

A
Twisted
Messiah

The Divine Labyrinth

Volume One

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In a facility on the edge of the forest, a group of scientists prepared to break into heaven. Their experiment was scheduled to begin at 08.00, but at 07.16, Mikhail Ilyich received a telephone call from the director of the power grid in Desnogorsk-7, asking him to postpone it.

Mikhail put his boots on the desk and patiently explained to the director that the experiment took six hours to set up. 'You can't just switch it on and off like your kitchen gas mantle.'

'It can't be helped,' came a reply that sounded like it was being put through a cheese grater. 'A station is down at Odinnadtsataya. We're worried about overloading the grid... You'll have to... until demand falls off tonight... will...'

The voice tailed away into static. Mikhail banged the telephone's brass ear-trumpet against his desk a couple of times, then hung it back on its switch hook. At fifty-seven, he was too old to be surprised by incompetence. It was a

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force of nature more reliable than electricity. *No point wasting energy on being annoyed*, he told himself. *There will be a way around him. There always is.* He put on his greatcoat and his fur hat, and stepped out of the prefab office, into the yard.

Ice glazed the potholes and gutters of the asphalt, and ridges of last week's snow traced dirty lines between the spotlights. Ahead of him, the great concrete block of Unit C stood against the pre-dawn sky, grey and solid and ribbed with metal piping. It was too familiar to be ugly. Mikhail walked towards it, breath misting, mind looking for a loophole in the director's order. The day shift had begun to arrive, and he spotted the floor manager, Aleksandr Petrov, sucking a few last drags from his cigarette outside the Unit's steel door.

'Kucherov wants us to delay,' Mikhail told him.

Petrov paused in the process of flicking the cigarette away. 'What? No. We've already prepped the door –'

'I know. Look, there's no point shutting it down just to restart in a few hours. We'll hold the door in standby until Kucherov gives the all-clear, and save ourselves another night of lost sleep.'

Petrov raised the cigarette to his lips, remembered it was finished, then dropped it to the ground. 'It's risky,' he said. 'That damn thing is like a pressure cooker. And protocol dictates...'

Mikhail shrugged. Protocol dictated that they shut the door down if it ran for more than eight hours. But he knew that if they followed every stricture forced upon them from on high, they would never get any work done. 'We'll keep an eye on it, pull the plug if the power level rises. Tell Sokolov to insert twelve control rods – that should keep it steady.'

He pushed through the door, into the cold passageway beyond. Inside, the walls were pasted with safety notices and political slogans. *The Voice of the Apostle is the Mouth of God. In the event of an alarm, please leave by the nearest exit. Report*

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All Suspicious Behaviour to Your Superior. Mikhail walked towards the double doors at the end of the corridor. A red warning light flickered on and off above the entrance, indecisively telling workers that the floor was both closed and open to personnel. He made a note on the back of his hand to get the maintenance staff to look at the connection and strode through. Beyond, the cathedral interior of the warehouse opened into a filigree of gantries and girders. Metal cooling pipes the size of locomotives ran water from the pumps in the Reservoir Room to a domed concrete installation in the middle of the chamber. One hundred and thirty-three control rods – ninety-eight fully inserted, the rest raised in the standby-position – rose out of the dome.

But it was to the pale, circular frame embedded in the bottom of the installation that Mikhail's eye was inevitably drawn. The frame was very old, constructed from a substance that was neither bone nor ceramic, but something in-between. If everything went to plan today, it was there that the portal to heaven would rip open – the climax of three decades of painstaking research and clandestine archaeology. However, if Mikhail was honest, the dream had never been his. It was the dream of his superiors, the directors of physics, the court flunkies, the government ministers. Mikhail ambitions stretched no further than a good pension and a comfortable retirement with his wife. He walked along the metal gantry, checking pressure gauges and energy dials. He knew that breaking protocol on the operation window of the door was risky, but he reckoned that he could keep the system under control. He was good at his job, and had two medals to prove it.

He retraced his steps and pulled the engelmeter from its metal bracket on the wall. According to its enamel dial, the theon particles from the gate were decaying at a rate of 2 microengels per hour. Well within acceptable limits.

Satisfied, Mikhail returned the device to its clip, and went to see about breakfast.

Olga's last instructions to Mary were very clear. *Don't go to Desnogorsk-7. And definitely don't go there on Apostolic Miracle Day.*

Well, Mary had never heard of Desnogorsk-7, and she couldn't find the town on any map, so the chances of her turning up on Apostolic Miracle Day felt pretty slim.

She certainly wasn't thinking about Olga's warning one freezing night, as she heaved herself into a closed railway van, trying to escape the Praying Men. Her only thoughts were of survival, and of getting as far away from the city of Yeysk as possible.

It was only two days later, when the railway wagon arrived at its destination, that Olga's warning trickled back to her.

By then, Mary's thoughts were greasy with exhaustion, and her stomach was tight with hunger. She had hidden herself behind the van's sheeted cargo – a Wentish engine, metal and angular and long-dead like the rest of its kind. It was there that the two soldiers found her. They were doing their routine check of the train, heaving open the sliding doors and flashing their torches into the dark. Mary was too scattered by three nights without sleep to react. Her eyes were unsteady, and her mouth was filled by her tongue. She looked like a beggar, wrapped in a burlap sack, with two mismatched mittens and a flap-eared hat that had lost its chin-tie.

One of the soldiers jabbed his rifle over the engine's tarpaulin and waved its bayonet at Mary's throat. 'Come out with your hands up!' he shouted.

Mary had just enough presence of mind to obey his order before she was stabbed in the neck. She lodged her elbows against the wooden slats of the van, and slowly manoeuvred herself into a standing position. The sacking

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fell away to reveal the bump of her thirty-four week pregnancy.

The soldiers, wrongfooted, exchanged a glance. ‘Come out of there, ma’am,’ one of them repeated, in a quieter voice. ‘But be careful. These machines have sharp edges.’

Mary found it difficult to hold onto what the boy was saying, but she understood what was expected of her. She squeezed past the scrap-metal engine to the van’s sliding door, and let the two soldiers help her down the footplate to the ballast. It was only then, as she stood astride the sleepers, swaying with exhaustion, that she realised how much trouble she was in. Beyond the signal gantries and the drifting white steam of waiting locomotives, she could see watchtowers dark against the dusk sky, and latticed fencing looped with barbed wire, and giant searchlights sweeping white ovals across the frozen ground. More soldiers tramped along the edge of the tracks and between the lines of waiting goods wagons, whilst somewhere in the darkness a bell clanked the evening cookhouse summons. In the distance, black windowed tenements rose out of the freezing fog, square and grey and ugly.

Even in her exhausted state, Mary understood what this meant. She was on the edge of a closed city.

No wonder the soldiers were jumpy. They probably thought that she was a spy. Closed cities were state secrets, built by the government on the edge of the tundra for clandestine military purposes – in this case, she guessed, experiments on old Wentish machinery. They were not the sort of places that you wanted to end up by accident.

She let the soldiers escort her across the tracks, too tired to explain her mistake. The soldiers took her to an outside toilet at the end of a tin shed, and locked her inside. Mary sat down on the toilet’s wooden seat, sighing in relief as the weight came off her ankles. It was only then, as the soldiers stamped their feet and argued over who would take a message to the town commandant that Mary heard the

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name *Desnogorsk-7* mentioned. She would have found it funny, had she had the energy to laugh.

It was just like the Book of Arariel foretold.

Or rather, *almost* like the Book of Arariel foretold.

According to Olga, the Book of Arariel said that Mary would arrive in Desnogorsk-7 with a caravan of reindeer herders, dropping out of the pine forests to trade furs for black market medicines and guns. It made no mention of railway vans or military arrests. But Mary's brain was too pickled to figure out what had gone awry. She leant her head back against the rear wall of the toilet and closed her eyes.

She had been an ordinary woman once – a floor girl at a canning factory, outside Borysch, with a room in the factory's dormitory, and a pet cat that she kept hidden from the matron. But then the Praying Men had come to Borysch, spouting mangled theology and prophecies of disaster. They had stalked the edges of the night with their knives, 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 just a waking dream, brought on by exhaustion.

Also a waking dream – or so she thought – was the yelp and thud of the guard outside being incapacitated. Because who would be stupid enough to attack a guard in a city full of soldiers? It was only when the padlock gave a rattle and the toilet door scraped open that Mary realised she was no longer hallucinating. A tall shadow stood silhouetted against the white floodlights, 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, plain and expressionless, with a slit for the mouth and two holes for the eyes. For one terrible moment Mary

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thought that the Praying Men had found her, and that 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.'

The thought of standing made Mary whimper. Her body was spent, her knees and ankles ached, and the weight of the child within her bent her spine. But the silver masked lady was insistent, tugging at her arm, forcing her to stagger out of the cubicle. 'There isn't much time, Mary,' she said. 'It's a miracle that you are here, despite all the interference, but if we don't move quickly the prophecy could still unravel. Come, this way. Watch out for point rods.'

The silver masked lady helped Mary across a stretch of frozen gravel to a chain-wire fence. Then, before Mary could catch her breath, she was being pushed through a gap in the lattice, into the street beyond. Mary knew that she should ask where they were going, but the words felt too heavy. She let the masked lady herd her between hollow, half-finished tenements, head down, body bent – until suddenly the telegraph wires that zigzagged between the buildings crackled with static, and a curtain of falling green light unrolled across the night sky.

It took Mary a moment to realise what she was seeing.

Every year, in his far-off Temple, the Twenty-Third Apostle performed a miracle to prove to the world that his rule was legitimised by God. Last year he had cured a woman of glaucoma. This year it was rumoured he would bewitch a wren to sing the Apostle's Psalm of Exultation. The miracle, like all great ecclesiastical works, 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 Apostolic Miracle Day. And she was in Desnogorsk-7.

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‘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 if I can’t fix the prophecy, then I can’t predict what will happen next, and if I can’t predict what will happen next, then I won’t be able protect your daughter. Please. Just a few more yards.’

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 Apostolic Miracle Day.

‘You lied!’ she wheezed. ‘You said you were – 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 am so sorry for what is about to happen. I would save you if I could, but we’re out of time.’ She reached inside her leather coat and pulled a loop of copper wire from the inside pocket. The wire had a double pronged plug at one end, and an antenna at the other. ‘I had hoped that this next bit would happen naturally,’ said Miss Price, ‘but this improvised device should work just as well. Please remember, Mary, this is the only way I can save your daughter.’

And she stabbed the double pronged plug into the flesh at Mary’s neck.

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In the control room of Unit C, Mikhail stared in dismay as the gate's temperature gauge nudged 100°C.

How had it got so high so fast? They had been following the reactivation programme to the letter. The dial's needle should not have risen past 31°C.

Perhaps leaving the gate in standby all day was not such a good idea.

He wiped the sweat from his bald pate, and tried to think about the problem sensibly. It was possible that one of the pumps had jammed. Well, that was easily solved. He switched on two back-up pumps to compensate. But alarming scenarios had begun to cascade through his head. If the water in the cooling system was allowed to boil, the steam produced would interfere with the water's ability to absorb neutrons, which in turn would cause a spike in the intensity of the reaction that powered the gate.

And *that* would cause...

The next bit did not bear thinking about. Better to end the experiment and face a disciplinary tribunal for ignoring the rules on standby procedure.

'Shut her down,' he barked, angrily. '*Shut her down.*'

Damn the Apostles, that's my career gone. He removed the paper cover from the ZA-5 button on his work station and hit the emergency shutdown. Theoretically, this should have caused all the control rods to descend into the gate, shorting the reaction. But instead an alarm began to ring.

'Power's rising!' a technician shouted.

Mikhail's eyes lurched to the energy gauge. Power was indeed rising. It had been at 5 MWt a moment ago. Now it was at 100 MWt. He felt a tremor of fear. *There is still time to control the reactor,* he told himself. *I am good at my job. That's what I tell everybody: I am good at my job.*

As long as the problem *was* just a jammed pump then the back-up pumps should stabilise the reactor any second now. He flicked a series of switches, barely conscious of

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what he was doing – and suddenly his entire work station lit up with flashing red and yellow lights.

‘Shit, shit, shit,’ said Mikhail.

‘Back-up pumps are jammed,’ shouted Petrov.

Mikhail felt his control slipping. The temperature gauge was still rising, the control rods were not descending like they were supposed to, and now the power had leapt to – dear God, *13,000 MWt?*

He had to do something decisive.

I am good at my job. I AM GOOD AT MY JOB.

‘Petrov,’ he said, ‘take Antipin downstairs and –’

He got no further. The rest of his sentence was drowned by a low, throbbing roar. The floor quivered. The windows rattled in their frames. Dust slipped from the light fittings and the ceiling tiles.

And down on the warehouse floor, there was a muffled, concussive *bang*.

Right on cue, Miss Price heard an explosion kick the night. She tightened her arm around Mary, trying to pretend that she was giving her a final hug. But really she was holding Mary still so that she could use her free hand to raise the antenna.

‘It will be alright,’ she lied.

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

But Miss Price knew that worse was to come.

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 Unit C disintegrated, and *something* boiled out of it. The *something* tore across the asphalt yard, bulldozing through prefab offices. It ruptured

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water pipes, mangled spotlights, chewed up the chain-wire fence, and then it was out of the compound and pulverising the streets beyond. Empty tenements folded aside like wet cardboard. The road rippled under its impact. Miss Price's eyes slid off its alien geometries, unable to get a lock on the dark, faceted mass avalanching towards her. For one terrible moment she thought that she had misjudged it, and that the thing would plough straight through her, disintegrating her flesh, obliterating her organs. But then the antenna bucked in her grip, and the *something* lurched. Suddenly the whole boiling ejection was squeezing in on itself, funnelling down the copper wire into a fizzing loop that ended in Mary's neck.

Mary's mouth slammed wide with shock. Her head snapped back. Her legs spasmed and her spine arched. Her eyes crumbled to char in their sockets. A whine of distilled pain wheezed out of her lungs.

Then her body slumped, and she slipped through Miss Price's arm to the cold bitumen below.

She was dead. As foretold.

But not her baby – not yet.

Miss Price quickly dropped the antenna and pulled a knife from her boot. Was this murder? She certainly felt like a murderer as she sliced a large arc beneath Mary's pregnant belly. *Mary was always destined to die in Desnogorsk-7*, she told herself, severely. *You have just ensured that her daughter will survive her.* But still, with Mary's blood welling over her hands, it was hard to feel innocent of guilt. She blanked her mind and pushed her horror as far away as it would go. Then she tugged at the lip of her cut. Dress and skin peeled away to reveal a glistening, gelid offal of organs, with a blue sack tucked in the middle.

Ashes began to fall from the sky. The twin explosions had deadened Miss Price's hearing, but she could still pick out the first, tentative screams of people caught in the blast.

Focus.

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She took a deep breath, then carefully cut the uterus open. More fluid oozed over her hands as she ruptured the amniotic sac. A tiny, soaking baby wriggled within. It began to cry the moment the cold air touched its skin. Miss Price quickly sliced the umbilical cord and lifted the slippery child into her arms. She held it close as the ash pattered against her cloak. In the distance, a low, fractal rumble signalled the collapse of a building, whilst further away, in the military camp, a siren began to wail. But for a few heartbeats Miss Price felt the relieved calm of an against-the-odds success.

It did not last long. A silvery flash snagged the corner of her vision.

Miss Price's gaze snapped upwards. A long, dark tunnel gouged its way through the tenement blocks, back towards the burning frame of Unit C. Halfway along it, in the slag of pulverised concrete, there lay a girl. She was face down in the ruins, her arms flung out like angel wings. A singed white dress rumbled up her back.

But it was not the girl's dress that had caught Miss Price's eye.

It was her hair.

Not brown hair or blonde hair or red hair or black hair, but a silvery, shimmering mother-of-pearl hair, washed with faint hints of green and copper and magenta.

Miss Price knew that hair.

A knot of panic formed at the base of her throat. She had not spared this girl a moment's thought when she had held up her antenna and bent the *something* towards Mary. But now, staring through the funeral veil of falling ash, she saw that the girl was in the wrong place. Not spread-eagled among the bent pipes and shattered guard huts of the Unit C gates. But *here*, in the wake of the *something's* destruction, far away from the person who was supposed to find her.

Had the prophecy snapped after all? Were they now in a state of chronological unorthodoxy? Was history see-sawing on its fulcrum?

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Miss Price looked urgently around for clues.

In the sky above her, a rain of sparks fell from the heavens. *As foretold.* A belly of orange-lit smoke heaved itself over the town and sprawled out across the pine forest, stripping the trees of their needles. *As foretold.*

And a tall, hefty woman, in the black uniform of the town commandant stumbled between the fragmented walls, tripping over rubble, slipping on ash, picking her way towards the fallen girl.

Miracle of miracles. *It was as foretold.*

The knot in Miss Price's throat relaxed. She took a steadying breath. She did not understand how it had happened, but the prophecy had stabilised of its own accord. Perhaps the town commandant had always approached the blast from this direction. Perhaps it was just luck that the girl with mother-of-pearl hair had fallen in her path. Or perhaps there was such a thing as divine intervention after all.

A thought for another time, she told herself. She rocked the squalling child in her arms. First things first. She had to find the reindeer herders and hand the baby over. The Nukomi would be camped in the forests upwind of the blast, but Miss Price needed to hurry if she was to catch them. It wouldn't be long before they sensed the wrongness in the air and began to retreat westward.

'Let's set you on your way,' she said to the baby.

She turned her back on the crumpled walls and the chasms of orange flame, and walked briskly towards the trees.

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 panel on his wall. Through the narrow slit of the ducket window 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, 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 made the earth, God made man, and then – without explanation – the moon fell down.

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 sentence, 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 moons, tiny, bean-shaped Takhos, 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 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 thought, sadly. He watched the red timber sheds of Knut's Bakken swing into view, and his mind settled back into its pale sea of oblivion.

The train clanked to a halt in a goods loop above a steep, shingle valley. Van doors clonked open, canvases rose against the spitting sleet, and the tack-menders and shoemakers and tinkers and scribes opened up their stalls. Pettar sat down on a green wooden bench by his stove, the clock ticking in his ear, and waited 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. 'Wake up. I need your advice.'

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. He sold wooden tops and toy soldiers out of a pink and yellow van, and his loud enthusiasm for life intruded on Pettar's grief.

Pettar reluctantly opened the door.

Little Rolf thrust a battered leather hatbox at him. 'It was with the parcels awaiting pick-up – pasted with a label saying *Return to Sender*. What should we do?'

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The hatbox 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 thread was tied loosely around its neck. Even Pettar, numb to the world, felt a moment of surprise.

Little Rolf tickled the baby's chin, causing it to gurgle. The noise 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 puffed white sheep to have a look. The fall of the moon had everybody on edge and they were glad of the distraction.

Little Rolf tickled the child's chin again. 'How could anybody abandon something so sweet?' he asked; and the bakken's foreman, Astrid Fix-me-up, who always had an opinion, said, 'The world is full of heartless people, Rolf.'

The baby tried to lift 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.

There was an uncomfortable silence. 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 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 their iron gates, and their skinny, sullen kids. 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 predictability of their world. It was not just the falling moon; a rumour had reached Knut's Bakken that two lakes on the high plateau had drained away, and there was a story going around about a far-off city levelled by an earthquake and its aftershocks. In the local marketplaces, itinerant friars climbed onto crates and ranted about the End of Days, whilst the Prince-Bishop in Gudstad, who was above such hysterics, 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 master.'

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 waggon to tease the wide-eyed children who had gathered around his racks of painted toys. And Pettar shuffled back into his van, putting the hatbox down on the floor by the stove, where it wasn't so draughty.

But six hours later, when the train arrived in Nordvik, Pettar didn't leave the baby with the station master.

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 hatbox, 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 a few hours longer,' he told himself. 'We'll be coming this way again tomorrow.' 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

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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 first 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 determined regularity. And Ingrid Quick-fingers 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 a precocious 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 rain-swept quays always smelt of fish. The crooked, spruce-forested Skarlsfjord 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 impatient, short-tempered foreman. The Austfjell peaks became Sledding and the Kaldalen glacier became More Sledding.

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 masters 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, his 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 Skarlmark 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 on the other side of the mountains 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 hunchbacked 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.'

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

‘Yes. Because he was drunk.’

It was evening, 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 or 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 instance, she spent an hour each evening working for the scribe as a way of learning her letters; but Millie was 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 she intended to collect together in a book. Millie hoped that Anders’ story might make her forget the large pile of copying that Millie had still to complete. But Ragnhild just sniffed that the lead mines were ugly and modern and that they should never have been allowed to blight the unspoilt valleys of the Skarlmark.

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 that 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 collapsing tunnel. 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 evening, 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 that the revelation sent him mad. Perhaps you could tell *that* story, Smokes?’

Anders sat forwards again, looking grumpy. ‘Everyone’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 *Twelve Weeks Among the Demon Cults of Slodvia* by Frieda Zimmerman, and now she wanted to be like Frieda, taking tea with savage chieftains in

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the bog-palaces of Zlot 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 fees. 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, 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. Ragnhild gave her a curt nod, and Millie stomped off along 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 axle 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 in the world beyond the Nordvik and Skalheim Railway Traction Company. All he cared about were signals, and bills of lading, and *axle boxes*. It wasn't surprising that they weren't properly related. She sawed at her fish, furious at the unrelenting dullness of her life – and then looked up, startled, as Pettar's fork clattered against his plate.

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

For a moment, Millie was afraid 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, dear. Nothing to worry about. But I think I might go to bed early tonight.’

‘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 Quick-fingers. *There’s nothing sinister about an upset stomach*, Millie told herself. *I’ll have a word with Cod-bone Finn about the state of his fish tomorrow*. She ignored the small gnawing fear that had begun to grind its teeth in her belly and returned downstairs to do the washing up in a tin bucket filled with soap flakes.

But that night, as Millie lay sleeplessly in her hammock, she heard her Pappa vomit again through the tiny ventilation window of his bed-loft; and her fear grew a little more. He had lost weight over the summer, 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.

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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.

The next morning dawned bright and clear, with a crisp frost that rimed the coal bunkers in the yard, and sparkled atop the steep, shingled 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 walnut.

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

'Of course, pappa.'

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 crowds of clog-shoed factorymen making their way to work, past the brick chimneys of the Schneider und Weber Smelt Mill; and then she was out of town and striding through a moonscape of spoil disgorged from the ore dressing stations. Skinny technoscavengers with wicker baskets strapped to their backs scraped through the debris, looking for the metal discs, old coins and porcelain

insulators of long-dead civilisation. Millie nodded to them in greeting; and slowly the mills faded into the cloud behind her, 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 past the ancient 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 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. She 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. Twice. At the absolute least.*

Millie chewed her lip. She hadn’t hiked all this way to be turned back now.

A bedraggled slip of black and white snagged her eye. It was a magpie, caught on the wire, 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 a warning.

Click, click, click, went the magpie.

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

‘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, a fuzzy

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yellow light hung in the fog, and by its 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 huge, stone ear, two miles across, carved flat into the mountain, with a mine entrance sunk where the ear canal would be. Steam-winch inclines climbed out of the dip, strung with chains of trucks. But the trucks were not the usual bouse hoppers; they were three planks high, and filled with pieces of strange, angular machinery. 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 a upside-down unicycle.

But what really gave the scene its uncanny edge were the carcasses that hung everywhere: lemming and pine marten, mountain goat 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 to ensure that they engender negative mass, our conversion will stabilise.'

'What does that even mean, Jim? Face it – Finkelstein 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 turning *black!*'

Two men were stood in the paraffin lamplight of a doorway. Their jackets were grey and buttoned down one side, and they wore the shiny, black caps and rubberised overcoats 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. Did she hear that right? *Cut the girl’s throat.* The words jarred inside her head. *Surely they can’t mean that literally.*

But the bottomlander soldiers were a rough bunch, always knocking people about with their rifle butts and making up excuses to fine them. It wasn’t a great leap to imagine them killing somebody.

I need to cause a distraction. If she could unhitch a cable from one of the inclines, then maybe she could –

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

‘What do we have 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 he was not going to drop her, so she stopped kicking and said, ‘I am the secret daughter of Baron von Whitkirk. He will be furious when he hears that you’ve manhandled me.’

The soldier ignored her. He heaved her through a gap in the barbed wire and dragged her down the scree ridge. Millie’s feet tripped helplessly over tussocks of heather and unearthed 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 mine’s cage lift. Fear slicked Millie’s stomach. She was trapped. *I’m sorry pappa*, she thought, helplessly. *I hope you find another orphan girl in another hatbox – and that she is better behaved than me.*

The other two soldiers climbed into the 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 Finkelstein 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, rubber sealed doorways hovered halfway up the sheer wall, whilst the floor at the bottom was striped with ducts and studded with ventilation panels. A petrol generator hummed below, powering a stern, white floodlight.

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 tweed suits of academics, but their clothes were so torn it was hard to tell whether they were male or female. An angular, metal throne stood over the devastation, cantered to one side on the uneven floor. It had a symbol embossed on its headboard, possibly a crescent moon with two stars. Three severed heads had been skewered onto spikes atop it, dribbling blood down 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 other side of the mountains.

Millie's 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 from black devilglass, and it glinted slickly in the white light. Millie swallowed a sob. *Frieda Zimmerman wouldn't face death with tears on her cheeks. Frieda Zimmerman 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.

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Jim unfolded a scrap of paper. ‘Hear us Lord God,’ he said, in a monotone reading voice. ‘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.

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?’ asked 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, Millie saw Frank clutch 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 from 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 metal 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, and 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 were pulsating, 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 Finkelstein 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 hard 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 fingernails were dripping 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.’

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

Help me! she screamed inside her head.

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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 great 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 fight back, pulling up dams, retreating into her head, but it was like holding off a tsunami. The wave crashed over her, oblivious to her struggles, promising obliteration.

'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 floodlight. 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 want no more part in this,' he said.

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

What THE HELL just happened?

Nothing in Millie's experience had prepared her for this moment. Not even *Twelve Weeks Among the Demon Cults of Slodvia*.

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.'

It was dusk by the time Millie arrived back at 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.

What do I tell him? she wondered, shivering. *That I lied about going to Gunnar and Aud's? That a psychopath tried to kill me?*

That something very dark is lurking inside me?

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

between a pair of empty hoppers and ducked under the chain of their couplings. 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 whistled tunelessly as he screwed four red wheels onto the axels of a wooden elephant. Ragnhild was sat in her cubicle of pigeonholes, copying an old family charter for the fishermen on Lake Langbatnet. Ingrid Quick-fingers was quietly updating Heidi the Stitch on the lives of her nephews and nieces. And at the end of the train, beyond the light and chatter, stood Pettar's guard's van, closed and quiet, a thread of smoke rising from its tin chimney.

Millie girded herself for a confrontation. Her throat ached. Her chest tightened. With heavy feet, she climbed the iron footplate.

Inside the van, Pettar 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 angry*. And suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

Pettar gave a sigh. He put down his enamel mug and his red paperback rulebook, and he 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 how could she explain the cascade of black blood that had drenched her, or Jim's scratchy gurgles as the life dribbled out of him? How could she 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 that 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 this time. Then, before Pettar could press the issue, she added, '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 trouble in the east is pushing the northern clans up against each other. The whole tundra 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 by the lakes, its long winter treks, its sleighs, its tents, and its strange songs sung around the fire, but they had most important thing in common. Gulmdal Pit.

Perhaps it's for the best, she told herself. It will be easier to forget what happened without Jaana around to remind me.

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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 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 a distant night train whistled in the dark.

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. *I don't think I'll ever be able to shut my eyes again*, she thought. But at some point she must have dropped into a light slumber, because her thoughts grew frayed and repetitive, and 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.

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 frost.'

She crawled to where Jaana was balanced at their usual lunch spot, her back against the metal slatted heating vent. The sun had barely risen above the horizon, and a collar of ice clung to the lock gates of Nordvik's inner harbour. On the quays below, Millie could see dockworkers rolling barrels of herring through the shadows of brown gabled warehouse. Behind them, peaked rooftops climbed over each other towards the craggy hilltops enclosing the town.

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 mildew. 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 primed lady on the cover. 'For me. Good friends read together, yes?'

'I suppose they do.' Millie looked down at the pamphlet. It was bound with green paper, and entitled, 'A Revelatory Insight into the Occult Secrets and Hermetic Prophecies of the Book of Arariel – 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 said all are talking 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 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:

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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 insisting that the fire in Königstein Minster was a sign of God's displeasure. She knew that she was becoming morbid, but she couldn't help herself.

'Thank you,' she said, quietly.

Jaana smoothed a loving hand over her magazine's cover. 'Merchant daughter left this.' She pointed to the lilac evening gown of the primped 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, failing that, a dog. But Millie understood. Better to make a fresh start.

If only I could become another person too, she thought. A girl who never went to Gulmdal.

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 doss-houses by the docks. She lived a precarious existence, loading and unloading ship cargoes, 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 next week, it was the only routine she had.

She turned the page of her pamphlet. *Naturally, the deepest secrets of the Book of Arariel can only be disclosed to the initiated. But in order to prepare the world for the forthcoming TRANSUBSTANTIATION 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 hidden vessel will spark against the storm of nightmares. The reliquary crown will release the Coming One from the devil’s house, and they will be unmasked 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 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.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the gulls squabble over the fishing boats in the harbour. Then a distant horn droned. Jaana gave an apologetic shrug. ‘Back to work,’ she said. ‘Tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow,’ Millie promised.

She waved at Jaana as the nomad girl slid down the roof, shiny black hair bobbing around her chin; then she sat by the heating vent alone, growing chilly in the dim light, her thoughts tired and blank. Below her, on the waterfront, steam cranes hissed, and a barge slid against the main dock, ready to ferry a cargo of lead pigs out to the ship in the fjord.

The silver halo popped back into her head.

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Millie tried to push it away, but there the halo burned, a stubborn, molten ring in her mind.

I am the Voice of God.

It was just a dream, she told herself for the hundredth time. But the halo wouldn't go away, and Millie was suddenly consumed by an overwhelming need to know if *this* was the day that the massacre at Gulmdal went public. *You should check the newspapers*, she thought. It would mean going to the railway station and braving the crowds there, but Millie couldn't sit still any longer. She jumped down a stack of crates abutting the laundry wall and made her way into town.

The station was perched high upon the hillside, its iron and glass canopies ruler straight above the jagged rooftops. A bookseller's kiosk stood on the main concourse, under the clocktower. Millie checked the headlines. They were once again preoccupied by trade union trouble in the heartlands. There were no references to Gulmdal Pit.

Millie breathed out in relief. She could hide from the massacre a little longer. But still, a nagging worry had begun to eat at her thoughts. Why *weren't* the newspapers reporting the murder of three academics?

It was almost like the killings had never happened.

There was nothing about Gulmdal in the next day's papers either. Or in the day's after that.

There *might* have been something on the third day, but by then Millie had other worries. The Winter School was fast approaching, and she did not have the energy to face the other kids.

'What would happen if I didn't go?' she asked Pettar, as she polished her boots one evening.

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 frowned 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 busy town on her own felt worse.

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

Over the next few days, 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 morning arrived, she felt unprepared. She made her way through the dark, frozen streets of Nordvik wishing for one more hour at home.

The Winter School took place in a slope-beamed loft above the Fishmonger's Hall. Millie tried to time her arrival to the last minute so that she wouldn't have to talk to the other students. But when she reached the top of the Hall staircase, she discovered that she had been foiled by Friar Espen'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. Millie retrieved it. She had given up expecting to find anything about Gulmdal Pit, but the newspaper offered an excuse to avoid getting dragged into a

conversation. She flicked through the pages, not really reading, and she was surprised to find an editorial about the *True and Concise Review of the Book of Arariel*. Maybe that would contain something useful.

Behind her, the crooked wooden staircase creaked. Friar Espen came bustling up the steps with a pile of books in his arms, 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 him. 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 to 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 moon; but as the editorial pointed out, nobody had heard of the Review before that summer. Likewise, nobody could prove the existence of a 'Book of Arariel' – an apocryphal text, first mentioned by the Coenobites of Belsham, which popped up every now and again in street legends and conspiracy theories. *We can only conclude that the Review is yet another eschatological hoax, and we call upon the Church authorities to take a stern line against its perpetrators.*'

Millie was disappointed. It 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 this time, in case she had missed

something important – and a piece of screwed up paper hit the back of the head.

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

Millie did not turn. But the moment that 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 class with the poorest folk of Nordvik, and even at thirteen, Millie knew that to be significant.

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

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

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?

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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. *It's going to swallow me.*

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 flushed faces stared back at her.

At the rear of the loft, a kid sniggered.

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

Impotent fury surged through Millie. She stalked down the loft to Friar Espen's desk, aware that everybody was gazing at her, angry at them for not understanding. 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 Methuselah was hoeing at his vegetable patch, when the spirit of the Saint King appeared in a blaze of glory. He told Methuselah to go on a pilgrimage to the cathedral in Ingelstadt, where the Angel Moriel was waiting. Methuselah touched the angel's finger, and in that moment he heard those last three Words of God, 'You Must Rule'. The Angel Moriel explained that Methuselah would henceforth rule as the Apostle, uniting the fractious churches of the continent, and bringing peace to the world. In return he and his descendents would be blessed with

long life and divine protection – the so-called Aegis of God.’

Millie’s anger became too loud for her to concentrate. She wanted Friar Espen to shout at her – to give her an excuse to shout back. But Father Espen voice’s 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.’

I don’t want bread pudding, raged Millie. I want you to shout at me. Why won’t you shout at me? Has Pettar’s been talking behind my back?

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 evening service at the Bekkergata Chantry. Forty noisy children followed Friar Espen up the frozen streets of Nordvik to a terrace above the cod liver oil processing plant. There, a round stone building stood, crowned with a high, ribbed dome, and 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.

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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 light of occasional candles. Magnvar Whiptongue, the loudest of the town's four burgomasters, was insisting that his sons help him up the stairs to their family box, whilst in a side chapel, the tough, grizzled patriarch of the Janssen fishing dynasty, Sejer the Janssen, was discussing dock fees and customs tariffs with a group of bottomlander merchants. The class gathered on the chantry's central floor, where the black and white tiles swam in slush, amidst a crowd of clerks and dockworkers. Anette again beckoned at Millie to join her, but Millie pretended not to see.

If only I knew what happened to me at Gulmdal. Then I might be able to make somebody understand what I am going through.

It still troubled her that nobody had reported the killings.

Perhaps the Baron has covered it up?

Tom might know. She looked around for him. He was stood with Tove, hunched over a snowball that 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. Why is he covering it up?'

'I – I don't –' Tom looked uncharacteristically thrown. 'What's the matter, Walkabout? What's happened?'

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 paused mid-stride, boot squeaking on the wet tiles. 'An exorcism?' she repeated. *Maybe that's what I need – an exorcism to destroy the thing inside me.*

'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 heart lurched. Her vision tunnelled. Sweat slicked her back and hands.

'What did you say?' she rasped.

But before Tom could reply, a hush fell on 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 corpusant 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's a black-lipped man here? NOW? Oh God, I don't have the strength to face this. I should leave before they bring 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. *Gulmdal*

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Pit really happened, she thought. I can't hide from it any longer. It really happened. Oh 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, the Steadfast-in-the-Faith, to help bring Anton Finkelstein back to the Light.'

He waved at the shadows behind him. Two of the Baron's guards wrestled a third man out of the vestry door. Millie heard the clank of chains and the scuffle of feet. '...you think you do God's will?' a voice shouted. 'You have no idea who God is. I am the only devout man here!'

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

Millie strained her eyes, trying to see. But the candelabra flames blotted out the man's features. Her lungs contracted and 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, Finkelstein 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 one hand towards the prayer rod. ‘– and channel it to where it is needed.’ He pointed his other hand at Finkelstein. ‘Let me BANISH this demon.’

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

Nothing happened.

Finkelstein 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, Finkelstein’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 with delight and lurched upwards.

‘Join me!’ screamed Finkelstein. ‘Join the ranks of the Prophet in the North!’ 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

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again. Distantly, she heard Finkelstein 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 Dursch 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?’

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 the hair out of his eyes. ‘It was just a bit a fun!’ he protested.

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

It was Moriel’s Day, and they had run into Tove at the Frost Fair. A hodgepodge of wooden booths and wigwam tents were crammed between the high dock walls of Nordvik’s frozen inner harbour. Vendors stirred cauldrons of goulash soup. A juggler was tossing rubber rings. Three fiddlers played a jig. There was even a dancing bear, shuffling lethargically on the ice, the bells about its neck and feet clanking like 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 stressful.

Jaana chased Tove off with the threat of another kick, this time in the *dangly man bits*. ‘You alright?’ 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.

They made their way to a red tent in the middle of the harbour, where the tables were crowned with gingerbread houses and gingerbread cathedrals, and where the warm smell of coffee hung above two metal vats. Millie handed over a coin for a pair of gingerbread Saints.

On a bare patch of ice opposite, Little Rolf was sat upon a wooden throne, holding court over a group of children. He wore a black fur coat with an eiderdown pillow stuffed

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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 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 echoed in her head: *Finkelstein abandoned us when he discovered that the Imp wasn't here.*

She pushed the memory away.

Over on his wooden throne, Little Rolf started to bellow 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 coins, whilst Tove was 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 fortune teller's booth, past the timber palisade of a rowdy dog-baiting 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 coconut shy. Jaana won three coconuts 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 cloak was peering at them, between the shoulders of the crowd. But her imagination had been spotting threats everywhere recently, so she forced herself to ignore him.

Then the clock on the Fishmongers Hall struck five and 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 that Millie didn't have the heart to refuse. 'If you want.'

They joined the press of people, bundled up in scarves and hats, gathered in the middle of the Fair. A ring of flaming tar barrels cast an orange light over the crowd. 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, devilman. *Shut it Down.*'

Little Rolf roared in defiance. The Imps began to shriek. Somebody in the crowd shouted, 'Shut it Down!' and the chant was quickly taken up by others 'Shut it Down! Shut it Down!!'

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

'The crowd pulls the Night Bishop off his throne,' Millie explained. '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

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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 dancing 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 Rolf and his band of Imps piled up the dock steps, into town. The crowd chased them along the street, shouting 'Shut it Down! Shut it Down!' and 'You run like a penguin, Little Rolf!' They surged up Skagen's Gate to the terrace of the Bekkergata Chantry.

There, a doorframe had been set up 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 just 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 inside a hot, crowded warehouse, with a hundred rowdy men and women. 'Perhaps another time,' she said. 'I'll see you tomorrow?'

'Maybe,' said Jaana. '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 Trollsens 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 walkways and spindle legged 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, bent in the doorway of Karl's Hardware Store.

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, whispered by the peddler women when no men were present, about girls cornered in the dark. Perhaps she hadn't imagined the stranger spying on her earlier.

Behind her, unsteady boots crunched against the two-day-old snow.

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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 lit by orange lamps. *I'll take shelter there.*

She turned into the yard. The Hall's door spilled an oblong of yellow light into the slush. Laughter and fiddle music drifted out on the escaping heat.

Almost safe, thought Millie.

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. Beneath the shadow of his cowl, she saw a pair of black lips.

Oh saints and angels, 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 God'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. How could that be?

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. Her heartbeat battered against her throat. Blackness crept around the edges of her vision. If Father Gunter didn't let go soon she was going to suffocate.

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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, threatening to knock something over. *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, you know the rules. No weapons in the building. You can leave your rifle out here with the skis until the feast is over.’

It was Friar Espen. Millie tried to cry for help, but she couldn’t get her voice past Father Gunter’s arm. Friar Espen didn’t turn. *He’s not going to see me*, she realised. *It’s too dark here, in the shadow of the herring barrels. I’m going to suffocate.*

She felt a sudden fury towards the Friar. He 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 of Apostolic States, eager to be liked, letting people get away sin, never committing to the hard discipline of a true churchman. It was past time that the Apostle abolished them.

Anger boiled inside Millie. It took her by surprise.

These aren’t my thoughts, she realised. *I don’t care if friars lack vision. Where is this coming from?*

She looked into shadowed eyes of Father Gunter. Beneath 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 I can distract him.

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

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

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

Millie felt his anger slam across her 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 Father Gunter's arm. But Father Gunter ignored him and aimed a 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.

Sejer's rifle, thought Millie.

'The gun!' she shouted. 'The gun!'

Sejer heard her 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 back, on top of Friar Espen, head lolling, limbs flopped. Father Gunter gave them both one last kick, then he strode through the door, lifting the rifle to his shoulder. *I HAVE HAD ENOUGH.*

A sob rose in Millie's throat. *What have I done?*

Inside the Hall there was a pop-pop-pop.

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Sudden 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. Bearded men with doublets buttoned up to their chins. Kids in petticoats 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 it's weight.

Fire licked around the frame of a window. A ringlet of smoke uncurled from the guttering. The gun popped again. *It's just like True and Concise Review foretold*, Millie realised. *A holy man will drown in his own anger, and spew forth fire and lead.*

The thought ran down her spine like a cold finger.

It must be a coincidence.

It must 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.