And whether Paholainen liked it or not, it imbued every grain of sand in the capital with the resonance of creation.

We had been held for the night in a wall-tower high above the south gate, and beneath us the city sprawled away into the distance on three sides. The cell was bare and draughty and the pocked stone of the walls was covered in graffiti, but I suppose we had been treated well-enough in the circumstances, with a thin blanket-roll and a crust of the previous day's guardhouse bread apiece. Josey had not yet woken from her stupor, and I was so concerned about her situation that I hadn't slept a wink myself and by that stage was functioning on the adrenalin of pure fear alone. With the sky brightening outside the narrow clerestory window above us, I climbed the cell wall and up the steeply raked alcove until I could look out. And it was there, holding on to the iron bars, that I encountered my first sunrise over Central Hall.

After a while, the denizens of South Gate tower began to wake and move about. Still I clung to the window bars, staring out at the College. And as the light became stronger, I realised that, while many of the buildings near South Gate – and all the grander buildings around Central Hall – were still made from the familiar cream stone, further away to the north and east there were huge towers of obsidian, ziggurats of steel and glass, and high brick chimneys shrouded in

brackish fumes that I had not seen in the first explosion of dawn. Also, it was now possible to pick out tangled skeins of piping, masts and antennas supported by brackets or riveted into the stone on the edges and at the apex of every building, like living cilia reaching out to interrogate the air beyond the limits of brick and mortar. Neither were the city roofs themselves as pristine as they had first appeared. Wires of all diameters snaked across them like hairline-cracks in porcelain, spanning the vertical chasms between structures and ivying their way up to the pinnacle of each tower. The cables met at nexus points across the city, forming spider-web meshes far above the streets. And underneath these networks of cable, raised transport platforms could be glimpsed, looping like ribbons in the gaps between buildings.

I was lost in contemplation of this other College – a world of verticals and matrices, of wires and bars, where the spread of our new technology was visible like leprosy in the stone itself – when my reverie was cut short by the sudden desperate appearance of a man scaling the side of a tower not ten rope-lengths away from our cell window. I heaved my face right up to the bars and stared at the figure, filthy and naked except for a tattered pair of shorts. His head had been brutally shaven, and I could see from the marks he left on the stone that he was bleeding. It was as he swarmed up the spire that I caught a glimpse of his back and realised that what I had assumed was dirt was in fact tattooed text; the man was covered in words. With that realisation came another ... this time more acute: he must be Kasivar. College adepts enclosed in four blue spheres apparated into the open air around the tower with a sound like the popping of joints. The pilots steered their strange craft towards the fugitive like hounds coursing a hare. They were joined by a mage of such power that he merely stepped out of the ether and walked towards the Kasivar across the void as if on solid ground, white robes flying in the morning breeze and spurs jangling at each stride. Though I tried hard to memorise his features (and you know that I am no slouch when it comes to such feats), it was as if the mage's face resisted any such attempt at scrutiny. His hair was neither long nor short but hung limply about his shoulders, framing a waxen face that lacked any noticeable expression and whose very emptiness filled me with foreboding. On his arm, he carried a winged lizard the size of an eagle which he stroked and fed from a leather bag dangling at his waist. As the Kasivar reached the whip-lash antenna at the top of the spire he had nowhere left to run, and it seemed that the adepts would surely be able to take him at their leisure. But I had forgotten the nature of the desert folk – as had his pursuers: the

climb up the spire wasn't an attempt at escape, rather it was an insane form of attack. Without warning, the Kasivar launched himself at the lower of the two nearest spheres, spinning like a dervish. So surprised was the occupant, that he didn't even have time to cry out as the Kasivar's foot connected with his throat, snapping his head back and crushing his windpipe. Without chant to sustain its flight, the blue sphere winked out of existence and both men plummeted towards the merchant's palace beneath them. There was a stomach-churning smack as a body slammed into the roof-tiles beyond my field of vision, but then, impossibly, the Kasivar swung back up into sight. I saw that he had caught hold of a thick wire as he fell and had used the cable to arrest his motion. Now he ran full tilt along an intersecting thread, like a circus acrobat, and leapt onto the nearest roof-edge, softening the impact of his fall with a diving roll. He didn't pause for a moment but plunged on in the direction of the great dome over Central Hall, bloody footprints on the honey-coloured stone inviting pursuit. Standing in mid-air, the mage watched impassively as the remaining three adepts took up the chase once more. Yet now they kept a wary distance between themselves and the Kasivar, who ducked and rolled, weaving a path along the walkways and roofs towards the centre of the city. Inside the spheres, the adepts loaded antique pistols – ceremonial hunting weapons that fired sharpened silver-alloy disks about the size of a fist. And soon the early-morning quiet was broken by the pinging ricochets of these missiles as they hit the stone and missed the man. I was so engrossed in the Kasivar's flight that I forgot all about Josey and our own dire predicament and concentrated on reaching out to the rooftops below.

Tentatively, I formed the word '**help?**' as a question in psi, shielding my efforts as I'd been taught. Abruptly, a narrow corridor opened between the warrior and myself, and I dived headlong down it ... tasting the warrior's overwhelming exhaustion, his faintness from loss of blood and the fire of poison locking every muscle in his body. Immediately, I allowed my own strength to flow to the Kasivar, even as I felt the bite of sharpened metal. A disc lodged deep in the warrior's thigh, then another caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head, shearing off an ear. While tears coursed unsolicited down my cheeks, I renewed my efforts to come to his aid. But instead of continuing his run the Kasivar stopped sharp in his tracks. On the flat roof of a government building, he turned to face the sun, and I felt his eyes sweep around the rooftops until he was looking directly at me. For the briefest of moments he smiled, and I experienced his ragged breath as if it were my own. I readied myself to give him all the force of nature I

possessed, but at that moment he closed the connection between us, leaving me dizzy and disoriented. Then he simply sat down cross-legged on the roof, as if he had decided to allow a few old friends to catch him up. I watched in grim horror as the adepts landed nearby and fanned out around their quarry, firing weapons all the while. Too many of the blades found their target for me to entertain any hope of escape now for my friend. Satisfied that the dying man was no longer a threat, the nearest adept reached out a weapon and pushed it point-blank to the Kasivar's temple. Unable to watch, I was about to slide down from the alcove when I heard a rushing sound, like wind over water, and then a snapping and cracking of bones, as in an inconceivable blur of movement the warrior dispatched first one, then another of his attackers, leaving complex patterns on the tiles in his own blood, until he stood alone on the roof with three bodies strewn around him like chaff after threshing.

There was a disturbance in the air nearby and the mage I'd seen earlier stepped lightly onto the roof near the Kasivar. As he moved, the soles of his polished boots seemed to strike sparks from the tiles, and I could hear spurs jingling in the morning quiet. I braced myself for violence, yet, to my amazement, when he reached the fugitive the wizard began to applaud. The Kasivar bowed his head in response, and I felt him preparing for death in the same way we children-of-song prepare for life – with the Founder's Prayer. He chanted the hymn so powerfully in psi that I could sense the stones of the city resonating in sympathy. With the final cadence still possessing the rooftops, the mage set his fingers against the exhausted warrior's chest, just above the heart, each digit piercing muscle and severing tendon like a scalpel as he pushed his hand inside. His brown eyes never moved from the Kasivar's face the whole time, and though he broke the man's rib cage with an almost casual savagery, his features remained impassive until those fingers had closed around the heart. Only then did he allow himself a modest smirk – and whenever I think there's too much beauty in the world, I only need to recall that bastard's grin to see the error of my ways. With a terrible sideways wrench, breaking tissue and shattering bone, he tore the organ from the warrior's chest and tossed it for offal onto the roof tiles where it spattered and slid, refusing to die.

The mage released the reptile from his arm to feed and walked away across the void, bloody fingers patterning the side of his tunic as they drummed a funeral march.

The muscles in my arms were screaming for relief when I finally let go the bars and returned to the gloom of our cell. Barely thirty minutes had passed since sunrise, but the day was already infamous, soiled and desolate. Yet even as my own bile spilled over the stone floor, I knew that this single Kasivar warrior had cost the College dear, and the man had died with the Founder's name on his lips. As for the demon who had made a sport of his death, I had a feeling we would meet again ... and I would not easily forget what I had seen. Nor would I forgive.

For a long time I stood with my forehead against the cool stone ... breathing deeply and trying not to think. Then I turned and walked over to where Josey lay and knelt at her side, brushing her cheek with an apologetic kiss.

"Well my Lady," I whispered, "if you wanted to wake up ... now would be a good time. I think we're in trouble!"

I took Josey's pulse as papa had shown me, and while I was counting the beats I risked a small were-light in my palm to be able to see her more clearly. Despite the fact that she seemed lost to the world, her pulse was as strong as ever, and I was just considering whether I should bang on the door to see if there was anyone else nearby, when the cell was unlocked and a stooped old man in the uniform of the tower guard entered carrying two bowls of porridge.

"Eat this while it's warm!" he grunted. "You're seeing the Keeper at eight o'clock.

I thanked him and took the bowls.

"There's been no word from the adepts who would normally accompany you to the Keeper's door, so I'll be back to take you down myself – at least part of the way," he said, wincing at the prospect. "Founder knows what you did to merit such a meeting!"

"We did nothing!" I replied, coolly.

I stared back at him, but he was unable to hold my gaze. When he'd locked the door, I waited for his uneven footsteps to retreat down the stone flags of the corridor beyond, and then tried once more to rouse Josey. I sat her up against the cell wall and attempted to open her eyes. I

called her by her true name; I even touched our silver bands in hope of igniting a spark of consciousness. But aside from the mocking clink of metal on metal ... nothing happened. Sitting back despondent at Josey's side, I spooned the jailor's gruel into my mouth, trying all the while to dispel the feeling that this grey breakfast might be my last.

Good as his word, the guard returned an hour later to take us down for interrogation. When he saw that Josey was still unconscious, he offered to carry her – albeit reluctantly – and I was grateful to him for this decency.

“What's your name?” I asked, as we descended the great tower.

“Staris,” he replied, his eyes shifting nervously this way and that as we approached the end of a covered walkway on the outside of the building.

“What's wrong?” I asked. “Are you expecting an ambush?”

“No, Miss!” he said, smiling at the absurdity. He led the way across a landing that gave access to a steep spiral staircase. “It's just that I shouldn't be talking to you – and I definitely shouldn't be helping you! If any of the duty guards ask for papers ...”

“I wouldn't worry about it, Staris,” I said. “You're saving the College time, no?”

At every junction along the tower's labyrinthine network of stairways, empty passages and echoing tunnels, we passed armed guards who waved us through when the old man mumbled our destination. Nobody asked to see our authorisation. We'd been walking for about twenty minutes when I realised that Staris was sweating like a plough-horse, and the pauses between one flight of stairs and the next were getting longer. I thought to engage him in conversation to give him time to recover his breath.

“Tell me something about the Kee--”

“Sshhhh!” Staris put his finger to his lips as we arrived at the bottom of a wide staircase. A dark corridor led away on the left, while across an open landing, steps continued down to our

right. The old guard led us cautiously along the corridor, Josey lolling in his arms like a rag doll. For ten minutes we followed its intestinal twists-and-turns, the hesitant slap of our boots on the cold stone the only sound. Just when I was beginning to think we must have circumnavigated the entire tower, we arrived at a door in the otherwise featureless passage wall.

It was unwatched and we stopped outside.

“There should be adepts keeping this way,” Staris said, craning his neck to see past me down the corridor. “I have never known this part of the tower to be left unattended.”

He lay Josey down carefully by the side of the door with her back against the stone and when he stood up, he rapped smartly on the knotted wood panel.

At first glance, the door seemed to be a simple affair – undecorated beech ... suitable for servants’ quarters, or perhaps for securing a large storeroom against unwarranted entry. Yet my craft-sense, prickling with apprehension, told me this was no normal barrier. And while all around elsewhere, I could feel the song of College stone underpinning life in the tower, beyond the door was silence and a yawning abyss too deep to fathom. Without any preamble, Staris turned ... his face a mask of fear.

“Don’t look him in the eye,” he whispered.

“Who are you talking about?” I asked.

He put a finger to his lips once more, indicating the room beyond the beech-door.

“He’s more than half demon and if he can cause either of you pain or discomfort ... he will. For that is the way of his heart.”

“We’ll be okay,” I said, smiling. Surviving my previous encounters with Paholainen’s minions had perhaps made me unintentionally blasé about my chances with a creature who was only ‘half’-a-demon.

“No Miss, you won’t!” Staris replied, pointedly. “This is no playground game! The Keeper is a mage of the darkest music ... his shadow haunts the stone here; all doors open or close at his command, and his spies are everywhere from gutter to gable. I – whose grandsires served the Provosts themselves – have survived in his employ for fifty years only by grovelling like a beaten dog, making myself a hireling of no consequence, a bystander as my own life disappears up and down these steps. But you ... you and your grandmother; there is something about you both – you will attract his attention; I can feel it. And the consequences do not bear

thinking about.”

He took a step away from the door, and to my surprise, he snapped a medallion from a chain around his own neck and pressed it into my hand, mumbling a blessing to Miriam as he did so; then he turned on his heel and strode off down the corridor in the direction of the upper levels and the fresher air.

“Aren't you going to wait? At least see us inside!” I called after him – the craft seeping into my voice. “What are we to do when you're gone?”

Staris stopped abruptly, my words hanging in the air between us. As he turned, I could see he was torn between the instinct to do the right thing, and an equally powerful sense of self-preservation that told him the longer he stayed in that gloomy corridor assisting two prisoners bound for the Keeper, the more he was inviting catastrophe. In the end, when he saw no one had emerged from the room, he walked back towards us with a sigh. Arriving at the door, he bent down, and with a grunt he took Josey back into his arms.

“It's the first time I have ever known this room to be unguarded – do you understand?” he said. “Something is amiss!”

Straightening his shoulders, he knocked on the door once again. There was no response. So we waited.

“Why don't you just let us go?” I asked.

“Because I would be signing your death warrant,” he said softly. “Guards stand at every entrance and exit with instructions to shoot any stranger found in the tower, unless accompanied by someone in a College uniform. Have you forgotten we are at war?”

“Come with us then,” I offered.

Staris eyed me as if I had suggested he throw himself from the tower.

“And what do you think would happen to my family if I did?” he hissed.

I sighed, long and loud.

“How about just opening the door and letting us wait inside?” I asked.

“It is locked and only the Keeper's voice will open it,” he replied.

I grabbed the handle and yanked it towards me, to no avail. As I did so, I felt Josey's limp arm brush against mine and without thinking, I took her hand and placed it on the lock. There was a sharp, sweet smell that I couldn't place – familiar though it was – followed by a sound like

an exhalation, as if the room beyond the door was releasing breath pent up over centuries. Then with an audible click, the door unlocked.

Staris gave a low moan, and I thought for a fleeting moment that he was going to drop Josey and run. Nevertheless, he mastered himself and carried the 9th Singer of The Vale, still unconscious, across the threshold and into the lair of her enemy.

“Who are you, little girl,” he asked, eyes wide, “that even the Master Keeper’s locks open for you?”

We were in an antechamber of sorts, dark and cold.

“What's that smell?” I asked, ignoring his question and countering with one of my own.

Staris lay Josey down again just inside the open doorway.

“Sundran,” he said, “the washing herb. He uses the oil as a perfume ... it’s brought from fields in the south. Many a College boy has learned to run when they smell it.”

I nodded as he paused a moment on the jamb, neither in nor out of the room.

“You should go back to the upper levels now,” I heard myself say. “May the Founder bless the hour of our meeting.”

With my blessing fresh on his head, Staris bowed briefly, then slipped away into the world beyond the Keeper’s domain. Without thinking, he shut the door behind him, and immediately I felt the room lock down once more. Frantically, I tried the door handle, tugging it this way and that – even pressing Josey's palm to it; but this time ... nothing.

I sat next to Josey in the dark once again, staring at the token the old man had pressed into my palm. It was backlit by a thin were-light I had set there which cast wild shadows all around. Handmade yet inexpensive, the medallion looked like thousands of others you could buy anywhere across The Vale; but what made my heart skip as I looked more carefully, was the fact that it had actually been struck during Miriam’s time and her likeness swam in front of my eyes – a striking woman with masses of curls ... and underneath, the phrase ‘by the Singer's grace’

engraved in College glyphs.

“Of all the faces to see right now that's one of the most reassuring, don't you think my Lady?” I said, almost to myself.

There was a moment of perfect quiet.

Then the world turned upside down as a clear voice rang out in the murk.

“What's wrong, Becky?” Josey asked the darkness, as if it were the only question in the universe to which an answer might be required.

I jumped out of my skin, dropping Miriam's coin and grazing my knuckles on the rough wood of the door by my side.

“Lady Josephine!” I croaked. “My Lady!”

“It's still nighttime, love,” Josey murmured. “Bad dream?”

“No,” I said, “no dreams today,” my mind racing to grasp what was happening.

“Do you want to sleep here with me and your dad?”

“Lady Josephine, I--”

“Okay – I'll put it on,” she said.

I waited, hardly daring to breathe, not knowing whether I should try and wake my charge from her delusion – though her eyes were open and boring a hole in my face with the intensity of their emerald gaze – or if I should go along with her.

When all choices are perilous, then sometimes allowing the river to carry you where it will makes the most sense. So I sat holding Josey's hand, and after a few minutes she reached her free arm out to her side, crooking the index finger. A delicious current of warm air blew through the room and with a sudden pistol crack, the Singer's palm exploded into a ball of fire that illuminated every corner of the antechamber, like a small sun.

The walls around us were crowded with religious art and ceremonial clothing. Gorgeous robes in glass display-cases and vivid portraits of the Singers of The Vale at their passing-over ceremonies vied to capture and enslave the eye. Of course, the result should have been calming, reassuring even; but the portraits produced the opposite effect. Each depicted a Singer in her child-form, and the artist had imagined their subjects just as the flames were beginning to bite. Childish faces were fixed forever in paroxysms of agony or ecstasy, it was impossible to tell

which – but what with the garish robes, pinned out like dead butterflies, and the tormented faces staring out from their frames, I shuddered involuntarily and turned away. Looking down, I saw the Miriam coin on the stone flags an arm's-length away and shuffled over to pick it up. Across the chamber from Josey and I, there was another door, this time decorated with ironwork in the shape of a serpent eating its own tail. When I turned around, I realised Josey was crawling on all fours towards it.

I jumped back to her side.

“Let me help you, my Lady!” I said, laying a hand on her shoulder. She stopped and looked up, as if surprised to see me. I held out a hand and she took it, allowing me to haul her to her feet, her other outstretched palm still blazing. Though I was numb from the press of recent events, as we stood in front of the serpent door I could still feel the weight of dark craft behind it; and I was sure the room beyond was a place from which few, if any, had ever escaped. However, none of this seemed to bother Josey, who walked forward as if she were in her own kitchen, grasping the door by the serpent’s tail and the brass handle together. Nonchalantly, she cast it open, snapping black enchantments like cobwebs, and melting both brass lock and serpentine ironwork so that the molten metal of both commingled and ran down the door, leaving scorch-marks all the way to the floor. Josey surged inside, with me following hard on her heels. But while the sun continued to burst from her palm, as soon as she entered the room she became subdued again, lost as if some inner compass had been broken when she stepped over the threshold. That’s not to say I was any better; for we were both caught like moths, staring vacantly at the terrible beauty around us.

Bare of all furniture and ornament save for a single carved-oak chair in the centre of the room, the cream stone of the floor and walls had been polished here till it shone like glass, reflecting every scintilla of the Singer’s light. But these details were only footnotes to the main theme of the interior.

For this was where the Master Keeper kept his keys.

Frozen in the act of falling, and held in abeyance by some hidden craft, keys of every shape, size and substance hung motionless in the air above our heads. Keys with blades of steel and delicate filigree bows that caught the light; keys with iron barrels, pegs of ivory, and wedges of coral; keys of cheap nickel-plate, keys of silver and gold; simple keys of brass and wood, composite keys of blood and bone; major keys, minor keys, College keys, sage keys, keys that unlocked palaces and hovels, temples and tombs ... and even, up in the gods, keys of purest thought that could unlock life itself – all of them hung in the Keeper’s chamber, waiting to be called.

I stared up at the quivering canopy, following the shards of reflected light on barrel and bow until they merged in the shadows under the apex of the roof, and I had the strangest sensation that the whole room was nothing but a gaping mouth, ready to bite down at any moment.

“It’s very late!” Josey said abruptly, catching hold of my hand. As the words came out of her mouth, the ball of fire in her right palm died away and we were plunged into darkness. The sweet smell of sundran seemed stronger now, carrying another darker scent underneath it ... the metallic tang of blood.

“Lady Josephine, I murmured, “we have to get out of here.”

I stared into the thick velvet blackness of our surroundings, berating myself for not noticing whether there had been a shuttered window high up on the wall when the room was illuminated.

“I suppose we could try one more take,” Josey replied, “though I’ll need a drink first.”

A sense of hopelessness washed over me.

“I don’t understand, my Lady,” I said, squaring to where I assumed Josey’s face should be. I felt then the full pressure of the moment ... trapped in a tomb-like chamber with the only exit blocked, and the growing certainty that only minutes remained before the arrival of our ungracious host and our subsequent discovery. In my frustration, I reached out to Josey and took her by the shoulders, and to my eternal shame ... I shook her with all my strength.

“What do you mean?” I screamed in her face, “WHAT DO YOU MEAN!” My own voice, harsh as a Lachani drover’s, echoed around the rafters and when it returned to my ears, I

began to sob. Hot tears coursed down my cheeks and I buried my face in Josey's shoulder.

"Sorry, my Lady," I gulped.

I felt her hands flutter around the middle of my back, and she planted a small kiss on my forehead.

"I'm ready!" she said. "Are we rolling?"

At that moment, there was a sharp splintering sound far overhead and I heard a shout.

ALMA!

It was papa. Beyond all hope.

ALMA! he roared.

We're down here! I called back.

Thank all the bloody gods!

There was a loud crash as roof tiles fell nearby, then abruptly a cylinder of natural sunlight poured into the room from above, like a waterfall. Two lines of wire followed, falling into the room with the sunshine. I took Josey's hand and we walked towards the pool of light. Even as we drew near, a familiar lithe figure rappelled down from the rafters at breakneck speed, the keys parting for her as she came balling through.

Alma Lachanilta! Noa shouted out her psi while still airborne. ***A hard trail was yours to follow, little sister!***

Then we were side-by-side and I was enveloped in a hug that threatened to accomplish what, so far, demons and darkness had not managed. Releasing me, Noa turned to Josey.

Well-met, my Lady, she said, offering Josey a deep formal bow. ***You must excuse me now for there is much to do and no time for the courtesy you both deserve.***

The Kasivara tied the end of one wire underneath Josey's arms while she spoke.

Only stay brave for a while more and we may yet win our way out of this viper's nest.

Then she tied the end of the other wire under my arms, gave the line a sharp tug and with a brief smile she was away, arm over arm, back up the first line towards the roof.

The wire under my arms went taut, and I felt my feet leave the ground as papa hauled me by main strength up through the shoals and banks of keys, nearer and nearer to the hole in the roof and out of the Keeper's grasp. As I looked down, I realised that Noa must have completed

the gruelling climb as I could see Josey, arms outstretched, beginning to rise after me. It seemed to take an age to arrive up near the rafters, but soon Yanic's boots came into view, wedged near a ragged edge of sky; and then I caught sight of his gloved hands on the line above me. I was passing through the last cloud of keys when Josey began to sing in psi. The melody was slow, and her voice shook a little, but I could feel the power of her chant welling up and filling the space, to the astonishment of papa and Noa. Though the text was in a barbarian tongue I had never heard before, I remember some of it to this day.

**Walle, Regen, walle nieder
Wecke meine alten Lieder,
Die wir in der Türe sangen,
Wenn die Tropfen draußen klangen ...**

And when she stopped singing, the Master Keeper's enchantment was broken. There was a sound like the rushing of a distant river in full thaw, and then all those countless keys, no longer held in place, began to tumble and slide towards the polished stone far below. Alarm bells started their clamour around the tower, and the noise in the chamber was deafening. While still climbing through the air, I snatched a small ivory key with delicate glyphs along its barrel as it fell past and put it in my pocket for a keepsake – something to look at in case I ever made it back home.

Dangling among the rafters some twenty feet above Josey, my head was just below papa's boots. Papa tied off the line and his two hands reached down for me. A grunt of exertion, swift upward movement, and there I was, standing beside him on top of the world, with bright blue sky and birdsong all around. Papa cried as he kissed me, tears running into his beard, but took no time to talk. Instead, he went straight over to aid Noa, and the two of them hauled Josey up and out of the ruined chamber. At last we stood on the roof together in a tight circle, arms around each other's shoulders.

This is the Lady Josephine, I said, as if they had never met.

Hearing the Singer's true name for the first time, papa and Noa bowed their heads solemnly, just as a huge explosion shook the tower under our feet.

Now my friends, said Noa, straightening, *we must run for our lives!*

Chapter 11 – From under the Keeper's nose

It was six storeys down to the street below. And in the end, we jumped.

Noa walked us to the edge of the roof and with her chant resounding in our ears we leapt through the tangle of wires and into the void beyond, as if that was the accepted way to leave the Keeper's chamber.

We landed among the early-morning commuters in Southgate, and dishevelled and grubby as I was, I stared back at them with that look we southerners often reserve for our northern brethren – two parts pity to three parts absolute contempt. I remember feeling euphoric, invincible. Not for a moment did I stop to consider the courage, energy and craft it had taken to arrive on the roof in the first place, or to keep us all from harm as we hit those pavement flags; and neither did I give any thought to the fact that, far from being over, our game of cat-and-mouse with the Keeper had only just begun. It wasn't until much later, when we discovered how papa and Noa had managed to piece together the jigsaw of our disappearance at Miriam's shrine and then effect an impossible rescue in the direst of circumstances, that I was able to shed tears of gratitude, but by then the person who most deserved them was gone. With hindsight, I think I'd probably reached the limits of my endurance and if I hadn't been charged with adrenaline, I would have dropped like a stone long before. By contrast, Josey was more alert. It seemed that our pilgrimage to Miriam's shrine had awakened her memory in ways that none of us (save perhaps Vanhin) had foreseen. And yet, for all that, we were both still a burden to our rescuers on the busy street that morning.

With the College folk milling around, some already chanting spells and shouting, Noa didn't even pause for breath but pointed instead at the elevated road snaking above us.

We need to get up there, she said.

Papa returned our packs and led us across the street, away from the gawping crowd. We waded through a set of revolving doors that marked the ground-floor entrance to *The Southgate Hotel*, an expensive-looking lodging house on the opposite side of the road. Filing past the cold-eyed receptionist, we walked purposefully across the lobby towards an open cage of sorts, set into an aperture in the wall.

“This thing moves between floors,” papa whispered. He was closing the latticed gate behind us when the receptionist crossed the floor and came alongside the cage.

“I’m afraid I’ll need to see your resident cards,” she said, “non-residents aren’t allowed to use the riser!”

“No problem,” papa smiled, “they’re here somewhere.”

He undid the cage, pretending to rifle through his pack; and as the receptionist leaned in, Noa’s open palm flashed towards her. The woman sank to the floor senseless and Josey helped me drag her into the riser. Closing the gate behind him, papa pressed the button for the second floor and with a hiss of hydraulics, the cage lurched upwards. I’m certain that if I’d eaten more than a single bowl of porridge over the previous twenty-four hours, I’d probably have lost the contents of my stomach. As it was, the sensation was merely intensely unpleasant.

“What’s wrong with walking?” I grumbled.

“Did you see any stairs?” papa asked.

“No, but this is unnatural—”

She’d rather jump! Josey said, stone-faced.

All three of us turned to look at her in astonishment. It was the first time she had spoken directly to the three of us and she’d made a joke ... at my expense. As I stared, a tiny smile broke across her face and I burst out laughing. Papa joined in, and soon anyone listening as we ascended might have been forgiven for thinking we were on our way to a spring festival or a highland dance, rather than trying to escape a city locked down for war.

We arrived on the second floor and left the receptionist propped up inside the riser. A single high-ceilinged room ran the length of the building, and at the far end double-doors led out to a parking enclosure. Beyond that I could just make out the edge of the transport platform. Sceptical as I was (and still am) about the benefits of technological revolution, the elevated road amazed me. Coming from a region of the country where the number of roads could still be counted on the fingers of one hand, I had to concede that the graceful metal ribbon that stretched away around the block was a thing of beauty. I was so absorbed in its sinuous curves that when the first MAGvee hurtled by, hovering an inch or so above the floor of the platform, I was almost sucked away into its slipstream.

“Did you see that?” I screamed, as the vehicle turned the corner at the end of the block

and disappeared.

Papa ruffled my hair and went to consult with Noa.

“Hold my hand,” Josey said, appearing at my side. I offered her my arm instead, and we looked on, awestruck, as the sporadic traffic sped past.

The Keeper has raised the Comaj against us, Noa observed bluntly. It won’t take them long to work out where we are, even as I try to shield us from their attention.

“Comaj?” I asked.

“Militia,” papa explained. “College volunteers. They’re supposed to keep the Singer’s peace within the city walls.”

“And they carry cannons?”

He nodded.

“They’re better equipped than the army!”

“What can we do?” I asked.

Leave, Noa said, with a tight smile.

Another MAGvee raced towards us and, without warning, papa stepped out into the middle of the road. He raised his sound cannon and pointed it straight at the oncoming vehicle and the driver wrestled his machine to a halt only inches away from papa’s legs.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” he screamed through the open window.

Papa kept the weapon trained on him.

“Apologies! We need to take—”

There’s no time, Noa said, wrenching the door open and dragging the reluctant Samaritan from his ride. We climbed in, and papa tried to coax the MAGvee to life with the former occupant banging on the windows all the while.

“It’s propelled by chant,” papa said. “We should be able to get it moving between us!”

Papa, Noa and I sang frequency tags from a dozen different motion spells, but the vehicle remained stubbornly rooted to the platform. Then looking back towards the hostel, I saw four armed men in grey uniforms running towards the outer door.

“They’ve found us!” I yelled.

Noa ran a finger along the calloused edge of her right hand and was about to jump out of the car when Josey began to sing.

**Die Räder am Bus drehen sich rundherum,
Rundherum, Rundherum.
Die Räder am Bus drehen sich rundherum,
Den ganzen Tag ...**

Activated somehow by her barbarian chant, the MAGvee leapt forward and papa grabbed the joystick to stop us careering off the road. Once in control, he twisted the throttle bar round as far as it would go and the car sped away along the frictionless platform like an arrow, leaving the hostel and the grey-clad militiamen far behind.

Some fifteen hours later, exhausted and despondent, we sat waiting for the College clocks to chime midnight in a filthy basement on the far side of the city, near the North Gate. We were holed up in a safe room under a block of dilapidated military apartments halfway down the breezily named Avenue of the New Moon, in the city's burgeoning industrial quarter. The apartment complex was less than ten years old, but already it seemed to be disintegrating in front of the residents' eyes. Large chunks of decorative cladding had fallen from the structure and several apartments on the lower floors were boarded up. The presence of a large tannery, an engineering works, and the huge copper vats of a brewery nearby ensured that the stench of the neighbourhood was unmistakable; and the heady combination of forged metal, stale urine, drying animal hides and chemical dye, finished off with the cloying smack of malted barley, meant that if you could afford to live somewhere else, anywhere else ... you probably already did. The story of how we came to be murdering time in such a place has been told and retold on so many occasions that I hesitate to give an account here for fear of offending readers that prefer their own versions. The truth was that every move we had made since our leap of faith that morning seemed to have been anticipated by the Keeper, who hadn't even bothered to pursue us himself but had sent his militia to give chase, hounding us across the city for his own sport.

We'd been in the MAGvee for the best part of an hour, heading across the College

towards the North Gate, when the Keeper struck back at us. The buildings had just started to change, and while the dome of Central Hall could still be seen, shining like a vast burnished bell away to our left, we were now approaching the ziggurats, chimneys, silos and storage tanks I had glimpsed from afar in my cell. Noa took a gulp of water from the flask in her pack as we passed the first stepped tower, dark and forbidding on our right. I tried to imagine anybody willingly going to work inside such a place.

“What do they make there?” I asked.

“Nothing,” papa replied.

The Kasivara turned around, her face bleak.

When Sivan gave the order to cut down the Forest of Amrah, the equipment left the city from this tower, she said. My uncle was captured and held here. My sister died here. She paused a moment and looked out of the window before continuing. *When the Singer takes back the city, I will ask her permission to tear it down, brick by brick.*

It’s hard to express the mixture of fear and disgust I felt as I regarded the ziggurat. At this remove from events, and given what was to happen later, perhaps I seem oversensitive or paranoid, but you must remember that, next to the murder of Miriam herself, the crime of cutting down the sacred forest was the most appalling act of violence I had ever encountered, and the incarceration and murder of my friend’s family only served to underline the real purpose of the building and the nature of those inside. I was still seething with rekindled rage when the Keeper shut down the magnetic current across the entire transport platform. The MAGvee crashed to the metal floor and stuck there like a limpet, motionless – its impetus transferred to the vulnerable molluscs inside. I hit the front seat and immediately had the wind knocked out of me, but poor papa broke his nose on the windscreen. Despite being subject to the same laws of gravity, Noa managed to spread herself across the cab, shielding Josey from serious harm. We sat for a moment in the silence that descends after such events, blood streaming from papa’s broken face. I tried to unscramble my thoughts, even as I led Josey from the useless MAGvee. Outside, Noa was already on her feet.

This is the Keeper’s doing. He toys with us.

She helped papa to sit at the side of the MAGvee, and I searched my pack for the MedKit.

“If the bastard knows where we are, why doesn’t he just come and get us?” I asked, taking out some turmeric paste.

He sees such childish cruelty as sport, Alma Lachanilta. And thank the Founder that he does, for truthfully, if he comes against us in person before we reach the gate, I do not know how it will end. He is stronger than I, and his mind is dark to me.

Before I had a chance to open the turmeric, Josey wandered over to where papa and I were sitting and stroked his face lightly with her finger, humming all the while. There was a curious displacement of the air around her and papa suddenly screamed out in pain. But when he removed his hands from his nose, the wound had disappeared. Though she hadn’t so much as looked in my direction, my aches and pains also vanished at the same time. Amazingly, it was Noa she wanted to talk to. The Kasivara dropped to her knees as she approached.

Forgive me, my Lady!

“What’s wrong Jan?” Josey asked.

I am ashamed, she said. ***In this place I fear every shadow.***

Josey said nothing that papa and I could hear. But those green-flame eyes never moved from Noa’s face. When Noa finally stood, kissing Josey’s hand, she turned to us and I saw the spark of zealotry blazing anew in her face.

We must go now, she said, her tattoos fading from view as she moved.

Still in awe, papa got to his feet and bowed to the Singer. I followed his example.

“Don’t be silly!” Josey said, rolling her eyes. “We still need to get back home!” And with that, she followed Noa along the platform. We joined other folk stranded by the shut down, and a group of about twenty of us walked until we reached a delivery bay set back from the main road. It smelled strongly of fish and seemed to serve a large indoor market whose premises abutted the platform. Noa led us inside and we allowed ourselves to be carried along a narrow corridor in the press of people.

Be on your guard, Noa said, as we entered an open hall where workers were busy packing huge carp into iceboxes. None of them raised their eyes or showed the slightest interest in our passing. ***The Comaj know we have to exit the platform somewhere. They will be waiting.***

We descended a broad staircase to street level and Noa and papa waited for us by the door. I couldn’t sense any immediate danger outside, but there were so many people thronging

the street beyond that it was impossible to be certain if we were being followed or not.

“I’ll cross the street first to give you some cover,” Yanic said. “Then come out with Lady Josephine. Walk straight towards me and keep going... Noa will be right behind you.”

Papa sauntered across the narrow road as if he hadn’t a care in the world, his right hand wound tight around the sound cannon in his jacket pocket. He paused on the corner at the side of a small workshop and Josey and I crossed over towards him, arm in arm. We walked past and carried on down the street. As before, no one seemed to register our presence and we strolled on for nearly three quarters of an hour, with Noa and papa giving instructions in psi, and Josey and I striding out as if we knew where we were going. I realised that we were making for the North Gate, but it didn’t take an escapologist to realise that that way out of the city would surely be under surveillance. I saw that Josey was getting tired and told Noa as much.

We stopped for refreshment, the only customers at a small booth serving sweet black coffee. Josey and I sat outside in the late afternoon sun waiting for the other two to catch up. Here the street was much quieter, perhaps because the smell of the tannery was already perfuming the air. Josey wrinkled her nose.

“City needs a wash,” she said.

“I think you’re right, my Lady.”

“Soap and water!”

“It would be a start ...” I said, smiling.

I had just raised the coffee to my lips when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and a narrow voice drilled into my ear.

You’re under arrest!

Desperately, I scanned the street: a dog, a few pedestrians on their way home. No sign of Noa or papa.

“There must be some mistake,” I said, stalling. “My grandmother and I live in Northgate and we’re on our way home.”

The thin-voiced man laughed.

Very good – but I’m afraid the Keeper knows all about you and your grandmother. He sent me over to collect you. Our company has orders to bring you back to the tower unharmed and whole, but your grandmother and your friends can be delivered in pieces ... it’s up to you.

I put my cup on the table and was about to try and talk my way out of the situation when papa screamed from the roof above.

“DOWN!”

I launched myself at Josey, upending the flimsy furniture in the process, and we both ended up on the floor as the booth shook. Noa shattered the rear door and came through the back of the place like a whirlwind. My would-be captor wheeled round with tendrils of battle chant on the tip of his tongue, but Noa was too quick. She was already airborne, and her heel smashed into the bridge of his nose, splintering the bone straight back into his brain and killing him instantly. A second later and papa was beside us, picking Josey and I up from the dirt.

Is everybody ok?

“Where are the rest of them?” I demanded.

“Delayed indefinitely!” said papa.

Dead, said Noa. *We have thirty minutes to get as far away from here as we can.*

By sunset, we were surrounded and the Comaj were insisting in loud, debilitating psi that we give ourselves up. The commander gave his word (much to papa’s amusement) that we would be well treated. We had broken into the military apartment complex in the hope that a shortcut through the ground-floor lobby would bring us out on the other side of the building, and thus we would be one step nearer to the North Gate. But the grey uniforms were already everywhere, and it seemed as if it would only be a matter of moments before the militia broke through the temporary ward papa had set on the main door. Noa suggested we hid on the roof while she created a diversion. Not for the first time in our flight through the streets, however, Josey surprised us all by disagreeing.

“You shouldn’t leave us now,” she said, taking Noa’s hand. “We’re meeting a friend.”

Noa bowed her head and sat down cross-legged on the concrete, without another word. Yet even as the militia were cutting through the outside lock, snapping papa’s hasty enchantments, an apartment door behind us opened and a woman’s voice, deep and sonorous, called out. We turned to face the new challenge with our weapons drawn.

I recognised our unlikely saviour immediately. It was the Meshaki officer from the guard patrol that had arrested Josey and I the day before. A College-issue cannon hung from a lanyard around her shoulders, but she stood with her palms open and her hands facing us.

“I’m a friend of the Wolf. If you want to live, bring your companions and come inside!”

Papa looked over at me and I shrugged my shoulders – what choice did we have? We followed her shaven head back into the apartment, and once inside, she got to work. Shutting the door behind her, I felt a familiar cadence as she cast a warding spell stronger than the fabric of the apartment itself into place around the threshold.

“Is that Vanhin’s craft?” I asked.

She ignored me, setting down her cannon on the kitchen table and striding into the living room to roll back an expensive woollen rug from the polished concrete floor. She leaned the rug against the wall and sang a complex chant sequence that seemed to transform the concrete at our feet into a viscous grey slush.

“Trust me now!” she said. “You must enter the safe room to avoid the mage’s eye and the only way in is through this door,” she pointed at the pool.

Before any of us knew what was happening, Josey had plunged straight through. I dived after her and once beyond the distortion field (so strong it could have shielded an army of chanting adepts), we found ourselves in a dimly lit basement. Papa and Noa followed. Finally, after a tense fifteen-minutes, our Meshaki friend entered and sat down at the workbench in the centre of the room.

“It’s done!” she said. “They think you found a way out the other side of the building and are still making for the North Gate. They’ve blocked off the whole area and there’s a dirigible in the air above us.”

Calmly, she took the cannon from her shoulder and proceeded to dismantle it piece-by-piece, cleaning it systematically with an oiled rag. She caught Josey’s eye as she worked.

“You look better than you did the last time I saw you, my Lady,” she said.

“So do you,” Josey replied.

Daddy's home.

No knick-knacks and gewgaws from foreign parts for you Josephine K. He dropped his kitbag off at teatime and vanished down Meanwood. Straight into The Beckett's Arms. Now he's found his way home across the Ridge, blathered, and he's in our living room, shouting like one of the aos sí.

"Madge!"

Top of his voice, but Don next door won't say anything, not after last time. And Mrs O'Keefe's stone deaf. The rest of the Irish in the Burchetts couldn't care less; the men are almost as bad as he is.

"Missä Madge on?"

The chimney rings with his bawling.

I woke the moment before I heard the door.

I recognised his boots on the cobbles, his heavy hands fumbling with the Yale and his gravel-pit voice. For what it's worth, even with an ocean of dark and two bottles of Smirnoff inside him, he's still my father and I love him. But I also know the script for these midnight scenes and it never ends well.

"Bloody Madge! Where are you?"

I don't know where she is, but I'm already at the bottom of the stairs, scared shitless.

And I'm shivering cold. Should have put slippers on, but you never think of these things. If he starts breaking stuff, I'll go and wake our Declan. Lukas and Pat are already up, but they'll stay where they are with the latch on the door if they've got any sense, it's safer that way.

"Vittu tätä paskaa! Vaimo!"

This last is bellowed like a berserker and accompanied by the sound of breaking glass as his hobnails collide with the fragile boundaries of reality in Leeds 6.

Tommi's not a sweet man in the drink.

Madge says she fell in love with him because he looked like a Jesuit when they first met at The

Merchant Seamen's Benefit Hall in Hull. To be fair to him, he's done his best to correct that misapprehension ever since, for the greater glory of god. Behind her back, the neighbours talk about the fact he's hardly ever around, and that's true. Yet he always sends money. And I've had postcards from Argentina, New Zealand and Singapore. And they don't know he has the strangest sense of humour, that he carves magical animals and plays football with the boys, that he makes heavenly kalakukko, and that he cries when I sing to him. The drink got its claws into Tommi early and it won't let go, no matter how hard we pull.

Madge says you can get used to anything. And when we see the canvas kitbag near the door, we already know what to expect. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but it's always on the cards. I don't understand how she copes, or what she tells Father Dunn down at St Anne's, but I can't look away anymore. No more easy absolution, isä. The Tommi that wakes tomorrow lunchtime and wants to make amends has got to understand: the puking, the shouting, the pissing in the doorway, and the fists ... it's all on tab. One day he's going to have to settle with everybody. Down here as well as up there.

"Will you not calm down, Tommi? Why don't you have something to eat?"

Madge is there now and I'm away upstairs to get our Declan.

"There's casserole on the stove," she says.

Mid climb, I hear a grunt as his fists connect and I run back to the living room. She's face-down on the settee as I enter, and there's blood on the cushions.

"What have you done you drunken bastard?" I shriek at him.

I kick out, almost breaking a toe. He reverses slowly, turning like a brewery dray in a cul-de-sac. Slate-grey eyes lock with mine and suddenly we're both sliding across the room as if the floor's tilted.

"Declan!" I scream.

Into the kitchen with you, Josey!

I pull the door shut and his right fist follows close behind, smashing straight through both plywood panels and slicing his knuckle. I watch with morbid fascination as he tries to extract his hand,

splinters and all, blood obscuring the last two letters of the word 'Järjestys' tattooed across his fist.

"Leave the girl alone!" mum slurs from the living room, sounding as if her jaw's been wired.

I hear him cursing, like a wasp in a bottle.

"Serves you right! Tyhmä paska!" I call out, pouring oil on the fire. Not a moment too soon, I persuade my legs to join in a desperate bid for the coal cellar at the other end of the kitchen. I wrench the key from outside and manage to enter and lock the door after me, before falling headlong down the steps into the darkness. And there I am, in a heap at the bottom; that's me crouched among the coal with my fingers in my ears, singing a prayer to St Michael ...

Daddy's home.

"Josey? Are you in there?"

I can't place the voice, which is vexing because I used to be good at that sort of thing.

"No I'm not!" I call back.

Minutes later, the door opens and a wash of daylight from the ground floor corridor chases the shadows away.

"It's Eileen. Mind if I come in?"

A woman with her hair cut too short enters, smiling. She looks like she could be in the army, but I've never seen her before and my face settles into a scowl. It's the face I save for strangers.

"Thought I'd lost you there for a moment," she says.

I tell her that I wasn't hiding from her, and for some reason I feel angry. She's probably the one that locked me in here in the first place! She squats down with her mystery face close to mine and my hands start to itch. I know it's not a thing you're supposed to do; I know it's wrong, but I can't stop myself.

There's a sharp 'twock' as I slap her cheek.

The name and address on a box stacked away to the left catches my eye, scattering my thoughts

like fish.

FELIPE LUZ & Sons Ltd. Fresh pineapples, Costa Rica.

I used to love pineapples ... had them delivered to my dressing room when I was singing. I turn round and the lady who looks after my room's there, right next to me. She's called Eileen. Her son's in prison. She's had her hair cut

"Hello Eileen," I say. "What are you doing down here? Is everything okay? Have they locked you up as well?"

She smiles and holds out a calloused hand.

"I'm fine love," she says.

She helps me up.

"They're serving tea in the day room; do you want to come? We can sit by the window."

I nod and we set off down the corridor together, arm in arm.

"What you fancy for dinner this evening?"

"Pineapple," I answer, matter-of-factly.

Midnight came and went with alarming asynchronicity, as if nobody could agree exactly where it should fall. Competing chimes from the older College towers mashed into one another, seeping only gradually into our hiding place, like news from distant lands. Papa and Noa, however, sat close in conference with our rescuer, who had introduced herself as Luz. They were discussing our escape and gave no sign of having heard the hour.

"There's no way out through any of the cardinal gates – all are watched," Luz offered. Papa took a swig of brandy from his flask and passed it round.

"What about secondary gates? There are three posterns, no?"

“Four postern gates, and a further two or three service portals,” Luz replied, “but all these will be under tight surveillance by now.”

Noa, cross-legged on the floor, leaned forward.

What about tunnels under the walls? she asked.

“There are many, but directly underneath the battlements there are also chants set up by the Founder herself that reach down to the root of the massif and block any intrusion upon the stone. This magic protects the College from attack and cannot be broken by any normal craft. The Keeper and the Songmistress have the words of power for such barriers ... you can be sure they are in place.”

I coughed into my hand to remind them of my existence but couldn't think of anything useful to say. In the end, I settled for sarcastic observation.

“We jumped down from the roof of the Keeper's chamber, so I guess we can jump up and over the walls as well,” I said.

Luz's eyes widened and she smiled as she glanced over at papa.

“Your daughter speaks her mind like a Meshaki colt – and yet perhaps she has a point. Maybe we don't need to *jump* the walls though ... maybe we can fly over them!”

“Neither Noa nor I have the power for such a spell. Even if we all pooled our talents, I don't think we could hope to get four people over a barrier of that size, through some of the best defensive enchantments in The Vale.”

“That's not what I meant my highland friend!” the Meshaki shot back. “I'm not talking about apparating or transferring, I'm talking about stealing an airship!”

There was a moment's quiet while the insanity of the suggestion sank in.

“An airship?” Papa rubbed his eyes with his palms, “Just like that?” He obviously thought Luz didn't know what she was talking about.

Let her speak, Yanic! Noa said.

Papa sat back, gesturing to Luz that she had the floor. She spoke on, eyes smouldering.

“Most of the armed dirigibles have been sent South with the troops to the highlands. There are three executive machines moored at Central Hall for government use, and a handful of smaller airships that rich city adepts use for recreation, but these will not carry the payload we need.”

“And so?” papa pushed

“There are two other dirigibles in College and they both belong to the Comaj. I’ve heard terrible things about the slave magic used to keep them in the air, but one is combing the streets near North Gate right now looking for you. The other is anchored at Comaj headquarters near the Founder’s Pool. That’s the one we steal.”

Noa’s eyes clicked open.

I’m still listening ...

Luz stood and began pacing around the basement.

“We can break into the main sewers from here and then take a direct path to the centre of the College. I’ve used the tunnels before to come and go unseen, so I know it’s possible to navigate down there. It’s thirteen miles back to the centre of the city – perhaps further than that underground – and it won’t be pleasant, but I think we can make it.”

“How do we get to the balloon without being killed?” papa asked. Luz sat down again and leaned towards us.

“Once we’re under central College, we’ll need to locate the pipe that serves the Comaj building. Then we crawl up through their sewage system and enter the premises wherever we can on the ground floor.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“I have two Comaj uniforms. I think that your father and I will change into them once inside and then we’ll walk straight up towards the dirigible platform with the three of you blindfolded and handcuffed as our prisoners.”

It sounded like the kind of fairy-tale escape plan that I might have had problems believing even if Aunty Val had read it to me as a bedtime story. And as for the bit about passing through the sewers, I was appalled we were even considering it.

“Does that mean we have to walk through other people’s sh-”

“That’s enough, Alma!” papa snapped. “What if we’re stopped while we’re still on the ground floor?” he asked. “Are you sure that the other balloon is still there? Do you have a Plan B?”

“There is no Plan B, Yanic Lachani,” she replied, the steel in her voice matching his. “We either get out from under the Keeper’s nose, or we don’t!”

Noa laid her hand on my father's arm as she stood.

Our thanks Luz. You're right. Matters come to a head and I have no plan that might see us alive on the other side of the city walls. She turned to papa. *Do you have something constructive that you would like to put forward, my friend?*

Papa sighed like a steam engine and shook his head.

"I don't seek to belittle your advice Luz, it's just that the stakes are very high. Do you know of the pearl hidden in our midst?"

Luz nodded her head slowly.

"I was the only agent that was told of the Singer's pilgrimage. For this reason, I kept my patrol away from the Midden Hill ... every day. Until we received a report that had to be investigated."

They looked across at Josey who was asleep, snoring with her head in my lap.

"Then you know all is lost if we are taken. It will not go well for any of us, least of all for Alma and the Lady."

"I offer no guarantees, but I say this: I will give my life for the Singer if it should be required."

Papa held out his hand to the Meshaki.

"That's good enough for me," he said.

The sewers stank.

But it was only marginally worse than the reek of the tannery above, so I breathed through my mouth and tried to think clean thoughts. I held Josey's hand as we stepped ankle-deep in sludge, following the fragile glimmer of Luz's werelight. The Meshaki led the group, with papa next – his cannon primed and ready. Noa brought up the rear. She had given me a hug before we set off and told me we had two things still going for us: the first was that the Keeper didn't know exactly where we were; the second was that he had assumed *I* was the source of the powerful magic that had rearranged his chamber – which meant that he didn't suspect who Josey

was. Having said that, as we trudged along underground, I wasn't sure whether Josey knew exactly who she was either. After her astounding interventions as we fled through the city, the Singer hadn't spoken a word since we entered Luz's safe room, despite my every effort to get her to talk. She seemed to have drifted off into another world.

Luz led the way along the floor of a smooth concrete tunnel. Effluent from much of the industry above came down these huge pipes and fed into a large canal. As far as I understood Luz's plan, we were heading for that stinking waterway and would then follow it for more than ten miles to a large network junction near Central Hall. I had all but given up thinking about the muck we were walking through, when I was shocked out of my daydream of Spring doughnuts in Lachan by a sudden squeal from the stinking murk to papa's left. He spun round, firing twice instinctively, and caught one of several creatures slinking by the tunnel walls. At first, I thought it was some sort of feral cat, but then another and another rose out of the sludge around us.

"Rats!" Luz called back. "The tunnels are full of them. Stand still and stay close together until they pass. Try not to shoot unless they attack."

"Sorry!" papa mumbled.

"I'll forgive you this time!" I said.

Papa turned and flashed a lame grin as we moved off. Half an hour later we joined the main sewer and we climbed down a service ladder that brought us out on a platform by the side of the canal. The roar of running water was all around now, and while the air was less stifling, the smell was every bit as bad.

On we marched through the underbelly of the city. For three long hours I don't remember anyone speaking a word. We took a short break for water, during which Josey retched into the sluggish flow and Luz helped me wipe her face with some clean cloth from her ni-pac. Other than that, my mind shut down until I became aware of Noa's voice behind me. It was a while before I realised the Kasivara was addressing me.

... there's no way through to the catacombs under Central Hall. All the drainage tunnels seem to skirt around the edge of the building. Noa gestured to the rock walls on our right. *Central Hall is above and below us on this side.*

"So sewers are no good if we ever need to break into the hall" I said.

That's right. Can you feel the demon-craft?

As I concentrated, I became aware of a power in the walls around me that I hadn't felt before on the College Massif. The strong natural resonance of the rock was still the base note, but grafted on top of it was another, darker frequency that was gradually changing the nature of the stone itself. The source of this dark craft wasn't aware of us yet, in the same way a Leviathan might be unaware of the minnows that feed in its shadow. But if disturbed, I had the feeling that the enemy was strong enough in that subterranean cavern to grind our escape party to powder.

"Over here!" Luz yelled. She had crossed a metal footbridge over the river of effluent and was climbing up and away from us. Finally, she hung from a service ladder that led to a walkway twenty feet above. The walkway curved off left and right, offering access to seven man-sized pipe outlets in the ancient brick walls, each served by an adjacent ladder enclosed in a rusting metal safety-cage.

"One of these has to lead to the Comaj building," she said. "All we need to do is choose the right one!"

Go on then, I thought.

"Didn't you say you knew the way?" papa asked.

Luz climbed back down the ladder with a face like thunder and we lingered, directionless, looking up at the seven gaping mouths. Fine droplets from the saturated air in the sewer settled on my face and hair, making me shudder with revulsion.

"Whatever we do, can we do it quickly?" I begged.

"I never said I knew my way to the door of the militia. I've brought you safely to the limits of my knowledge," Luz shrugged. "From here on, our only guides are common sense, luck, and craft," she inclined her head towards Josey as if to say: *it's her turn!*

Papa turned to the Singer.

"My Lady ... can you help us?"

Josey's eyes remained downcast and unfocused, as if she was still somewhere else, and given our present predicament, I couldn't blame her.

"Alma, try and explain our peril. She may awaken to your voice, no?"

I took Josey's hands in mine and closed my eyes, calling her true name. Luz spoke up from the ether somewhere to my left.

"Tell her we need to choose a fucking tunnel, or it'll be too late, and none of us will

escape the Keeper.”

I ignored her frustration and reached out to Josey. But after fifteen minutes of brain-frying concentration, sweat was running into my eyes and I was beginning to doubt my own sanity. Exhausted, I pulled away from the enigma of the Singer’s consciousness and opened my eyes.

My lady, we need you! I called out, fighting to keep the edge of panic from my voice.

We waited for guidance, but when nothing happened, I let Josey’s hands fall from my grasp and, after a moment’s consultation, Luz ran back up the access ladder and began checking the entrance to each tunnel.

There isn’t time to go down each one, Noa shouted after her.

I led Josey over, and we started up the ladder ourselves. Noa followed immediately behind the Singer, ghosting her every move, and when we all stood together on the narrow walkway that hugged the wall of the sewer, I looked up at the mouth of the nearest tunnel directly above us. The spout of effluent arched out over our heads, frothing and foaming its way down into the gelatinous watercourse below. I was about to suggest the fourth tunnel along for the simple reason that there the flow of sewage was much reduced, when Josey’s voice entered my head, as if from far away.

Becky’s like me, she plays by intuition ...

At that point, Luz had already been up and down three of the second stage ladders and reported back that there was nothing to choose between the tunnels.

She plays by intuition ...

I set off up the ladder to the fourth, and when I came level with the mouth of the pipe, I sniffed the air and was shocked to find that it smelled of pine.

Intuition ...

“This is the way!” I called down.

“How can you be sure?” papa shouted back.

I had no reasonable answer to the question, and so avoided giving one.

In the end, I’m certain it was the fact that we could get inside without getting soaked that won everybody over. If all the pipes were perilous, then it seemed masochistic to select one

where we needed to swim through muck merely to enter. Besides, no-one else seemed to notice the pine resin in the air, so I kept my own counsel.

The fourth pipe sloped gently upwards, and after squelching along it for a mile or so we arrived directly underneath a service chute that led up through the tunnel roof. There was a marker tile set into the concrete of the pipe by the side of the chute which had three College glyphs cut into it:

C M J

“Comaj!”

Luz’s teeth shone white in the gloom.

“I think this is where we leave the underworld,” she said, slapping me on the back. “Well done kid!”

We all linked arms and for a moment our private prayers were loud in the silence. Then, without another word, we began our ascent.

We climbed out of the sewers into a disused cellar deep in the bowels of the Comaj building. Papa and Luz changed into their grey uniforms and fixed loose blindfolds and hand-bindings on Noa, Josey and I. We chanted a rusted door open to gain access to the basement of the premises proper, and after piling into a maintenance riser to get to the ground floor, Luz led us up five consecutive flights of stairs, with papa bringing up the rear. Thankfully, our progress was uneventful. We arrived at the fifth-floor landing, accompanied only by the sound of our own footsteps, and stopped to catch breath. Luz passed by, checking that our hands at least offered the illusion of being convincingly tied. I turned around to Josey and whispered that I could eat a horse (which was true). I was sure she heard me, yet my comment didn’t seem to register. I’d tried several times to explain to her what was happening as we climbed the stairs, but so far had got nothing in return beyond a wan smile – though that was a relief to see in itself.

“The service stairs continue up on the other side of the building,” Luz said.

“Unfortunately, that means we have to cross the fifth floor. Stay close to me and remember; you’re supposed to be Comaj prisoners – eyes down, say nothing!”

We were almost through the eggshell walk to the other side of the building when a bell rang, and a bleary-eyed duty officer stepped out of a riser set in the wall to our left. Surprised, she looked up and asked Luz where we were going.

“Just in from Westgate, ma’am. Taking these three upstairs for questioning,” Luz explained, “then going for a hot coffee!” She smiled at the woman.

“Floor seven?”

“That’s right,” Luz continued.

“Might need some heating on in the holding cells up there – if you don’t want them to freeze to death. Why don’t you take the riser up?” the duty officer asked.

Luz pulled a face.

“They make me feel sick,” she said. “Besides, it’ll do them good to walk.”

“Your legs, not mine,” the woman shrugged. “Did you hand in the paperwork downstairs as you came in?”

“I did!”

The duty officer waved us on, sat down at her recessed desk just next to the riser and began sorting through a wad of papers.

“Thanks!” Luz called back, and we marched off through doors at the other end of the floor that led out to a landing. Stone steps spiralled up above us for three or more floors.

“They’ll keep the balloon at the top of the building,” I murmured, almost to myself, “won’t they?”

After tackling three interminable flights of stairs, we reached the final landing. It ran straight into heavy double doors that led out onto the dark roof beyond. Luz pulled the ropes from our hands while Papa chanted a werelight into his palm to read a laminated sign on the wall to our left:

ATTENTION: No general access to sky jetty

The doors were locked with spellcraft wound around them like razor wire, and papa captured my thoughts when he spoke.

“Do you think they’re alarmed?”

Noa shifted her weight onto the balls of her feet and without warning exploded into a stupendous leaping kick that smashed a hole in the door where the lock had been. The force of the blow propelled the lock unit, door handle and all, straight out into the night. Immediately, the strange buzz of warding spells was silenced. It seemed that Noa had shredded the wards and absorbed their power without incurring any apparent harm.

Doors aren’t alarmed, she said, smiling at papa. *I’ll keep watch here, my friends. You must find the airship.*

It was cold out on the roof.

Far away, in the direction of Eastgate, the horizon was beginning to brighten, but the sky above us was still dark, full of stars and breathtakingly beautiful. I stood for a moment allowing the fresh air to wash the reek of our subterranean wanderings from my lungs.

The ‘CM2’ was moored to a sky jetty on the west-facing side of the building, her rubber fenders preventing the frame from grinding into the concrete as she rocked in the breeze. Bright yellow and 35-feet long, the dirigible had a fat gondola for a belly and a broad curving back. High-tensile wires criss-crossed her sides, and from that aspect she looked like the mutant progeny of a grasshopper and a giant sunflower seed, with vertical and anhedral fins protruding from her exoskeleton to stabilise her passage through the air. The entire rigid frame was made of light tubing that enclosed hundreds of bladder-like gas sacs filled with an eldritch substance many times lighter than air that kept the craft aloft. Two large directional motors were fitted on the frame, one on the port side and the other to starboard, but how these worked I simply couldn’t fathom. The craft waited for us, bobbing gently by the jetty, like a pleasure boat on Lake Telyn.

“How does it work?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” papa replied.

“We’re just about to find out!” Luz said as she tugged the entry hatch open and stepped

onboard.

Noa's voice, flat and unemotional, came from the landing.

Men approach. If we're to leave unhindered, we must leave now!

How many? Papa asked.

Nine or ten, accompanied by a mage, strong in craft. I think they come for the dirigible.

There was barely room for a pilot and a navigator in the cockpit at the front of the gondola. Papa sat down immediately, eyes devouring the controls, trying to grasp in an instant how to fly the contraption. Directional joysticks, one on either side of the pilot's chair, were linked to the motors on the outside of the dirigible, while pedals in the footwell looked as if they controlled speed.

"How do we start the bloody thing?"

I walked down the craft looking for buttons to press. Away from the cockpit, the gondola was more spacious, with room for ten passengers, five seated comfortably in a row each side of a central aisle.

They are here! Noa said, matter-of-factly. ***Are you ready?***

No power! Papa shouted back.

Luz helped Josey to her seat.

"I heard that they use slaves to power these craft," she said. "There must be an access hatch to the hold ..."

I moved to the rear again, and there on the floor at the very back I saw the hatch cover, fastened with four heavy duty key-locked clips. Luz came along and wrenched the key from a holder on the wall, and we undid the cover. Even after our earlier experience in the sewers, the stench of unwashed humanity that rose up from the dark space at the bottom of the gondola was appalling. I gagged as Luz conjured a werelight and we peered down into the hellish blackness together. Eight boys my own age, eyes huge in the sudden light, were shackled at benches that ran the length of the dirigible. Thin wires snaked from power-converting equipment attached directly to their temples, at their necks and over their hearts, to a main control panel under the cockpit; and each boy had an intravenous attachment that fed directly into his arm.

The grim depravity of harnessing children to a machine, like beasts of burden, rendered me speechless; I sat with Luz, unable to take my eyes from the drooling faces below.

“By the gods!” Luz spat. “Poor souls! Their minds are gone.”

“Who could do such a thing?”

“You’d be surprised, Alma Lachanilta” Luz whispered.

It’s too late, Noa’s voice broke through our stupor. *I will deal with the Comaj*, she said calmly. *Make sure you get the Singer over the walls. The Wolf will be able to sense her as soon as she’s beyond the Keeper’s net.*

Shocked into action, Luz jumped up and snatched her cannon from the seat nearest the hatch. “We can’t let her face them alone,” she cried, leaping out onto the jetty. “Look out for the Lady!”

At that moment I felt a bottomless surge of chant behind me in the gondola and in a heartbeat Josey had apparated down among the children in the hold. She took the hands of the two boys nearest her and sat on the edge of their bench, green eyes blazing. The iron shackles melted away, and the entire space began to fill with the thrum of the Singer’s power. A warm nimbus of light grew around Josey and spread to each child in turn, becoming brighter and brighter, until it was too painful to look at.

“That’s it,” papa crowed, his voice cracking into falsetto. “I don’t know what you’ve done but the motors are working!”

A cannon blast echoed across the roof and Luz flew backwards from the landing onto the sky jetty, chased by two militia men in grey body armour. For an instant their attention was caught by the humming engines and the fey light that blazed inside the gondola. That moment was all it took for Luz to despatch them both. Then, without preamble, Noa leapt through the door, dodging goutts of fire directed at her by a young mage, who vaporised the entrance as she passed through it.

Fly, you fools! Noa shouted over her shoulder.

Luz fired her cannon until the cartridge was spent, then she ripped the mooring cable from its cleat on the jetty and dived into the dirigible, just as papa gunned the idling motor.

Meanwhile, Noa and her opponent danced back and forth across the roof. As we pulled away, there was a flash and the mage detonated battle chant that pinned the Kasivara to the

ground. I turned away, unable to watch, but when I looked again, Noa had regained her feet. She began to spin, faster and faster, until her features were a blur and the mage's enchantments were unable to find purchase. Abruptly, from inside the maelstrom Noa struck a single bone-crunching blow. A kick passed straight through the magician's shields and with an audible crack, snapped the woman's neck, almost tearing her head from her shoulders. She crumpled to the ground and Noa looked up at the dirigible. We were now more than two rope lengths away from the jetty, but I ran to the hatch and yanked it open, nonetheless.

"You can still make it Noa!" I shouted.

The Kasivara turned away, heading back towards the building, and my heart sank. Yet the next instant, she whipped round and began a wild run for the edge of the roof. The blood hammered in my ears and the world around me faded as she launched herself from the jetty into thin air. I shut everything else out, willing her to cover the absurd distance to the airship. It was only when I felt the impact of Noa's body on the outside of the balloon that I dared to raise my head and breathe normally once more. Our luck had returned, and I found that I couldn't see for the tears that filled my eyes. Noa hauled herself in through the open door and caught me up in her arms.

Thank you, little sister, she said.

Luz and I sank into our gondola seats, while Noa tried to drop down into the hold to check on Josey, shielding her eyes from the starburst glare. It proved impossible ... like feeding yourself into the centre of a blast furnace. In the sky around the dirigible, warding spells were bursting and popping, and sirens blared below us in the quiet suburb of Westgate, yet it seemed nothing could hinder our passage.

Noa gave up trying to reach the Singer, and calling a blessing down into the hold, she pushed her way forward to the cockpit instead.

"What kept you?" papa asked, as she sat down beside him.

They didn't want to say goodbye! she said, pulling her legs up underneath her and staring out of the window.

Chapter 12 – Flight

We had cleared the Western edge of the massif and were already spiralling down towards the plain far below when three of the child-faced demonspawn that had waylaid Josey, Papa and I in the highlands appeared out of nowhere and set about mauling the dirigible.

Protect yourselves! Noa shouted.

Though jolted from sleep, I instinctively shielded my mind from the powerful psychic distortion around the creatures. Razor-sharp talons slashed straight through the polished yellow veneer of the gondola's exterior, gouging deep grooves in the wooden frame beneath and inviting the biting cold of early morning inside. The craft was buffeted and smashed this way and that, as the demons made pass after pass around our heads. And as if the terror of being torn from the skies wasn't enough, the reek of decay from their leathery wings made me consider jumping out of the cabin of my own accord. I was looking up at the ceiling of the gondola when I heard a loud detonation. This was followed by another ... and then several smaller explosions in rapid succession. We began to lose altitude.

"They're bursting the gas sacs!" papa said. "They've no mind for this themselves ... somebody must be guiding them."

Yanic!

There was an ear-splitting blast as papa discharged a cannon at point-blank range at a demon trying to enter the cockpit. The reinforced glass shattered with the impact and the creature fell from the sky with half its cherubic face blown away.

Noa crawled along the stricken gondola towards us with the wind howling around her, threatening to tear the flimsy structure inside out. She wore no disguise now and her tattooed flesh seemed to writhe in the presence of the enemy. I was about to ask her what I could do to help, when she launched her body like a torpedo down the fuselage. I sheared away a split-second before she hit me and heard a crunching sound as she barrelled into the Meshaki, breaking the woman's arm like a matchstick. Luz dropped the cannon she'd been about to unload into my back and sank to her knees. It was obvious that the poisonous voices of the demonspawn had taken her, momentarily. Yet now pain brought a measure of clarity.

"Alma – forgive me!" she called.

Dazed by the speed of events, I stood transfixed.

Shield her! Noa growled as she kicked the tattered remains of the entrance hatch into oblivion. Then, with her braided hair snapping around her like snakes in the wind, she exited and began to climb up the outside of the battered dirigible.

All the while, the power output from the hold remained steady. It was impossible to know whether Josey was even aware of the problems we were facing. Papa tried to offset the loss of lift from the ruptured gas sacs by using the motors, but the whole craft was so unstable that it felt as if we were in free fall. I widened my shield to include Luz and was about to call on Josey to give up her voluntary isolation in the hold, when the Meshaki screamed out Noa's name.

I turned in time to see Noa hurtle past the gondola window towards the ground, locked in combat with one of the creatures.

Enraged, I grabbed Luz's cannon from the floor and crawled over to the open hatch. One demon remained, the muscles of its feathered haunches bunching as it tore at the starboard engine. It looked up at me and smiled, cherubic face gleaming in the sun.

...throw yourself out little girl...

...your life is meaningless. You know you'll not be missed...

...even now your father hopes that I will open your belly and spread your innards out over the trees below...

I leaned out and fired the weapon until the dry clicks told me it would fire no more. As the creature fell away, it took most of the engine unit with it and the dirigible began to spin uncontrollably.

Lady Josephine! My terrified psi cut through the gale. But though white light still shone from the hold like a beacon, the Singer made no reply.

"Strap yourself in!" papa cried. "I'm going to try a spell to absorb some of the impact when we hit the ground."

I fastened Luz's belt, then climbed into my seat and secured my own.

It's done.

Papa chanted the same shielding spell three times, beads of sweat rolling from his forehead as he manipulated the frequencies required. When he had all three spells prepared, he called on me to help him stitch them together. Following papa's guide, I dragged the shield mass

with my mind until it was under the gondola, and then I fed it with everything I had.

We hit the ground hard, papa still wrestling at the last to keep the nose of the gondola from ploughing straight into the hillside and killing us all. I felt immense pressure on the shield, and then the world shifted sideways as the entire dirigible bounced into the air again before performing a crazy cartwheel among the pine and scrub. The gondola broke into three, and the remaining gas sacs in the super-structure exploded. When I came around, I found myself hanging upside down, suspended by my seatbelt, in the gondola's shattered mid-section. We'd come to rest against a flowering gorse bush, and I remember thinking that the smell was as near to heaven as I was likely to get. Luz was still unconscious, and my heart seemed to have paused to consider its position. Indeed, all The Vale seemed to be holding its breath. But as life took hold once more, the image of Noa falling through the sky like an avenging angel, popped unsolicited into my head, alongside a memory of my father battling to control the ruined airship. Thinking I had lost all those dear to me, I threw up on the sandy ground beneath me and must have fainted, because the next time I awoke I was overjoyed to find myself looking straight into Josey's concerned face.

"What are you doing up there?" she said as if I'd gone missing during some childish prank. "We need to find some shelter, Becks. Can't you see there's a storm coming?"

I closed my eyes, unable to deal with the Singer's abstraction.

"My Lady!" I cried. "I thought I'd lost you! What happened in the hold?"

"Gone," she replied sadly, "all gone."

I was about to unleash a stream of questions, when I felt a pair of strong arms undo my seatbelt. They caught me around the waist and lowered me to the ground.

The lady and I have located everybody, a voice said, gently. ***Come! There's little time and much to do.***

Of course it was Noa. I smiled wanly at the Kasivara

"How did you escape?" I asked, shaky legs folding underneath me.

She took hold of my arm.

I fought the demonspawn in the air until he was gravely wounded, and then I forced him to land, she said, matter-of-factly.

My face must have shown amazement at this disclosure, for Noa smiled and added ...*it was no great feat – the demon was smaller than his brothers!*

An hour later, the five of us had been reunited and were limping down the hillside together. Papa said that the shield had saved us, and that I should be proud; although the intolerable pressure that the crash-landing had placed on the structure of the spell had been enough to relieve us all of our senses even before the gondola had disintegrated. Papa had been shunted straight through the shattered cockpit window and had flown headfirst into a stand of wild gooseberry nearby. Remarkably, apart from bruises and a face full of minor lacerations, he was unharmed. Luz had hit her head on the window in the tumult. And though her broken arm had been expertly splinted by Noa, it meant that she couldn't carry much of anything. As for the Singer, none of us knew exactly what had happened in the hold or how she had escaped harm as we crashed, for she would not answer our questions. However, something about the terrible dependence of the boys had affected her deeply and caused her true power to blaze unshuttered. Now, despite my hints about bruises and broken bones, that same impossible magic was cloaked once more, and Josey was content to limp along with the rest of us.

Together with our ni-pacs, we salvaged what we could from the wreckage. I took a College-issue hand cannon and a serviceable lock-knife to replace my birthday present, confiscated by Paulus at the South Gate. Luz insisted that we also gather all the spare ammunition we could find. After filling our water bottles from the stream just below the crash site, we set off. Instead of turning due south towards the Alamar, we struck out southwest, through the isolated western foothills of the massif, and down towards the wasteland where the eaves of the great forest had once lapped against the College Mount like a vast green sea. Everyone agreed that avoiding other people was probably a good plan for the immediate future.

We walked late into the afternoon, and the sky gradually clouded over above us. We had seen and heard nothing of the enemy since the demon attack, but I was so tired that I'd begun to hallucinate foes behind every tree. It was the eighteenth of Fourthmonth. Exactly two weeks and

two days earlier we had stood in the village square in Tivalhas while Vanhin preached rebellion. Now I was no longer sure if my family and my friends were alive or even if Lachan still existed. When the rain finally began to slate down, I welcomed it as it seemed to underline my own darkness and doubt. Yet my gloomy preoccupation was soon challenged by my companions.

Look to the Singer!

Josey had drifted away from my side and was walking among tall grass and sage away to our left, towards a steep limestone bluff. I muttered to myself as I drew alongside, pulling Josey's padded coat out of my pack.

"My Lady ... your coat!"

"Why?"

"It's raining!"

"But we'll be inside soon ..."

Shaking my head, I expelled air noisily through gritted teeth and almost stalked off, leaving her to freeze. So awry were my feelings, that I hardly noticed a few moments later when she stopped fifty paces behind me among the oaks at the foot of the bluff. Suddenly, she was nowhere to be seen. Panicking, I yelled for papa and returned to the trees. It was only as I drew right up to the limestone that I saw the entrance to a cave and found the Ninth Singer of The Vale sat alone on a stone bench in the dry gloom.

"Please, Lady Josephine ... tell me where you're going next time!" I murmured, throwing my pack on the sand at her feet. I slumped on top of it face down with my head near her leg, like a wounded animal. The others arrived and were overjoyed that we had found shelter.

"Thank God!" said Luz, staggering inside, ashen-faced and faint with pain.

"Did you check it out, Alma?" papa asked. "I don't want anyone or anything sneaking up on us while we're asleep."

I shook my head sullenly. Papa chanted a werelight and walked to the rear of the cave. It was shallow and dry all the way back and showed no signs of recent use.

A shepherd's place, Noa said, pointing at the bundles of kindling stacked near the entrance. *What a find! Thank you, my Lady.*

Luz limped over and sat down near me, trying to make herself comfortable against her

pack.

“We should set a ward across the doorway,” she said.

“You’re right, papa agreed. “If we all help, it’ll take less time.”

I groaned and levered my eyes open, helping Luz to sit propped up with her back against mine. Between the four of us, we fashioned a door ward that was strong enough to withstand a concerted attack from outside. As we finished chanting, Josey’s voice rang out low and distinct, and the sound was taken up by the limestone vaulting around us. Suddenly the space was lit by a warm green light that seemed to emanate from the Singer herself. Luz’s mouth opened in a grimace as the light washed over her, and I heard the cracking and popping of her bones as they mended and reset themselves in front of us. Cuts and bruises disappeared, and my own mood lightened sufficiently that while I still craved sleep, at least now I didn’t feel like killing someone to get it. By the time Josey’s chant faded, Luz was curled up on the sand like a cat, snoring.

Papa dragged brushwood and leaves to disguise the entrance, and when he’d finished, he sang a small cooking fire to life in the centre of the cave. Josey had also fallen asleep where she sat, so I covered her with a blanket and gave her a kiss before joining papa on the floor by the fire. Noa smiled at the two of us staring into the flames.

I’ll take the first watch, she said. It will be your turn just after midnight, Alma Lachanilta.

I looked up at her.

“We got out,” I said. “I didn’t think we would.”

She nodded.

Neither did I.

Papa set water to boil and threw a handful of sage leaves he’d gathered into the pot. The pungent smell filled the cave.

“Are you gonna tell her?” he asked, grinning at Noa. The Kasivara gestured that papa should be the one to speak and he placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Roi contacted us just before the demons attacked. We took back Lachan two days ago!”

I could scarcely believe my ears. What with Josey’s experiences at Miriam’s shrine and our existential problems over the last forty-eight hours, I hadn’t given any thought to the

rebellion. Now the news hit me like a thunderbolt.

“You mean we won?”

“No ... I mean we took back Lachan!” papa said. “The Songmistress is massing a great army by the banks of the Nedray just below Dormin. Vanhin killed the albino commander in the attack – he was Sivan’s only son. There will be no end to this now until we overthrow the College in the South or are utterly vanquished ourselves in the attempt.”

“What about Sami and Auntie Val?” I asked, almost fearful to hear the answer.

“They’re both alive!” papa said, and I turned and hugged him for all I was worth.

“Vanhin’s household are nursing them back to health ... with Jur supervising!”

Noa crouched beside us.

Vanhin also knows something of our troubles and there’s been a change of plan. He’s keen to escort us safely back to Tivalhas as soon as possible now the Keeper is interested in your whereabouts.

“So, what do we do?” I asked.

“We eat, we rest, we keep watch. And in the morning, we push on down to the base of the massif and enter the desolation of Amrah,” papa replied.

We need to avoid capture at all costs until Vanhin arrives, Noa continued. He set off north with a small force as soon as Lachan was secure. They’re apparating to Amrah and he’ll be looking out for us along the old pilgrim track through the forest.

“He’ll never get here in time,” I said. “It took us ten days to arrive at College Bounds!?”

If the wolf says he’ll be here, then I take him at his word. Unless, of course, you have reason to doubt him.

I bit my tongue, thinking of all that could go wrong.

“If we don’t get some sleep, the question of rescue won’t even arise,” papa said. “We’ll still be dreaming here in this cave!”

I sat an uneventful watch for three long hours in the middle of the night. Nothing moved in the dark and all *seemed* quiet outside – though with Luz snoring like a buzz saw nearby, the

Keeper could have landed a dirigible on our heads and we would have had no warning. I made a mental note to tease the Meshaki about it in the morning, and then when papa came to relieve me, I went back to sleep, wrapped in all the clothes I possessed to keep out the chill. When I awoke, the sun was just rising. Noa was already out scouting the terrain ahead of us, and Luz was checking our packs to make sure no one was carrying too much.

“How’s the arm?” I asked.

“Like new,” she said, flexing the limb in question, and shooting a thankful glance at Josey, who was pretending to be asleep as usual.

“That’s great,” I said, forgetting all about her noise pollution during the night.

“Your father told me about the victory in the highlands. May we all live to see better days!”

“Amen!” I replied.

Papa handed me some strips of dried meat and two cups of water and I shook Josey gently awake.

“My Lady!”

Her only response was to groan at me and pull her blanket firmly over her head.

“Go wake your dad,” she said.

We didn’t meet anyone as we moved on down through scrub and sage towards the base of the massif, and Luz and I were already discussing the merits of breakfast in the House of Wander when Josey alerted us.

“Someone’s coming!” she said, as we scrambled down a grassy bank under the cover of a thicket of hazel.

We threw ourselves down into the undergrowth. A moment later I felt Josey’s hand on my shoulder. She said nothing but pointed upwards. Sure enough, away on the edge of my hearing, I heard the drone of an approaching engine.

“It’s a bloody airship!” I hissed.

Noa gathered us all together. Hurriedly, we joined in with papa like practiced hands. He provided the foundation for a shielding spell and we filled the structure with chant. It was a similar gloss to the one we had used to deceive the Sentinel, but there wasn’t time for any great

subtlety here. This was simply the magical equivalent of draping a camouflage sheet over our heads. If the mage himself was on board and looking hard enough he would see through the subterfuge.

The dirigible passed high overhead. It circled us twice, crisscrossing the western feet of the massif, before moving away to the north.

“They’ll be back,” papa said, sighing.

“Maybe we should stay here,” I said.

“We’ll miss the Wolf!” Luz said, stating the obvious.

“I know,” I replied. “It’s just that ... I have a bad feeling about entering the wasteland again.”

At the very bottom of the massif, the trees began to thin out and we stopped to consider our position. Papa suggested we move only under cover of darkness, and that we carry a shield with us, feeding it with chant as we walk. All day we sat looking out at the mutilated stumps of Amrah, until, with the dusk, melancholy began to set in. Once again it was Josey who raised our spirits. She sang a strange song from her native land about an owl and a cat. Eventually she lost patience with my constant questions about the characters involved, but by that point we were all smiling.

As twilight became night, we readied ourselves to leave our hasty camp. Josey called me over and asked me to keep something safe for her, and as she held out her hand, I was astonished to see what looked like eight heavy white pearls resting on her palm. She nodded to herself, as if responding to a conversation taking place elsewhere.

These are sarida. Look after them, Becks she said, ***they’re precious.***

I tucked the stones into the inside of my jacket, trying to remember where I’d seen one before. Lost in thought, I helped Josey to her feet, and we followed the others out onto the blasted heath.

We found the old forest trail easily enough by moonlight and hurried along it in close single file for nearly four straight hours, keeping our shield fixed around us all the while. We stopped for water by a huge rhododendron, one of the few forest shrubs that had clung on and now flourished after the departure of the trees. Papa reached over and pulled the piece of hair I

was absently chewing from my mouth. I rolled my eyes at him and murmured that I was hungry.

“What can I do about it, sunshine?” he said, smiling. “I’m not a magician.”

The next thing I knew, there was a coruscating stab of light from directly above that illuminated the heath for miles around; and then came a rumble of battle chant so strong that it made my nose bleed and tore our shield to shreds, even as we tried to hold it in place. A blast of power that could have taken out an entire mountain village hit Noa and steamrolled her from our side in an instant, sending her flying into the darkness like chaff after threshing. I moved in front of Josey to protect her, but at the last moment I flung myself to the side as a hex tore through the air towards me. Turning as I fell, I saw that the Singer had taken the full force of the enchantment in my place and now she hung motionless, entombed alive in a diamond carapace. I screamed her name and pressed my face against the shell, butting its smooth surface with my forehead. But Josey was lost to the world, and it was beyond my skill or strength to reach her. When I looked up again, the air was full of dark blue spheres, like poisonous soap bubbles. And inside each one sat a grim-faced College adept.

The Keeper had caught up with us at last.

You finish recording and you’re shattered. Eight hours hard labour.

You shout goodbye to Bernie and Bernie’s PA says they’ve called you a taxi. But outside on the street in the rain, everything’s different. The plaza’s all wrong ... looks like the set of a Fritz Lang film. Nothing familiar. See ... this should be Bow Street. Then the tube’s down there and Covent Garden’s behind you!

Suddenly, a taxi driver appears ... waving. He flags you down.

“Cab for Dame Josey?”

“Thanks!”

"Where to?"

"Home please."

"Hampstead ... 28 Lower Terrace?"

"I...I'm not sure--"

"Through Highgate?"

"They don't like me coming in late."

"Wrong address is it?"

"No ... it's not that. I just feel like everything's buried at the moment. I need to get to Woodhouse – Leeds 6. I think it's quite close."

"Close to Hampstead?"

"They're one above the other ..."

"Now you've lost me, love! You're prepaid to Hampstead. If you wanna go somewhere else, you're gonna have to tell me where."

"I want to go home."

"So do I, love – believe me!"

"Let's go, then. If we set off north, we're bound to get there ..."

"Alright, lady. Woodhouse via Hampstead. You sit back and relax. I'll give the number here a call and then we're on our way."

"Tell them it's Josey!"

Birthday party.

At 28 Lower Terrace, Hampstead.

Sam plays Rückertlieder.

“Knight has enjoyed profound musical relationships with many composers over the course of her long career, yet her recent interest in Mahler has heralded a late-flowering of creativity that has seen her produce some of her best work. This disc – her only recording of the Rückert-Lieder to date – is an absolute revelation. In “Ich atmet’ einen linden Duft” she conjures the bitter-sweet ache of the poet’s words with utter conviction. “Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!” emerges as a world-weary sigh, rather than the strident demand often heard in other less nuanced performances, while “Liebst du um Schönheit” scales fiery emotional heights without once losing the singer’s trademark effortless control. Similarly, her desolate “Um Mitternacht” is miraculously understated. Accompanist Bryn Davies also deserves mention for his inspired playing here, which matches Knight, toe-for-toe, in its depth and directness.”

[Gramophone, April 1999]

The disc spins.

Tables turn.

And as your oiled voice slips through the speakers, filling the living room, you escape outside. You’ve already forgotten why they’re all here today.

Messy folk.

Noisy folk.

With their noisy stories.

Sam should send them home. There’s not one recognisable face among them.

Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder!
Meine Augen schlag' ich nieder,
Wie ertappt auf böser That;
Selber darf ich nicht getrauen,
Ihrem Wachsen zuzuschauen:
Deine Neugier ist Verrath.

You take several deep breaths, letting the pale moonlight shine right through you.

Sel - ber darf ich nicht ge - traue - en, Ich - renn Wach - sen
 Bienen, wenn sie Zellen bauen,
 Lassen auch nicht zu sich schauen,
 Schauen selber auch nicht zu.
 Wenn die reichen Honigwaben
 Sie zu Tag gefördert haben,
 Dann vor allen nasche du!

Your voice bleeds out into the garden through a gap in the French windows, merging with the sounds of North London until both lose their shape. You feel the colour drain from the familiar world around you and find yourself hoarse from screaming, staring at the spot where moments before there was a house and a husband. Instead, hard fear – pulling like an undertow – sharks towards you through the shallows.

Hell's murky, with manicured hands.

And they close around your throat in the darkness.

nicht in die Lie - der!

Der - ne Neu - gier ist Ver - rat, ist Ver - rat!

Chapter 13 – Fight

There was laughter nearby.

Not the mirthless cackle of a pantomime villain, but a full-throated, equitable humour that was even more unsettling in the circumstances. It perfumed the night air like an invitation, as a figure materialised in the empty sky above us. I recognised the mage from the College rooftops and felt the flame of hope I'd carried inside since the start of our pilgrimage sputter and fail.

Well, well! he said, as if debriefing the cast of a particularly controversial play he'd just witnessed. ***That was very entertaining. We really had no idea where you were last night.***

One of the blue spheres swooped down low, until it was almost close enough to touch.

Drop your weapons! the pilot shouted. ***If you stand down your chant and your cannons, you will be transported back to the College in comfort.***

Defeat and death.

I've faced both at the Singer's side and never flinched, but on that dark evening I was ready to surrender. *What's wrong with yielding when you know you can't win?* I told myself. *Enough running and hiding! And if we must die, why not go to meet our maker after a good meal? I'll bet the Lady agrees with me!*

It was then I locked eyes with papa and saw that he'd read my thoughts. He smiled at me. A beautiful, reassuring smile. The smile of someone who was at peace with the world. Ashamed of my weakness, I smiled back.

There would be no surrender.

Not now.

Not ever.

I swore at the sphere, just as papa leapt up into the air, his hands wreathed in flame. Catching the pilot unprepared, he struck the man once in the chest and the floating craft was his. Hiding behind the adamantine shell that had formed around Josey, Luz shot the deposed pilot dead before he hit the ground and then began firing at will. Releasing the safety catch on my own weapon, I knelt and took aim. There were nigh on thirty spheres overhead in protective

formation about the Keeper. Papa snaked madly in and out between these, striking here and dodging there, while his opponents seemed unable to respond effectively at such close quarters. All the time he angled inside, trying to reach the mage. I knew he couldn't hope to succeed, but the glory of the attempt made me love him even more. I stilled my mind and sent him my strength, such as it was. Yet even as it seemed Yanic might come near enough to strike a blow for us all, the Keeper vanished. He reappeared less than a rope's length away from Josey and I, chanting a dark spell that ignited the air between us. Papa saw the attack and veered down behind the Keeper, just in time to be momentarily blinded as my ring blazed like an evening star, absorbing the enchantment. Nevertheless, the force of the spell's discharge alone was still sufficient to flatten me into the dirt at the Keeper's feet. Sensing papa's approach, the wizard didn't bother to press home his advantage but turned instead, growing to the size of a behemoth. Facing papa, he snatched him from the air between his thumb and forefinger – like a mantis taking a fly. The sphere winked out of existence and the adepts closed around us as the Keeper nonchalantly tossed Yanic into the air. A cannon shot caught papa in the spine as he fell, then tendrils of chant from the assembled spheres wound about him like spider-silk until he was suspended above us.

Will you people never learn?

The mage seemed to be addressing me. I struggled to my feet, and I'm embarrassed to say that I wept and pleaded for papa's life like the child I was. Towering above us, the Keeper's bland face morphed into a mask of sympathy and he nodded sagely, even as he stabbed a giant finger into the side of my father's head, like a potter moulding clay. For a split second I shared papa's agony, then the wizard severed the connection between us. Shrinking back down to human proportion, the Keeper opened his hand like a flower and the force he released exploded in the soft tissue of papa's brain, making shrapnel of his skull and reducing the warm soul that had built my life to cold, dead flesh in the merest moment.

Screaming, I ran towards papa with my cannon blazing. The Keeper flickered and vanished from view and at the same moment, on the edge of my vision, I caught a blurred impression of what seemed to be a wrecking ball smashing into the ring of adepts over on my right-hand side. In a dancing frenzy, Noa reappeared in their midst. She was badly wounded, yet she skipped from one sphere to another as if on steppingstones, dealing death and destruction

wherever she went.

And suddenly there they all were.

The rescuers. Come too late.

Vanhin strode into the half-light, his unmistakable voice boiling the air. Adepts fell from the sky like rain and I saw Noa's brother, Roi, strike to left and right, and where his blows landed nothing moved again. Behind these two came fifteen or twenty rebel fighters, among them some familiar faces. Confronted with the prospect of a much more difficult encounter, with the odds balanced and the outcome uncertain, the Master Keeper abandoned my father's lifeless body and fled. Vanhin pursued him and the battle raged all the way back to the massif. But I was no longer interested in College or Highland. All I knew was that my father had been taken from me. I sat next to his corpse, closed my eyes, and let the darkness in.

By the time Vanhin gave up the chase, we had lost ten of the freefolk, including Yanic. And while we'd made the enemy pay as the patrol retreated up the mountain, the Keeper himself had regained the city. Vanhin returned and the rebels began to bury their fallen comrades. Through my tears I saw the huge frame of Kolle, the one-eyed skinner from Lachan, digging a grave nearby. But nobody dared to come near me, for my grief made the air around me toxic.

Inside her diamond prison, Josey seemed trapped in aspic. While others erected tents and tended the wounded, Vanhin worked at the Singer's side for nearly an hour to break the dark enchantment, his granite voice perturbing the air. Finally, with a sound louder than a cannon crack he broke open the spell-casing around her and Josey emerged like a dragon. As she set eyes on Vanhin, there was a moment when those watching thought she intended to strike the Wolf down. Instead, she looked about her, taking in the graves, the injuries and the sadness, and she paused as if unsure of her next step. It was Noa and Roi, reunited in the battle, who led Josey over to me.

"You can all fuck off!" I told them without raising my eyes. "Anybody touches my dad and I'll kill them!"

Thirty minutes earlier, Kolle had tried to prize my fingers away from papa's jacket so that he could bury him, and I'd made his ears bleed with my chant. He'd left me well enough alone after that. But Josey wasn't Kolle. She walked through the waves of poisonous psi as if they didn't exist and knelt down by my side. Noa and Roi followed her example. And then Vanhin came and knelt across from the Singer. Soon the rebels were kneeling where they stood. I looked up for the first time and saw to my amazement that the Wolf was crying. Noa too, still covered in blood and dirt, wept openly for Yanic. And all around us, the freefolk spoke their memories of papa and made me an offering of their sadness.

Josey didn't cry.

Nevertheless, her eyes shone like emeralds in the dark as she sat vigil by my father, and even through the armour-plating of my grief I felt anticipation building. Without looking at me, Josey lay one hand on Yanic's ruined face and placed the other on his chest. She began singing a Foundation song.

A deep magic.

A making.

A single tongue of white flame danced down Josey's arm, along her outstretched finger and onto papa's body. His flesh and his clothes embraced the fire and soon, a furnace raged about him and the others were forced to withdraw from the savage heat, singing the Founder's Prayer as they went. They left Josey and I together, impervious, at papa's side. Yet as we knelt there, I had the strangest impression that Josey and I weren't among the ruined stumps of Amrah at all, but instead we worshipped inside a barbarian shrine, surrounded by people in outlandish garb singing dirges, and in front of us a different body was burning. Josey sagged as if about to faint and I held on to her to steady her. She bent over the pyre and whispered a scrap of verse into the flames which I memorised as she spoke:

... still he burns,
whom I have loved

as ever man was loved

cracked hymns

accompany

his fall

and all

the tears

that course

only serve

to stain

the day

a deeper grey:

colour of ashes

on wet grass

Every word seemed to have been wrung from her heart and I felt her loss more keenly than my own. It was a pain born of shame and oblivion, and it seemed beyond hope. The vision faded and passed like smoke on the breeze, and we were by ourselves with papa once more.

Yet even as Yanic's body was consumed and the flames died down, a green shoot began to climb out from between his ribs, rising like a change of key. As we watched, the shoot sprouted leaves and became the trunk of an ash tree, the trunk grew branches, filling out and stretching upwards as years passed in a single exhalation, until a huge canopy opened overhead. But the Singer hadn't finished yet. The great ash stood on a mound where papa's body had lain moments earlier, and now Josey walked over and knelt there with her back to the trunk. Raising her hands, she called out the names of the eight previous Singers of The Vale, one by one, and as she came to the end of the list, she spoke her own name and dug her hands deep into the loam at

the foot of the ash. The earth shook as her power radiated out, and green-fused-flame stretched like a net from stump to stump; from root to twig. Everywhere we looked, new saplings began to rise. Josey stood and held out her hand to me. And I, who had washed and cleaned her body when she was unable to do it herself, who had sworn at her, laughed with her and learned magic next to her, now felt unworthy even to stand by her side.

Still she motioned.

I can't do this without you, Becky, she said.

So, I went to her. And as Josey sang, holding my hand in both of hers, it seemed that we two alone were rooted and fixed in the world ... and everything else orbited around us.

In the pre-dawn light, the canopy of Amrah stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see; for forty miles in every direction the trees had been restored. And when Josey and I had finished, the rebel company found themselves kneeling in a wooded glade, deep inside a living forest.

Chapter 14 – Scouring the Grove

When both your parents are dead before you've even started dating, your perspective on life changes fundamentally.

Scribbling these words at my usual table in College Close, I'm reminded how nature and experience combine to shape young minds as they meet the world. Acolytes clean my rooms and tend the rose gardens nearby, offering their services gladly just for the honour of being near the Lady Alma. Sweet children; loving and good-natured. And each of them has a kinder outlook on the world than the woman they serve. For I am neither sweet nor good-natured. And though I try always to walk near the light, sometimes I see only darkness ... even now, after all these years.

Papa was the yardstick by which I measured the world. Despite the excesses of Sivan's regime, he convinced me that The Vale was a land of hope ... and that was the problem: for without his loving care, his gentle hands and his ready smile, I wasn't sure I wanted to go on hoping. Backwards or forwards, all options seemed worthless. The idea of an empty cabin in Lachan with the cloying sympathy of an entire village draped around my shoulders offered me no incentive to rush back to my hometown – even though twenty-four hours earlier I would have hugged the knees of any mage willing to transport me there. Similarly, adventuring by the Singer's side with my father's ashes still feeding the worms had lost all its glamour. Papa's service had cost him his life and the notion that I might also be called upon to pay that price began to seem more like a family death-wish than a leap of good faith. Josey obviously had no need for an awkward teenager in her entourage, anyway, surrounded as she was by new believers; and the proof of her power stood all about us in the shape of the forest.

My solution was, of course, no solution at all; I intended to sit under papa's tree, leaking tears, until either I starved to death, or I figured out a way to kill the Keeper of the Keys. In fact, the sweet idea of revenge was the only thing that prevented me from taking a cannon and blowing my brains out those first few days. Mindless and pure, hatred was the flame that burned on inside me when all other fires had been extinguished.

We set up camp on the edge of the ash glade, and for a day-and-a-half, with the world poised on a knife-edge, everybody waited. We were untroubled by the College patrols that occasionally buzzed high overhead. For one thing, they flew above the cloud cover; and for another, Vanhin had set a glamour around us that made the camp invisible to enquiring eyes. And while the Keeper must have known that we hadn't left the forest, he didn't seem too keen to initiate another bruising encounter with the Wolf, just yet. At least not until his mistress returned.

I slept for twenty-four-hours-straight after my father's death. And when I finally awoke, I found I'd been moved inside a tent, wrapped up in two Lachani blankets, and laid out on a thick cotton mattress. I sat up, shrugged off the covers, and made my way outside, stumbling like a blind woman to the foot of papa's tree. I purposely ignored every attempt at conversation in transit so I could throw myself down on the grassy mound that marked his grave and feel truly sorry for myself ... adrift and lonely in a hostile world.

Towards lunchtime, the rich fragrance of stew became almost unbearable, and when Noa and Roi crossed the clearing towards me with three bowls and a hunk of fresh stove bread, the relief was tremendous. Without saying a word, they set my portion down on the grass and sat cross-legged beside me. In my pride I wanted to push them away for presuming to intrude on so perfect-a-sorrow, but the stew was singing a welcome in my lap, so I held my tongue. And they, great souls that they were, merely set to with their spoons in solidarity.

When I'd finished eating and the black mist around me had lifted a little, I gazed at the Kasivari. Incredibly, Noa's wounds had healed while I slept, and the flesh-and-bone of the desert warriors looked smooth as olive wood. They were both barefoot, as I'd first seen them in the snow of the Lower Abhash Valley, and it seemed that they were impervious to the vicissitudes of the world they shared with the rest of us. Yet, as I stared at the dragon tattoo that peered out from under Noa's tunic, winding around her neck, I could have sworn, once again, that I saw my own name, fluttering like a bird near the dragon's mouth.

"Why does my name appear on your skin?" I asked.

Because I worry about you and in doing so, your suffering becomes my own, Noa

replied.

I found this explanation astounding, and on any other day would have plied the Kasivara with questions until I understood fully how the craft burned in her, instead I snorted ... as if her words were absurd.

“You needn’t bother,” I said, “I’m fine!”

Roi raised an eyebrow and continued to clean his bowl, but Noa put her food down calmly on the grass at her feet and leaned forward.

I know you are, Alma Lachanilta, she said. But that doesn’t alter the truth of my words. We are friends, and if you have a burden that I can lighten ... you have only to name it.

A silent dialogue passed between sister and brother. Rising, they collected their bowls and headed back to the tents, leaving behind the sweetness of a psi blessing.

I dozed until the afternoon, then woke, cold as a corpse, to find Vanhin by my side. The old man’s silver hair was plaited, and his huge face was turned up toward the sky as if waiting for a sign.

“What do you want?” I asked, intentionally rude.

Nothing, he replied.

“In that case, if you don’t mind, I’d rather sit here alone.”

I have an offer to make.

Vanhin’s head angled towards me, and his slate-grey eyes found their range.

If you’ll help me return the Lady Josephine to Tivalhas and keep her safe there until we have forced the Songmistress back beyond the Nedray, I will accompany you north to hunt down your father’s killer, he said.

I shrugged my shoulders, pretending nonchalance.

Am I still responsible for the Lady? I asked. *She seems quite able to take care of herself now; her power grows, and her mind is clearer than it has ever been.*

It’s you, or no one, the old man replied. *You swore an oath in the hermitage, Alma ... your father and I were witnesses. We both know the Singer’s strength waxes and wanes. Now she lies alone in her tent, unconscious since she restored the forest. She remains closed to me, so I cannot help her by my craft. Our highland friends are, as usual, divided – some grow*

restless to be back in the South defending their homes; others now seek only to serve the Singer, having seen her power uncloaked. And while war and chaos rage all around, I have left you to the luxury of your sorrow ... until now.

I stood up, incensed.

I don't need anyone's help to go after the Keeper, I said. Nor do I need your permission to grieve!

Even as I said it, I knew the first part was a lie. Vanhin held me in the crucible of his gaze and tears followed as surely as if he'd taken out a stick and laid about his errant pupil. I thought the old man would leave me to ponder the error of my ways, but he scooped me up in his arms instead and embraced me.

"I promise you there will be a reckoning with the Master Keeper," he whispered in my ear, "the Wolf pays all such debts in full."

He set me down under papa's tree once more, drying my tears with an outsize finger.

See if you can help Lady Josephine, for I have a notion that she waits only for the sound of your voice!

... theres a smell on the air that reminds me of the stuff you put in washing machines with the clothes sickly sweet i mention it to the young man on the bench next to me and he smiles he has a nice smile and bright ginger hair but his hands are shaking i think maybe hes an alcoholic he takes out a packet of cigarettes and begins to search his pockets i check my pockets too just in case whatever hes lost turns up there

my son smokes i tell him as we search filthy habit

he nods and pulls a face

thats me mum he sighs

you

im johnny

of course you are i say

*folks mill around nearby talking in hushed voices as if were asleep and they dont want to wake us
some of them smile no teeth but they dont come over i wonder why everyones dressed for a concert ...
perhaps its the interval*

have i been singing

no mum johnny says

my throats raw

*a tall woman with dark hair comes to stand in front of the bench she shakes hands and talks
moving smoothly between people she reminds me of sam*

... thank you for the flowers

... thank you for coming

... dad would have understood

... send our love to uncle pat

... shes not feeling so well

... ill make sure she knows

do i know her i ask

thats our annie

*i flip the name around in my head like a jigsaw piece to see if it fits anywhere but im not myself
today nothing fits its the air its too sticky like the paper you put out for flies next thing i know im shaking
johnny looks worried he says something but my teeth are chattering so hard i cant hear*

s-samll be w-wondering where ive g-got to

its happening again johnny calls out

*two women appear by my side
 the tall one bends over and touches my forehead a fringe of silky black hair curtaining her face
 a-are y-you a n-n-nurse i ask
 something like that, she says
 shes so familiar i bet she knows sam i look over her shoulder at the raised beds beyond the path
 such beautiful flowers pinks deep reds yellows and creams all waving their names jostle and push around
 the edge of remembering as the rattling in my body runs its course
 would you like a hot drink mum
 y-yes p-please i say
 she opens a can thing with a cup and a screw lid and steam escapes, and with it comes a strong
 toothpaste smell i like it
 you need to let it cool she tells me as she pours my names annie
 th-that's m-my d-daughter's name i say
 i know she says*

*the other girl comes and perches next to me on the arm of the bench big brown eyes red around the
 rims i know her voice she says shes rebecca and im so happy that thats who she is i want to kiss her but i
 burn my mouth on the tea and have to spit it out bloody tea goes over my bloody shoes and everybodys
 pretending not to stare becky takes the cup and places it on the ground by the leg of the bench she hands the
 man next to me a box of matches before putting her arm around me i tell her she needs to get
 more sleep you cant burn the candle at both ends i dont know if she understands but we stick together
 like those bits of metal laughing and shaking in unison*

*smoke the ginger-haired man asks
 why not our annie says
 he shares out the white sticks but I dont get one*

perhaps im not really here
where are we i ask
the shaking has died down and the woman with the mousey hair moves round to crouch in front
of me she takes my hands in hers
were at the crematorium she says
i nod ...
weve just been to dads funeral
im sorry to hear that i say

the tall woman sucks deeply on a little white stick while she runs a hand through her hair the end glows
bright like a tiny sun and i follow the line of ash that forms until its whisked away on the wind ...

Later that night, I sat despondent by Josey's side as the rain fell. I was in the familiar position of waiting for my charge to wake. Underneath her closed lids the Singer's eyes danced to-and-fro, as if searching for a way out, and, without thinking, I sent Josey a blessing in the hope that her dreams were kinder than my own. I gazed at the collection of forlorn objects on the blanket in front of me with an intensity that would have worried my friends if they had witnessed it. I'd been going through my father's things. There wasn't much to salvage.

one pack
 one padded coat
 a knife
 an empty flask
 a water skin
 an opened medkit
 one change of clothes

a diary stuffed with songs

Little enough to show the quality of the man or the strength of the life he had lived. Yet each object was more precious to me now than my own breath. I'm not sure how long I'd been cradling the items as I listened to the deluge outside, but my hands and feet were cold and lifeless by the time I became aware of my surroundings once more.

It seemed to have been raining for a lifetime, water tearing down from the skies and slamming into the canvas, as if a fire raged inside that needed to be subdued. I studied the Singer's face, trying to sort out my feelings. Before speaking to the Wolf, I'd naively supposed that I could walk away from Josey when I felt like it. Maybe return to the highlands and restart my childhood with Aunt Val and my cousins. We could find somewhere far away from Lachan and its memories ... Miens perhaps, or further South still? I could try being a normal girl, hemmed in on all sides by mountains and clouds; the kind that keeps chickens, sings songs to the cattle, and marries too young. Jur, Sammy and I might even go back to school ...

... an image of the white-and-green schoolhouse in Lachan slipped unbidden into my head, and there was papa greeting the children in the doorway, ruffling my hair and blowing me a kiss as I passed by.

Have a good day, sunshine! he said.

"I'll try," I murmured.

The completeness of the memory shocked me, and I dashed away fresh tears as I heaved my thoughts back to the Singer. Staring at her porcelain features and the white corkscrew curls that framed them, it slowly dawned on me that I could no more walk away from Josey than I could walk away from myself. Not only were we bound by ties rooted in oath and craft, but we had walked a difficult and dangerous path together since our first meeting at Miriam's Beacon. Right or wrong, I knew she would never abandon *me* by choice, and with this realisation a measure of the disgust that had hijacked my heart when the Keeper stole papa's life fell away. I took Josey's hand and began to sing a hymn in Lachanin. You probably know the words ...

Mother of The Vale
 By whose grace
 Moon and stars
 Are kept in place
 Honour the pure
 And reverent souls
 Gather them to you
 And make them whole--

I hadn't even got to the rousing chorus before Josey's lashes began to flutter, and her green eyes opened. We observed each other for a time, and just when I was wondering if I should say something to avoid any awkwardness, she heaved herself up.

"Where are we, Becks?" she asked.

"In the forest by papa's tree, do you remember?"

My question seemed to drain her of the little energy she had on waking.

"I should go back home."

"I know," I said, not really knowing anything.

She sighed. "I loved him ..."

Unsure of the tangent she was taking, I kept quiet.

"... and when you've had gold, nothing else will do!" A single tear fell down her cheek and I tracked its passage until it disappeared under her chin. "I still speak to him, you know."

Her face clouded over, and I was suddenly conscious of the many souls behind those fathomless eyes. I looked away to rid myself of the terrifying impression of polyphony, and when I turned back, Josey seemed to have reached a decision. She squeezed my hand.

"Tell the Russian that we're on stage again this evening ... at the summer palace."

"Lord Wander?"

She smiled, and a little colour crept back into the world.

"That's right!" she said.

I shouted for Noa, and moments later the Kasivara lifted the tent flap and peered in, a

huge black longbow strung across her shoulders.

All is well, little sister?

“The Singer’s awake, and I think she wants to visit Sivan’s palace – Vanhin needs to know.”

Noa grimaced at the prospect.

Does the Lady say why?

I shook my head and began to fill my pack.

“I don’t think she intends it to be a social call, though,” I said.

An hour before dawn, we were already marching through the forest in the direction of the Sacred Grove. Josey was still too weak to walk but had insisted on traveling all the same. She was strung precariously on a litter that dangled between Kolle and Roi. The rain had barely paused since my vigil in the Singer’s tent, and we had begun to feel the dampness in our bones. I thought that saying goodbye to papa’s grave would be more difficult than it actually was, but I’d already promised myself that I’d be making a pilgrimage to the forest at least once a year for the rest of my life, so we had parted on good terms.

The old pilgrim trail had been erased when the forest was restored, so we relied on Vanhin’s memory and Noa’s tracking skills to guide us through its vast hectarage, stopping only briefly on marching rations at lunchtime. By late afternoon we were nearing the Grove when Josey slowed our progress. She climbed down from her litter and limped along beside Roi for the final mile, holding on to his arm for support. Her presence brought a hush of purpose to the group, a focus that had been lacking until that point. Two-hundred yards short of the paved central area, Vanhin dropped back to join her. One of my abiding memories of the march is the image of Josey and Stefan walking hand in hand into the palace courtyard at the epicentre of Amrah, right over the spot where the Lady Miriam had been murdered half-a-millennium earlier.

They were met by an officer of the College, tricked out in an elaborate maroon uniform and accompanied by armed guards. He stopped the couple by the gate that led into the formal

gardens, while our company remained hidden among the pristine trees.

“Welcome to *Laulun Rakastajatarin*,” he said. “I’m afraid no-one’s allowed to visit while the mistress is away. If you turn back now, you can both walk away free. Another step in this direction, however, and the law of the College will necessarily fall on your heads. I’ll be forced to incarcerate you here at the Songmistress’s pleasure.”

A profound stillness ate his words as soon as they were uttered. As I’ve said many times before, the old man’s sense of humour was always a mystery to me ... and never more so than at the entrance to the palace that evening. He laughed in the man’s face, and the sound was reminiscent of the low rumbling just before an earthquake. Wiping his eyes on a sleeve, the Wolf thanked the mystified steward.

“Your welcome reminds me why I despise the Songmistress. We have come to teach you a different tune, my friend, and so I offer you now what you have just offered me: you and all your household can leave this place unharmed if you put down your weapons and take only what you need to walk from here to the College Massif.

“Is this some kind of joke?” the steward asked, his cheeks flushed and his voice brittle in the saturated air. More of the servants were emerging to watch the strange encounter.

“No ... I am deadly serious!” Vanhin replied. “Of that you can be sure.”

“Take these poor deluded souls to the guard house, feed them, and lock them up!” the steward said. But by then it was already too late. Josey had started to sing, and the stones of *Laulun Rakastajatarin* were answering.

Arranged around a formal garden, Sivan’s summer palace consisted of five delicate white marble towers, each six or seven stories high, with ample room for luxurious guest chambers and bespoke living quarters. These towers were joined by high limestone walls, built more for aesthetic impact than any defensive function. In the centre of the garden was a large dacha, constructed entirely from sentient oak. And even from where we were standing, I could sense the structure was an abomination. It was covered in exquisite carving – animals, birds, cherubs and demons all danced across its exterior. Next to the dacha, a beautiful mirror-pool, made from the

same marble as the towers, stretched like a cat on a rug between the gardens and the palace. As Josey's song soaked into the walls, the members of the household were frozen where they stood, unable to move or speak.

Vanhin signalled for the company to emerge from the forest.

The Singer wishes everyone to take part in the restoration of this place, for it belongs to us all, he said.

We began chanting seed syllables as Vanhin laboured to fashion a vessel that would hold our combined power. I remembered how papa and I had helped with a similar spell when the Lady Josephine had just arrived at the hermitage and was hovering between life and death. Now she stood at the centre of a choir of twenty-five rebel souls and I couldn't help but feel pride in her achievement. Overtones and partials crowded together in the sky above the Grove and Josey chanted with her eyes raised. Then as the frequencies overlapped and intermeshed around our circle, she walked over.

Do you still have the stones I gave you?

I reached into my jacket pocket and retrieved the heavy pearls she had given into my safekeeping. I counted eight stones back into her waiting palm, singing all the while. In the air directly over our heads, a white ball of energy had formed, and now the Singer lifted her voice alongside Vanhin, and the ball blazed like a star. She reached up with her right hand and plunged it into the centre, holding the stones in her left. There was a pulse of light, a flare of power so strong that it burnt its way into my retina through closed eyelids, and suddenly the earth came alive. In one roaring convulsion, Sivan's pleasure palace, her retainers, and all record of her footsteps on that sacred ground, were swallowed up.

And when at last we could see again, the eight young boys from the dirigible stood among us, shining like angels. Josey smiled at them with great kindness, while we looked on, hardly able to believe our senses.

Guardians of the Grove! Vanhin's subterranean rumble cut through the tumult as he addressed the children. ***The Singer has called you from bliss to protect this place and to cleanse it from all taint of the enemy. Do you accept the burden?***

Each figure inclined his head, and then moved to stand round the clearing. Meanwhile, Josey gestured for me to reach up and touch the sphere, and for a moment, as her palm met mine

inside the maelstrom, there was a brief sensation of warmth and I fancied I could almost taste the craft connecting every living thing in the Grove. Then she shared a fragment of the crushing power already stored in the spell and I felt as if my arm was caught in a meat-grinder. I opened my mouth to scream, but fortunately Vanhin was by our side, and as he added his power to the sphere, the pain receded. He invited our companions to join us, and, one by one, they blended into the ensemble. Following Josey's lead, we knelt, one hand to sky, one hand on the ground. And the moment our fingers brushed the waiting soil, there was an almighty detonation and an ocean of enchantment discharged into the earth. As it spread across the grove, many of the company were left senseless in its wake. I never discovered whether it was the silver ring or my previous exposure to such spellwork that protected me, but I remained conscious alongside Vanhin, Josey and the Kasivara. We watched as sentient oaks returned to the Grove for the first time in living memory, and rich turf crept over the central clearing once more. Finally, eight young birch trees grew from saplings before our eyes at the cardinal and intercardinal entrances to the clearing, and as they reached skyward, I heard them singing Josey's name.

Then all was still.

And when the dust had settled, the glade and the Sacred Grove beyond had been rededicated, carved anew at the heart of The Vale by the voice of the true Singer. Of the Songmistress's Summer Palace, however, not a single stone remained. It was as if *Laulun Rakastajatarin* had never been.

By the time we'd all reclaimed our sanity, it was late in the evening, and as Vanhin wouldn't permit a fire to be lit in the Grove – not even for cooking – we had to be content with beef jerky, dried fruit, and water. We sat on the damp grass facing each other like silent chessmen in the deepening twilight, as we ate our cold supper.

It was the unmistakable sound of Vanhin clearing his throat that roused me from a pleasant daydream of travelling down to Dormin with papa in happier times. The old man's impossible voice filled the clearing with a noise like the grinding of a giant pestle and mortar.

"My friends!" he said, grey eyes moving across the company. "Over the last few days the Lady Josephine has blessed us with a glimpse of her true power. You will be able to tell your children and your grandchildren that you were with the 9th Singer of The Vale when she returned to protect the land. And yet there is still much to do before we can lay down our weapons. It's true that the enemy will no longer be able to find this place if she comes seeking it, for it has been moved beyond her physical reach and the Guardians will only open the gates for the Lady herself."

The old man rose to his feet, joints cracking.

"But elsewhere in The Vale," he continued, "we are not nearly so well-defended. Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to return to the Highlands!"

Suddenly, everybody had something to say. As quiet as supper had been, now the glade rang with voices. Vanhin held up his hand for calm.

"The Songmistress advances slowly up the Nomrech Valley with the largest army The Vale has ever seen. She burns everything in her path, and I have received reports that demons fight openly in her vanguard."

The spectre of fear flickered over many faces at this, and the talk died away almost as quickly as it had begun. Vanhin seized the moment.

"There is a brief window during which we can apparate back south, but it requires much craft, patience and precision to operate."

"Where's the portal going to be?" asked Pikka, a sinewy swordsman from Yniq.

"We'll need to march back to the spot where we were set down. A portal will be opened there at first light, tomorrow."

"That must be thirty miles or more, Lord Wander," said a woman I remembered seeing on guard duty at the Gathering. "Is it possible?"

Vanhin stared at her as if she'd suggested we sacrifice an infant to Paholainen.

"With great respect, not everyone is cut from the same granite as the Wolf," she continued, shaking her head.

A fresh voice from the opposite side of the circle joined in the debate.

“While no one here can doubt that the Singer has the greatest power and spirit among us, her flesh does seem near to exhaustion.”

I looked up and recognised Tord, the young mage that had almost come to blows with Vanhin in Tivalhas. The old man seemed to rein in an impulse to punch him in the face, and he continued as if neither Tord nor the guardswoman had spoken.

“Two jumps we’ll make: the first will bring us to Redach on the east coast, and from there we’ll be lifted straight to Tivalhas, where we’ll report all that has happened to the rebel council, and the Lady Josephine will take her rightful seat at the head of the council-table.”

I looked at Josey next to me, realising that I hadn’t paid the slightest attention to her since she had completed her labours here in the Grove. She remained propped up against her pack, but her eyes were closed, and her head was sunk into her chest. I felt for the pulse at her neck. It was almost imperceptible. Noa saw my concern and came alongside, and when she was unable to rouse the Singer, she turned to face Vanhin.

My Lord Provost, the Lady Josephine has retreated deep into herself. Her life-force is so weak that without rest here at the centre of The Vale, I fear she will not be restored to vitality. A forced march of thirty miles through the night is beyond her--

“She can be carried!” he snapped.

Carrying her will slow you down, Noa said. She will need to be checked regularly as you progress. Not only might you miss the portal, but if you’re attacked, some of you will need to avoid engagement to defend her.

The old man’s eyes blazed.

Disloyalty and cowardice from a Kasivari princess? he asked, incredulous.

Old friend, Noa replied, my loyalties are the same as ever, but you know I serve the Singer above all else.

Freefolk will die if we don’t return, Vanhin urged, mastering his temper.

Roi appeared at his sister’s side.

Might there not be another path? he suggested, slowly.

I shifted uncomfortably, but my companions turned to Roi and gestured for him to speak on.

Before we lost Yanic Lachani, Roi began, his measured psi gentle on the ear after Vanhin's grating tones, *there was a plan to take the Singer to the Kasivar territories, where she would be watched over by in the hidden realm and defended to the last drop of blood until such a time as the Highlands were secure. Now her power has been revealed here in Amrah – for only a Singer of The Vale could have restored the forest and sealed the Grove – there is no safe hiding-place for her. We have not been attacked since the skirmish with the Keeper, but that does not mean that the forest is not being watched, nor does it follow that an attack is not imminent. It may be that the Keeper will be waiting for us at the portal with servants of the dark Lord against whom none of us, save the Singer herself, can hope to stand.*

Roi paused, choosing his next words carefully,

I understand the need for a speedy return to the Highlands, but that is what Sivan and her generals expect you to do. Even now, they will be preparing to combat the Singer's power on the battlefield and the College will be searching the mountainsides of the Five Valleys day and night to learn where we have hidden her. But both my sister and the Singer's sworn companion, Alma Lachanilta, say that Lady Josephine is not yet ready for this test ... might it not be better then if we confound their expectations?

"How?" several voices interjected at once.

Noa took over.

The idea is simple, she began. *We don't take the Lady south at all – we take her north, instead ... keeping to the spirit of the original plan.* Here she looked directly at Vanhin. *Why don't we split the company in two, my Lord? We only need a small group of volunteers to travel by the Singer's side, men and women who will pledge their lives to get her safely through to the Northern Desert. Thus a group of rebels will still apparate from the eaves of the forest tomorrow morning and materialise again in the Highlands, and College spies will assume that the Singer is among them, because neither the Keeper nor his mistress can imagine any other strategy for the application of such power.*

Vanhin turned his eyes on me, and I felt the dizzying shift of perception as he opened a private psi channel while discussing Noa's proposal with the rest of the company.

Alma, only you I trust in this. You must try and talk to the Lady. I need to know that she gives her consent before I abandon her.

You're not abandoning her, my Lord, I countered, you're saving her life!

Then find her for me, child ... and ask her, he said, almost pleading.

I cursed my luck as I knelt by the Singer, trying to calm my breath until it lost its ragged edge. Then I closed my eyes and reached out to her with my mind, as I'd done countless times before. At first I felt nothing and was about to open my eyes and tell the old man that I didn't have the power, when suddenly I sank forward, my awareness dissolving into the ground like smoke. The next moment I was *elsewhere*; steeped in blackness with the profound sensation that Josey was all around me.

She was in the endless dark.

And the ashen quiet.

Far off in the distance, I saw a pinprick of light and tried to set off towards it. Nevertheless, it seemed that it would take me a lifetime to cover the distance, and I began to despair.

My Lady! I called out. ***Can you hear me?***

Before I could comprehend what was happening, I was pitched headlong towards the spark, and moments later I found myself looking out at the strangest scene. Held motionless between crisp cotton sheets on a narrow bed, I was lying in a small room with a woman sitting near me on a chair, her head bowed. The smell of disinfectant was sharp in my nostrils and I was suddenly aware of cables snaking away on all sides, linking my flesh and blood to machines that hovered around the bed like crows over a corpse. I immediately thought of how the newly-appointed Guardians had looked when we first found them, trapped in the hold of the dirigible.

Lady Josephine?

My voice echoed thinly around the empty corridors of my own head but didn't seem to register in the room at all. Abruptly, the woman in the chair began to speak, and while the language was barbarian and incomprehensible to me, the voice was unmistakably Noa's. As I stared out towards her, I caught a glimpse of a dragon tattoo winding around her neck.

Why do you show me this, my Lady? I bellowed, mystified by the vision. Only then did I

recall the reason I'd agreed to try and rouse the Singer in the first place – and here was her answer: a vision of Noa.

As if the Singer had only been waiting for the realisation to dawn in me, I was immediately drawn back ... pulled away from that terrible space and spat out into the spongy darkness beyond. A few moments later, I surfaced in the Glade like a pearl diver come up too fast; body drenched in sweat, nose bleeding. My companions were shocked into action: the guardswoman brought some cotton wadding to stop the blood, and Luz soaked a cloth in cold water and wiped my face.

I opened my eyes and Vanhin was by my side. I held his wolfish gaze for a few moments and then murmured a single word.

Noa

They left the Grove for the portal just before midnight, jogging into the dark as if pursued by hounds, while we set up our tents. True to his word, Vanhin had asked for volunteers prepared to escort the Singer and every member of the company had put themselves forward. Noa and the Wolf sat for an hour before they finally agreed on two men and two women to make the journey to the north alongside the Kasivara, Luz and myself: they chose the guardswoman, whose name was Miska, along with her companion, Anya – both seasoned warriors from Vanhin's own household; then Tord, the hot-headed highland mage; and finally, Kolle ... whom I had known all my life.

However, with nothing more to go on than a few rogue overtones – which only I seemed able to hear – I found myself distrusting the skinner more than the rest of the company combined. And I was certain that he and I would cross blades before too long. If I had known then what he carried inside, I would have murdered him as he slept.

It would have been a kindness.

Chapter 15 – Songmistress

It was the middle of the night and outside the tent, the air was charged with a subtle craft that swept the fog from my thoughts. The weather was mild and clear and as I wandered away from my sleeping companions into the embrace of the oak trees that fringed the glade, I felt a thrill of closeness to the power that ran through every blade of grass underfoot. Fully alert, I decided to walk for a while in the moonlight to try and tire myself out. The black ice that had settled over my heart seemed to be thawing a little and suddenly, everything seemed achievable:

...of course we'd manage to protect Josey

...of course we'd get her to the Kasivari

...and of course I'd get used to being without papa ... eventually.

Stars littered the sky in an impossibly random snarl, as if a diamond merchant had rolled out the greatest selection of stones ever cut and then lit a fire behind each one. I probably stayed too long staring at the worlds above my head, for I was shivering when I returned to the tent. Josey hadn't moved an inch. I dried my feet and climbed back under the blankets, snuggling up to the Singer. Despite the exhaustion that overwhelmed me, I still tossed-and-turned for another twenty minutes before falling deeply asleep.

And then came the dreams ...

I'm walking by the swollen River Lach. It's springtime, and I'm accompanied by a large dog with a shiny brown coat. I'm not sure if she's mine, but we certainly seem to be seasoned travelling companions. Papa and I must have been keeping the old fasting days throughout Thirdmonth, because I'm starving. We pass down through Skinner's Row, and I hear the clink of glasses and the sound of laughter coming from Kolle's yard. I'm seized with curiosity, and as we draw near the gate I peer inside. I'm greeted by the sight of a crowd the like of which I've never

seen gathered in one place in my hometown before. People from all parts of The Vale, dressed in their best clothes. It could be a wedding or a naming ceremony, but I don't see a bride and groom, or any children for that matter. Kolle isn't there, yet as I look through the gate, I spot his dead wife serving wine to the guests. I push the gate open and slip inside, only to discover that the dog won't follow me. Perhaps it's the throng of people or the enclosed space – whatever the reason, she remains stubbornly aloof outside, as if on guard duty. My sudden appearance seems to have unnerved Kolle's wife, who looks at me wide-eyed as I approach. She puts a finger to her lips as if warning me to silence. Bemused, I smile to reassure her and look for a place to sit at the nearest table ... but all the seats are taken. The occupants suggest I go and sit at the top table and so I make my way over.

It takes me an age to thread my way across the yard, and I can hear the dog growling and complaining outside. Eventually, I arrive at a table near the door into the house where an extra place has been set, and I sit down, exhausted. The chair at the head of the table is empty, and the moment my body touches the seat, a tall woman emerges from Kolle's house and walks towards the party. Conversation peters out as she approaches, and by the time she reaches my side, the only sound I can hear is the dog barking in the street.

Hello young lady, she says, glad you could come to my party!

She has a terrifying presence, but words really can't do justice to the fear she inspires in that yard. She radiates a kind of basilisk malevolence that I've seldom encountered before. The woman's hair is so black that it seems almost blue in the sunlight, and though I try to focus on her face, it shifts and changes even as I look at her – now guileless, now sly; now young, now old. Only her empty blue eyes remain constant. They fix me with a gaze that flays the flesh from my bones.

Do I know you? I ask, feeling impossibly alone.

We're here to honour the memory of Miriam, Eighth Singer of The Vale, she says, but the ovens in this hovel are broken and there's no bread for the guests.

For some reason, I feel responsible. Maybe that's what she wants.

Can I help?

You could conjure some fresh loaves.

I'm totally unprepared for the request, and don't know how to explain that my education

in the craft hasn't stretched to the finer points of bread-making. I can just about light a fire ... if she has something to burn.

I realise you'll need material to work with, so I brought these along for you, she says.

Delicate tapered fingers reach down into a heavy leather bag by the side of the table, and I notice that the woman's wearing a silver ring, just like mine, and both are glowing. She retrieves a handful of what, at first glance, I take to be polished stones and drops them on the table in front of me. Then she looks up expectantly. My instincts scream that I shouldn't attempt any craft by her side ... that I should make my excuses and leave. But somehow, I'm reluctant to wake before I know what's going to happen.

Bread by itself won't be enough! I blurt out.

The woman laughs and for a moment her face looks like Aunty Val's. She lays her hand on top of mine.

If you make the bread, I'll bring the feast, she says.

As I look at the stones, I realise what she's offering me – they're *sarida*, like those Josey brought out from the hold of the dirigible. Each one containing a human soul. My dog is barking as if Paholainen himself has arrived at the gate.

No – I won't do it! I say.

The smile freezes on the woman's transient face and is replaced by a look of profound disappointment.

Are you sure, child?

I nod and try to stand. An irresistible force pushes me back down into the chair.

Now that's a shame, she says, disapprovingly, ***because I have all these hungry mouths to feed ...***

Shaking her head, she gathers the *sarida* from the tabletop and puts them back into her bag.

Perhaps there's something else you can do for me ...

I catch the flash of a blade as she straightens up and my heart flies into my mouth. At the same instant, however, the dog manages to force Kolle's gate open – or perhaps it's Kolle's wife that lets her in – and she comes bounding over to my side, barking for all she's worth.

And even as I make a fuss of her, the witch, the tables, the people, and the house and yard

itself melt away into the boiling darkness.

It's just rained, but now the sun's out and the sky's a peerless blue above the tree canopy in the great Forest of Amrah. The smell of Spring is everywhere, and it fills me with indescribable joy. I dance and skip as Josey and I make our way among the trees. We pass a pool, and I catch a glimpse of my reflection as we walk by. It shocks me so much that I retrace my steps to reassure myself. But there's no mistake: staring back at me from the mirrored surface of the water is the muzzle of a large brown bear, head tilted quizzically to one side. I amble after Josey and when I catch up with her, I let fly.

Why didn't you say something, my Lady?

Josey stops and crouches down, so we're level with each other.

What am I supposed to do now? I growl.

She scratches my head, which though quite pleasant, seems to add insult to injury in my combustible brain. I stalk off ahead, heedless, sulking for all I'm worth. It takes me maybe fifteen or twenty minutes of running full tilt to get the fret out of my system and to realise that the Singer is no longer anywhere in sight. Mortified, I follow my own scent back through the trees until I reach the pool, calling out Josey's name as I go. Arriving at the spot where I last saw her, my nose describes a mystery: Josey's trail ends abruptly, two rope-lengths away from the water, as if she's been whisked away into thin air. How swiftly the innocent beauty of the morning turns to menace – and the forest, which was my playground only an hour earlier, becomes my prison. I sit down on my haunches and consider the situation.

What would papa have done?

I try to hold an image of papa in my mind as he was in Lachan, but the best I can manage in the moment is an impression of the great ash tree that Josey raised over his grave. I don't know if bears cry in the wild, but this one seems to have been blessed with the ability. Yet even as I'm about to descend into a familiar emotional crevasse, it dawns on me that papa's ash tree is as good a place as any to begin my search. For one thing, it's powerfully magical, and for another, it's taller than everything else around it by a good twenty feet. With the growing

conviction that I have the solution to the Singer's disappearance between my paws, I sniff the air and begin to run due west.

Josey is in the topmost branches of papa's tree; I spot her as soon as I arrive. And what's more, somebody's up there with her.

When I try to cross the glade, however, I find my way blocked by the same irrefutable force that pinned me in my chair in the previous dream. On the edge of panic, I look around and decide to climb a huge beech tree nearby. It's not as tall as papa's ash, but perhaps the canopy will bring me close enough.

I swarm up the mossy branches and position myself precariously in the crown of the tree. And when I look across towards the ash, there's Josey ... sat on what looks like the flimsiest branch in the forest, moving gently with the wind. And floating right next to her is the woman with the empty eyes from Kolle's yard. We're above the roof of the forest and Amrah stretches around us like a verdant embrace. I find that if I concentrate, I can hear snatches of conversation from across the glade.

I brought you up here to finish your education, the witch says. *I suspect our mutual friend, the Provost, neglected to tell you that angels watch over your every step here in The Vale.*

Josey looks at the speaker with such sympathy, that, for a minute, I'm sure she knows her from somewhere else.

If you were to throw yourself off this high perch, for example, before one hair of your head touched the ground, the Founder would send an angel to catch you and you'd land as lightly as a feather.

A ghost of a smile plays across her extraordinary face, beautiful now in the Spring sunshine.

But I'd get ready to jump anyway, if I were you, my Lady, she urges.

Josey closes her eyes.

Let's hope those old prophecies are true! the woman says, an edge of steel entering her

voice. She clicks her slim fingers, summons a dark flame, and sets it to work eating into the living bark just below the Singer's eyrie. I watch aghast as Josey turns and tumbles from the canopy like a stone.

Without a moment's thought, I launch myself towards the ash tree ...

Dawn breaks over Central Hall.

Cresting the eastern walls of the College, the sun climbs the dome until it sets the burnished silver ablaze. An ornate wrought-iron table, furnished with three matching chairs, has been set out for us up there on the roof, and Josey and I stroll across the tiles towards it.

There's a glistering in the air by the table as we approach, and, dressed in white, her dark hair caressed by the gentlest breath of wind, our adversary appears like a mirage and beckons us over.

"Hello Annie!" Josey says, walking towards her with outstretched arms.

"I am Sivan Callax," the witch replies icily, "Regent of all The Vale, by Paholainen's will. You would do well to remember it, old woman ... my patience isn't infinite!"

Josey's arms drop to her sides and she sits down at the table as if wounded. I can feel her disappointment, so I move my chair closer.

Sivan passes a hand over the table-top and a flask of hot tea appears, accompanied by two exquisite bone china cups. She pours the liquid into the cups and the sweet aroma of pine-needle tea wafts towards us.

"I can offer you a new covenant here in The Vale," she continues. "The College is prepared to cede your highland rabble all the land you can observe from this table."

I pick up my tea, cradling it against the morning chill. It's as if we sit at the very apex of the world, looking down like eagles in flight across every square-inch of The Vale. I can make out the snow-capped peaks and mountain villages of the Five Valleys, taste the clamour and bustle of the great coastal metropolises, drink-in the endless lakes, rivers, fens, marshes and mudflats of western Meshak, and drown myself in the magnificent shifting sands of the Kasivari

desert, all girdled by a bright cobalt sea. It's breath-taking spell work and I feel myself gasping involuntarily at the glory of it all.

"A generous offer, no?" Sivan asks, eyeing us both with a hungry smile. "Just imagine all you could accomplish with such a power-base. Not to mention the lives that might be saved if a futile war is avoided. Perhaps you could usher in a new golden age of benign College rule. And all you have to do in return is kneel down now and acknowledge Paholainen as your master."

Heat waves shimmer in the air between the two women, and suddenly there's a clean, sharp snapping sound followed by a hiss as Josey's cup shatters and the tea inside explodes into steam on touching the tabletop. The flask disappears and then the table itself, now glowing a dull red, begins to sag and melt, until it pools like congealed toffee on the roof tiles at our feet.

I look around for Josey and see she's already striding away towards the edge of the roof.

"Senile old fool! You really think you can hold back the tide?" the witch screams at Josey's back, the tendons in her neck taut and her face an ugly puce. "I've seen your death!"

"You and me both," Josey says, without looking back.

Afraid I'll be left behind, I drop my cup and run after the Singer, who catches hold of my hand and gently pulls me towards the dawn.

"You're safe, Becky. I'm here."

I opened my eyes slowly, afraid of what I might find. We had entered that strange still moment just before morning where night and day meet, wrestling for mastery, and inside the tent Josey watched over me.

"Bad dreams?" she asked.

I nodded, Sivan's final words still echoing around my head.

"You called my name."

"We were there together," I said.

"Where?"

“On the roof of Central Hall, in my dream.”

She smiled and stroked my hair.

“Sivan tried to persuade us to betray the rebellion.”

“And did she succeed?”

“No, my Lady.”

For a long moment the Singer said nothing, her eyes shining in the silhouette of her face above me. Finally, she yawned and slid my head gently into her lap, covering me with a blanket. It was only as I drifted away once more with the coming of dawn that she murmured to herself.

“Then we did okay ... didn’t we?”

Sam and I never see our Annie these days.

She thinks something’s eating me away on the inside ... which is strange because that’s exactly what I think about her.

[...] out of the three of them, you would have said Annie would be the one most likely to follow me into opera. She loved singing and before Jonathan and Becks were born, I took her to work with me. Recitals, recordings, festivals, concerts ... she even came to Charlie’s ENO rehearsals and warmed up backstage like everyone else! They all knew her – Placido nicknamed her ‘Josey’s little shadow’. But there are no perfect childhoods. And the other side of the coin, of course, was that she missed out on a lot of the normal stuff kids do; what with Sam sweating blood trying to get his business off the ground and me struggling to be a mother and a diva at the same time, play dates, birthday parties and kite-flying in the park went out the window. One of my biggest regrets (and a mistake I didn’t make with the other two) is that when Annie should have been fast asleep in bed, her dolls would be arranged around the piano stool and she’d be watching glassy-eyed as I crammed score after score into my head. At five she knew ‘Vissi d’arte’ better than I did, and when Jonathan arrived, he was coerced into playing ‘opera stars’ with her – first as her audience and then as her chubby leading man ... probably one of the reasons he

refused to sing at all in primary school. In the end, it was Becky's effortless musical talent that shook Annie's world. The way Annie saw it, if you couldn't be the best at something then there was no point in doing it at all. She found, to her astonishment, that she couldn't match her sister's musical memory or her ability to pick up an instrument and play it. And when it became clear that little Becky was a piano prodigy, instead of concentrating on her own precocious singing talent, Annie walked away from music entirely. She was 16."

[Levin, P., (1999), *Dame Josey – A Knight at the Opera*, London: Random House, p. 20]

Anyway ...

If I want to meet up just the two of us, I have to book well in advance. We see her birthdays and Christmas and she still phones at weekends to recommend over-priced restaurants in Islington, (and Sam sometimes goes over to Stoke Newington to see James and the kids), but the rest of the time she ignores us. Sam suggested we'd probably have a better chance of seeing her if we were lepers ... then at least there'd be a photo opportunity in it for her!

'Young MP treats ageing leper parents to slap-up meal at Frederick's!'

He makes me laugh ...

I arrange to meet Annie at her weekly clinic in Stoke Newington, on Valentine's Day. Mending fences. Building bridges. I take the tube from Hampstead to Angel, without incident. Problems only start when I go for the bus. I catch the 73 on the wrong side of the road by accident and set off towards Central London. Instead of heading North, I end up in Oxford Circus. Again.

I fall asleep and they swap drivers.

Some bloke with a bin liner wakes me up, saying he needs to clean the bus before it sets off back to N16. I climb down and begin strolling along Oxford Street. Suddenly, I realise I don't know where I am,

or what I'm doing here. I see the sign for Selfridges and remember I used to sing Christmas carols there when I was a student. I go inside and sit in Hemsley & Hemsley. I must have left my phone on the bus, because when I want to give Sam a call, I can't find it anywhere. I ask the waitress if I can borrow hers and she takes pity on me (though they're not supposed to). We look up everybody's numbers online. Annie's is the easiest to find – we get through to her office in Hackney, but it's already closed – and I leave a message saying I'm drinking coffee in Selfridges and I'd love someone to come and find me. I leave everybody the same message – except Becky who doesn't have a phone. Then I hang up and return the mobile.

Though they're far too small, the quinoa scones in H&H are excellent, and I'm wolfing one down when a young girl at the next table recognises me.

"I don't believe it! Dame Josephine?" she says. "You taught my sister at the Academy!"

I nod my head, though the name she mentions doesn't ring a bell, and I agree to sign a napkin, smiling all the while. She asks me if everything's okay and I tell her it is.

I order a Croque Monsieur and when it comes, I'm impressed: fresh, hot, and large enough for two. I eat until I can't force another crumb in my mouth. And then for-the-love-of-God I can't find my purse ... it's not in my bloody coat pocket or my bloody handbag. It must be with my bloody phone on the bloody bus traveling back to Stoke Bloody Newington.

By this stage, I'm so anxious I'm hyperventilating.

The duty manager wants me to leave, but the waitress from earlier on comes over and asks if she can help. I tell her that I can't find my money and that somehow, in the middle of Selfridges, I'm lost. Together we go through my bag and my pockets. I think she thinks I'm simple ... and maybe she's right. I can't remember ever feeling this lost before. Then two things happen in rapid succession: I find my purse – it's in the inside zip-up pocket of my fancy jacket (along with my phone, flashing a hundred messages) – and our Annie arrives.

The Honourable Anne Devonshire MP (Hackney North & Stoke Newington) slides into the seat opposite me, dark hair falling tastefully over her face. Waitresses murmur around us, the kitchen sends us complimentary pastries, and Annie administers a sound public bollocking to the duty manager: the concession is hers for the taking.

And even though I tell her the good news about my purse and phone, she's not pleased. You can see from the lines on her forehead. She insists on paying my bill, even though I've got enough money, and she orders herself a large gin and tonic. And when she's sure no one's watching, she leans over and hisses at me like an angry wildcat.

"What were you thinking?"

The question grabs my attention like a thumb screw:

What was I thinking?

What was I thinking?

What was I thinking?

Tears stream down my face.

"I don't know, Annie," I say, "I don't know ..."

Chapter 16 – Wetlands

The Melisse was too full to ford. That much was clear from the outset.

I pulled the neck of my oilskin closer about me, and from my vantage point in the field above the flood meadow, I watched the swollen river crash along, marking the swift passage of branches and other detritus as they flashed by.

An unseasonably damp Thirdmonth in Meshak had merged into the rainy season and the wettest Fourthmonth on record. And with every step we took out into the fens, it became clearer to me that our safe passage through to the northern grasslands and then on to the desert beyond was far from guaranteed. As we progressed, drainage ditches had become fast-flowing streams; streams had swelled into boiling rivers, and rivers ... well, the churning torrent in front of us was merely the last word in a sentence that had been writing itself the whole journey. After leading us faithfully through the wetlands of central Meshak, Luz had brought us at last to the banks of the mighty Melisse river, gateway to the north. She'd said the fording point was unmissable ... almost a mile wide, at a curving reach in the river where the water was only knee-deep over shingle. But after days of constant rain, we had arrived at the top of the wide river valley to discover that the Melisse had gone into spate two days earlier, and her waters had breached the banks on both sides, flooding the surrounding land for miles in all directions. It seemed we had laboured together in vain, through mud and mire, to bring our wagon to a crossing point that no longer existed.

Tord and Kolle were still wrestling with the front axle which was hub-deep in sludge, despite our elevation. I clapped the mage on his shoulder.

"You might as well stop," I said, "we're not going down to the water now ... surely?"

"If we do, we'll never get back up," Kolle grunted from the other side of the wagon.

"I'm hungry!" the mage said, straightening and stretching. He and Kolle looked as if they'd been dipped in honey and then rolled in shit. Stripped to their waists, they'd been heaving the wagon through bog and fen, using a not-so-subtle mixture of mage-craft and brute force, since lunchtime. And though we'd all taken our turns at the thankless task of pushing and shoving the covered wagon to keep it moving, without the heft of the two men our journey would

have been abandoned long ago.

“I’ll stake out the horse and we can see about making some food.”

This idea seemed to motivate the skinner, and with a grin he retrieved two shirts from the interior of the wagon, throwing one at the mage as he returned.

“Don’t get my shirt wet, you cackhanded oaf!”

These two had fallen together like brothers as our journey unfolded, and though they argued as if married, I’m certain each would have laid his life down for the other had it been necessary. Now, clad in their oils, they began to set up the canvas lean-to under which we did most of our cooking.

“Is there no other way through to the North?” Tord asked the empty air, rolling his eyes. “What I wouldn’t give for a chorus of adepts and a portal!”

Kolle smiled.

“What about dry feet and a quart of brandy instead?”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Skinner,” Tord replied.

“You’re right – no dry feet. But what about the brandy--?”

Kolle led the mage to the back of the wagon, and after bowing to Josey, who sat, grey and lifeless, staring out at the submerged world around us, they retrieved a bottle and cups and set about the liquor with a will.

I climbed up and sat next to the Singer.

“Are you well, my Lady?” I asked

She inclined her head slowly, as if unsure how to answer.

“I’m thinking about going home,” she said.

“Me too,” I offered. “I think about it all the time, but I can’t decide whether it’s because I need Lachan, or because I imagine Lachan still needs me!”

Josey’s green eyes smiled for the first time in a long time.

“That’s exactly how I feel ...” she said. Then suddenly her face clouded over again, and her eyes stared straight through me. “Did you remember your door key, Becks?” she asked. “I don’t want you locked out if you come to visit ...”

There was a moment’s hiatus.

“Do you mean the key I took from the Keeper’s chamber?”

I took out the small ivory key I’d stolen, which I kept on a leather cord round my neck.

“This one?” I asked.

As soon as she saw the key, she seemed to forget the urgency of the question.

“That’s good, love,” she said, taking my hand in hers and surveying the track that had brought us down into the shallow-bottomed valley. In the distance I could just make out two figures bundled up against the rain: Miska and Anya – bringing up the rear as usual. Josey coughed, a deep hacking bark that suggested the dampness was getting into her soul. I wrapped a scarf around her neck and slid down from the wagon.

“I’ll get Felgrund sorted and we should try and find some sage for your cough.”

As I loosened the mare’s belly-girth and uncoupled her from the wagon, I sifted through the month-and-a-half that had passed since we left the Sacred Grove. We had been on the move constantly, and yet I couldn’t escape the notion that the evil we faced was something that couldn’t be outrun and was simply biding its time, waiting for the right moment to strike.

That first morning after the Wolf’s departure, Josey and I had woken late. The others were already eating breakfast as I sought out Noa and told her of the encounter I’d had with the Songmistress in my dreams the night before. I don’t know what I expected her to do ... perhaps I thought she’d tell me not to eat cheese before bedtime or some such nonsense. Instead, deadly serious, she sat me down with Josey and dredged through every recollection, like a College official investigating a murder.

“How did she find us?” I asked. “I thought the Grove was sealed against demons – we watched the Singer rededicate it!”

Sivan is no demon; she is flesh and blood, like you or I.

Noa didn’t reply for a long beat, then she pointed at my silver ring.

You wear the mirror ring of the Lady Josephine, she said. But the Songmistress also

wears a ring, no?

I remembered seeing a silver band on Sivan's finger in the dream and nodded.

Her ring was a gift from Lady Miriam long ago. Perhaps the connection between the bands, though weak, was sufficient for her craft. It would explain how she found you and how she was able to visit you in wraith-form last night. The Singer is closed to the minds of all of us, but you, dear Alma ... are not.

I must have looked terrified for Noa gave me a hug before she continued.

If it will make you feel better, I don't think Sivan knows where you are – it's entirely possible that she still thinks you and Lady Josephine left for the highlands with the Wolf – but she will be bending her whole will towards tracking your band all the same. We must work some spellcraft of our own to close the avenue.

"Maybe Tord can help us?" I suggested.

Maybe he can, Noa added thoughtfully.

In the end, the work on my band took the rest of the morning. Tord seemed childishly pleased to be asked to help, and he and Noa fashioned a powerful blocking spell similar in structure to the one Vanhin had taught me against psi intrusion. When they'd finished, Noa went straight to Josey, who was still bleary-eyed.

Would you bless Alma's band, my Lady?

Josey showed no comprehension of the request but took the ring anyway, staring at its scuffed surface as if she read our fortunes there. I was growing impatient and already imagined that I could hear cogs grinding inside her head, when abruptly, she flipped the ring up into the air and it vanished.

"What are you doing my Lady?" I cried out, horrified.

"Doesn't need blessing ..." she mumbled.

She nodded at my hand, and there was the band on my finger, now polished to a high lustre and slightly warm to the touch – as if I'd never removed it.

"... it's already blessed."

Walking from the Forest of Amrah to the Kasivari wilderness is no light undertaking. In better times, we might have worked our way back eastward and headed for the northern-most foothills of the College Massif, picking up an arm of the Postal Road – a large dirt track which ran for a further fifty miles due north. However, Vanhin had cautioned us against this course and common-sense suggested that all major public roads would be watched by agents of the College. They may have thought we were already in the highlands, but that still didn't mean that we could walk out of the Keeper's backyard without attracting attention. After much discussion, we decided that we should swing away north-west out of Amrah and make for the fens and marshes of Meshak. Luz would lead us through the land of her birth, and after crossing its territory, we would climb up to the northern grasslands and from there walk out to meet the desert. Thus, two days later, well-rested and in fine spirits, the eight of us set off through the trees in the direction of Meshak, just before dawn.

Choosing Luz as our guide proved to be an inspired decision. After following her to freedom through the College sewer system, Noa and I were perfectly happy to rely on her knowledge of the countryside above ground, and we knew that her instincts for self-preservation were at least as good as our own. It also took some of the pressure from Noa, and as we travelled unhindered and unnoticed across the wild Meshaki border I could feel her beginning to relax.

And if Luz blossomed as our guide, then the other members of our strange band likewise found their vocations and their voices on that circuitous path down into the fens.

Tord was an odd creature.

I think I was, perhaps, a little in love with his wild red hair and high cheekbones; though given the fact that, when not looking with adoration at the Singer, his chiselled features were always turned towards Anya (whose thick locks were the colour of straw), this was something he probably never even suspected. Undoubtedly a gifted mage – numbers, transformation and shamanism were his specialities – he nevertheless spent much of the early stages of the journey trying to match Noa and Luz for strength and resilience on the trail. This impossible undertaking was made all the funnier since the two women paid no heed to his increasingly desperate acts of bravado. Matters came to a head one wet evening, a week into the journey. We had just finished

eating when Tord declared that he was sure he would emerge victorious in a sparring bout with Luz. He even suggested an appropriate spot for such a contest, in a clearing beyond the camp by the side of a small lake.

“With or without craft?” Luz cracked back at him, smiling.

“Without!” he answered, stung as if the very idea that he might resort to magic against a northerner (and a woman!) was scandalous.

In the event, the mage’s dinner was soundly beaten out of him by the Meshaki, and I’m sure he even thanked her for the instruction as he was retching. However, the loss seemed to cure him of his crisis of masculinity, and for the rest of the journey Luz’s word was law – unless it went against Josey’s wishes or, indeed, against Tord’s own notion of what the Singer’s wishes might be. He could still be infuriatingly hot-headed and thoughtless at times, but who was I to point the finger in that regard? He was also open and generous, and well-liked by all of us as a consequence.

Anya and Miska were Tivalhas born-and-bred; both lovers of song and story and both lethal with blades of any kind. The similarity between them ended there, however; for while Anya was as aloof and reserved as she was striking to look at, Miska was foul-mouthed, warm and very funny. From the outset, she and I got on well and we would often sing folk songs from the Five Valleys as we walked, changing the words to annoy Anya and make the others smile. Nevertheless, looking back at the whole company, it was Kolle that proved the biggest surprise, despite my misgivings about him. He insisted on overseeing our food, and his mordant wit and great cooking became one of the few good reasons I could see for getting out of a soaking wet tent in the morning and gathering together around a sputtering campfire as evening fell. His knowledge of meat was kaleidoscopic, and he knew enough about herbs for me to prefer his cooking to anyone else’s. Kolle it was who, when we first entered the shallow fens on the fringes of north-western Meshak and found that the water had been poisoned, kept us alive by cleaning and cooking the palm-sized spiders which were the only thing Noa and Miska could catch around the lifeless marshland. Fried in salt, ginger, and garlic, the legs were still too hideously life-like for me to eat, but the white meat inside the head and body filled our bellies until we reached fresh water again. Added to that, the fact that he lent his hands readily to all that needed doing and was always the first to volunteer, whatever the task, went a long way to alleviating the

pall cast by my gloomy premonitions. I was still conscious of the jangle of dissonance that plagued my craft-sense when he spoke, but gradually I learned to tune it out, and as the days ran into weeks, and Fifthmonth arrived at last, I found I had buried my fears and was friends with the big Skinner ... which is what those that violated him had intended all along, I suppose.

By the time we reached the city of Mecheltev, known locally as ‘The-Maiden-of-the-Fens’, we were all suffering from the damp and cold, despite the reprieve of fine weather that accompanied our arrival. More worrying, however, was the fact that by then Josey was seriously ill. She had limped through the city gates with me propping her up and coaxing every step out of her, and once inside, the skinner had had to carry her.

We found temporary accommodation on a patch of wasteland that had been rented to itinerant merchants gathered in the city for the Fifthmonth Fair. And once we had paid for our corner of the plot and pitched our tents – mainly to give them a chance to dry out in the welcome sunshine – everyone gathered by the Singer’s tent to take stock of our situation. Though we seemed to blend in with our merchant friends, who were a surprisingly diverse group, Luz wasn’t taking any chances and insisted we wait till all but the very young and the very old had left for market before we spoke freely among ourselves.

Noa, who had altered her appearance to look like a Meshaki trader, saw that I was preoccupied.

What's on your mind, Alma Lachanilta?

“The Singer is exhausted,” I observed. “She needs to rest and to dry out ... we all do.”

“I can’t shorten the distance between here and the desert!” Luz exclaimed. “Unless we keep going, we’ll never get there!”

“We should stay here for a couple of days at least,” I said.

“We’ve walked twenty miles a day for as long as I can remember,” Miska said, in support. “I’m starting to walk in my sleep.”

“Maybe we just need to slow down?” Kolle suggested.

“Look ...” Luz said, “... for the moment our enemies don’t know where we are. When they find out, I’d like to have the Singer hidden so deep in the desert that they can’t be bothered to come and dig us out.”

“And anyway,” Anya added, “the longer we stop in one place, the more chance we’ll attract attention. Mecheltev won’t be free of College spies, believe me!”

Miska glanced about her as if the spies were hiding in our ni-pacs, then she smiled at me, rolling her eyes.

“I know!” Tord leaned forward, “Why don’t we steal some horses?”

Noa looked up, incredulous, and Luz stared at the firebrand as if he’d just soiled himself.

“Because stealing fucking horses is not something that goes unpunished in these parts,” Luz replied. “I know this city: they’ll have the militia out scouring the fens, then there’ll be a report to the College and security’ll be as tight as a gnat’s chuffer for weeks! Trust me Tord, we’d have to fight our way across the bloody province.”

“Just a minute, though,” Kolle said. “Soldiers riding horses to death can cover maybe fifty or sixty miles a day ... we could certainly make thirty. One horse might still make all the difference. Can we buy one?”

Noa spoke up, voicing my thoughts.

Money isn’t the issue; the Lady Josephine can’t manage alone on horseback.

We all looked over at the tent where Josey lay asleep.

“What if we purchased a horse and wagon to take us across Meshak?” Miska suggested.

Luz stood up, smiling broadly.

“I know where we can buy a good horse. A friend of my cousin lives in the city. He’s a tight-fisted old bastard, but his animals are well cared-for! If the Founder smiles on us, I might even get him to throw in some oilskins as well.”

“What about the wagon?” Tord asked.

That’s a job for you and Kolle, Noa said. ***Why not try some of these merchants?***

Perhaps one of them will want to sell the wagon as well as the vegetables that came in it.

“But Tord can’t bargain his way out of a paper bag!” I said, forgetting my resolution to be more circumspect.

“Exactly!” Luz said. “That’s why you should go with the two of them to make sure we get value for money!”

The-Maiden-of-the-Fens was a good-looking city.

Stone-built for the most part, she stood raised above the flat marshlands on an ancient tor, an island of civilisation above a mazy wilderness of reed and river. The walls were in a state of genteel disrepair, reflecting the kind of neglect that suggested the idea of defending the place against attack from outside wasn't considered of paramount importance to the city elders. The streets, however, were a different matter. They were paved with white limestone and well-maintained at every turn. And when we arrived at the marketplace, I saw why. The volume of trade passing through Mecheltev was almost overwhelming. The space was vast, a seething exchange where any transaction that could be imagined seemed to be taking place. Machinery, livestock, flowers, vegetables, bread, cakes and sweetmeats, tools, weapons, medicine, surgery and tooth pulling ... all were available, at a price.

We strolled over to a merchant we'd seen at the campsite that morning when we arrived. He'd brought cut-flowers and fresh herbs to sell at the fair and the open wagon he was using to display them seemed a good size.

Kolle tried his charm first.

"Hello my friend! Have you considered--?"

"Fuck off one-eye!" the merchant bellowed. "You're frightening my customers away!"

Tord was furious at the slight to his friend and was all for using his craft to wilt every bloom the man possessed. Kolle simply grinned and bowed, and we moved on through the fair. After three further attempts had yielded no more joy than the first, the skinner suggested we adjourn to the beer tent to try and change our luck. I hadn't even taken a sip of the half-jar Kolle had bought for me before a great commotion started up just beyond the canvas. It sounded as if someone had poked an angry serpent with a stick. We took our drinks and joined the crowd gathering around a grubby, leather-clad Mecheltevian, who called himself 'the inventor'.

The hissing noise we'd heard was the sound of steam being released at pressure from an unlikely contraption he was trying to hawk, propped up at the back of a covered wagon. He'd rigged up a rudimentary belt-drive to deliver power to the wagon's rear wheels, and if he'd managed to get the engine to work, he might even have demonstrated the viability of the concept.

I was excited by the prospect of a steam-powered cart – until I realised that it didn't have steering apparatus of any kind, and the belt drive didn't look sturdy enough to take the cart a rope's-length away from the beer tent, let alone across country to the other side of the province.

"Gather round and see for yourselves," he called out, "the one-and-only 'motorator'! Transform your old carts and wagons into modern road vehicles at the pull of a lever! Ladies and gentlemen!"

As it turned out, neither the pull of a lever nor the introduction of several shovels-full of black rock could make the motorator move. I sensed the man's desperation and felt a last-ditch attempt to get the machine to work using an ill-fashioned spell, and when that failed and the boiler began to cool, the inventor slumped down, disconsolate against the wagon. His audience began to drift away.

Kolle sidled up to the salesman.

"I'll give you seven College crowns for the wagon," he offered.

The man didn't look up.

"It's got a fully-caulked white-oak bed with clinkered-and-caulked pine sides, and a pair of brand-new hickory shafts ..." he said, "... worth ten, if it's a day."

"I'll throw in another two for the contraption," Tord added, nodding at the steam engine.

This seemed to shake the inventor out of his torpor, and he demanded another three crowns for the machine.

"It's a 'motorator' for god's sake! This time next year it'll be worth a fortune – I'm a fool to even think about selling it!"

I stepped forward and looked the man in the eye.

"Seven for the wagon; three for the machine that doesn't work ..." I said bluntly, adding a little craft to my voice to help things along, "... and that's our final offer."

Kolle and Tord pulled the covered wagon back to the campsite between them, and when we got there, we found Luz and Miska fussing over an elegant chestnut mare.

"She's called Felgrund," Miska said, giving the horse a carrot. Luz had bought supplies from a wholesaler on the edge of the market and so we had flour, rice, yams, beans and pulses, as well as salted fish, cabbages and carrots, and strips of beef jerky to take with us. After surviving

on marching rations and the sparse hunting in the fens, our new stores seemed to promise luxury, but Luz reminded us that there were many miles yet to go and we would probably be boiling our boots before the desert came into view.

A pile of ropes and harnesses lay next to Josey's tent and Noa sat nearby, untying a large bundle of clothes. I gave Felgrund a cautious pat in greeting as I passed her and walked round to sit with the Kasivara. Josey was awake and I was glad to see that she was drinking a cup of hot pine tea rather than the luke-warm, milky slush the locals were foisting on the public in the marketplace.

"Hello, my Lady!" I said, brightly.

Josey smiled and offered me a drink from the flask Noa had made her. I took a cup and sat by her side, and the two of us eyed the world through a curtain of pine-scented steam. Tord tinkered with the motorator, muttering and crafting all the while, but in the end, he had to admit defeat and Kolle dragged him away to help load supplies onto the empty wagon. Despite Tord's assurances to the contrary, it looked as though we'd paid three extra crowns for a pile of junk. Nevertheless, the mage insisted we take the machine with us, so we strapped it under the bed of the wagon, wrapped close in a greased tarp.

The bundle Noa was sorting into sizes turned out to be as important as the wagon, in its way – it contained oilskins. Though worn and stained, they were still serviceable.

"Did you get these from your horse guy?" I asked Luz.

"No, they're from the supply store. The storekeeper asked where we were going, so I told him we were heading west to Togura on the coast to meet family for mid-summer," she said.

"Do you think he believed you?" Miska asked.

Luz shook her head.

"He seemed more concerned that we had somewhere dry to store all the stuff he was selling us. He already thought we were crazy."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because this is the rainy season, Alma. And like the man said: 'nobody in their right mind travels across Meshak in the rainy season' ..."

A fortnight later to the day, we were huddled together under dripping canvas by the side of the Melisse, while the rain hammered down all around, and the meadow below us disappeared beneath the waves. Noa and Luz had returned from their scouting expedition just after dark and reported that they'd walked for nearly ten miles due east with the river, and it was flooded and rising the whole way. What was worse, was that for much of that distance it wound about a steep-sided canyon, where it was impossible to find passage for the wagon even if we could have made it across the meadow and marshland in-between. For two weary hours we discussed the situation back and forth, with no agreement on the best course. Our way lay across the river, and then over a series of dales beyond, towards the Meshaki capital of Norbek some two-hundred miles distant. Yet Luz admitted that she had never seen weather like this before, and that our route might well be impassable from this point onwards.

"We could always go back to Mecheltev," I suggested.

Tord groaned at the idea of retracing our steps. Then Josey spoke up.

"I need to go home," she said. "I'm from the north, originally."

Tord stopped his pantomime groaning and knelt in the mud by the Singer's side.

"Then we'll find a way, my Lady!" he reassured her.

Noa joined him on her knees.

We're going home, Lady Josephine, she said, ***even if we have to swim to get there.***

Without realising it, I had joined the rest of my zealous companions, kneeling in the mud at Josey's feet, and we all swore to push on North whatever the obstacles. That seemed to settle things. We were still faced with an impossible crossing, but there was little that could be done in the dark. Standing and dusting herself down, Luz took charge of us.

"If we're going to find a way forwards, we'll need to rest. Let's look at our options again, first thing."

Anya took the evening watch, and I gave her my gloves as her own were soaked from earlier attempts to snare fresh meat. I climbed wearily into the back of the wagon and unpeeled my oilskins, hanging them to dry above me. As I settled down between Josey and Noa, I saw the Kasivara's eyes glint in the dark.

Sleep well, little sister, she said.

“Noa, can I ask you something?”

I took her silence as a ‘yes’ and continued.

“Can you swim?”

I don’t know why the question popped into my mind at that moment, but as you know, first-to-mind is always first-to-mouth with me. There was an awkward silence, and then I saw the flash of Noa’s teeth as she grinned.

Can you? She asked.

Not very well, I admitted.

That makes two of us, she said. *I learnt to swim in a water cistern in the deep desert, but I’d still rather fight a bear than get my hair wet, if you must know. Does that answer your question?*

I nodded.

Papa taught me in the river just below Lachan. He said it was so cold that it was a sure-fire way of getting me to shut up!

We sat together in the moment, remembering.

I miss him, Noa said, eventually.

I shucked down among my blankets.

So do I ...

Blue-tiled bar down the docks. Smell of grilled fish.

There’s a song in my head.

Barco Negro ...

[...] e o teu barco negro dançava na luz
 Vi teu braço acenando entre as velas já soltas
 Dizem as velhas da praia que não voltas
 São loucas,
 São loucas [...]

Sam?

Do you remember Portugal? It rained nearly every day.

We sailed round the coast with the kids. You taught Becky to swim off the back of the 'Melisse' near Carcavelos beach, and then Johnny steered us into Lisbon port the same day, wearing a real leather pirate's hat, with me and Annie singing 'Rule Britannia' at the top of our voices!

You can't have forgotten that!

We were supposed to spend ten days onboard, but in the end we booked into a hotel after four because you refused to stay another night on the boat – said it was like being trapped in a tin can with someone pissing on your head, poetic in your prose as always. We tied up Mlle Melisse in the Parque des Nações marina, scuttled her, and made good our escape downtown.

In my memory, blue doors open inwards,

A hub of talk rifled through with the clink of glass and the clatter of cutlery; full, but not crowded. Pickled carrot salad, bread, and olives appear on the table by the window as we take our seats; and no one recognises me, nobody at all. We ask for wine and Coca Cola and I French-plait Annie's hair – almost like a normal mum ... on a normal holiday. There's a band setting up: voice, accordion, Portuguese guitar, violin. The singer offers up a few notes to the smoke-stained ceiling and our Annie's head tracks her like radar, hungry blue eyes devouring everything she has to give.

Becky's only six and can't sit still yet unless there's a piano involved.

She spies an old upright over by the bar, and while Annie and Jonathan argue about the seating arrangements, she waltzes away. Across the room, she sits down without ceremony and plays Mozart.

Nobody notices at first ... the musicians carry on unpacking their gear and folk carry on eating their fish. But by the time she finishes, the room bursts into spontaneous applause. Diners shout out their delight, the singer kisses her hand and the barman pours her a Coke-float. Only fifteen minutes through the door and Rebecca's home-from-home. She bows and runs back to us with a lopsided smile. As she arrives at the table, Annie stands abruptly, pushing her chair back.

"You okay, love?" I ask.

"Fresh air," she murmurs absently, without turning.

I watch her make for the door, face flushed and mouth set, and I worry about her...

We're still peering at the menu when the band starts tuning for a second set. Annie's had enough of her sister for a lifetime.

"For god's sake, just buy her some strawberry ice cream, dunk a portion of fish fingers in it and get her to shut up!"

"That's enough, Annie!" you tell her. "You used to take your time choosing food as well."

Everybody else has ordered. Chargrilled sardines. Monkfish with garlic and basil. Giant prawns. Fish stew. Unfazed, Becky prods the menu with a sticky finger.

"Can I have those pink maggots and a strawberry one of that ... together?"

"One of what?" I ask.

"That, mama!" she points at the menu, tapping a photo of a huge ice-cream sundae.

"Prawns and ice cream ..." Sam translates.

Becky nods at her dad.

"Two scoops," she says, face deadly serious ... two fingers raised in front of my nose.

My youngest's going through a phase of matching foods by colour. Unfortunately, I can't live with some of the combinations this generates.

"No Rebecca you can't!" I snap at her. "Sit down on your bottom."

She does.

"Why don't you have some fish stew, then finish off with the ice cream?"

"I don't like stew."

"Why?"

"... because it's yellow."

We don't eat until gone 10pm, but the evening flexes its arms to accommodate us. And when the bonny Portuguese girl finally sings 'Barco Negro', it marks the place out. Fixes it in my mind forever ... like Proust's Madeleine or the moon-landing.

Annie's the only one left standing as midnight chimes. Tight-lipped, she walks us back to the hotel in the rain, like a teacher whose favourite pupils have mutinied. You wink at me and smile.

"There'll be hell to pay in the morning!"

The next day there was a lull in the rain, for which we were all grateful. Nevertheless, during the night the river had continued to fill the meadow, rising up the shallow valley-side until it was almost lapping at the wheels of our wagon. The whole valley looked like an inland sea, and the undulating path we had taken the day before as we wound down towards the Melisse was itself now submerged in places.

Tord appeared from the other side of the wagon.

“Seems the weather’s forcing our hand,” he said, as he greeted me. “We can’t even go back the way we came now. And if it rains again tonight, we’ll find ourselves swimming if we stay where we are.

“Swimming may yet be the final outcome, whichever path we choose,” Luz said, stamping her feet to restore circulation as she emerged from the wagon’s cramped interior.

Our company gathered around the kettle; Josey wrapped in a Kasivari scarf, nose red and eyes watering; Anya and Miska dour and preoccupied. The rest of us made small talk in an attempt to stave off the inevitable decision that had to be made. Should we abandon our journey here – leave the wagon, put Josey on Feldgrund, and take what gear and provisions we could carry with us across country back up to the top of the valley? Or should we brave the Melisse?

I investigated my tea, watching a solitary pine needle circle lazily on the surface while my mind drifted.

“Didn’t the inventor say the wagon was ... caulked?” I mumbled.

Kolle heard me and shot to his feet like a piston, knocking over the stove in his haste.

“Bloody hell ... the girl’s right!” he shouted. “The bed and sides are watertight!”

I struck the wagon wheel a glancing blow with my boot.

“There you are, then,” I said, “this thing’s our best bet ...”

The day before, we’d talked about the possibility of building a raft, dismantling the wagon, and poling it across the river, if we could find enough wood and if the water levels went down sufficiently to make the attempt – but this morning that didn’t look likely on either count. And besides, the construction would have taken more time than we had, with the water rising around our ears. But if the wagon itself could float ...

Suddenly, everyone was talking at once.

Miska had an idea that we could use our empty freshwater canisters as floatation tanks, tied on the outside of the wagon at the waterline. We would need to transfer any fresh water that remained into our spare bladders – but that could be done. Kolle offered to repack our remaining

supplies, making them as watertight as possible.

We need to know how far the flooding reaches on the other side of the valley, Noa said, looking at Tord. *Can you fly, mage?*

“No, but I will try and find the information you need all the same,” he said, “though the spell may not work ...”

We watched as he sat down at the back of the wagon and began to produce a series of grinding, low-frequency pitches. While the notes seemed random, the sequence of accompanying overtones was complex and powerful. These were followed by deep exhalations, then the mage’s eyes rolled back into his head till only the whites showed and he let out an unnerving cry, like the shriek of a banshee. Sweat poured down his face, and I moved closer to catch him in case he passed out. Suddenly, from somewhere high above us, his cry was answered. I spotted a falcon scudding over the valley, a black speck racing against the grey sky, and I touched Tord’s hand, but it was cold and lifeless, like stone. Noa motioned to me to leave the mage to his business.

He has entered the mind of the bird and is viewing the land beyond the river through her eyes, she said. *To disturb him now would be dangerous.*

We waited until Tord’s erratic shallow breathing abruptly deepened, and he sucked in a huge lungful of air, like a drowning man brought suddenly to the surface. His eyes rolled down, and the mage was among us once again.

“Here! Drink this!” Kolle said, chafing his friend’s hand and offering him a metal cup, half-full of cheap brandy.

Tord gulped the coarse liquor down, coughing as it clawed at his throat. With a free hand he wiped the sheen of sweat from his face.

“If we can get across the river, we are in luck. The Melisse has flooded the valley for about five or six miles on the other side as well, but after that the land rises steeply; and though the going is heavy, I saw drovers’ paths and flocks of sheep on the far hillside.” He let his head sink into his hands when he’d finished speaking, as if to stabilise the world around him.

“Our thanks, Tord,” Luz said. “If this is the case, we must ready ourselves. Kolle, can you and Miska scavenge wood from above the flood line, and try and fashion paddles for us to use? Tord will join you when he’s recovered, and the rest of us will ready horse and wagon for the crossing.”

Until mid-morning, our makeshift campsite was a hive of activity. Even Josey was seized by the sense of purpose. She washed our tea things, folded and stowed the bedding in the back of the wagon, and decanted the fresh water, while Luz and Anya discussed how best to get Felgrund across the Melisse. They decided we should pay out a lead rope and tie it to the back of the wagon.

“That way she can swim behind us, and if the current takes her, at least she won’t be hit by the wagon,” Anya said. “I’ll make it my business to watch her and see how she fares.”

Meanwhile, Noa and I removed the shafts at the front of the wagon. After we’d managed to undo the flush iron bolts that secured them to the wagon bed, we lay them on the floor in the back. When Anya had finished feeding Felgrund, the four of us reloaded our worldly goods and rolled the canvas cover halfway up the frame all around to make it easier to paddle. Luz fastened the empty water canisters, one front and back, and two on each side.

“How’re we all going to fit in the wagon at once?” I asked, peering into the gloom.

“With difficulty,” Luz said.

Just after eleven o'clock we were ready.

Tord, Kolle and Miska had come up with five bespoke paddles, and we stood around in our oilskins admiring them, as if that was to be the extent of our exertion for the day. It was Noa who finally galvanised us into action.

I will begin a directing spell the moment we are afloat, but I’ll need help to maintain it, she said.

I offered to sit by her and lend my craft, such as it was, and Tord, despite being exhausted from his shamanistic casting earlier, said that he would do the same.

“Let’s go then!” said Luz. “Looking at the river isn’t going to get us across!”

Anya led Felgrund round and tied her to the backplate, while the rest of us manhandled the wagon until it faced the rising edge of the tide, twenty feet away down the hillside. Then with Josey and I safely inside, the others fastened lines to the backplate and slowly lowered her down. There was a slap and a splash, and it was done: we were afloat, just as the first rain of the day

puckered the surface of the river.

One-by-one, the companions clambered aboard, and a few moments later four makeshift paddles bristled out from beneath the canvas, striking the water in unison. Noa sat down in the centre of the wagon, closed her eyes and began to chant. For a time, it appeared as if the current would take us where it wanted, regardless of our efforts, then I felt the first surge of Noa's spellcraft arrest the drift and begin to drive us forward, committing us fully to the river crossing. Felgrund wickered as she slithered into the muddy flow at the end of her lead rope, and Anya leant out as far as she dared, calling soothing words of encouragement.

Tord took my hand and the two of us sat down next to Noa in the cramped belly of the wagon. The mage's eyes were bloodshot, and a pulse beat at his temple, but his grip remained steady and we began, between the three of us, to pull the floating wagon across against the river's downstream surge.

We were halfway over when disaster struck.

Noa, Tord and I were occupied combatting the fearsome power of the river when our companions ran into trouble ... or more accurately, when trouble ran into them.

The rope attached to Felgrund was holding well, but the horse had been washed wide downstream of the wagon by the current and she'd been hurt by debris as it flashed past in the water. Anya had stopped paddling and was leant out of the wagon trying to calm the stricken beast. It was as she did this that we were struck by a huge log, knifing downriver like a battering ram. The impact sent everyone sprawling, save Noa alone, who sat, immovable, in the bed of the wagon, chanting. Amazingly, the clinkered sides remained largely intact, but there was a breach near the waterline which immediately began to flood the inside of the wagon. As she righted herself, Luz screamed Anya's name and leapt to the tailgate. But by then Anya was nowhere to be seen.

Meanwhile, Kolle had pulled off his oilskin and shirt and stepped over to the back of the wagon.

"Tell Noa to follow us downstream!"

Before we could reason with the skinner, he was already in the water, swimming strongly with the current.

Alma! You must help me!

I returned to my place beside the Kasivara and Tord reluctantly joined us, repeating Kolle's request for Noa's benefit. We allowed the river to take the wagon, while Miska and Josey bailed out water with bowls and cups, and Luz fended off debris. Then suddenly, from behind a wall of rain, the big Skinner reappeared near Felgrund, holding Anya's head above the water as he swam against the wild current. We tried three times to get near enough to haul them on board, but with the current thrashing us all downstream, it was impossible.

"We must strike for the other side while we still can, Noa!" Luz called out.

Any clear memory of events beyond that point seems to have deserted me now. I remember Luz's constant shouts of reassurance to the skinner and Josey bailing water by my side, but why the Singer never released so much as a whisper of her craft, I'll never know. Otherwise, the three gruelling hours we spent in the water are lost. It became a trial of strength with the Melisse, and every inch of the river was fought over. Finally, the wagon struck mud and stone on the other side of the valley, and we realised that, by the Founder's grace, we had reached land once more.

Kolle had clung to Felgrund the whole time, hugging Anya to his chest ... determined to save her. However, while horse and Skinner were exhausted but alive, when Luz and I drew near to Anya and turned her over, we saw that her face was blue and swollen, and her breath long gone from her body.

We buried Anya at the top of the valley, looking north towards the Meshaki dales. Miska spoke a few words as she had known Anya longest, and then we wrapped our companion's body in her oil skins and lowered it into the grave we had dug. Everyone hauled stones and dropped them over the waterlogged soil until a cairn marked the spot. Josey had unearthed a single violet primrose that she had found growing above a flooded dell near the wagon, and she planted this in between two large stones on the top of the grave. As we left the mournful site, we had no inkling that it would become a place of pilgrimage, or that Anya would come to be seen as a martyr of the rebellion ... a patron saint of rash endeavours and lost causes.

When I visited her grave almost a decade later, the mound was covered in green turf and violet primroses ran riot over the hillside.

For many days after Anya's death our spirits were low. Noa had held us together at the crossing by craft alone, and had pushed herself far beyond her limits, as always. Kolle was similarly spent, chilled to the marrow, and deeply ashamed that he hadn't managed to save Anya's life. As a result, he developed a fever which he couldn't seem to shake. Despite my best efforts, nothing I said would persuade him to allow Josey to help either – he insisted she had better things to do with her time – so his malady and uncharacteristic reserve lingered on, casting a shadow over us until we neared the grasslands and the weather became dryer and warmer. Luz cracked the whip and we continued north, but there was no escaping the fact that it was a subdued and weary group of travellers that arrived below the Meshaki capital of Norbek on the 25th of Fifthmonth.

It was a chance meeting with a farmer in the fields outside the city that saved us from capture and brought us news that turned the world upside down for the company. Luz had called out a greeting as we passed by, and the old man waved us down.

Had we heard? The war in the South was over!

Hidden behind the wagon's travel-stained canvas, my jaw dropped in disbelief as the farmer spoke. He told us that the freefolk had held the highlands. In fact, Sivan had already agreed terms with the Wolf, and all the land south of the Nedray had been given over to 'the savages'.

Luz greeted the earthshattering news with a resigned nod, as if she'd been expecting it. She thanked the farmer and was about to snap the reins to move us on, when the old man continued.

"There's bound to be crackdowns and reprisals," he said, "it's human nature. What I can't stand is the bloody College coming down here and taking over!"

He proceeded to complain loudly about patrols at the entrance to the city, and the Songmistress's agents signing up new conscripts across the capital.

"... anyone without papers is pulled in off the street." The old man sighed and looked out

across the barley. “Norbek isn’t what it used to be!” he said.

“Few places are, my friend!” Luz agreed.

She thanked him once again for sharing his news, and we rolled away through the fields. In the back of the wagon we were in tears. And the fact that either no one had thought to send us the news, or they had tried without success, made the chance encounter with our unlikely informant more poignant. The highlanders’ victory went beyond our wildest dreams. It was a triumph of craft and courage over arrogance and devilry, and each of us (save perhaps the Singer herself) felt that the outcome would change our lives forever.

There are many reasons why people cry.

Tord was crying because he was a southern patriot; Miska was crying because she was happy that she would be able to return to Tivalhas and see her husband and young son again; I was crying for the home I’d left behind, the victory I felt I’d taken no part in, and the father whose dream of independence had helped to give birth to the rebellion, but who hadn’t lived to see the triumph.

And then there was Kollé.

I’ve often wondered about the skinner’s tears. I think now that they were genuine, and the man trapped inside that dark shell was weeping like a child for the loss of his soul.

We heeded the farmer’s warning and skirted around the capital, on tenterhooks the whole time in case a College patrol stopped us. Thereafter, we kept to country roads and farm tracks and avoided contact with people as much as we could, and slowly, slowly we climbed into northern Meshak. When we arrived at Rujam in the upland fens, we settled the faithful Felgrund in early retirement with an oyster woman, working her beds by the side of Lake Gatta; then we sold the wagon and the motorator (much to Tord’s glee) and bought passage on an old lumber barge, travelling the remaining one-hundred miles through the canal system to the grasslands beyond.

Chapter 17 – Kasivari

At last, there came a bone-dry day.

A day when rain was only a distant memory.

As we walked, the heat made the earth dance and shimmer as if we'd reached the very edge of reality and its warp and weft were unravelling in front of us. The rolling prairie was long gone, replaced by a no-man's land of bleak rocky outcrops, stunted thorn bushes and a thick layer of dust. Instead of the sound of heavy boots, our passage was punctuated by the rhythmic slap and slosh of the water bladders at our backs and the prayer-flag flapping of loose cotton scarves, tied around our heads against the scouring wind.

Earlier that morning, Noa had led us down a steep-sided wadi and for the rest of the day we had followed its desiccated meanderings, until suddenly, on either side, the smooth ochre walls dropped away and I looked out on the open desert for the first time.

It was a week since we had said goodbye to the quiet border town of Aveshreev, with its sweet mint tea, its smiling urchins, and its biddable guards. And civilisation had fallen away a little further with each mile we had travelled since. Now, faced with an ocean of sand and the endless azure sky, I was speechless at the austere, sun-drenched beauty of it all. It was a wild, cruel place, shunned by all save the Kasivari who'd lived there since the song of creation was first sung. Yet it was impossible not to be moved by the sheer scale and grandeur of the landscape. Once, Noa's people had roamed freely across the whole territory, even trading further afield into Northern Meshak and down as far as the massif. But since Sivan's coup, necessity had forged them into a nation of warriors and persecution had driven them deeper and deeper back into the wilderness. And there they had remained, keeping their ancient traditions alive, guarding their secrets, and nurturing the flame of prophecies that elsewhere in The Vale were long forgotten.

I caught up with Noa.

Where are we going?

To meet friends, she replied.

Nearby? I suggested, hopefully.

Not far! At a place called ‘Mother-of-Water’, in the old Kasivar tongue. It’s an oasis.

We walked together in companionable silence for about half a mile.

No more questions, Alma Lachanilta? Noa asked, grinning. *That’s not like you.*

I smiled and dropped back by Josey, linking her arm. The sun had worked a kind of magic on us all – coughs and sneezes had disappeared, and the aches and pains that had bothered the companions for months had been burnt away in the ferocious heat.

“I used to love the desert,” Josey said as we walked. “I sang in Cairo once. ‘Aida’, right next to the pyramids, with Mehta conducting. You would have loved it, Becks, but it was long before you were born ...” She began to hum, and for the next hour she taught me some of the strange barbarian melodies from this ‘Aida’, and the two of us passed the time till camp in laughter and song.

The oasis appeared like a trick of the mind at sunset the next day. We had just crossed a ridge between two huge dunes and Noa and Luz had left us to scout ahead, when suddenly I could smell sweet water and the seductive scent of figs. Josey and I stopped dead in our tracks. Abruptly, she grabbed my hand and we careered in a sharp diagonal down the largest dune, tumbling and sliding through the fine sand until we met solid earth, greenery and the first trees we had seen in a fortnight at the bottom. The cool, spring-fed pool at the centre of the oasis shone like a dark sapphire in the last of the light. Without waiting for me, Josey pulled off her boots, her top and trousers, and then she unwound her cotton scarf, leaving it draped like old skin across the stones at the waterside. She plunged straight in and when she surfaced, she kicked her legs and let out a whoop that echoed and re-echoed in the emptiness around us. A moment later I followed her into the water, puffing like Jhansi’s Dragon. We swam out to the centre of the pool and then back again to the shallows, and as we turned around, naked as the day we were born, we found our companions standing awkwardly alongside a wide-eyed group of young Kasivari warriors, maybe twenty strong. Mortally embarrassed, I dived for my clothes. But I needn’t have worried – nobody seemed the slightest bit interested in me.

Lady Josephine, may I introduce chordwan Ce’an, Noa said. *She and her chord have*

come to guide us home.

A warrior with striking geometric patterns tattooed on her face and neck stepped forward. At her signal the Kasivari fell to their knees, prostrating themselves before Josey. It seemed they had been searching the desert for a saviour and clearly thought they had found one.

We set up camp in the oasis and sat down with our Kasivari friends to eat. The *chord* carried scant provisions but insisted on sharing all they had. We ate dates and a strong liquid cheese flavoured with oil and sage. Kolle had made a simple broth with pulses and some dried onion, which he offered around. The Kasivari were very polite, but I saw more than one of them empty powder from a small leather pouch they all seemed to carry and stir it into the mixture. Unable to restrain my curiosity, I asked Noa what was going on. She mentioned my interest to one of the warriors who insisted on giving me the pouch as a gift, and I remember blushing furiously as I mumbled my thanks. Noa reached over and added a handful of the powder to my bowl. Tentatively, I sipped a spoonful and was amazed at the wonderful flavour – somewhere between chicken, nut, and shrimp. I finished one bowl and begged another straight away.

“What’s the spice?” I asked the warrior who had given me his supply.

Heinä sirka! he replied.

“It’s delicious!”

I turned to Noa.

What did he say?

Crushed locust, she said

I heard Tord and Kolle sniggering loudly behind me as my stomach lurched.

Later, we drank thick *kahvi*, flavoured with cardamom from glasses that Ce’an handed round with great ceremony. Looking up at the stars, I was astounded to see one fall right above our heads, trailing such glory that it brought a lump to my throat. I remembered watching other skies with papa by the side of the hermitage and I wept silently for all the useless beauty in the world.

Josey drained her *kahvi* and turned to Noa.

“How about a song, Jan?” she said.

Before Noa could respond, Ce'an spoke up.

Holy one, if you would allow us to sing to you, you would do us great honour.

Josey shrugged and nodded her head, patting Ce'an's calloused hand. She lay back on the coarse grass by my side and closed her eyes as the *chord* began to sing. None of the companions spoke as the music thrilled the air around us. Bare and simple were the harmonies, yet the song was sung with such purity and faith that it seemed to open a door to the universe above us. And when the last notes had melted away we were transported. Kolle, however, was incoherent with grief.

"What is it my friend?" Tord asked the big Skinner. He didn't reply but stalked off to be alone at the other side of the pool.

"Should I go after him?" I asked.

"Best leave be," Tord answered. "Such music makes you think of home and family, and poor Kolle has neither."

"What about a story before we turn in?" Luz asked, changing the subject. "Come on Noa!"

Very well, the Kasivara replied. *But such deep music should only be followed by stories of creation, and these lose something in the common tongue.*

She stood and murmured a prayer. Then she began to speak:

This is the story of the greatest making that ever there was ...

Once, long eons past, the moon gave birth to twins: a girl and a boy – Järjestys and Kaaos. The girl was good with hands and voice; she was a composer and a singer, a baker, a spinner, a finder, and a mender of things; while her brother, whom she loved dearly, was a riddler, a trickster, a shaker and a destroyer. The two complemented each other well, and each looked after the other as they grew towards the stars. When they came of age, the sun asked them to create something new to adorn the cosmos. And so it was that the boy shut himself away and tried with all his might to compose, to bake, to spin, to find, and to mend, without once speaking to his sister. However, these were skills that he had never learned, and now he found he had not the mastery required for so great a task. His sister waited for him to return to her so that they might work alongside each other as they always had, but Kaaos was proud,

and slighted by his own ignorance he fled and hid in the darkness at the far end of time, nursing his anger and harbouring resentment against those that loved him.

Finally, worried that something had happened to her brother, the girl prepared to go and seek him out, but as she stepped into her sieve, her mother called out to her.

“Järjestys! If your brother is gone, then you must attempt the task without him. His absence forces your hand and casts both your fates: forever now you will be the Founder – she that creates; and your brother, the Leveller – he that destroys.”

No argument or plea would move her parents to reconsider, so there was nothing for it but to begin the labour.

Thus, by herself the Founder birthed The Vale, first fruit of her heart. She sang its molten breath into being and nursed its fiery body; and every creature she brought forth, every plant, every rock she fashioned was part of the great song of creation ... and when she sat back to listen to her making, she realised that it was beyond compare. Indeed, The Vale's perfection rang out across the heavens like a bell, where at length it woke the Leveller from his jealous dreams and brought him back home, boiling with rage. Ever adept at destroying and diminishing, he took up The Vale between his mighty hands and shook it, like a broken toy; and in so doing, he tore apart the land his sister had made, causing jagged mountains to rise like giants in the southern wilds and dry ash desert to triumph here in the north. He shook The Vale until its fragile shell began to crack and the rocks themselves began to lament, and through these faults the pitch darkness that was the greater part of him rushed in, blocking the stars.

When the Founder heard The Vale's lament, she flew from her wheel in the garden and confronted her brother.

“Set my child down, or you will cause me to lose my temper. Already you have broken much that may not easily be mended ... stop now, brother, and we shall labour together to set things right!”

“At last you stoop to acknowledge my presence, sister!” the Leveller said. “When everything is finished and your work adorns the heavens for all to see, and I am left to whine at the door like a beggar at a feast.”

“That was your choice, brother. I waited long for you to return, until time had run

through the glass and I was compelled to begin without you.”

But the Leveller was cruel in his spite and would take no counsel. He continued to crush The Vale, his knuckles white with the toil, until the Founder sprang at him with her needle and thread, and the universe trembled at their warring.

Fearing the end of all things, Sun and Moon stepped in to separate their offspring, forbidding either of them ever to touch or enter The Vale in person again, at risk of their own annihilation. But neither would give way over the fate of the new world – one seeking to preserve; the other to destroy. And this, their dispute, has been carried down the ages, even until today. Unable to stand on The Vale’s soil themselves, they must employ agents to realise their designs. From the Founder, Singers were sent to protect the land and its people, to teach them their lore, and to help them make sense of their lives; while the Leveller chose to work through the creatures of darkness he had introduced to The Vale when first his hand closed about her throat. Chief among these was Paholainen, the Lord of Shadows, who works always to unbind those things set fast by the Singers.

Much has changed in the world since those ancient days, my friends, and yet our lives still hang in the balance from the same cause. We Kasivari stand – as we always have – on the side of the true Singers against the serpent; and we wait for the dawning of a new age: a time when our children can sing without fear, when we can teach the desert to bloom as once it did on the first day of creation, and where Paholainen and his servants are driven back into oblivion for all eternity.

“I’ll drink to that,” Kolle said, walking back to sit among us as if he’d never been away. He was immediately handed *kahvi*, to which he added a generous slug of brandy. The bottle travelled round the fire and when it arrived back, Luz raised her glass.

“Well met Ce’an, she said. Then she turned to Noa. “May the Founder grant us all the grace to see this new era rise from the ashes of the old!”

‘Amen’ echoed around the oasis, the cry rising into the star-sprung sky until it disappeared into the vastness of the desert night.

Early next morning before the sun was up, we were already walking in the deep desert. While the Kasivari moved like ghosts through the sand, barely leaving a mark as they advanced, the rest of us were considerably less accomplished. Noa told us to tread in the footsteps of the *chord*, and this we did, by and large. I lost count, however, of the number of times I stumbled and slid as we crossed the wilderness – and I was not alone in my ineptitude. Eventually though, the gait and the daily rhythm of our guides began to rub off on us. We stopped when they stopped, marched when they marched; and always as we progressed further into the embrace of the empty dunes, we kept the rising sun on our right. The desert folk knew where to find food and water in a land that seemed bereft of both. Plants that were invisible to us would be found and dug up, exposing tap roots loaded with moisture. Stills were excavated as soon as we stopped, and by the time the sun had cooled we had fresh water to drink.

Ten days out from the oasis the land began to rise, and we laboured up onto a blistering escarpment of sandstone and granite. At midday we took refuge in a rock cleft and I drifted into a cool reverie of the Five Valleys. I was brought sharply back to reality by the sound of sand devils twisting across the heights towards us. I asked myself why anyone would choose to live in such a place and the answer came back unbidden, as if papa were beside me again: ‘... most people don’t have the luxury of choice, Alma; they must deal with life as they find it.’

Perhaps sensing the weariness in my mind and body, Noa informed me that we would be in Ez Nomar by nightfall.

“What’s it like?” I asked, turning my back on the whirling dust.

Ez Nomar?

I nodded.

I was born and raised there she answered. *It’s a special place. Almost as old as the College itself, and very beautiful. And the rock is alive just like the College Massif. My mother lives still inside the city walls. She has many responsibilities, but I’m sure she’ll be pleased to see us. If you’re lucky, Alma Lachanilta, you might even get something better than powdered locust to eat!*

After weeks of desert rations, my face lit up at the idea.

“What does your mum do?” I asked. “Is she a cook?”

She is the Mage of Ez Nomar.

Ce'an led us down from the scorching sandstone heights and we threaded our way into a deep canyon from the top of the rift, along paths cut into the sheer rock that shimmered with the stored heat of the day. These half-tunnels seemed to have been burrowed by some process unknown to wetlanders, and they looked for all the world like collapsed wormholes. Whatever their provenance, they brought us safely down the giddy incline and as we descended into the canyon proper, the punishing temperature began to recede.

Setting out from the Sacred Grove, I'd worried that another trek across The Vale was the last thing Josey or I needed, but it seemed that the Singer was physically stronger now than I'd ever seen her. True, she tired quickly whenever she used the craft, and recently, the periods when she retreated into the silence of her own thoughts had been occurring more frequently. Nevertheless, since we arrived in the desert her skin had taken on a little colour and her appetite was – as ever – good. I guess she felt at ease around our companions ... as did I.

The further we walked – the more the light began to fade, and our guides paused to take torches from finely wrought embrasures in the wall. We gathered around and shared the last of the dried figs the *chord* had brought with them, before continuing to wind down into the belly of the canyon. Until this point, the two sides of the chasm had been almost within touching distance of each other; however, after passing a fault in the rock face, the gap widened, and the sides of the canyon began to pull away.

For another weary hour we tramped the smooth stone, conversation gradually petering out as exhaustion set in. Then suddenly, as we negotiated a particularly serpentine bend, Ez Nomar, the hidden fortress of the Kasivari, came into view. The ancient city was built into the vertical rock on both sides of the canyon and the two communities were linked by countless bridges that spanned the narrow chasm. All around us lamps were being lit, even though the red sky above suggested that out on the rift the sun had not yet gone down. And as they winked into existence, from every corner voices were raised, beautiful and strange, welcoming the Ninth

Singer and her companions.

Tunnels and corridors now became busy thoroughfares, decorated with astonishing murals and mosaics, much as I had seen in Miriam's refuge. At a junction guarded by a dour young warrior, we turned back into the hillside and then stumbled along for another fifteen minutes in a passageway parallel to the canyon, asleep on our feet, until Noa brought us to a halt at last by the side of two huge doors, inlaid with silver-gilt.

Beyond this entrance lie the guest rooms of Ez Nomar, she explained.

Ce'an came alongside and spoke to Noa. Then she and the rest of her *chord* insisted on touching their foreheads to Josey's feet, before bidding us farewell. We said our thanks and promised to meet with them the following morning for breakfast. I could see that this pleased Ce'an immensely, and I understood that another chance to be near the Singer – even for a short time – would be interpreted as a great honour among the other *chords*.

When the seven of us were alone again, Noa explained that representatives from the Kasivari tribes had come to Ez Nomar from the deep desert to see for themselves if the rumours about the return of the Singer were true. An open meeting had been called in the Hall of Voices for later that evening when the day's heat had passed, and we were all invited to attend.

There is fresh water, and clean clothes have been provided for all of you. Wash and rest and wait for the summons.

"I can't remember the last time we ate," Josey said. "Can I have a cup of tea?"

I winked at her and she looped an arm round my shoulder.

Meals are served later here in the desert, my Lady, the Kasivara replied, smiling, *but I can have goat curd, bread, olives and tea sent up to you now if you wish?*

Josey nodded vigorously, in case Noa had been in any doubt.

"When exactly is the meeting?" asked Miska, as she pushed the silver doors open. "If I put my head down on a pillow, you won't wake me again for a twelvemonth!"

Don't worry! I'll take you all down to the hall myself when the time comes, Noa replied, throwing a mock salute at Miska.

A wooden chest ran the length of one wall in the fine room Josey and I had been given. We washed and changed into the simple cotton robes that had been set out for us on the chest. The walls of the room were spectacular – covered in frescoes depicting the creation of The Vale. And when I'd finished dressing, I dragged a chair over to the balcony and sat by the jasmine that tumbled over the railing into the darkness of the ravine, scenting the twilight. On either side of the chasm, lamps sparkled as if the place was lit by fireflies. Josey came and leant on the railing, taking a deep lungful of the clean, dry air.

“Shall I comb your hair?” she asked a moment later.

“You’ll have your work cut out, my Lady,” I replied, “it’s full of knots.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, I used to be good with knots.”

She began to pull a wooden comb through my unkempt mane. Strangely enough, not a single tangle caught as she worked.

“It’s good to see you happy, love.”

I considered her words and realised she was right: I was as happy now as I’d ever been since papa’s death. I don’t suppose I’d stopped missing him, but perhaps I didn’t hate the world quite so much for taking him away.

An hour later, Noa announced her presence outside the room with a rhythmic beating on the door and we drank water together before rounding up the other members of our company. Looking (and smelling) considerably better than we had when we arrived, we were taken down a narrow corridor that brought us, after negotiating three sets of wide stone steps, to a heavy cedar-wood door, unadorned to the naked eye but alive with enchantment. Noa embraced everyone, and then led us through into an enormous galleried hall, lit by wide seams of luminous crystal in wall and ceiling. I could sense the pulse of an old and powerful craft beating in the rock beneath us, and I closed my eyes the better to feel its nature.

When I opened them again, we were on a raised dais just above the floor of the hall and I looked out, trying to make sense of what I saw. The ancient hall had been carved out of the mountainside in the days of the first Singer and was intended to seat a thousand souls ... maybe twice that number were assembled there: men, women, and children eager to see a legend come to life, or else perish on the platform in front of them. And when we moved across the dais to

face the crowd, an expectant hush fell. From the other side of the hall, seven Kasivari elders entered, followed by a white-haired woman bent by the years she carried. She wore no insignia or other indication of rank, but as she came closer, I saw that all those around her bowed as she passed. Neither did she appear to have tattoos or other markings on her body; yet her face, once seen, was not easily forgotten – for both eyelids had grown tight like drumskins over the bone ridges of her empty sockets. It wasn't that the old woman had lost her sight – it was that her eyes had been removed to lend her vision. The others on the dais held back and she walked steadily towards our company, as if she saw all that needed to be seen. Noa bowed deeply as she came near.

Mother, I am returned. And I bring with me the hope of all The Vale.

The ancient one acknowledged her with a nod of the head and reaching up she ran a finger around Noa's jawline. She walked on until she stood before Josey, and when she spoke her voice was steady and measured, yet hard as flint.

Lady Josephine, I am Shi Jihan, mage of this refuge. In the name of the seven tribes I welcome you to Ez Nomar. My blood is your blood!

The entire hall repeated the phrase after her. Then with her face upturned towards Josey, Shi Jihan continued.

I it was who told my children where to find you in the frozen south. And since the blood-oath was sworn, I have kept watch over you, when I was able, to try and smooth your path back to us.

When she'd finished, she shook like an old oak in the wind, sinking down first onto one knee and then the other in front of the Singer; and everywhere in the hall, Kasivari followed her example, until in their silent thousands, the whole refuge knelt to honour the Lady. I looked at faces filled with the same zeal I'd witnessed in Noa when she was by Josey's side – a combustible mixture of adoration, strength, and pride. If these Kasivari all fought like Noa and her brother, then the leader that persuaded them to leave the desert and revolt would command a force to be reckoned with. For some reason, the prospect of such a conflict made me shiver.

Looking around, I found myself alone on the dais. Josey had helped Shi Jihan to her feet and to the delight of those assembled, the two women had led the rest of the company down to the floor of the hall, where ranks of the desert folk still knelt on the bare stone. I followed them

and stood sheepishly beside Kolle and Tord.

The Singer and the desert mage sat cross-legged facing each other and the entire congregation held its breath as they started to sing. The harmony was strange; a mixture of exotic modal statement and barbaric invention, but pushing closer, I felt the familiar build-up of overtones as power began to resonate about them. The air shimmered and bent, and then Josey spoke quietly in psi – almost a whisper – but the words hung in the air as if they had been spoken by the rock of Ez Nomar itself.

... For in the wilderness streams will break out and wells shall be struck in the desert!

Abruptly, she sank her hands into the rock at her feet, and it yielded like soft clay to her touch. Her fingers described a circle maybe two feet in diameter, and there was a rumbling that ran to the roots of the canyon and back. When she finally removed her hands, a fountain of clear water shot out of the solid ground. It fired up towards the roof of the hall and fell back down like a benediction, soaking everyone.

My blood is your blood! Josey said, directing her words to Shi Jihan, and the desert folk erupted into wild ululating cheers and cries of wonder from floor to gallery. In a land where no rain had fallen in living memory and the nearest well was an oasis at the far end of the canyon system, to see Josey bring water out of the naked rock beneath their feet was enough to convince those in the hall that the true Singer had indeed returned to The Vale. After that first mighty spout, the water had settled back to a rise of about three or four feet and its sweet babble was mesmerising. The cheers and cries died down and Shi Jihan looked across at Noa. The warrior moved to stand in the centre of the dais, facing the crowd.

Brothers and sisters in song, our cousins in the South have rebelled against College rule and won for themselves a great victory in the foothills of the Five Valleys. They now hold the far south against the Songmistress and her devilry. And I tell you this – though the highlanders raised the Singer's banner first and though she returned first to them and was nursed back to life by the Old Wolf himself, they have entrusted her safety to the Kasivar. This is a blood duty and a happy burden that all here must bear. There will be much to discuss and many plans to make in the coming months. For the present, however, it will suffice to tell those you represent that you were here in the Hall of Voices tonight. Tell them what you saw.

Tell them that the prophecies have been fulfilled. Tell them the Singer has returned to lead the faithful.

When Noa finished speaking, the hall was suddenly filled with song; not the muscular psi I was used to hearing from my friend, but real voices raised in an eerie unison. It took me two whole lines to realise that they were singing a version of the Founder's Prayer I'd never encountered before. I joined in tentatively, relishing the strange harmonies created by the hall's natural resonance. And when the last note faded, I felt the rock around us continue to tremble with joy.

People got to their feet and began to leave, first from the floor in front of us and then from the galleries above, bowing to the Singer as they went. Soon there were only twenty or thirty men and women left behind in the hall, and the play of water from the fountain Josey had conjured was loud around us. A large circular table standing a foot from the floor was brought down from the back of the dais and set in the centre of the auditorium. I stood just behind Josey's left shoulder as she was introduced personally to each of the elders, and while my hearing and craft sense are both excellent, the thickly accented psi of the people that clasped the Singer's hand, or else knelt and kissed her feet, was almost like a foreign language to me. What needed no translation, however, was the oath of loyalty each one swore to Josey before they backed away to sit down at the table. When all the formalities had been observed and Shi Jihan had washed Josey's hands and feet, we sat cross-legged on floor cushions to eat.

How Papa would have loved the food!

Rice, lamb (which seemed intended only for us, as none of the Kasivari touched it), a spiced paste made from white beans; five different salads (including one with pomegranates), flatbread, grilled vegetables, and fresh fruit ... all washed down with sage wine. It was a wonderful welcome, and after passing through storm, flood, and fire to get there, we were grateful to the desert folk for their generosity and warmth.

‘Welcome home Becky!’

The banner above the sliding doors that lead out into the back-garden is a work of art. Annie made it. Cló Gaelach lettering straight from The Book of Kells. Five hours bent over a kitchen table with Williamsburg Cadmium Green, Funchon Red, Prussian Blue – and in the centre, over the doorway, a beautiful Steinway grand in charcoal and Iridescent Pearl White ... just in case Becky’s forgotten what one looks like.

“I don’t remember ...”

Becky stubs out a cigarette in one of my Limoges saucers and pours herself another coffee. Strong fingers shake as they stir in sugar. Her skin’s turned pale grey while she’s been in hospital, almost as pale as the translucent cup she’s holding, and I have the sense that if her feet weren’t locked around the legs of her chair, she’d float away on the breeze. Over by the grill, Sam, Johnny, and Annie’s fiancé James are talking football, but the vague counterpoint of their voices is as much background noise as the hissing of monkfish tails and the wailing of sirens on the other side of the heath, and they might as well be on Mars for all they’re contributing. In truth, it’s just the three of us trying to find nice things to say to each other. We reminisce about camping in Cornwall when they were little, then sailing and surfing off Carcavelos the following summer ...

“Come on, Becks!” Annie says. “Johnny had that ridiculous hat ... and daddy taught you to swim off the back of the boat.”

Becky doesn’t respond.

Instead she drains her coffee in a single gulp, offering up a faint smile as if to appease the gods of memory. While nobody’s actually asked her how it felt to be sectioned, I think she’d prefer that line of

questioning over archaeology with Annie. I try to catch Annie's eye, but she's either ignoring me, or she's genuinely trying to engage her sister in conversation. I look away, sighing involuntarily.

"Nobody forgets their first swimming lesson ..." Annie sounds almost apologetic, like Columbo returning to a crime scene.

"Dad!" she hollers, effortlessly bridging the gulf between barbecue and table. "Dad! What was our boat in Portugal called?"

"Melisse!" Sam finally yells back.

"That's it!" she turns, triumphant. "You learned to swim off the back of the 'Melisse'."

Annie grins like she's just positioned Becky on the cusp of enlightenment.

"Ring any bells?"

"I don't remember," Becky murmurs, shaking her head.

James walks over.

He's a nice lad, works in a merchant bank in Canary Wharf. His dad's the Right-Honourable-somebody-or-other and besides being the poshest person in the garden by a considerable margin, he also possesses the loudest speaking voice.

"Sorry to interrupt, ladies, but Chef advises me that the fish is ready!"

"Thank you, James," I say, turning to my girls. "Shall we?"

On any other day, the presence of hot food nearby would have signalled an end to all discussion. But today, Annie can't let Rebecca be. Like a dog with a bone, she wants her to dive deeper into their shared past, to show that however fucked-up the world outside is – and however far they've grown apart – they can still find something of themselves in each other. A laudable theory ... excruciating in practice.

Around the table patience is beginning to fray, like old rope.

Annie leans over, incredulous.

“What about playing Mozart in the Blue bar? They loved you there! I bet you haven’t forgotten that!”

Becky stands up abruptly, slamming her legs into the underside of the table with a dull crack. The cup flies from her hand, smashing somewhere over by the door. And though the table is too heavy to upend, for a moment the coffee-pot dances crazily. My youngest daughter looks around, wide-eyed, like a stricken deer; and then she walks back inside the house. And though she doesn’t say another word, for days afterwards all I can hear is her parched voice echoing in my head,

I don’t remember ...

Shi Jihan said that we could rest easy that night as there was no evil inside the ancient fortress unless we had brought it in ourselves. It was an off-the-cuff remark, intended to emphasise how safe we were in her care; but it proved to be darkly prophetic. For you to understand fully the terror that stalked the perfumed darkness in Ez Nomar, I must summon up demons that still haunt me after seventy years. The tale is no easy one to tell, for my own fault is written there for all to see. Yet as the Kasivari say, there are only two mistakes a seeker-after-truth can make: not going far enough along the road, and not setting out on the journey in the first place. In this, as in all else ... you will be the judge.

We had eaten our fill and shared stories in the Hall of Voices until we were hoarse, and as we climbed back towards our rooms everyone seemed content. The long journey was over, and Josey was safe among friends in the hidden realm. Yet for some reason I was restless and vexed. The dissonance that jarred my senses when Kolle opened his mouth had returned at table with a vengeance, and suddenly it had begun to bother me once more. I suppose I’d become inured to it as we travelled through Meshak, and the man’s obvious goodwill and courage

throughout our odyssey had erased all sense of foreboding. But now, with the craft flowing through the very stone beneath our feet, I couldn't hear the words of the yarn he was spinning for the crow-cluster of overtones that accompanied it. My head pounded and I didn't need to be a student of the craft to know that something was wrong; but when Josey asked how I fared, I smiled back at her, mumbling platitudes and choosing to ignore the alarm bells. The man was a family friend, he'd known my father, and his loyalty, now proven on many occasions, was not mine to question.

If only.

If only.

It's true that if only I'd allowed my instinct to sway my judgement, perhaps much of the grief and hardship that followed might have been avoided. It's also true that wisdom is easy to stumble upon after the fact. Though I sensed the presence of the enemy well enough, I couldn't interpret my feelings, and consequently I was of little help to my companions when it mattered most. You see, with my dark moods, my sharp tongue and my longing for revenge, I thought that I was the one who had carried the taint of evil into Ez Nomar.

The seven of us arrived back at the silver-gilt door in good spirits and we sat with Josey, reliving our journey, singing and clowning until I saw the Singer's head start to nod. Kolle – who had been the life-and-soul of the party – brought out a special bottle of vintage Lachani brandy which he had carried all the way from the Highlands in his ni-pac. He suggested a nightcap and there were tears among the company as we drank to the health of The Vale, remembering papa and Anya, saluting the Wolf, and blessing the Singer's return to the land. We shattered our glasses in the empty grate, as custom demanded, and then we said goodnight.

Noa remained with us, and she and I made a fuss of Josey. We listened to her account of a barbaric singing competition that she had won in her own world, while I combed out her hair in repayment for her earlier help. Finally, I sang her to sleep with a lullaby my Aunty Val had taught me and when she was snoring, I went to the room Kolle shared with Tord, and asked him for the brandy bottle. He handed it over, his one good eye never leaving my face.

“Are you sure, Alma Lachanilta?”

“Of course I’m sure!” I replied. “I wouldn’t ask otherwise!”

For a fleeting breath, it seemed as if the skinner wanted to say more. Then the moment passed, and he grinned.

“Enjoy!” he said.

I returned to the room and like the young fool I was, I persuaded Noa to join me in another glass of brandy, which we enjoyed looking out into the stillness of the canyon.

By the time we said goodnight and I had fastened the shutters across the balcony and shot the bolts on the night door, I felt a deathly tiredness that I’ve never experienced before or since; an unnatural exhaustion that sought to shut down the mind and steal the spark of consciousness. I climbed on my bed and sank into sleep like a stone falling down a well, and the last thing I remember before the blackness took me was the strange smell of *sundran* in the room.

A sound like a cat coughing up a fur-ball dragged my craft-sense out of suspension and my sluggish waking mind followed. The chamber was quiet and surprisingly cold. I tried to move and found that my body would no longer obey me; neither could I shout or make any other kind of sound. Only my heart, lungs, and eyes seemed still to function. Desperate, I looked across at Josey, and to my horror, I could just make out the figure of a man standing in the darkness by the side of her bed, his back towards me. The mixture of anger, fear and helplessness was almost overwhelming, but as I stared in enforced passivity, I recognised the muscular frame.

It was Kolle.

Every dissonance that I had buried or ignored came crashing back into my head. How in god’s name had he got into the room?

The skinner bent over Josey, checking her neck to see she was still breathing. Then he began to move slowly back-and-forth, criss-crossing the chamber, humming under his breath as he went. All the time, I was aware of the cruel irony that guards were stationed only a few yards away at the end of the guest corridor, protecting us against attack from outside. But against

treachery and betrayal from within, the door had been left wide open. I tried to scream for help, but whatever dark spike had been introduced into the brandy, it precluded my use of psi while it ran its course.

Kolle had completed his spellcraft and he made his way back towards the Singer. The skinner had always been an indifferent magician as far as I knew, and it was clear that the shielding spell he had sung into place was only a shell, like the frame of a tent without the canvas. He needed power from somewhere to activate it.

The big man coughed once more, and this time his body was racked by a terrible convulsion, as if he was about to vomit. I could just make out his huge form doubled over at the end of Josey's bed, a strange indigo luminescence blossoming from behind his single eye. That same dusky glow started to pour like contagion from his open mouth and then from his ears and nose, light intensifying as it pooled around his chest cavity. I felt dark magic oozing into the room from Kolle's rigid body and the shield that he had lovingly prepared was suddenly activated, sealing the space off from the world outside. My own tenuous grasp on consciousness was tested as I began to choke on the stench of rot that plagued my nostrils. And as I watched aghast, the skin across Kolle's barrel chest rippled and stretched as if it had a will of its own. There was a soft wet tearing sound and a cracking and snapping of bone, and suddenly a man's arm burst through Kolle's ribcage, reaching out towards me like a blind spider. I closed my eyes against the horror, but the sorcery that filled the chamber could not be denied. With my eyes shut, I could still see the vortex of power in front of me. And when the opening was large enough, and the skinner's poor flesh-and-bone were burned away, a hellish figure stepped from the maelstrom.

I can feel your sparrow mind, girl, and I know you see me.

I knew the Keeper's voice instantly, hating it with a passion that went beyond all reason and restraint, and I screamed my silent venom like a mad thing. For a golden second the shield around the room faltered, but the Master Keeper paid it no heed. He simply walked over to Josey and picked her up like a sleeping child. Then he moved back towards the indigo vortex that still raged in the centre of the room.

I have not the time now to deal with you as I should ...

There was a thunderous crack as something hit the rock wall outside. It appeared that my cry had not been in vain ... someone was trying to break both wall and spell to enter the chamber.

... but do not doubt me when I tell you we will meet another time, without the interruption of wolf or scorpion, and then I think your nine lives may have run their course.

He turned, spurs raking the stone floor, and stepped back into the portal, taking Josey with him. The portal closed behind them, plunging the room back into darkness.

That same instant, the shield cracked under the pressure of mighty craft applied from outside and Noa smashed through three feet of solid rock, pulverising it with her bare hands to reach me. I saw her tortured eyes flick around the room, taking in the Singer's empty bed, Kolle's blood on the polished floor and my own frozen countenance; and I watched, still helpless to intervene, as she sank to her knees by my side.

Chapter 18 – Counterpoint

Central Hall

From a gallery high above the white marble and mosaic floor, an angelic choir wove their chant around the Songmistress. Today she was final arbiter in a closed trial, the proceedings of which had gone unnoticed by the population at large in the College. Still reeling from defeat in the South, the citizens had taken to the streets to protest at the continuation of food rationing and other wartime sanctions, and since she had returned from her summit with the Wolf, she had been forced to set the Master Keeper on them more than once to maintain law and order. For the moment, she was still numb with pain at the loss of her son; and sitting across the negotiating table from his killer, she had almost despaired. Yet today Sivan was smiling again. She felt that hers would be the sweeter victory. Old Stefan might have won his day in the sunlight, but she would make sure that he, and the highland rabble he led, enjoyed an eternity of darkness after this business was concluded.

Bring in the prisoner!

A door opened at the opposite end of the hall, and a phalanx of armed guards took positions across the auditorium. They were followed by no less than seven battlemages, veterans fresh from action in the Five Valleys, who formed a tight ring about Sivan and joined their voices with the gallery choir, adding the strength of their craft to the shield about her. Finally, the Keeper of the Keys entered, leading an old woman into the Hall on the end of a silver chain. Here in the bright sun he looked the least of his peers – brown shoulder-length hair, plain cream robe, and waxy, unformed features – yet the way in which the soldiers seemed to defer to him, and the other mages flinched involuntarily as his spurs caressed the stone floor nearby, spoke volumes.

His prisoner, however, seemed unaware of her predicament. She was still dressed for sleep in a simple cotton shift, and her bare feet made no sound as she drifted behind her captor. White hair formed a mass of natural cork-screw curls that partially hid her face, and the

impression she gave was one of confusion and bird-like fragility. Nevertheless, those that were there swore later that as she walked over the mosaic of Mallian, The Vale's First Singer, flecks of gold and lapis in the ancient pattern seemed suddenly to catch fire in the sun's rays and spring to life under her feet, like sparks from a blacksmith's forge. The Master Keeper dragged the prisoner round until she stood directly in front of the regent's throne and then he leant over and whispered, almost coquettishly, in her ear.

"Today you're going to tell the Songmistress your name!"

She ignored him, turning her gaze towards the occupant of the throne instead. Sivan stood, her heavy robes creaking.

"So ... you're the Ninth Singer of The Vale?" she said, smiling. "You don't look like a saint!" Cunningly designed windows in the geodesic underside of the great dome ensured that the central space was as bright as day, and both women were bathed in sunlight where they stood. The prisoner smiled, her green eyes aflame. "Do you understand the charges against you?" the Songmistress continued. "You're accused of falsely impersonating the holder of the highest office in the land!"

There was silence in the Hall as the two women stared at each other. After about ten minutes, the Keeper made the mistake of interrupting.

"Lady Sivan, if I might make a suggestion ...?"

There was a flash of movement. A flick of the Regent's wrist, and power surged towards the mage like a tsunami. He barely had time to shield himself and, strong as he was, the impact still drove him to his knees.

Have a care, Master Keeper! I am no hedge-witch to be schooled by you. The annals of The Vale are full of politicians who outlived their usefulness. When I want your suggestions, rest assured I will ask you for them!

Sivan resumed her probing of the extraordinary woman in front of her. The Lady Josephine was unreadable, unreachable; buried beneath defensive armour that no chant or spell – neither hers, nor anyone else's – could break. The Keeper had reported that, so far, she was impervious to his crude physical attacks: words hit home, blows fell, poison burnt, and blades penetrated, but all seemed to be absorbed and nullified by the craft that was alive in her very

blood. So far, she hadn't said a word, but the Songmistress already knew her name and the name of her young adept; and she knew also the great power the prisoner wielded. What she couldn't work out was why the woman had allowed herself to be taken. Why hadn't she burnt the Keeper to ash for his insolence and then marched on the College with her zealots?

In short, this rebel Singer was an enigma, a conundrum. And Sivan Callax loved conundrums.

"Lady Josephine, you must know that the penalty for such crimes against the State is death. Yet even now, at the eleventh hour, if you open up your heart to me I will do all I can to save you."

Abruptly, the old woman held her hands out as if in supplication to the Songmistress, and those assembled assumed she was about to beg for clemency. Instead, she started to sing:

"Up above the streets and houses,
Rainbow climbing high.
Everyone can see it smiling
Over the sky ...

The tune was cacophonous and the text incomprehensible, yet as soon as she heard it, Sivan felt the music touch her soul, and there was an aching familiarity that itched at the base of her memory, just beyond reach.

Silence, witch! the Songmistress screamed at the old woman.

The prisoner smiled, beatifically.

"You used to love that show," she said.

I know you, Josephine Singer! Don't think you can walk into my hall and weave your spells before my throne. These are serious crimes: treason, murder, espionage ... the least of which signals your death; and it's been left to me to pass judgement on you. So, you see ... your life is in my hands!

Josephine coughed deeply. And when the fit had passed, she stood, head bowed.

“I told you what would happen if you opposed me. Do you still have nothing to say?”

Green eyes locked on the Songmistress’s face.

The prisoner took a step towards the throne. ***Who put you in charge, Annie?*** she asked, even as the Keeper dragged her back and tightened his grip on the chain around her neck. ***Who made you queen?***

Quite why the old woman’s mad ramblings struck such a powerful chord in the centre of Sivan’s being, she couldn’t begin to guess, but when the Regent of The Vale, Consort of Demons and Mistress of Dreams, found herself dashing away a tear, she knew that she’d heard enough.

On this first day of Sixthmonth in the 8901st year of College rule, I, Sivan, Regent of The Vale, do solemnly sentence you, Josephine Singer, imposter, to solitary confinement for the rest of your natural life. You will be led away from this place to a secure cell, where you will spend the remainder of your days in contemplative solitude. May the Founder have mercy on your soul.

“Muzzle her and take her underground. Her sentence begins immediately.”

Ez Nomar

Noa and I sat in the red dust on top of the canyon. We were dressed for travel, long Kasivar scarves wrapped around our heads and weapons at our sides. I shivered in the pre-dawn stillness as we waited for Shi Jihan to join us, finding relief from the torment and doubt I felt inside in the gusts of fresh wind that buffeted and pulled at us.

No one had slept the previous day, from the youngest child to the oldest greybeard. The whole refuge was gripped first by shock and then by shame at the breaking of the blood oath to protect and serve the Ninth Singer. But the feeling of the multitudes as they wailed and tore their

garments were as nothing next to the pain and guilt of Noa.

In that dark chamber the day before, I had watched, paralysed, as Noa took my knife from the table next to the bed and ghosted the belly-cut she felt would atone for her negligence. I saw her shoulders roll and ripple and felt the utter calm of her decision, and that is when I finally broke out from Kolle's toxic spell. I sensed its hold cracking first around my throat and I screamed at Noa that same instant. There was a blinding flash from the mirror ring and all movement in the canyon ceased, momentarily. Noa froze with the point of the knife drawing a tiny bead of ruby blood where it had punctured her skin. I tried to get up from the bed, but my legs refused to support me. Thankfully, by then Shi Jihan entered the room like a gale and the blade was torn from Noa's hand and lodged to the hilt in the rock wall near the window.

We awoke later in a bright cave near the top of the canyon complex. Perhaps it had once been a hermit's room, for there were delicate paintings on the walls near the entrance. Sun soaked the front of the cell, but as we faced each other, it was as if we plunged the room into darkness of our own making. Noa it was who had the courage to speak first.

Little sister, you saved my life but you've broken my heart. I am ashamed to live with what I have done, and my carelessness with the pearl of the world means that there is no place left for me among my people.

What are you talking about? I said. *The fault is mine ... I persuaded you to join me in drinking the skinner's liquor, and the demon that encased the portal inside Kolle's flesh and blood did something no mage managed to detect, whatever their lineage. Shi Jihan herself welcomed the skinner to the refuge, the Wolf agreed to his selection for the company, and he lived by our side as companion and confidante, through good times and bad, for nearly three months. If the knife must fall on someone for their negligence – let it fall on me!*

Noa's eyes softened as she understood I was in earnest.

Alma Lachanilta, I tell you this: today I relinquish my birthright, my titles, and my lands in acknowledgement of my failure, but because you would not let me relinquish my life,

I give it to you, freely. I will serve you for as long as we both live.

I began to shake my head, but then realised that I needed Noa more than she needed me. Suddenly, I was certain of my path in a way I hadn't been since the Keeper had murdered papa. I remembered the strange sensation I'd had of following a route already decided for me by fate when I stepped out to distract the wolves from Josey's body, all those months ago on the Nomrech Ridge. The feeling was similar.

There is only one thing to do, Noa. Only one thing that will satisfy honour and friendship.

The Kasivara watched, brown eyes unblinking.

Follow the Keeper. Find the Lady Josephine and rescue her. Or die trying.

For a moment Noa remained as still as the stones around us. Then a smile unfolded slowly across her face, like the rising of a winter moon. I held out my hand, as if we were in the playground in Lachan.

Noa shook it.

We'll walk this last path together, she said, and kissed me on my forehead. ***And if they come to meet us with an army, we will make such an ending that they will still be singing of it when the College has crumbled to dust.***

She stood and helped me to my feet.

We must find my mother and ask for her help.

Is that wise? I asked, unable to imagine that Shi Jihan would speed us on our way.

Wise?

Noa laughed and motioned for me to follow her.

We're all wise here, Alma, and how has it helped us? The time for wisdom is past. Blind courage and foolishness will have to suffice!

If it were possible, Shi Jihan seemed to have aged another lifetime overnight. She had shrunk in on herself like a walnut, and it looked as if her bones were trying to escape the skin that held them in place. The three of us sat cross-legged together at a low table in the mage's

sparsely furnished private quarters, and she listened impassively as I told her what I had decided to do. When I finished, Noa added that she intended to accompany me.

And how will you travel the thousands of miles that lie between here and the College? the mage asked.

Any way that I can, I replied, *though I will crawl there if I have to.*

Do you not think that they will have prepared for your arrival? She countered.

Let them prepare, I said. *I must go to the Singer – love, friendship and honour demand no less. I ask no one to accompany me. Noa has offered her companionship of her own free will.*

The old woman walked over to a dark oak dresser at the back of the room.

Love, friendship and honour?

I tried to avoid the scrutiny of those eyeless sockets, but it was impossible. I nodded my head, not trusting my voice. Shi Jihan took up a glass decanter and poured herself a cup of clear liquid that smelled strongly of aniseed.

What do you know of those three? she asked.

Enough to understand that if the same had happened to me, the Lady Josephine would have levelled mountains to come to my aid.

Shi Jihan put out her hand and touched my face, and I felt a strange tingle as a tendril of craft explored my resolve. The old woman smiled sadly.

No-one can see the future. Perhaps those of us gifted in the craft see more pieces of the jigsaw than others, but no-one can assemble the whole picture and be sure they have it right.

She sighed and drained her tonic.

Nevertheless, if I thought I could save my people by pursuing some other course, I would push you and my daughter out of the door of Ez Nomar and lock it behind you without a second thought. But you brought the Singer back among us again, and in every piece of the future I have glimpsed, I have seen your face, Alma Lachanilta. You are the winter spark that starts the fire. You are the key that unlocks the door. Therefore, I will help you to travel quickly where you need to go, though it will cost me dear. I pass the test of pride and can now go to my mother's house unashamed.

Noa and I rose together, a volcano of objections on our lips.

Quiet!

The door to the mage's quarters slammed shut of its own accord and an irresistible force pushed both of us back to the floor.

The two of you will prepare yourselves for your journey, and I will prepare myself for mine. I will endeavour to send you by craft to the foot of the College Massif – from that point on you will be in the Founder's hands.

I couldn't help the tears. This wasn't what I had intended. I looked at Noa to reassure her, but her face was unreadable, as she stared down at the table. Shi Jihan released us, and when I raised my eyes, she spoke directly to me.

Don't be sad, Alma. I have lived a long life and am content with my choices. You must speak to your travelling companions and make your peace with them, for they will be lost without you. And if you wish to leave a message for the Wolf, then you may, for he will be here within two days. As for your journey – it will take me one whole night to prepare the chant, so look to meet me on top of the canyon tomorrow, just before dawn. Now I would like to speak a few words with Noa in private, if I may, she said.

I bowed to the old woman with a deep reverence and left the two of them together.

Wandering out into the refuge, I was surprised to discover that it was not yet midday. I found a bench near an orange tree overlooking the canyon, and I sat down to gather my thoughts, numbed by the speed of events. I don't know how long I spent there contemplating the delicate span of a stone bridge above me, but my daydreams were interrupted by a warm hand on my shoulder.

"Need some company?" Luz stepped around the bench and sat down, and behind her I saw the familiar flame of hair that marked Tord's presence, followed by Miska's worried frown. I realised I was glad they'd found me.

The four of us sat together for so long without saying a word, that eventually a small boy came and started to play with building blocks around our feet. His mother ran out from rooms nearby and whisked him away, her apologies loud in the silence. I patted him on the head as he left and dredged up a smile for his mother.

"What now, Alma?" Luz said, finally breaking the spell.

“I don’t know” I lied.

“I think you do! I think that we must part company and you don’t know how to give us the news.”

I looked at her with renewed admiration.

“Am I that transparent?”

She nodded and we laughed.

“You’re right, I said. “I must follow the Lady Josephine.”

“When do we start?” asked Tord.

I smiled but said nothing.

“You know we *all* swore to protect the Singer with our lives. Any blame for what happened with Kolle is shared equally among us,” Miska added.

“I don’t talk of ‘blame’,” I said, “only of responsibility. The company fulfilled its quest. You brought the Singer safely all the way to Ez Nomar. Now you are rightly free of your obligations.”

“Why don’t we wait for the Wolf and then march to the doors of the College and demand that the bitch give the Lady Josephine back to us?” Tord offered. Luz spoke then, quietly and to the point, as always.

“There’s no time to gather an army, Tord. Or to march it thousands of miles and fight a pitched battle with the Songmistress at the other end. I believe that the Lady is stronger than we think, and her own great power will keep her safe from those who would harm her. But who will guide her out of the mazy corridors of her own mind?”

I turned to Luz.

“It is for this reason I run to her side.”

“You know I would travel with you to the end – as would we all!” Luz said.

I nodded and put my arm around her shoulder.

“Our hope – if we still have any – lies in speed. Noa will accompany me as far as she is able.”

Tord slid off the bench and came to his feet.

“Then we’ll chant for you both until you come back to us, Alma.”

“We’re counting on it!” I said.

We took supper in the Hall of Voices before saying our final goodbyes. Tord gave me an amulet against sorcery he had from his mother, insisting I wear it under my tunic next to my skin. Miska said she would look out for me in Tivalhas in the spring, and Luz gave me a small, pearl-handled canon that she always kept in her boot for ‘emergencies’. She gave Noa a poem she had composed about the fens and then we hugged and parted – Noa and I climbing up to our high cell and the others returning to the guest quarters.

As far as I could tell, Noa meditated facing the murals till morning. Before I fell asleep, I asked about the woman captured in the paintings and she told me that it was the Lady Ishah, Sixth Singer, and a famous Kasivara princess. When I remarked that the two of them had a lot in common, she grimaced and turned back to face the wall.

I am no longer Kasivara, she said.

By the time the sun climbed over the top of the canyon, Shi Jihan had begun her chant. She wove sound around Noa and I, her ebony staff striking the ground rhythmically as she sang. Power rose through the rock at her call, and the hairs across my body stood on end as she passed close by. She stooped to drag the staff around us in a rough circle, and wherever the ebony tip touched the ground it left a bright fiery mark, as if molten stone from the heart of The Vale had been brought up to warm the dusty earth just beneath our feet. When the circle was joined, she stepped outside its confines and turned back to face us. Inside, closed to me and hard as granite, Noa watched her mother work. Across her shoulders, unstrung, the Kasivara carried her great bow, its single rune-laden arrow tucked into a leather belt at her back; but otherwise, she was, as ever, barefoot and unarmed. I shifted the canon I’d brought with me onto my knees and clipped the spare cartridges into my belt. The weapon was uncomfortable to carry and felt inadequate to the task, but if we were met by an army of adepts when we arrived at the massif, I wanted to be sure I would have my say before the end.

It is time! Shi Jihan said. *I have told Noa of a way into the catacombs under Central Hall. It was fashioned in Ishah's time and is entered via a tunnel in the Southern Massif. Whether this way is known to Sivan Callax I cannot tell, but I think not. It is knowledge passed from mage to mage in Ez Nomar and never mentioned outside. How you will gain access to the tunnel is also hidden from me, but I have seen you there Alma Lachanilta, so have the courage to search and you will find a way. And remember this: if you win the tunnel, then you will eventually arrive at a winding stair, cut without rail into the heart-rock of the Massif and cantilevered with such skill that it seems to hang in the air of its own volition. This stair winds for an eternity up through the mountain until it reaches the catacombs above. It is a perilous route, but it is your destiny.*

"Thank you," I said.

The mage inclined her head.

Waiting longer here serves no purpose. Let us throw the dice and be done.

Noa and I chanted the complex sequence of seed syllables Shi Jihan had requested we learn the day before, and cloaked in the strength of her craft, the old woman breathed a single word of power to create the portal. I felt the surge and jolt as her body absorbed an impossible amount of energy from the earth and bent it to her will. Then it was as if the air itself had melted and we were thrown forward with a force and speed that threatened to strip the very skin from our bones. The world vanished around us replaced by a roaring madness, and I heard Noa shout out her mother's name into the heart of the tumult. The old mage's voice drifted back to us as if she were already part of the roiling air we gasped.

May the Founder sweeten every breath you take, my daughters.

We hit the ground like ballast tossed from a balloon, and when we were able to breathe again, we raised our eyes and found that we were lying in a quiet clearing among scrub oak, not a mile away from the base of the southern side of the College Massif. And in front of us, we could see the bitoomin scar of the Trunk Road cutting uphill towards College Bounds.

Grim-faced, Noa was on her feet in a moment.

We must move further round the Massif and put some miles between us and the road.

Without waiting for our bodies to regain their equilibrium, we set off at a loping run to

rescue our friend.

Sivan's private quarters, College Green

Depending on how it caught the light, the hairless face in the mirror shifted between sculptured beauty and a shadow play of patched flesh and exposed muscle, as if the outer visage was a poor fit that only partially hid the wet red workings of the inner. Sivan Callax sat deep in thought, examining the seeds of doubt sown by her strange new captive. Her introspection was cut short by the sudden unwelcome clatter of spurs in the corridor outside.

“Enter!” she called, as her strong features settled into their usual form, black locks growing into place as she spoke.

“I asked not to be disturbed, Master Keeper,” she said, turning round as the mage crossed the threshold. “What is it that cannot wait till our midday meeting?”

“A Comaj patrol above the College recorded a huge explosion of craft just a moment ago in the southern foothills of the Massif, my Lady. It would seem that someone – or something – has just apparated there, with enough force to bring down a sentinel.”

Sivan rose, slowly. And the temperature in the room sank as her mood began to sour.

“How many transferred?”

“The dark one accompanying the patrol said he saw only two leave the portal.”

Sivan relaxed visibly.

“Then take whatever force you feel you need and deal with the matter,” she said, her mind already drifting away from the despicable creature in front of her.

The mage bowed and was about to leave when he turned at the door.

“I was just thinking about the new prisoner, my Lady.” His bland features arranged themselves into a mask of piety. “If the regent would permit me to spend an evening or two in her cell, I feel sure that I could persuade her to reveal everything she knows about the rebel

movement!”

Sivan wheeled round, and for a moment there was a glittering displacement in the air between them. The Keeper prepared to defend himself, but his mistress only smiled in response. When she spoke, her words were devoid of emotion, but they made the foundations of the building tremble all the same.

If you go near the woman without my leave, I will give you as a gift to those I serve. She will die naturally in the cell where she sits, or I will want to know why. Have I made myself clear, Master Keeper?

“Perfectly clear, Lady Sivan,” he answered in a voice as empty as her own.

“Good. Now leave me. We will talk again when you return ... assuming you don’t meet your match down there,” she said, empty blue eyes dancing.

With a bow, the Keeper of the Keys left the Songmistress’ quarters, his spurs raking the polished marble. And as he reached a patch of sun at the end of the colonnaded corridor, his form dissolved into thin air as if it had never been.

Ishah’s tunnel, College Massif

Following Shi Jihan’s directions, we had found the tunnel and managed to open the outer rock door that had kept its location secret for over two millennia. But now we paced like fools outside the inner door, made of a brittle white substance that felt like polished bone. A cursory glance at the door suggested it was ready to collapse at the merest breath of wind, but Noa said that there was magic woven into its very fabric, and without a key of some sort, the world could rot and mankind return to dust before the door would open.

“We could try and make it up to the College Bounds and then scale the city walls under cover of darkness?”

Noa shook her head, still pacing.

The walls themselves are not unprotected, and they're patrolled constantly. There must be a way to open this door. We would not have been sent here otherwise.

I turned back and was testing the doorframe for any break in the craft behind it when I felt a stinging sensation over my heart where Tord's protective amulet rested. It took my sluggish mind precious seconds to work out exactly what that signified, and as I turned back to warn Noa, I was struck dumb with terror when I saw the figure apparating silently behind her. The Master Keeper strolled into the clearing, releasing the winged lizard from his arm, and I watched as the creature settled among the bleached branches of a dead oak to see the sport. Without any apparent effort, the dark mage transformed into a giant bear, even as Noa's bow burst into flame on her shoulders. The bear snatched Noa up like a doll at the same moment, razor sharp claws puncturing flesh as he began to crush the life from her in an embrace that would have broken the back of an ox.

Flipping the catch on my canon and mumbling the beginnings of a prayer, I made to run towards her, but Noa's voice burnt into my head.

Stay back Alma!

He held Noa facing me, veins pulsing in her forehead as she battled for breath. Then for one terrible minute she seemed to go limp in the bear's embrace, and the Keeper fractionally released his hold on her. Sensing the change, Noa straightened like an iron rod and her head pistoned back into the creature's maw again and again, with the force of a steam hammer.

Bloodied and dazed, the bear brought a paw up to its muzzle, and Noa seized her chance. She swivelled round, lashing a free hand out to strike the beast in the eye three times in blurring succession, before locking her legs around the arm that held her in an attempt to overbalance her foe and bring them both crashing to the ground.

Howling in rage and frustration, the bear fastened both paws about her body and threw her with all its might across the clearing. She hit the rock wall in front of us with a sickening crack and my heart broke.

I took aim with the canon and loosed off two easy shots, both of which hit the creature square in the body but had no discernible effect. Without thinking, I reached for the amulet at my chest and by chance, I touched the small hard shape of the ivory key I'd rescued from the

Keeper's chamber, also strung about my neck. Like a match to kindling, the thought caught fire.

The ivory key!

Josey had said I shouldn't forget it in case I was 'locked out'. Heart pounding, I took two steps towards the bone door and fell over backwards. Looking down, I saw to my horror that where my boots had been moments before, two saplings were forcing their living roots into the stony soil beneath me.

Greetings, little sparrow! Welcome back to the College. Plant yourself there and I will be with you in a moment when I have removed the scorpion's sting.

He turned towards Noa, shape-shifting back to human form. The canon flew from my hands and I felt something snap at my belt and looked down to see that my lock knife had been taken. When I looked towards my tormentor, I saw he already had the blade open in his palm.

I reached out to Noa.

Wake up Noa. I have the key. You must--

Even if I live to see the end of this world and the beginning of the next, I don't think I shall ever witness another blow struck with such power and precision as the one the Kasivara delivered to her foe that day. From lying prone on the ground, she seemed suddenly to spring over the Keeper's head and fall down on him like deadly rain, knocking the knife from his hand with a descending kick and then splintering his squib nose with her elbow. Abruptly, the air was filled with magic as the mage sought to subdue her with enchantment. Yet Noa's glyphed skin turned the spells as fast as they fell, and he was forced to resort to blows that favoured her style of combat more than his own. Each searched for a weakness in the other that would give them mastery, as attack, counterattack, feint, and counter-feint were executed in blistering succession, until it became impossible to separate the combatants at the centre of the whirlwind. I dropped into a trance and lent Noa all the craft I had. However, just as she seemed to be gaining the upper hand, the Keeper's winged creature attacked from the tree above, clawing at her eyes. I screamed out, sharing her pain; and a moment later realised that my sister had blocked the way back and I could no longer help her. Though blinded momentarily, Noa launched a mighty two-legged kick that would have been sufficient to shatter the mage's skull, but this time she was a fraction too slow. Transforming into a nightmare creature of rock and stone, he caught her mid-flight. Swiftly

the fight turned, and with fists of granite the mage battered at Noa's legs until they broke with a dry stick sound that brought bile to my throat. Thrown to the ground, she lay panting, unable to rise. The Keeper regained his human shape and straightened, slowly. Gone was the arrogance and the swagger. He was exhausted and badly wounded himself, but I saw Noa's death clearly written in his face.

Tearing my gaze away from the hypnotic scene, I realised my legs were free of enchantment and staggered over to the bone door, thrusting the ivory key into the lock. There was a loud click as the tiny shaft turned, engaging the ancient mechanism, and the door swung open without a sound. And yet, even with the way clear before me, I found I still couldn't leave my friend to her fate. Key in hand, I whipped around just in time to see the Keeper limping towards me. He didn't even look at Noa as he passed her, so he was just as surprised as I was when the Kasivara rolled directly into his path, using only her arms. Ignoring the excruciating pain, she latched first onto one of the mage's legs and then the other, stabbing them repeatedly with the black arrow she'd tucked into her belt that morning. She worked like a surgeon, severing the tendons behind his knees with the arrow's silvertip as he flailed and cursed, until finally he crumpled down into the churned dirt by her side.

Alma, run! And don't stop until you find the stair! Run little sister!

Before she finished speaking, I threw myself through the door and pulled it shut behind me, turning the key in the lock in a single motion. Sobbing in the passageway beyond, I began to run; and I ran like someone who has lost their soul, lurching from darkness into greater darkness along the smooth stone floor. I cannot recall now how long the journey through the mountain's secret depths lasted, but I had almost slowed to a crawl by the time I stumbled into a large cavern at its root. I made my way blindly towards the centre of the space, with only the trembling werelight from my own palm and the uneven reverberation of my ragged breath to gauge the size of the grotto. Gradually, I became aware of a rock-hewn pillar rising like a vast tower in front of me, helixed with worn cantilevered steps that wound up and out of sight.

This then was the start of the winding stair, exactly as Shi Jihan had described it. I blessed the desert mage's name out loud and started to climb. Round and round I went, faster and faster, until it felt as if I no longer touched the stone at all but flew straight down the central spiral, like a child about to be born.

The Provost's Cell, under Central Hall

The cell was uncomfortably warm, and a faint smell of lavender lingered in the air.

Prisoner 943-476-5919 sat on the edge of a Spartan bed, staring at the phial in her hand. She shook the colourless liquid, watched it settle, and thought again about drinking it.

It came in with the food yesterday – hidden inside half a loaf of bread. She was sure of this because the guard had stopped her from taking a bite. Put his hand over the crust. He'd seemed nice ... reminded her of Dr Bennett. A decent man, she thought – same bald head. He'd whispered something in her ear. *Something important.*

She uncorked the tube, and the sharp scent of almonds momentarily displaced the lavender – but it was no use, the guard and his words were gone ... like morning dew. On impulse, she walked to the corner of the room and upended the phial down the drain. As she straightened, a wave of nausea washed over her and she had to sit down on the bed. She was hungry. She'd made a mark on the wall near the bed each time the food tray had appeared. There were three marks.

Three meals.

Three days.

She closed her eyes.

All she could hear was the toing and froing of her own blood, the grinding of bones and the tidal flow of breath. But Josey Knight was used to this kind of music, and she strove like a titan to grasp the slippery golden fuse of self that lay at the heart of it all. And slowly, hand over hand, she began to drag herself home ... singing as she went.

Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen ...

WIGMORE HALL		box office: 020 7935 2141 wigmore-hall.org.uk
A public recital Dame Josephine Knight – soprano Bryn Davies – piano		
Serial No: SGR59468		
Sat	04 May 2013	7:30PM
Stalls	right F17	£30:00

You're in the wings before your final concert.

Sam — who would jump through fire for you, who would take a bullet or a knife in your place without a moment's thought — really can't take the possibility of your humiliation.

He's worried you'll forget the program ...

you'll lose your voice ...

you'll swear at the audience ...

you'll walk off stage ...

you'll miss your cue and never get out there in the first place ...

And he's probably right, because you can't remember any of the instructions the PR woman just gave you. But there again ... were they worth remembering? Doesn't it always boil down to the same thing anyway? When the bell rings, you answer the call ...

And so the bell rings ...

"Dame Josephine ...?"

Sam gives you a desperate hug.

“We're ready when you are!”

Annie and Rebecca wave from the opposite side of the stage. Annie has turned off her phone and is looking at you, really looking ... and it's as if you see each other for the first time.

Two human beings.

You smile and she smiles back.

Becks has chewed the ends of her fingers off and looks as if she's full of molten lava. She's willing you on, lending you all she has for as long as you need it. You lock eyes and you know that your youngest daughter is probably the only one who can really follow you where you need to go ...

And so you step out into the light and it's bright like heaven.

Bryn stands beside his Bechstein, gurning like a simpleton.

There's applause.

Cheering.

A standing ovation, though you haven't sung a note yet.

You bow ...

And then all those swarms of possibilities splintered around your head collapse until it's just you and the maths. You open your mouth and 70 minutes later you've explored the promise of Mozart, Puccini, Verdi, Schubert, Schumann, and Wolf, together.

“Brava, Josey!” they shout. “Brava!”

You're old friends, now. Travelling companions.

Lady Lazarus and the resurrection people.

You take a curtain call and Sam is all smiles. He's surprised when you kiss him, and tears start at the corner of his eyes. He hands you a glass of champagne and you can't remember if it's okay with the medication, but you drink it anyway. The audience are on their feet again. People shout out stuff they want you to sing. They say they love you. You walk centre-stage and ignore them. There's only the Mahler

encore left.

You look over at Sam and mouth: "I'm okay!" ... and it's true, you are.

The applause dies down and Bryn starts to play, but you ... you're hearing the Berlin Phil.

And the moment the harp drops those low pedal Cs, the fog blows away completely and everything's within reach, transparent, searchable ... for as long as the music lasts. The reedy wheeze of the Cor Anglais unleashes a wave of euphoria and you raise your head two bars before you enter and you stare into their eyes, breathing in their hopes and fears. The hall is packed and now there are people standing in the aisles. They heard you were on your knees, that you'd lost it, that you'd probably cancel. But you're here and it's easy for you.

*Words have gone,
names and faces are elusive,
time is broken and place irrevocably changed;
yet in spite of it all you can still sing ...
and therefore,
you're still
Josephine
Knight.*

*And in the field of quantum uncertainty
that one surety is enough.*

The hungry faces beg you to open the door and take them with you.

Somewhere else.

Anywhere else.

And so you start ... pianissimo ruhevoll ...

bist,
throng.

Ich leb' al - lein
I live a - lone

in mei-nem Him -
in mine own Heav -

Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen,
Mit der ich sonst viele Zeit verdorben,
Sie hat so lange nichts von mir vernommen,
Sie mag wohl glauben, ich sei gestorben.

[I'm lost to the world
With which I used to waste so much time,
It's heard nothing from me for so long,
that it probably thinks I'm dead.]

You find the door to your soul, as you have so often in the past, and you wrench it open until they can see inside. Then, one-by-one, you help them across the threshold ...

mal, in mei-nem Lie - ben,
en. I live for love's sake,

in mei-nem
I live for

Es ist mir auch gar nichts daran gelegen,
Ob sie mich für gestorben hält,
Ich kann auch gar nichts sagen dagegen,
Denn wirklich bin ich gestorben der Welt.

[It doesn't matter to me
Whether it thinks me dead;
And I can't deny it,
for, in truth, I *am* dead to the world.]

... and you set off across the grass, through the forest, and on towards the high mountains, leaving the door open behind for those that wish to follow.

Lie - ben, in mei-nem Lied.
love's sake, whose life is song.

Ich bin gestorben dem Weltgetümmel,
Und ruh' in einem stillen Gebiet.
Ich leb' allein in meinem Himmel,
In meinem Lieben, in meinem Lied!

[I'm dead to the world's tumult,
And I rest in a quiet realm!
I live alone in my heaven,
In my love and in my song!]

There's an extraordinary silence ...

And then it's over.

It's all over.

Everybody's in tears. Sam, Bryn, the girls, the PR woman, the audience; everybody ... apart from you. You hold them all in the palm of your hands, rocking them to-and-fro ...

in meinem Himmel ...

in meinem lieben ...

in meinem Lied.

Chapter 19 – Goldberg Variations

Still
Reliable
Local

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Fire at Scardale Grange (Getty Images Ltd.)

Scardale Grange Fire: investigation to begin

SCARDALE GRANGE - In a statement released today, North Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service confirmed that it has begun an investigation into the blaze that tore through the nursing home exactly one week ago.

In the early hours of last Friday morning, around 100 elderly and vulnerable residents were evacuated after fire broke out in the Grange's older east wing complex. At its height, more than 60 firefighters fought to control the inferno which destroyed the entire 2nd floor and claimed the life of retired maths teacher and long-term resident, Mary Evans. Some 20 people required hospitalisation – mainly due to smoke inhalation. Others, however, suffered more serious injuries, including retired opera star Dame Josephine Knight (another long-term resident at the Grange) who remains in a critical condition in the Burns Unit at Wharfedale General Hospital.

Mark Braithwaite, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, told The Gazette: "The Service is now looking into exactly how this deadly fire started and how it was able to move through the building so quickly." Braithwaite went on to praise Incident Commander Iain Johns for his decisive intervention on the ground but was also keen to commend members of the Grange's night staff, saying that if they hadn't put their own lives at risk to rescue residents and begin the evacuation process, there could have been many more casualties before the emergency services arrived on the scene that night.

[Click [here](#) for the full story of last week's fire]

1 hour ago

Local dentist arrested in denture scam probe

A Skipton dentist is being questioned by North Yorkshire Police over a treatment scam that has allegedly cost the Skipton & Craven NHS Trust more than £30,000.

Dr Harold Slingsby, 60, a dental practitioner in the town for over 27 years, was arrested at his Otley Street practice yesterday morning on suspicion of fraud. The former Craven District councillor made no comment as he was escorted from the premises and taken to Skipton police station, where he was detained pending investigation by officers from the NHS Counter Fraud Agency (NHSCFA). Agency contractors have since been seen emerging from the clinic carrying confiscated computer equipment and several boxes of financial documents for further examination.

Slingsby's arrest follows an enquiry by NHS Protect into the alleged forging of nearly 200 claims (worth an estimated £35,000) for taking dental impressions or fitting dentures on behalf of patients who had either never received the treatment described, or who were deceased at the time the claims were initiated. The dentist is also under separate investigation by the IRS, and a spokesman for North Yorkshire Police advised anyone who has had dental work done at Slingsby's practice over the last five years to get in touch with police to discuss their treatment and any payments they may have made. A helpline and email address have been set up for this purpose.

This investigation is ongoing.

Helpline: 01756 504 3**

Email: nhsprotectdental@northyorkshire.pnn.police.uk

All information will be treated in the strictest confidence

3 hrs ago

Eileen cleans up a storm with 'Light Work Ltd.'

An Embsay woman who launched a new cleaning services company this week has just received a £2000 start-up loan from The Prince of Wales' Trust.

Eileen Mahoney, 52, was overjoyed when she found out that her application for support had been successful ...

4 hrs ago

Smoke still hung in the air on the second floor of Scardale Grange's east wing, shifting like wreath mist in the lazy currents that drifted along the corridor. And only the rhythmic jangle of metal against metal – coming from somewhere deep inside the complex – disturbed the funereal calm that permeated the building. The noise grew more insistent as footsteps approached from the stairwell, and the scent of lavender began to co-mingle with the carbon particles in the air to form a new atmosphere.

Ignoring the red-and-white barrier tape across the doorway, Night Manager Brian Salmon strolled, unchallenged, into the burned-out shell of Room 9. He paused, plastic-covered hands clenching and unclenching into fists involuntarily, and inspected the melted nameplate fused onto the skeleton of the door. It was still possible to make out the name 'Josephine Knight', though the letters had warped and bubbled with the intense heat. As he penetrated further into the ruined room, his bland features began to rearrange like the smoke in the corridor, and the ghost of a smile played momentarily across the sprawling suburbia of his face.

A week had passed since fire swept through the building, killing one patient and leaving another fighting for her life in Wharfedale General. It was also a week since St. Brian of Scardale had emerged heroically from the flames carrying Josephine Knight in his arms. And similarly, it was just seven days since the Night Manager had appeared on national television, garnering praise and support for his selfless actions from all quarters. His brown hair had been badly singed, and his hands were still lathered in antibiotic cream and sheathed inside thin plastic gloves, nevertheless, visitors to the burns unit came away with the impression that it would take a lot more than singed hair and burnt flesh to impede Brian Salmon's return to rude health. The doctors said that while he'd been lucky to retain the use of his hands, they'd noted a remarkable stoicism and a positive attitude to pain in their patient that seemed to augur well for a full recovery.

He'd been allowed out of hospital as an outpatient yesterday – on condition of absolute rest at home – and as he left the ward the consultant had given his shoulder a paternal squeeze, calling him 'an inspiration'. Naturally, the marked limp and the fire-damaged voice he had adopted for the security guards on entering the Grange today were entirely his own creations: affectations maintained with Oscar-winning panache in public but

discarded as soon as he was alone. His decision to visit had been spur-of-the-moment, more sightseeing than fact-finding. On one level, he'd simply wanted to revisit the site of his beatification. But what no-one else could possibly know, was that Salmon wasn't merely stoic in relation to the discomfort arising from his injured hands, he actively relished the delicious spikes of pain that washed over his body whenever he tried to make a fist. And to feel the sharp bite of raw nerve-endings screaming for release here in this corridor was ... stimulating. Consequently, it was something he attempted frequently.

The crunch of Salmon's brogues on the charred wood underfoot made it sound as if he were walking on old bones. Disregarding laminated warnings about the perilous condition of the floor, he picked his way to the seat of the fire. The dividing walls between rooms 6, 7, 8, and 9 had largely disappeared and only the structural beams remained, gaunt and black, pointing up like ribs towards the roof, visible now through the scorched slats and fallen plaster. The glass was long gone, of course; replaced by polythene sheeting that moved gently in the summer breeze – now incurve, now convex – giving the impression that the whole corridor was somehow alive. Eyeing the remains of Josey Knight's oak dresser, the hero of Scardale bent down to salvage a scrap of photograph showing the opera singer's profile and slipped it into his back pocket.

Salmon had no idea why he'd returned to the second floor that night – and he understood even less why he had subsequently broken down the blistering door to room nine and rescued the old bitch from the inferno. It didn't matter now, though. Whatever trick his subconscious had been trying to play on him, he had to admit it had been a stroke of genius. A few rooms further down, the other zombie had died – cooked in her own bed like a Sunday roast. Even now, a part of him thrilled to think about the fine line he had walked. That Mary Evans' body had been charred beyond recognition and was identifiable only by her dental records, meant that nobody would ever see the bruises he had planted there reach full bloom, nor would they be likely to find the other gifts he had so freely given.

The Knight woman was different.

He'd taken more time there. Been Subtler. Much subtler. And then he'd brought her out, burning the skin from his own hands in the process.

By the time police and fire brigade arrived, the other residents were being led to safety, and the duty nurse and doctor were dispensing blankets and medication in the intact west wing. He'd lain Josey Knight down on a bed that had been dragged outside. Then he'd

slumped on the stone steps near the entrance to the building, surrounded by the nightshift team. And without him saying a word, a tale of his heroism had begun to emerge from the fog of catastrophe.

--Brian walked right upstairs into the fire and brought one of them down. His hands were bubbling ... the fucking skin was bubbling!

--He's a top bloke. Who else would risk their life like that? Especially for somebody that's ... you know! You've got to remember they're not ... they're not really all there!

And later, when the outside broadcasting vans arrived, disgorging their complements of bacon sandwiches, coffee and questionable journalistic talent, Salmon had given statements, like communion wafers, to all those who'd asked nicely – his maimed hands inspiring sympathy wherever they appeared. When Marjorie arrived, close to dawn, she'd kissed him before bursting into tears for the cameras. And by the time his final interview was broadcast on BBC Look North later that same morning, Salmon had attained media enlightenment, pitching his voice and moulding his expression into the perfect combination of heartfelt sorrow and tortured righteousness.

“Anyone else would have done the same. It's heart-breaking that patients have died here tonight despite our best efforts. I made it out first time ... but the fire was just too strong for me to get back up there. Poor Mary ...”

The silent tears on Salmon's waxy cheeks lent the finishing touch to the whole package. Everyone was happy – the journalists had a hero worthy of a Netflix mini-series; Salmon felt his moment had arrived ... there was talk of a gallantry medal (how his mother would have laughed); and after a reassuring word with the Grange's insurance provider, even Marjorie had started to relax. Scardale Grange was news.

Time hung loose in the kitchen.

The Roberts on top of the meat fridge stood silent and the house phone was purposely off the hook. Pliant minutes hovered over the bright orange Le Creuset pans, stacked-and-

racked neatly near the ovens, while loose-limbed seconds cavorted by the Parry Titan extractor hood, or else skated ineffectually around the stainless-steel prepping stations. Only the steady hand of Head Cook Janice Trufit moved chronometrically as she sliced wafer-thin strips of zest from an unwaxed lemon, deftly avoiding nicking the bitter white pith beneath the skin with her ruthless blade.

Jan was making lemon drizzle cake. Unusually for her, however, her mind was elsewhere. She added the lemon zest to the flour, sugar, eggs, butter and milk already in front of her in a Pyrex mixing bowl and began beating the mixture to a smooth cream by hand, considering all the while the shocking possibility that she had been mistaken about Brian Salmon. Eating humble pie didn't come naturally to Jan, but the fact that Salmon seemed to have put his life on the line to rescue a patient – surely that counted for something? Hadn't he snatched her friend Josey Knight from the flames with his bare hands, for god's sake? Jan thought back to her first meeting with the Night Manager. He'd shaken her hand and she'd felt as if she were greeting a corpse. She'd taken an immediate and profound dislike to him and had been certain that there was something about him that was very wrong ... something that made her flesh crawl. Ever since then, she'd gone out of her way to oppose him at every opportunity, and she was aware they'd both behaved like children. Maybe it was time to reassess the man? An apology would be going too far – but a tactical withdrawal? That might be possible. And it would certainly make life easier.

Salmon was on his way to the staff car park where a taxi was waiting to take him home. As he passed the kitchen, he saw a light inside and thought about his feud with the Head Cook. There was no doubt about it: the Trufit woman deserved carving up and cooking in her own fucking ovens, but hers was the only dissenting voice in a universe full of love for him at the moment. Would it hurt just to pop in and say hello? Smooth things over?

Wearing his best smile, he pushed open the kitchen door and entered the cook's domain.

Jan reached for a lined and greased cake tin and poured in the contents of the Pyrex bowl. Still deep in thought, she crossed over to the warm oven, bent down and slid the cake inside. It was only as she backed away that she sensed a reptilian presence behind her and spun round to find herself face-to-face with Brian Salmon. The sequence of events that followed would never be agreed upon by either party in court but seemed to have occurred entirely by chance. Distracted thoughts, trauma, polished floor tiles, injured hands, sharp knives ... they all played a part. But in the final analysis, from the moment Salmon set foot in the kitchen, fate seemed to have already decided the outcome.

It was as if Jan had summoned the Night Manager just by thinking about him. The bastard was already in her head ...

“What the fuck--?” she screamed as she backed up hard against the stainless-steel prep station. For the first (and only) time in her life, she lost her footing on non-slip floor tiles, twisting and grabbing for the nearest knife as she fell.

Salmon had also attempted to draw back but forgetting that his hands were still raw he had put them out behind him to catch his balance, and when they encountered the work-surface they had simply refused to hold his weight. Inevitably, he fell backwards, cracking his head open on the unit’s sharp metal edge before sinking to the floor, where he landed on top of the cook just as she was trying to get back to her feet. Thinking she was being attacked and with Salmon’s dead weight draped over her to confirm it, Jan began to stab her assailant repeatedly in the legs and buttocks, fighting like a wildcat to lever herself out from underneath his body. Finally, she stood, gasping for breath in the lemon-scented air. Salmon groaned as he sat up, staring in genuine amazement at the blood oozing from his legs and lathering his collar. It was only as he turned to Trufit and saw the red daub on her kitchen whites, the knife in her hand, and the fear of God in her eyes that he started to grasp what had happened. A strange expression – admiration perhaps – played minutely across his face.

“You stupid bitch!” he spat. “Now look what you’ve done.”

“Ground floor: Wharfedale General Hospital Main entrance; Eye clinic; Ophthalmology Department; Laser Surgery; Orthopedic outpatients; Imaging and X-ray Department; doors opening ... doors closing.”

The lift rose quickly, leaving two stomachs three floors below. And while gravity reasserted itself, there was a loud ‘ping’ – as if someone nearby had just rapped a knuckle on the side of an expensive wine glass.

“Third floor: Jason Manny Burns Unit; Wards B14 and B15; Plastic and Reconstructive Department; access via bridge to Bolton Wing... doors opening.”

A tall man in a pristine white shirt and royal-blue turban strode out of the lift and surged away down the corridor, iPhone glued to his ear. The lift doors closed and opened – and closed and opened again. Finally, a large Yamaha keyboard emerged, propelled on skinny legs that terminated in scuffed Chelsea boots. A pair of strong, graceful hands gripped the keyboard in a desperate bearhug as the strange hybrid creature teetered along in the direction of Ward B15.

Rebecca Knight dreaded visiting her mother.

Or more precisely, she had dreaded visiting her mother in Scardale Grange. For Becky, the place was pregnant with pain – and every path, inside or out, seemed to offer the same bleak prospect. For years she’d caught the train from Kings Cross to Leeds every fortnight, taking the branch line up to Skipton and then catching a DalesBus to the door of the nursing home. Becky always arrived with the best of intentions. Nevertheless, her own savage empathy, compounded with guilt at what she had come to see as her mother’s incarceration in the Grange, meant that she was consumed with an overwhelming sadness as soon as she crossed the threshold, and was unable to function much beyond holding Josey’s hand and crying over her Lucozade. She’d pleaded with her brother and sister to have Josey moved back up to London after their father’s death, but to no avail. Annie was too busy setting the world to rights as a rising star in the Labour Party, and the only thing commercial property wizard Jonathan was passionate about these days was money. Neither of them felt the way Becky did about Josey, though both had been closer to her as children. Annie had said as much when they’d argued the previous Christmas: as far as she was concerned, Josey was dead, and only the increasingly mute husk of their beautiful mother remained – to be kept safe, ready for burial when the time came. Becky couldn’t blame them for their

detachment either – they had families and careers; the kind of grown-up commitments that made her job at Waitrose seem like playschool. Johnny had been given sole power of attorney over Josey's financial affairs three years ago now, and took great pride in balancing her books, investing the royalties from her back catalogue of recordings and dabbling in stocks and shares with the fluid income from her property portfolio. Nevertheless, when news of the fire at the Grange reached Stoke Newington last week, it was Becky who had found herself unable to sit by and do nothing. Annie may have publicly thanked Brian Salmon on behalf of the family, and then made sure Josey was as comfortable as possible before she left her in the care of the nurses at Wharfedale General, but after everything her mother had been through, the fact that she had also survived this invitation to hell and was now alone in hospital galvanised Becky into action. She'd emailed work straight away to tell them she needed to take some time off for family reasons. Then she'd telephoned the hospital. The nurse on duty had told her that her Josey was still in a critical condition and under strong sedation, but that a family visit would be good for her. Of course, it was impossible to tell the impact the trauma of her injuries might have had on her Alzheimer's until there was some return to consciousness, but despite losing her hair and suffering severe burns on her arms and legs, the nurse seemed to think her mum was in a better place, medically speaking. In short, Josey was clinging to life, and that was all her daughter needed to hear.

Yesterday Becky had caught the train to Leeds again, followed by a private taxi all the way to Skipton. The Airbnb near Skipton bus station had turned out to be a lot dingier than it looked online, but that didn't stop her paying the woman a week in advance to stay there. And having lugged her beloved P115 all the way to the Yorkshire Dales, she decided that the least she could do was to play for Josey. After all, the last time she'd played piano for her mother was just before she'd dropped out of the Royal College. And that seemed a lifetime ago. Plenty of water had flowed under the bridge since then.

To arrive at the door to her mother's room and to feel up to the task of opening it was a new sensation for Becky. Setting the keyboard down carefully against the wall, she opened the door and peered inside.

Warm tech and the faint nose of silver sulfadiazine, fluxed with lavender floor-cleaner and disinfectant, had thickened the atmosphere in the room until it felt like soup, so Becky opened a window to let in some fresh air and the last of the evening sun, before crossing over to peer at her mother.

“Hello mama, I’ve come to see you again. It’s Becky! You didn’t half give us a fright!” She rubbed noses with Josey like an Inuit before wheeling away to snatch up her rucksack and empty its contents out onto the floor. “You look very modern with your hair like that!”

Ignoring the procedural chirps of the machines keeping Josey alive, Becky began to set up her keyboard in the middle of the room. She plugged the pedal jack into the back of the P115 and found a socket for the power cord. At last, with the keyboard ready and all the cables where she expected them to be, she set her battered copy of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* on the music stand and opened it at ‘Aria’.

“I know it’s been a while,” she said, “but I thought I’d play you something.” She pulled up a plastic chair and pressed the power button on top of the keyboard.

“This used to be your favourite.”

Most music is ephemeral.

Notes are born and they sound, decay, and die ... even as we do. But there are some unique compositions, some luminous performers, and some singular performances that combine sound in such a way that the form, harmony, and expression produced resonates through space and time, reshaping matter and repurposing energy, bending the very physical laws that describe them to breaking point, and generating unimaginable waves of consequence as a result. Like her mother before her, Rebecca Knight – though she had no notion of the fact – was one such performer, and instead of evaporating into the evening air like a weak anaesthetic, Bach’s masterpiece seemed rather to suck the whole world into Josey’s room as she played. Becky hummed along ... a bad habit which neither four years at music college, nor ten years without touching a piano had managed to expunge. It was as she came to the last movement and began the restatement of the opening *Aria*, that she noticed a strange acoustic effect at the edge of her awareness. Suddenly she couldn’t be sure if she was hearing her own voice humming the melody in the right hand, or her mother’s.

Becky realised that the hairs on her arms were standing to attention and her scalp was crawling with rogue notes that seemed to have escaped the confines of the page and taken on a life of their own around the room. She laughed awkwardly, shaking her head to release the tension. And as the last phrase of Bach was translated into the fragile light that fell through the window, she pulled away from the keyboard and listened.

After a long while, with the shadows lengthening outside, she rose and unplugged the Yamaha, putting cables, pedalboard, and powerpack carefully back into her bag. Next, she closed the stand and attached the carry strap. When all was ready, she fastened the window once more and crossed over to the bed.

“Well ...” she sighed, “... I enjoyed that. Hope you did too!” She planted a kiss on Josey’s forehead. “I’ll be back again tomorrow. Beethoven or Scarlatti? Do you remember the Scarlatti Sonatas I used to play for you and dad? Maybe I can dig them out?”

Josey’s youngest daughter opened the door to the main corridor, arranged her assorted bags and straps and then hoisted up the P115 in front of her in the same awkward bearhug that had proved effective on the outward journey.

“Okay then! See you later, mama ... love you!”

She left Josey’s room, flicking the door shut with her heel as she sashayed out, woman and keyboard joined at the hip in an ungainly yet strangely beautiful amalgam.

Hurrying back down the corridor to the lift, Becky didn’t see the smile that blossomed across her mother’s face amid the monitors, medicines, cannulas, drips and salves. Now synchronicity and serendipity are not the same thing as cause-and-effect – everyone knows that. And without cognition, surely a smile is nothing more than a smile; a random muscular anomaly ... an empty sign?

Yet as silence settled once more, like dust, over the hospital bedroom, and Josey’s smile faded inexorably from her face, somewhere close by, Becky’s music still resonated – and her mother’s smile still shone like silver, illuminating an entire world.

Epilogue

Hawk hangs motionless in the blue wash above the Grange, tawny eyes drinking in the world below. She knows nothing of the apes on the ground ... their lies, their triumphs, and their traumas. Not for her the rush of time's arrow backwards and forwards about her head – only wind, sky, and an endless hunger.

Flashing lights fill the carpark.

Oasised in-between the dayglo yellow of a waiting ambulance – doors open to the sun – and the egg-yolk-and-cobalt check of a squad car, five woodpigeons assemble for a parliament on the warm tarmac and drill at the grain mix the cook scattered for them earlier. Suddenly, the double doors to the west wing open and an orange stretcher mounted on a collapsible aluminium frame noses its way out into the sunshine. Two paramedics accompany the patient, one providing the forward motion, the other speaking rapidly into a mobile phone.

“... male Caucasian, 30s, victim of frenzied attack. Multiple stab wounds from shallow blade over rear upper thighs and buttocks. One deeper puncture wound near kidneys. Serious head wound on rear of skull – suspected fracture and probable delayed concussion. Significant loss of blood. Both hands have previously suffered serious burns. Healing tissue may have been compromised and will need to be examined for re-infection on arrival at Wharfedale. Patient stabilised for immediate transport. High concentration oxygen administered. Moving in and out of consciousness. Femoral and carotid pulses checked ...”

The pigeons rise skyward as a flock, some of them landing on the roof of the ambulance, some of them escaping away towards the trees in the lower tiers of the garden. But as the paramedics prepare for departure, one by one the wary congregation returns.

Hawk pauses ... each moment alive with movement – the pitch-and-yaw of wings, the flexing of talons, and the pounding of a furious heart. She is indifferent as the injured man is wheeled out and loaded into the back of the ambulance. And the next procession to emerge from the double doors meets with equal contempt. A dark-haired woman in stained chef's whites is chaperoned across the tarmac. She swears as her captors manoeuvre her unceremoniously into the back seat of the squad car and slam the door. The vehicles disappear down the green throat of the dale, and as the leaves settle, the car park returns once

more to the brutal concerns of the present.

Hawk continues to defy gravity, wings fixed in a shallow V, tail feathers fanned out, eyes burning. Then, without warning, she folds and falls, hurtling down from the clear sky like a stone.

**A Voice in the Dark –
[Re]Constructing
Josey Knight:
Narrative, Time, and
Memory in *This
Hollow Vale***

An Exegesis

Introduction

Universes may co-exist in the same wave-train, operating as the harmonics of a complex of frequencies. Analogous to the groove in a phonograph record, which is easily distinguished into horns and strings by the practised ear – horns one universe, strings another. We may exist in all universes, but ‘hear’ only one because of our limitations, the valve of our desires, our practical, physical needs. All is vibration, with nothing vibrating across no distance whatsoever. All is music. [...] The difference between worlds is the difference between songs.

–Greg Bear, *The Infinity Concerto*

This Hollow Vale is an epic dementia fantasy novel that explores the nexus between narrative and time, memory and identity, and cognition and consciousness. This exegesis examines the role these interlinked ideas have played in the development, construction, and delivery of the novel’s unusual protagonist, and in the shaping of its identity as a piece of fiction.

I began my professional life as a singer. Three years after making my debut with the New Israeli Opera Company, I made my way to the United States and at the tender age of 24 I was living *la gran vida* in New York, freelancing in both opera and early music.¹ Even as it was happening, I think I knew it couldn’t last. By 26 it was all over. I had developed cysts on my vocal cords that required an operation, and unable to afford treatment in the US, I returned to Britain. The cysts were removed – that was the easy part. However, my voice was never quite the same again and it became clear that I would need to find something else to do. I’d always been interested in writing and engaged by literature (particularly science fiction and fantasy), and I also loved film, so having just waved goodbye to my musical

¹ Most notably as a tenor with the *New York Early Music Ensemble* under conductor Fred Renze.

ambitions thirty years earlier than intended, I decided to step away from singing and music altogether. Instead, I threw myself headlong into education, qualified as a high school English teacher, and got into the habit of writing bad fiction (and worse screenplays) in my spare time. And while I was aware that much of what I was writing was rubbish, I took comfort from the words of Hugo and Nebula award-winning author Octavia E. Butler who encouraged me to

[...] forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won't. Habit is persistence in practice (2005, p. 141).

Some years later I moved up to London and enrolled for an MA in Feature Film Screenwriting at Royal Holloway College. Though I graduated with distinction (even managing to sell a finished screenplay), I found myself looking beyond film projects for a larger canvas to work on. The idea of writing a 'fantastic' story – something epic in scope and 'symphonic' in structure and thematic content was already taking shape at the back of my mind.

Fantasy

Perhaps the decision to write a portal-quest fantasy is unsurprising, given my literary preferences.² Accordingly, in *This Hollow Vale*, the story beyond the real-world frame is set in a universe which appears to resist rational explanation, and many of the components of mainstream fantasy have found their way into the novel's

2 In her *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), Farah Mendlesohn points out that subgenre categories "are determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world." Thus, in the portal-quest "we are *invited* [...] into the fantastic" (*Introduction xiv*, [my italics]). The following selection of portal-quest novels spans more than 150 years of publication and hints at the huge range of material available: *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) by C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* (1977-2013) by Stephen Donaldson, *The Fionavar Tapestry* trilogy (1984-86) by Guy Gavriel Kay, *Stardust* (1999) by Neil Gaiman, *The Magicians* (2009) by Lev Grossman, and *The Light between Worlds* (2018) by Laura E. Weymouth.

DNA.³ The central narrative is full of magic: impossible feats, powerful spells, pitched battles, potent healing, wizards, demons, and dragons. As you'd expect, Dame Josephine (Josey) Knight, former opera diva and hero of *This Hollow Vale*, also possesses extraordinary abilities. In a land predicated on the occult power of music and song, Josey's voice seems to promise those around her access to the creative, controlling power of the gods themselves. Similarly, as the action moves us between realities (via a vocal portal) across an entire realm in flux, we encounter world-building, multiple narrators, and a host of secondary characters – and so the notion of the book being 'epic' in scale also seems quite justified, at least superficially. As for a relationship to the larger underlying tradition of epic poetry stretching all the way back to important 'taproot'⁴ texts such as Homer's *Odyssey* (~750 BCE) or the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (~2100 BCE), we can find broad resonances of these works in *This Hollow Vale* too. As scholar Farah Mendlesohn suggests

From the epic, [...] fantasies draw a certain unity of action, the sense that we follow characters through their beginning, middle, and end [...they also draw] ideas of sequenced adventures, journeys as transition, and the understanding that there is a destiny to follow (2008, p. 3).

Deciding whether *This Hollow Vale* can be termed an 'epic fantasy' isn't really a question of scale or geography, however; neither does it depend on how well-drawn the magical characters are, or on the destructive power of the battles in which they engage. Instead, examining the significance and scope of the changes heralded by Josey's arrival in The Vale and exploring whether anything has been resolved by the

³ See Appendix 3 for table: 'Classic genre components in *This Hollow Vale*'.

⁴ John Clute, co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), coined this term to refer to older – sometimes ancient – works that have become important reference points for modern fantasy writers.

time we reach the final chapter, offers much better insight into the appropriateness of the taxonomy. Nevertheless, it is the juxtaposition of ‘dementia’ and ‘fantasy’ in *This Hollow Vale* which changes everything. What exactly is a *dementia fantasy*? Are there any others? And what brought the topic to my attention? The answers to these questions go to the heart of this thesis and shape much of the analysis that follows.

Dementia

After working abroad, I returned to the UK in 2016 to care for my mother, a retired primary school teacher and former amateur singer, who was critically ill in hospital. Beyond severely impaired mobility, the most challenging fallout from her hospitalisation turned out to be the periods of confusion and failing memory that she experienced.⁵ I observed her physical and cognitive deterioration at first hand, and it affected me deeply. Consequently, the events surrounding her illness and her ongoing treatment had a huge impact on the form and content of the novel’s developing narrative. As mum’s facility with language began to diminish, she gave up writing poetry and stopped keeping a diary – something she’d done for 70 years. If I’d been an artist, I would have painted her, but given my obsession with writing and my as-yet-unfulfilled ambition to compose a longer ‘symphonic’ narrative, I began to consider the possibility of capturing something of her singular nature on the page instead. Clearly, I still wanted her to be recognisable (at least to me), and there were obvious ethical issues about representation to consider; yet even as I carved out parameters for the project, in my head *This Hollow Vale* was already becoming a

⁵ Now interpreted by family members – myself included – as undiagnosed MCI (Mild Cognitive Impairment), a condition that usually prefigures dementia – https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/what-is-dementia/related_conditions/mild-cognitive-impairment.

collaboration between the two of us, a kind of swansong.

However, while the personal impetus for this project came from my mother's illness and subsequent cognitive decline, her individual story is part of a much broader socio-cultural narrative taking place in Western society, as people respond to the impact of dementia on their lives. With the total number of those living with dementia worldwide expected to rise to 78 million by 2030⁶, the medical, social, cultural, and financial implications of such projections for ageing societies like ours have forced governments to respond with major legislation over the last decade in an attempt to reassure worried citizens.⁷ In contrast, most influential mainstream media seem content to amplify the profound fear people feel confronting the condition.⁸ Thus, Alzheimer's disease (AD) is routinely described in apocalyptic language as an unstoppable dark force, an implacable enemy, or a ferocious monster 'stalking' humanity;⁹ and similarly, any predicted increase in dementia diagnoses is talked of in terms of a 'deluge' or a 'tsunami' of cases.¹⁰ Hannah Zeilig notes this frequent use of disaster/flood imagery to describe dementia in news reports, suggesting that "the notion of floods is also curiously biblical. Both nature imagery and biblical allusions pepper the language that is used about dementia [...] The overall impression is of dementia as huge and ancient. It is beyond our grasp and can only be understood through reference to massive natural phenomena (usually disasters) or in

6 Climbing further to 139 million by 2050 (WHO, 2021).

7 For example: Obama's 2012 *National Plan to Address Alzheimer's Disease in the US* – updated every year – and the UK's *National Dementia Strategy* from 2009, alongside the *Prime Minister's Challenge on Dementia* 2015 & 2020.

8 Even conservative broadsheet *The Telegraph* felt it necessary to run a banner headline for a story branding Alzheimer's disease 'Britain's Biggest Killer' (Bingham, 2016), noting that it had recently overtaken heart disease in the UK for the first time to win the dubious accolade: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/14/dementia-becomes-britains-biggest-killer/>

9 See Marlene Goldman's excellent essay 'Purging the World of the Whore and the Horror: Gothic and Apocalyptic Portrayals of Dementia in Canadian Fiction' (2015) or else her book *Forgotten: Narratives of Age-Related Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease in Canada* (2019), for in-depth consideration of why much writing about dementia – from academic research to tabloid journalism – looks at the condition through the prism of the apocalyptic or the Gothic.

10 For a recent example of this trend, see this 2020 blog in *Scientific American*: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/a-tsunami-of-dementia-could-be-on-the-way/>.

biblical/mythical terms” (2014, p. 260). The use of such emotive imagery in the dominant narratives of AD does little to educate and inform the public about the disease yet works tirelessly to confirm the prevailing belief that an Alzheimer’s diagnosis – apparently heralding not only loss of cognitive function and short-term memory, but also (ultimately) loss of self – is worse than a death sentence.

Animating dementia in this way has an essentially reductive effect on the representation of the individual involved. They are ‘emptied’ of value by the implied comparison and the condition is allowed to take centre-stage. Janelle S. Taylor argues persuasively that

the gothic and the zombie variants of the Alzheimer's narrative depart from the same basic premise: the body may continue to live, but the person with Alzheimer's is dead, gone, no longer there, no longer a person. He or she does not know your name, does not "recognize" you, therefore cannot "care" about you, but you must "care" for him or her – and such "care" is conceived as an unending toil of unrelieved grimness (2008, pp. 313-335).

The resulting ‘zombification’ process “enflames disgust while undermining its two antidotes – respect and sympathy” (Behuniak, 2011, p. 86) and this has serious social implications, making it easier to justify the idea of locking away and curbing the freedoms of those whose cognitive dysfunction marks them out. This terrorising of the news space around dementia has been at least partially responsible for generating what Australian academic Megan-Jane Johnstone calls “a profound terror of the disease and a range of individual and societal risks believed to be associated with it” (2016, p. xvii).

Constant media interest, coupled with growing personal experience of the

syndrome, has led to a surge in cultural texts of all kinds featuring dementia, reflecting both its ubiquity and the increasingly pervasive influence it exerts on our collective psyche. Many authors have written about dementia across multiple genres, ranging from literary fiction – through crime and romance – to the graphic novel.¹¹ There have also been several critically and commercially successful film and television adaptations of bestselling dementia novels in recent years, emphasising the breadth and depth of interest in the topic.¹² Nonetheless, to date, no one has placed an ageing protagonist with late-stage Alzheimer's at the centre of a fantasy novel. Thus, as my creative instincts asserted themselves, opera diva Dame Josephine began to emerge in a subgenre of her very own. Yet while I have offered some brief insight into the background and motivation for the project, the question of what an *epic dementia fantasy* is remains unanswered. Like novelist and academic Naomi Krüger, I didn't set out to write a novel about Alzheimer's per se, and nowhere in *This Hollow Vale* do I exhaustively catalogue the symptoms and pathologies of the disease. By the same token, neither am I seeking to exploit AD by employing it as a simplistic character trope. To say that the disease is approached obliquely in *This Hollow Vale* is a valid observation, but that's not to suggest that it hasn't had a fundamental impact on the novel's form and structure, as we shall see. In fact, I share Krüger's interest in the possibility that fictionalised representations of dementia might instead allow us "to tell a new kind of story, to challenge, re-imagine, re-characterize and destabilise habitual configurations" (2015, p. 113). It is in this spirit that I employ the term, eschewing notions that, as a genre, fantasy is too

11 Examples from each of these genres might respectively include Michael Ignatieff's *Scar Tissue* (1993), Henning Mankell's *The Troubled man* (2011), Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook* (1996), and Paca Roca's *Wrinkles* (2007).

12 Lisa Genova's *Still Alice* (2007), *The Corrections* (2001) by Jonathan Franzen, and *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014) by Emma Healey have all been adapted for large or small screen since publication.

conservative, and neither robust nor serious enough to be used to explore radical or ethically complex issues.¹³ Instead, I take full advantage of the freedom that comes with a genre that doesn't need the compass of rationality to challenge perceptions about the nature of ageing, illness, temporality, and selfhood. *This Hollow Vale* is a *dementia fantasy* because it seeks to problematise assumptions about the lived experience of someone with Alzheimer's by viewing the condition through the unusual narrative prism of speculative fiction, thus effectively "readjust[ing] the contextual parameters" (Herman, 2002, p. 334) for constructing meaning and facilitating understanding. Inspired by personal circumstance and the wider cultural discourse around ageing and cognitive dysfunction, the novel takes risks in terms of structure and narrative form to fictionally represent the subjectivity of someone with dementia, mapping out Josey's inner world and reminding us that the interior landscapes we inhabit are just as important as the exterior. As scholar Lucy Armitt concludes:

[...] we understand, create and experience not only the world around us, but also the world of our dreams, desires and fears, in terms of the very language we learn to articulate. Fantasy fiction simply brings this to the fore (1996, p. 18).

Music, memory, and magic

An integral part of this mapping out of Josey's inner world and a key feature of

13 Novelist China Miéville addressed these criticisms of the genre in an interview for the journal *International Socialism*. His comments on fantasy's oft-overlooked potential to support radical thought are particularly interesting when considered in the light of my attempt to represent the inner life of someone with dementia in *This Hollow Vale*. Miéville observes that "When you tell a fantasy story you pretend that things that you know to be *impossible* are not only possible but *real*. In that way you create a mental space (a pretended world, or whatever) which redefines or pretends to redefine the impossible. That is a psychologically and aesthetically radical thing to do" (Newsinger, 2000) [Newsinger's italics].

the structural and narrative experimentation in *This Hollow Vale*, music is of great importance in the novel. The Vale is founded on, and sustained by, music; and, as a cornerstone of culture, a harbinger of change, a repository of memory and emotion, and as the true language of selfhood and magic within the novel, music (in general) and singing (in particular) are central to the functioning of the narrative. This being the case, music has a compelling contribution to make to the dementia discourse in the novel, offering us a different prism through which its central themes can be viewed. Of course, *This Hollow Vale* is not the first fantasy novel to employ music in this way.¹⁴ In fact, the genre has a long tradition of incorporating music, songs and lyrics into many of its most successful narratives, and even the notion of a ‘soprano sorceress’ is not a new concept.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the idea of enduring musical pathways giving access to a self which is otherwise closed as a result of cognitive dysfunction remains an intriguing foundation upon which to build a central character, and music is manipulated here in a variety of ways to support this premise. For example, music is used to assist the shift between temporalities, to amplify the protagonist’s mood, to support her individual voice, and to reveal her buried memories. Often these functions are indicated by the appearance of printed lyrics, or the use of palimpsestic musical scores, ‘watermarked’ underneath the main text to colour the narrative they accompany. Music is also routinely suggested in the operation of magic and is employed to facilitate important action throughout the

14 The fantasy texts in the following personal selection all feature music and/or singing: *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), *The Silmarillion* (1977) – J.R.R. Tolkien; *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) – Ursula LeGuin; *The Dragonriders of Pern* (1988) – Anne McCaffrey; *Spellsinger* (1984) – Alan Dean Foster; *Infinity Concerto* (1984) – Greg Bear; *The Fionavar Tapestry Trilogy* (1995) – Guy Gavriel Kay; *The Wishsong of Shannara* (2006) – Terry Brooks; *Soul Music* (2013) – Terry Pratchett; *Sing the Four Quarters* (2016) – Tanya Huff; *The Singing* (2008) – Alison Croggon; *Anansi Boys* (2005) – Neil Gaiman; *The Name of the Wind* (2008) – Patrick Rothfuss; *Seraphina* (2013), Rachel Hartman; *Signal to Noise* (2015) – Silvia Moreno Garcia.

15 *The Soprano Sorceress* is actually the name of the first book in L.E. Modesitt Jr’s *Spellsong Cycle* and features classically trained singer Anne Marshall as the musical protagonist transported to a parallel world (Erde) where her voice becomes a powerful magical tool.

novel. Having said this, the relationship between music, memory, and cognitive dysfunction isn't merely the product of authorial sleight-of-hand. There is a body of well-documented evidence supporting the persistence of musical memory long after cognitive function has been severely impaired by dementia, and this provides the 'real-world' context for Josey's experiences in *The Vale*.¹⁶ Yet the influence of music isn't just felt in the cut-and-thrust of the narrative, musical ideas have also played a structural role in *This Hollow Vale*, influencing the division of the novel into chapters, and thereby offering another layer of interpretive possibility to the reader.¹⁷ Whether in the form of pieces alluded to, lyrics, narrated performance, spellcasting, or else in palimpsestic scores, music is a vital narrative component in the dementia fantasy and essential for the survival of protagonist Josey Knight.

The exegesis which follows, then, considers *This Hollow Vale* as an attempt to portray the interior world of a protagonist with dementia, lending agency where otherwise there would be none. The first section looks, in depth, at *This Hollow Vale* as a novel about dementia seen through the lens of temporality. The second steps back to engage in a comparative analysis, considering *This Hollow Vale* in the company of other novels about dementia, and addressing a range of issues central to successful narrativisation. Taken together, these sections make a case for the

16 See *Musicophilia* (2007, pp. 336-337) where neurologist Oliver Sacks makes exactly this point, or for further examples see Beatty, W. et al., (1997); Warren, J.D. et al, (2003); Cuddy L.L. et al., (2005); Narme P. et al, (2014), among others.

17 The division of chapters on the contents page at the beginning of *This Hollow Vale* suggests a simple tripartite structure overlaying the novel that resonates with sonata form in classical music. Making this connection, it becomes possible to interpret many of the narrative structural currents in the novel in associative musical ways. Thus, for example, the prologue and the first three chapters function to establish what might be termed *This Hollow Vale*'s 'home key' – sounding out the novel's major themes, before Chapter 4 takes the reader into the 'development' section represented by *The Vale*.

originality and value of both *This Hollow Vale* and of fiction itself in interrogating and re-imagining our discourses of dementia.

Thus, section one opens with an exploration of temporality in *This Hollow Vale*. This topic is important to an understanding of the way *any* narrative works but is especially germane when considering the conjunction of fantasy and dementia in the novel. The fantasy genre offers opportunity for particular forms of temporal experimentation, and these have been fundamental to my representation of the subjectivity of dementia – a condition where the deep past is often more accessible to the individual than the immediate present, and where the rigidity of conventional chronometric time can become restrictive and painful. The thesis investigates the nature of this experimentation, examining how temporality is employed as a narrative tool in *This Hollow Vale* and assessing how my approach to it has influenced characterisation, narrative, plot, and structure. The novel's multiple temporalities are shown to be both supportive and indicative of the character and ontology of protagonist, Josey Knight. Further, they are revealed as facilitating reader collaboration in the cumulative [re]construction of Josey's identity across the duration of the text, in the hope of arriving at a deeper understanding of her nature by the novel's close.

Section two builds on the insights and observations of section one, to offer a comparison between the way characters with dementia are represented in *This Hollow Vale*, and the way they are portrayed in three recent novels featuring protagonists with similar diagnoses: *Turn of Mind* – Alice LaPlante, *Elizabeth is Missing* – Emma Healey, and *May* – Naomi Krüger. Exploring key themes such as genre, gender, memory, selfhood, care, and agency, the analysis examines how the

different authors deal with the complex task of writing dementia while keeping the ethical need for a truthful depiction of the condition at the heart of their narratives.

1. Temporality

All narrative is inherently *temporal*. Narratives are, as philosopher Paul Ricoeur points out, tales set in time, whose very structural components themselves “take time [to unfold]” (1984, p. 101). While Ricoeur argues that all novels are ultimately concerned with time, in making his case he separates those under consideration into two distinct categories: one, a catch-all set which he labels ‘tales of time’, and into which he places all novels by virtue of the criteria set out above; the other is a smaller, rarer collection, which he terms ‘tales about time’ stating that texts in this group (e.g. Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*) have “the very experience of time [...] at stake in [their] structural transformations” (p. 101). Expanding on Ricoeur, Mark Currie argues against the veracity of such categorization, stating simply that all novels are “novels about time” (2007, p. 4), even those where time is not deemed to be of primary importance. He suggests that even in a narrative that appears to be temporally straightforward, there will always be more than one idea of the present at work – the present of narrated events, for example, alongside the present created by the act of narrating itself, or the present experienced by the reader. Currie goes on to explain that an appreciation of reading as a more temporally complex process is essential if we are to see beyond the limited (and limiting) parameters of conventional narrative temporality (p. 4). Our stories should reflect the full range of temporalities we experience as human beings rather than reinforcing familiar tropes of predominantly linear progression.

As a novel, *This Hollow Vale* fundamentally challenges such conventions. The book is temporally complex, featuring multiple narrators and an exterior ‘real-world’ narrative frame juxtaposed against an interior fantasy universe – both operating

apparently independent chronologies (the latter acting as an elongating mirror for the former). The whole temporal structure is further complicated by the presence of periodic fractured nonlinear episodes (which, for the purposes of this thesis, I have termed ‘wormholes’) that disrupt the main narratives, through which Josey Knight, a protagonist with dementia, presents an anthology of what at first seem to be random memories that, together, help the reader to explore her character. Of course, as Falcus & Sako assert, any fictional representation of dementia “must negotiate the fundamental temporal disruption of serious illness and, specifically, illness that upsets the subject’s relationship with time as past, present and future” (2019, p. 81). Thus, Josey’s Alzheimer’s effectively undermines any suggestion of conventional linear progression through past and present towards a rosy future that she can never attain. However, it’s not merely on a structural level that time has a significant role to play. As readers, our grasp of the wider themes in the novel – ageing, identity, memory, selfhood, care, agency, family, friendship, responsibility, illness, death – is also peculiarly shaped by the way we perceive ourselves and our stories in relation to time. And this perception itself is, in turn, heavily influenced by the dominant cultural narratives about dementia, the life course, and old age prevalent in our late modern society.

Interpretive gerontologist Jan Baars (2012) argues that western culture has become a chronocracy, where multiple experiential readings of both the ageing process and the life course – largely informed by how we feel rather than the attainment of any particular age marker – have given way to the hegemony of a single narrative: that of “chronometric time” (2012, p. 7). He goes on to suggest that it is the linear nature of this chronometric time which leads to many reductive and

restrictive interpretations of the ageing process. Our lives are assumed to possess a linearity that presupposes constant progression to higher and higher levels of development, both in terms of career and cognitive capacity (2012, p. 178), and those biographies that don't (or won't) conform to this narrative run the risk of being interpreted negatively as belonging to the unsuccessful or unfulfilled. Similarly, seeing life courses as necessarily moving through a succession of fixed linear gateways as we age (such as education, employment, relationships, retirement, old age, illness and death etc.) defines our horizons in a fundamentally narrow way, placing utility and redundancy in the same fixed temporal locations for everyone, despite huge individual variations in physical and cognitive health. The concept of chronometric time, with its inevitable period of decline foretold, seems to offer little encouragement for those at the end of the continuum to age well, whatever physical, emotional or spiritual state they find themselves in. In fact, 'ageing well' often simply becomes a synonym for 'staying young'. Thus, youth is lauded by our culture and associated with powerful societal tropes of positive development and forward motion. Cultural critic and age studies pioneer Margaret Morganroth Gullette contends that in this environment we are all "aged by culture", lamenting the fact that ageing has become so inextricably linked with the concept of decline in the West that these two terms are now interchangeable (2004, p. 9). Cynthia Port draws on queer theory to underline this picture of a youth-obsessed culture, in whose dominant narratives there is no place for the old or the ill:

No longer employed, not reproducing, perhaps technologically illiterate, and frequently without disposable income, the old are often, like queers, figured by the cultural imagination as being outside mainstream temporalities and

standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future [...] And like queers, the old have projected onto their bodies that which normative culture fears and represses within itself: the knowledge of eventual bodily failure and mortality (2012, p. 3).

In the face of such rampant ageism and ableist prejudice, it's important to nurture the idea that other temporalities beyond the conventional are still accessible. In this context, Judith Halberstam's words of hope about possible futures for subcultures within the queer community seem to apply just as pertinently to the old and the infirm: "Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities [...] by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of the conventional forward-moving narratives of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2003, p. 314).

This Hollow Vale pushes against the limitations of these dominant temporal narratives – Port's "fetishization of the future" (2012, p. 19) – in a number of ways. In terms of its narrative trajectory, the novel conforms neither to linear stereotypes of ageing, nor to the existing tragic templates of earlier dementia novels. As gerontologist Ann Davis Basting suggests in her 2009 book *Forget Memory*, until relatively recently dementia has been largely associated with two types of tragic narrative – both of which seem to avoid dwelling on the continuously experienced existence of the person with the condition. Narrative-type one catastrophises dementia and looks to the future for salvation, offering opportunity either for the next generation to restore the ideal of untroubled temporal progression, or for doctors and scientists to find a cure (which seemingly is always waiting, just out of reach, around the next corner). David Shenks's 2001 bestseller *The Forgetting: Alzheimer's*,

Portrait of an Epidemic, is an example of a narrative that follows this trajectory.

Narrative-type two is a tale of loss that sees dementia ‘hollow-out’ a talented and often inspirational protagonist, leaving them a shadow of their former selves. This storyline obviously looks to the past – creating dramatic tension between the character as they were ‘then’, and how they are ‘now’. John Bailey’s 1999 memoir *Elegy for Iris*, Nicholas Sparks’ *The Notebook* (1996), and *Still Alice* (2007) by Lisa Genova are all ultimately examples of this approach. *This Hollow Vale* interrogates and subverts the kind of temporal exclusivity that locates happiness and wellbeing as essentially locked away somewhere in the past or the future. Josey’s wormhole revelations demonstrate that, while professionally successful, financially rewarding, and artistically fulfilling, her life has been far from easy in emotional terms, while her ‘present’ real-world predicament – lying critically ill in hospital – serves to remind us that even if she survives her injuries, her future is likely to remain challenging in every aspect. I attempt to use the many different temporalities in the novel to inform and ‘fill in’ Josey’s incipient self from moment-to-moment in *The Vale*, so that by the close of the novel, instead of feeling that Josey is lost to them, the reader entertains the idea that wherever Josey is, she retains a measure of the self that they helped to (re)construct as the narrative progressed.

Scardale Grange and the limitations of chronometric time

Strange as it may sound, conventional chronometric time is, in a sense, another antagonist in *This Hollow Vale*. While friendship, love, and humour are not paid for by the hour in Scardale Grange, in contrast, medication, maltreatment, decline, and death are all accompanied by the ticking of a clock. For the residents of

the nursing home, life seems to grind inexorably forward in measured and measurable chronometric fashion, punctuated by the endless daily cycle of meals and medicines. However, the novel's entire real-world plot actually unfolds over the course of a single week in high summer, and a (more-or-less) conventional narrative of tragic decline (see Basting: type 2 above) is set up for Josey from the outset in the opening frame, compressed into a single day in her life – 15th August, 2018 – her wedding anniversary. Old age, dementia, enforced retirement, the death of a loved one, estrangement and isolation – add to this the abuse she suffers at the hands of the night manager and the deadly inferno that breaks out in her room and there are more than enough tragic elements present to persuade the protagonist (and the reader) of the need to seek refuge from conventional temporality. Indeed, while Josey's narrative life may have only just begun by Chapter 3, the reader could be forgiven for thinking, logically, that it must also soon be over given the seemingly insurmountable problems she faces. Interpreted chronometrically, as a series of events, the action in the opening chapters seems initially to confirm that Josey is simply conforming to conventional societal and medical expectations for someone her age with an advanced dementia. And the compression of these events into a narrow chronology serves only to heighten tension and reinforce the limiting parameters of those expectations.

The main-text narrative in the opening chapters remains largely sequential and is relatively easy to follow, hour by hour; thus it's not difficult to draw up a timeline (see Appendix 1) and examine events in and around Scardale Grange from sunrise to sunset to check the action in the novel against the storyline.¹⁸ Employing

¹⁸ From sunrise, when we see the Grange's "White-washed limestone walls and deep-set windows" (p. 13) for the first time, to sunset, when Josey is left alone in her room and night falls "like a shroud" (p. 42).

this convenient (if limited) analytical approach, it soon becomes clear that by mid-afternoon we've already met all the key characters in the opening real-world frame, including Josey's youngest daughter, Rebecca (Becky – the most important character in the novel after Josey herself), Jan Trufit (the cook), Eileen Mahoney (the cleaner), and Josey's nemesis, Brian Salmon (the night manager). Similarly, by the early hours we've witnessed all the key events, from Josey's abortive phlebotomy session with Dr Armitage, to the birth of the electrical fire that destroys the Grange's east wing and leaves Josey fighting for her life in Wharfedale General Hospital. Reviewed baldly like this, the untroubled timeline reinforces the sense of inevitability in the opening frame and emphasises the negative aspect of the narrative's chiaroscuro shading – the build-up of tension in the text somehow made worse by the unforgiving exactitude of the chronology it wears.

However, in terms of the relationship between story and discourse, even a cursory comparison between the novel's timeline and its *storyline* in chapters 1-3 reveals that there are temporalities in the latter – disrupting the main-text narrative – that are not represented in the former. Literary theorist Gérard Genette called these disruptions 'anachronies' and used the term to refer to "all forms of discordance between temporal orders of story and narrative" (1983, p. 40). Indeed, any sense that main-text temporality should take precedence over the other temporalities presented to the reader is persistently undermined throughout *This Hollow Vale* by the use of a variety of interpolated texts that puncture and problematise the conventional passing of time in the novel, yet which contain narrative material that is, as we shall see, absolutely essential to an appreciation of the way the novel functions. If anything, the presence of these other timeframes teaches us that

accessing the ‘whole story’ in *This Hollow Vale* requires the adoption of both conventional and non-conventional temporal perspectives, and they point to the limitations of chronometric time to properly represent the life of a character like Josey Knight, for whom hours, minutes, and seconds hold little meaning. Thus, the feeling that Josey is becoming increasingly ‘lost to the world’ as the novel progresses through the first three chapters is intentional and meant to suggest not only that conventional time has ‘run out’ for Josey (and others like her) – with all the crushing associations of debilitating illness, loss of selfhood, and inevitable death that the phrase conceals – but also that people with dementia are perceived as being already out of step, out of kilter, and misaligned in comparison to the rest of us when it comes to telling their own stories in time. When the reader moves into the wormhole episode at the end of Chapter 3 with Josey’s screams still ringing in their ears, they have, in effect, reached “the limits of narrativity” (Hartung, 2016, p. 13) at Josey’s side. It is at this point, with the narrative in crisis, that the nature of the text (and narrative time in the novel itself) must change to accommodate Josey’s needs and properly respond to the appalling injustice of her situation.

The Vale and the temporal possibilities of the fantastic

While it’s possible to interpret the genre shift into fantasy in Chapter 4 in a variety of ways, at a fundamental level, the crunch of narrative gears and the change in temporality is intended to represent the idea that Josey has retreated deep within herself, fleeing the pain, the negative expectation, and the oppression associated with chronometric time as depicted in the events that take place in the novel’s real-world frame. Drawing on unguessed-at inner resources, a love of speculative fiction,

an instinct for survival against the odds, and a powerfully intact sense of musical self (the product of a profound lifelong relationship with singing), Josey creates *The Vale* from the landscape of her own consciousness. Fantasy then, as a temporal tool, offers Josey (and the reader) a new relationship with time: the freedom to access, investigate, and reassemble the fragments of her past while a more dilated, multi-layered 'interior' narrative temporality unfolds around her. Alma's narration in *The Vale* forms a key part of this complex new temporal environment. She narrates from the perspective of a powerful woman Josey's own age, reflecting on events that took place when she was a teenager, and reinforcing a fiercely 'independent' persona for an aspect of the protagonist's consciousness that is of crucial importance in the novel. Alma's lively main-text quest narrative is shot through with the character's world-weary proleptic comments, hinting at a future she inhabits where Josey has long since triumphed against the College and where society has perhaps even become complacent about its freedoms once more. This occasional flashforward technique gives the reader insight into Alma's role as both participant in and chronicler of the events we witness, while the idea that she narrates as an insider encourages the reader to take her words at face value. Such temporal and vocal layering – perhaps suggestive of the splintering of Josey's personality into multiple narrative 'masks' – works to insulate Josey's consciousness from the pain she associates with chronometric time in the real world, even as it lends breadth and depth to *The Vale's* past, present and future.

Nevertheless, though there are no wristwatches or cell phones in *The Vale* – and civic timepieces only appear to be a feature of life (and thus part of the soundscape) in a metropolis like the College – clock time still possesses some

relevance for the characters in the fantasy world. It is still measured using familiar components from the world Josey knows. Thus Vanhin, Yanic and Alma arrive at the hidden door to the hermitage “after about fifteen or twenty minutes of walking” (p. 55); on leaving the tunnels under the Nomrech Valley, Alma, Josey and Yanic enter the Linn Forest and trudge on for “an excruciating hour or two” (p. 98); and Vanhin’s enchanted storm rages outside the snowhouse “for two whole days” (p. 100). And even if the names of the months are transformed into their Volean equivalents (Firstmonth, Secondmonth etc.), there are still twelve of them in a calendar year. Yet it is this very familiarity that allows us to reflect on the fact that time has a very different role to play here. It’s not just a quirk of fate that the most depressingly authoritarian and amoral place in The Vale – the College – should be more subject to the passing of chronometric time than anywhere else. Highlanders, who as Alma tells us can count the number of roads in the entire Five Valleys “on the fingers of one hand” (p. 196), live a very different life to citizens in the wine-town of Sulvan near the Great Trunk Road, whose experience is different again from a Kasivari *chordwan* crossing the ever-shifting sands of the northern desert – thus it’s logical that their perceptions of time should be different. Beyond acknowledging the broader shared rhythms of day and season required for individual and communal organisation, the idea of marking the passing of every moment on a tally-sheet would seem strange to most inhabitants of The Vale. Slavery to one temporal ideal as a way of managing the totality of our experience makes very little sense in our own world and no sense at all in a multidimensional universe; thus, time is necessarily much looser in The Vale – helping to orient Josey’s quest in the new world, but not tying events down to the absolute minute and second.

As Carl Jung scholar Angeliki Yiasssemides points out when discussing the relativity of time in human experience, “To appreciate the whole of our experience we must reach beyond causality and temporal linearity, to develop an approach that allows for multidimensional and synchronistic experiences” (2014, p. 2). The synchronicity between worlds lends the ever-shifting relationship between what is ‘fantastic’ and what is ‘real’ in the novel extra poignancy. For example, a detailed timeline for the fantasy narrative (see Appendix 2) reveals a proportional relationship of around one day to one month between ‘real’ time in Scardale and ‘fantasy’ time in *The Vale*. Thus, the real-world action in North Yorkshire takes place over seven days, while events in *The Vale* unfold over several months. This loosening of time not only allows Josey the freedom to journey through the world she has made, rediscovering and refreshing the wellsprings of her own selfhood, but it also allows her to fight for liberties that are both intensely personal and at the same moment of concern to millions across *The Vale*. Nevertheless, there is a strong connection between the two timescales (as the day-to-month relationship suggests) and Josey’s key actions in the high-fantasy quest turn out to be crucial when set against her real-world predicament. The ambiguous location of the fantasy genre somewhere between “the imaginary and the real” (Hartung, 2017, p. 338) affords this author a platform for observing and perhaps even reconsidering the nature of ageing and serious illness. Indeed, as scholar Heike Hartung argues (building on the seminal work of structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov) “the mode of the fantastic serves to open up alternative visions of time and aging” (2017, p. 336). Thus, just as the desecration of *The Vale*’s landscape and the enslavement of its people by Paholainan’s demonic forces “foregrounds” (2017, p. 338) Josey’s existential struggles in the real world, so

her awakening in a magical land where (after surviving an encounter with a pack of timber wolves) she seems to be blessed with nothing but time on her hands, immediately recalls by contrast the normative temporal pressures she was subject to before her translation. Though critically contested today, Todorov's keen structural perception of the fantastic as being intimately connected to (maybe even arising out of) the real is helpful here. His assertion that "Far from being a praise of the imaginary, [...] the literature of the fantastic posits the majority of a text as belonging to reality – or, more specifically, as [being] provoked by reality ..." (1975, p. 168), suggests that he saw the exploration of the borderline between the real and the unreal as a "central concern" (p. 37) of the genre. In this sense, the fantastic in *This Hollow Vale* is very much fantasy in response to the provocation of the real, and the idea remains just as apposite when considering temporality as it is when examining character parallels between the two worlds, their shared structural components, or their sometimes-analogous storylines.

However, what marks the fantasy world out indelibly as temporally different from North Yorkshire is the absence of a limiting set of chronometric prescriptions to which Josey is expected to conform. When Josey arrives in The Vale, she's wounded and clearly ill, but there is no assumption of death, no nursing home or 'camp' for the elderly and confused, to which (by age or cognitive function) she is automatically affiliated. And while youth and its energy are well represented by the passion and candour of 'Young Alma' and her Lachani cousins in The Vale, the expectations that surround Josey as an older woman are totally different to those that frequently arise in our own world. Gone are the unspoken assumptions of worthlessness and redundancy highlighted by scholars such as Gullette, Baars, and

Port. Josey is seen as legitimate heir to a power that is almost without limit, and instead of being viewed as ‘frighteningly’ ill and ‘dangerously’ old and therefore unproductive and burdensome, she is honoured and cared for with love and respect by those around her. Even so, this is not to say that characters are unaware of her challenging cognitive condition and her comparative physical weakness. After Josey’s arrival in Tivalhas in Chapter 8, Vanhin emphasises these very points to Alma – yet it is done with the intention of ensuring a continuing high standard of care and diverting pressure away from the Singer, until she is more able to bear the load:

We both know the Singer is the greatest among us here, but for the moment I must ask you to keep her true identity hidden. She is yet weak and there will be those who flock to our cause in the coming months whom we cannot fully trust. Until the Lady comes back to herself, she will need all the guidance and protection we can provide... (p. 126)

This Hollow Vale offers the reader an alternative view of the potentialities of old age: as an opportunity to build on what’s gone before, a chance to arrive at a deeper understanding of oneself and others, a time to fully realise innate talents and abilities, and perhaps even occasion to take on new responsibilities and succeed in their fulfilment.

This reimagining of old age as open-ended opportunity is reflected in the roles taken up by characters in *The Vale* at stages in their lives that serve to challenge conventional norms for life-course progression. Josey (70s), Sivan (400), Vanhin (500), Shi Jihan (300) and the narrator ‘Old Alma’ (70s), for example, are all vitally important players in the seismic events that shape the world around them, despite possessing a combined chronometric age that might suggest otherwise. Similarly, in

contrast both to the closed world of Scardale Grange (where Josey is estranged from her own children and intergenerationally isolated) and our own society's prevailing generational model which fetishises youth while penalising the old and infirm¹⁹, intergenerational friendship and collaboration are presented as customary in *The Vale* and occur at many key points in the main-text plot. The Scouring of the Grove, for example, involves all eight of the boys Josey rescued from slavery, alongside Alma, Vanhin, Noa, Roi, an entire party of highland warriors, and, of course, Josey herself. It seems that everybody's involvement is required to undo the desecration wrought by Sivan and her masters, and when the grove is restored, the whole group is transformed by the experience. Perhaps this level of collaboration implies that the nature of our own consciousness is misconstrued when we perceive ourselves as exclusively separate and sovereign beings – positing consciousness itself as a collective phenomenon.

The creation of a world where the unexpected (or the fantastic) can occur is always simultaneously an act of temporal experimentation, and as a platform for exploring temporal possibility, *The Vale* offers some interesting anomalies that serve to challenge even its own more expansive temporal norms. One such fluctuation occurs in Chapter 15. Entitled 'The Songmistress', the chapter is the shortest in the novel, and yet is of central importance to both real-world and fantasy plotlines. It is composed of a brief introductory section and a closing passage of similar length that frame three, sequenced dream-episodes where the normal passage of time is suspended, distance is rendered meaningless, and where we enter what we might call Alma's surreal 'dreamtime'. These episodes are still narrated by Alma but slip

¹⁹ This model has been rightly criticised by age studies scholars such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette, not only for trying to make old age disappear entirely, but also for driving a wedge between generations rather than uniting them (Gullette, 2004).

into the present tense for their duration, giving them an urgent, breathless quality and an immediacy that links them to the novel's interpolated wormhole content in terms of style and adds to the strangeness of the narrative at this point. The first two episodes involve symbolic animal transformations (in the first Josey takes the form of a large dog, while in the second Alma has been transformed into a bear), whereas the third is a grander affair, intended to awe and impress, and utilizes the stunning backdrop of the huge dome over the College's Central Hall. While sleeping, Alma is attacked by the Songmistress in spirit-form (who uses the fact that both she and Alma possess 'mirror rings' bequeathed to them by true Singers of The Vale to gain access to the girl's mind inside the supposedly inviolate Sacred Grove). This is our first direct encounter with Sivan Callax in the novel and reveals her to be a powerful opponent and a mage of some skill. Interestingly, because it occurs beyond the parameters of 'normal' time in The Vale, it offers Sivan the opportunity to exploit Alma's relative inexperience with magic in an arena where it seems the protections of the waking world can be temporarily circumvented. She creates the dream scenarios to try and tempt Alma (and through Alma, Josey herself) to betray the Founder.²⁰ Significantly, Josey is offered sovereignty over the whole of The Vale – all she must do in exchange is break faith with her friends and abandon the fight against the College. While this is an obvious ploy to persuade her to give up her decisive partisan support for the freefolk of The Vale in the fantasy narrative, such significant choices also have 'real-world' ramifications, as we have already discussed. Josey's participation in The Vale's rebellion equates with her own existential struggle in North Yorkshire, and while betraying Vanhin and Alma may seem to be the path of least

²⁰ The biblical allusion to the temptation of Christ in the desert here is intended to reinforce the existential nature of the struggle to win Josey over, rather than suggesting that Josey is 'Christlike' in any religious sense.

resistance in *The Vale*, in the world of Scardale Grange it would, nevertheless, pull time down around her own head – resulting in death. When seen from this perspective, the ten-page chapter assumes much greater import. It is indicative of Josey's strength of character in both worlds that she chooses to carry on resisting, pursuing her own ends on her own terms.

The knowledge that the singer has lived another life and has other responsibilities elsewhere in an alternative universe, to which she is equally attached and where her jeopardy is poised similarly on a knife-edge, problematises the fantasy narrative and encourages the reader to interrogate the text much more closely to tease out the allegorical content. Without an appreciation on some level of the fact that, as she moves across *The Vale*'s physical geography, Josey is actually mapping out her own consciousness and thus challenging the whole notion of 'lost' or 'regained' selves, we lose the novel's *raison d'être*. There, in the teeth of the two main-text narratives, *This Hollow Vale*'s bricolage of interpolations offers up shards of the 'real' Josephine Knight for us to puzzle over, react to, and even piece together. Not only are they the instrument by which key information is communicated to the reader, they are also major disruptors, actively working to fragment the novel's conventional linear storylines in an attempt to meaningfully represent the protagonist's struggle with dementia.

Stitching time: 'wormhole' episodes²¹ and other interpolated texts

The interpolated material in *This Hollow Vale* helps us to understand and

²¹ See Appendix 4 for table: 'Wormhole Episodes in *This Hollow Vale*'.

interpret the different temporalities in the novel. Thus, chronometric time and fantasy time are bridged by a range of inserted texts that complicate the novel's linear plotting, but which are nonetheless essential to its working. These interpolations fall into two categories: embedded intertexts and wormhole episodes. The former represent a collection of secondary textual material and ephemera related to the protagonist; while the latter are essentially much more intimate first- and second-person POV narrative mechanisms whereby the author interrupts the main-text storyline to allow the reader to experience key episodes in Josey's personal life retold in her own words.

There are twenty-seven embedded intertexts across the whole novel, and sixteen of these lesser interpolations are themselves embedded in wormhole episodes. Taken alone, such heterogenous fragments are, by their very nature, much less personal and intimate than the wormhole narratives. Though they don't map out the protagonist's consciousness in the same way, their function is to comment on, amplify, or sometimes contradict what is going on in the main-text narrative or wormhole episode where they appear. They range in size and complexity from simple text-based designs such as the name plate on Miriam's empty tomb in Chapter 9, to more complex combinations of song lyrics and palimpsest musical scores, and even a full-blown newspaper front page.

There are seventeen wormhole episodes in the novel, and these amount to some 12% of the total volume of text. Individual episodes range in length from barely a page (Wormhole 6) to nearly four pages (Wormhole 9), and it is rare for there to be more than twenty pages between them. While the wormholes possess no set structure that is entirely characteristic, there are *structural patterns* and stylistic

inflections that distinguish them from the body of main text. For example, all the episodes are in the same italicised font – distinct from the font chosen for the dominant narrative. Often (though not always), they include embedded intertexts and/or they contain evocative musical ideas²² that help Josey's words to be read in a particular way, but whose presence can further complicate the temporal disruption by adding extra degrees of contrast to the narrative 'present' of the individual episode. As already hinted, however, not all wormholes function in the same way. And while the majority do look 'back' towards events in Josey's 'real'-world past, others look 'forward', foreshadowing future events or predicting the appearance of new characters; or else they glance sideways – allowing Josey to comment on a key moment in the novel's 'present'. They are ordered associatively rather than chronologically, linked with events, characters, or locations at the point where they puncture the main text narrative, and this makes the process of assembling what we know about Josey's life one of constant digging, cross-checking, recalibration, and re-evaluation as the novel progresses. This 'archaeological' approach is intended to encourage the reader to interrogate the relationship between the novel's dominant temporalities and the wormhole episodes. It challenges the hegemony of the Scardale Grange and The Vale storylines and offers us a deeper truth about Josey to excavate. Finally, when Josey addresses us directly without resorting to the mediation of Alma or the omniscient narrator of the opening and closing frames, it lends the relationship between reader and protagonist an almost uncomfortable intimacy and immediacy, often affording a visceral power to the events narrated.

Building on the idea that the lived experience of dementia cannot be

²² In some wormholes printed musical scores are quoted on the page (Wormhole 4) or else appear like palimpsests under the main text, suggesting music's central role as a spur and support for memory (Wormhole 3, Wormhole 15, Wormhole 17 etc.).

represented in a conventional linear fashion and noting Mark Currie's observation about the inherent instability of concepts such as 'past', 'present' and 'future' as they relate to narrative (2007, pp. 5-6), I use these wormhole episodes to disrupt the novel's dominant narrative temporalities in the hope of arriving at a more nuanced picture of the protagonist and her dementia. Paradoxically, although the wormholes are undoubtedly disruptive, they are not intended to function purely (or even primarily) as destructive narrative tools. The disruption they bring creates unexpected connections between Josey's experiences in Scardale Grange, her time in The Vale, and the significant events she recalls from her own life-course, effectively stitching together the different times and spaces in *This Hollow Vale* that are then used to map her recovering consciousness. The conceit that Scardale Grange and The Vale are two separate physical locations governed by independent chronologies, with 'unique' events occurring in each, is gradually eroded by the presence of the wormhole material, and the cumulative effect of this content and its delivery doesn't just call into question the nature of reality for Josey, it also casts doubt on our understanding of what constitutes reality for all of us. Far from simply being random snapshots of events past and future then, the wormhole episodes constitute some of the most vital biographical material in the whole novel and are therefore key to an understanding of the forces that shaped its protagonist. Exploring a selection of wormholes in more detail will help to explain how they work on the page and how they link to the text around them.

Although Wormhole 1 is one of the shortest interpolations, it still contains many of the key components associated with these episodes. Just before Wormhole 1 disrupts the main text, Josey arrives in the Grange's medical room to have some

blood taken. She's confused and obviously wishes she was elsewhere. This state of confusion presages her sudden translation away from the Grange and her transformation into a bird, soaring through mist above rolling countryside in a pristine new world she names 'The Vale'. Because we know that Josey is unwell, our first assumption is that the whole episode must be a product of her illness – a delusion distracting a sick woman from an imminent medical procedure. And while it is a moot point as to whether looking through a 'window' into a different world constitutes a step into the future or a step out of time altogether, nonetheless the episode introduces us not only to the fantasy land itself, but also to two key Valean characters: father and daughter Yanic Lachani and Alma Lachanilta.

After Josey's prologue disclosures about her intense lifelong relationship with music and singing, it's not surprising that this first visit to The Vale should be facilitated by music – as she tells us: "It starts without warning. A man singing faint to my left" (p. 17). Considering its importance across the novel, setting up an early precedent that encourages the reader to perceive music as a vehicle that permits movement between worlds – a portal, if you like – is critical to managing the way many of the wormholes are experienced. The episode also includes embedded lyrics from the folk song that Yanic and Alma are singing, underlaid by the first of several palimpsestic musical scores employed in the novel to reinforce the unique functioning of Josey's memory. The song, written in Irish, is entitled *Óró, sé do bheatha bhaile*, and talks about welcoming home a valiant woman who has suffered for her country. The lyrics are obviously redolent with symbolism for Josey, perhaps even hinting that she is already familiar with this new place and certainly implying a prior relationship with the man and his daughter. Employing an Irish folk song not

only suggests a link to Josey's Irish heritage (her mother Madge was born in Ireland and is an Irish speaker), but – with the song becoming a rebel anthem in the early 20th century in Ireland during the struggle for independence – it might also be interpreted as anticipating Josey's head-on collision with authority in *The Vale*, becoming a fugitive from the College and a figurehead for the rebel movement.

In contrast to Wormhole1, Wormhole 11 looks back to a time when Josey was still a teenager living at home with her father, mother, and three brothers in West Yorkshire. The episode's temporal significance lies in the fact that it doesn't simply draw us back to one fixed point in Josey's life, but instead (like other key wormholes) moves us associatively through two different time spheres before we return to the dominant temporality. Encountering such rapid temporal change continually challenges the reader to try and define 'reality' within the novel for themselves. When this episode punches a hole in the flow of the main-text fantasy narrative in Chapter 11, Josey has just met Meshaki officer and rebel spy, Luz – Eileen Mahoney's Valean counterpart. The wormhole serves to forge a link between these two characters across time and space, using the physical location of the basement saferoom under Luz's apartment in the College as an associative starting point that calls to Josey's mind an experience she had as a teenager where she was forced to lock herself in a coal cellar for protection from her drunken father. Moving rapidly through time, the coal-cellar then transforms into a ground-floor storage cupboard in Scardale Grange where Josey has retreated from the world, and where carer Eileen enters to look for her. Thus, the notion of 'needing to find a safe space' resonates across three different temporalities. Similarly, the last words Josey and Luz/Eileen speak before the wormhole have a resonance that goes beyond the time sphere in

which they're spoken. Luz tells Josey that she looks better than she did the last time they met (Josey was unconscious on the Midden Hill after visiting Miriam's shrine in Chapter 9). Josey's reply – "So do you" (p. 203), – is strange because she has never seen Luz before. It only makes sense, anachronously, if Josey is referring to Luz as *if she were Eileen* and remembering that the last time they met (in Josey's room at the Grange in Chapter 2), her friend had just cleaned up Josey's vomit. This reinforces the interchangeable nature of the parallel characters for Josey and reminds us that, while we can only experience one narrative world at a time as we progress through *This Hollow Vale*, Josey inhabits all the worlds in the novel simultaneously (past, present, real, and fantastic) as they represent the totality of her lived experience. The parallelism of the main characters (Alma/Becky; Eileen/Luz etc.) also hints at the notion that perhaps Josey isn't the only one with memory problems in the novel. From Josey's perspective – seeing friends and family in one world who don't appear to recognise her in another – their apparent amnesia could be taken to imply that her supporting cast are the ones suffering from cognitive dysfunction.

In terms of characterisation, this wormhole offers some deeply disturbing information about Josey's father's drinking and abusive violence, and (along with other material gleaned from Josey's recollections) suggests Josey's troubled relationship with a parent whom she loved and admired but whose influential personality was critically flawed. Taking Josey's obsessive approach to singing into account (she calls it an "addiction" in the prologue), it's possible to argue that this trend of *parental addiction leading to suffering* continues into the next generation with Josey's career ultimately seeming to have had a detrimental effect on the

development of all her children. Finally, the co-opting of a name ('Felipe Luz') glimpsed in the Grange storeroom and then used subsequently for Eileen Mahoney's parallel character in *The Vale* – just before that character re-enters the main fantasy narrative – suggests Josey's mind working behind the scenes in the novel, trying to find meaning in her experience and using those remembered fragments creatively to guide her through the present as it emerges, moment by moment. This pattern of powerful spoken content resonating with the past, engaging in dialogue with the present, and shaping the immediate future is found in all seventeen wormholes, regardless of temporal orientation.

The fact that Josey inhabits various narrative 'selves' at different times in her life-course is reflected in the variety of registers used across the wormholes: ranging from the childlike voice that represents Josey at primary school in Wormhole 9, to the sharp sophistication and barely-controlled aggression of Josey when talking to Iestyn Wallace, principal of Becky's music college (Wormhole 5). Wormhole 13, however, showcases a fundamental change in the way the text is presented which is specifically designed to suggest a deeper level of cognitive dysfunction on Josey's part in response to husband Sam's tragic death. The narrative attempts to communicate the protagonist's grief and confusion, compounded by dementia, employing small-case letters and reducing punctuation to an absolute minimum, thus making it harder for readers to navigate the episode and forcing them to share something of Josey's disorientation:

do i know her i ask

thats our annie

i flip the name around in my head like a jigsaw piece to see if it

*fits anywhere but im not myself today nothing fits its the air ... its too sticky
like the paper you put out for flies next thing i know im shaking johnny looks
worried he says something but my teeth are chattering so hard i cant hear*

(p. 243)

At this point the protagonist no longer recognises her own daughter and is unable to remember the reason for her presence at the crematorium. Josey is in a terrible cognitive, physical and emotional state, and her inner turmoil is reflected in text and layout.

The opening line from the Friedrich Rückert poem, *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* forms a direct link between Wormhole 17 and the scene which precedes it, marking it out from other wormholes where the relationship with the dominant narrative is more oblique. We have just witnessed Josey in solitary confinement in a cell under Central Hall in the fantasy narrative. If she wishes to stay alive, she must escape her prison and return to the 'real' world, where she lies critically ill in hospital. It seems as if all the other musical moments in the novel have been preludes to this one, as Josey unearths and relives the powerful memory of her final performance as a professional singer. The poem, set to music by Gustav Mahler, was her encore in that farewell concert and now proves to be the pivotal step on her journey back to consciousness. The episode opens with an embedded intertext in the form of a ticket to the concert at the Wigmore Hall in London. The specific date and time on the ticket help to anchor the event, pinning it down factually and thus bringing us a step closer to our own chronometric world. Subsequently, the impact of the embedded material works alongside a palimpsestic score of the Mahler song and the full Rückert lyrics to manipulate our interpretation of the recital so we see it not just in

terms of what it reveals about Josey historically, but also what it can tell us about her chances of survival in the novel's real-world frame. The episode is spoken by Josey in the second person present tense, which has a very direct, almost imperative feel when read, creating the illusion that the reader is sharing the experience as it unfolds, thus magnifying its emotional impact. In a sense, Josey's extraordinary performance in this wormhole brings us full circle, allowing us to witness the truth of her statement about the role of music in her life from the opening prologue:

I don't sing because I want to, but because I need to. I don't have any other option. It's a compulsion. Like drugs or drink. And what's strange and wonderful about my addiction is that on those rare occasions when I manage to sing myself someplace else ... I can take an audience with me. That's my gift (p. 11).

Here then, in the final interpolation, we see her do just that – she transports the audience and in doing so heals herself. The beautiful song and highly suggestive lyrics²³ capture the audience's imagination, allowing Josey to carry them to another world by her side. And while their rapture only lasts a short time, Josey's powerful projection of an almost mythical, heroic self in this episode proves strong enough to enable her to cheat death for a short while longer. The fact that the fraught temporal relationship between Josey's recital in a 'real world' past, her powerfully re-imagined performance in the fantasy present, and the move back into the 'real world' present of the novel's closing frame doesn't detract from the narrative impact of this final wormhole, reflects the robust relationship Josey has built up with the reader across *This Hollow Vale*. As in previous wormholes, narrative, temporality, music, and

²³ For full lyrics of the Mahler song see inside Wormhole 17 (p. 331).

memory work hand in hand, bringing the past to life in Josey's present. The protagonist may routinely forget the names and faces of family and friends and no longer be able to orient herself in any of the worlds in which she lives, yet she can still sing ... and therefore she is still Josephine Knight. The act of singing – and the public affirmation she receives for her performance – reinforces for Josey the incontrovertible truth that she's still in possession of her self. As she says, "in the field of quantum uncertainty [...] one surety is enough" (p. 330). Life, while improbable, is nonetheless still possible as a result.

Temporality in *This Hollow Vale* is thus shown to be a vital narrative tool, revealing mechanisms of mind and memory, defining different states of consciousness, and even distinguishing between worlds. Throughout the novel, the uncaring rigidity of conventional temporality is challenged and ultimately rejected by the protagonist in favour of a much more personal idiosyncratic relationship with time. Collectively, the wormhole narratives and other interpolated materials give access to multiple temporalities and combine to foreground Josey's unique biography, allowing the reader insight into the ongoing personhood of a woman living (and dying) with dementia. They massively expand the opportunities for meaningful engagement with her character, albeit at the risk of disrupting the novel's dominant temporalities and stalling the main narratives within them. In the final analysis, however, I believe this pitfall is avoided because the reader comes to acknowledge the recurring temporal apparatus of the wormholes as the workings of Josey's independent mind and to accept the time travel and exposure to vital narrative material that they offer, in the hope of arriving at a better understanding of the extraordinary woman at the heart of the story.

2. Comparative analysis: *This Hollow Vale* and novels of detection/mystery narratives

As we noted in the introduction to this exegesis, while a wide raft of cultural and literary narratives of dementia have appeared across multiple platforms and genres over the last decade, to my knowledge, *This Hollow Vale* remains unique in the sense that there is still no other fantasy novel centred around an ageing female protagonist with Alzheimer's. In the absence of other fully-fledged fantastic dementia narratives to explore for comparison²⁴, I have turned instead to three relatively recent examples of 'detective' or 'mystery' fiction that feature dementia – Alice LaPlante's *Turn of Mind* (2011)²⁵, Emma Healey's *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014)²⁶, and Naomi Krüger's *May* (2018). The distance between these novels and my own is not as great as it might at first seem. With its dark crimes, its villains, its parallel world, and its enigmatic self-reflexive hero, *This Hollow Vale* can also be read as a mystery narrative. Indeed, understanding the mystery at the heart of all these narratives requires the reader to first 'solve' the conundrum represented by the protagonist and their dementia. While each offers multiple points of contrast with *This Hollow Vale*, they nonetheless all share a similar respect for the profound task of representing the disease truthfully and showcase protagonists that hold the key to the real mysteries

24 While neither *The Singing Detective* (1986) by Dennis Potter, nor Iain Banks' *The Bridge* (1986) have anything specifically to do with dementia or epic fantasy, I feel it's important to acknowledge the influence of both as background reading for this project, given their obvious parallels with *The Hollow Vale*. While Potter's approach to structure, plot, and characterisation are very different from my own, there are many resonances between the two narratives – not least the isolation and infantilisation of the protagonist by his hospital carers (in response to a debilitating psoriatic skin condition), and his retreat into a protective interior 'fantasy' world, where sanity and agency can be better maintained. Likewise, Potter's inspired use of musical subtext and his realisation of Marlowe's voyage of self-discovery as a detective story were also important signposts in my research. The potential of Banks' concept for *The Bridge* (a protagonist constructs a whole world around the site where he was involved in a near-fatal accident, interacting with and inhabiting this constructed world while lying critically ill in hospital) offered me a working example of a finely crafted pocket universe. Finally, the cognitive challenges faced by both these protagonists revealed possibilities for the representation of Josey's dementia that gave useful direction in the novel's development stage.

25 Winner of the inaugural Wellcome Trust Book Prize in 2011, now awarded annually for excellence in literature where the central theme "engages with some aspects of medicine, health or illness" (wellcomebookprize.org).

26 Winner of Costa Award for best debut novel in 2014.

at the heart of their respective narratives. This section will focus on critical aspects of the way dementia is portrayed in *This Hollow Vale*. Finding resonances in the approaches of LaPlante, Healey and Krüger, it will briefly rehearse the connection between dementia and detective fiction before moving on to explore how the different authors grapple with the central themes of memory, selfhood, care, and agency in their attempt to rise to the challenge of “narrating the limits of narration” (Krüger-Fürhoff, 2015, p. 96).

Traditionally, detective narratives have been regarded as conservative and hyper-rational, with linear plotlines that reject philosophical musing on issues beyond the case at hand in favour of a straightforward ‘death-detection-explanation’ structural model (Knight, 2010, p. 136). As David Orr points out, in classic examples of the genre, readers identify with the (usually male) detective as a rational guide “...whose role is to pick out a clear pathway through the confusions of the story before presenting the reader with a reassuring resolution where an identifiable, unambiguously guilty, culprit is punished” (2020, p. 561). In such narratives, mysteries are explained, and murders solved for the sole purpose of re-establishing the status quo, thus implicitly supporting the existing social order within the world of the text. Seen in this light then, the idea of a female protagonist with dementia functioning effectively at the centre of such a text seems almost absurd. As noted elsewhere, dementia is often characterised by a fragmented experience of time and an inability to connect people, places, and events to form a narrative ‘self’ – which is immediately at odds with the linear approach to storytelling discussed above. Without objectivity, recourse to reason, and an infallible memory, the “Descartian male detective” (Ng, 2012, p. 144) is severely compromised and new narrative

models need to be found. Fortunately, changes in critical thinking about the genre have led to the revision of much of this narrow formalism, ushering in new diversity via narratives that have departed from the conceptual restrictions of classic detective fiction, shifting towards what Falcus and Sako call “an explicitly self-reflexive model of detection” (2019, p. 117). This revision has also led to a reassessment of the relationship between narratives of detection and the societies in which they are produced, with critics such as Mary Evans suggesting that crime fiction may provide us with “the most vivid account that we have of Western societies’ various fears and preoccupations” (2011, p. 12). If this is the case, then the appearance of crime fiction featuring dementia is a logical expression of the overwhelming fear and apprehension surrounding the disease currently in the Global North, a kind of mediating filter that “may articulate, and possibly seek to contain, the cultural anxiety the condition provokes” (Falcus & Sako, p. 115). Similarly, the fact that there is as yet no cure for dementia and we have no way of perceiving the true nature of the inner lives of individuals living with the syndrome in its later stages, lends the cultural texts associated with diseases such as Alzheimer’s an intrinsic sense of mystery that many writers have been drawn towards.

Turn of Mind is narrated by protagonist Dr. Jennifer White, a retired surgeon with Alzheimer’s. When her closest friend Amanda dies in gruesome circumstances (involving the apparent mutilation of the corpse), Jennifer – the last person to see her alive – becomes the prime suspect, despite being unable to remember that a crime has even occurred. As the murder investigation intensifies, it becomes clear that Jennifer’s unconventional relationships with her best friend and her two grown-up children hold the key to the mystery, but it’s impossible to know whether her

dementia is stopping her from identifying the killer or providing her with a convenient cloak to hide the truth. In *Elizabeth is Missing* protagonist Maud (an 82-year-old woman with dementia and the story's *de facto* detective) moves between two interconnected timelines, investigating the disappearance of her friend Elizabeth in the novel's present and her sister Sukey in the past. The characters and action in each become increasingly entangled in her mind, offering us a window on the confusion she feels. When the 70-year-old mystery finally begins to unravel, Maud's fractured memory gives us the backstory to Sukey's murder at the hands of her husband, and with the help of her daughter Helen, Maud finds her sister's body and solves the crime. Finally, in *May*, Naomi Krüger's eponymous protagonist is an elderly woman living with dementia in a care home. Though May can no longer always recognise the family members that visit her, she is nonetheless haunted by a particularly vivid memory of a red-haired boy – her half-brother Ned who drowned tragically when May was still a young girl. The story takes place over a day in May's life and the novel employs a polyphonic approach to narration that uses the voices of her family and her young carer Afsana, to offer personal snapshots of their lives even as they collaborate in the construction of May's own biography.

All these novels feature female protagonists with dementia, and fundamentally challenge the hegemony of the rational male detective (alluded to earlier) through a gendered and collaborative approach to the mysteries at the heart of each narrative. Yet this is only one aspect of their unconventional gender makeup. We're also introduced to powerful female friendships, female killers, and female cops, similarly suggesting the wholesale rejection of several other previously male-dominated character tropes. As we have already noted, *This Hollow Vale* takes inspiration from

this loosening of gender norms to challenge related stereotypes in fantasy literature. Protagonist Josey Knight is no teenage social misfit, lone-wolf barbarian, or Gandalf figure, but instead a retired female opera singer in her 70s with Alzheimer's. She benefits from the support of a female friendship network, has an intergenerational female carer in the teenage Alma, quests alongside female soldiers, and confronts a dangerous female villain. More importantly, at a deeper level Josey is motivated (and perhaps ultimately redeemed) by love, in the same way that La Plante's protagonist is motivated by love for her daughter, Healey's Maud by love for her sister and her best friend, and Krüger's May by feelings for a long-lost half-brother. None of these women is driven by "detachment and logical analysis of clues" (Rowland, p. 120); they operate according to a different model, and gender is central to communicating that difference to the reader.

***This Hollow Vale*, dementia and the 'detective' or 'mystery' narrative**

One of the key ideas that links these four texts together is a self-reflexive approach to detection (mentioned earlier). 'Detection' here, then, refers just as much to a process of introspection and self-investigation as it does to the uncovering of an external crime, or the untangling of a mystery, and it is only through experiencing the private recollections and revelations of the central characters at various stages of their lives that we can begin to posit some notion of their selfhood. Each author strikes a balance between leveraging the close affinity dementia and mystery share (to enhance the way the reader experiences the texts hermeneutically) and falling into the ethical trap of presenting the central character with dementia as an "enigmatic other" (Falcus & Sako, p. 120).

Unlike some of the other texts in this analysis, there is no doubt about the nature of the crimes committed in *This Hollow Vale*: the night manager's abuse of residents and the nursing home's neglect of its duty of care are demonstrably inexcusable and need no sleuthing on the reader's part for guilt to be appropriately apportioned. And while there are hints at the end of the novel that the wheels of justice are beginning to turn in North Yorkshire, *This Hollow Vale* is not a whodunnit and there is no linear progression of a crime narrative towards comfortable closure. Instead, the 'mystery' in *This Hollow Vale* lies in understanding/interpreting Josey herself and her strange experiences in the parallel world of The Vale. The events that take place there are directly influenced by and have a profound effect on Josey's dementia, and it is the protagonist's own inner cognitive processes that shape the often challenging (if ultimately restorative) allegorical content of the fantasy narrative. What separates *This Hollow Vale* from the other texts is the fact that what is implicit in Healey, LaPlante and Krüger – that we can't assume we understand the world as experienced by someone with an advanced dementia – is made explicit in my novel. The Vale is that brave new world seen from the inside. Once there, we are no longer the arbiters of what is a real experience and what is not, and the mystery of what happens to Josey after the tragic fire at Scardale Grange can only be solved (and her quest to return home fulfilled) when she has passed through a period of existential crisis, acquainted herself ontologically with her new environment, and when the reader has finally assembled the pieces of her fragmented past, captured in the wormhole episodes (and other inserted texts) that recur throughout the novel, thus paving the way for her to regain consciousness. By giving first-person narration to a character with advanced dementia in this way and by inviting the reader to join

in what amounts to a process of collaborative detection, the experience of such active reading results in a highly personal encounter with the disease.

Turn of Mind, *Elizabeth is Missing*, and *May* each offer a distinct vision of this personal encounter, while issuing a similar invitation to collaborate in the solving of the novel's central mystery. We are privy, for example, to the frustration and confusion of Healey's Maud as she searches for clues, and we work with her to try and fathom the puzzle of her missing friend and her lost sister. We hear the polyphony of May's family creating the protagonist's past – but it's May's own voice lamenting the loss of her half-brother Ned in the present that resonates most strongly, allowing us to catch a glimpse of the world seen through her eyes.

Likewise, seeing life from Jennifer's perspective after the death of her friend Amanda gradually brings the reader to appreciate the character's unconventional nature and to understand the complex position she holds within her family and friendship networks as the narrative progresses. Though we are never quite sure how much of Jennifer's narration we can take at face value, realising that she herself feels unable to trust anyone around her (including her own children) adds to the sense of insecurity, confusion, and mystery we feel as active participants in the events of the novel. As we've already suggested, the notion of detection here goes beyond the merely procedural and, given the bare minimum of clues in LaPlante's text to help nudge us in the right direction in terms of exposition (and the fact that we don't get to explore the psychology of any other character in depth), the necessity of reading as an act of collaborative detection becomes very persuasive. The sense of cooperation in this construction of meaning is never stronger than at the very end of the novel when, knowing the identity of the real killer, we're placed in the strange, dramatically

ironic position of appreciating the full extent of Jennifer's pain and sacrifice while simultaneously knowing the part she has played in protecting her daughter and derailing a murder investigation. The reader is left to decide where they stand in the face of the moral ambiguity of the narrative as the final page is turned. Such intimate exposure to central characters with dementia can only serve to highlight the epistemological and ontological struggles that those who live with the syndrome face every day, suggesting that narratives of this kind may indeed have a role to play in fostering a better understanding of the disease.

Memory and selfhood

These novels work from the outset to challenge negative archetypes of dementia that persist in our society, such as the biomedical model that equates memory loss with a measurable erosion of selfhood, a haemorrhaging of individuality and awareness that continues “until there is no self left” (Behuniak, 2010, p. 233). This reductive idea promotes an understanding of the treatment of dementia as necessarily involving isolation “from communal forms of care and inclusion” (Katz, 2013, p. 304) to protect society from the irredeemably broken citizen. While the dementias that Jennifer, Maud, May and Josey experience often push them to the limits of emotional and physical endurance, it would be wrong to characterise any of these women as a “selfless other” (Falcus & Sako, p. 113) or a “zombie” (Behuniak, 2011). Though the authors pull few punches in their attempts to represent cognitive decline with some veracity, all four protagonists are depicted from the inside as full and complex human beings, individuals that merit the same regard and compassion as any other member of society. The effectiveness of these portrayals can be

attributed, in part, to the way the authors approach the key topics of memory and selfhood. Setting the issue of memory loss at the centre of a narrative is fraught with danger – not least because of the risk of unintentionally legitimising the kind of oversimplistic understanding of dementia outlined above. As we have seen elsewhere, memory plays a central role in shaping personal narratives (life stories), and we know that dementia results in critical problems with cognitive function that inevitably lead to an erosion of the ability to relate such narratives coherently. Psychologist Jerome Bruner insisted our sense of self was inextricably linked to the personal narratives we create (*Making Stories*, 2003) and concluded that when an individual could no longer create their own life story they had effectively ‘lost’ their selfhood. The depiction of memory and selfhood in *This Hollow Vale* fundamentally undermines Bruner’s assumptions, however. Isolated from family and friends and marginalised by society, the possibility that someone in Josey’s position might still have access to a “complex psychological life” (Falcus & Sako 2019, p. 135) is routinely ignored or overlooked in our culture. As demonstrated in section one of this thesis, *This Hollow Vale* celebrates this possibility, rejecting a conventional tragic arc for Josey’s character in favour of presenting a complete pocket universe to the reader as a kind of narrative ‘safe room’, created in extremis by the protagonist following the contours of her own mind. At the same time, the reader’s exposure to seemingly random first- and second- person memories spanning Josey’s entire life-course offers the clues needed to illuminate the allegorical mystery at the centre of the novel which is, of course, an understanding of Josey herself. And if *This Hollow Vale* avoids equating loss of memory with loss of self by positing memory and the act of remembering as a collaborative endeavour, then it’s an idea that the other texts

also employ to good effect. With Maud's narration, for example, Healey gives the reader just enough clues to facilitate active participation in solving the conundrums presented by her protagonist's complex past, and as Lucy Burke points out, while Maud's fractured present tense is crucial to our understanding of the extent of her cognitive dysfunction, "it also demands that we provide the continuity, connections and explanations that elude Maud" (2017, p. 99 [my italics]). To an extent, this social interpretation of memory operates similarly in *May*, with Krüger's lively multivoiced narrativization of the past and her first-person evocation of the protagonist providing information, context and clues for the reader in much the same way as the wormholes and other interpolated materials operate in *This Hollow Vale*.

Communicating the lived experience of dementia is crucial to our understanding of these women as protagonists and as people. However, each author approaches the task in a different way, employing various techniques to create the 'voices', to uncover the memories and represent the cognition of their characters, and to show the impact of their respective dementias on the way those characters interact with the world.

As we saw in 1, *This Hollow Vale* employs wormhole episodes alongside a variety of other inserted texts that operate in much the same way as the notes, journals, and letters used to record personal thoughts and feelings in *Elizabeth is Missing* and *Turn of Mind*. We have already discussed how the wormhole episodes offer the reader access to key memories from Josey's life-course, allowing us to experience her voice in a variety of registers that reflect multiple stages of her biography from childhood to old age. Necessarily, the non-sequential, fractured portrayal of the protagonist's journey in this way evokes the impact of Josey's

dementia on her cognitive function. Krüger uses a comparable linguistic approach over the course of her novel in May's own first-person narrative episodes. While these usually come at the end of each chapter, significantly Krüger employs the following episode to open the novel, establishing her protagonist's voice for the reader.

<i>There was a boy</i>	<i>a very strange enchanted boy.</i>	<i>They say he</i>
<i>Wandered very far</i>	<i>very far</i>	<i>A little shy —</i>
<i>Go away, I can sing if I want to —</i>	<i>over land and sea.</i>	
<i>and sad of eye —</i>		
<i>Keep singing and they'll go away —</i>		
<i>but very wise</i>	<i>was he —</i>	
<i>Don't look, don't look, don't look —</i>		
<i>And then one day</i>	<i>one magic day he passed my way</i>	<i>and</i>
<i>while we spoke of many things fools and kings</i>		<i>this he said to</i>
<i>me</i>	<i>the greatest thing</i>	<i>you'll ever learn</i>
		<i>is</i>

Just keep singing till he comes

(May, p. 5)

Here the use of non-sequiturs, a non-conventional layout of text (indicating pauses), and Krüger's choice of italics to distinguish between remembered lyrics and May's internal personal dialogue all combine to suggest emotional depth. The author also employs the 'em dash' effectively to signal the abrupt segue from song text to speech, and back again, contributing to the notion of 'two worlds' (see below). Thus, in *May* and *This Hollow Vale* language and layout are used in similar ways to suggest more obliquely how the characters feel about their condition.

Compared to Jennifer and Maud, May and Josey are undoubtedly at a different stage in the progression of their dementia as their narratives open. Both are already institutionalised, and their personal freedom has been reduced as a result. Yet for all that, they still have intensely individual voices and manage to communicate a strong sense of self to the reader. And while they may not comment

directly on their own treatment, age-related deterioration, and cognitive dysfunction in the way that LaPlante's Jennifer and Healey's Maud seem able to, May, for example, can still allude indirectly to her own memory problems: "Something is all together wrong. There are doors that never open. Things I can't get hold of" (p. 165). Likewise, it isn't difficult to ascertain how May and Josey feel about the limitations placed on their horizons by the disease and the endless personal interventions that must be borne as a consequence by those in care. May's narrative episode '7:38am' shows the protagonist making her feelings known in the best way she can.

Oh! Now is it? there's no need to – I can do it!

Don't take them off thank you
very much for your Cadbury's
Roses, thank you very much, thank
you very, very, very, very, very,
Very, very, very much.

The water!

He stepped in a puddle right up to his middle and
never

and never–

Do you have to? Too hot, too hot, too hot

cheap soap, white tiles

This is not a hospital

(pp. 22-23)

In this excerpt, May bridles against the unwanted intervention of her carer. Note once again the variations in spatial layout conveying breaks in train of thought, and the stream-of-consciousness juxtaposition of external dialogue (with the carer) and internal monologue (song text and children's rhyme) uniting the prosaic world of the here-and-now with the timeless poetic world inside where Ned resides. The figurative use of events in the 'present' to navigate or comment on those in the 'past' and the

manipulation of song texts, advertising jingles and/or apparent doggerel to suggest deeper emotional concerns works to produce a picture of a self that is operating unconventionally, but nonetheless still possesses a compelling inner logic. And in the same way that music and lyrics are used to aid memory, contextualise narrative, and comment on action in *This Hollow Vale*, it's worth remembering that Alberle's lyrics to the wistful Nat King Cole song *Nature Boy* run through May's first-person episodes in Krüger's novel, supporting and amplifying mood and memory, and similarly reinforcing the distinctive voice of its protagonist.

Despite the different stages of their dementias, each of these four women demands respect from those around them – sometimes for the way they bear suffering and loss, sometimes for their dogged persistence, and sometimes simply because they maintain a sense of their own worth in a world where their value as members of society is often overlooked. In the excerpt below, Josey speaks for all the protagonists when she reminds those around her that she too has a position in society:

"The blood will have to be taken another day, when you're calmer,
Josephine!"

Meena pushed the wheelchair out of the room and was about to set off down the corridor when Josey shouted back at the top of her lungs:

"It's *Dame* Josephine!"

(p. 20)

Responding here to the alcoholic locum's attempt to reassert control over her in the medical room at Scardale Grange, Josey demands the respect she is due, declaring her formal title out loud and reminding the patronising doctor that they are *not* on

first-name terms. In the face of society's apparent willingness to judge these women and find them wanting, such episodes serve to reinforce a persisting sense of self-worth and to emphasise that equating memory loss with loss of personhood is a fundamentally misguided approach when attempting to understand the experience of someone living with dementia.

Care and agency

Care is a central concern for those living with dementia and an important theme in all four novels. Closely linked to notions of personal agency and selfhood, the progression of characters from independent to assisted living, and thence away from familiar communities and into institutionalised care, is usually shown to be a movement towards greater isolation and authoritarian control over the body of the individual, and in three of the narratives such a journey seems to challenge not only the main character's ability to take action on their own behalf, but also threatens a range of wider basic freedoms (such as the right to personal liberty and freedom of association) – freedoms which others in our society take for granted. In contrast, even though memory loss robs Maud of the comfort of knowing she solved the mystery of her sister's murder, living in her own home (with the assistance of a carer), surrounded by family and friends, and participating in the life of the social and familial network to which she belongs, Healey's protagonist still enjoys a measure of independence at the close of the novel. Meanwhile the other protagonists all remain more physically isolated as their narratives end: in a secure psychiatric ward (Jennifer), a nursing home (May), and an intensive care burns unit (Josey).

This Hollow Vale offers the reader a bleak vision of residential care. While it

appears that Scardale Grange – with its idyllic location, famous residents, beautiful grounds, and modern facilities – must surely offer the best that money can buy, experience soon teaches us that appearances here, as elsewhere, cannot be trusted. However, alcoholic locums, flammable drapes, an ageing sprinkler system and dangerous electric sockets are not the Grange's biggest problem. Worst of all, a trusted senior member of the managerial staff turns out to be a serial abuser. Yet while we are rightly appalled by Brian Salmon's behaviour and the care home's seeming indifference, both are only symptoms of a greater social malady. Salmon and the Grange represent the darker underbelly of an increasingly 'care-less' society, in which older people and those with conditions such as dementia, can be legitimately locked away from the rest of us, ostensibly for their own good, but really to avoid interrupting the illusory narrative of continuous progression, professional advancement and conventional life-course chronometry on which we've been raised, and to prepare them for subsequent exploitation. This dark vision is offset only by the care and humanity of individuals acting on their own behalf for others inside the institution. Cleaner Eileen Mahoney and head cook Jan Trufit offer genuine friendship and care to Josey, despite their own suffering and the challenges they face both inside and outside the Grange. Arguably, it's this loving care and companionship that provide the only real social context to tease out Josey's limited periods of lucidity. Beyond her love for (and immersion in) music, the protagonist is never happier in the novel's opening frame than when she is sharing a cigarette with Jan or laughing with Eileen, both of whom she obviously feels close to. Unfortunately, when the care and advocacy of her friends is unavailable to Josey, we realise how far her agency has been compromised.

Turning to look at the other texts, it's clear that LaPlante is also critical of professional institutionalised care. The residential facility in *Turn of Mind* is a difficult place for Jennifer White. She's watched constantly, and though she's allowed visitors, she's under lock-and-key restrictions for her own safety as a result of her rapid cognitive deterioration. We are assured, however, that no expense is being spared on her care. Jennifer's new home is "an extraordinarily clean place [...] pristine [...] luxurious," a place where it's possible to inhale the "scent of money" (p. 154). Yet just as Josey's experience in Scardale Grange demonstrated, expensive care homes don't necessarily nurture their residents as they should – and the constant scrutiny and lack of basic privacy begin to take their toll:

Never felt guilt. Never felt shame. Until I was brought to this place. Trussed like a chicken. Denied the right to move my bowels in private. *Purgatory* I heard one of the other residents call it. But no. That implies that heaven is within reach once you have paid for your sins. I suspect this is a station on the one-way road to hell (p. 214).

The feeling is only compounded when Jennifer is moved to a secure psychiatric unit. This final remove, the geographic expression of the protagonist's worsening dementia, at last brings her to a location where she's no longer able to advocate for herself in any way, a place where there are "no niceties [...] no soft edges [...] no salvation" (p. 295). Here, she surrenders to the visions that fill her head and accepts that her life is nearing its end.

Krüger's *May*, on the other hand, casts the nursing home in a different light. The author doesn't offer any explicit criticism of May's residential care – there's no suggestion of malpractice or lack of compassion – and implicitly there are numerous

instances presented to the reader where the essentially benign nature of the institution is placed to the fore (Afsana's positive relationship with May, the kindness and generosity of co-workers Gill and Alison, the care provided to the residents etc.). Whereas in LaPlante's novel, the polyvocality adds to the atmosphere of confusion and suspicion, Krüger's asynchronous polyphony is collaborative in nature and builds into a patchwork quilt of May's life, revealing how she has influenced those around her. And while agency in the novel's present is something May negotiates with carers and her own increasingly fragmented consciousness, as we noted earlier, it could also be argued that Krüger gives her protagonist agency by making hers the first voice we encounter. Thus, May's words resonate throughout the novel and, as Krüger says, "she provides the context in which all other narrators will be understood" (2015, p. 116).

However, institutionalised care isn't the only form of care these novels depict – neither is it always the most significant in terms of plot. Familial care and the importance of the support of friendship networks and carers (either in a domestic setting, within an institution, or out in the world at large) are also shown to be key to the motivation and wellbeing of each protagonist, with issues of love, trust and sacrifice combining to deliver powerful narrative impact.

Both *This Hollow Vale* and *Turn of Mind* problematize familial care as an ideal, probing the fault lines of sibling rivalry, greed, jealousy, and parental misunderstanding to suggest that relying on next of kin to always have the best interests of their nearest-and-dearest at heart is fundamentally naïve. These novels also undermine a broader cultural idealisation of familial care in our society that has been seized upon by successive governments and used to cover up chronic

underfunding in health and social care. Negatively impacted by her dementia, Josey's relationship with her family is undoubtedly complex from a care perspective. Becky tells us that her brother is only motivated by money and that as far as elder sister Annie is concerned, Josey is already dead, "and only the increasingly mute husk of their beautiful mother remained, to be kept safe, ready for burial when the time came" (p. 339). Consequently, by the time the action in the novel begins, Annie and Jonathan have largely stopped visiting their mother and seem almost to resent her for 'succumbing' to Alzheimer's. The perception of familial care in late-stage dementia as merely the curation of a "mute husk" and the estrangement it has caused between Josey and her two eldest children obviously prey on the protagonist's mind and are key destructive forces against which she figuratively pits herself in the fantasy section of the novel. Everything changes after Josey's translation to *The Vale*. From the moment she arrives in the Five Valleys, the protagonist is cared for by an intergenerational network of characters devoted to her wellbeing: from Vanhin (who admittedly also has ulterior motives), through Yanic, Noa, and Luz, to Alma, who all love Josey deeply and would give their lives for her – and yet are apparently unrelated by blood. Gradually, as the fantasy narrative progresses, it is the care and companionship Josey receives (without which she would have died on arrival in *The Vale*) that provides her with a platform from which she is able to begin to exercise something akin to personal agency.

LaPlante's exploration of familial care is even more ambiguous. Like the relationship between Josey Knight and her children, Jennifer's connection with family and friends is far from simple. When Fiona and Mark agree to place their mother in a care home, ostensibly in response to the progression of her Alzheimer's, it seems

the decision is motivated by the best of intentions. However, by this stage Jennifer is already under investigation for the murder of her best friend, and when we subsequently learn that Fiona – Jennifer's financial executor – has sold the family house, and that Mark has a drug habit to fund and appears to be after his mother's money, then the context of her institutionalisation is rightly called into question. Jennifer appears vulnerable and any agency that she might have had when living at home with carer Magdalena, seems lost in the sea of competing voices that gather around her in the care home. This perception of Jennifer's defencelessness is, nevertheless, challenged by subsequent events – once again reminding us that, as with Josey in *The Vale* and Maud solving Sukey's murder, we can't assume to know the thought processes of someone with an advanced dementia. Discovering that Fiona is Amanda's killer, the reader realises that Jennifer may, in fact, be consciously protecting her daughter by accepting Fiona's version of events from the night of the murder. If this is true, then the idea that she is bereft of agency is incorrect and, despite her advanced Alzheimer's, in the end Jennifer has instead coolly assessed the situation and chosen, as a mother, to accept the blame for murder in her daughter's stead.

In *Elizabeth is Missing*, the input of family, friends, and carers is shown to be of vital importance in preserving the agency of protagonist Maud. Maud's daughter, Helen, makes time to be with her mother every day, and (assisted by paid carer Carla) ensures that Maud is properly looked after. Despite the numerous scrapes Maud gets into as a result of her cognitive dysfunction, the patience and support of her close family seem to offer her a stage (similar to that offered by Josey's collaborators and carers in *The Vale*) from which she can operate even as her

dementia progresses; a baseline that fosters the exercising of personal agency for as long as it remains feasible. On the other hand, Maud's Sisyphean struggle to help her friend (and by extension, her murdered sister) can only be effective if she has credibility in the eyes of those from whom she seeks assistance. Healey demonstrates the loss of this credibility by showing us the dismissive encounters Maud has to endure with her doctor, the police and even (on occasion) with Helen herself. Like Josey, Maud's illness has transformed her into 'the other', effectively locking her out of meaningful personal exchanges with authority figures. It is only a chance remark from Maud after a visit to the hospital to see her friend Elizabeth that allows Helen to unlock her mother's real thoughts and intentions, and to answer the riddle at the centre of Maud's quest. In the end, Sukey's murder is solved by serendipity (rather than by procedural graft or intellect), and through Helen's eventual willingness to listen to her mother and become the advocate she needs.

Turn of Mind, *Elizabeth is Missing*, *May*, and *This Hollow Vale* each argue in their own way for a reassessment of our understanding of cognitive dysfunction as it affects those living with dementia. Taken together, the texts invite us to consider the possibility that the central ideas explored in this section – memory, personhood, care, agency, and perhaps even consciousness itself – can be better understood as shared constructs rather than the self-defining capacity (or sole responsibility) of a sovereign individual. We are connected to and accountable for the vulnerable in our communities, whether we like it or not: they complete *us*, as we complete *them*. Such an observation contains implicit criticism of the way our culture currently approaches dementia-related treatment and care – and isolation, loss of status and respect, infantilisation and 'zombification', the curbing of personal freedoms, and the

misguided conflation of memory with self are shown to have profound consequences in each narrative.

Conclusion

This exegesis set out to examine how the prism of fantasy has been employed in *This Hollow Vale* to depict the subjective experience of Josephine Knight, a protagonist with dementia. Section one explored the role of time in the narrativisation of the novel, revealing the ways in which *This Hollow Vale* could be said to challenge conventional notions of temporality. Asynchronous ‘wormhole’ episodes (alongside a wide range of interpolated textual and musical materials), polyphonic narration, and the incorporation of a parallel universe where time operates very differently are all shown to be influential in terms of the insight they offer into the character of the protagonist and the unfolding of key events. Section two offered the reader an in-depth comparative analysis of three other recent novels featuring protagonists with dementia, examining differences and similarities in the narrativisation of the subjective experience of these central characters when set alongside *This Hollow Vale*.

Initially conceived as the first part of a trilogy of novels exploring one woman’s bardo-like journey towards the end of her life, *This Hollow Vale* is an original epic dementia fantasy novel. It may still be the only portal-quest fantasy to make it to the page featuring a protagonist with Alzheimer’s. Science fiction theorist Darko Suvin once stated that fantasy was a genre “committed to the interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment” (1972, p. 375), suggesting fantasy stories are irrational and therefore intellectually ‘lightweight’. This kind of criticism, referred to earlier, implies that the genre isn’t an appropriate vehicle for the discussion of complex ethical, social, political, and philosophical issues (such as those faced by people living with dementia). While Suvin has since softened his position, the idea

that fantasy is somehow ‘immature’ persists, despite numerous critically and commercially successful works of fiction offering evidence to the contrary. However, beyond the generic trappings of magic, escapism, wish-fulfilment, happy endings²⁷, quests completed, and evils overthrown; and outside the misplaced optimism of what scholar Laura Berlant termed “conventional good-life fantasies” (2011, p. 2), I have found the genre to offer a platform where non-conventional ideas about ageing, memory, living, loving, and dying can find a natural home. Like Naomi Krüger, I wondered “whether fictional accounts can hope to play a role in creating more space for empathy, imagination, and understanding” (2015, p. 109) around dementia, and in the process of researching and writing *This Hollow Vale* I discovered for myself that this was almost certainly the case.

Precipitated by challenging events in my own life and accompanied by the unravelling of ‘normality’ in the world around me (in the face of a global pandemic), *This Hollow Vale* is a strange novel that reflects, in many ways, the strange times into which it was born. On a general level, the book draws attention to people living with dementia, obliquely exploring – through a strong mature female protagonist – how our society views the condition. Even in the worst human situations, it posits the idea that love and life are never entirely absent; it suggests that far from knowing the minds of those with a dementia diagnosis, our suppositions can often be worlds away from the truth; and it asks us to believe that with real community, care, love, and respect, much that might at first seem impossible can still be achieved by those

27 J.R.R. Tolkien coined the term *eucatasrophe* in his influential essay ‘On Fairy Stories’ (*Tree and Leaf*, 1964) to describe the unlikely turn of events in a narrative that sees a happy ending emerge in the face of almost certain disaster. He explains the term in a letter to his son Christopher: “I coined the word ‘eucatastrophe’: the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears (which I argued it is the highest function of fairy-stories to produce). And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back. It perceives – if the story has literary ‘truth’ on the second plane (...) – that this is indeed how things really do work in the Great World for which our nature is made” (1981, Letter 89).

whom society locks away. On a personal level, the novel has provided me with a safe space where I have been able to explore my response to my mother's illness and subsequent death in what I hope is a creative and life-affirming way. Finally, if there is a deeper narrative purpose in *This Hollow Vale*, I would like to think it is to offer the reader pause-for-thought about what it means to be a conscious human being, showcasing as it does, not just our strangeness, our arcane rituals, our cruelty to one another, and our pain – but also our beauty, our hope, our love, and above all, our transcendent courage in the face of suffering.

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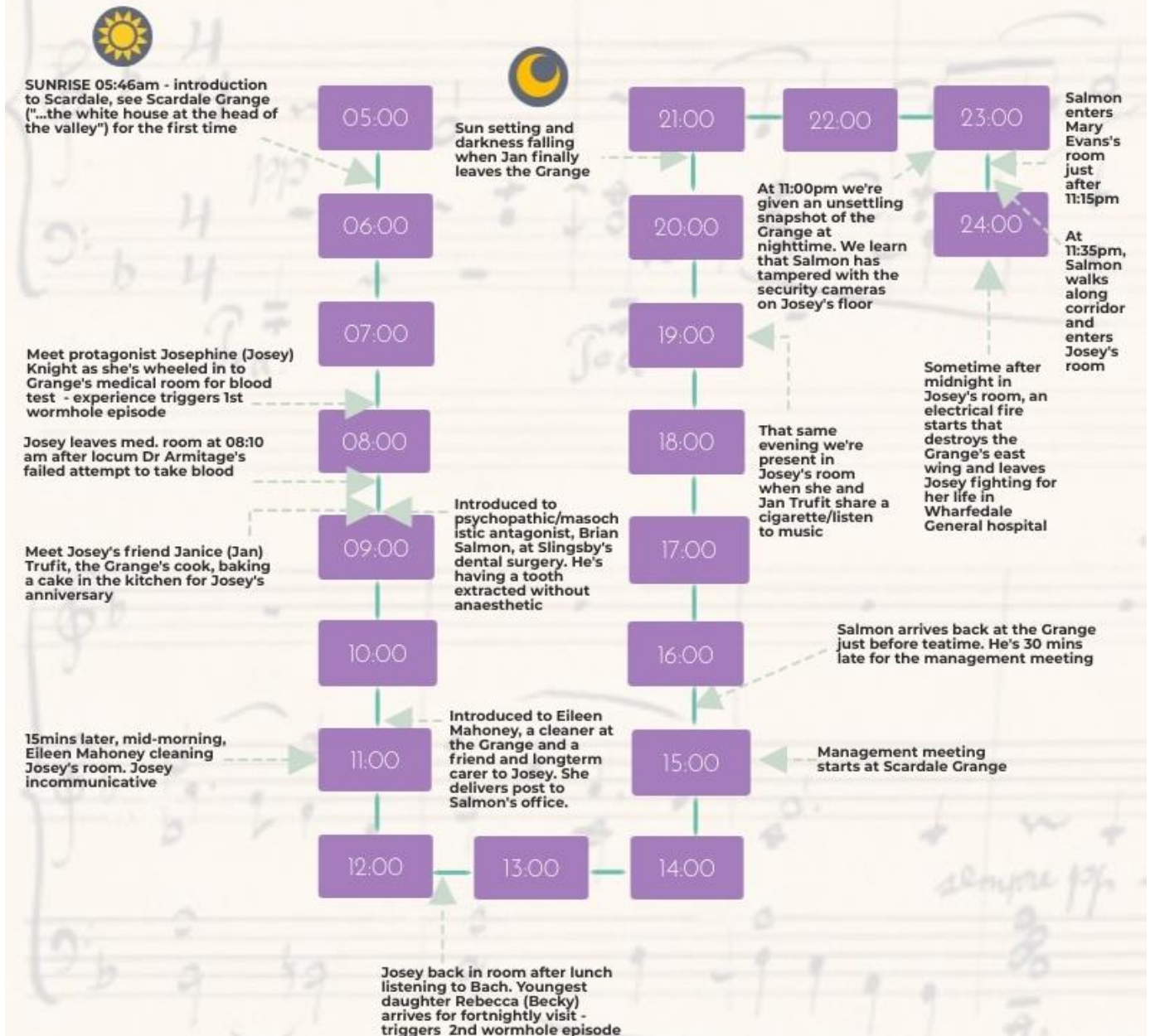
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Appendices

Appendix 1 — This *Hollow Vale*

OPENING FRAME TIMELINE: SCARDALE GRANGE (15th August, 2018)



Appendix 2 — *This Hollow Vale*

A Fantasy World Timeline: *Seven Months in The Vale*

Narrator's Time

Alma Lachanilta takes over narration from start of Chapter 4. Her commentary is presented from perspective of an older woman, describing events that happened some 60 years before the present she inhabits.

Twelfthmonth

We learn that it was “deepest winter” when Josephine (Josey) Knight, 9th Singer of The Vale, returned to the land.

- **1st Twelfthmonth**

Alma tells us it was the day before her 14th birthday (1st Twelfthmonth) when she and her father (Yanic Lachani) set out on one of their regular trips up to a high plateau on the Nomrech Ridge to visit the hermitage of the mysterious old man she calls Vanhin (wizard Stefan Wander) – her father’s singing teacher. They arrive just after nightfall.

Alma and Yanic bring the unconscious Josey down from Miriam’s Beacon back to the hermitage to be healed in the early hours of the morning on 1st Twelfthmonth. After celebrating Alma’s birthday at the hermitage, they arrive back in the village of Lachan in late evening of the same day.

- **14th Twelfthmonth** (2 weeks later)

Alma and her cousins, Sami and Jur, are feeding animals after school when a College Patrol, led by Morton Callax (son of The Vale’s unpopular ruler, Sivan Callax/the Songmistress) arrives in a convoy of snowtrax to investigate the magical phenomena reported to have occurred up on the high ridge round the time Josey reappeared in The Vale.

Later that evening, Kolle the Skinner has his eye put out by Callax and is taken to be questioned/tortured. Alma faints and finds herself back up at the hermitage, this time in her spirit/wraith-form. She wakes Josey out of her coma, unwittingly precipitating an earthquake (and an avalanche).

The College declares a state of emergency. Another College patrol is on its way up to the Nomrech Valley, mandated with setting up a permanent communications base in Lachan (sometime in the next seven days). Callax imposes a curfew until their arrival.

- **15th Twelfthmonth**

In the early hours, after confiding in her Aunt (Valerie), Alma escapes Lachan alone to try and make it up to the hermitage. As dawn breaks, Alma scales a

cliff face that she hopes leads to the Nomrech Ridge. She is saved from burial in a snowslide by her silver ring and by Vanhin's magic. Alma, Vanhin, and Yanic go to the hermitage. Alma is reunited with Josey.

Midday: Alma, Yanic, and Josey enter secret tunnels under Nomrech

- **16th Twelfthmonth**

At dusk – Alma, Yanic, and Josey emerge exhausted from the tunnels under the eaves of Linn Forest.

- **21st Twelfthmonth**

Alma, Yanic, and Josey meet up with Vanhin the wizard at the Hinab Pass into the Upper Abash Valley. That night Vanhin summons a snowstorm to hide their tracks. Yanic and Vanhin build a snow shelter to keep them alive.

- **23rd Twelfthmonth**

Storm still raging outside the snow shelter.

Vanhin gives Alma her first magic lesson – includes an impromptu magic task: she must sing a bean shoot to life out of the frozen earth. Yanic and Alma fall asleep after their exertions leaving Josey and Vanhin staring at each other. Triggers brief Wormhole 6 episode from Josey.

- **24th Twelfthmonth**

Lunchtime – party reaches the Golden Ladder where the River Nedray falls into the lower valley. River is frozen. They descend steps cut in the limestone and are attacked by a flying demon. Demon is shot and killed by black arrows fired from below. Vanhin and Yanic are happy – they mention the Kasivari. Night – Alma meets Kasivari warriors Noa and Roi for the first time. Kasivari swear blood oath to Josey. Alma and Josey eat roast rabbit.

- **25th Twelfthmonth**

Yanic and Vanhin take Alma and Josey to visit Radha's Well on way down Lower Abash Valley to Tivalhas.

At dusk – 10th day after leaving hermitage the party arrives safely in Tivalhas.

Narrator's Time – prolepsis

Alma draws us forward to her own present where she bemoans the dilating/distorting effect of history and propaganda on the events she has lived through.

- **26th Twelfthmonth**

Kasivari leave Tivalhas to return up the Abash Valley to keep watch by the Golden Ladder. Alma and Josey bathe and settle into the House of Wander.

Firstmonth/Secondmonth/Thirdmonth

3 months pass

Winter becomes spring and Josey begins to “put some weight back on to her frame.”
 Alma and Josey receive regular lessons in chant (magic).
 Vanhin sends out messages to call a gathering of the mountain clans
 Towards end of Thirdmonth – highlanders begin to arrive in Tivalhas for the
 Gathering.

- **30th Thirdmonth**

Alma and Yanic go down to the highland camps that have sprung up to accommodate the freefolk arriving for the Gathering in the meadow below Tivalhas, to listen to the harpist Mother Attar play.

- **31st Thirdmonth**

Vanhin tells of his past as Provost of The Vale under Miriam Singer (revealing his true age and power as a mage) and relates the history of his enmity with Sivan Callax. He and Yanic persuade Alma of the necessity of getting Josey as far away from the Five Valleys as possible before the rebellion starts. They outline an outrageous plan: Noa and Yanic will accompany Josey and Alma to the safety of the Kasivari desert in the far north of the country. They will travel disguised as pilgrims and stop off *en route* at the College Cemetery to visit Miriam’s shrine in the hope that the experience will help Josey to recover her wits.

Vanhin has booked them passage as far as the College Bounds on a merchant steam truck.

Fourthmonth

Traditional time for pilgrimage in The Vale

- **2nd Fourthmonth**

The Gathering takes place – Vanhin persuades the highlanders to rise up against College rule and free their brethren in Lachan from curfew and imprisonment. Alma is reunited with her cousin Jur who was rescued from prison near Lachan by Vanhin.

- **5th Fourthmonth**

Pilgrimage – Alma, Josey, Yanic and Noa leave Tivalhas and climb aboard Jhansi’s steam truck, *The Dragon*, to hitch a lift to the shrines of the Singers at the College Cemetery.

- **8th Fourthmonth**

Dragon stops to refuel at Tafas.

Night – truck attacked by highwaymen. Noa and Yanic defeat them.

- **9th Fourthmonth**

Morning – *Dragon* essential maintenance in a bitoomin yard near Lake Telyn, just outside Serebit.

Night – refuel and first stopover at merchant terminus on outskirts of Terezan.

- **12th Fourthmonth**

South of Sulvan (a wine city), Noa gets news from Roi that the Wolf has attacked the College forces occupying Lachan. The rebellion has begun.

- **13th Fourthmonth**

The Dragon drives past the ruined Forest of Amrah (the sacred forest). Alma is shocked and angered by the desecration.

- **14th Fourthmonth**

By midday they start to see the foothills of the College Massif.

As evening falls, they arrive at the Alamar (aka 'the snake's tail'), just where the road starts to climb up the massif towards College Bounds. They refuel and take on water.

Jhansi drives on through the night.

- **15th Fourthmonth**

Morning – Josey unsettled – Alma notices that the Singer keeps looking up at the sky. Alma remembers similar behaviour before the demon attack on the Golden Ladder.

Midday – a winged Sentinel (demon) attacks the pilgrims just after lunch. Noa and Yanic bury Alma/Josey for their own safety and then stand guard with a shield spell to hide them all.

Late afternoon – *Dragon* passes through gates/checkpoint and enters the College Bounds. Jhansi sets the pilgrims down at the cemetery gates. They wave him off and the steam truck continues on to the College.

Pilgrims enter cemetery and walk to the Tombs of the Singers. Noa waits there while Yanic accompanies Alma and Josey up the Midden Hill. He leaves them to walk on and find Miriam's shrine on their own.

Josey and Alma enter Miriam's shrine – Josey makes contact with Miriam and all her other reincarnations. Josey's 2nd awakening in The Vale.

Evening – They emerge from shrine just before it collapses. Alma is awakened by voices. They encounter a routine perimeter patrol of College guards – under Luz/Eileen's command – alerted by the powerful frequency of magic given off in the shrine. Alma and Josey are found (still unconscious), arrested and transported to the South Gate of the College, where they are imprisoned ready for questioning the next day.

- **16th Fourthmonth**

Sunrise – Alma wakes up, looks out of her cell window, and sees the College for the first time. Josey remains unconscious. As Alma takes in the vast city skyline, she sees a man scaling a building nearby. She identifies him as a

Kasivar warrior and watches, horrified, as he is hunted across the college rooftops by adepts under the command of a powerful dark mage – The Keeper of the Keys (Alma’s – and the reader’s – first introduction to the Keeper/Salmon antagonist in *The Vale*).

After breakfast – The old tower guard (Staris) takes them down to the Keeper’s chamber for questioning, carrying the unconscious Josey.

Locked in the Keeper’s chamber, they are eventually rescued by Noa and Yanic who break in through the roof of the building and drop lines down to haul them out. As they leave, Josey breaks the enchantment that holds the Keeper’s keys in the air. They cascade down to the ground. Alma plucks a small ivory key out of the air as it falls past her and puts it in her pocket.

Morning until night-time – Josey, Alma, Yanic and Noa go on the run in the College metropolis. That night, they are eventually cornered by the COMAJ (civil militia) in a dilapidated complex of apartments for military personnel. Luz, the Meshaki captain whose patrol arrested Josey and Alma the previous day, saves the pilgrims, reveals herself to be a rebel spy, and takes them to a safe room in the basement underneath her ground-floor apartment.

Midnight – They decide they’ll try and escape the city through the sewers, come up underneath the Comaj building, and then steal air transport to get over the city walls.

- **17th Fourthmonth**

Early hours – escape group passes through sewers and up through Comaj building.

Sunrise – after overcoming resistance they commandeer a dirigible and make their escape over the College’s western battlements.

Morning – dirigible attacked by demons and forced to crash land. Everybody survives the impact with only light injuries. They continue on down the western side of the massif.

Late afternoon – Josey finds a cave for the companions to shelter from the rain and spend the night. She heals everyone’s injuries and they set up a watch.

We learn that Noa has heard news from Roi – the highlanders have retaken Lachan. With the Keeper now worryingly interested in Alma and Josey, the Wolf is apparating down to Amrah with a group of warriors to escort them safely back to Tivalhas.

- **18th Fourthmonth**

Morning – the companions breakfast in the cave before moving down through the foothills. A dirigible passes overhead, searching for them and they take

cover until it passes. They make their way to the bottom of the massif and wait under the trees. After discussion they decide they will only move out into the ruined forest when it's dark.

Night – the companions break cover and set off to rendezvous with Vanhin. After walking for hours, they stop for water and are suddenly attacked by College adepts, led by the Keeper himself. Noa is badly wounded. Josey is hit by a spell (meant for Alma) that imprisons her inside a diamond carapace, and, after fighting valiantly, Yanic is killed by the dark mage.

Vanhin arrives with reinforcements and turns the tide of the encounter – the rescue party pursues the adepts back towards the massif. Keeper escapes to the safety of the College, many adepts die, 10 of the freefolk are lost.

Vanhin returns to free Josey from the enchantment that imprisoned her. Josey sees what has happened to Yanic and goes to sit by Alma's side. The Singer cremates Yanic and plants a huge ash tree where his body lay.

- **19th Fourthmonth**

Early hours – Josey enlists Alma's help and together they restore the entire ruined Forest of Amrah. They finish the job just before dawn.

Alma sleeps for 24hours, exhausted after the trauma of the previous day.

- **20th Fourthmonth**

That night Alma sits with Josey, who has been unconscious in her tent since the restoration of the forest. She sings a Lachani hymn to the singer and helps her to regain consciousness. On waking, Josey asks Alma to tell Vanhin to prepare for a visit to the Sacred Grove the following day.

- **21st Fourthmonth**

One hour before dawn – entire party already marching through forest towards Sacred Grove.

Lunchtime – stop briefly for 'marching rations'.

Late afternoon – arrive near the Sacred Grove. *Laulun Rakastajaterin* (Sivan's summer palace) is destroyed and with the help of the whole party, Josey's magic scours and rededicates the grove.

Late evening – as usual after exertion, Josey is exhausted and drifts into a dangerous stupor. Vanhin urges them all to ready themselves for a march back to the site of the portal where they apparated two days earlier. There is a heated discussion about whether the Singer will be safer back in the highlands. The Kasivari suggest that they should continue towards their northern desert home and take Josey there instead – they think it's the last thing Sivan and her masters will suspect. Eventually, Vanhin agrees. The party splits in two. Alma, Noa, Luz, Tord, Kolle, Miske and Anya pledge their

lives to ensure that Josey reaches the Kasivar lands unharmed. All the remaining rebels (including Noa's brother Roi) will return South with the Wolf.

Just before midnight – the Wolf leaves the Grove with his warriors to return to the highlands and take back command of the rebellion. We don't see him again.

- **22nd Fourthmonth**

Early hours of the morning – Sivan visits Alma in 3 strange dreams and tries to force/persuade her (and through her, to influence Josey) to join Paholainen. With Josey's help she resists. The meeting with Sivan triggers Wormhole 14 (exploring Annie's relationship with Josey).

- **24th Fourthmonth**

Just before dawn – Alma, Josey, Noa, Luz, Tord, Kolle, Miska and Anya set off on trek to Kasivari desert and safety.

Fifthmonth

Meshak (in rainy season) to Kasivari desert

- **2nd Fifthmonth**

The Singer's company enters Mecheltev (The Maiden-of-the-Fens), hoping to blend into the crowds gathered for the Fifthmonth fair. Josey is exhausted and ill. They stop to buy supplies, to dry out tents/gear and to rest. They purchase a horse (Felgrund) and cart to help speed up the journey.

- **16th Fifthmonth**

Company camps by side of flooded River Melisse in the rain. The ford they were hoping to cross is submerged – they debate next steps.

- **17th Fifthmonth**

11:00am – They decide to attempt a crossing of the swollen river in the caulked wagon.

2:00pm – wagon strikes dry land on the opposite bank. Tragically, Anya has drowned in Kolle's arms.

Afternoon – The company buries Anya at the head of the valley.

Narrator's Time

Alma reminds us that these events happened a long time ago – she tells us that at the time nobody knew the site of Anya's burial would become a place of pilgrimage, but that's what happened. Alma recalls she visited the hillside ten years after the events described here and found it turfed over and covered in primroses.

- **25th Fifthmonth**

The company arrives just below the Meshaki capital Norbek. They find out from a farmer that war with the South is over for the moment. Against all expectations, the Wolf has won independence for the highlands.

Sixthmonth

- **3rd Sixthmonth**

Company leaves border town of Aveshreev.

- **10th Sixthmonth**

Alma sees the open desert for the first time.

- **11th Sixthmonth**

Sunset – company arrives at the oasis (Mother-of-water). Meets up with the 20-strong Kasivar *chord* led by Ce'an.

Noa tells Kasivar creation story.

- **12th Sixthmonth**

Following Ce'an and the Kasivari, the company heads out into the deep desert.

- **22nd Sixthmonth**

Dusk – company arrives at Ez Nomar (the hidden fortress), capital of the Kasivari. The city is ruled by Noa's mother, Shi Jihan, a powerful mage.

Night – Josey meets with Shi Jihan and many of the Kasivari people in the Hall of Voices. She draws water out of the stone floor and causes a fountain to spring up inside the hall. The Kasivari recognise Josey as the 9th Singer and Kasivari elders swear allegiance to Josey.

There's a feast in the Hall of Voices.

- **23rd Sixthmonth**

Early hours of the morning – The Keeper of the Keys uses Kolle's body as a portal (facilitated by a demonic spell planted in the skinner – presumably by Morton Callax) and appears in Josey's room. He snatches the Singer and apparates back to the College before anyone (except Alma) knows what has happened or is able to intervene.

- **24th Sixthmonth**

Mid-morning, College – After a kangaroo court trial in Central Hall, Sivan sentences Josey to life imprisonment as an imposter and traitor.

- **25th Sixthmonth**

Dawn, Ez Nomar – Shi Jihan, the Mage, uses all her power to set up a portal between desert and College and in an act of extreme courage, sacrifices herself to send Noa and Alma all the way the foot of the College Massif.

Meanwhile in Sivan's chamber in College Green, the Master Keeper tells his regent that a patrol has just detected a huge 'explosion' of magic at the base of the College Massif as two people apparated there. She sends him to deal with the incursion.

Later same morning – an epic battle takes place between Noa and the Keeper of the Keys outside the door to Isha's Tunnel.

Alma finds that her ivory key fits the door to the tunnel. She escapes inside and runs to find the winding stair.

- **26th Sixthmonth**

Josey in solitary confinement under Central Hall.

She tips the poison she's been given away down an open drain in the corner of her cell (it was given to her as an act of kindness on the part of one of her jailers). It seems as if she is finally about to lose her mind...but listening to the pounding of her heart and the rushing of her blood, she begins to hear music. She sings a Mahler song that acts as a memory map, setting her on the path back to consciousness. Strong memories associated with the music trigger Wormhole 17.

Appendix 3

- A framing device that encircles the fantasy world – presenting a ‘real’ world for contrast
- A parallel fantasy world
- A portal into the fantasy world
- Magic or other supernatural elements as main features of plot
- A troubled protagonist with great (magical) potential
- A sage/guide figure who helps the protagonist (at least initially)
- Magical creatures
- Magical items
- Other races
- A journey or quest
- A world that is in trouble or flux

Table 1: Classic genre components in *This Hollow Vale*

Appendix 4

Wormhole 1 – Irish rebel song/ 1 st glimpse of The Vale	page 16
Wormhole 2 – Becky meningitis	page 32
Wormhole 3 – Sam's death/Josey's translation to The Vale (<i>Tosca</i>)	page 46
Wormhole 4 – Remember me!	page 75
Wormhole 5 – Iestyn Wallace/Becky	page 89
Wormhole 6 – Storytelling	page 106
Wormhole 7 – Jan & Josey wheelchair outing	page 113
Wormhole 8 – Bathtime	page 131
Wormhole 9 – <i>The Boy Friend</i>	page 154
Wormhole 10 – Becky ECT	page 177
Wormhole 11 – Daddy's home	page 204
Wormhole 12 – <i>Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder</i>	page 229
Wormhole 13 – Crematorium 2	page 242
Wormhole 14 – Annie/Josey (Selfridges)	page 264
Wormhole 15 – <i>Barco Negro</i>	page 280
Wormhole 16 – Welcome home Becky!	page 304
Wormhole 17 – <i>Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen</i>	page 328

Table 2: Wormhole Episodes in *This Hollow Vale*