

A
Twisted
Messiah

The Divine Labyrinth

Volume One

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WILLIAM DAWSON

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This edition of *The Divine Labyrinth* is based upon the Wisengrund Manuscript (German Federal Archives). Two earlier versions of the first volume are known to exist: the Eugen Kindlmüller edition (Hamburg, 1901) and *Un Mesías Retorcido*, published by Ediciones Delgado (Madrid, 1908). All three texts contain substantive differences from each other. For a more comprehensive breakdown of the book's complicated providence, please refer to the Appendix.

A NOTE ON TIME

Due to the high spin of Torus, a terrestrial day is very short, only about four hours long.

For practical purposes, the Commonwealth uses a greatday, as established by the Third Council of Ingelstadt (Year 388). This consists of six days strung together. The greatday is usually named after a Saint and begins at 'sunrise', which is defined as the moment the sun rises in the Holy City of Ingelstadt on the spring equinox. Three terrestrial days (or twelve hours) serve as the wakingday, followed by three days of greatnight.

Thus, two o'clock Saint Johann's Day III translates as the second hour of the third terrestrial day of the greatday in honour of Saint Johann. Or, on a twenty-four hour clock, roughly 3pm.

It is presumed that time zones exist, although it isn't clear from the narrative where they fall.

Prior to the Third Council of Ingelstadt, there was a great deal of regional variation. The city of Regillia, for example, confined their greatnight to the fourth and fifth terrestrial days, which meant that their greatday was one terrestrial day shorter than in Ingelstadt. In Went, meanwhile, there does not seem to have had any established wakingday/greatnight routine.

The table overleaf provides a full breakdown of a typical Commonwealth greatday in Year 33.

	Time	Time (24hr)
<i>The Wakingday</i>		
Saint Johann's Day I	1	6.00
	2	7.00
	3	8.00
	4	9.00
Saint Johann's Day II	1	10.00
	2	11.00
	3	12.00
	4	13.00
Saint Johann's Day III	1	14.00
	2	15.00
	3	16.00
	4	17.00
<i>The Greatnight</i>		
Saint Johann's Day IV	1	18.00
	2	19.00
	3	20.00
	4	21.00
Saint Johann's Day V	1	22.00
	2	23.00
	3	24.00
	4	1.00
Saint Johann's Day VI	1	2.00
	2	3.00
	3	4.00
	4	5.00

Darkhours in grey. Please note, the above table is a rough guide only. The length of an hour on Torus does not necessarily correspond exactly to the length of an hour on Earth (see Appendix).

There was an old miracle of Hezekiah-ap I, long degraded now, which gently planted an image of the Angel Moriel on the retinas of a pregnant woman, in order to give her comfort as labour approached.

Mary tried to blink the broken star of light and limbs off her vision. It kept coming back, now dribbling eyes, now torn apart by screaming lips. She screwed her eyes shut, hoping it would go away. But the light remained, brighter now, with shadows moving behind it.

‘Hands in the air!’ a voice shouted. ‘On yer feet.’

Mary jumped. A brushstroke of torchlight ran up a metal spike. *A bayonet*, she realised. Her exhaustion oozed into alarm. Somebody was trying to kill her. Again.

She slurred out her old excuse. ‘I’m not the one you’re looking for. I’m not —’

Her voice faltered. Not who? She chased the memory through her head, trying to pin it down, but it eluded her.

‘Don’t care who you are, miss,’ said one of the shadows. ‘You ain’t supposed to be here, and that’s a fact.’ And his

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companion added, ‘Saints, get her out of the van quick, Fyodor. They’ll be wanting to shunt the trucks for the next train, and the sergeant will rake our ears if we hold them up again.’

Gloved hands reached for her. She was pulled from her hiding place, into the torchlight.

‘Fyodor, stop, stop – look – she’s pregnant.’

There was a pause. The hands drew back. Mary sagged against a piece of sheeted cargo, hunched in the dark like some unholy cross between a pipe organ and an automobile. A Wentish Device, she guessed, metal, and angular, and centuries dead like the rest of its kind. She couldn’t immediately recall why she had hidden herself behind it, or how long it had been, but that was a problem for later. Right now, she was more concerned by the two faces, swimming before her. Soldiers, by the look of their black fur caps, and crisp grey overcoats. She tried to gauge level of threat they posed.

One of the soldiers sighed. ‘I *knew* tonight was going to be a bitch. It always is when I get assigned with you.’

‘Piss off Andrei. You’re *my* bad luck.’ The rifles dropped. ‘Come on, miss, let’s get you of there. But be careful. These Devices have sharp edges.’

Mary found it hard to hold onto what the boys were saying, but she understood what was expected of her. She edged towards the sliding door and let the soldiers help her down the footplate to the ballast. It was only then, as she stood astride the icy railway sleepers, swaying with exhaustion, that she realised how much trouble she was in. Beyond the signal gantries and the trellis watchtowers of a military town, half the night sky had been ripped away. In its place span a whirlpool. The vortex was clamped in place by two ivory towers, and it had a valence of ghostly light fluttering around its edge, frayed with twisted limbs, and bent necks, and fleeting faces wrenched in agony. It took Mary a moment to process what she was seeing.

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‘The Eye of GOD,’ she breathed, sparks hissing on her breath as spoke the divine syllable. ‘It really exists.’

‘Easy, miss. You ain’t supposed to know about that.’

Mary barely heard. Fragments of memory skittered through her head. Olga had called the Eye a magnifying glass into the past. Through it, you could see... Her brain scrambled around for details. ‘The War in Heaven,’ she blurted out. ‘That’s what Olga kept bleating on about.’

‘Fyodor, get her to shut up. We’ll be doing reports all greatday if the sergeant thinks we’ve caught a spy.’

Those lights, flashing within the vortex of spectres, might well be angels with fractal wings and impossible faces, bending reality around them. Or maybe demons, their bodies so dense they had their own gravitation tug, plotting mayhem inside their floating rocks.

Mary knew she should be alarmed. Something about this situation was very bad. Olga had said... Olga had said...

She couldn’t remember what Olga had said.

The soldiers gently escorted her across the tracks, towards a line of tin huts. Mary’s unsteady eyes followed the giant searchlights as they swept white ovals over the frozen ground. More soldiers tramped along the files of waiting goods wagons, gun muzzles pointing up over their shoulders like antennas. But it was the sliver of silvery light, stretched above the horizon, that held her attention, puzzling her for a moment before she realised what it was.

‘The far side of Torus,’ she breathed. ‘Catching the sun.’

‘Yeah, good idea, stick to stating the bleeding obvious, miss. Much safer.’

It was not a sight Mary had ever expected to see. At some point during the last few days, she must have crossed the circular pole running around the top of the planet and descended a little way into the donut hole at its centre. If she stood here long enough, she would see the middle moon, Terminus, rising up and down through the hole like a bobbing apple.

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No wonder the soldiers were jumpy. She was well beyond the edge of civilisation, in what looked like a Closed City. Quite possibly, they had mistaken her for a spy.

'I'm not a spy,' she mumbled.

'Of course not, miss. You tell the sergeant that. But perhaps just step in here first?'

Before Mary could work out what was happening, she was pushed into an outside toilet. The door slammed shut behind her. A brief spasm of fear squeezed her chest, but her thoughts quickly unravelled again, and she slumped down onto the wooden seat, groaning as the weight came off her ankles. It was only then, as the soldiers stamped their feet and argued about who would take a message to their sergeant, that she overheard the name of the town she had arrived in.

Desnogorsk-7.

And Olga's final warning screamed like a meteor through her head. *Don't go to Desnogorsk-7. And definitely don't go there on Miracle Day VI.*

Mary's pulse tightened. Desnogorsk-7. She was in Desnogorsk-7. That was bad, she was sure of it. Very, very bad. If only she could remember *why*.

Her thoughts spiralled unhelpfully.

She wasn't cut out for this. She was a nobody. A floor girl from a canning factory on the outskirts of Borysch. She had a room in the factory's dormitory, and a pet cat she kept hidden from the matron. Her only skill was making ends meet.

But something had gone wrong. She had been running, running for so long. Running along the northern latitudes of Torus, from Borysch to Mostovsky to Ilsky to Yeysk. Trying to protect her child. Trying to escape the...

'The Praying Men,' she breathed.

Memory squirmed inside her head. The Praying Men had come to Borysch, spouting mangled theology and prophecies of disaster. They had stalked the edges of the

greatnight, breaking bones and cutting cult symbols into the skin of their victims, looking for her, looking for her unborn child.

‘I won’t let you kill my baby,’ she shouted at the darkness, momentarily convinced that a Praying Man was in the toilet with her. But it was only a waking dream, brought on by exhaustion.

Also a waking dream – or so she thought – was the yelp and thud of a guard outside being incapacitated. Because who would be stupid enough to attack a guard in a town full of soldiers? It was only when the padlock rattled and the toilet door scraped open that Mary realised she was no longer hallucinating. A tall shadow stood silhouetted against the white arc lights, cloaked in black velvet, with black gloves and black boots, and a long coat of black leather. The only thing that wasn’t black was the figure’s silver mask, cold and expressionless, with a slit for the mouth and two holes for the eyes. For one terrible moment Mary thought that the Praying Men had found her and all her running had been for nothing. But then a woman’s voice said, ‘I am a friend of Olga Nikolayevna. Let’s get you out of here before more soldiers come.’

Olga. The name was like birdsong after the long winter’s dark. Olga was safety. Olga was refuge. Olga had hidden her from the Praying Men, shown her the Arariel Solutions, told her never to set foot in Desnogorsk-7...

‘Wait,’ Mary slurred. ‘No – stop.’

The silver-masked lady tugged at Mary’s arm, forcing her to stagger out of the cubicle. ‘We’re running out of time,’ said the woman. ‘It’s a miracle you’re here, despite all the interference, but if we don’t move quickly the prophecy could see unravel. Come, this way. Watch out for point rods.’

Mary stumbled across the frozen gravel, her mind lumbering in circles. *We’re running out of time. We are running out of time. We Are Running Out of Time – Natasha 1-6.* Those

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were Words of God. Heard by Saint Natasha. Printed in gold leaf on the cover of *The Arariel Solutions*. A warning of what was inside.

The prophecy, Mary suddenly remembered. There was a prophecy in the book. A prophecy about Mary, and about her child. One that the Praying Men had vowed to destroy by any means possible, even if it meant slaughtering dozens of unborn children to stop the future in its tracks.

She needed to escape. Protect her child. A knife would do the trick. She had one somewhere. Or had *had* one. Where had it gone?

‘I won’t let you kill my baby,’ she mumbled.

‘Good,’ the lady replied. ‘Because that really isn’t the plan.’ She peeled back a flap of chain-wire fence and herded Mary through. They staggered into a street of half-finished warehouses, whose hollow-eyed windows stared ghoulishly down at them. Mary was dimly aware of static crackling along the telegraph wires, but she was so busy trying to remember what had happened to her knife, she didn’t look up until the Eye of God spat with sparks, and a curtain of falling green light unrolled across the heavens.

Every year, in his far-off Temple, the Twenty-Third Apostle performed a Miracle to prove to the world that he was still trusted by God. Last year He had cured a woman of her glaucoma. This year it was rumoured He would bewitch a wren to sing the Apostle’s Psalm of Exultation. The miracle excited theons in the lower atmosphere of the Commonwealth of Apostolic States, causing an aurora to form.

Mary was looking at a Miracle Day aurora.

She lumbered to a halt, one foot in the gutter, her laboured breath heaving in her chest.

It was Miracle Day VI. And she was in Desnogorsk-7.

‘Oh no –’ she panted. ‘Oh no, no, no.’

The silver-masked lady stopped to give Mary’s aching spine a stroke. ‘It’s not much further,’ she said, gently. ‘Just

another block, and then you can sit down and rest, I promise.'

'No. You don't understand. Olga said – she said – if I'm here, on this day, it will all go wrong...'

The green glint of the aurora bent across the lady's mask. Her voice dropped and her reply was as soft as the first falling flakes of snow. 'I know, Mary,' she whispered. 'But I fear the alternatives are very much worse.' She pointed up at the Eye. 'You see that fight? That was the beginning. In those dark days, when Purgatory was razed and the Gates of Heaven shattered, they created a monster so terrible it almost destroyed creation...'

'No,' mumbled Mary. 'No.'

'The monster sought to break into Heaven. It had heard the old adage that He who sits on the Throne of GOD can remake the universe in His own image. And maybe that's true. But the monster was defeated before it could find out for sure. Defeated, yes, but not destroyed. Soon the monster will return, and your daughter is the key to stopping it. Or maybe she is the one who will hold Creation down whilst the monster rewrites the mathematics of our atoms. It's still in the balance. Already a chessboard of factions are mobilising. If I am to protect your daughter from the nightmare that is to come, I need to be able to predict events. And I can't do that if the prophecy is broken. Please Mary, you have to complete your part. Just a few more yards. We need to be a safe distance from the Incursion if my plan is to work.'

Mary's thoughts were slippery and her memories were jumbled, but there was one thing she was sure of. Olga would not want her here, in Desnogorsk-7, on Miracle Day VI.

'You lied!' she panted. 'You said you were Olga's friend. But you're not. You're not Olga's friend. Who are you?'

The lady slid her arm around Mary's back in a sad, comforting hug. 'You may call me Miss Price. And Mary – I

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am so sorry for what is about to happen. I'm going to try and save you, but my plan is untested, and my priority has to be your daughter. Come, we need to get out of range before – ' She stopped. The Eye of God flared suddenly bright. There was an almighty shudder, and the spiral of spectres was abruptly sucked into a squat, concrete unit at the foot of the vortex. The Eye winked out.

'And we're out of time,' said Miss Price. 'Damn the Moons. Hang on.' She fumbled inside her leather coat and pulled a loop of copper wire from her inside pocket. The wire had a double-pronged plug at one end, and an antenna at the other. 'I really hope this makeshift dampener works. Please Mary, remember, I'm doing this for your daughter.'

And she stabbed the double-pronged plug into the flesh at the base of Mary's neck.

Mary screamed.

At the same moment, an explosion kicked the night.

Orange light strafed the rimward sky. It seared away the aurora and slammed long shadows through the hollow interiors of the warehouses. Mary froze in alarm, her hand clutched around the bloody prong in her neck.

'Don't worry,' whispered Miss Price. 'I will protect your daughter.'

She gave Mary's head a final stroke, and a second, louder explosion punched a mushroom cloud of smoke and debris into the atmosphere. The front wall of the concrete unit disintegrated, and *something* boiled out of it. The *something* tore across the asphalt yard, bulldozing through prefab offices, rupturing water pipes, mangling spotlights, chewing up the chain-wire fence. Then it was out of the compound and pulverising the street beyond. Empty warehouses folded aside like wet cardboard. The road rippled under its impact. A sludge of angry thoughts dredged along in its wake. Mary felt them bend around the *something* like black wings. There was a great lurch. A shudder of alien geometries. And suddenly the whole boiling ejection was

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squeezing in on itself, funnelling down the copper wire into a fizzing loop that ended in Mary's neck.

Mary's mouth slammed wide in shock. Her head snapped back. Her legs spasmed and her spine arched. For one scintillating moment it looked like Miss Price's plan had succeeded. Then Mary's eyes crumbled to char in their sockets and a whine of distilled pain wheezed out of her lungs. Her body slumped, and she slipped through Miss Price's arms to the cold bitumen below.

She was dead. As foretold.

But not her baby. Not yet.

PART ONE

**Something Scratching
to Get Out**

Years 33 – 20

The rhythm of the brake van changed. Pettar Steadyhand moved out of habit, leaning into the sunken ducket on his wall. Through the glazed slit running down its edge, he could see their train of brightly painted peddler wagons, curving across the grey arches of Over Dal viaduct. At the far end of the bridge, a distant signal waited in the mist of wakingday's first evening, its semaphore arm angled at danger.

Time to wake up. Time to do his job.

Time to pretend that the world had not ended.

He stepped over to the brake column and span the metal wheel of his brake.

And then the moon fell down.

The sentence popped unexpectedly into his head. It was how the Creation story ended. God cut off His hand and curled up His fingers to make the earth, God used the smallest bone of His thumb to make man, and then, without explanation, a moon fell down.

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Back when he was a kid, Friar Henrik had reassured the children in his tin-shed Winter School that moons didn't just drop out of the sky. The story, he said, was a metaphor for the loss of innocence. But six weeks ago, a moon *had* come down, the smallest of the ninety-eight minimoons that swarmed around Torus, tiny bean-shaped Praeco, showering silver meteors across the sky.

Its fall was too late to compromise Pettar's innocence. That was long gone. This past year, his life had entered a tunnel of routine. He shepherded his peddler trains up and down the fjords and valleys of the polar mountains, checking signals, signing invoices, blowing his tin whistle. But his pride in the job had gone. The brass buttons on his blue jacket and waistcoat had tarnished. The gold braid around his cap had frayed. Grey stubble crept across his chin.

My moon fell down long ago. He watched the red timber sheds of Knut's Bakken swing into view, and his mind settled back into its pale sea of oblivion.

By the time the train clanked to a halt in the goods loop, shortnight had fallen. Van doors clonked open, canvases rose against the spitting sleet, and the tack-menders and shoemakers and tinkers and scribes lit the lamps inside their stalls. Pettar sat on the green wooden bench by his stove, the clock ticking in his ear, waiting for the routine of re-starting to give his life structure again.

A knock at the van door broke his quiet.

'Hey Pettar,' shouted Little Rolf. 'I've got a question for you. Are you ready?' He paused theatrically. 'What's a vampire's favourite ship?'

Pettar's heart sank. He didn't want to face Little Rolf. There was nothing little about the toymaker. He was built like a cheery blonde bear, with a voice to match. Over the past year, he had made it his life's mission to cheer Pettar up, and although Pettar knew that his efforts were kindly meant, the clumsy interventions intruded on his grief.

‘It’s a blood vessel!’ cried Little Rolf. He laughed for a moment at his own joke, then knocked again. ‘Hey, but seriously, wake up. I need your advice.’

Pettar reluctantly opened the door.

Little Rolf grinned and thrust a battered leather Testament Box into his hands. ‘It was with the parcels, awaiting pick-up, pasted with a label saying *Return to Sender*. What should we do?’

The Testament Box felt oddly heavy, and it wriggled in Pettar’s grip. Pettar held it steady as Little Rolf lifted the lid. A six-week-old baby blinked back at him. The child had a fuzz of black hair over its scalp and a fading pink birthmark on its cheek, and it was wrapped in white tissue paper. A red ribbon was tied loosely around its neck. Even Pettar, numb to the world, felt a moment of surprise.

‘I thought –’ Little Rolf hesitated. ‘I thought you might –’ He broke off again. ‘Well, I thought that you would know more about this sort of thing than I do.’ He blushed, and tickled the baby’s chin, causing it to gurgle. ‘Sorry, this was clumsy of me, I’ll go to Ingrid –’

But the baby’s gurgle had already attracted the attention of several peddlers and traders, stood on the gravel bakken abutting the loop. They left the noisy pens of skinny goats and cumulonimbus sheep to have a look. The fall of the moon had everybody on edge, and they were glad of the distraction.

‘What you got there Pettar? Does the Railway Company deliver babies now?’

‘How much do you want for my three kids?’

‘Do you take husbands as well?’

Little Rolf tickled the child’s chin again. ‘Ignore the grumpy adults,’ he cooed. ‘You’re a little darling, aren’t you? Who could abandon something so sweet?’ And the bakken’s foreman, Astrid Fix-me-up, who always had an opinion, said, ‘Not everybody’s as soft as you, Rolf. It was

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probably one of them bottomlanders. They have hearts of ash and grit.’

The baby lifted its foot to its mouth.

‘Oh, the poor mite!’ cried Little Rolf. ‘It’s missing a toe.’

Everybody craned their necks to look. The baby was indeed missing a toe, the big toe of its left foot.

An uncomfortable silence settled as they all wondered what to do next. The noise of the bakken encroached upon their circle: cottars and farmwives bartering headcheeses, and salted reindeer meat, and barrels of mead. Knut’s Bakken was not *quite* a Devil’s Market, where anything could be bought and sold, but still people tramped for hours over the mountains to exchange gossip and fill their larders for the oncoming winter.

It was Astrid who broke the quiet. ‘There’s an orphanage down in Nordvik, run by the factory-nuns of Saint Winifred,’ she said, hefting a crate of dried stockfish. ‘You should take her there.’

Little Rolf wiped a smear of dribble from the baby’s cheek. ‘It seems a shame to leave her in that terrible place,’ he said quietly, and there was another pause as everybody thought about the ugly clapboard buildings, with their high walls, and iron gates, and skinny, sullen kids, sent to work in the fisheries from the age of eight. But nobody had any better suggestions. Life was hard in the mountains and extra mouths were never welcome. Besides, the past few weeks had shaken people’s faith in the reliability of their world. It was not just the falling moon. Rumour had reached Knut’s Bakken of volcanic eruptions all along the Arctic Circle, and there was a story going around about a town in the Vedmark levelled by an earthquake and its aftershocks. Wandering friars climbed onto crates in the local bakkens to rant about the End of Days, whilst the Prince-Bishop in Gudstad, who was about such hysteria, lectured his parishioners on the Retribution of God. Nobody wanted to

complicate their lives whilst the world threatened to betray them.

Pettar knew what was expected of him. ‘I’ll take her to Nordvik in the van,’ he said, wearily. ‘Drop her off with the station mistress.’

And that was that. Decision made, the crowd broke up. Astrid Fix-me-up walked off towards the red storage sheds, shouting curses at her porters. Little Rolf returned to his pink and yellow wagon to tease the wide-eyed children who had gathered around his racks of painted toys. And Pettar shuffled back into his van, putting the Testament Box on the floor by the stove, where it wasn’t so draughty.

But one shortday later, when the train arrived in Nordvik, Pettar didn’t leave the baby with the clan mistress who owned the booking office rights there. It was now nearly a year since he had lost his wife and two sons to a rogue miracle, and when he looked at the little girl, asleep in her Testament Box, he felt an emotion that he hadn’t felt in a long time uncurl in his chest. It was fierce and protective, and he knew that he couldn’t hand this tiny child over to the hard-faced nuns who ran the orphanage. ‘I’ll keep a-hold of her for a few hours longer,’ he told himself. ‘We’ll be coming this way again next greatday.’ He bought a baby’s bottle from one of the peddlers, and a dozen linen nappies, and he nursed the baby all the way to Skalheim and then back down to Nordvik. But by then he had no intention of giving the child up. Instead, he tried to think of a name. He briefly considered Hilda, after his wife. But that was too painful. So, in the end, he named her Mildfred, after his mother, or Millie for short.

Millie grew up in Pettar’s guard’s van, travelling back and forth along the winding, single-track line of the Nordvik and Skalheim Railway Traction Company. She learnt to

crawl on the van's floorboards, and to say her first word inside its rattling walls: 'No,' which meant both *no* and *yes* and sometimes also *Pettar*. Her cot was clamped to the green wooden bench beside Pettar's stove, and later, as she grew, it was replaced by a hammock, strung across the far end of the van.

The peddlers doted on her. Little Rolf made her a toy box full of brightly decorated spinning tops and pull-along trains. Trond the Shoe fashioned tiny felt boots that she lost with careless regularity. And Ingrid Quickfingers embroidered her clothes with smiling dragons and herds of tea-drinking reindeer. But it was Pettar who fed her, and nursed her, and cleaned her cuts, and managed her tantrums, and taught her how to read a signal and tell the difference between right and wrong.

She was an inquisitive child. At the age of five, she renamed all the stops along the line. Nordvik became Fish Town, because its brown, gabled warehouses and its sleet-swept quays always smelt of fish. The crooked Skarlsfjord, with its thick forests of nightspruce, became Wibbly-Wobbly Lake. The viaduct to Knut's Bakken became Astrid's Bridge, and Knut's Bakken itself became Astrid's House, because for reasons nobody could fathom, Millie loved the short-tempered foreman. The high glaciers and unclimbable, spearhead peaks of the Austfjell became Off Limits. And the hidden valleys of Skalheim became Dirty Smoke, because the smelt mills there stained the sky with a drab, black pall. Pettar, amused, gamely adopted the names, much to the bemusement of merchant factotums and station mistresses not in on the joke. He would never get over the loss of his two boys, and the sadness of their passing hung around him like woodsmoke on a winter's day, but as long as Millie was plodding about his van, demanding that they get a cat or a dog or a dragon, the pain felt a little more manageable. Millie was oblivious to the silent ghosts that haunted Pettar. She called him Pappa,

even though she knew that he wasn't her father, and she felt sorry for those kids who grew up without a boisterous, ever-shifting tribe of aunts and uncles to entertain them.

It was not an easy childhood. Folk in the Skarlmak were poor, and the winters were long and dark and hard. But the Church looked after people's souls, and the Baron looked after people's lives, and the wild only occasionally intruded upon the mountain valleys: a bull moose, running startled ahead of the train; the rumour of tribes in the Interior latitudes of Torus going to war. For the first thirteen years of her life, Millie was safe.

But then one day she heard about the Gulmdal Imp.

And unbeknownst to her, the biggest prophecy the world had ever seen quietly began.

'You can hear it knocking in the lead mines,' said the fireman, Anders Smokes, as he sat with his feet up in front of a brazier, sipping tea from a metal flask. 'Three taps, pause, then three taps more. Odd the Drink swears he saw it, years ago, running over the heath near Gulmdal Pit – a hunchback little thing, all leathery skin and pointed teeth. He reckoned it belonged to one of the infernal tribes.'

'Odd the Drink is a drunk. It's how he got his name.'

'No it isn't. He got his name because he fell in Bandvann lake.'

'Yes. Because he was drunk.'

It was the first evening of greatnight, and the peddlers were camped along the ballast of a railway siding, cooking herring on little stoves, counting money, darning socks, and repairing old shoes and broken toys. Millie was sat on the footplate of Ragnhild's World of Words, ill-temperedly drafting a bill of lading for a Skalheim lead merchant. At Pettar's insistence, she spent an hour each greatday working for the scribe as a way of learning her letters; but Millie was

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thirteen now and she already knew her letters, and the work was *boring*.

In the hope of a distraction, she shouted into Ragnhild's van, 'Anders is going to tell one of his stories. You should come and write it down.'

Ragnhild's real name was Magarey Higginbottom, and she was a stiff, grey-haired lady, who had travelled up from the bottomlands to write about life in the Skarlmark. She was particularly interested in the ancient folktales of the mountains, which hinted at a previous Cycle of Civilisation before the one that had begun fifteen hundred years ago. It was her intention to collect the tales together in a book. Millie hoped that Anders' story might make her forget the large pile of copying work that Millie still had to complete. But Ragnhild just sniffed and said that the lead mines were ugly and modern and that they should never been allowed to blight the unspoilt valleys of the pole.

Millie rolled her eyes, which is what Astrid Fix-me-up did whenever somebody said something stupid. 'Friar Espen says that there are bell pits going back five hundred years,' she pointed out. 'That's hardly modern.'

But Ragnhild pretended not to hear. She was very good at not hearing things she didn't agree with. Her pen scratched primly against a bill of exchange, her half-moon spectacles quivered on the end of her nose, and she refused to move from her tiny cubicle of pigeonholes and pinewood drawers. Millie had no choice but to pick up the next sheet from her pile and begin work on a residency permit for a soldier and his family. She did so sulkily, not caring if she blotted her ink.

Over by the brazier, Anders sipped his tea, and continued with his story.

'They say the imp lures unwary miners into a labyrinth of shafts and tunnels behind the mine, promising to give them new futures. Sometimes, it will keep its promise, and the lucky miner will return knowing where to dig for

treasure or how to save his mates from a tunnel collapse. But other times, the imp will twist its words, and the miner will exhaust himself trying to save his wife from falling off a ladder only to set the tragedy in motion himself. And sometimes, the miner never comes back at all.

He sat back in the battered, winged armchair that he heaved out of his House Wagon every dinnertime, smiling in satisfaction at a job well done.

His audience exchanged a sceptical glance.

‘Is that it?’ asked Little Rolf. ‘It was a bit... brief. Couldn’t you add in some human interest?’

‘Five out of ten, Smokes. Not one of your best.’

‘I hear the old Baron went looking for the imp once. They say he stumbled across a secret Cult worshipping it, and the revelation sent him mad. Perhaps you could tell *that* story, Smokes?’

Anders sat forwards again, looking grumpy. ‘Everybody’s a bleeding critic. No, I don’t know *that* story, Trond. But I do know the tale of Saint Tulla, a crofter’s daughter from Sogndal, who heard four Words of God: Question Not Good Fortune (Tulla, 1-4)...’

Millie pulled a face (also copied from Astrid) and stopped listening. She wasn’t interested in Anders’ religious stories. There was too much praying in them, and they always had a stale moral at the end. Millie liked *adventure*. She had recently read a book called *Two Years in the Outer Tropics* by Frieda Zimmermann, and now she wanted to be like Frieda, braving low gravity and coriolis storms to take tea with savage chieftains in their bog-palaces, and then writing articles about it for the International Institute of Geography. But in order to publish articles for the Institute, she first needed to attend university, and there was no chance that Pettar would be able to afford the Chapter House tithes. So Millie was stuck in the Skarlmark, learning how to scribe from Ragnhild, taking over the old lady’s van when she returned to the bottomlands, marrying a farmer,

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settling down on a homestead in the middle of nowhere, and then growing fat with children and distemper.

It was not a life she was looking forward to.

I will make my husband's life a misery, she vowed. And then I will become a witch and make everybody's life a misery.

She finished her copying work and handed it over to Ragnhild for checking. Once Ragnhild had given her the all-clear, she stomped off down the siding to the guard's van, where Pettar was getting dinner ready.

They took their meal as they always did, privately in the van, hunched over a tiny fold-down table barely big enough for their two mismatched plates.

'How did your work go?' asked Pettar.

Millie didn't want to relive her hour of tedium, so she scowled mutely at her fried plaice.

Pettar gave a placid shrug. 'The axel box on the front right wheel keeps running hot. There must be a leak in the oil reservoir.'

Millie felt her soul shrivel. Pettar's interests were so small it made her want to scream. He had no curiosity about the world beyond the Nordvik and Skalheim Railway Traction Company. All he cared about were signals, and bills of lading, and *axel boxes*. It wasn't surprising that they weren't blood related. She sawed at her fish, furious at the unrelenting dullness of her life – and looked up, startled, as Pettar's fork clattered against his plate.

Her Pappa's face had turned the colour of wax.

Millie's first thought was that he was choking on a fishbone. She frantically tried to remember what you were supposed to do. Thump his back? Scream for help? But then Pettar seesawed to his feet and ran for the door. A moment later, she heard him vomit over the ballast outside, on the dark flank of the train, away from witnesses.

'Pappa, are you alright?' she called.

Pettar returned to the table, wiping his mouth with a red and white polka dot handkerchief. He poured himself a

glass of water and sat down. 'Just an upset stomach, dearest. Nothing to worry about. But I think I might go to bed early.'

'Of course, Pappa.'

She helped him up the ladder to his loft above the van, where a wooden pallet was piled high with appliqué quilts made by Ingrid Quickfingers. *There's nothing sinister about an upset stomach*, she told herself. *I'll have a word with Codbone Finn about the deplorable state of his fish tomorrow*. Ignoring the small gnawing fear that had begun to grind its teeth in her belly, she returned downstairs to do the washing up in a tin bucket filled with soap flakes.

But that greatnight, Millie lay sleeplessly in her hammock, listening to her Pappa vomit again through the tiny ventilation window of his bed-loft. And her fear grew a little more. He had lost weight during the long summer daylight, and she kept finding his hairs on the cushions and rugs of the van. He needed to see a doctor. A real doctor, not the apothecary who travelled with the peddlers. But doctors cost money, and Millie had none.

In the loft above her, Pettar vomited for a third time. Millie's chest constricted with panic. She had to do something to help him. Frieda Zimmerman wouldn't lie pathetically in her bed, hoping that the problem would solve itself. Frieda Zimmerman would find a way to cure her pappa.

She thought about Anders' story. It was almost certainly a fairy tale, made up as a joke by the miners. But Millie was desperate, and perhaps the story contained a grain of truth.

Tomorrow, she told herself. Tomorrow, she would climb the rocky valleys to Gulmdal, find the Imp, and ask it to give her a new future. Or she would prove that it was a myth and come away empty handed.

Either way, it was better than doing nothing.

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The waking day first dawned bright and clear, with a crisp frost that rimed the coal bunkers in the yard, and sparkled atop the steep, shingle roof of the signal box.

'I'm going to help Gunnar and Aud shut up the summer dairy for the winter,' Millie told Pettar, as she fried a sausage over the stove for breakfast. 'And I might stay to bring the cattle down from the high pastures as well. Is that alright?'

Gunnar was Pettar's brother-in-law, and Millie felt guilty about embroiling him in a lie. But Pettar still looked wan from last night, so it was only a small guilt, about the size of a walnut.

Pettar rubbed at a headache in his temple. 'Good idea. Give them my love.'

She packed a husk of bread and a slab of cheese into her knapsack, and then, once breakfast was over, she jumped down onto the ballast and left the yard.

It felt good to be away from the van. The bustle of Skalheim calmed her a little, and her worries were gradually submerged by the din of lead traders and company clerks haggling in palisaded yards along the lakefront. She climbed through the gangs of clog-shoed factoryfolk making their way to work, past the brick chimneys of the Karlssen Clan Smelt Mill; and then she was out of town and striding through a moonscape of spoil disgorged from the ore dressing stations. Firstnight fell, swiftly plunging the mountains into darkness. Upon the slagheaps, skinny technoscavengers with wicker baskets strapped to their backs lit their lamps and continued to sift for the metal discs, old coins, and porcelain insulators of the long-vanished Sinners. Millie nodded to them in greeting, and slowly the red throated mills faded into the dark, until all that was left was the distant clank of hammers and the creak of giant waterwheels driving the settling tanks and roller crushers. She passed the prehistoric column of a Bone

Tree, poking up through the earth like a tusk. And then she was alone.

On the rare occasions when a stranger dared to ask Millie about her ambiguous origins, she would proudly declare that the Skarlmark was in her blood, 'Like platelets. Or haemogoblins.' But two hours later, when she arrived at her destination, Millie was forced to concede that there was precious little Gulmdal in her veins. By then, seconddawn had arrived, and a weak light lit the splashmountains that curled overhead like a wave. Millie stood on a ridge above the valley, looking down into the drizzling mist. The path, which had been having second thoughts for some time, petered out in a tangle of barbed wire. A rusty metal sign hung over it. *KEEP OUT. Trespassers will be shot. Once in the head, once in the heart, and twice in the groin.*

Millie chewed her lip. She hadn't hiked all this way to turn back now.

A bedraggled slip of black and white snagged her eye. It was a magpie, caught on the wire, its wings spread-eagled, its head bent to one side. A glint of copper winked at the black cape of its shoulder. Millie wondered if it had been fixed there as some kind of pagan warning.

Click, click, click, went the magpie.

Millie skipped back in alarm. There was a grinding sound as the magpie's head cranked around to look at her. Its wings shivered against the metal barbs of the wire.

'Error,' it said. 'Error.'

Millie didn't know what to do. Scream? Run away? Stand frozen to the spot?

It's probably a trick, she told herself. *I bet a lead miner has wired it up with a battery to scare people.*

Except, now that she was here, Gulmdal didn't look much like a lead mine. Beyond the barbed wire, fuzzy yellow lights hung in the fog. By their glow, she could see a dip of land, whorled with ridges like a human ear. Indeed, if Millie was being fanciful, she would say it *was* an ear – a

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huge, stone ear, nearly a mile across, carved flat into the mountain, with a mine entrance sunk where the ear canal would be. Steam-winchies strung with chains of trunks climbed out of the dip. But the trunks were not the usual bouse hoppers. They were three planks high and filled with pieces of angular machinery: Wentish Devices, left behind by the Sinners when their prehistoric civilisation had collapsed. Two concrete storage sheds stood at the bottom of the dip, alongside a smithy and a mess hall, whilst the silhouette of the mine's winding gear reared over the yard like an upside-down unicycle.

But what really gave the scene its uncanny edge were the carcasses that hung everywhere: lemming and pine marten, frost monkey and brown-spotted ptarmigan. They dangled from the beams of the winding house, from the arch of the smithy, and from the eaves of the sheds. Millie wondered if she had stumbled upon an illegal fur trapping operation.

Then she heard voices.

'I'm telling you, if we invert our souls, our conversation will stabilise.'

'What does that even mean, Jim? Face it – Fischbacher lied to us. He spouted a load of junk theology, talked us into helping him, and then abandoned us when he discovered that the imp wasn't here.'

'You don't know that –'

'Look at my hand, Jim. It's turned *black*.'

Two men stood in the paraffin lamplight of a doorway. Their overcoats were grey and buttoned down one side, and they wore the black fur hats of soldiers.

'Stop panicking, Frank. We have the sacrifice. We have the altar. When Bobbie returns with the knife, we'll cut the girl's throat and then –'

'I feel sick. I'm going to vomit.'

'Not here, you prick!'

Millie froze. Had she heard that right? *Cut the girl's throat.* The words jarred inside her head. Surely, they didn't mean that literally.

But the bottomlander soldiers were a rough bunch, brought in by the central government to police the border. They were knocking people around with their rifle butts and making up excuses to fine them. It wasn't a great leap to imagine them killing somebody.

She needed to cause a distraction. If she could unhitch a cable from one of the inclines, maybe she could –

A hairy hand swiped out of nowhere to grab the collar of her red, homespun coat.

'What have we here?'

Millie yelped and tried to twist herself free. 'Let go!' she cried. But the hand was strong and hard with muscle. It belonged to a squat-necked soldier, with a head like a bucket and a chest like a boiler. Two bloody mountain hares hung from his belt. He did not flinch as Millie beat her fists against his arm.

Millie realised that he was not going to drop her, so she stopped kicked and said, 'I am the secret daughter of Baron von Whitkirk. He will be furious when he hears you've manhandled me.'

The soldier ignored her. He heaved her through a gap in the barbed wire and dragged her down the scree slope. Millie's feet tripped helplessly over tussocks of heather and fragments of devilglass. Words of God tumbled reprovingly through her head: *Stop Meddling With Things You Don't Understand* (Inese, 5-11); *Too Much of That Interference Destabilises* (Laszlo, 1-6); *For the Love of God Keep Quiet* (Johann, 1-7). The nuggets of divine wisdom, recorded by Saints over the centuries, were rarely clear and often fragmentary, but there were enough of them to suggest that poking your nose into other people's business was a bad idea.

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The soldier threw her onto the frozen ground outside the storage sheds.

‘Found another one. She was watching from the top.’

‘Let’s get her into the mine. Frank keeps vomiting and I think one of my toes has fallen off. I can feel it rolling around in my boot like a ball-bearing.’

The squat-necked soldier tightened his grip on Millie’s collar. Millie tried to slip out of her coat, but Squat-neck caught her arm and swung her with easy strength over the tramline, into the cage lift of the mine.

Fear slicked Millie’s stomach. A prayer caught in her throat. ‘I’m sorry, Pappa,’ she whispered, helplessly. ‘I hope you find another orphan girl in another Testament Box, and that she is better behaved than me.’

The other two soldiers climbed into lift and pulled the metal gate shut. One (Frank) had a black hand, the other (Jim) had a black nose. All three had black lips and black tongues and eyes veined with black.

Jim released the brake and the cage began to rattle downwards, through the rippling strata of rock.

‘We’re going to die,’ whimpered Frank.

‘Shut up,’ snarled Squat-neck. ‘Look, I don’t care what that prick Fischbacher said. He was just a mouthpiece. It’s the one he serves who matters. I didn’t convert to find some bastard imp. I converted because our wages are piss-poor, and the Over-Lieutenant is a dick, and we deserve better.’

The squeal of the cage’s wheels suddenly changed. They left the darkness of the shaft and began to descend through a wide, subterranean cavern. Millie felt a weird vertigo. The cavern looked like a metal warehouse, hatched with platforms and gantries, except it was turned ninety-degrees on its side. Walkways plunged impossibly downwards. Sealed portals hovered halfway up sheer walls. The floor at the bottom was striped with ducts and studded with

ventilation panels. A petrol generator hummed blow, powering a stern, white arc light.

The devastation it illuminated turned Millie's stomach. A bed of smashed crates and torn tracing paper covered the floor. It was splattered with blood from three headless corpses. The corpses wore the frilled tweed suits of academics, but their clothes were so torn it was hard to tell whether they were male or female. An ivory throne, out of place among the devastation, stood cantered to one side on the uneven floor. It had a symbol etched onto its headboard, possibly a crescent moon with two stars. Three several heads were skewered onto finials atop it, dribbling blood down the sockets and protrusions at the back. A trussed girl was folded up in the seat, her knees digging into her chin, her mouth bound with a cloth gag. She wore the long, reindeer-hide coat and red woollen hat of a nomad from the hubward side of the mountains. Her black hair was streaked with brown and grey as it began its seasonal shift to white.

Terror charged Millie's muscles. Her composure deserted her. She kicked and screamed and tried to break free. But Squat-neck just threw her over his shoulder. 'Get the gate, Jim,' he said. 'Can you remember the invocation?'

Jim hauled aside the metal lattice. 'I wrote it down on the back of an old leave pass.'

'You mean you wrote down a load of bollocks,' said Frank.

'Shut up!' snapped Jim and Squat-neck together.

They stepped out of the lift. Millie's vision cartwheeled over broken acetylene lamps and pools of blood. She was thrown down at the foot of the throne.

Squat-neck pulled a knife from his belt. 'Ready when you are Jim. Let's do this quickly.'

The knife was made of black devilglass and it glinted slickly in the white light. Millie stifled a sob. Frieda

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Zimmermann wouldn't face death with tears on her cheeks. Frieda Zimmermann would spit in the faces of her killers.

But her throat was too dry to spit. All she could do was sit up straight and try to meet Squat-neck's eyes.

Let him see the light go out of me.

Jim unfolded a scrap of paper. 'Hear us, Lord GOD,' he said in a monotone reading voice that made even the syllable-sparks look damp and limp. 'We bind our souls to your service. Give us the strength to overcome cowardice, and the rage to overcome meekness. We reject the false Church and its fraudulent Apostle, and instead prostrate ourselves in front of your True Face. Please accept these two virgins as proof of our devotion.'

Squat-neck grabbed Millie's hair and yanked her head back. His ugly, red face twisted into a grin. Millie couldn't help herself, she screwed up her eyes. *So much for being brave.* Instead, desperate thoughts cascaded through her. Pettar was going to be distraught. Would they find her body? It took half a minute to die from a cut throat. *Please don't let this hurt.*

The seconds ticked by. No knife fell.

'What are you waiting for?' barked Jim. 'Kill her.'

Millie opened her eyelids a crack. Squat-neck's black lips had parted in shock, and his knife hovered an inch from her oesophagus. He blinked at her incredulously.

Over Squat-neck's shoulder, Frank clutched his hand to his stomach. 'Shit!' he cried. 'My little finger's dropped off!'

'Just kill the girl,' snapped Jim.

But Squat-neck didn't move. He continued to stare at Millie, searching her face for something. 'Is that *you?*' he whispered.

Jim swore and tried to grab the knife off Squat-neck. 'If you can't cut her throat, I'll do it,' he said. But Squat-neck snarled and thumped Jim in the face. Jim's black nose exploded like a rotten plum.

‘Oh pissing hell,’ said Jim. He stumbled backwards, skidding on spilt blood.

‘Mind the hand!’ cried Frank. Then, ‘Oh shit, oh shit – *it’s fallen off!*’

He began to shriek in horror.

‘Shut the fuck up!’ roared Squat-neck. He grabbed Jim by the collar and threw him towards Millie. Millie tried to twist out of the way, but she only succeeded in banging her head against the ivory throne. Jim’s body eclipsed the floodlight. His knee caught her jaw.

‘I’m sorry!’ shouted Squat-neck. ‘I didn’t recognise you before. But please, accept this benediction as my apology!’

And with a slash of his hand, he raked the knife across Jim’s throat.

Millie screamed. A cascade of warm, glutinous blood slopped over her. It fanned out from her scalp like an umbrella, swallowing her face, her shoulders, and her body. The blood was black and lumpy and it stank of hawthorn, which is also the stench of a corpse. Millie gasped for breath, inadvertently swallowing wobbling globules of it. The rotten, metallic taste made her gag. She tried to claw the glue from her eyes, but more still came. Squat-neck kept his arm wrapped around Jim’s chest, holding the dying man upright as his legs spasmed. The black veins in Squat-neck’s eyes pulsated, and black tears trickled down his cheeks. ‘Oh, I feel it!’ he cried. ‘At last, I feel it! His glory shines within me! Our Lord has come, just like Fischbacher promised. It is time to rid the world of those parasites who hold us back. The snivelling priests. The fat landlords. The nagging women.’ His cheek was pressed against Jim’s scalp, but he was able to shift his head a little to look down at Millie. His teeth had begun to fall out, and his nails dripped from his fingers. ‘You don’t know who you are yet, but I see your black wings and your silver halo. I can release you. Together we will turn the world upside down.’

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Millie choked on horror. The blood was everywhere, she couldn't breathe, and Jim's dead legs flopped over her face.

'Help me!' she screamed.

She didn't expect an answer. She had come to Gulmdal alone, and she would die alone. This was her own stupid fault.

But somewhere deep inside her, she heard an echo. Power brushed the edges of her mind. There was a yawn of impossible age.

Millie teetered on the brink of it, wondering what it was.

The *something* stirred.

Suddenly Millie was a tiny mote, thrown before the crest of a wave. The wave swept the bottom out of her consciousness, exposing her mind to a vast, shapeless infinity. With sudden horror Millie realised that it was going to swallow her. She tried to pull back, throwing up dams, retreating into her head, but it was like holding off a tsunami. The wave crashed over her, oblivious to her struggles.

'Yes!' cried Squat-neck, squeezing the last blood from Jim's neck. 'Arise, my lord! Ari –'

There was a clonk. A crowbar arced away from Squat-neck's head, spraying droplets of black blood through the spotlight. Squat-neck's legs folded, and he corkscrewed to the floor, pulling Jim's corpse down on top of him.

Millie sobbed and gasped and swallowed more blood. The surge within her crested. For a moment she was sure it would wipe her mind. But then, as quickly as it had arisen, it fell back. She felt it sink into the depths of her mind, below her memories and her thoughts, still present, still dangerous, but for now, dormant.

Frank let the crowbar drop. Its hooked tip clanked against the metal floor. He lent against it, panting. 'I never liked you, Bobbie,' he said. 'I want no more part in this.'

Blood dripped from Millie's chin. Her chest heaved and her hands shook. She swallowed, then swallowed again.

What THE HELL had just happened? Nothing in her experience had prepared her for this moment. Not even *Two Years in the Outer Tropics* by Frieda Zimmermann.

Start with the basics, she told herself. *Get out of here. NOW.*

She forced her wobbling legs to stand. Behind her, the nomad girl wriggled in the seat of the throne. Millie focused her shattered consciousness on her.

It took two attempts, but eventually she managed to croak out the necessary words. 'I-I'm taking the reindeer herder with me.'

Frank sat down, heavily, on the back of a headless corpse. His right arm now ended in a soft, black stump and his hair was falling out. He stared at the black glove of his severed hand, lying in the blood at his feet, and a single black tear trickled down his cheek.

'Do what you must,' he said, leadenly. 'Just let me die in peace.'

The first dusk of greatnight had arrived by the time Millie made it back to the Goods Yard. She had done her best to tidy herself up, washing her hair and face in a mountain stream, and scrubbing at her clothes with wet handfuls of heather. But her coat remained stained with grey blotches, and her blouse and bodice were both ruined. Pettar was going to ask questions. And what could she tell him? That she had lied about going to Gunner and Aud's? That a trio of psychopaths had tried to kill her?

That something very dark was lurking under her soul?

Behind her, the nomad girl clambered onto the tracks.

'Watch out for moving trucks,' said Millie, quietly. 'And don't step on the points, they could snap shut around your ankle.'

The nomad girl didn't reply. Perhaps she hadn't understood. Millie was too tired to try again. She slipped

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between a pair of empty hoppers and ducked under the chain of their coupling. The two of them made their way down the dark, silent row of trucks to the siding where the peddler train stood.

It was another ordinary evening for the peddlers. The braziers were lit along the ballast, and Anders Smokes was sat in his armchair, telling a story about the Marauder Kings of the Skarl, which Trond the Shoe kept interrupting with unhelpful questions. Little Rolf screwed four red wheels onto the axels of a wooden elephant. Ragnhild sat in her cubicle of pigeonholes, copying an old family charter for the fishermen on Lake Langbatnet. Ingrid Quickfingers quietly updated Heidi the Stitch on the lives of her nephews and nieces. And at the end of the train, beyond the light and chatter, Pettar's van awaited, closed and quiet, a thread of smoke rising from its tin chimney.

Millie girded herself for a confrontation. She climbed the footplate.

Inside the van, Pettar was sat in his armchair, a mug of tea in one hand, a much-thumbed copy of *The Railway Rules and Regulations* in the other. His eyes widened when he saw Millie. 'You didn't go to Gunnar's,' he said, heavily.

Millie didn't know what to say. *He's trying to look stern*, she thought. *He wants to be cross*. And her eyes filled with tears.

Pettar gave a sigh. He put down his enamel mug and his red paperback rulebook, and opened his arms. 'Come here and tell me what happened.'

Millie scuttled into his hug. A part of her wanted to tell him the truth. *Today I was almost killed by a psychopath*. But she had no idea how to describe the cascade of black blood that had drenched her, or Jim's scratchy gurgles as the life had dribbled out of him. And she certainly had no idea how to tell him about the *thing* that had risen inside her, threatening to obliterate her consciousness.

I just want to forget about it, she realised. *I want to pretend it never happened*.

She mumbled into Pettar's chest, 'I slipped and fell in a bog.'

Pettar frowned. He fingered the blotched collar of her coat. 'I'm not angry,' he said, quietly. 'If something has happened, you can tell me.'

But Millie knew that no comforting words from Pettar would banish the cavern of horror that had opened up in her chest. 'I slipped and fell,' she said again, more aggressively. Then, before Pettar could press the issue, she added, 'I-I found a girl lost in the mountains. I think she's a nomad. Her name is Jaana, but she doesn't speak our language very well.'

Pettar looked over to the van door. Jaana was hovering on the ballast outside, waiting to be invited in.

'She must be a refugee of the Crushing,' said Pettar. Then, when Millie looked blank, he added, 'They say that turmoil in the Interior is pushing the clans up against each other. The whole inner continent is in turmoil.'

He waved Jaana into the wagon. Jaana scrambled up the footplate and dropped into wary crouch at the far end of the van, her back pressed against the jigsaw of fitted shelves and pinewood cupboards.

'Can she stay with us?' asked Millie.

Pettar gave her a quick hug, which Millie knew meant *no*. 'We'll give her a meal and a bed tonight, then take her down to Nordvik in the morning. There's a community of refugees there, I believe. She'll be better off with her own.'

Millie understood. They couldn't afford another mouth to feed. But still, her heart fractured. Jaana's life might be unfathomably alien to hers, with its summer camps in the Interior, its white nights lit by the arc of Far Torus, its sleighs, its tents, its long winter migrations, but they had most important thing in common. Gulmdal Pit.

Still, perhaps it was for the best. It would be easier to forget what had happened without Jaana around to remind her.

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The following hour was a bit of a blur. They must have eaten dinner together, but afterwards Millie couldn't recall what Pettar had cooked. The next thing she knew, Pettar was climbing the ladder to his loft, and Jaana was stood by the stove, tipping the straw padding out of her boots to dry on the floor.

Millie remembered her manners and told Jaana that she could sleep in her hammock. 'I'll make a bed of cushions on the floor.'

And then Pettar was snoring above them, and the clock was ticking quietly, and the birds of shortday had begun their morning chorus.

Millie lay awake, too afraid to sleep. All she could think about was the drowning cascade of blood and the devilglass knife at her throat. She was sure she would never be able to close her eyes again. But at some point, she must have dropped into a light slumber, because her thoughts grew frayed and repetitive. She found herself running through a succession of metal rooms, chased by a rolling sea that was sometimes a man with a knife. There was blood in her mouth, and in her hair, and when she stumbled into a cavernous chamber lit by white light, a soldier with black lips reared over her.

'Arise,' he said. 'Arise.'

And then Millie was stood alone in the darkness, and a silver halo burned in front of her, molten and spitting, and dribbling white fire to the floor.

I AM THE VOICE OF GOD, it said.

Millie's eyes snapped open. She sat up, gasping for breath.

It was fifth or sixth shortnight. The van was dark except for a tongue of embers in the open stove. Jaana snored lightly in her hammock. The ceiling creaked as Pettar turned over in his bed.

The silver halo, thought Millie, sweating. Squat-neck said he could see my black wings and my silver halo. What does it mean?

WILLIAM DAWSON

Outside, sleet began to tap against the windows. Blood thudded in her ears. *It was just a dream*, she told herself. Then, more desperately, *Everything that happened today was just a dream*.

A click against the van's rear window made her jump. Between the curtains, a thin column of lamplight fell. It shifted as a shadow moved across it. Millie glimpsed a magpie perched on the narrow sill. Its body was strangely stiff, and its feathers stuck out at odd angles.

The magpie looked at her with a steady black eye.
'Beep!' it said, and flew away.

After a loud bang, everything sounds quiet. Millie's life very nearly returned to normal. The peddler train still trundled back and forth along the Nordvik and Skalheim Railway Line. There were still parcels to collect and milk churns to deliver. Pettar's lungs still wheezed horrible wet noises whenever he exerted himself. Nothing had changed.

And yet...

A weak winter sun glinted off the portholes of a cargo ship anchored in the fjord. The flash ambushed Millie with a memory of the silver halo.

I am the Voice of God.

Her boot slipped on the corrugated tin roof of Mother Sissal's Laundry. She had to fall forwards to stop herself sliding off.

'You fine?' called Jaana.

'Yes. Sorry. Patch of ice.'

She crawled to where Jaana was balanced at their usual lunch spot, her back against the slatted metal heating vent.

Her friend's hair was now winter white, faded to yellow in the light of a single gaslamp, fixed to the gable. Only ten minutes had passed since sunrise, but already dusk was closing in. Ice formed about the lock gates of Nordvik's inner harbour. Dockworkers rolled barrels of herring past the warehouses and assembly rooms on the waterfront. The old timber clanhouses of the land-gender squatted like fat, red pagodas against the mountains, their eaves hung with wooden cows and goats and sheep.

Millie curled up next to Jaana, arms around her knees. *If God really did speak to me that night, she thought wearily, wouldn't that make me a Saint?*

Saint Millie. The first Saint since the Apostles had reformed the Church five hundred years before.

But Millie didn't feel like a Saint. In fact, she felt dirty. The memory of Jim's black blood clung to her like a bad smell. She expected Jaana to recoil from her touch. But Jaana just grinned and tossed a dog-eared pamphlet into Millie's lap.

'For you,' she said. Then she waved a glossy magazine with a vignette of a lady in the origami robes and beaded headdress of the Apostolic Court. 'For me. Good friends read together, yes?'

'I suppose they do.' Millie looked down at the pamphlet. It was bound in green paper and entitled, 'A Revelatory Insight into the Occult Secrets and Hermetic Prophecies Outlined in The Arariel Solutions – Being a True and Concise Review of that Text.' She flicked through the pages, her eyes widening at the woodcuts of grotesque, screaming faces. 'What's this?'

'Lot of nonsense,' said Jaana. 'Cabin boy on cargo ship give me. He say all people talk about it in Hales. Thought you like.'

It was indeed the sort of thing that interested Millie these days. Ever since Gulmdal Pit, she had been haunted by nightmares of dead bodies and devilglass knives. She

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would wake in the middle of the night with the taste of blood in her mouth, a fading silver halo ringing her vision. In a desperate attempt to understand what had happened, she had become obsessed with apocalyptic literature. Printed sermons railing at the decline in morality. A leaflet claiming that an eel caught off Heland had been marked with strange hieroglyphs. A tract arguing that the fire in Königstein Minster was a sign of God's displeasure. She knew she was becoming morbid, but she couldn't help herself.

'Thank you,' she said, quietly.

Jaana smoothed a loving hand over the magazine's cover. 'Merchant daughter left this.' She pointed at the red and gold Court Dress of the vignettted lady. 'Would suit me?'

'I preferred you in reindeer hides.'

'Was smelly.'

Jaana only wore blue dockworker overalls these days, and she refused to teach Millie how to lasso a reindeer or a horse, or even a dog. But Millie understood. Better to make a fresh start. She just wished that she could become another person too. A girl who never went to Gulmdal Pit.

Once upon a time, the peddlers had nicknamed her Walkabout, because she was always wandering off. But these days, she rarely left the van. She'd be there now, pretending to read, if it wasn't for Jaana. Jaana had found a community of refugees living in the dosshouses by the docks. She maintained a precarious existence, loading and unloading ship cargos, and running messages for the customs officials. Her face was knobbly with hunger, and her arms had become two matchsticks of skin and bone. Millie had got into the habit of sharing her mackerel sandwiches with her at lunchtime. Until the Winter School started up, it was the only routine she had.

She turned the page of her pamphlet. *Naturally, the deepest secrets of The Arariel Solutions can only be disclosed to the initiated –*

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and the Final Revelation of God, revealing as it does the Meaning of the Torus, must remain hidden from mankind until the conclusion of Year Zero. But in order to prepare the world for the intervening TRANSUBSTANTLATION, here are three signs...

‘It says that a holy man will drown in his own anger and spew forth fire and lead.’

‘Is nonsense.’

‘Then the night will blaze with blue light and the sky will be marked by the sign of Their Coming.’

‘Is nonsense.’

‘And *then* the storm of nightmares will descend upon the faithless. The Holy Vessel will stand on the Coming One’s left and the Reliquary Crown will stand on the Coming One’s right, and together they will release the Coming One from the devil’s house, unmasking them for all mankind to see. And the Raging Disciples, having found their Lord, will raise their devilglass knives to the heavens and sweep down upon the land in a paroxysm of blood.’

‘Is —’

Jaana went quiet.

The last sentence settled uncomfortably between them. It sounded a bit too similar to what had happened at Gulmdal Pit. Millie wondered if she should broach the unspoken topic with Jaana. Perhaps together they could work out what it meant.

But her courage failed her. Better not to relive it.

She rolled up the pamphlet and put it in the pocket of the thin, second-hand jacket that had replaced her beloved red coat.

‘Is nonsense,’ she said, quietly.

Don’t think about the silver halo.

But of course, not thinking about something is still thinking about it. Millie carried the pale ring around in her

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head wherever she went. It was there as she queued in the hot little bakery underneath the Gaarder Clanhouse. It was there as she washed and braided her hair in the Unmarried Women's Room at the Town Bathhouse. And it was there as she sat on the floor of Pettar's guard's van, polishing her boots in preparation for titheday chantry. It didn't help that the Winter School was fast approaching, and Millie was no longer sure she had the energy to face the other kids.

'What would happen if I didn't go?' she asked Pettar.

Pettar coughed into his handkerchief. 'I'd get into trouble with Friar Espen.' He frowned. 'Why are you suddenly so reluctant to see your friends?'

Millie had no answer to that. She gazed down at her boot-brush, scrubbing hard at a scuff on the toe. She briefly toyed with the idea of playing truant. But somehow, wandering around the dark, busy town on her own felt worse.

I have no choice. I'll have to go.

Over the next few wakingdays, she did her best to prepare, practising normal expressions in the mirror, steeling herself not to flinch when other people spoke. But still, when the dreaded greatday arrived, she felt unprepared. She made her way through the frozen streets of Nordvik, wishing she could pause time for a few more hours. But although the sun had now vanished until spring, the stars maintained their inexorable revolutions, grinding the clock onwards, towards the school bell.

Friar Espen's Winter School took place in a slope-beamed loft above the Fishmonger's Hall. Millie tried to delay her arrival until the last minute so that she wouldn't have to talk to the other students. But when she reached the top of the staircase, she discovered that she had been foiled by the Friar's terrible time-keeping skills. She hung back at the loft door, watching her classmates kick the slush off their boots and shake the snow out of their hair. An oily stink of fish rose from the salting rooms below. Bags were

thrown onto desks and flasks of tea were balanced on the stove. Tove, the class show-off, was shouting that he had started shaving now, even though nobody could see any evidence of hair on his chin, whilst the two girls that Millie had been friends with last winter, Anette and Lise, breathlessly exchanged presents of toffee and homemade lace.

The room felt too crowded and too hot. Millie wished that she was back in the quiet of Pettar's van, curled up in her hammock.

A copy of last week's newspaper poked out of the bin by the door. It was *The Holy Gazette*, imported all the way from Hales, and printed uncompromisingly in High Apostolic. Millie retrieved it. She had no real intention of reading the paper – she found the foreign sentences hard work – but as she flicked through the pages, using the newspaper as an excuse to avoid making eye contact, she stumbled across an editorial about *The True and Concise Review of The Arariel Solutions*.

Her interest stirred. Maybe this would explain what had happened at Gulmdal Pit.

Behind her, the crooked wooden staircase creaked as Friar Espen came bustling up the steps. He had a pile of books in his arms, with an apple balanced on top. 'Alright, alright, settle down!' he shouted, kicking his brown habit before him. 'I said *settle down*. Tove, SIT, or I'll glue you to the seat myself.'

Millie tore the editorial out and scurried after the friar. Anette and Lise pointed at the seat that they had saved for her, next to them. But Millie ignored their earnest faces and instead chose a desk beside Nils, who had once wet himself in class. Then, whilst Friar Espen searched his drawers for the register, she began to read.

The editorial did not think much of the Review, or the craze surrounding it: '*...irrational nonsense has begun to eat away at Society... the hysteria of the uneducated mind is infecting the*

thoughts of people who should know better...? However, in between the editor's surly commentary, there was some interesting background on the pamphlet. The anonymous authors of the Review claimed that they had written it twenty years before, which would mean that they had foretold the fall of the ninety-eighth minimoon. But as the editorial pointed out, nobody had heard of the Review before that summer. Likewise, nobody could prove the existence of *The Arariel Solutions*, an apocryphal text, first popularised by the heretics of the Farthingay Brethren, which popped up every now and again in street legends and conspiracy theories. *We can only conclude that the Review is part of a worrying trend in eschatological hoaxes that has gathered pace as Year Zero approaches, and we call upon the Church authorities to take a stern line against its perpetrators.*

Millie was disappointed. The article contained nothing that might explain the similarities between the third prophecy and what had happened at Gulmdal Pit. She began to read the editorial again, slowly in case she had missed something during her laboured translation; and a piece of screwed up paper hit the back of her head.

'Wake up, Walkabout,' whispered the boy behind her. 'My father's paying for this.'

Millie didn't turn. But the moment Friar Espen stepped over to the blackboard easel, she threw her exercise book in Thomas von Whitkirk's face.

Tom very politely handed it back.

'You might need this,' he said, blandly.

Once upon a time, Millie would have gleefully spent the rest of the lesson plotting her revenge. Tom von Whitkirk was the youngest son of the Baron, and he exasperated and amused Millie in equal measure. If he wanted to go to university, he could, no questions asked; and that rankled. But he showed no horror at attending the occasional class with the poorest folk of Nordvik, and even at thirteen, Millie knew that to be significant.

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Today, however, Millie felt her interest in him evaporate.

On the blackboard, chalk squeaked as Friar Espen wrote, *You Must Rule (Methulah-sah 1-3)*. ‘This morning, we shall consider the last three Words of GOD, as heard by the First Apostle, Methulah-sah the Great, whose enlightened wisdom did not include what Neri had for tea last night, Tove.’

Millie’s thoughts drifted. She hadn’t slept properly in weeks, and the classroom was hot with excitable children. Friar Espen’s voice took on a metronomic cadence as he described the golden halo that had appeared around the First Apostle’s head. *It can’t have been God I heard*, Millie thought. *I didn’t get a golden halo.*

So what does that make me?

She peered into herself, searching for the taint on her soul. Deep inside her mind, under the film of her thoughts, she could sense a slumbering power.

What are you?

There was a loud POP. Millie jumped. A rolling swell of darkness surged over her thoughts. She grabbed the edges of her desk in panic, afraid that it was about to swallow her.

Far away, laughter filled the loft.

‘How many times have I told you to slack the corks in your flasks before putting them on the stove?’ asked Friar Espen, wearily.

Millie’s gaze lurched to the stove. Atop its domed metal cover, one of the flasks was foaming brown, milky tea.

A sudden anger ripped through her. Before she knew what she was doing, she was on her feet. ‘Which fish-mouthed dickface did that?’ she screamed at the class.

There was a stunned silence. Eight rows of faces stared back at her. At the rear of the loft, Tove sniggered.

‘Mildfred Pettarsdatter,’ said Friar Espen, quietly, ‘I will not have that language in my classroom. Come and sit at my desk.’

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Impotent fury sluiced through Millie. She stalked down the loft to Friar Espen's desk, aware that everybody was gazing at her. Friar Espen pulled a seat around to face his. She threw herself into it, daring him to say something. But Friar Espen turned back to the class and said, 'Now, if we may return to the First Apostle. Let's go over the story again.'

'One day, a devout man called Methulah-sah was hoeing at his vegetable patch, when the spirit of the Saint-King appeared in a blaze of glory. He told Methulah-sah to go on a pilgrimage to the ruined cathedral in Ingelstadt, where the Angel Moriel awaited him. Methulah-sah touched the angel's finger, and in that moment he heard those last three Words of GOD, 'You Must Rule'. The Angel Moriel explained to Methulah-sah that he would henceforth rule as the Apostle, uniting the fractious churches of the continent, and bringing peace to the Known World. In return, he and his descendants would be blessed with long life and divine protection, the so-called Umbrella of GOD.'

Millie's anger became too loud for her to concentrate. She wanted Friar Espen to shout at her, give her an excuse to shout back. But Father Espen's voice remained infuriatingly mild. He told the class to write up their own thoughts on the First Apostle's Words, then he crouched down next to her.

'Is everything alright?' he asked.

Millie had recently discovered sarcasm, and she put it to good use now. 'I was just so enthralled by your take on the First Apostle,' she snapped. 'I couldn't keep my mouth shut.'

Friar Espen gave her a considering look. 'It's always good to get your thoughts out. But perhaps this wasn't an appropriate environment. You know, Sister Kari at the hospice is a good listener, and she bakes an excellent bread pudding. You should go and try it some time.'

But Millie didn't want bread pudding. She wanted Friar Espen to shout at her. Why wasn't he shouting at her? Had he been discussing her recent mood swings with Pettar?

She angrily dropped her gaze, determined not to say another word. Friar Espen waited a moment, hoping for a reply, then he gave a small sigh, and moved away. Millie spent the rest of the lesson writing 'Friar Espen is a cock' in her exercise book.

After lessons, the class was scheduled to attend the III-Day service at Bekkergata Chantry. Forty Noisy children followed Friar Espen up the icy streets of Nordvik to a terrace above the cod liver oil processing plant. There, a round stone building stood among the clanhouses, crowned with a high, ribbed dome. It was surrounded by a canvas maze. A steady stream of dockworkers and shipping clerks shuffled between the taut beige sheets, following the winding path to God.

'No shortcuts,' Friar Espen ordered.

He was wasting his breath. Two boys slipped under a loose canvas the moment his back was turned. Millie ducked after them, daring Friar Espen to tell her off. But the Friar pretended to be more interested in his bootlaces.

I WILL make him lose his temper, she vowed.

It was dark inside the chantry, and drapes of frankincense smoke sagged between the columns. A thousand twilit saints crowded the wall recesses, their gold leaf halos smouldering in the occasional candlelight. Magnvar Whiptongue, the loudest of the town's four burgomasters, shouted at his sons help him up to their family box, whilst in a side chapel, the tough, grizzled patriarch of the Janssen fishing dynasty, Sejer the Janssen, discussed dock fees and customs tariffs with a group of bottomlander merchants. The class gathered on the chantry's central floor, amidst a crowd of clerks and dockworkers. Anette again beckoned at Millie to join her, but Millie pretended not to see. If she could just work out

what had happened to her at Gulmdal Pit, then maybe she could make people understand what she was going through. But who would know anything about the mines?

The Baron, perhaps?

The Baron, however, was far away in the Klippefort.

His son, then. She looked around for Thomas von Whitkirk. He was stood with Tove, hunched over a snowball they had smuggled into the chantry. Millie pushed her way towards them. ‘What has your father told you about Gulmdal Pit?’ she demanded.

Tom tried to hide the snowball behind his back. ‘Hello – yes, what?’

‘Gulmdal Pit. What happened there?’

‘I – I don’t –’ Tom looked uncharacteristically thrown. ‘What’s the matter, Walkabout? What’s wrong?’

He doesn’t know anything, Millie realised. ‘You’re useless,’ she snapped. ‘Why don’t you pay more attention?’

She angrily slapped the snowball out of Tom’s hand and stalked away. Tom, confused by her hostility, skipped after her. ‘I *do* pay attention. I know all sorts of things – like, like – clouds move across the sky because the earth is *rotating* – and –’ He dropped his voice to a whisper, ‘– there is going to be an exorcism today.’

Millie’s boot squeaked to a halt on the wet tiles. ‘An exorcism?’ she repeated. She turned the idea over in her head. Perhaps that’s what she needed, an exorcism to destroy the thing inside her.

‘Yes,’ said Tom. ‘Father Gunter says that an oil prospector got infected by a demon, up in the mountains, and now his lips are all black.’

Millie’s anger abruptly evaporated. Her vision tunnelled. Sweat slicked her back and hands.

‘What did you say?’ she rasped.

But before Tom could reply, a hush fell across the chantry. Father Gunter marched onto the prow of his gilded pulpit, cloth-of-gold robes winking in the light of

two trident candelabra. He made an elaborate gesture at the congregation. 'Let us pray for the Twenty-Third Apostle.' The congregation turned on the spot three times, and a brief, blue corposant crackled around the metal prayer rod that hung from the bottom of the dome. Father Gunter's brow lowered, unimpressed. 'A truly devout community would have lit the entire chantry with their prayer electricity.'

Millie barely heard him. She swayed on her feet, dizzy with shock, trying to process what Tom had just said. There was a black-lipped man here? Now? Oh God, she didn't have the strength to face this. She was a fool to look for explanations, they only caused her more distress. She needed to leave before they brought him out.

But her legs betrayed her and refused to move.

In the pulpit above, Father Gunter began to recite the Psalm of Logophilia, his bottomlander tongue chewing up High Apostolic words. On a good day, Millie could understand one phrase in three. Today, however, the sentences smeared into a single, unintelligible blur. Instead, she tasted rotten blood on her tongue and heard Jim's scratchy death rattle as the life drained out of him.

Dear God, what do I do?

Father Gunter's chant came to an end. He unwrapped a cloth of red velvet from around the five Holy Books, kissed each calico-bound volume in turn, then set aside the square of wood that represented the missing Third Testament.

'Before we proceed with today's service,' he said, 'we have an important task to perform. A wayward lamb has strayed from GOD's Grace. I call upon you, loyal servants of the Apostle, to help bring Anton Fischbacher Out of the Maze and back to the Light.'

He waved at the shadows behind him. Two of the Baron's guards wrestled a third man through the vestry door. Millie heard the clank of chains and the scuffle of feet. '...you think you do GOD's will?' a voice shouted,

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showering sparks off the balcony. ‘You have no idea who GOD is. I am the only devout man here!’

Does he have black lips? Was Tom telling the truth?

Millie strained her eyes, trying to see. But the candelabra flames blotted out the man’s features. Her lungs contracted, her dizziness grew. The something inside her turned over, like a slumbering bear awakening from hibernation.

Father Gunter held up his hands. ‘Let us turn in prayer. Oh Lord, we entreat you, show mercy on this poor soul –’

Behind him, Fischbacher cried, ‘Mercy? What use does GOD have for *mercy*. Does a lion show mercy for the gazelle? GOD is a predator! The apex predator of the universe!’

Father Gunter kept his eyes fixed on the open text in front of him. ‘– Please Lord, show *mercy* on this soul and give us the strength to confront the forces of darkness –’ He gestured at the congregation, and they turned again. Only Millie remained still.

I have to see his face. I have to know for sure.

‘Help us to banish the demon that eats him –’

‘You’re a fool, little man!’

‘– so that we may baptise him again in your Grace.’

‘You mock and sneer, puffed up with false meekness, but in truth you would make a better convert to the True Faith than me!’

The congregation completed another turn of prayer and a crackle of blue static chased around the prayer rod. Father Gunter raised his voice. ‘– We gather the electricity of our Faith and draw upon it’s sacred power to eject the demon from our brother.’

‘There is no demon in me! Only the True GOD.’

‘Bless us with your Holy Grace.’

‘I can hear the echo of His Voice right here!’

‘Bless us with your Sacred Words.’

Millie clutched her temples and spread her feet.

‘Let me draw upon the will of the steadfast as the Saint-King taught us –’ Father Gunter held an iron sceptre towards the prayer rod. ‘– and channel it to where it is needed.’ He pointed his free hand at Fischbacher. ‘Let me BANISH this demon.’

There was an expected pause. The congregation watched for a spark of holy electricity.

Nothing happened.

Fischbacher began to laugh. ‘You can’t convert me!’ he gasped. ‘I am beyond the reach of your feeble heresy. *But I can convert you.*’

He threw himself forward. The two guards were dragged after him. For a moment, Fischbacher’s face was haloed in candlelight. Millie saw his black lips drawn back over rotten teeth, and the web of black veins netting his cheeks. Her stomach dropped. The something inside her crowed in delight.

‘Join me!’ screamed Fischbacher. ‘Join the ranks of the Prophet in the Hole!’ He collided with Father Gunter, and sank his teeth into the priest’s hand.

The blood rushed from Millie’s head. She staggered against a fishwife, corrected her balance, then staggered again. Distantly, she heard Fischbacher scream, ‘Arise! ARISE!’ But the something was everywhere, steamrolling over her thoughts, knocking loose old memories, smashing down barriers, rearranging connections. She tried to cling onto something that was undeniably *her*. Her love of cinnamon pastries. A memory of Pettar heating hot chocolate on the stove. But it was all too much. The something drained her brain of oxygen. She made one last, desperate effort to correct her balance.

Then, blackness.

The next thing she knew, Friar Espen was stood over her, tucking Tom’s jacket under her head. ‘Millie, Millie,’ he said, urgently. ‘Can you hear me? Are you hurt?’

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Millie blinked up at him. Her vision was ringed with the afterburn of the silver halo, and her mind felt fuzzy, as if everything had been pushed around and put back in the wrong place.

Am I still here? she wondered. *Is this still me?*

She no longer knew how to be sure. Damp crept through her clothes. She tried to sit up, but Friar Espen caught her shoulder.

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Rest a moment.’

But Millie didn’t want to rest. She wanted to get as far away from the black-lipped man as possible. ‘I’m fine,’ she snapped. ‘Stop interfering.’ She got to her feet and gave the Friar a hostile scowl. The Friar’s face was pale with worry, and she could guess what he was thinking: *I must tell Pettar all about this.*

Pettar was ill enough already. Millie didn’t want to add to his worries.

‘If you say anything to my Pappa,’ she said, threateningly. ‘I’ll never come to the chantry again.’

The other kids treated Millie’s blackout like a joke.

‘Oh no, don’t faint on me!’ cried Tove. ‘Quick, somebody catch her!’

He threw his arms around Millie’s waist and tried to pick her up. Millie wrestled against him, slapping his arm with her mittens, but he didn’t let go until Jaana kicked him in the leg.

‘Leave her alone.’

Tove hopped back a step, mopping hair out of his eyes. ‘It was just a bit of fun!’ he protested.

‘My foot is bit of fun too. Want another laugh?’

It was Moriel’s Day III and they had run into Tove at the Frost Fair. Around them, a hodgepodge of wooden booths and wigwam tents crammed between the high dock

walls of Nordvik's frozen harbour. Flaming tar barrels threw orange light over the crowds. Vendors stirred cauldrons of goulash soup. Clan matriarchs noisily brokered marriage deals over kegs of hot mead. There was even an armoured bear, all the way from the Interior, its tortoiseshell back glinting with firelight as it shuffled back and forth in its chains. Normally, Millie loved the Fair and all the colourful traders who appeared with it. But this year the clamour grated on the inside of her skull and she found the press of people chaotic and stressful.

Jaana chased Tove off with the threat of another kick, this time in the *dangly man bits*. 'You fine?' she asked Millie.

Millie had no idea. A part of her wanted to go home. But Jaana had been talking about the Fair for weeks and Millie didn't want to disappoint her.

'Let's get some gingerbread,' she said.

The made their way to a glowing red tent in the middle of the harbour, where the tables were crowded with gingerbread pagodas and gingerbread cathedrals. The warm smell of coffee hung above two metal vats. Millie handed over a copper bead, clipped in half, for a pair of gingerbread Saints.

On a patch of bare ice opposite, Little Rolf sat upon a wooden throne, surrounded by torches, holding court over a group of children. He wore a black fur coat with an eiderdown pillow stuffed down his chest, and he had used red greasepaint to draw an angry mouth around his lips. The effect was rather spoilt by the fact he couldn't stop laughing. His court of children were dressed in rags and animal skins, and their faces were plastered with green and brown makeup.

'What's this?' asked Jaana.

Millie bit the head off her gingerbread Saint to put it out of its misery. 'It's the Night Bishop,' she explained; and when Jaana looked confused, she added, 'The Night

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Bishop? The most evil man in history? It is said that at the dawn of time, he tried to rule as God.'

'And the shouty children?'

Millie didn't want to think about the children. 'He was served by a court of infernal imps,' she said, quietly. And before she could stop it, the voice of a dead soldier whispered in her head, *Fischbacher abandoned us when he discovered that the imp wasn't here.*

She pushed the memory away.

On his wooden throne, Little Rolf bellowed commands. He told his imps to steal this woman's toffee apple or throw a snowball at that man's back. The children shrieked with delight and obeyed. Many of them were Millie's classmates. She could see Lise harassing a passing clerk for copper beads, whilst Tove kept insisting that he was now the Imp King, even though he wasn't in fancy dress.

Once upon a time, Millie would have demanded to be a part of the pageant too. But not today.

'Is fun,' said Jaana, enviously. 'I join next year?'

'It's not your religion.'

'Is now.'

They walked on, past the beer tent, past the soul weigher's booth, past the timber palisade of a rowdy stick-fighting show. Millie had seen these attractions every year for as long as she could remember, but today her memory of them felt jumbled, as if they had been bent out of shape. *It's the thing inside me*, she thought. *It has eroded what makes me me.*

They took a turn at the frostseed shy. Janna won three white-shelled frostseeds, filled with spicy red flesh, before the owner very politely asked her to stop. Millie stood by the netting and watched. She was briefly convinced that a man in a shaggy fur coat was peering at them. But her imagination had been spotting threats everywhere recently, so she forced herself to ignore him.

The clock on the Fishmonger's Hall struck three-four. Jaana pointed to a stream of people making their way towards Little Rolf's throne. 'What is crowd?' she asked.

'They're going to drag the Night Bishop off to Hell,' said Millie. She shrugged. 'It's not that interesting.'

'We watch?'

No, we leave, thought Millie. But Jaana looked so eager she didn't have the heart to refuse. 'If you want.'

They joined the press of people, bundled into scarves and hats in the middle of the Fair. Orange firelight crawled across their faces. In the sky above, the stars turned so slowly they almost looked stationary. Jaana bobbed up and down on her tiptoes, trying to see what was happening. Somewhere ahead, Millie heard Sister Kari's voice drift over the cobbled heads. 'It is I, the Angel Moriel, here to deliver God's First Message. Heed my Words, Puppet of the Devil. *Stop This Right Now.*'

Little Rolf roared in defiance. The imps began to shriek and jeer. Someone in the crowd shouted, 'Stop This Right Now!' and the chant was quickly taken up others. 'Stop This Right Now! Stop This Right Now!'

'What is this?' Jaana shouted above the noise.

'The crowd pulls the Night Bishop off his throne. Then they chase him around the Fair. It's all a bit silly.'

'We chase too?' asked Jaana hopefully.

Again, Millie wanted to say *No*, but again she heard herself say, 'If you want.'

The crowd lurched. Millie was swept forwards. Suddenly everybody was tumbling and laughing, and slipping and falling. They chased Little Rolf and his band of imps between the stalls, whooping each time one of them skidded on the ice. The beer tent got knocked over. The armoured bear roared. Millie felt the noise press against her like an iron weight. But Jaana was laughing, and that helped hold back her panic a little; and the nomad girl grabbed Millie's hand, which helped a little more. And finally, Little

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Rolf and his band of imps piled up the dock steps, into town. The crowd chased them along the street, shouting, ‘Stop This Right Now! Stop This Right Now!’ and ‘You run like a penguin, Little Rolf!’ They surged up Skagen’s Gate to the terrace of Bekkergata Chantry, where a doorframe had been set in the dirty snow.

Sister Kari grabbed Little Rolf’s arm for the pageant’s final act. ‘I banish thee to Hell!’ she shouted.

She threw Little Rolf through the door. The imps followed their master in a disorder of waving hands and screaming mouths – all except Tove who stopped at the doorframe and bared his behind.

The crowd cheered. Sister Kari pretended to be indignant, but really she was laughing too. Father Jonas, the senior curate, aimed an exasperated kick at Tove’s backside.

Millie hugged her ribs and willed the pageant to end.

Father Jonas held up his hands for quiet. ‘Let us celebrate that memorable victory over Tove’s posterior by turning in prayer.’

The crowd fell silent.

‘Where’s Father Gunter?’ somebody shouted.

‘Is he too grand to join our festivities?’

The curate gave a bland smile. ‘Father Gunter is sadly ill,’ he said, firmly. ‘But I hope my words will inspire you as much as his. Please turn. Hear us, O Lord, bless our wayward souls so that we might find the true path to you through the labyrinth of our sinful lives...’

Millie tugged at Jaana’s sleeve. ‘The interesting bit’s over,’ she whispered. ‘Shall we go and sit by the laundry vent?’

Jaana pulled an apologetic face. ‘Not now. Big party with dockworkers tonight. I go there. You come?’

Millie imagined being trapped in a hot, crowded assembly room, with a hundred rowdy sea-gender folk. ‘Perhaps another time,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow?’

‘Maybe. Or maybe I be too drunk? Is mystery.’

'I'd steer clear of the moonshine,' Millie advised. 'It's been known to send people blind.'

They slipped out of the crowd. Jaana ran off through the ruts of frozen snow, towards the docks. Millie crept down the terrace steps, intending to sit by the laundry vent alone until everybody else had calmed down.

The electric lamps of a factory yard lit motes of falling snow. A call-and-response song started in the Confraternity Hall of Torilldatter Sawmill. Millie felt a heavy tiredness weigh upon her that had nothing to do with exercise or sleep.

She reached Skagen's Gate. Swan-necked gaslights hissed quietly above the timber verandas. The shop shutters were down on the pawnbrokers, the bakers and the ship's chandlers. Nobody was about.

Nobody, that is, except for a single man, in a heavy, fur cloak, lent against the laddered steps to the Frida Clanhouse.

A drunk, thought Millie. Give him a wide berth.

She lengthened her stride.

The man straightened and watched her pass. Millie felt his gaze linger on her back. She had, of course, heard stories about girls cornered in the dark, whispered by the peddler women when no men were present. Maybe she hadn't imagined the stranger spying on her after all.

Behind her, unsteady boots crunched against the two-day-old snow. A bubble of panic formed in Millie's chest. Going to the laundry no longer felt like a good idea. She looked around for a refuge and spotted the Fishmongers Hall ahead. Its red clapboard walls were lit by grinning, trout-shaped lanterns. Quickly, she turned into the yard. The Hall door spilled an oblong of yellow light into the slush. Laughter and fiddle music drifted out on the escaping heat. Her heartbeat accelerated as safety beckoned.

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The footsteps behind her broke into a sprint. Millie didn't have time to react before a hand grabbed her shoulder and span her around.

'Help me!' rasped a voice.

She was thrown against a pile of the herring barrels, stacked by the door. Her head bounced off the rim of a lid. A man's face swung close, and beneath the shadow of his cowl, she saw a pair of black lips.

Oh saints and angels, she thought, despairingly, *it's happening again.*

The man jammed the flat of his arm against her chest. 'I know its you,' he wheezed. 'Please, you must help me. I have dedicated my life to the Lord's work. I don't deserve this.'

A fragment of light from the doorway caught the man's face, and Millie saw a thin, sharp nose, and the curve of high cheekbones. She realised who it was.

'F-Father Gunter?' she stammered.

'Yes, yes, it is your priest, child. You *must* help your priest.'

Millie stared at the black veins throbbing in his cheek. Father Gunter was suffering from the same affliction as Squat-neck and Anton Fischbacher. Millie had no idea how that was possible.

The priest lent his arm into the base of her throat. 'Do not disobey me, child. I am a man of GOD. Help me.'

Millie was unable to draw breath. She felt her heartbeat kick against her throat. She tried to say something – a shout for help, a prayer for mercy. But all that emerged was a panicked wheeze.

'HELP ME,' Father Gunter shouted.

And the *something* inside Millie awoke.

It rolled around the bottom of Millie's thoughts, like a cannon ball loose on the deck of a ship. *It's coming again,* she thought. *I can't stop it. It's going to sweep what's left of me away.*

Over by the Hall door, Millie heard voices. ‘Now Sejer,’ said Friar Espen, ‘you know the rules. No weapons in the building. You can leave your rifle out here with the skis until the feast is over.’

Millie tried to cry for help, but she couldn’t get her voice past Father Gunter’s arm. She waved a frantic hand, hoping to get his attention, but it was dark in the shadow of the herring barrels, and Friar Espen didn’t see her.

A sudden fury erupted within her. The Friar was always poking his nose into other people’s business, acting like he was important, but when she needed him to pay attention, he suddenly went blind. That was the problem with friars, they were so nearsighted. They had no chantry to give them vision. They wandered the towns and villages of the Commonwealth, eager to be liked, letting people get away sin, never committing to the hard discipline of a true churchman. It was past time the Apostle abolished them.

Anger boiled inside Millie. It took her by surprise. These weren’t her thoughts, she realised. She didn’t care if friars lacked vision. Where was this coming from?

She looked into eyes of Father Gunter. Behind his sharp cheekbones, she sensed his building fury. It felt like a tangible object – a lump of clay that she could mould into any shape she chose. Maybe she could cause a distraction...

She exerted a point of pressure on the priest’s anger.

Father Gunter abruptly let go of Millie. ‘I’ve had enough of these Godblind Friars,’ he spat.

Millie collapsed to the ground, choking for breath. Father Gunter’s cloak swept over her as he turned towards the Hall door. ‘GODBLIND FRIARS!’

His anger slammed across Millie’s mind. She looked up, suddenly afraid, and saw Father Gunter leap at Friar Espen. Friar Espen barely had time to raise his hands before Father Gunter swiped a fist at his jaw. The Friar fell back against the rack of skis, his eyes glazed with shock. ‘Hey, stop!’ shouted Sejer the Janssen. The burly fisherman tried to grab

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Father Gunter's arm, but Father Gunter ignored him and aimed a vicious kick at Friar Espen's legs. The Friar tumbled to the porch floor in a clatter of skis and poles.

Millie stared in horror at what she had unleashed. She tried to grab Father Gunter's anger again and get it back under control. But there was too much of it. It filled the yard like a billowing wind. God, how he detested this town. The endless winters. The freezing huts. The whining peasants demanding absolution and then returning to their sins the moment that his back was turned. 'You don't deserve me!' he screamed. 'I am a holy man!' He kicked Friar Espen in the ribs. Sejer again tried to wrestle him back, but Father Gunter threw him off. A ski broke under the priest's boot. He paused at the sound, panting with fury. And something on the porch timbers caught his attention.

Millie realised what it was. 'The rifle!' she shouted. 'Sejer, your gun!'

Sejer heard and dived towards it. But Father Gunter was quicker. He picked the rifle up by its barrel and smashed the stock into Sejer's face. Sejer fell backwards on top of Friar Espen. Father Gunter gave them both one last kick, then strode through the door, lifting the rifle to his shoulder. *I HAVE HAD ENOUGH.*

A sob rose in Millie's throat. She struggled to comprehend what had she done.

Inside the Hall there was a pop-pop-pop. Screams sliced the night. Benches crashed over, voices bellowed, 'He's got a gun!' – 'Get down, get down!' – 'Oline, the window!'

A woman staggered out of the door, clutching her shoulder. She was followed by a man dragging along a white-faced child. Orange light crawled up their backs.

'Oh Saints Alive, he's knocked over a torch.'

'The tablecloth's on fire!'

More people barrelled out of the door. Burly fishwives in their best frocks and red pom-pom hats. Bearded men with doublets buttoned up to their chins. Kids in petticoats

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and breeches. They staggered across the frozen snow, looking over their shoulders in horror, unable to believe what was happening.

Millie knelt by the wall of herring barrels and stared at the hell she had unleashed. *Pop* went the gun. Pop. Pop. Pop.

A click of claws made her look up.

It was the magpie, perched on the arm of a yardlight, where the lamplighter rested his ladder. It gazed down at Millie with a shiny, flame-spangled eye.

'I'm sorry,' sobbed Millie. 'I didn't mean to do this. I just wanted to stop him from strangling me. I-I didn't think—'

The magpie's gaze did not waver. Millie wilted beneath its weight. She watched the fire lick around the frame of a window. A ringlet of smoke uncurled from the guttering. The gun popped again. And a new and terrible thought ballooned inside Millie's head. This was just like the True and Concise Review had foretold. A holy man was drowning in his own anger and spewing forth fire and lead.

It had to be a coincidence.

It had to be.

She watched a surge of smoke roll out of the door. Two men dragged a body slimed with blood into the yard. Somewhere in the dark, glass shattered.

And Millie curled up into a little ball, afraid that a prophecy had just come true.