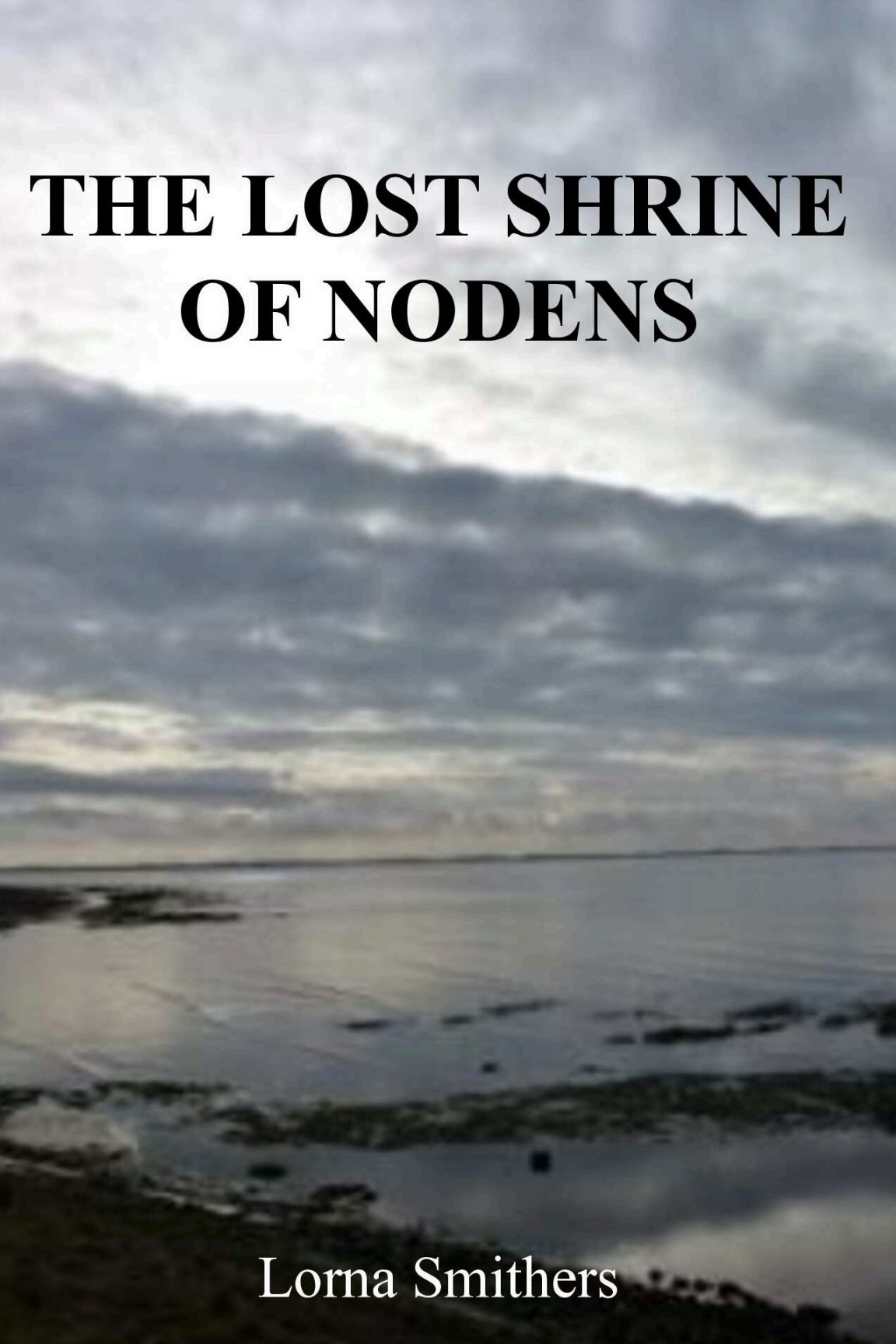
THE LOST SHRINE OF NODENS
Lorna Smithers

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For Nodens,
ancient British god
of healing dreams

Chapter One

Chesney

I pray my mum will not find out about the bomb.

Wrapped in tissue paper, it is at the bottom of my school bag, beneath my laptop and my buttie box. Olivia, from Eco Club, snuck it to me at break.

It isn't illegal yet to carry a seed bomb, but it still isn't a good idea. There has been another bombing over the Ribble in Preston, this time at the Fishergate Centre. It was the St George's Centre last time. As usual, the blame has been put on the far left and the far right, as the divisions deepen between those who want to change the world and those who want to keep it as it is. Then, I see a pair of fourth years in black hoodies with 'Doomsday' and 'Apocalyptic' logos, there are those who want to bring it to an end.

I clutch my school bag tightly as I make my way to the bus. It is made of blue denim and is decorated with patches of the environmental groups I support - 'Guardians of Nature', 'Friends of the Earth', 'Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament'. The buses are electric now. They changed them from petrol when Eco-Shift were in power a couple of years ago. Now the Traditionalists are in, have found more offshore gas, they want to change them back.

What the buses run on doesn't change the protocol. As I approach the 704, a double-decker, nervously I take my phone from the front pocket of my bag and pay through the Stagecoach App. Upstairs, on the back seats, sit the oldest and hardest pupils - the Winters and their crew. Then, the rest of us, in order, in accordance with how well we fit into an unspoken schema.

I'm glad I don't stand out too much from the norm. I don't have black or brown skin. I don't have a foreign accent. I don't have BO or wear glasses. I'm neither fat nor thin. I do have frizzy ginger hair, inherited from my dad, tamed back into a ponytail and smoothed down with water in the loos. My face, like his, is a

landmine of freckles, but wider, like my mum's. I'm of athletic build. Like my father, I'm a runner. I'm just another geeky eco-kid amidst a steadily growing horde. Thus, I get a seat, right at the front. Beside me, a nervous first-year lad is also clutching his bag. Some of the other first years and a second-year Polish boy with a brace have to stand and endure the barrage of spit and soggies rained down from above.

None of the third or fourth years come down today to nick our bags and toss them to the back, to get the favour of Lorraine and Aidan Winter, who jettison them out of the back window after taking their pick of the valuables. Everyone's afraid of the Winters with their snow-white hair and frost-blue eyes, colder than the Arctic blasts, which are becoming more common as the Jet Stream weakens and the Polar Vortex breaks down. Even though Brady Winter left last year, like a yeti, he still haunts the edges of the playing fields; twisting arms, breaking fingers, dealing out black eyes to those who won't buy his cheap hash or snowy white baggies.

I hold on tightly to my bag, daring not to think about what they will do if they get hold of my seed bomb. I'll be on their list, then, of ones to watch. Not just an eco-kid, an activist. Ones to tell their father about, Old John Winter.

Even though the mid-September sun is shining through the windows, I shiver at the thought as we drive down Crow Hill Drive, then onto Liverpool Road, past the rows of bars and shops. It's gone upmarket, Upper Penwortham, just as much as Lower Penwortham has gone downhill.

It seems to take an eternity waiting at the lights to turn right onto Cop Lane. Behind me, two other first-year girls are scrolling on their phones. "Justin Bieber's fit." "Tom Holland's fitter." I'm a little jealous of their friendship.

I had friends when I was at Middleforth Primary School. But my best friend, Amina, was sent by her strict Muslim parents to Penwortham Girls' High School because they didn't want her to mix with the boys at Penwortham Priory. Even though, like me,

she wanted to come to this school because of its reputation for excellence in science and technology.

I was friendly with some of the other girls, but in the last year, they started getting interested in boys and pop music. Hanging out in gangs with boy-girl divides, boys challenging girls, girls challenging boys to kiss each other. Coupling up in the bus shelter or in Greencroft Valley woods.

I tried snogging a boy once. Horrible word, snogging. Suited the way his wet lips fumbled round and round in circles before he stuck his tongue in my mouth.

"I don't think I like kissing," I'd said to Lisa afterwards, when we were alone in the bus shelter, waiting for the pouring rain to stop before going home.

Lisa was my closest friend in that crowd, pretty, although she'd started spoiling it by putting thick mascara on her eyelashes and red lipstick on her lips.

"What did he do?"

I tried to explain.

"Like this?"

To my surprise, to my astonishment, she kissed my lips, slowly, softly. When she put her tongue in my mouth, just the tip, a bolt of lightning shot from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. I dizzied.

"Well?" she demanded.

I was so overwhelmed, wondering what had happened, what it meant, I forgot to rub the lipstick off before I got home. My mum shouted at me for putting "that cheap red muck on". She's a strict Methodist. I dread to think what she might have said if she'd found out that I'd kissed another girl.

Afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about Lisa; she was on my mind night and day. However, it was obvious it meant nothing to her. She just liked copping off, mainly with the lads, but it was rumoured, with girls too.

I'm glad Lisa didn't come to Priory with her temptations. I've figured it's a lucky break, getting away from that crowd. I never

truly fit in, preferring stuffed animals to Barbies and David Attenborough to Heartstopper. I'm hoping to make new friends with similar interests at Eco Club.

Relieved to have survived the bus ride with my bag intact, I get off at Hill Road South and walk past the suburban houses. Middleforth is the middle ground between Upper and Lower Penwortham. The home of the middle classes. Our identity is firmly upheld. Tidy gardens. Jet-washed drives. Freshly mown lawns. Beds and baskets of cultivated flowers.

As I turn onto my road, Far Field, I sneak a glance at the roundabout, at the grassy edges around the sycamores. There, when it goes dark, when I'm sure there is no one about, I will drop the bomb. I will watch it explode, seeds nestling like secrets between the grasses, sinking down. Then, I will wait until spring, for signs not only of monocot leaves but dicots— tiny seedlings of birdsfoot trefoil, ragged robin, ox-eye daisy.

Someone will shout, "There's been a bomb!"

The eco-crowd will celebrate and the trads will curse the untidiness.

I will watch from my room with a smile and no one will know it was me.

Lorraine

"Aidan! Catch!"

A toffee-nosed fourth year tosses us a phone stolen from one of the second years who made the mistake of taking the front seats at the top of the bus.

My brother half catches it, half clasps it to his lap. Brady's got a good catching hand, but Aidan's got butter fingers and isn't doing a good job of purloining goods, selling drugs, or being the cock of the school or king of the bus. It's coming down to me, a year younger, to keep our fearful reputation up.

"What d'you reckon?" he passes me the phone.

Motorola G66 6G. “Barely worth selling it,” I mutter. I glare at the fourth year. “You should know better than to nick off Kingsfold kids. Them,” I point to the small line of the middle classes filing off the bus at Hill Road South, “they’re the ones with the Apple iPhones and Samsung Galaxies.”

“Not even when it’s been fixed up by you-know-who?” asks Aidan.

My frostiest stare is now turned upon him, a stare that could freeze the sun or maybe save the polar ice caps if I gave a shit about such things. We’re not supposed to discuss business, let alone our dirty middleman, in public.

Loathsome, he is, Stanley Robinson, with his greasy dark hair, his oily face and hands, his disgusting overalls stained with the dirt not only from his work as a mechanic, but his dirty jobs for us, going places we wouldn’t touch.

“Not even then.” Still, I put the phone in my bag. It’s possible Stanley could fix it up in some way to profit on it, but I’ll not tell Aidan that. My picking.

Two more bags come our way. From a black one covered in doom stickers, we harvest another Motorola and a penknife with a blunt blade that the doomy little scrag obviously didn’t manage to get out in time. Then, from a nondescript brown rucksack, a half-decent iPad.

“We don’t do PE kits.” I tell Aidan to throw it back.

Finally, I see that we are approaching our bus stop at Kingsfold Community Centre. I get up to lead the way. It isn’t easy being the most feared and hated girl in the school, on the estate, in Penwortham. I’ve got to keep those who loathe me at bay with an icy gaze like a glacial edge.

Always got to have a knife. A cold, sharp friend. My only friend. Tucked up snug and close by my right hip in a secret pocket in my skirt. Carwenna, ‘White Hilt’, she’s called, after King Arthur’s knife, Carwennan. My Dad thinks he’s King Arthur, the Winter King, from Bernard Cornwell’s novels, but the closest he has ever got to chivalry is having a round table. I

christened Carwenna with my own blood and she's been blooded countless times since. Everyone on the bus knows it. I stare knives.

They back away from me, with my platinum white hair, like rapids that no white water rafter could survive and the smooth plastercast of my face. My lips are a slim, pale line saying, "Don't you dare fuck with me."

Good. They all cower back. Now, the stairs, a challenge as the bus begins to slow and might jolt, curving round in my white and blue Rule Britannia sneakers. You might have thought I'd wear stilettos. They'd look good on a frost queen, but they're no good for running or fighting unless they're in your hands and by that time you're on the floor with someone's shoes in your mouth.

Perfect. Off the bus without any challenges. Now, to the park, for more pickings to be had, for arms to twist, my pack following me like tame dogs.

We pass Kingsfold Community Centre - a squat red brick building with a triangular sloping roof at the front for the reception and offices and a taller white-washed building behind housing a hall and function rooms. It's meant to be for us, with its local council meetings and community activities, but there's nothing that caters to our tastes and instead we're kept out. CCTV cameras are dotted around with signs to say we're being watched.

On Kingsfold Park, the volunteer community support officers are fixing the tunnel on the first slide and replacing the missing end of the second; re-hanging the swings on the frames from where they've been stolen; mending the gym stations that run along the path—pull-up and chin-up bars, press stations, ab benches, an elliptical, and an air bike. A team is rolling the roundabout back into place from where it's been moved.

It's a complete waste of time as we will only trash it again tonight. However, Mark Denver, our local councillor, is ever hopeful that his efforts to engage the community with youth counselling and activities will succeed.

As always, the Winter Crew are the first on the park to take the pick of the spots. For a laugh, we decide on the Peace Garden. The pathway is in the shape of a white ribbon to represent opposition to men's violence. Snowdrops grow there in spring and it's surrounded by young trees and shrubs. There are seagulls circling overhead. Dirty birds. Mouths fouler than ours.

We huddle in a ring of white tracksuit tops with blue stripes down the arms. That means we're Winters. White stripes mean neutral. Red stripes mean Summers and we're always on the lookout to drive them off our territory.

Aidan rolls a joint, a sloppily made saggy thing, tries to light it, fails.

"It's this Peace Garden," I say, "it doesn't like us."

We move and huddle outside. The spliff lights. Aidan passes it round. It still keeps going out. I pass my turn and keep an eye on the incoming groups of doom-kids and eco-kids, the sportsters doing the run of gym equipment stationed along the path and look for those who will be easy to pick off. We'll not touch the other trads. Not unless we get desperate.

Our fodder spotted, Aidan finishes the joint and squishes it into the ground with far more squishing than is needed to put it out, to show our victims what is coming to them. We begin to circle like sharks, our crew spitting peas and soggies with blowguns at a group of doom-kids. We manage to make one bolt and Craggy and Colin catch him and bring him over.

He's a fourth year with long, lank, brown hair hanging over his face.

"Want to buy some hash?" I offer him a lump of rocky.

"No," he attempts, knowing where it will lead.

"Wrong answer," I say, "Aidan, give me his hand."

He tries to hide it away like a ferret in his black Mind Games hoodie.

Bloody butter fingers fails to find it, but I'm like a terrier with a nose for sniffing out errant creatures and grabbing them with pale, cruel hands.

There's an art to snapping fingers. Bending them back with thumb and forefinger. Have you ever heard the sound? Some say it's like ice cracking on a cold day, like the Hounds of Hell yapping, the bottom of Hell caving in. The shriek of that kid. It could bring God and all his angels down from Heaven or the Devil and all his demons up from Hell or the community police rushing over. Thankfully, they're preoccupied with a doomster with a gun.

"Now are you going to buy some hash?" I ask the little twerp.

Whimpering, now, he is, trembling, near wetting himself.

"It'll numb the pain," I promise.

"Can't now you've broken my finger."

"You've got nine others to choose from."

"£20 to our temporary bank account," commands Aidan, takes the kid's phone from his bag and hands it to him ready for him to type in his pin number.

His unbroken middle finger tremulously begins to tap the digits.

Then, to my surprise, to my outrage, a dirty great seagull flies down to mob Aidan, flapping in his face, beating him away from the kid. "Keow! Keow!"

There's another one, a brazen thing, in front of me. Eying me with its yellow eyes, the colour of the robes of Judas Iscariot, a bilious old sea-farer, its beak snapping yellow. How dare it come and threaten me?

A shameful thing, Lorraine Winter, the hardest girl in Penwortham, backing away from the big bird as the community police head over, the kid retreats to them with his broken finger and the rest of the Winter Crew flee.

Before I make my escape, I look around for my most hated enemy. That demon spawn of Stanley Robinson shouldn't be here today. He should be in grief.

But there he is, in the shade of the twisted hawthorns by the ditch. His eyes are redder than the blood-red hawthorn berries from grieving his mother. They're filled with desire for revenge.

He knows who killed her. As he watches from the shadows of his hood, he takes out a crisp packet and crushes crisps into his hand and holds it out for the gulls to flock to feed.

Carson Robinson, the son of our fixer, has long been trying to fix us up. Weird shit happens when he is around. Literally. Gulls shit on our heads or one of my brothers stands in a whopping great dog turd. Stolen phones get returned to their owners and our temporary bank account gets hacked. Whereas Stanley is under the cold and wintery thumb of my father, he is not. Soon he will be. By God, by Arthur, by the blood on my knife, I swear it.

Chapter Two

Chesney

Our house is detached and stands on the corner between Far Field and Hill Road South. Robin, our gardener, has weeded our flower beds, where the Michaelmas daisies and calendula are in flower, orange supplementing purple. He's on his knees, putting our autumn bedding plants in—primulas, pansies, polyanthus. Next, he'll hang up the hanging baskets. Then, he'll trim the box hedge. Finally, he will take his power hose to the drive and blast away all the tiny little seedlings who are trying to grow in the cracks.

I nod a hello to Robin, note the door is on the catch, and go straight in. The heat hits me, the scent of a Glade plug-in, Jasmine and Honeysuckle. Then, from the kitchen, as always, the scent of baking cakes.

My mum's a keen baker. She does all the baking for Penwortham Methodist Church. It's the Autumn Fair tomorrow, and she's making toffee apple cake, plum and marzipan tart, cinnamon buns, and sticky ginger pudding. That means I will have to help on the cake stall rather than going to the volunteer work party in Greencroft Valley that Olivia told me about.

I wipe my feet on the mat, take my school shoes off, put them on the shoe rack beside my trainers, dad's road shoes and trail shoes, and Mum's flats. The carpet in the hallway is pink and plush, and the walls are an inoffensive beige.

"Good day?" mum calls.

I'd better show my face, unguilty, not the type of kid who has a bomb. "Yes."

She is standing at the work surface, in her white roll-neck sweater and long floral skirt, making icing from scratch—sifting the icing sugar into the cream spoon by spoon to get the right consistency, taking up the whisk and beating. Finally, a drop of vanilla essence. Her short, blonde hair is in a neat bob. Her face

has never seen make-up. She's a larger lady, but she carries it well, with grace, filling the space with her cake-scented vibrancy.

On the kitchen table is the floppy carcass of a half-knitted jumper— white, purple, pink. Beside it are her knitting needles. Mum used to own a knitting shop on Leyland Road, but she sold it a few years ago and paid off the mortgage. She now works from home, selling on Etsy, and volunteers for the church, running a food bank and a Knit and Natter.

"Met any friends yet?"

It's the last day of my first week at school. "Still working on it."

"How was cross-country running?"

"I came second." I'd run the 10-kilometre route through the woods in just under 50 minutes and been pleased with myself.

"Your dad will be proud." Mum smiles.

Dad's been a runner since he was a boy, like Grandad and Great-Grandad. They say it's in our blood. His family, the Liddells, come from Whitehaven in Cumbria. Great-Grandad worked on the nuclear reactors at Windscale and was there at the disaster, in 1957, helping organise the fight against the three-day fire that released radiation across the land. A hero. Grandad had leukaemia when he was a boy and my family suspect it was due to the release of radionuclides, yet he too worked at the facility when its name changed to Sellafield and my father followed with its decommissioning— clearing away the waste for future generations.

When they weren't working, my father and his forefathers ran — along the coast to St Bees, around Ennerdale Water and Buttermere, up Scafell Pike, the Old Man of Coniston, Great Gable, through Windy Gap, down to Gatesgarth.

Dad was the first to enter competitions - 10ks, half marathons, marathons, ultras. He's got enough medals to fill a drawer and t-shirts in a wardrobe. He met Mum when he came to Preston for the 10k. He often tells the story of how he was walking around afterwards and was drawn to Penwortham Methodist Church by

the smell of the cake, but behind the stall found someone tastier than her blueberry muffins. Everyone groans.

Mum persuaded him to move from Sellafield to Springfield, outside Preston, where they make fuel for nuclear reactors, settle down, and have me. Yet, he's still always on the go, researching new interests, running up Rivington.

"Where's your PE kit?" asks Mum.

I groan. My mind has been so caught up with the bomb I left it in my locker. Sweaty. Muddy. My trail shoes coated with mud. It's going to stink.

"That's not like you," she looks at me penetratingly, "is something wrong?"

I swallow.

"It hasn't been stolen by that nasty Winter crowd, has it?"

Relief, "No, no, I just left it in my locker after all the excitement of the race."

I go upstairs to my bedroom. Bare walls. No film or pop stars. Not even posters of environmental activists like Greta Thunberg or Jessie Roberts. This is because Methodists are not allowed to worship idols on the basis of the Second Commandment, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image'.

Mum will not even let me pin up pictures of extinct animals. Even though Noah saved them two by two, loaded them on his ark, at the time of the flood. A story that speaks to our times of rising seas and species loss. I like the way that Noah saved the animals instead of the people.

I have my own wooden cross, above my mantelpiece, the Lord's Prayer beneath. I recite it in the morning and the evening. Since I kissed Lisa, I have been stumbling over the lines, 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,' thinking of Eve tempting Adam, Lisa's apple-red lips.

In 2021, same-sex marriage was approved in the Methodist Church. But our pastor, Reverend White, doesn't agree. "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," he looks at the boys, "Eve and Adam, not Eve and Sandra," at the girls.

I'm not sure what God thinks or if He's even there. I know He spoke to Noah, but He never speaks to me or answers my prayers. Is it because I sinned?

I hope he isn't watching as I take my bag off, reach inside, take out the bomb. Only a little bit of the clay used to bind the seeds has rubbed off on the tissue paper. I smile, cradle it in my hands, wrap it back up, and hide it at the back of my drawer in my bedside table behind my eco-friendly skin products.

I grab a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, jumper, and smalls from my dresser and enter the bathroom. I jettison my school uniform—a black V-neck jumper, white blouse, black and yellow striped tie, grey knee-length skirt, and white ankle socks—then take to the power shower. Hot. Strong. Blasting away the sweat and grime I could not wash off in a minute under the cold trickle in the school showers. I wipe down the tiles and the glass with a squeegee.

Squeaky-clean, I sit on my bed and scroll my newsfeed for environmental news and look with longing at the work party in Greencroft Valley.

The click of the front door. Footsteps. Dad's home. It must be time for tea. I nip to the loo. When I get down, Dad looks tired. He's been haggard for some time, and I suspect it's the toll of his work. His narrow face is drawn, his freckles are splodgy, his ginger hair is thinning. He is speaking hushedly to Mum, and her eyes are shiny with concern. Hearing me come in, he looks over, straightens his shoulders, and puts on a smile.

"Tell your father how well you did in cross country," says Mum.

As she plates up the fish, coated in homemade batter, the homemade chips, and garden peas, I describe my muddy slog through the woods, share my time.

"Well done. You will soon be running for the school team."

Dad's usually a big eater. You should see how much pasta he can pack away when he's carb-loading before an ultra—enough to fill a cupboard. Today, he's struggling to finish his chips,

moistening them with extra mayonnaise in order to swallow them down before he rinses his plate.

When he goes for a shower, I say to Mum, "What's up with Dad?"

She looks away. Sighs. "He doesn't want to tell you, but he's been for tests."

"What kind of tests? Has he been testing radioactive material?"

"Not exactly but I fear it's related."

A nasty feeling in my bones. Like when I say, "Radionuclides," "iodine-131."

"The blood tests have shown," she speaks, controlling her emotions, "a rise in abnormal white blood cells and low numbers of red ones and platelets."

We're both familiar with these symptoms from Grandad's story.

"He's got leukaemia." A sense of nausea, anger, fear rides over me. "Inherited from his father's line or picked up from handling the radioactive waste."

"To be sure, he's got a bone marrow biopsy booked in next week."

Like an unstable atomic nucleus emitting radiation, I feel like I'm falling apart.

"So," says Mum, "we're both going to have to be strong for him." Eying me sternly, "Make sure we do nothing to upset him in his fragile state."

Lorraine

The Winter House isn't really a house, but four flats knocked together. When my mum and dad came here from the north with a snowstorm at mid-winter twenty years ago, they started out with just one flat, and as their business, pushing drugs and stolen goods, grew, they bought up the others.

It's in the area known as Legoland because the buildings look like they're built out of Lego bricks. Toy-like. You almost expect

little blokes with square heads and plastic pincers for hands to be living in them—that's my brothers. It was built in the 1970s for the working classes and for scum like us.

Key in the lock, and I'm in our living room. It's big enough to hold all the Winter Crew. Slouchy sofas, armchairs, bean bags in the corners. A big flat-screen TV for watching the footie and the horse racing. A pair of weighing scales at the back for when customers come round to do a deal. Our ever-present bucket bong, a 2-litre bottle floating in it, foil lid black with hash. Our dog, Cavall, named after Arthur's dog, an Alsatian with eyes like a pair of blue moons, is lying on a rug, licking his old grey paws.

Mum and Mel have only just got up. They're in their dressing gowns watching trashy telly. My mum's long, wavy platinum hair is just like mine, and her eyes are blue as diamonds, sparkling false and shiny as her wedding ring. Mel, the common slut, is drinking a breakfast bevy, a can of Stella. Her short, blonde hair is dishevelled, and her gown is half open, displaying DD breasts. She never puts them away, even when my dad's about.

Mum and Mel both got boob jobs when they opened the Burrow, a lap dancing bar, close to Perfect Tens, in Preston, together, last year. It's a sordid affair, their take on the Playboy Bunny Girls—the Bumping Hares. Upstairs, it's all above board, but downstairs, you'll find the Rabbit Holes. The stuff that goes on down there you'd never have found in the pages of Playboy. They're up late as they work late and Mel often stays over.

Mum tried to persuade me to get a boob job too, but I refused. I don't mind being a B cup, chest near flat as a racehorse, as I've got my long legs. I've never had a problem pulling. I've had nearly every fit lad on the estate.

To Dad's study to drop off today's pickings. Aidan's down on his count. He's still out there. He'll be doing penance, he will, if he fails to make good. Brady'll be in later. He's got bigger jobs, longer hours, now he's out of school.

I knock on the door.

"Come in."

When it's business time, he's business Dad. His study doubles as his counting house. There are shelves filled with books. World histories, historical novels, crime and thrillers, then classics, such as Shakespeare and Aeschylus. He loves a good tragedy, he does. Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet. Those ancient Greek plays where dark, vengeful justice is always done. He's got every book about King Arthur he could get his hands on. From Bernard Cornwell back through Tennyson to those ancient Welsh tales where Arthur's a thug, just like us, killing off the witches and giants.

Then, there's the filing cabinets filled with files where he keeps his accounts and the safes in which he stores his money. A real old-school trad, he doesn't like doing much on the internet where it can be hacked into.

Then, there's the cabinets full of drugs. Weed— hash and green. More than a dozen varieties: Purple Kush, Silver Haze, Northern Lights, Blue Dream… Then, in baggies of various sizes, a veritable snowstorm of every white substance you can dream of — ketamine, amphetamine, cocaine, heroin. Stacks of ecstasy tablets. Valium and barbiturates. My brothers and I are only allowed to consume the weed, but we've tried the rest.

I present my winnings. Because of Carson, I've only just met my quota. "Three Motorolas, an iPad, a Samsung Galaxy, and the pin number for Stanley."

"Disappointing," Dad says.

"And a pen knife," I speak lamely and hand it over.

Dad's white eyebrows twitch, yet no hint of a smile crosses his dolorous square face, and his frosty blue eyes remain slush puppy cold. "You will not be getting that horse unless you buck your ideas up."

That hurts me worse than any penance or white-hilted knife.

Since I was old enough to say "horse," I have loved to watch them on the TV. Horse racing. Steeple chasing. The Silver Brumby, Spirit Riding Free, Sea Biscuit, and Black Beauty. I've

dreamt of their flowing manes and their tails like liquid gold and their promise of galloping free from Kingsfold's streets.

"Daddy, will you take me to see a horse? Will you take me horse riding?"

"There are no horses in Kingsfold," he told me, "all the riding schools are shut down. But if you are good, I will buy you a stable and a horse."

Dad has been promising to buy me a horse if I work hard since nursery. Thus, I started stealing cakes and jellies from other kids. Then, at primary school, I moved onto pencils, pencil cases, buttie boxes, and school books.

I didn't like it at first, being taught by my brothers how to twist arms, making them scream. I didn't like the blubbering, and I didn't like the snot. I didn't like their wounded looks, how they began to fear me, to flinch away.

But for a horse, I would do anything. Still, Dad hasn't bought me one. Mum hasn't bought me so much as a My Little Pony or a Fashion Star Filly.

It's Carson's fault. Since primary school, he's been foiling my plans.

"It was him again," I tell Dad, "killing his mum didn't work."

"But it has brought Stanley to heel," Dad says, "he told me if his son misbehaves again, he will be down on him like the wrecking ball they used to demolish Penwortham Mill in an avalanche of several tonnes of red brick."

The thought of Carson on the end of Stanley's big, oily fists satisfies me until I think of his ability to dodge and duck his way out of any tricky situation.

He'll be back at school soon and after revenge. Best get my knife sharpened. I go to my room. I've got a white fleecy throw over my bed, built-in wardrobes for all the clothes a winter girl could ever want—white and blue dresses, all Rule Britannia and Old Britain labels, piles of designer sneakers. A silver exercise ball in the corner for toning my hard, flat abs. A selection of classics on my shelf—Virgil's Aeneid, Dante's Inferno, Paradise

Lost. Like all New Catholics, I enjoy books about the torments of Hell.

In my cupboard, I've got my forbidden shrine. Undercover, like the Catholics during the Reformation, we are, with our hidden rites and priest holes. I open the door to my well-kept secret, Popish and venerable. A bronze statue of St Mary of the Rose with fresh red roses scattered all around her. A statue of Jesus on the cross in full decor with his crown of thorns and bloody nail wounds. Wooden icons of my favourite saints with their halos, their croziers, their red and weeping lances slaying wicked serpents.

I recall how, when I was at primary school, doing my good work for my family, there was one girl, Amelia Sullivan, with big blue eyes, who didn't blub. She said instead, "Girls like you make baby Jesus and Mother Mary cry."

It hurt me, that did, a good New Catholic, fond of Jesus and Our Blessed Mother. "Mum, Dad," I asked, "does hurting others upset Jesus and Mary?"

Mum laughed. "Of course not. After all the torments Jesus went through, he's hardly going to be bothered by a little bullying and arm-twisting."

"Look, for example," Dad said, "to King Arthur and the witches, giants, and dragons he slayed, and to the Crusaders and the infidels they slaughtered. Then, to the Spanish Inquisition and all the torturing they did."

Satisfied me, that. I'm a daughter of Arthur, a crusader, an inquisitor. We're doing this for the good of God, king, and country for when Winter rules.

I speak a prayer to Mother Mary and all my saints as I take my blue-grey whetstone to White Hilt, with her floral decorations, with her snowflakes. As I slide the stone along the blade, stroking, scraping, grinding, fashioning a razor's edge, I pray we will satiate our hunger for Robinson blood.

Chapter Three

Lorraine

It's a Saturday night. Plenty of options for the Winter Crew. We could stay on Kingsfold Park and hope the Summers come to fight with us, or we could go to Lostock Hall, to their park, round the back of the Tardy Gate shops. Or, together, united by hate, we could go into Preston and cause havoc, maybe bash in the heads of some immigrants or a Muslim or two.

However, Brady's made the call. Instead, we're going to the Green Viper. He's got a catch wrestling match with Sunbeam Summer. We rendezvous in our living room, Brady, Aidan, all the lads taking their turns on the bucket bong, pulling it up, hash burning fiercely, to fill the two-litre bottle with smoke, then pushing it down, breathing it all in, puffing it out. Dizzying, it is, a bucket bong. Not for me. I like to keep my head clear, I do. It probably isn't going to do Brady many favours before his match, but it's his call. Mel's going down on it too, just like she does on her prime catches.

She's coming with us to make a catch of Daniel Green. From Wigan, originally, he was a professional catch wrestler and fought at the Snake Pit. He set up the Green Viper in a vacant unit on the industrial estate on Factory Lane at the request of Mark, who thought teaching the sport would help us local youths to channel our anger and keep us off the streets. It's helped augment our arsenal with some proper nasty wrestling moves.

Mel's planning to seduce Daniel to replace Stanley as our middleman. She lured that oily interloper into his role and helps keep him tamed. Like a leech, she is, the way she gets her teeth into men, sucks them dry. Daniel would likely fight dirty if forced and could take over Stanley's dirty work.

We make our way through the estate, down Leyland Road and onto Factory Lane, leaving a trail of skanky weed smoke and its stink behind us. The sun's just setting and it's a blowy night with

the first leaves coming down from the trees. A flock of crows overhead. Late for them. A bad sign. Talks to them in Crow Wood, does Carson, the solitary raven too. Need to watch our backs tonight, we do, good job I sharpened my knife.

We turn left onto the industrial estate and find the building, little but an oversized tin can. Above the entrance is a sign reading 'The Green Viper' with a neon green plastic image of a snake refusing to be wrestled to the ground.

Inside, it's a grim and sticky place. Near the entrance are newspaper cut-outs and photographs charting the history of catch wrestling, also known as catch-as-catch-can. It started in the 1800s, in Wigan, as a pastime of working men. No set grip. No rules. Men, 'like wild beasts, maddened bulls', as a sporting digest records, writhing on the ground. The winner got a pint in the pub and the loser was thrown into the canal. It was popular with the miners who, after a shift, would come out and wrestle on the shale, exchanging bets, which were paid in either cash or beer.

There's pictures of Billy Riley, his famous gym in a shed in Wigan, which became the Snake Pit. It was named by the Japanese, who came over to learn our old Lancashire wrestling tradition and said, "Upon attempting to throw a Wigan wrestler he would land on his front and attack you like a snake." Then, there's Roy Wood and images of Daniel and his trophies.

Proper men, them, could have wrestled King Arthur, I bet. He was a wrestler in one of the old Welsh stories, where he wrestles and kills a black witch.

In the centre is the ring—a raised square platform with four steel posts topped by foam and a canvas floor. Three green ring ropes, tensioned by turnbuckles, are pulled tight between the posts. It is surrounded by plastic chairs. At the far end is a makeshift gym with barbells, dumbbells, and kettlebells.

Mark sits at a table at the front, signing everybody in. He's got short, mousey-brown hair and an unnaturally smooth visage, like a Ken doll. Formerly a working-class man from Kingsfold, he made it big as a flyweight catch wrestler, then used his money to

catch himself a rich wife from upper Penwortham and fix his mashed-up face with plastic surgery.

Afterwards, he moved into youth counselling and became a local councillor. He's a soft trad, Mark, in a brown suit and a neutral white tie. When the Labour Party and the Green Party combined to form Eco-Shift and the Conservative Party and Reform combined to form the Traditionalists, he won a lot of the old Labour supporters over to his cause.

"Ah, the Winter Crew, it's good to see you here, not causing trouble." He eyes us from behind black-rimmed glasses with eyes red from lack of sleep.

I sign my name and the rest of us sign in meekly as snowy white bear cubs.

He sniffs, but his nose does not move. "I hope that isn't weed."

"No, no," my brothers lie, "we don't smoke that shit."

"Pockets," says Mark.

They groan, turn them out, and get a lump of hash confiscated.

"You got that knife on you, Lorraine Winter?"

"No." I show my empty pocket. He doesn't check my sock.

As Mel signs in, she makes eyes at him and flashes her cleavage. "Want to search me? See what I'm keeping down my bra?"

Mark's plastic face fails to blush, sticking at fake tan.

We'll behave tonight because nobody wants to fall afoul of Daniel Green's mean catching hand, which my brothers have felt the grip of. He's standing by the ring, greeting the guests and riling up the wrestlers. He's a big man, over six foot, broad, well-muscled, with close-shaven hair black as the coal mines his ancestors worked in Astley Green. And the mess of his face. Catch wrestling is a cruel sport. Two cauliflower ears to put his mother's cabbage patch to shame and a nose broken so many times it looks like it's been trampled flat by the hooves of a hundred pit ponies. He's wearing a black T-shirt with the Green Viper logo and black trackie bottoms.

Mel's going over. Watch this, watch this, he can't take his eyes off her. Sad coal-black eyes. Rumour has it that he quit his professional catch wrestling career and came here because he lost his kill switch in the ring after a devastating defeat in the regional championships against Sunny Summer.

The concept of a kill switch is this - you go into the ring a nice person and for the length of the fight you become a killer, then you come out and you're a nice person again. Like a broken light switch, mine's on all the time.

No doubt Mel can turn Daniel's kill switch back on again, ignite his hatred for the Summers, and get him under Dad's cold thumb. Look at that, look at that, he's eying her. He can't take his eyes off her tits, almost on full display, hanging out of her little white dress, incongruent for a gym.

We take our seats just in time. Our enemies, the Summers, are coming in. Sunbeam Summer, the same age as Brady, as burly as him, red mullet. The sisters with long, red hair. Sasha, my age, tall and hard. Silence, the middle sister, in her wheelchair. Selina, the youngest, thin and fiery. They go to Lostock Hall High School. Unlike us, they keep their demonic natures concealed. Straight A students, they excel at sports - Sunbeam at rugby, Sasha at hockey, Silence at wheelchair racing, Selina at running. Our best looks of ice and their best looks of fire. What tension. This will be the first time Brady and Sunbeam have had more than a playground fight.

The lights dim. Daniel calls the first fighters up. Just young lads. Fourth years. In tight shorts known as spats and short-sleeved tops called rash guards. The less you wear and the tighter, the harder it is for your opponent to get a grip. Bare feet. No footwear allowed.

"Put your kill switches on," Daniel commands.

Both youths put on their killing faces.

"Ready… wrestle!"

Then they're at it, grasping, grabbing, they're going down. A near arm lock. The lad slips out of it, pulls his opponent's arm

into an arm triangle choke. “Aargh.” He taps out, shouting, slapping the mat - a submission.

Next up, a pair of fifth-year girls. Fierce, this one is.

“Penalty! No fish-hooking.”

You’re not allowed to hook your fingers up someone’s nose.

They’re at it again and one girl’s got the other in a wrist lock. She’s not giving in, she’s pulling out of it and has got the other girl in a head lock, nasty thing. She’s using a bulldog choke, squeezing her arms together, pressure on her throat. The other girl’s choking, finally banging out her submission.

Brady’s not taken a liking to the sight of that. A quick break. He shouldn’t be going out for another smoke, but there’s no stopping him. I go too, in case Carson’s skulking, to my dismay hear the croak of a raven overhead. I’ve got a bad feeling about this. The wind’s making a horrible wailing noise as it hits the corrugated steel building like a banshee’s warning. Hand on my knife, I’m looking about for my adversary in every shadow.

Back in, and Brady and Sunbeam get changed into blue and red all-in-one wrestling singlets and come out to wintry howls and summery cheers.

When Daniel sees Brady’s telltale red eyes, he frowns, but says nothing. I read his look. Let him learn his lesson, going stoned into a catch wrestling ring. It’s a disaster, highly embarrassing, from beginning to end. Brady barely getting or slipping from a grip. Sunbeam almost pinning both his shoulder-blades down on the mat, a pin, the moment they fall to the ground. Flipping over. Sunbeam’s got him in a knee lock. Then ‘pop’. Brady screams in agony like a baby in a cot. He’s bawling the damn place down. What a hell of an embarrassment, and the Summers laughing.

A glimpse of movement at the far end. Is that him, sitting in the shadows on a barbell? Carson, in his black hoodie, with his hand crooked on his chin? A blink of my eyes. He, or his apparition, is gone. I’m back to Brady’s cries.

Mark, a qualified First Aider, runs up. Daniel holds Brady down whilst Mark pops his knee back into his socket, and he

screams even louder. He whimpers, blubbers, as Mark and Daniel help him from the ring. Cheers for Sunbeam all around and the Summers have never looked sunnier.

Curses from us as Craggy and Colin help Brady limp out into the night. Bloody windy out here and the croaks of a flight of crows laughing. Damn Carson. It wouldn't surprise me to see him amongst them on black, ragged wings.

Knife in my hand. Wild night this. I've got a feeling there will be a bomb.

Chapter Four

Chesney

Last night, I did the deed. I dropped the bomb. This morning, I am sitting in the pews at church, listening to a reading from Genesis 1. “And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after its kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after its kind: and God saw that it was good.” This assures me I’ve done the right thing.

Reverend White is standing at the front, reading from the Bible on a wooden lectern. Behind him is the communion table with a red linen cloth, two lit candles, and the chalice and paten for holy communion. He’s a middle-aged man with dark hair and a receding hairline. When he reads God’s voice, I don’t think he sounds like God. His monotone does not change. It has neither the tone of a kindly father nor of thunder.

The pews are packed. As people lose faith in the government and the concept of having a government at all, more and more people are returning to religion. To the pastors and the priests to look after the flock. Not so much the Church of England, but the non-conformist churches like the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers. There’s been a rise in Popism—Roman Catholic and an ugly New Catholicism. The Muslims never stopped following Allah, the Jews Jahweh, the Hindus their gods. Then, there are the Pagans who worship the old gods. Standing and dancing around the stone circle up at Brockholes and making offerings to Belisama, ‘Most Shining One’, the goddess of the river Ribble. I like the idea we have a river goddess. Sometimes, if the light is shining right on the water and I squint my eyes, I think I catch a glimpse of her, unlike God.

I do my best to sing the hymns, to praise the Lord with love, faith, and intent. I do not get up for Holy Communion as I haven't been confirmed yet. Dad isn't truly a Christian, but he did it for love of my mum, to marry her, the same way he wears the Sunday sweater she knitted him to church.

"I worship only the wind and the rain," he once told me, "things you can see."

The drinks stations on his marathons are his stations of the cross, the last miles his crucifixion, before he passes the finish line, into the arms of the sky. After he's run an ultra, he always looks as if he's been crucified. Wrapped up in a cocoon or a tomb of silver foil, all ruddy, all sweaty, half-dead. Afterwards, when he gets home, I take from the freezer two bags of garden peas and wrap them in tea towels so he can ice his knees.

"Poor knees," he looks at them, puffy and swollen, "got to take care of them. I pray that they will last as long as me, that I never have to stop running."

It's possible, now, his knees might outlast him. As the service ends, I hear them creak as he gets up from the pew and we leave the church. My mum helps my grandma (on her side) to the doors. She is a squat little lady with white curls, wearing a cardigan, shawl, and long formal skirt. She gets onto her mobility scooter. Grandad can walk with his stick. He is completely bald and is wearing a V-neck jumper knitted by Mum.

Just outside the entrance, Mark stops to check how we're doing. "Just wondering if there's anything you need, considering…" he trails off.

Mum has known Mark from the Methodist Church since he got together with his wife, Barbara, an hourglass-shaped woman with golden hair. There's something strange and plasticky about them, how the concern in their voices does not translate to their eyes nor to their smooth faces.

"We're doing fine, but we always appreciate prayers," Mum says.

"We will keep you on our prayer list," Mark promises.

As he and Barbara do their rounds, I gather their list is very long.

We set off down Leyland Road to Grandma and Grandad's house. I look back at Penwortham Methodist Church, with its triangular roof and near-gothic spire. On the left-hand side of the display board, big black capital letters on neon yellow state: 'Only Jesus can save us'. On the right-hand side, a list of community events: 'Sew and Share, Messy Church, God Talk'.

The houses on Leyland Road are mainly terraces built to house the cotton workers who worked in Penwortham Mill, which stood on Factory Lane. Then, there's the Royal British Legion pub, further down, the Kowloon Chinese Takeaway, the Barrel Alehouse, and the convenience store. The mobility shop was handy when Grandma needed to get her scooter.

Grandma and Grandad live on Buller Avenue in the terrace house they inherited from their parents, who, like them, worked in the mill. My great-grandparents worked the cotton looms, and my grandparents made surgical lint when the factory was run by Vernon Carus until 2006. It's is made of red brick, and the front door stands firm and upright, side by side, like soldiers, with the door of the house next door, which belongs to Amina's family. The Iqbals moved here during the 1970s from Bangladesh to fill the labour shortage and worked alongside my grandparents making lint.

Dad unlocks the door, and Mum helps Grandma off her scooter and in. I help Dad, who is weaker than usual, to wrestle her vehicle into the hallway. Mum commandeers the kitchen to cook a Sunday roast, and the rest of us sit down in the living room, on the green-blue sofa and matching chairs. There is a long wooden table in the centre, and no television. "God made us from clay, as flesh and blood people, to talk to each other," Grandad has always been adamant, "not to watch simulacra on a screen. If that was the case, he would have conjured Adam from a microchip."

So, we talk a while, Dad doing his best to stay cheerful, taking out a local map and quizzing Grandad about what Penwortham

Mill was like before it was demolished, making illegible notes on his notepad with a scratchy pencil.

Knock, knock, knock. “There goes the door,” says Grandma.

I get up to answer it. To my delight, it is Amina with her grandmother, Safir. Both are wearing black hijabs and abayas. Amina is of medium build and has a brown, heart-shaped face and soft, dark eyes, and her grandmother is of similar apparel. Once taller, she is now shorter, due to her stoop.

Safir goes to sit beside Grandma, and they begin to reminisce about growing up on the street and their days in the mill. I invite Amina to sit in an armchair and get myself a wooden chair from the kitchen.

“How’s your grandmother doing?” I ask as I sit down opposite her.

“Alright,” she says, “although her memory is getting worse.”

“She seems to be able to remember everything from her childhood and more.” I note the animated conversation taking place between our grandmothers.

“Her long-term memory’s okay; it’s her short-term memory that’s going. She keeps forgetting what’s happened on the news, thinks Eco-Shift are still in. Then, she misplaces her keys. She somehow left them in the toilet yesterday.”

“That’s not good news.”

We look at each other, know there’s a word for this, but don’t say it. Saying “dementia” seems worse, somehow, than naming “leukaemia” or “cancer”.

“How’s school been?” I change the subject.

“Alright,” she says.

I know Amina’s alright doesn’t mean alright but know better than to press her. “How are your older sisters?”

“Alright.” She pauses, then, “but,” seems about to speak, doesn’t.

“Don’t say one of them has been assaulted again as a result of the bombings.”

“No, no, not that.” She shakes her head.

"What?"

"In order to defend themselves…"

"What are they doing?" I imagine them with knives, guns, or bombs.

Amina looks around, hushes her voice, "Self-defence."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Is that all?"

"My parents would not approve." She turns her eyes to the heavens, "Allah…"

"Would likely want your sisters to be able to defend themselves."

"They're going to the Green Viper," Amina leans forward, concernedly, "training with a big guy there, Daniel Green, an ex-catch wrestler."

"What's catch wrestling?" I ask, confused, never having heard of the sport.

"Catch-as-catch-can," says Amina, "it's an old Lancashire style of wrestling. It originates from Wigan. It's one of the most brutal in the world. It's called that because there are no rules but a few unwritten ones, such as no hair pulling, spitting, or eye gouging. Arm locks that pop your elbows from the socket, neck cranks that strangle, takedowns, submission techniques."

I picture her sisters with the Winter brothers in wrestling locks and wince.

Lorraine

The Roman Catholics are on the hunt for us New Catholics. They don't like what we do—using the word of God to promote bullying, murder, and torture, even though they have been doing it for hundreds of years.

Thus, we Winters hold our Sunday Mass in our broom cupboard. We had to clear out all the brooms, mops, vacuum cleaners, and their multiple nozzles and heads, and the carpet washers and steam cleaners. Such equipment is essential in a

house where parties inevitably lead to vomit and bloodshed. It is stored in the cloakroom, and our coats go on a coat stand.

Still, it is very crowded. The only decoration is a very bloody Jesus on his cross. Father Whittingham stands beneath him. He has grey hair and a grey beard with guard hair in it that make him look like an old grey wolf. He holds a Bible. Beside him is a silver chalice filled with red wine and a silver platter with thin wafers of bread on it for communion. Father Whittingham does the rounds of all the New Catholic houses on a Sunday.

Our appointment is 10 a.m. and Dad always struggles to drag Mum out of bed, and I have to pull my brothers out of the stink of their hash-ridden room. We're so close I can smell the alcohol on Mum's breath and the weed on my brothers. Not that Father Whittingham is bothered. He always takes a good sip from the red wine as we pass the communion cup. Hammered, he'll be, by 3 p.m., once he's finished his rounds, staggering home.

Our service is quick and simple for a Catholic rite due to the time restraints. We greet Father Whittingham, cross ourselves, acknowledge our sins and ask for mercy, and the Father leads a prayer in which we respond, "Amen." This is followed by a reading from the Old Testament in which God smites His enemies with plague or fever or causes an earthquake. I always enjoy singing the Psalm by which we call upon God to stand with us against the wicked and bring curses to our enemies—the Summers.

It's then communion. "The body of Christ." "The blood of Christ." Yes, we do believe we are eating His body, drinking His blood. A blood-thirsty lot, we are. Mum drinks a full cup, Christ's blood around her lips like a vampire. Dad apologises and slips the Father an extra fiver. My brothers don't like red wine. They cough and splutter. I sip decorously with reverence for our saviour and wait for the thin sliver of wafer to dissolve on my tongue. I've got respect for Him who suffered for our sins, I have, not like my brothers, whose grubby hands the Father slaps away from stealing more bread.

We then have confession and receive our penances. I've been a good girl this week. I've met my quotas and got more of Carson's dark deeds to report. I'm disappointed I don't get any Hail Marys as I like saying them. Because Aidan hasn't got enough pickings or twisted enough arms, he gets 50 Hail Marys and has to take a cold shower. Brady has not only lost his catch wrestling match to Sunbeam Summer but failed to steal a delivery of laptops, so he gets 100 Hail Marys and has to wear a hair shirt. Mum lost all the money she had stuffed down her bra at the lap dancing club and has to abstain from alcohol for the rest of the week, which will be a killer. Dad has not got any penances this week as he succeeded in killing Winona Robinson and has managed to bring Stanley Robinson to heel, but I doubt it will last long. The next time Stanley double-crosses us, he'll have to pray the rosary and beat himself with a cattail whip of knotted cords made from woven cotton string. Our penances might seem harsh, but over the Ribble in Preston, Priest Town, Father Fazackerly has his penitents wearing shirts of barbed wire and flagellating with leather scourges with seven cords.

We finish with readings from the Book of Revelation about the casting from Heaven of Satan into a lake of fire and brimstone, where he will be tormented, night and day, forever and ever; the Second Coming and the establishment of the Kingdom of God and a new Heaven and Earth.

"Go forth with violence and strength," says Father Whittingham.

"Thanks be to God," we echo.

Chapter Five

Chesney

I'm drawn to her the first time I see her, and I don't know why. She's got dull, dark brown hair, cut short, with a long, floppy fringe with a twist at the end. A moment of watching her shows why. She's twisting it around her fingers, which are stumpy, with nails bitten to the quick. She's plump. Her face is pasty. Yet, there's something about her large, dark, frightened eyes.

She's seated on the front row in the science lab, and I'm one chair to the left, behind. She's on her own. I'm on my own. There are spare seats next to us. It's a roomy building with big windows looking out onto the playing fields. Today, it's chemistry. Mr Monkhouse, an older man with a near-white beard, wearing a white lab coat, is showing us, on a digital projector, the names of the equipment we will be using for future experiments.

She's mouthing the words as though she's never said them before. "Burette." "Burette stand." "Bunsen burner." "Beaker." I like the way she says "b". She makes the letter sound new and exciting, like freshly baked bread. I wonder why I haven't seen her in any other classes. She must be a later starter.

We go to collect our equipment. She picks up her Bunsen burner and a rubber tube, then attempts to attach the tube to the chimney instead of the gas pipe.

"Hey," I say, demonstrating with mine, "it's meant to go here and not there."

She flinches, looks at me suspiciously, wary-eyed.

"Honestly, I'm trying to help. See how it fits?"

She stares as if helping and kindness are not in her vocabulary.

"Which primary school did you go to?" I try to make small talk.

"Kingsfold." She turns down her gaze.

Oh. A bad feeling in my stomach. She's from that rough estate in Lower Penwortham, where the Winter House is, where the bad kids hang out.

"Where'd you go?" stumblingly and joltingly, she asks me.

"Middleforth."

"We'll not be in the same set when they sort us out."

"We could be," I pick up two pairs of forceps, "if I help you."

"Why would you want to do that?" I've never seen anyone look so surprised, except in cartoons when the eyes of the characters pop out of their heads.

"I could do with a friend," I admit, showing my vulnerability.

Her lip quavers. "I had a friend once, but…" she trails off.

"What happened?"

She shakes her head.

I think of what happened between me and Lisa. "Some friendships don't last. Come and sit with me. The gas taps have two ends, and we can share."

We set up our equipment. "I'm Chesney Liddell. What's your name?"

"Val."

"And what's your surname?"

She looks away.

It isn't hard to tell. We're into the second week of school, but we've still got to wear white stickers with our names on them in capital letters on our chests.

"Val Robinson," I read.

She winces.

Robinson. The name rings a bell. I recall a few weeks back reading a news article about how a man named Stanley Robinson had been arrested on suspicion of trafficking a delivery of laptops meant for kids at our school. A mean-looking man with close-cropped dark hair and threatening dark eyes. He'd been accused of aiming to sell them on to the Summers, then acquitted. Yes, I have a sinking feeling; there is certainly a family resemblance.

"Why have you only just started school?" I ask her.

She looks downtrodden. “Family problems.”

Poor girl. Perhaps I can save her. Perhaps I can help.

“This one, burning red, is lithium,” I demonstrate, holding the metal ion, with my forceps, into the flame. “This one, burning blue-green, is copper.”

“Let me guess,” she tries it herself, “this orange-red one is calcium.”

I’m delighted to see a smile on her face and some colour in her pale cheeks.

It takes my mind off Dad. His bone marrow biopsy came back positive. We’re discussing treatment options, with the first one being chemotherapy. I’m trying to learn about other chemicals such as cyclophosphamide and daunorubicin.

Lorraine

I’m in maths. I’m sitting at the back with Alice Turner beside me. Alice has long, auburn hair and has found the perfect shade of foundation for her skin, Caramel Romance. Mine’s Ivory. Her Mum owns the beautician at Kingsfold Shops. We both get our eyelashes done there at the weekend. Alice helped me to find my frosty-blue eyeshadow—a bonus of our friendship.

I am half-heartedly filling in the answers to the sums as I watch for when my classmates sneak their phones out of their bags under their desks to use their calculators, so I know which pocket they keep them in.

“Watch,” I nudge Alice, getting her trained up, “Wendy Dalton.”

Wendy, one eye on our teacher, who has one eye on us and one on his marking, is writing with her right hand whilst sneaking her left one to her bag.

“Wendy…” Mr Hindley catches her.

Damn it. He’s on form today. I’m not going to be able to target anybody. Frustratedly, I shift my gaze to Carson, who is also on a back seat, in the corner, in the shadows. Barely visible, it’s as if

he carries the darkness about with him, obfuscating fogs and mist, so he cannot be seen.

I know he's there. He's the only boy in the school who gets away with having rips in his school pants and his tie unpicked and half undone.

He has a fringe like the forelock of a black Fell pony overhanging dark eyes still puddly with grief due to the loss of his mother and swimming with vengeance like the pools that dobbies spring sharp-toothed from.

I know he did for my brother, poor Brady, with his fat knee and limp. Damn him, playing innocent, as he always does, ignoring my hateful stares.

Carson was the only one, at primary school, who managed to evade my torturous claws, slipping from my grip, slick as an otter, quick as water.

"You watch that boy," Dad told me, "he'll be worse than his father. Watch him with the eyes in the front and back of your head and all around."

But Carson was difficult to watch, near invisible, evasive as fog and rain. The one day I caught him, got his hand, he opened it and in it was one of those giant house spiders with a dark, hairy body and long, crooked legs. Those ones my brothers stamped into a sticky, gory mess of splattered body and curled-up legs or we'd call Cavall to hunt down and gobble up for us.

"You wouldn't hurt a spider, would you, Lorraine?" he asked.

And I hated him, because he was quiet and unafraid of me, of spiders. Because I couldn't squash it, or think of a retort, or lash out at him. He made me look stupid, he did, him with his soft, dark fringe and curious eyes.

"Don't let him lure you away, Lorraine, he will try to," Dad warned.

And I did not go with him from the playground when he said, "Come see the hedgehog rolled up tightly in a ball with all his spines around him," "the robin with a broken leg," "the snail who's left a long path of silver."

Yet, I did go with him, when he said, “Come with me to see the horses.”

How I longed to see those mythic, magical beings with fairytale feet in dancing, silver horseshoes who only existed on TV and not in Kingsfold. I didn’t believe Carson until he led me from the playground down Bee Lane to Lord’s Lane and there, in the fields, ponies. Piebalds, skewbalds and a beautiful near-white Welsh mountain pony with a dished face and pert ears.

We stood at the gate and he whistled and she came. From his back pocket, he took a solitary Polo mint, covered in pocket fluff, put it on his hand. She whiffled it up like a happy vacuum cleaner and pored for more.

But she would not let me stroke her. She shied away from my cruel hands.

She would not let me touch her frizzy, white forelock nor her soft, grey muzzle.

Afterwards, I went there often, watched from a distance the girls in beige jodhpurs and clicky black jodhpur boots wheeling wheelbarrows to the stables, filling them with soiled straw and droppings, emptying them at the midden. Bringing the ponies in from the fields, brushing the mud off with hard-bristled dandy brushes, grooming them sleek with body brushes, bending down to pick their feet out, one by one, with glinty hoof-picks. Oiling hooves. Tacking up. Then riding. Round and round the paddock in circles and figures of eight and jumping coloured cross-poles and straight bars.

Oh, how I longed for a horse. If I’d had a horse, my hands might be kind, not cruel, running down legs, feeling for cuts and bumps, gently squeezing above the fetlock joint for a hoof, picking carefully around the sensitive frog.

Oh, how I longed for a horse. A way of riding away from Kingsfold. No longer being the most feared and hated girl, but somebody who could sit tall and straight and proud on a pony in perfect partnership without coercion.

It took a while, many stolen carrots, stolen horse treats, but at last the Welsh mountain pony came to me, snuffled them up, let me touch her muzzle.

Then, the next time I visited, she, the other ponies, the stables were gone. The land was empty and signs were up for the building of a new estate. When I asked Dad about it, he told me that the Summers are horse thieves and that Carson colluded with them to steal the horses.

I've hated him ever since with a vengeance that could tear the North Wind from his desolate high towers in the North Pole and bring him singing forth to Lancashire - a northern beast bringing his worst Arctic blasts.

How I hate the way that Carson gets away with his crimes unnoticed. How the other pupils, even the teachers, don't even seem to realise he is there.

Mr Hindley has not picked up that, as usual, Carson has already finished all his sums. Not only calculating the correct answers, but adjusting them, so he gets just the right amount wrong so he can stay in the third set. He tries not to look clever so the teachers and the police don't catch on that he's involved in his Dad's fixing and trafficking business; that, in the back of his maths book, he's adding and subtracting other figures. Plotting distances, routes, timings, rubbing them out quickly with his eraser.

Yes, good at erasing things he is, but I'm recording everything. On my phone, getting bigger, I've got a list of his sins and the penance he will pay.

*

The bell goes and I'm priming Alice for picking on a new victim. I've been trying to get to Val Robinson for a while, to get to Carson, but somehow, when I try to approach her, he appears, in the background, like a ghost. So I've been getting rid of her friends one by one. The last one was bad.

“Do you never feel guilty?” Alice asked me when she first started out.

“No,” I replied. Winters don’t feel any emotion. I’m like my knife, a tool that’s good for its job, goes in and out without reprieve.

“Did you never feel bad about Amelia Sullivan?”

“No.” That feeble, blonde doll girl, more Cindy than Barbie, none of Barbie’s sass, had lied to me, saying that hurting people made Jesus and Mary cry. Some say we went too far, pushing her over the edge. She was found hanging in Penwortham Woods on a tree down the bottom. Not far from Hangman’s Bank, where, once upon a time, many skeletons hung.

We were questioned about our bullying, but it turned out her mother had bipolar, and it was suspected she had it too, but was too young to be diagnosed. Like us all, she had problems at home. We just tipped her over.

“Val’s got a new friend,” I say to Alice, “Chesney Liddell.”

After the class has ended, I take out my phone, open the school timetable. Dad’s taught me a way to hack into the system so I can see not only my class times but those of the other pupils too. I find Val and Chesney’s. “Quickly, Val and Chesney are coming out of science now.”

We catch the end of their line filing out. That’s interesting. They’re not going to one of the usual seating areas and they’re arguing on the way.

“Alone together,” I catch from Chesney.

“Round the back of the lab,” from Val.

“Brady Winter.”

“Safe today… Wigan.”

A flash of fury as Carson must know where Brady is and have told his sister. We follow them to where they sit down on their bags, backs against the wall.

“If we go into the lab, we’ll be able to listen,” I say to Alice.

When we get in, I look down and see, to my interest, that Chesney is showing Val a packet of pills. As well as electricals,

my parents encourage me to steal medications, particularly those that are only available on prescription and to watch out for sleeping tablets and strong pain killers.

"This is cyclophosphamide," Chesney says to Val, "it works by damaging the DNA of the blast cells and suppressing the immune system."

"Don't say she's got leukaemia, poor thing," says Alice.

"These are Dad's anti-nausea tablets," she takes out a packet of Odansetron. "And these ones are for the pain." Disappointingly, just codeine.

"No, just her Dad," I reply.

"Still." Alice looks reluctant and turns away.

"Alice," I speak in a low voice, "we've all got something going on."

"Do you want to try my vape?" Val gets out a pink vapouriser with a silver mouthpiece.

My brothers went through a phase of nicking vapes, but they sold for so little it wasn't worth their effort. That one's cheap, I judge, barely worth a fiver.

"No," says Chesney disapprovingly, "you shouldn't be vaping."

"I've got a nice vape juice—strawberry and mango."

"Ok, go on."

Val takes a suck on her vape and blows out a cloud of scented smoke.

As Chesney watches, I note, in her eyes, something more than concern and disapproval. Could this be, I recognise the look, love?

"Do you see it?" I ask Alice.

"Yes." She might not be much good at spotting goods to steal, but she's got an eye for romance. "Don't say you're going to force the poor lovebirds apart?"

"I'll wait until their relationship blossoms, then truly break their hearts."

As I speak, I see a flash in the woods revealing Carson's silhouette as he lights a roll-up with a silver Zippo lighter, like one of his 20th-century rock icons.

Chapter Six

Chesney

"This is Val," I introduce her to Mum.

Val is staring around as if she's never been in a house before. When we got through the door, she wriggled her toes in glee as they sunk into our plush carpet and said she would like to get a vape juice like our air freshener.

"What's your surname?" Mum asks her.

Val stares down at her socks, grey, with a hole exposing her big toe.

"It's Robinson," I tell Mum.

As she tightens in disapproval, I go over, whisper in her ear, "I'm going to save her."

At first, she looks at me as though I'm insane, then a warmth comes into her eyes. "Would you like some cake?" she asks Val.

"Cake?" Val's face lights up. "Yes, please!"

"I've got spiced fig rolls, pumpkin slices, and blackberry and apple cake."

Greatly daring, Val asks, "May I have a little piece of each?"

The delight on her face as she samples each piece is worth the risk of bringing her home. I'm relieved Mum has accepted her. I'd guessed she would, knowing she is kind and caring to those who come to the food bank.

After she's eaten, we go up to my room. "We have to be quiet as Dad's in bed."

"Can I meet him?"

"No, he's to have as few visitors as possible during this critical stage when his immune system is suppressed to avoid infection." I always change my clothes and wash my hands before I go in and wear a mask.

"You don't have any posters," she says, disappointed. "What kind of music do you like, anyway? I've never heard you talk about your favourite bands."

“I don’t listen to music,” I admit, “but I do know lots of birdsongs.”

I take out my phone and play the song of the song thrush, the alarm call of the blackbird, the ‘teacher teacher’ of the great tit, the ‘tsee tsee tsee chu chu’ of the blue tit and the ‘zee chay zee chay zee chay’ of the willow tit.

“It’s hard to tell them apart,” she says as I show her photos of the different tits.

“Willow tits are on the red list, but there are still a few around in Lancashire because we have areas of damp willow scrub where they nest.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“Not yet, but Olivia said they once nested on the island in the mill pond where Penwortham Mill stood, but haven’t been heard for a while.”

Next, I open my bee app. “It’s also really important we save the bees.” I show her the pictures and read the Latin names. “*Bombus terrestris, Bombus lucorum, Bombus pratorum*. You can see those in the garden. This is *Andrena cinerara*, the ashy mining bee. I was disappointed when I found out that *Andrena ishii Ribble* was named after J. Ribble, not the river Ribble, and can’t be found burrowing into the sandy banks.”

“Do you never watch TV?” She looks around my room for a screen and spots my laptop. “Netflix? Wednesday or Sandman?”

“No.” I shake my head. “We can watch David Attenborough though.”

After we’ve watched two episodes, she begins to get restless and fidgety. Hopefully, “Do you want to listen to some bands I like?”

“What kind of music are you into?”

“Rock, metal, goth - Sleep Token, Ghost, Liminal.”

I gape in horror. “Doomster bands!” I exclaim. Glancing at her black hooded jacket, I only just notice the Paradigm Shift icon, subtle, in grey.

“I don’t like the heavy stuff, like Godsmack, but my brother does.”

“You have a brother?” I’m astounded. “I’ve known you for weeks and you haven’t mentioned him.” I’ve always wanted a brother. “Is he older or younger?”

“Carson’s in the fourth year.”

So, he goes to our school. Surely I’d have spotted him if he looks like Val.

“He’s invisible,” Val says, “nobody notices him, not even the teachers. His work barely ever gets marked, and they shut him out of the showers after cross-country running because he’s always in last and isn’t on the register.”

I’m doubly jealous. Not only a brother but an invisible brother. “I want to meet him. Tell me where and when.”

*

“4 p.m., after school,” says Val the next day, “on Kingsfold Park.”

My throat tightens. I’ve never been, but Kingsfold Park’s got a terrible reputation. Not only do the Winter Crew hang out there, but it’s the place where the doomsters and the trads gather in gangs and fight.

“The Winters won’t touch us when Carson’s about,” she reassures me.

Still, I’m incredibly nervous as I stay on the bus with Val, past Hill Road South, right onto Pope Lane, then past Puccini’s, Bargain Booze, and the wasteland where the Shampan once stood. Left onto Kingsfold Drive.

I’m relieved to see the Winter Crew get off and head towards Legoland. We go past the council houses and disembark at Kingsfold Community Centre.

It’s a grey November day. Still and unseasonably warm. There are still leaves on the trees across the road and stray plants flowering on the bank. As we pass the community centre, I’m

perturbed by the 24-hour CCTV cameras. “Where’s the notice board?” I wonder what activities are on.

“There isn’t one,” Val says, “it keeps getting stolen or burnt.”

On the park, the volunteer community support officers are cleaning graffiti off the playground—two slides, one with a tunnel, one without. They’re hanging up swings on the frames from where I guess they’ve been stolen, putting new seats on the roundabout, repairing the broken seesaw.

“It gets trashed every night,” Val sadly shakes her head, “still, Mark Denver is optimistic he will see the day that we care for our local park.”

I look around and see children taking it in turns to go down the slides, in ones, in pairs, a bus of four holding tight. A pair are arguing over the spring riders—who will ride the black horse and who gets the mangy brown bull. Their mums stand nearby, two with prams, vaping as they chat.

At our end, the doomsters. A tall guy in a long, black coat wearing a black crown. Two girls in black hoodies, one with pink hair, one with green hair. A menacing woman with a punk hairstyle that looks like a shredding wheel. A silver-headed boy, who I recognise from the fourth year, with his face whited and black stripes painted above and below his eyes.

“Hi Johnny,” Val waves.

At the other end, a group of trads in white tracksuits with blue or white stripes on their sleeves are standing around a phone and jeering at the screen. “Fucking immigrants.” “Get them out of that hotel.” “Smash their heads in.”

There’s no one like Val about. I scan the hedgerows. I look in the trees.

Val gets a text. Opens it. “The new Sleep Token album,” she gasps, “a gift from…”

“Me.”

I jump in surprise as much as she does as I see the dark-haired lad behind her, his hands on her shoulders, with slim fingers and black-painted nails. He’s got the same large, dark puddles of eyes.

He's dressed in a baggy black hoodie and ripped black jeans, and neither disguise the fact that he is ridiculously skinny. He smells of tobacco smoke. He is a doomster. I quail.

"So you're Chesney," he eyes me curiously, "Val's told me all about you."

"Val only told me about you yesterday and she said you're invisible."

"That's right," Carson nods sombrely, "for the most part, I don't exist."

"A shame," I say, "I imagine a few doom girls would have a crush on you."

"Not a chance." He raises his ring finger, a black ring on it, showing he is asexual.

He looks from me to Val and back again as if trying to assess something. Then, "Val told me you're into nature and caring for the environment. I can show you where the pink-footed geese and whooper swans visit the Ribble in winter and the sparrowhawks nest in Greencroft Valley in spring."

*

"Carson says it's ok for you to come to our house," says Val.

This is a surprise after nearly two months. "Has something changed?"

I'm in the doldrums. Dad's chemo has not worked. He's now trying radiotherapy. Throughout, he has continued running, although it puts him to bed.

"Not really." Val refuses to explain the shift in circumstances further.

This time, we stay on the bus, nearly empty, to the end of Kingsfold Drive, where it turns left onto Studholme Crescent, and get off at Moss Acre Road.

"This one's ours," Val gestures.

Val's house is in the middle of a row. On the drive is a blue Ford Escort, with the bonnet propped open, in a state of disrepair.

There is a car frame with only three wheels on the garden lawn. The hedge is overgrown.

I notice paint peeling from the door as Val unlocks it with a squeak, a slightly musty smell in the hallway and a threadbare carpet, although it isn't unclean. She guides me through to the kitchen, where there are not one but three toasters on the old-fashioned work surfaces, a couple of air fryers, a coffee machine and a collection of kettles in a variety of sizes, shapes and colours.

Carson is in the corner, on his phone, observing the movements of a red dot on a map. "Dad's in Leyland," he swipes the screen shut, "we've got some time."

"Have you managed to put a tracker on his phone?" Val asks.

"Maybe," Carson speaks noncommittally.

"If he finds out, he will be even more angry than ever," Val looks concerned.

"A calculated risk." Carson feigns nonchalance, but his hand, on his phone, trembles.

"Where's your mum?" I ask, looking around, "what does she do?"

"She used to work at Priory Park Care Home," says Val.

"And now?"

Val exchanges mournful looks with Carson.

"She's dead," Carson speaks softly, "she died in a car accident."

"Just before school began," Val speaks sorrowfully, "that's why I started late."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I feel a flood of empathy for them. No wonder they're so downtrodden and sad. Val picks at the torn skin around her fingernails, and Carson tugs awkwardly at a stringy bit hanging from a tear in his jeans.

"And what does your dad do?" I change the subject.

"He was a mechanic," Val says, "he still fixes cars, but now it's mainly electricals."

“Occasionally,” Carson speaks bitterly, “for the most part I do the fixing.” His gaze sweeps over the objects on the kitchen surfaces with resentment.

“I clean,” Val looks grumpy, then, more cheerfully, “but sometimes he lets me paint.”

When she speaks of painting, I see car spray colours in her eyes—metallic silvers and golds, pearlescent blues and mauves, solid greens and reds.

“Sometimes,” Val adds dolorously, “Dad breaks things just so Carson has to fix them, and he makes a mess just so I have to clean up and repaint.”

Carson frowns at her, and she winces, realising she’s said too much.

As I look around, I notice there is a pall in the room, not one of uncleanliness, as I can see that Val has made an effort to keep everything clean, but an oppressive atmosphere. Somehow, I know, by a hidden sense within, that bad things have happened in this house, to Val and to Carson. My eyes are drawn to a hole in the wall. “Whatever happened there?”

“That’s from when Carson got lucky,” Val says, “managed to dodge a punch.”

Carson glares at her. “Are you going to make your friend a brew?”

“If you’ve managed to get one of those kettles working.”

“They’re all working,” Carson speaks offended, “take your pick.”

Val chooses a tall, red kettle with a silver spout, switches it on, opens a cupboard, takes out two mugs and a packet of Morrisons Savers tea bags. “Milk and sugar?” She heads to the fridge, takes the milk out, sniffs. “Ugh,” she pours it down the sink, “we’ll have to drink it black.”

“Just one sugar,” I say.

She takes out a bowl of white sugar, puts one spoon into mine and two into hers, pours the boiling water into our cups, waits for it to brew.

“Are you not having one?” I ask Carson.

“Carson doesn’t drink anything but water and Russian Standard Vodka,” says Val. “And he doesn’t eat enough either,” she speaks accusingly. “After I complained about having to eat his leftovers, he started vanishing them.”

Carson’s really glaring at her now, with lowered brows, dark, hurt eyes.

“What’s in for tea?” she presses him.

“Fish fingers and chips,” says Carson, “or we could have noodles.”

“The last time we had fish fingers, he only ate one fish finger,” says Val, “didn’t think I wouldn’t notice that he’d vanished the rest, then fed them to the cat.”

“Cat?” I ask.

As if on cue, “Waargh!” a scrawny tortoiseshell moggie sidles in and leaps up onto the work surface. Carson strokes her back and she arches it. “Waargh! Waargh!”

“She was hungry,” Carson says, “and I wasn’t.”

“Cat hair!” Val shrieks, appalled. “Get her off the top!”

Carson opens an unlabelled tin of cat food with a grindy old tin opener. One that you actually have to turn. With your hands. Unlike our electric one.

“Down you come, Court.” He sweeps her off the surface and places her by the bowl, forks in the cat food, squishes it until it looks vaguely edible.

“We named her after Courtney Love,” Val explains, “out of Hole.”

“Tsss.” Court hisses at the cat food and sidles back out of the kitchen.

“See why I gave her my fish fingers?” Carson points to her disapproving tail.

“What have we got time to do before Dad gets back?” Val asks.

“Before we do anything else, I’ve got something to show you,” says Carson.

As he leads us upstairs, I notice that the carpet at the back, on every other step, has been scraped off by someone who walks oddly with their right heel.

'Do Not Enter', says the poster on Carson's door, 'Hazardous Waste.'

As he opens it, I see why. The left side of his room is taken up with an industrial shelving unit with a stack of mobile phones on it, laptops, a computer, a wide-screen TV, then there are consoles and other gadgets on the floor. On the right side, a bed, with black covers with skulls on them. On his bed are three mobile phones in pieces—cases, processors, circuit boards, batteries. On his bedside table is a stack of papers with scribbled words and beside it what I guess is a bottle of vodka with the label in Russian. The smell of tobacco, from the ash tray on the floor, permeates all.

"I don't just fix things for Dad. I've got my own fixing business."

"I don't think Chesney's going to be interested in your gadgets," sighs Val.

"But you'll both be interested in this." Carson takes a screwdriver, to our shock and surprise, begins to take up the floorboards.

As he works, I look around at the gloomy posters of bands on his wall. Sleep Token, Ghost, Turnstile, I recognise. A black poster with cold white mountains: 'Joy Division - Unknown Pleasures'. Nine Inch Nails.

"Carson doesn't want to be a fixer all his life," says Val, "he wants to be a rockstar, but Dad won't have it, he's adamant he's got to bring money in."

As she speaks, Carson pulls from beneath his floorboards a guitar. An electric guitar. I know nothing about guitars, but somehow I recognise it is a good one from its figure-hugging shape and the way it gleams.

Carson plugs it into an amp, picks up a sheet, "Do you want to hear a song?"

We both nod enthusiastically. Somewhat clumsily, Carson strums the strings, gets into a rhythm, surprises me with a deep voice that does not sound like it belongs to him, nor the lyrics, coming from an older, deeper place.

Beyond the shores
there's a place of song,
there's a place where you and I belong,
somewhere beyond silence, somewhere beyond death
where dwell the miscreant ghosts and the vanished.
There's a place that music comes from.
And somewhere, beyond sound,
there's a lost shrine with red-eared hounds
who offer to comfort us and lick our wounds.

Val, her brows knit and gaze critical, is unimpressed. Glancing at the sheets of lyrics and the near-empty bottle, "You've been drinking too much vodka."

"No, I haven't," Carson speaks defensively, "I've had that bottle for weeks." He looks at me, explains, "Fixing and songwriting may look different, but in reality, the processes are the same— trying to get the parts or the words to fit perfectly. Sometimes you figure it out. Sometimes it's trial and error. Sometimes you suddenly see. When all else fails, there's vodka."

"Your phone," says Val to Carson as it beeps.

Carson opens it on the red dot on the map. "Dad's on his way back."

"Shit," says Val, "I've not cleaned the bathroom." To me, "You'd best leave."

Chapter Seven

Chesney

Every time I run with my dad, I fear it might be his last. Five months have passed since his treatment began, but neither the chemotherapy nor the radiotherapy have worked. The last resort was the stem cell transplant. His father was a half match as a donor, and he had just enough of his own to grow.

The days when he had the aggressive therapies to kill off every single one of the blast cells and, consequently, nearly all his healthy immune cells too, were hellish. He got a terrible gut infection, with a raging fever, vomiting up the tiny bits he could eat and dry retching when he could not. In the end, he was taken into hospital to be put on intravenous antibiotics.

Following the transplant, we had a few hopeful weeks, but then, the news that the tides had turned against him again. By some inexplicable mechanism, more blast cells were forming and expropriating the rest.

Why, I asked, staring at the diagram of a cell in science, do you malfunction? How did the radiation (which I believe was the cause) get through your walls, and how, in your nucleus, did it change the code of the DNA? If the code can be changed to trigger cancer, why can't it be turned back? Not even our biology teacher can provide the answer.

Meanwhile, Dad runs on, as if by running he can escape death. He has given up on hair, gone for a number two, which barely fuzzes. His face is pale and drawn, and his freckles stand out like sandy-brown lakes. And still, he runs, putting one foot in front of another, in his trusty New Balance running shoes. Only occasionally losing his balance, catching himself.

It's spring, and our feet beat a double father and daughter rhythm as we run to the end of Hill Road South, down Marshalls Brow with Pear Tree Park on the right. The celandines and primroses have been and gone in Greencroft Valley, to be replaced

by cow parsley and bluebells. The trees and hedgerows have burst into leaf, and everything smells of green things growing.

Each morning, before I go to school, I have been looking hopefully on the roundabout for signs of seedlings from my bomb, but as yet found nothing.

Down Leyland Road, past Penwortham Methodist Church, over the bridge. Old, cobbled, with Victorian lamp-lighting, a piece of mislaid history.

"Remember the story of the vicar?" Dad asks me.

"Yes," I recall, recite it back to him, "it fell down in 1759 when a Catholic priest rode over it and the Protestants said it was a punishment from God, whereas the Catholics said God saved him."

We continue, down Broadgate, beside the Ribble, past the cottages on the left and Dad points out the stretch of the river where the ferryman rowed. Past the Continental pub, under the railway bridge, into Miller Park. Awakening trees on either side, sparkle of the river, early morning sunlight. We got out early to avoid the Park Run at 9 a.m. Dad used to run it some Saturday mornings and got a PB of 22 minutes for the 5k.

"Good for my age range, but I'll never win, I'm better at endurance."

It's been heartbreaking to see his mileage decrease from ultras to just 10k. Now, to see him struggling to endure the run from our house round the park. Easing our pace, under the disused East Lancs railway bridge, past the café and toilets and the pagoda. At the new Tram Bridge we turn left and run up the hill that the park runners complain about and past the flagpole at the top that they are always told not to run into (always, someone does).

Along the top of the park. Looking down on the fountain flowing again. Past the spring bedding plants— hyacinths, tulips, and forget-me-nots. Down the hill, back under the bridge, returning by the same route. Painful to see Dad flagging as we run back up Marshall's Brow. Cruel thing, that hill is on the way

back, not the way out, but still, he makes it. One more run, one more day, his smile enduring on his breathless face.

Lorraine

I'm back at my lookout point, alone, as Alice is off on a task. I'm frustrated as my lovebirds are not getting it together because Chesney's father is dying.

"We're losing him," sobs Chesney, "the doctors can't help us. Even the consultant, the oncologist who saved Nam Taylor, says there's nothing he can do. All they can offer is palliative care. Monitoring, antibiotics, pain relief."

"I'm really sorry," says Val, also in tears, "I wish I could help."

"I've prayed and prayed," Chesney is distraught, "but God doesn't answer."

"Have you tried praying to the old gods?" Val asks.

"What, like Belisama?" Chesney shakes her head. "What could a river do?"

"There are others."

"Who could turn back death?"

"My brother says there are healing gods beyond the waters, beyond the veil."

Now, this is interesting. I've long suspected Carson of black magic— of witchcraft, of dealing with the old gods, trickster gods. Unlike the Devil and his demons, Dad told me, you don't know where you're at with them.

"Pagan gods," says Chesney, uneasily, "my mum wouldn't like it."

"Maybe I could get Carson to say a prayer for you? Work a spell?"

"No," Chesney is appalled, "I'll have no doings with devils and satanic magic."

There we are. That confirms it. Dad's got friends amongst the New Catholic Inquisition who would have him if I could find the evidence.

“It’s not like that,” protests Val, “just because some have horns…”

“I thought better of you,” Chesney gets up, shakes her head, stomps away.

Damn it. Religion, like politics, can be such a barrier to relationships.

Val sinks into tears, head in her hands, blubbering like in the playground when we stole her toys—not dolls, but action figures—Power Rangers and X-Men; popped their arms and legs from their sockets and pulled off their heads, then gave them back dismembered in a mass grave in a cardboard box. Pathetic.

Then, what’s this? Appearing, like Batman, in his black hoodie, Carson. He’s twirling Val’s fringe, asking her softly, “Sis, whatever’s wrong?”

“It’s Chesney.” Val chews on a fingernail, pulls back a strip of skin. “Her father’s dying of leukaemia and the doctors can’t do anything about it.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that, but all we can do is be there for her.”

“Can’t you do anything?”

“There’s nothing I can do to stop death.” Carson is sombre.

“I know you pray to the old gods. I know you can work magic. You can make yourself invisible. You can make a whole roast dinner disappear.”

“This is slightly different.” His sister’s watery reflection in his pool-like eyes, hands pressed together in prayer, pleading for her lovebird’s father’s life.

Enough to bring a tear to the eye of the Queen of Winter, but not to mine. Unlike my mother and father, I don’t cry. I don’t weep rivers of ice.

“Ok,” Carson gives in, “on May Eve there will be a dark moon.” His pupils are black as the moon when she turns her back on the sun. “I will try.”

*

Every May Eve I dream I am battling against Sasha Summer. She has her hockey stick and I have my knife and she whacks me over the head.

"Summer has come!" she speaks her victory on May Day.

On Halloween, it is reversed, and I stick her with my knife.

"Winter has come!" I speak my victory on All Souls Day.

This May Eve, I will not be sleeping or dreaming nor will I be joining the usual battles in which Winters are always beaten by Summers. Instead, on this night, Walpurgis Night, when demons and witches are said to fly around the spire of Saint Walburge's in Preston, I am going to be gathering evidence of my lifelong enemy's misdeeds for the New Catholic Inquisition.

From my pocket, I take the tattered bit of thread I found in the school corridors that treacherously frayed itself from Carson's ripped pants. I hold it to Cavall's nose, and his eyes gleam and light up like cold blue moons.

Old, he is, but he's still got a fervour for tracking our enemies. He strains at his lead, pulling me down Kingsfold Drive, past the park where a Summer and a Winter are battling for a trad girl in a mock white wedding dress.

On Studholme Crescent, Cavall barks a warning. I see a breath of fire in the distance, smoke snorting from the nostrils of the red crepe dragon with dozens of feet, shaking its head. Sunbeam Summer will be in the head, his crew behind. Later, the red dragon will take on the white dragon, Brady in the head, in an immense battle of fire and ice before the white dragon falls.

I duck into the porch of one of the nearby houses until the red dragon has passed. Onto New Lane, Leyland Road, Factory Lane. As we pass the industrial park, go under the railway bridge, past Vernon Carus, I realise that Cavall is taking me to that accursed pond where Penwortham Mill stood.

It's mighty quiet. Eerie. The dark moon is a hole in the sky. The occasional sigh of the wind through the willow trees like a lost maiden. The pond is almost large enough to be a lake and is

rectangular. Bays are cut around it for fishing, and rusty grafitti'd barrels stand on them.

They didn't end up building on the site of the mill in the end. According to local legend, each time they did, the bricks got moved overnight to another location. Some said it was environmental protestors who did it. Others argued it was fairies, a black cat, a black dog, or a boggart. Some said it was the spirits of the orphans who once worked in the mill, with their knock knees, clogs, and smocks, or the old mill owner, John Watson.
To my perturbation, I think I glimpse the mill reflected in the water, built of red brick with wide, gaping windows, hear the clack of looms inside.

Then, Cavall gives a woof. Something else catches my eye. Carson. He's standing on one of the fishing bays with a huge, black rucksack on his back. That bag. My eyes narrow as I recall how, when I've followed him in the past, it seems to be bottomless as he goes about his chores. From street to street, knocking on doors, handing over phones, laptops, TVs. I know full well what you can hide in a kettle, how many bags of coke fit in an air fryer.

He's putting down his rucksack. Kneeling beside the lake. Ghost-like reflection. He begins to speak, softly, in a voice like willow catkins falling. "Gods beyond the waters, hear my plea, for the father of the friend of my dear sister."

He's praying to the old gods. Holy Virgin, this shit is real. I reach into my pocket, take out my phone, hit record, and set Cavall on watch.

"In exchange for the life of Steven Liddell, I bring offerings."

He reaches into his bag, takes out a mobile phone, swipes it open. "This song is called the Land Beyond the Ninth Wave." He presses play and holds the phone over the waters so whatever he thinks is down there can hear.

A tinny, awful sound. Carson droning. I can't see any god liking that.

When the song is over, “This is an Apple iPhone 17 with an A19 chip. On it are albums by my favourite bands: Ghost, Nine Inch Nails, Joy Division.”

He throws the phone into the water. It plops a circle, ripples, sinks. He watches intently. What is he waiting for? To my disturbance, more ripples, then, with a preternatural bubbling and crackling, the phone reappears. It flashes in disco colours, like the Northern Lights, illuminating the waters. A message I cannot see flickers on the screen. Carson reads it, frowns, shakes his head in disappointment. The phone sinks back again.

Once more, Carson reaches into his bag, takes out an iPad, opens it. “This song is called the Lady of the Lake.” Again, he subjects the gods to his trash.

“This is an iPad Pro 13-inch with Apple Pencil Support. On it are my favourite films: The Nightmare Before Christmas, Donny Darko, Pan’s Labyrinth.”

The iPad sinks, reappears flashing like an angry red traffic light. Another message.

“Damn.” Carson reaches into his bag again, takes out a laptop, turns it on. “This is Song for the Orphans Stolen by John Watson.” A terrible tune. No matter, I see the mill in the water, I see young faces pale as cotton.

“An Apple MacBook Air M4 with an M4 chip, neural engine, and spatial audio. On it are my favourite books: Mythago Wood, Out of the Silent Planet, the complete works of Percy Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe.”

The laptop sinks, reappears, flashing with an on-off blue light, like a siren. Carson looks hopeful until he reads the message. His shoulders slump.

“What, then, do you want?” he asks beseechingly. “Can you not turn back death, or do you require more than the latest state-of-the-art electricals?”

The waters are still, silent, then another rush of bubbles, rising upon them a bone. An old white bone, brittle and hollow. Some joke of the gods?

“I don’t understand,” sighs Carson.

The bone sinks back down into the waters. Dejectedly, he shoulders his rucksack. Even though it should be empty, it looks like a heavy weight.

I step back into the woods as Carson passes and make my own way home, Cavall panting before me, blue eyes smiling at a job well done. On the way, on Kingsfold Park, I see the remains of the white dragon. Ripped and torn, it is pinned to the grass on the playing fields with a dozen knives.

No sign of my brothers or our crew. A bit of blood. No bodies. They escaped.

Entering the Winter House, I feed Cavall two tins of Pedigree Chum. “Good boy.” He licks his lips, slobbers, goes to lap from his bowl of water. I sit down on our wintry white sofa, take out my phone, heart beating quickly with triumph and excitement, open my videos, click on the one that was taken at 11.45 p.m. Just before midnight. I see the pool, the bays, the fourth bay where Carson stood, but there’s no one there. Just a barrel with graffiti on it that reads: ‘Plumb the Deep. Revere the Old Gods.’

Chapter Eight

Chesney

The harder I pray, the further my father drifts away. Every time I visit him in hospital, it seems like there is less of him there, like a little more is gone. His body wasting with bed rest. His colour, his freckles oozing from his face.

I kneel before my wooden cross. "Oh Father who art in Heaven, why will you not listen to me? Why will you not save my father? Is it because I am a sinful girl?" I think of kissing Lisa, how close I've come to trying to kiss Val.

"Or is it," I wonder, "because you are a cruel God?"

Every night, along with the Lord's Prayer, I have been reciting Psalm 19, and we have been praying it as a congregation in the intercessionary prayer slot. I have been emphasising the petitions for deliverance from 'the pestilence that stalks in darkness', 'the sickness that strikes at noonday', the 'plague' that 'comes near thine tent'. I have been reading the Psalms, the calls to a wrathful God to strike down His enemies. Of them there are many. There is little talk of mercy. There is little talk of love.

I have been re-reading the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The passages about the crucifixion. The lines where Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I have been picturing him on the cross, blood dripping from the crown of thorns, the holes in his hands and feet.

I've been watching Dad's slower and less visible crucifixion.

At least his father has not deserted him. Grandad and Grandma have been to the hospital to visit nearly every day, bringing him Jelly Babies and reading to him from his favourite childhood books like the Chronicles of Narnia.

He used to say there was a fawn waiting, like Mr Tumnus, at the lamppost in Greencroft Valley to lead us to otherworlds, and we used to pretend to meet him and go into imaginary landscapes with nymphs and fawns.

Grandad looks a lot like him. His red hair turned strawberry and is now white. Grandma is of old Cumbric farming stock. A sturdy lady, she still remembers the old sheep counting system, "Yan, taen, tedderte," which he loves. They count together, to twenty, "tedder-a-mimph, medder-a-mimph." When they say, "gigget," they giggle. I don't laugh. It feels like an end.

I hate seeing him there, all hooked up to machines, monitoring his heart rate and his pulse. Nurses constantly coming in to draw off blood or feeding into his bloodstream a steady stream of painkillers and antibiotics.

"Why God," I say, "have you forsaken him, have you forsaken me?"

Again no answer. Just a plain wooden cross looking like it's waiting for me. "No, I'm not going to be the victim of your wrath or a slave to your rules."

I take down the cross. I carry it into our garden. I take a spade from the shed and I dig a hole, next to our compost heap, then I throw it in and bury it.

"Let it rot down," I say, "let it be good food for the worms."

I try not to think of Dad's body, soon to be worm-ridden, in the ground.

*

I try praying to the old gods, but I'm not sure how to, or whether they're there. "Gods of the wind, the rain, the mist, the sun, will you help my Dad?"

I don't receive an answer, but in the room in the hospital, something shifts. My father is now in and out of consciousness. In and out of dreams. As the beep of his pulse becomes slower and weaker and the mountain-like patterns on the cardiogram less consistent, less tall, he speaks of running.

"I'm on the coast route, passing St Bees, looking over Morecambe Bay, going over the hills, up Scafell, Helvellyn, Skiddaw. You should see the views."

“Is this normal?” Mum asks the nurse.

“Yes,” she says, “we call them End-of-Life Dreams and Visions.”

“I think the Old Man of Coniston is my final destination. I know that Dad will be waiting for me there. I’ve got my backpack with a flask of strong tea. I’m ascending. It’s right misty up here. I can’t see, but somehow I know where I’m going, and I can see him there, my dad at the top. There’s someone with him—a figure made of mist. We’re sitting to drink our tea.”

No angels, no God. I wonder if Mum is disappointed.

Her eyes are bright and teary, and so are Grandma and Grandad’s.

‘To think our son is going before us’. I can see it writ on their faces.

“The misty figure is pointing out towards Morecambe Bay. I can see a land there, in the clouds, oh it’s beautiful, oh it’s unspeakable, good for running. He’s telling me I can take off my trainers. I don’t need them there.”

The rhythms of the machine are slowing, the beep of his pulse stops.

“No,” gasps Mum, as his grip loosens on her hand.

One long beep. A sense of lightness.

“I’m going home.”

*

Penwortham Methodist Church is packed to the rafters for Dad’s funeral. Nobody is dressed in black because he wanted it to be a celebration of his life. I am wearing a sensible beige dress with a cardigan and low shoes. Mum bought Val similar attire as she wasn’t allowed to come in jeans and a hoodie.

I’m not sure I should have brought her. She looks like a doe out of the woods. She’s wringing her new suede handbag as if it’s a sodden dishcloth.

That describes the way I feel— weak with weeping, wrung out by sorrow. There's a Dad-sized hole in my life. There are running shoes on the rack unfilled.

There he lies, in the coffin, in black trousers and a shirt the colour of mist. He should have been buried in one of his running T-shirts or a new one marking all the miles he's done. That's what I talk about when I get up to make my speech— how much I loved him, how much we loved to run. "He ran 426,000 miles," I boast, "mostly in northwest England. He ran up every peak in Lancashire and Cumbria, splashed through every moorland bog."

On display at the front are all his medals, all his T-shirts on a washing line. We've printed out his photographs of the peaks of the hills he climbed.

The last song is Jerusalem and, as we sing, I see my father's 'feet in ancient time' walking 'upon England's mountains green' and 'green and pleasant pastures'. Although he's dead, I don't feel he's fully gone. Every inch of the land is filled with his memory, with his stories, which live on.

Poor Val. She's like a deer who's lost the deer-trods as we head for the cars to follow the hearse to the graveyard. She doesn't know where to look, how to smile or make eye contact. She keeps tripping in shoes too tight for her broad feet. We get in with Mum and Dad. Dad's parents give Mum's parents a lift. I wave to Amina and her family, in white hijabs and peach abayas.

Dad asked to be buried in the natural burial ground at Hill Road Cemetery. We pack out the car park and walk past the trees and memorial plaques, decorated with flowers, candles, stones and shells, statues of birds and Buddhas, cartoon characters and gnomes, decked with football flags.

The graves are unmarked. A complete vanishing into the land. My father's is ready, open, deep, a large pile of dirt to the side, set to be shovelled in. Are the worms there? Do they know? Are they prepared and waiting?

Dad is lowered in, by the sleight of hand of the funeral attendants now in a cotton shroud. “Earth to earth and dust to dust,” the Reverend speaks.

I think of God making Adam from clay and crumbling him back again.

No longer my God. I see no clouds and no face in them in the bright blue sky. A tear runs down my cheek, I feel the sobs coming up to rack me, swallow them. Val touches my hand. I squeeze hers back, not too obviously.

We go back for the buffet in the church hall. Val stares disbelievingly as though she has been invited to an otherworldly goblin feast before she begins tucking into the canapés, bruschettas, fritters and bedevilled eggs.

“Come and meet Amina.” I drag her away.

“This is Val.”

“Uh, hi.” Val looks down and fumbles with her bag.

“I’m Amina, and these are my sisters, Fatima and Aisha.”

“How’ve you been?” I ask Amina. “Sorry I’ve been around less.”

“It’s alright,” Amina says, “I can see you’ve got a new friend.” A knowing glint in her eyes. “We’ve got some new friends too, from across the river, on Broadgate. We’re forming a group to stand up to the trads.”

“That’s good to hear,” I say, “how’s your grandmother?”

Amina sighs. “Her memory’s still deteriorating. She’d forgotten your father’s name. She kept asking when we’re going to Stephen Campbell’s funeral. He died and was buried in 2025. But we’re doing our best for her.”

We eat cake in the shape of Dad’s running T-shirt and shoe-shaped biscuits. Val and I sit outside on the wall and finish the last biscuits as the rest of the guests leave, then go onto the bridge to look down at the Ribble. Death comes and leaves a hole in the world. Immutably, the river flows on.

I glance at Val and see a tear running down her cheek, her lower lip trembling. “Are you crying about my dad?” I ask, puzzled.

“No,” she admits, “I’m remembering Mum and how much I miss her.”

“Tell me about your Mum,” I encourage her.

“Come to mine tomorrow,” she says, “Carson and I will show you some photos.”

*

Another bright May day. Sun shining off the red mini on the Robinsons’ drive. It looks like a nice car from the back, but as we walk past, I see the front is smashed in to the point of no longer being a bonnet, folded up like paper.

In the living room, Carson is pushing the stuffing back into the mustard-coloured settee where the cat has torn it out. The scratch marks all the way up the brown and beige curtains suggest she has been using them as a climbing wall. Court is sitting in the corner, watching him, green-yellow eyes wide and innocent. Carson shoves the last of the carnage in with a disgruntled huff and sits down, and she jumps on his knee. “Mew.”

He scowls at her. “I’m not happy with you.”

Ignoring his reprimand, she curls up into a scraggy purring ball.

On an armchair, there is a printer and the usual stack of mobile phones. Where it looks like another armchair should be, instead, there is a washing machine, slowly whirring, picking up speed, with filthy overalls inside it.

Val brings me a rickety chair in from the kitchen and puts the kettle on. She returns with cups of tea for me and her and a glass of water for Carson. Plomping herself down next to her brother, “Come here, Court.”

“Tss,” Courtney hisses and swipes at her with her paw.

“How was the funeral?” Carson asks.

He looks tired and defeated. His eyes are circled by dark rings. As he exchanges glances with Val, I see they share expressions of guilt. Why? Surely not because of Dad's death. What else have they been up to?

"It went well," I say, "Dad got the send-off he deserved."

"It was incredible," says Val, "what do you call those crispy things again?"

"Canapés." I'm annoyed she gives more attention to the food than Dad.

"Then there was a cheese board and charcuterie and shrimp cocktails."

Carson raises a hand to cut her short before she recites the rest of the menu.

"Where are you hiding our pictures of Mum?" Val asks him.

Almost dislodging Court, he reaches into his back pocket, takes out his wallet, removes a fan of photographs, holds them before him like playing cards.

"Tell me about her," I press them.

Carson pulls a card. "This is Mum as a girl." He passes it to me. "Growing up on the estate."

She's small, dark-haired, with an odd-toothed grin, pushing a bike.

"Just another one of the Kingsfold kids." He passes another.

"Mum and her friends when they'd just left school," Val informs me.

They're on Kingsfold Playground, in short skirts, cigarettes in their hands.

"Her first job at the butty shop at Kingsfold Shops with her friend, Louise," Val continues, getting into the story as Carson passes the cards.

She's smiling, wearing a hairnet, both of them are holding sausage sandwiches.

"Then she got the job at the care home. This is one of the old ladies she looked after, Lilly. She not only took care of the people

in the home but those in the community who came for help and advice or a shoulder to cry on."

"She didn't do it to call attention to herself," says Carson.

"Like us, she was invisible," Val tells me.

Before drawing the next card, Carson pauses a moment, then hands it over.

Val winces. "Here she is with Dad when they met at Pear Tree Garage. She took her car in for a service and got more than what she paid for in the back."

She, Winona they tell me, is sitting on the boot of a car with a man I recognise as Stanley Robinson but younger, more like Carson, less mean, smiling.

"He was alright when they first got together," Carson speaks somewhat begrudgingly. "He had a temper, but mostly he kept it, cared for her, worked hard. This is the last photograph before it all went bad," he passes it to me.

"Mum and Dad on the beach at Blackpool on their honeymoon," says Val.

I give it back and Carson shuffles it into the pack without showing me the rest. "Later that summer," he says grimly, "Dad met a woman called Mel."

"A common prostitute," Val speaks disparagingly, "who used to hawk her wares in Preston, on New Hall Lane and Riversway Dockland, went up in the world when she met Susan Winter and became her live-in leech."

"She and Dad started having an affair," says Carson, "she seduced him to work for the Winters. That led him to give up his job at the garage for fixing and trafficking. He ended up as their middleman, trading with the Summers."

"What was in it for him?" I ask. Looking around, "It hasn't earned him much."

"As far as I can tell," Carson confides, "false promises and threats."

“And cocaine,” says Val, “that was when he started getting nasty. When Mum questioned him, he turned on her; when we questioned him, upon us.”

“They just used him to do their dirty work,” Carson glances at the overalls in the washing machine going round rapidly on the final spin. “Still do.”

As the washing machine bings, Carson goes over to it and pulls out the overalls. Frowning at the remaining stains, he reaches for a stick of stain remover, rolls it on in patches, puts the overalls back in, and restarts the wash cycle.

“I’m doing my best,” Carson says, “to clean up his discrepancies.”

“How did your mum die?” I ask. Recalling, “Was it a car accident?”

“Yes,” says Val, “she was driving over the moor near Winter Hill to see her sister.”

“It gets slippery up there,” I recall from running with Dad.

“It wasn’t a slip on the road that caused her death,” says Val.

“She was chased,” claims Carson, “driven off the road.”

“Oh,” I gasp, “wasn’t that murder?”

“There’s no firm evidence,” he replies, “but she knew that road like she knows her own palm. She went to see her sister every week.”

“Who do you suspect?” I ask.

“The Winters,” says Carson, “to punish Dad for double-dealing with the Summers.”

“How can he go on working for them?” I don’t understand it.

“Because he’s dependent on their business and their drugs,” says Carson.

“And,” Val speaks vehemently, “because of that slut, Mel Ripon. Mum knew about their affair. She’s still got her suckers in him, the bloodsucking bitch.”

I glance over at the washing machine filling with soapy suds. “Do you think there is any hope that he might change his ways and come clean?”

“Not with that leech attached to him,” Carson spits, “I’ll bet the Winters don’t know that Mel’s also double-crossing them to the Summers.”

Chapter Nine

Lorraine

A meeting, in our meeting room, at the Round Table. The table's meant to be round to symbolise equality amongst King Arthur's knights, but Dad asserts his hierarchy by sitting in a huge, black leather throne-like armchair. Above him is his sword. It isn't called Excalibur, but its earlier name, Caledfwlch from the Welsh myths. He likes to go back to the oldest origins, my dad.

There are other swords on the wall and photos of Dad's sword-fighting victories. Spears, shields, knives, daggers too. He'd like to go back to medieval times when we all fought like knights, but until then, we'll keep our collection of guns on our gun rack. He's got a big rifle and a nifty revolver.

Dad's sitting in his armchair with Mum on a slightly smaller one beside him. Like Arthur and Guinevere, they are, but Mel, she's no courtly lady. She's got a flimsy white summer dress on barely as big as a vest.

Sitting next to Mum, she cuts them both a line of coke on the Round Table. Picture that, Guinevere and her ladies, bank notes up their noses, snorting like pigs. I'm next to Mel and Brady and Aidan are spaced in between.

"We meet today, three nights after midsummer," speaks Dad, "to address Stanley Robinson's further double-dealings with the Summers, further misdeeds."

What's he done now? I hope it's something terrible, something that will warrant a punishment, something that will provide us with an excuse to kill him.

"He has opened a supply line to Rat Roberts for the Summers."

Oh, this is bad. Ratty and his gang live like sewer rats in the Mile Tunnel. The mile-long underground tunnel runs from the Maudlands area of Preston to Deepdale and was closed in 1995, and they moved in soon after. They live in stolen trains. Their drains are like sewers, stinking, festering. They've got rats' tails,

rats' teeth; one bite, and you'll get the plague. They're damn skilled at crawling up the sewers to steal and deliver goods. A couple of years ago, Stanley opened us a supply line to them. Should some of that trade start going to the Summers, we'll be losing our gains.

"Is it time," I ask, hand on my knife, "to kill him?"

Taught me some goods skills, knife-fighting, my dad has.

Dad glances to Mel. "How far on are you with seducing Daniel?"

"Oh, I've had him," she smiles, "in that catch wrestling ring when all the others have gone home. Arms locked, knees locked, bodies locked together, rolling around like a couple of vipers wrapped around each other. Like snakes. I've had him in his very own bed. He's asking me to move in."

"Very good," Dad approves.

"Best not be getting fond of him," Mum admonishes, "getting housey."

"Hardly," says Mel, "I prefer my Rabbit Hole and my work on the docks."

"More pressingly," Dad pushes, "have you started introducing him to our trade?"

"Yes," Mel replies. "He didn't like it at first with his high ethics. Even though his ancestors worked down those filthy coal mines, he didn't like the sound of our dirty work. A good working-class man. I set up a couple of ambushes to bring him round, showed him the danger poor Mel is in."

"And now?" Mum asks.

"He's coming with me and delivering beatings," she smiles.

"Well done," approves Dad, "how long until he's working independently?"

"A few months," she replies, "definitely by Halloween."

"We'll be back in power then," Dad reminds us, "a good time to strike."

"What about you, Lorraine," Mum asks, "are you any closer to dealing with Carson? When his dad dies, we need him removed

so he can't carry on his work for the Summers or turn it over to his own fixing business."

"Not much further," I admit bitterly, "he still slips through my hands."

Dissatisfied tuts from my parents, grins of satisfaction from my brothers. They're enjoying seeing me, not them, failing, about to get it in the neck.

"Only," perhaps I should tell them, take the risk of looking mad, "I did see him practising black magic on the pond near where Penwortham Mill stood."

Dad's gaze darkens. His eyes turn near dark blue as mill ponds. His brows knit. Who would have thought he would take such interest in such a ridiculous tale? He leans forward, grave and intent, "Tell me more."

I provide an account of Carson's prayers to Pagan gods to save the life of Chesney's father, his offerings, the supernatural responses, his failure.

My brothers chuckle behind their hands and make deprecative gestures.

"The last reply an old and hollow bone."

Something knowing in Dad's expression.

"I tried to take a video, but it wouldn't come out," I admit.

"No, it wouldn't." Dad strokes his chin. "You keep watching him, you keep reporting back. I've got a friend at the Inquisition who'd be very interested in this and who'd make your arm twisting look like Guinevere taking the arm of one of her maidens for a turn around the park."

"How is Val and Chesney's relationship moving along?" asks Mum.

"Slower than one of Ratty's stolen long-haul freight trains."

Chesney

Over the summer holidays, a wildness comes over me. I'm fed up with helping my mum with summer club at church—with

organising games, laying out plastic disks for kids to run around, boiling eggs for the egg and spoon race, picking them up broken, shells shattered, squishy and stinky. I'm fed up with helping out with Bible Study and reading stories I don't believe in. No amount of banging a stick on the sea floor can part the tides. No bush can burn without burning. Noah, his ark, even his animals, can go to Hell.

When my mum asks me where my cross is, I say, "I don't know. It fell off my wall and I don't know where it is and I don't want another one."

I'm disappointed because barely any of the seeds from my seed bomb grew. A few birdsfoot trefoil and ragged robin leaves appeared then died again. No stems. No flowers. Olivia explained that it was due to shade from the trees.

"No," I say to my mum at the end of the week. A hellish Friday. Cleaning cake smears off the door handles and the windows in the toilets and picking up squashed jelly babies from the floor in the church hall. "I am not helping again next week. I'm sick of church. I'm sick of the rules. I'm sick of the kids who don't follow them who you don't tell off. I'm sick of Reverend White's sermons and I'm sick of God and I don't believe in Him!"

Mum pales so severely I think she might faint.

Still, I assert myself, "I'm going to volunteer in Greencroft Valley instead."

"Chesney, I wish you'd told me sooner how you felt."

"You're not mad at me?"

"It's okay to ask questions," she reassures me, "I went through a phase of questioning about God, but decided I needed Him and the church."

"Why," I ask her, "didn't he save Dad? Why didn't he save Jesus?"

"God was born in and lived as Jesus so he could know our suffering and compensate for our sins. He lives, suffers, in each of us. Suffering is part of life."

I don't want to accept that. I want to worship gods of happiness. Of blooming and blossoming, creativity and healing, loving and nurturing, not pain.

"Whatever you decide, I will support you." She puts her arms around me.

Two days later, I get my first period. A red splotch in my knickers. A stain on my bed. My mum washes my smalls and sheets and gives me a bag of scented sanitary towels. I determine to find an eco-friendly alternative.

I'm the youngest at the Guardians of Nature work parties in Greencroft Valley. Olivia takes me under her wing. She is tall, half Native American, wears her black hair in a cornrow braid, and has a fierce look but a kindly smile.

She demonstrates how to water the plants in the poly-tunnels, checking the soil in each pot to assess its moisture level. Together, we re-pot red and white campion, meadow cranesbill, native foxgloves, big and purple. Some of the plants are ready for planting in the meadow, and we carry a tray each. Olivia shows me how to dig holes with a trowel, tease out the roots, push the earth in firmly around the plant to keep out air, and stamp it down. I plant my purple loosestrife and help her to plant a tray of knapweed. It feels good to have my fingers in the soil, to be rooted, like a plant.

When I ask, she tells me a little about the beliefs of her mother's line. "We see every part of nature as inspired: hills, rivers, trees, even phones." She teaches me simple rituals like greeting the sun in the morning and little prayers to help the green things grow, to blossom, to be rich in fruit. I go home with my hair unkempt and mud under my nails and sleep soundly.

*

I have a spat with Val in her living room whilst Carson is on an errand.

"Why don't you show me your bedroom?" I ask her again.

“Why don’t we watch something on telly?” She gestures to the three TV screens. “We could put three things on at once, like three episodes of Planet III.”

“Are you hiding something?”

“No.” She looks guilty.

I’m fed up with this. “I let you into my house and show you all my things. I share them. We feed you and take care of you. I like you, really like you, and you don’t see it. Sometimes I think you’re just using me for my mum’s cakes.”

Val gasps. “I like your mum’s cakes, but I like you more,” she admits. “I’ve never been sure if you like me. I’ve never been liked except by…” she drops off.

A flash of jealousy. “Who?” I do my best to keep my voice neutral.

“Amelia Sullivan,” she says, “only,” in a dull voice, “she’s dead.”

My envy vanishes and is replaced by guilt. “How?” I ask tremulously.

“Suicide,” Val speaks, her gaze low, a tear welling in the corner of her eye. “Lorraine and her crowd bullied her, called her Cindy. It wasn’t much of an insult compared to what I got called, but she was a fragile little thing. They found her hanging from a tree in Penwortham Woods around a year ago.”

“That’s appalling.” No wonder Val was hesitant to befriend me. For the first time, I feel a real flash of hatred for Lorraine Winter and her cruelty.

“So, what will it be?” Val reaches for the three remotes.

“Please,” I say, “can I see your room? I don’t mind if it’s untidy. I won’t judge you.” With an encouraging smile, “It can’t be any worse than Carson’s.”

Val swallows. Reluctantly, “Well, okay.” She leads me upstairs.

When she opens the door, I can barely believe my eyes when I see the stacks and stacks of… not electricals, but boxes with action figures in them.

“I’ve collected them since I was a little girl,” she admits, “Amelia hated them. Power Rangers, X-Men,” she shows me, “every single model of Cyclops and Wolverine there has ever been, and I managed to put Cypher, Warlock, and Slipstream back together after Lorraine dismembered them.”

I gape. Determined to be non-judgemental, “And what’s in the others?”

“Warhammer figures,” she tells me, “some of Carson’s friends play it.” Opening the boxes one by one, “Combat Patrol: Iron Hands, Combat Control: Death Korps of Krieg, Tyranids: Termagants and Ripper Swarm.”

I can’t say I’ve a liking for the squat, militant, robotic figures with their oversized weapons and armour several sizes too big for their bodies or for the motto, ‘In the grim darkness of the far future, there is nothing but war.’

On the other side of the room, I see Val’s bed and a table standing by it. There are more figures upon it. These, mythic and compelling, catch my eye. On one side, there is a figure with flaming hair and a burning sword, with a huge silver-bristled boar and a beautifully fashioned army of ants. On the other, a warrior with bull horns and long, ice-white hair sparkling with frost. His cape, artistically, sweeps behind him. He is surrounded by sleek, white, red-eared hounds, poised and unique in perfect poses, baying and barking.

“And who are they?” I go over to marvel but dare not touch.

“Those? You like them?” she asks shyly, with an expression of growing pride. “This is a new game Carson and I are creating called War of the Gods.”

“Tell me about it,” I encourage her.

Val’s cheeks flush with pleasure. “Carson and Johnny have been researching the old gods of Britain, who we don’t know much about because the ancient Britons didn’t write anything down. However, there is some archaeological evidence, and their stories are recorded in the Welsh myths.”

“Why only in Wales?” I ask. “What about the rest of England?”

“That’s the tricky bit.” Val frowns. “Johnny explained to me that between 4000 BCE and 800 CE, people all over Britain spoke a language called Br…” she struggles with the unfamiliar word, “Br… Brythonic. I think it might be the word Britain comes from. When the Anglo-Saxons invaded and replaced the language and culture with English, some of the Britons fled to Wales, taking the stories of their gods with them.”

“I see,” I speak with understanding, “so they got hidden in the Welsh myths.”

“Uh huh,” grins Val. “They’ve been part of the Welsh culture for a while, but only recently have the Pagans and Druids started worshipping them again. And even now, few know the names of the old British gods.”

“Who are they?”

“This is Gwythyr ap Greidol,” she gestures to the fiery warrior. “His name means Victor, son of Scorcher. He’s the Summer King. And this,” she looks wary as she points to the icy warlord, “is Gwyn ap Nudd. His surname is spelt n-u-d-d, and Carson told me you’ve got to pronounce it correctly, neeth, never nud, or he will get very pissed off. It means White son of Mist. He’s the King of Winter and the ruler of the Otherworld, who rides out with his hounds hunting the souls of the dead.”

I shiver, unsure whether I like these gods, the figures so uncanny, so real.

“I admit they’re a bit scary and can barely believe I painted them.”

“You can paint? And so beautifully? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did say that Dad let me paint,” she reminds me.

“But I thought you were just spraying dirty old cars,” I admit.

She goes over to her bedside table, where I see her collection of paints. Trays of watercolours and oil paints in more colours than I can count. Tubes and tubes of acrylics. Paintbrushes, in all

shapes and sizes, in pots. In the centre of them is a half-finished goddess statue who takes my breath away.

Proudly, “This is Creiddylad, the goddess of the land, who brings forth green grass and flowers over whom Gwyn and Gwythyr fight every May Day.”

“She’s incredible.” I admire the intricate details of Creiddylad’s floral crown, the garland around her neck, her flowery dress. Somehow Val has managed to dot the yellow eyes of the daisies and perfectly followed the edges of the forget-me-nots, bluebells, and hawthorn blossoms.

Val beams. I’ve never seen anybody so happy. She looks like the smiling sunshine on NASA’s Solar Dynamics Observatory. On a roll now, she reaches under her bed, pulls out another box from the multitude stored there.

“This,” she pulls out an aquamarine-skinned god, “is Nodens. He was later known in Wales as Lludd or Nudd, and Gwyn ap Nudd is his son.” His long grey hair and beard are bedecked with sea shells and barnacles. He holds a trident in his hand. Placing him on her bed, she surrounds him with winged wind spirits and water spirits with fishtails blowing their conches.

“In this,” she pulls out a big box, “is the Temple of Nodens. It’s still in parts at the moment—the temple itself, the baths, and the dormitories. We based it on the ancient one at Lydney, where people went for healing dreams.”

“Nodens is a god of healing?” I ask with excitement.

“Yes,” she says. “Pilgrims travelled from across Britain to sleep in his temple and receive a healing dream and get it interpreted by a priest in the morning.”

If only I had known about Nodens when Dad was ill. “Is he still around now?”

Val nods. “Not only that, he had a shrine near here.”

“Where?” I’m intrigued.

“Somewhere near Cockersand Moss. Two Romano-British statuettes dedicated to him were found there, but unfortunately, someone stole them. Scholars think this suggests he had a shrine

that was further out to sea and was washed away during the earthquake that caused the flood in 543."

I'm blown away not only by all this information but by Val's ability to remember it, on top of her secret painting skills, which she has not shown in art.

"How do you and Carson make the figures before you paint them?"

"He tells me the stories. I draw the designs and make the moulds. Then he puts them in the low-temperature casting system in our garage. He thinks it's possible we'll be able to make money without relying on his fixing business."

Chapter Ten

Lorraine

"It is three days before Halloween," speaks Dad, "the cusp of winter."

We're at the Round Table again. Mum and Mel are looking slightly more ladylike in their tight blue dresses with glasses of Prosecco in their hands.

"How close is Daniel to taking over Stanley's role?" Dad asks Mel.

"Closer. He's delivering good beatings to our more obstinate customers but refusing to take that strong right hand of his into the Mile Tunnel. He keeps saying he wouldn't touch Ratty and his pack with the 100m flagpole the Traditionalists are flying the Union Jack from on top of the Lancashire County Council building, let alone a barge pole. Nor the Doom Camps."

"Do you think he'll come round?" Dad presses.

"In time," Mel speaks evasively.

"Three days' time?"

"Alright, no." She looks irritably into the bubbles of her Prosecco.

Dad considers. "Stanley is becoming too much of a nuisance to have around. We must be rid of him on the ordained date. This means you two," he looks at my brothers, "will have to share his work until Daniel is ready."

"We can't deal with Ratty!" Aidan looks terrified.

"And I'm not setting foot in those mangy Doom Camps," gups Brady.

Good job I'm still at school at this blizzard point in the story of Winter.

"They'll never find the rat pack and the doomsters will be selling them nothing but fakes and lies from the pockets of their long black coats," says Mum.

“If that’s the case, we’ll have to forfeit those supply lines for a while.”

My brothers look relieved but still nervous about the weight of the load.

“Are your plans for Stanley’s murder in place?” Dad asks Mel.

“Yes.” She swirls her glass, bubbling, fizzing more happily now. “I’m going to lure him into the Fun House at the fair with a promise of more fun.”

She and Mum titter, chink their glasses, quaff the remainder in one.

*

I sit and watch the entrance to the Mile Tunnel at Maudlands. You wouldn’t know it was there, over the brick wall just off Radnor Street, unless you looked. A square gap, dropping down quarry-like, walls decked with ivy and ferns. Then, the darkness of the pair of train lines, the pillars between. It’s flooded again, in this wet weather, at least knee-deep, perilous down there.

I saw Carson go in over two hours ago and am curious to see if he comes out. I’ve been watching him following his father’s routes into darker and darker dens and keeping an eye out for his black magic. I saw him offering bread to the geese on the canal, crumbling some into the water, nothing else.

A slosh, slosh, slosh. Here he comes. He shakes himself off like a dog. He’s drowned by a set of his father’s overalls, but they are spotlessly clean.

Nothing but flood water on him. No sewer slime. Not a scratch nor a bite. That big rucksack of his looks even fuller than it did on the way in. What’s he been swapping and trading? He shimmies up the ivy then disappears.

Curse him, learning our trade routes, curse his oil-faced father.

When I get home, nobody’s in. Working hard, they are, at the moment. I make myself a ready meal. A chicken curry. It tastes

like the plastic box. Nothing like the tasty Booths chickens I get when I'm a good girl.

A knock at the door. Mel's knock. All I need. Reluctantly, I answer it. She's wearing a coat for once, open of course, a dress and fishnets under it.

"My mum and dad aren't in. They haven't left you any money or cocaine."

"That's lucky because I've come to speak with you."

That's odd. She rarely wants to speak to me. We share a mutual dislike.

From the corner, on his rug, Cavall growls. He's never liked her either.

"Can I come in?"

"I suppose."

We sit down on the sofa.

"Are you going to offer me a drink?"

Reluctantly, I get her a can of Stella and do not give her a glass. That doesn't bother her. She pulls the pull-tab with a practised crack and slurps the foam. "I came to you to ask you whether you'd like to help me out."

"With what?" I ask suspiciously. "You know my help doesn't come cheap."

"Oh, but you'd pay to do this one—kill Stanley Robinson."

"I thought you had it all planned."

Mel smiles. Licks her lips. If leeches had tongues, that's what they'd look like—fat and pink. A tongue to choke a man if it went down his throat. "I have but I thought with the two of us, it might be more fun."

She wants me to help her play with him, I realise, but can I trust her?

"Imagine how much fun we could have in the Fun House."

It's rumoured that the Summers' Fun House contains dangerous games. That sometimes things aren't as they seem and people don't come out. Yet, I long to kill Stanley, with a longing that makes my knife sing.

"Ok," I agree.

"It will be so much fun." A gurgling laugh. She empties, crushes her can, and departs.

Chesney

I know that I really like Val and I know she likes me, but not if she likes me in the same way. Like girl to girl. It's no use asking Carson because he's not only asexual but sex-blind. Val once told me the story of how Alice Turner stalked him in the second year, making eyes at him, rubbing against him in the corridor, to no response. When, finally, she summoned the courage to pinch his arse, he thought she was trying to steal his Zippo.

Tonight, I decide, will be the night I make my move. It's Halloween. For the first time, Val and I are going to the fair. My mum thinks I'm just going trick-or-treating. Carson didn't want us to go, but, knowing we would go anyway, he said, "You'd better come with me and Johnny and Olivia."

As Val and I sit together on the bus, I consider where and how I'm going to do it. On the big wheel? After we've ridden, hugging close, down the helter-skelter? Perhaps I could win her a duck on the hook-a-duck. Kiss her. "Quack, quack." Gauge her reaction; if it's bad, tell her it was a Halloween trick.

"You're quiet today," says Val, "what are you thinking about?"

"Oh, just the fair," I tell her, hoping she doesn't see me blush. My cheeks are terrible for pinking, giving me away each time our thighs touch as the bus bumps.

When we get to Val's house, Carson is on the roof, hammering on new tiles. I see he has fixed the guttering. Over the last two weeks, there was non-stop rain. Val told me how a constant plip-plap-plop outside her room kept her awake; then the rain started coming through the roof and flooded the attic.

Carson put his foot down, "Now we're better paid, we can afford a builder."

"I'll pay for it, but you can fix it," Stanley told him.

He's pulling weeds from the chimney pot and fixing on another flue.

"Is it legal for him to be up there without scaffolding?" I ask Val.

She shrugs as he shimmies down the ladder and slides the extension in.

"That should stop us from being inundated for a couple of years." He stands back and runs his gaze over his handy-work with satisfaction.

"We've more to worry about with water rising up from below," says Val.

I had seen it surging up from the drains, making a river of the roads and swirling around the houses, almost to the doorsteps. The lawn is still soaked, large puddles lying there like dark dogs and Kingsfold Park under water.

"Doesn't help that our house is sinking too," sighs Carson.

The Kingsfold Estate was built on a mossland, a lowland raised peat bog. Hence the street names Moss Acre Road, Padway and Knutters Platt, recording the wooden trackways and little bridges that led across the moss. If climate change continues at this accelerated rate, it will be a bog again soon.

"Are you sure Dad's not going to be back soon?" Val asks Carson.

"Not until the end of the night." He mutters under his breath, "If he's lucky."

"What was that?" Val asks sharply.

Carson bites his lip and ushers us indoors.

On the kitchen table is a swanky sewing machine and a huge black curtain. Val takes a paper with designs on it out of a drawer, a piece of chalk, and scissors, and begins drawing, cutting, and sewing our costumes. I can't believe they have left everything to the last minute nor that the curtain looks suspiciously like the one off the stage at school.

"What are we anyway?" I ask as Val holds up the costumes.

"Walking dead," Carson replies, takes out his pocket knife, and slashes them.

A knock at the door. Val opens it and lets Johnny and Olivia in.

Olivia hands me a copy of Robin Wall Kimmerer's 'Gathering Moss'.

"Thank you," I say gratefully and put it into my school bag.

We don our costumes and take it in turns to sit very still as Val does our face paint. Val paints big blue bruises around Carson's eyes. It's odd to see Olivia pale with hollow eyes and bluish bruising on her face and Johnny with an ugly scab under his silver hair with jammy blood oozing from it. I try not to flush through the white paint as Val leans in close with her brush, rings my eyes in black, and draws a jagged cut across my left cheek.

"Perfect," she smiles.

Our faces are so close I might have kissed her if the others weren't there.

"Thank you," I say.

She heads up to the bathroom to use the mirror to do her own make-up.

Olivia and Johnny start discussing the new Iron Cage album. Carson is restless, constantly opening and closing his phone to check something.

"Are you watching Dad?" Val asks him as she comes down, face white as cartridge paper, eyes blacker than ink, a gaping gunshot wound in her forehead.

Carson slips his phone into his pocket. "Are we ready?"

We all nod our heads like eager little dogs.

"Remember," he speaks solemnly, "this is the night summer is defeated by winter and Gwyn ap Nudd rides to gather the souls of the restless dead."

Lorraine

The crop of the Winter Crew are gathered in our living room. Alice is doing our make-up. We're frost demons and the Summers

are clowns. There is no mythic story of how that came about; it's just how it is. Aidan is a wendigo. Brady is a yeti. Caleb is Bigfoot. I'm a demonic ice queen. Mel, in a blue silk dress her nipples show through, is a frosty banshee.

Mum and dad, who need no make-up for their roles, are in their bedroom having a quickie before they depart to hunt down the Summer Twins and Lady Summer. Cavall isn't up to going this year; he is on his last legs.

Mel is at the cocktail bar, mixing up a concoction like de-icer from blue WKD, curaçao, and vodka, serving it with ice and illegal plastic straws. She brings a glass over for me and we have a quick heads-together. Not that I want to put my noggin next to her slap-face, but secrecy demands it.

"Are your plans in place for killing Stanley?" I ask.

"Yes." She stirs her drink with her straw like a witch stirs a perilous brew. "I managed to sneak into his house the back way yesterday whilst Carson was putting up the guttering round the front for a send-off shag."

"That was a stupid risk. Carson might not have eyes in the back of his head, but he does have cameras all around the house, invisible as hexes."

"I wanted him to know. The noise we made outdid his hammering."

"Why?" I demand.

"So we can lure him into the Fun House and kill him too." She titters. "I accidentally left my phone in the kitchen so he could put a tracker on it."

"That could be dangerous," I consider, "but if it works…"

"Your daddy will be ever so pleased with us," grins Mel, takes a suck from her straw, hiccups, "say we're such good girls, might buy us both a pony."

I glare at her. She is not fit to ride a horse. She who rides men to death. She does not deserve one, with or without saddle and bridle, never, ever.

“Stanley thinks that I want him again tonight in the Fun House. Not only that,” she giggles, “he thinks we’re going to have a threesome.”

I almost retch because I can’t think of anything more disgusting than doing it with Stanley, that bogeyman with his limp, his leer, the things he does to girls. If you’re wondering about my attitude towards sex, you might have guessed. I’m an ice queen. I do not love. Sex is functional. Like taking a bottle of milk out of the fridge and putting it back in again. A basic need. I lost my virginity in the loos at Blackburn Ice Rink when I was thirteen. I’ve usually got one or two boyfriends on the go.

“You bitch,” I snarl.

Mel sucks suggestively on her straw.

Alice puts the final touches on her own make-up. She’s a frozen undine.

As dusk falls, “Let’s go,” I say to the crew.

“Who put you in charge?” asks Brady, taking the lead.

We head through the estate to Leyland Road, noticing the wind getting up, tearing leaves from the trees, a storm brewing. I keep tight hold of my crown.

Chapter Eleven

Chesney

"There's no bus tonight," says Carson, "because none of the drivers want to take the Winter Crew from the New Lane bus stop to the Tardy Gate. They usually walk up Leyland Road, so we'll take the back ways."

He guides us off the estate, onto Bee Lane, Lord's Lane, Flag Lane. By the fading light, I see the ditches, beside the hedgerows, are overflowing. There is water in the fields. From it, the gulls are departing. Overhead, a flight of pink-footed geese, honking like otherworldly hounds. The new estate they have long been supposed to be building here hasn't yet come to be.

The wind is getting up. Whuumph. Blowing through the rips in my costume. I'm glad we thought to put thermals on underneath. Val walks beside me, puffing slightly, sucking on her vape, which smells of toffee apples.

Carson is continuing to check his phone every other minute. Seeing me watching him, he makes a couple of swift movements on it with his forefinger, pockets it. The next minute, instead, he is checking his watch.

Olivia and Johnny, walking behind, are pulling ridiculous, gurning zombie faces at each other and singing a mournful Smashing Pumpkins song.

Down Fir Trees Avenue, past some proper-looking houses, decked out with cobwebs, candlelit pumpkins and turnips, spiders, skeletons, and ghosts. Onto Coote Lane, then Leyland Road. From the fairground, I can hear the music blasting out—unseasonably summery pop and dance. I see the drop platform high in the sky going down with a cascade of screams. The big wheel, slowly turning, illuminated with globes of light. The rotavator spinning. The swing chairs swinging round and round.

A thrill of excitement runs through me. I glance at Val. Her eyes are alive. We pay our fares with the banking apps on our

phones and enter through a flame-edged gate with a burning sword above it.

"Look out for clowns," Olivia warns us, "the Summers."

"What do you want to go on first?" I ask Val.

She's gaping around. "That, that, and that," she's pointing, can't choose.

"I suggest something gentle to begin with." Olivia points to the Big Wheel.

We queue.

"Looks a bit wobbly," says Val as our car halts.

"You need to be quick," the assistant tells us, "or you'll miss your turn."

"Come on." I take her hand, guide her in, and seat her.

"It's an awful way down," she says nervously as the car rises.

"Then don't look that way," I tell her, "look at the view instead. To the north, Kingsfold Community Centre, Castle Hill, Saint Walburge's spire."

Val stares awestruck across the land. I wish she'd look at me just for once. I wish I was in a movie where the scene is arranged for the perfect first kiss. The Big Wheel goes up to its zenith. I point out the mast on Winter Hill to the east, then, to turn her to me, Blackpool Tower to the west.

"We went there once," she tells me, "to see a comedian, Peter Kay, the one who talks about that fine rain that soaks you through." As the wheel goes down, she recites his jokes about chippy tea and garlic bread at a wedding.

Thwarted. We get off and gather in a circle. Carson and Johnny light roll-ups. Val changes her vape liquid to candy-floss. Olivia and I stand away from the smoke, keep an eye on the clowns, with their hideous bulging eyes and wacky red hair amongst the zombies, vampires, and skeletons. Carson is looking at his watch again. He is intent on watching it whilst dissecting with Johnny the technical issues with the new Bad Madness song. Thus, he doesn't see me sneak closer to see that he is not looking at a clock

face, but at two red dots on intersecting maps, in different places. He's watching his dad, but who is the other person he is tracking?

"The Winters are coming," Carson says, "let's get above on the drop platform."

"I'm not sure I'm ready for that yet." Val looks nauseous.

"You'll be okay." I use the opportunity to take her hand, and she lets me.

We all get onto the ride and take to the back row. The platform rises. As we get to the top, I look down to see the Winter Crew and their followers flooding through the fiery gates like an icy sea to meet the red-headed clowns.

Lorraine

It's not time for a battle yet. It's not time to hunt them down. Instead, we fling insults at the clowns, saying who can fuck who, who can stick what where. The usual stuff. Then a clown goes too far, throws a punch. For breaking the protocol, he gets his mouth stuffed full of candy-floss until he chokes.

Then, it's time for the childish, foolish displays of bravado. Seeing which crew dares to fly the highest on the swing chairs, to form the biggest snake of people sliding down the helter-skelter, to jump the highest off the drop platform.

"Don't be breaking your leg again," I growl at Brady.

All the while, Mel and I are looking out for Stanley Robinson. It's easy to clock him by his limp. For one of his first double-dealings, Cavall bit him and took his Achilles out. His clown suit is yellow on the left and red on the right. That's the side he limps on. He's even clumsier in his clown shoes. That should make him even easier pickings. His face is painted white, with a hysterically wide grin. He is wearing the customary red nose. Sasha Summer, tall in her clown suit, juggling red and orange clubs, is not hard to spot, nor Silence in her wheelchair, balancing a burning diablo. Selina has a pair of fire poi whirling around her clownish head.

Then, there's Sunbeam, swallowing, breathing out fire, like a fire-breathing dragon.

I know he's here, too. Carson. Even without Cavall, I can smell him. Somewhere amongst the zombies, vampires, and walking dead. Like a corpse. My hand goes to my knife. She is singing for his blood. For the blood of the Summers, for the blood of the Robinsons, on All Hallows' Night.

The wind is getting up. The storm is beginning to sound like hounds howling.

"Fancy a pill?" Mel gets a baggy out of her pocket.

I shake my head. I don't take ecstasy on the job. Not one like this.

"Go on," she pushes me. "It will be fun."

Murder and ecstasy. Suddenly, it sounds like a good idea.

I nod, wash the tablet, with a little icicle on it, down with a gulp of the blue cocktail from the plastic bottle I am carrying in my shoulder bag.

Mel takes hers and in twenty minutes we're coming up. Grinning as we head for the carousel, the galloper, with its beautiful prancing white horses. Damn it, how much I love horses with their flowing tails and manes. With their long legs, made for galloping like mine, with their big chests and their bigger hearts, which I lack, pumping blood round their veins.

My favourite thing, at our house, is watching the racing on the telly. Watching Dad place his bets. Seeing the horses getting ready, heads tossing, nervous. Then the way they fire themselves from the stalls like gunshots. How they rush around the track, the wind in their tails, the sky in their manes. How I cheer, "Go on! Go on!" How I hate to see them fall in the steeplechases, after the hedgy hurdles, jockeys tumbling beneath in little balls. How I pray that they will get up again, without their riders, race on.

What a sad thing it is; the closest I get to having a horse is riding a carousel. It's like a dream. A flood of white horses around me. I'm in the Camargue with them galloping through the sea and riding through the marsh. I'm seeing flashes of otherworlds

around me. Floating ghouls. I'm the Winter Queen to the Winter King guiding the souls to a palace of icicles.

"Your turn is over."

I'm shaken from my reverie by the assistant.

"You've been on there for over half an hour." Mel is laughing.

They have to drag me off the galloper. I'm off my tits. This pill is strong. I'm gritting my teeth. Gurning. Need some gum. My teeth are clamping together tighter than the clamp in the science lab that got stuck with Jenny Jones's finger in it, meaning we had to leave her there screaming. My mouth is drier than it was then. Nearly got caught. Water. I try to pull Mel to a stall. Everything's juddering, jerking, flickering. Like a television on its way out. I can't walk straight. My feet are dancing. Like Amelia Sullivan's legs kicking.

"Water." I can barely splash the word out. I have forgotten how to say, "please."

The man on the stall's run out and Mel is passing me more of the blue stuff.

She drags me onto the waltzer. Pounding music like a hammer. Bang. Bang. Bang. Sounds like Carson banging on the gutters. Nailing flashing lights to the walls, switching them on, laser beams burning through my forehead. And we're spinning. The whole universe is spinning around us.

There is a man in a clown suit pushing us and I see it is Stanley Robinson.

"Harder, harder, faster, faster!" cries Mel.

"Slow down," I croak, "I think I'm going to throw up."

Another big push and Stanley throws back his head with Pennywise laughter.

I am sick, in a blue fountain, all over myself and Mel. Luckily, it matches our dresses. Afterwards, my head is clearer. The tempest in my stomach has calmed.

The spinning of the car is slowing down, and Mel is making eyes at Stanley. "Come to the Fun House, and Lorraine and I will show you some fun."

Chesney

We're playing roll-a-ball. Eyes fixed on the balls as we roll them up into the holes and wait impatiently for them to come back down to roll again. They've called the game the Summer Derby, and all the horses started out with burning manes, but the wind is getting up and is blowing out the flames. Mine and Carson's are leading neck-and-neck. Jerking forward by one, two, three furlongs each, depending on which slot we roll the ball into. We're both racing to win a prize for Val. I think he knows how much I want this because I beat him at the post as the fire in my horse's mane dims.

"I'll buy something for you," I say to Val, "you can pick anything."

Her eyes are huge as she browses the prizes. Teddy bears. Long squishy snakes. Cartoon characters in all shapes and sizes. A legion of gadgets. Rubik's cubes, playing cards, slinkies, bracelets, bangles. Paintbrushes and paints.

"There." She points to a box at the back of the stall.

The assistant looks surprised and brings it over. I see it's an action figure: the Incredible Hulk, bare chest green and hulking, in tiny brown shorts.

"Palitoy Mego Die-Cast Hulk from 1979," she squeaks in glee.

The assistant hands him over. "Enjoy." He presses a button to send the horses back to the start. All his pushing can't reignite their manes in the wind.

Val takes the Hulk out of the box and kisses his forehead reverently. Then, with him still in her hand, she kisses me, full on the lips. "I love you."

"I love you too." I kiss her back with all the passion of summer dying.

"Whit-whoo!" Whoops and cat calls all around us.

"Dirty lesbians," a clown.

"Are we girlfriend and girlfriend now?" asks Val.

“Yes,” I say quickly before either of us can change our minds.

We hold hands. Left one fully, but I have to share her right with the Hulk. For the first time, she meets my gaze, and I see myself and her reflected back, in all our awkward second-year vulnerability, just come out in the middle of the fairground in Lostock Hall, in front of the demons and clowns.

A blast of wind blows through the stall, swaying the teddies, blowing a packet of multicoloured felt-tip pens down, and scattering packets of silver stars. Another roar rips the fabric on the roof and threatens to blow us apart.

“I’ve got to go,” says Carson.

The red dots on his watch are glowing like warning lights.

“No.” I tell the others, “He’s tracking his father and whoever is tracking him.”

“Carson, please don’t,” Val grabs his ragged sleeve. “The demons have got claws and knives; it’s nearly winter; you’ve only got a pocket knife.”

“Not just any pocket knife.” Carson pulls away with a ripping sound that leaves a piece of fabric in Val’s hand and vanishes like a phantom into the night.

Chapter Twelve

Lorraine

The Fun House stands at the back of the fairground, in the middle, like a goalie waiting to catch the ball in a hockey match when all else has failed. Stanley's our ball. We're the players. The Fun House is the goalie and the goal. We're luring him towards the three-storey building with its images of what goes on inside—laughing clowns, jesters, people burning, a hungry lion's roar.

There's a girl in my year, Olivia Johnson, half Native American, who believes that everything has a spirit, even the school buildings. I can half believe this house is inspirited, looming, swaying in the gathering gale.

The ecstasy is losing its effect and I don't feel good. I take another swig of the blue. A drunken murder has got to be better than murder on a come-down.

"Where do you want us?" Mel speaks seductively. "On the crazy stairs?"

Stanley is limping along behind us, goonish in his clown shoes.

We enter and lead him up the stairs.

"Careful, don't slip," says Mel.

There's blue stuff on the stairs, which tilt and tip and sway beneath us. He goes down with a bump, curses in a voice darker than Pennywise's.

"Oopsy-daisy," Mel chuckles, "let's hope you don't have any more accidents."

She's got him angry too soon, but luckily upstairs on the third floor is the punch bag maze. We duck through it, swinging the punch bags at him. He beats them, smashes them with his fists, some force, crazed clown's roar. We have to cross a rotating cylinder and Mel and I just manage it. He gets halfway, loses his balance, sits down on it with a crunch, crushes his balls.

He's really mad. Closening on our tails. We pass the jumping jester and its leaps up on its spring, "Ha-ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho!" It startles him for long enough for us to slide in a red tunnel onto the second floor. He chases us across a moving platform that rotates, shakes, blasts fire from unseen holes. Like the geysers you can see burning on the landfill site at Clayton Hall.

What the devil is this? This is no game. I've burnt my jeans and my ankle. Stanley sears his clown suit. He has to stop and roll on the ground to put it out.

Before us, the gauntlet. There are two of them. Swaying axes. Swinging swords. But they're not made of foam but metal, and they're bursting into flames.

There's something not right here. This is some kind of Summer setup. But who is being set up? Me? Mel? Stanley? Carson indubitably following us?

"I'll take the left, and you take the right," says Mel, "meet you at the end."

But which will Stanley take? He's mighty close. My legs are wobbling, and I'm not sure I can judge the rhythm of the burning, slashing swords.

Chesney

Val told me that Carson is always last in cross-country, walking at the back with a rollie. Today, he's like a bullet from a gun. But I'm a runner - got 12 seconds in the hundred metres. I'm hot on his heels, leaving the others behind, rushing like a hockey ball shot by Sasha Summer towards the goal.

The Fun House. Burning, raging, a lion's roar. Is it the lion on the wall or is it a lion, a tortured beast within, or is it just the roaring of the winter wind? Carson's ragged clothes are flapping in it like the wings of murdered crows. Then, he's in, racing up the crazy stairs, wobbling, jolting. I'm following, both slipping on the blue stuff, falling, grunting, getting up again.

Dodging, ducking, through the punch bags. Across the rotating cylinder. Past a… "Ha-ha-ha! Ho-ho-ho!" The jumping jester stops me in my tracks, nearly stops my heart. I'm losing him, sliding down the red tunnel like a rat down a drainpipe. He's running like a soldier in World War II across the turning, shaking floor, evading blasts of fire shooting up as if from hidden flamethrowers and blazing like the flames at the end of a Last World concert.

I stare at the revolving floor with geysers still burning before my eyes. This isn't just fun and games. This is a dark Summer plot. I don't want to follow, but he might need me. I set off, darting, diving, dancing through the blasts, swift as a falcon, quick as a minnow. My running, spinning, turning on a sixpence in hockey see me through the hellish fires unscathed.

Carson pauses to blow out a burning sleeve and winces at a burn on his hand. He takes a look at his watch, curses as he sees he is missing a dot, again when he looks ahead to see the swaying axes and swinging swords light up.

Lorraine

Ouch. I tell myself it's just a little burn. Just a little cut. I know it's worse than that, the raw, gaping wound on my thigh, but I've got other things to think about. Stanley following me. He's almost through the swords. In spite of tripping over his clown shoes, he's singed but not hurt.

Where's Mel? I look about, but there's no sign of her. Gone down amongst the axes? Her body burning up? Surely I'd hear her screams.

Nothing to do but lead Stanley on, my hand on my knife, reassuringly cold.

I slide down an orange tunnel, making it slippery with my blood. I run across the rope bridge, swaying dizzily. Damn the pain. Don't fall. Don't fall. Look back. Stanley's still coming. Eyes like mad spinning billiard balls.

Through a door into the hall of mirrors. He's coming at me from all angles.

Chesney

"Don't," I say to Carson, quailing at the flaming axes, the fiery swords. "Your father isn't worth it. The way he's treated you and Val. Leave him to his end."

"He might be a hateful, conniving, abusive bastard, but he's still my Dad."

Gaze fixed on the axes, he sees his moment, sees a path, runs it.

"If there are gods, help me now." I sprint through the swords.

Lorraine

Stanley's upon me. He's got me in his grip. "Spread your legs, bitch." Horrible big red nose and red mouth leering like an open wound, like a U-shaped cut.

"No." I get him an arm lock. One of the techniques I picked up from catch wrestling at the Green Viper. I hear the joint pop out of his elbow. It reminds me of when we pull the wishbone at Christmas, throw out the carcass.

His mouth is trying to say, "Aargh," but the sound gets stuck in his throat. Like the steam train in the Mile Tunnel that Ratty and his gang stole from the Ribble Steam Railway and Museum and bricked in to have their parties in. I think I hear it go, "Choo! Choo!" I hear its whistle. Stanley's face has gone grey as the faces of the trains in Thomas the Tank Engine under his face paint. He's gone stiff in my grasp, sagging down. A heart attack, I guess. Hundreds of reflections of his body on the ground and me, the murderer. A hundred snapshots of Lorraine Winter all over the online news. Just one mugshot with a number underneath it when I'm taken down.

I've got to clean away the evidence. I bind the cut on my leg with a strip from my frosty blue gown and mop up the blood the best I can, stuff it in my shoulder bag, take out some wet wipes and wipe away my fingerprints. Where the hell is Mel? It's time for the next stage of our plan. I slip into the darkness of the exit, wait for Carson to find his father reflected in a hundred mirrors, dead from a hundred angles, my knife in my hand.

Chesney

My sprint finishes stand me in good stead. I'm through the swords. Carson's through as quick and he's still got his head and all his limbs.

"Uh, Chesney…"

A smell of burning behind me and I see my ponytail's on fire. Swifter than a swift swooping over the Ribble in the burning light of dawn, he's lopping the burning end off with his pocket knife, trampling it out on the floor.

I follow Carson down an orange slide. Ick. It's wet with someone's blood. Whose? Across a rope bridge, then, very carefully, he is opening a door.

"Dad." Carson sees his father's corpse, in his charred clown suit, in the middle of the hall. Reflected at him in a hundred mirrors, from a hundred angles. His ridiculous big feet in their red and orange-spotted turned-up shoes. His stupid big nose. A hundred of them. Like red traffic lights. Like warnings.

"Carson, don't go in, it's dangerous." I pull on his rags, try to stop him.

Pocket knife in hand again, he looks around, sees only the reflections of his ghoulish face. Slowly, cautiously, he goes over to his dad. He sets down the knife, takes his father's pulse, shakes his head. Taking off his red wig, his red nose, his clown shoes, he sets them beside him like grave goods.

"It looks like the Summers had the last joke," he speaks regretfully.

The wind is howling outside. It sounds like sorrow. Carson's face, in a hundred mirrors, is pale and hollow, his eyes big bruises. His lips press together, straight like a ruler, then waver like a line of the wandering dead.

"Howl, howl, howl!" speaks the wind.

What is that I see, movement, near the exit?

Carson looks at his watch. Devoid of dots. The clock face reappears. It's midnight.

The lights in the hall of mirrors shut down. Utter darkness. Then, appearing from the dark, to my horror, to my disbelief, a pack of hounds. Shining white and gleaming, sleek as ice slicks. Ears red as arterial blood. And their master, an icy river of white hair, bull horns, face black as a miner's. Cloak flowing behind him even though he's brought no wind with him. He glows with the uncanny light of the Otherworld, the light of ghost stars. Around his neck hangs a hunting horn. I recognise the Gatherer of Souls.

In his fay light Carson trembles, regains his composure, "You."

"You know who I am and why I am here?"

"By your bull horns and hunting horn I recognise you as Gwyn ap Nudd."

"You know then I have come to gather the soul of your father?"

"Yes," Carson replies.

He steps aside as one of the hounds bites into his father's right heel, pulls back savagely, shaking its head, rips the soul of Stanley Robinson from his body. He's no longer in his clown suit and looks more like the man in the photos— close-cropped dark hair, surly cheekbones, a thin nose, and a cruel mouth.

"Can you tell me what you made of your life?" asks Gwyn.

Stanley is staring in horror at his corpse, at the horned hunter, at his son.

When he does not speak, Carson speaks in his stead: "He was once an alright man, a good mechanic," begrudgingly, "taught me a few things about fixing. But," more darkly, "he always had a

temper. Sold himself to the Winters and the Summers too, became a dealer, an adulterer. He," Carson's voice wavers, "hurt my mum and my sister and me too."

"Does your son speak the truth?" The coldness of winter in the Hunter's gaze.

Stanley's mouth opens, closes, like a trapdoor. Nothing comes out.

"Have you no explanations, apologies, for your son?"

"The Winters and Summers took advantage of my willingness to take on jobs they had no taste for, and Mel," fury in his eyes, "seduced and twisted me."

"I asked for explanations and apologies, not excuses." Gwyn is terrifying in his wrath, blowing about him like the winter wind, setting his hounds a-howl.

The ghost of Stanley Robinson floats back, cringing. "I'm not a bad man, tell him, son. Tell him how I ran a good business, kept you and Val."

"Who killed you?" demands Carson, "was it that treacherous bitch, Mel?"

"She had a role in the trickery. Will you take vengeance for me?"

"If not her, who brought your end?" Carson presses.

"My very own heart," Stanley admits, "at the end of the chase. Will you avenge me?"

"I will," Carson says, picking up his pocket knife, "lay to rest your dirty work."

"You will come with me," says Gwyn to Stanley, "as for the other restless dead…" He eyes Carson. He turns his abyssal-pupilled gaze to me.

It's the end. My knees go weak. He's going to take me away to the Otherworld. Just after I've got together with Val. Just after I've found love.

"I have felt your call," admits Carson, "but don't think I'm ready to go yet."

“Please don’t take me,” I beg, “it’s just a costume. See?” I rub at my face paint.

Gwyn smiles slightly. “Both of you have roles to play and tasks to do.”

“If you could just give me a clue,” pushes Carson.

In Gwyn’s hand appears a bone, old and white, brittle and hollow.

“I still don’t understand,” Carson shakes his head, confused.

“You will,” Gwyn says, glancing at me, “both of you.”

Chapter Thirteen

Chesney

"Sunny and Daylight Summer and Lady Summer too," Val stares at the list she holds, appalled. "I can't believe Dad invited them to his funeral."

We're in Val and Carson's living room, surrounded by stacks of papers and appliances, attempting to sort through Stanley Robinson's ill-begotten legacy.

"Can't you just vanish them off the list?" Val implores him.

"There's much about Dad's life I'd like to erase," Carson looks at his father's untidy handwriting distastefully, "but I can't just rub out his dying wishes."

I'm doing my best to support Val as she supported me when my dad died. Since her father's death, the sense of threat has gone from the house, but Val and Carson remain weighed down by his debts and penned in by the machines. As far as I'm aware, neither of them has shed a single tear. It's all so much more horrible than my father's death, brutal and clownish.

"I don't want Val to see him like that," Carson said after finding him.

I could see why. Dead in a clown suit. Painted face an unfunny mask of agony. Laid out like a bad joke. A terrible way for a man, albeit a bad one, to die. We'd called the police and got them to take him before telling the others.

"He died of a heart attack in the hall of mirrors," Carson told Val.

A look on her face between pain and relief, then a narrow-eyed look at her brother. "He was chased," she spoke, suspiciously and knowingly. "And you," she prodded him, "were chasing the chaser. Who was it?"

"I suspect Mel Ripon," he replied, "although I didn't see her."

“And the setup in the Fun House, the flaming geysers and axes and swords?” I looked back at the missing end of my ponytail and at his burn.

“A sadistic game of the Summers who were playing us all.”

I’ve been wearing my hair in a bun since, so my mum doesn’t find out.

I think of how Selina has knocked my ankle out with her hockey stick, and I’ve seen the flames at her feet as she outraces me in the 100 metres. “Tell me about the Summers,” I say, “I only know the sisters from sports.”

“Their fathers are the Summer Twins,” says Carson, “Sunny and Daylight. They’re both professional catch and show wrestlers. They like to ham it up in the ring, deceive their opponents into thinking they’re goonish. Then they’ll flip their kill switches on and have a big win. They’ve got a devilish sense of humour. Beneath it, they’re astute businessmen.”

“They’re identical twins,” says Val, “no one knows who’s who.”

“Another of their games,” Carson notes, “to deceive and confuse.”

“Not even Lady Summer.” Val looks disgusted.

“Don’t you mean Ladies Summer,” I ask, “if there are two fathers?”

“There’s only one Lady Summer,” Val speaks with certainty.

I remain puzzled and feel as though I am missing something.

“She thought she had one husband,” Val explains, “found out later she had two. Turns out she saw the funny side. Their kids don’t know who’s whose.”

“That’s,” I shudder, “disgusting.” Then, “What’s she like?”

“A lion,” Val continues, “she’s got a terrible roar. She’s got a lion too.”

I think back to the image of the lion on the Fun House on the fairground.

“She eats men alive and women and children. The Summer House is like a lion’s den. It makes the Fun House at the

fairground look like Bright Sparks Nursery. She's got a production line in the basement where they make toys full of nasty surprises - jack-in-a-boxes, clowns, jesters, jesters' hats."

"Lady Summer's also an astute businesswoman," says Carson, "knows the supply routes like the lines on the back of her hand. How to tweak them, get the best for her money, when to send her lions in for the kill."

"What does this mean for you," I ask Carson, "now your dad's dead and you've inherited his business? Will you be trapped between Winter and Summer?"

For a moment, he looks cagey, like a rat in a rat trap, a mouse in a cage, food for lions. Yet he speaks determinedly, "Dad had already been severing his ties with the Winters and, with his death, the last one has died with him."

It's a relief that Carson will not have to deal with Lorraine and her family.

"Unfortunately, that came at the cost of his double-dealings with the Summers, which means that I have been left with his remaining dirty work."

He begins to move a fridge from the living room, balancing it on one corner, then the next. The door falls open. Something nasty, pickling in a glass jar, falls out. Hastily, he picks it up, shuts the door, switches to pulling.

Lorraine

I'm laid up in bed, a bandage on my leg, haven't been to school. I haven't been out of my room, let alone the house. In a bad way, I am. I keep having flashbacks to the fairground, Stanley spinning us round, the chase through the Fun House. The shock of those flames, real fire, not fake, the real bite of the flaming sword, then almost getting raped and killed by Stanley.

Lying here alone, I've been plagued with suspicions. I've pieced together a picture which might be truth or paranoia. I suspect Mel set it up in advance, colluding with the Summers,

double-crossing us through Stanley. She gave me a duff pill or spiked my drink, then lured me into the Fun House so I had to run their fiery gauntlet before he did for me.

But I've got no proof. I can't tell Mum and Dad. Mel's stuck to our plan and told them she murdered Stanley. I was not meant to be there, so I can't tell them what happened. I just made up a story about getting cut up in a fight between the clowns and demons, as so often happens on Halloween. She's getting all the congratulations and I'm getting extra penances for managing to get hurt in a scrap with the Summers on the cusp of winter.

Then, there's my failure to kill Carson. What happened there was beyond belief. By some uncanny ritual, laying out his father's shoes, his nose, his red wig, managing to summon one of the old Pagan gods. At least that's what I think he was, and I wasn't going to hang around to find out. Shit scary him, with horns on his head, hounds with ears redder than any blood. I tried to get a photo, but when I opened it, all I could see was mist. It would be a good one for my Dad and the Inquisition if I could speak it. I can tell them about the rite but not that I saw the god. They might think I'm sighted or I'm crazy, then they would try to exorcise me too.

I'm not one hundred percent sure if I'm right myself. I've been relying on Mum's benzodiazepines to get to sleep and need something stronger to get up.

Chesney

"It's not a very big turnout, is it?" I whisper to Val.

"Are you surprised?" she whispers back.

We're at her dad's funeral at the crematorium at Hill Road Cemetery. This time we are dressed in black. We chose our outfits from the Cats Protection charity shop—formal dress jackets and skirts and flat black shoes. Carson is wearing a black suit several sizes too big for him.

Stanley's dad is here, a bent little man with a smoker's cough. His mum is not. Neither are Winona's family. A few of his old school friends and co-workers at the garage have shown up, a rough-looking lot, making me uneasy.

Making me uneasier still are the Summers. Daylight and Sunny are great, devilish brutes of men, nearly heaving out of their suits, like the Hulk. They have flame-red hair, hotter, more flame-like than the furnace of the incinerator. Not only their size but their presence fills the crematorium. In spite of their smiles, people stay out of their way as if they might burst into flames.

Lady Summer is a big, buxom lady with bigger, golden hair, like a lion's mane, in luxurious curls, with claws like a lion, long, white, and manicured.

As she entered, Val told me, "When she found out about the joke the twins played on her, she laughed it off and said, 'There's enough of me for two'."

We take our seats on the front left, and the Summers take the front right. The service begins, led by a civil celebrant, starting with the usual hymns, sung without vigour, aside from Lady Summer's soaring soprano.

Then, it is time for the eulogies. Val gets up, stutters through hers. "Dad was once a kind man, once, on one day only, the only time I got his breakfast right… He once kept his word about what was on the TV at night… He kept me fed on fish fingers… He didn't let the house fall right down." Returning, "Please don't let Carson say anything out of place," she begs.

"My dad taught me to fix things," Carson stares into the coffin, eyes as dark and hollow as those of his father's corpse. "He taught me many lessons. Also of things that cannot be fixed, ever, in this world." He turns away.

Stanley's friends step up and share muted memories of school and times at the garage. "Good at maths." "Fixed my bike." "Brokered my car."

“What sweet words,” Lady Summer gets up. “I am impressed. He served us well,” she beams about, “in somewhat hazardous work, a brave man.”

The Summer Twins get up together and speak in turn. “A good man.” “A hard worker who supported his family.” “A shame the fairground is where he met his end, for we have happy memories of the fun of the fair, times of happiness and laughter, of the thrill of the rides, of going home.”“Suspicious circumstances that have not gone unnoticed.” An undercurrent of menace beneath their tone and congenial behaviour that gives me goosebumps.

More prayers, traditional hymns. ‘Amazing Grace’. ‘Be Still My Soul’.

What will become of his soul? I wonder. Taken by Gwyn. Will he find peace in the Otherworld or return as a restless ghost to be dragged back again?

We stand, heads bowed, as the coffin rolls into the furnace.

I glance at Val, then at Carson, dry-eyed, not a tear in the whole crem.

*

The reception takes place at the Royal British Legion on Leyland Road. A basic buffet is laid out—sandwiches, salads, pork pies, and sausage rolls. Stanley’s dad and his former friends stay for a pint and a bite to eat. A miserable, shuffling crowd who are quick to make their apologies and depart.

Because of them, the Summers are coming towards us. Lady Summer with the twins, like blazing bodyguards, flanking her on either side.

“Not the most shining send-off for your father,” the Lady disapproves.

“He told us you had a bard’s tongue,” says one of the twins to Carson.

“And you had a sweet little mouth,” the other to Val.

“He got better than he deserved,” speaks Carson, loose-tongued.

“We require a word,” both twins to Carson in voices not to argue with.

Carson attempts to postpone by taking a bite of his sausage roll.

“Nasty burn on your hand,” a twin notes.

“An accident fixing something,” Carson explains.

“You been playing with explosives, boy?”

“Just something that short-circuited.”

“Stanley left things unfixed.” “Debts unpaid.” “Pacts broken.” “Routes unrun.”

Carson’s hand tightens on his sausage roll a little more with each statement. Still, he goes over to the other side of the room. There’s a story in the Bible called David and Goliath where a tiny shepherd boy goes up against a giant with a slingshot. It’s like that scene. Only Carson is faced with two giants and has nothing but a roll with the sausage squishing out.

Meanwhile, Val and I are stuck with a beaming Lady Summer. Our story is Daniel in the lion’s den but without the hope of being saved by God.

“Your father told me,” Lady Summer says to Val, “you’re good at cleaning.”

“I do my best.” Uncomfortably, she picks cheese off her cracker.

“Do you want to be a cleaner when you grow up?” the Lady presses.

“No,” Val shakes her head with surety.

“That’s a shame. I could offer you a cleaning job better than your average office clean. A few more hazards, mind, but you can usually mop them up.”

“No,” Val speaks again, more firmly, “I don’t want to be a cleaner.”

“Then what do you want to do?” The Lady makes for a tuna sandwich.

“I want,” Val pauses to finish her cracker, “to be a painter and model maker.”

“You could come and work on our production line,” the Lady offers. “I could show you how to make things that will take off in the world with a bang.”

“No, I want to run my own business,” Val declines.

“Not much money for lone artists these days,” astutely the Lady shakes her head. “Nobody buys paintings. Nor much in artisan modelling. However, you can make quite a bit selling vintage models. You’ve got any of those?”

“No, no, no,” Val shakes her head quickly and swallows hard.

The Lady raises a brow, drawn on in brown pencil. “Stanley said you like cats.”

“Did he?” Val looks surprised.

I think of her grievances with Court.

“How do you fancy looking after some mothers with kittens? Not your usual moggies but fancy pedigrees such as Siamese, Persians, Burmans?”

“Oh, I don’t think Courtney would like that,” says Val decidedly.

“Well, that’s a shame,” the Lady shakes her head. “With your father dead and you and your brother needing to pay the bills. If you should get into a bad patch…” she passes Val a business card featuring a roaring lion’s head.

I glance over and see Carson has downed the sausage-less remnants of his roll on the table to shake the hands of both Summer Twins at once. The handshakes go on and on and not on his behalf. Their eyes bore into him like devil eyes until, by some sleight of hand, he pulls from their holds.

Flexing his fingers irritably, “I’ll pay off Dad’s debts but not be held captive. I’m not going to be wrestled into your games against the Winters.”

His defiant words, in spite of their threat, hit them on the forehead like a ball. They walk, slightly stunned, from the crematorium, Lady Summer aiding them.

*

After Stanley Robinson's funeral, after the smoke from his corpse has blown across the sky and disappeared to wherever smoke goes, the pall lifts.

Carson receives his ashes through the post in a plain black urn.

"Where are you going to scatter them?" I ask him.

"Down his supply routes as I close them down and end his affairs."

I worry that with their mother and father dead, Val and Carson will be taken into care, but nobody from the local authorities phones or knocks on the door.

When I ask Val, she explains, "Carson's erased us from the database."

Carson manages to remove all the items for fixing into the garage. It's like a TARDIS in there. Tiny from the outside with a rusty metal door that doesn't open, and Carson refuses to fix it, so nobody can get in. On the inside, it's like New York City. Skyscrapers of laptops. High rises of mobile phones, rising higher than the eye can see. A Manhattan of microwaves. A Brooklyn of washing machines and tumble dryers. A Bronx of dishwashers. A Queens of speakers and audio equipment. A Staten Island of kettles in all different colours - sea blue, cloud white, grass green. The floor is paved with video games, and the ceiling is panelled with instructions.

Val and I clean the house from top to bottom with eco-friendly products I have made at Eco Club. Scrubbing the walls with a sugar soap made from sugar and washing soda. Cleaning the surfaces with a surface cleaner made from white vinegar and water with a drop of lavender essential oil for the scent. Polishing with beeswax from the hives in the school garden. Throwing a cleaning tablet made of baking soda, citric acid, and tea tree oil down the loo, watching it fizz like a can of lemonade, scouring, and flushing.

Carson follows behind with a tube of Polyfiller and a tin of paint, dressed in his dad's overalls, splodges of gloss mixing with the other stains. After we finish, we celebrate by burning them with Stanley's filthy rags and tarps.

We bake potatoes, wrapped in foil, in the flames and open them like Christmas presents, skin black and crispy, soft inside. Carson almost eats a full one.

"No more," smiles Val, "will he have to run Ratty's underground tunnels and risk getting bitten or his eyes gouged out by the ghost of Margaret Banks."

I recall how the fifteen-year-old girl fell from a train carriage and was dragged to her death and continues to haunt the Mile Tunnel and shudder.

*

At the end of a grey November, Carson leads us into the back garden. It's wild, unkempt, with a pit for the bonfire, an old paddling pool full of algae that's been there since he and Val were children, and a falling-down shed.

Standing on the patio, he holds up the black urn, shakes it to show it is empty. "I've closed down Dad's supply routes and left his ashes with them."

He raises the urn above his head and drops it on the floor. It smashes into shattered shards, black and sharp and shiny, like his father's black pupils.

We take it in turns with the spade to dig a hole at the back of the garden, cutting our way through nettle roots, turning over a couple of bones.

"Just our last cat," Carson speaks, quickly reburying them.

He sweeps up his father's broken legacy with a dustbin and brush, deposits it in the hole, takes some time arranging it, as if it's a Gaudí mosaic.

"No one's going to see it," Val says impatiently. "I'm getting cold."

We're still in our school uniforms and our legs are goose-bumpy.

"Your business in this world is complete," Carson speaks to his dad.

For a moment, I see Stanley's ghost leaning against the shed.

"Although," Carson looks towards the tumble-down shack, picks up a stray shard and turns it in his fingers, "your death has not yet been avenged."

"You're not going to kill Mel, are you?" Val asks worriedly.

Carson runs his finger along the sharp edge, then deposits the shard in its proper position. It glints. The glint is reflected in Carson's black pupils."Do I," his voice is less than reassuring, "look like the kind of man who would kill a woman?"

Chapter Fourteen

Lorraine

There's only one thing that can get me out of the house after this. My dad says it's a dirty thing, ketamine. He should know as he was one of the first to start selling it before it got big. He got it off his racing mates. "Not meant for humans, horse tranquilliser." Still, he sold it. White stuff that can numb a horse with a torn tendon, with a shin splint, so well it can race. It can put a horse to sleep, even a big, nervy racehorse with frothy nostrils and a heaving chest.

That's how I've been every day, like a horse before a big race, anxious, heart beating too fast, going dizzy when I stand up, thinking of going out the door. I don't like Guns N' Roses, but there's a song, Cold November Rain, that summarises how it is out there. Rain like gunshots that hurt and bruise. That's why I've got to be the one at the right end of the revolver.

So, for the first time, I sneak into Mum's room and steal some ket. To conceal my doings, I add to hers a tiny bit of talcum powder. In my room, on my bedside table, I cut a line and snort it. It burns my nose. It tingles. I fight the urge to sneeze and blow the rest of the powder, like a snowstorm, onto the floor. Then, the effect, the numbing. It takes away my pain more quickly than an ice pack on a swollen knee. It erases my memories more swiftly than an avalanche erases a mountain village. Tomorrow, I determine, Lorraine Winter will be back at school, twice as cruel.

Chesney

The only time I'm not with Val is when I'm at Eco Club. Everyone at school knows about us. Most people are okay. Everyone's aware of homosexuality these days. We've got an LGBTQIA+ club, but me and Val haven't been yet. There are just a few trads and jokers who point us out, "Lezzers." A couple of

girls in my PE class who won't shower or change near me. I haven't told Mum yet, but I think she might suspect.

At Eco Club, we have been studying mosses and learning how they indicate different habitats. I've managed to find and collect common pocket moss, *Fissidens taxifolius*, from the woodland in Greencroft Valley, grey cushioned grimmia, *Grimmia pulvinata*, from a wall near my home, and was surprised to find feathery bog moss, *Sphagnum cuspidatum,* in a pool on Val's lawn. *Sphagnum* usually only grows on peat bogs. Olivia suggested the spores had survived from when Kingsfold was Penwortham Moss.

I whisper their names like secrets, a little spell, to green the land, as I leave the science labs and walk across the seating area towards reception, in order to leave and walk home as there are no buses after Eco Club.

Someone grabs my arm and twists it behind my back. "Ow, ow, ow." My pain is replaced by terror as I look over my shoulder and see it is Lorraine, looking crueler than ever; her face a pale plasterboard of foundation, her eyes bluer than a cold winter sky, a cold-blooded smile on her thin lips.

"Do you want to buy some hash?" she asks in a convivial tone.

"No," I say, "get off me."

"Wrong answer." Lorraine twists harder.

"Ow!" She's going to break my arm. I need it for the work party in Greencroft Valley on Saturday. We're going to be planting trees in the woodland. I've chosen to plant the wild cherry saplings. I need to be able to dig a hole, put a tree in, put on the tree guard to protect it from browsing deer.

"Ow! Ow! Oh, okay." I submit.

She loosens my arm and reluctantly I get out my phone.

Triumph in those cold eyes, and I see they are slightly glassy and her pupils are dilated. She's on something and it isn't just weed. Disgusting. With reluctance, following her instructions, I transfer £20 to her bank account.

"Good," she says, "we're all set up now. I'll have some green for you next week."

She hands me a baggy with a little lump of black plasticky hash.

What am I going to do with it? I wonder worriedly on the way home. I can't bin it because someone might see me, look in the bin, find it, and report me. I can't bury it in the back garden because Robin might dig it up. I settle for hiding it at the back of my drawer in one of my jewellery boxes.

The next week, I get Olivia to walk me across the seating area. However, Lorraine is waiting for me, jumping me from the woodland beside Hill Road graveyard. She makes me buy the green. It stinks. I stash it behind the hash in a towel soaked in Pure Clean Linen air freshener.

The week after, I walk back down Cop Lane instead. Lunging from the roundabout outside my house, Lorraine grabs me and I'm faced not only with her but her brothers. Brady's pale, meaty fists. Aidan's cruel, gormless hands. A cold horror comes over me as I realise the Winters know where I live. Beneath the shade of the sycamores, no one can see us. I try to scream.

Lorraine clamps her hand over my mouth. "Silence."

"Do you want to buy some amphetamine?" asks Aidan.

I know better than to say, "No." Dumbly, I nod my head.

This time, I am told to transfer £50 into the Winter temporary bank account.

"We'll be here again tomorrow," says Brady, "I'll have some cocaine. £100."

The next day, I don't dare leave the house. For the first time in my life, I pretend I'm sick. My mother believes me. I look ill. Pale and frightened. Not hard to fake that I'm off colour, feel like I'm going to puke, haven't yet.

Val comes round after school, although I told her not to. As she comes into my room, she sniffs, "So that's why you have been off school. I'd never…"

She can smell it, the weed. I should have known I couldn't fool her.

"It's not like that. I haven't touched it. I wouldn't."

"Where is it?"

Reluctantly, I get out the baggy of green and lump of hash.

She opens the bag first, takes a peek, "Low-grade stuff," examines the hash, "cheap crap. Cut with shoe polish. Did you get this off Lorraine?"

I don't want to tell her. I don't want her to know I'm under threat, not after Amelia Sullivan, but I don't have any other way of explaining it. She knows that I don't do drugs, would never buy them except under coercion. "It's not going to continue," I lie, "that's all she wanted me to purchase."

Val does not believe me. Instead, slapping away my protests, she reaches into the drawer of my bedside table, pulls out skincare products, jewellery boxes, checks them, then, finally, from right at the back, the bag of amphetamine.

"Holy shit," she gasps, "I can see where this is going," appalled.

"I'm not going to let her get to me like Amelia Sullivan."

"You've already started missing school."

"I can handle it."

"What are you going to do with the drugs?"

I shake my head. "I'll think of something."

"I'll take them," she offers, "Carson will be able to get rid of them."

"I don't want him to know what happened. He might do something stupid."

"I'll think of another explanation."

"But you could get in trouble."

"My life has been one long list of troubles." She puts the drugs in her bag. "Come to school tomorrow. I'll walk you home. Everything will be alright."

Lorraine

My plan is working perfectly. Val went to Chesney's last night. Today, they're closer than doves in a nest, Val, her defender, never

leaving her side. I know, from my observations, that Val will walk Chesney home tonight. This time, my brothers and I will have both their monies.

I left school early to get myself ready, then settled myself in the bushes on the roundabout when none of the middle-class hoots were watching. I'm just waiting for my brothers now. They're late. What's taking them? It's 3.30 p.m. and Chesney and Val will be back at the house at 3.40 p.m.

I know Brady and Aidan are out together on the motorbike doing business in Chorley, a quick little job, should be back by now. I watch the digits on my phone change from 3.30 to 3.31 to 3.32, then the bastard thing rings. I'd silence it, but the number is Preston Hospital, one I know well.

"Hello," I speak hushedly.

"Is that Lorraine Winter?" a female voice.

"Yes."

"I'm ringing to inform you that your brothers are here at the hospital."

Oh shit. "What's happened to them? What have they done now?"

"They've been in a motorcycle accident."

Shitter and shitter. "How are they?"

"Aidan is okay. He has broken an arm and bruised his ribs. But Brady," she pauses, "hit his head. His helmet saved him, but he's in a coma, critical."

This is really shit and I don't believe it's an accident. "Coming." I get up from the bush, brush dirt and leaves from my skirt, run like a racehorse for the bus.

Chesney

The next day I'm surprised to see Lorraine, not waiting on the roundabout, but running as if the Hounds of Annwn are on her heels towards the bus stop. She's so preoccupied she doesn't see Val and I dodging onto Corncroft.

The day after, I find out why. Jemma, behind me in registration, is reading the headlines. “The Winter brothers have been in a motorcycle accident. It happened on the M61 when they were on their way to Chorley. Something on their bike blew and they swerved onto the hard shoulder, then into the bollard. Aidan has been injured and Brady is critical.”

“Deserves them right.” “Keep them out of the way.” No one is sympathetic.

So that’s why Lorraine was running so fast and her brothers didn’t show. I’m deeply relieved, but also highly suspicious of what and who caused it. It cannot be coincidence that the day after I tell Val about Lorraine forcing drugs on me and she trots back home with them to Carson, the accident happens. Carson knows machines. If he can fix them, he can break them.

“You and Carson are behind this, aren’t you?” I whisper to Val fractiously.

“Carson fixes, I clean, we don’t break stuff and leave a mess.”

Val doesn’t admit to it. Neither does Carson. Lorraine and her brothers do not attempt to sell me drugs again. As Christmas approaches, the sky stays grey, as if waiting to snow, but doesn’t, not even for the birth of Jesus.

On Christmas Day, Val comes round and gives us all presents. “The Oldest Animals of Penwortham. Ribble Otter, Priory Pond Dragonfly,” to grandma and grandad on Dad’s side, “Pear Tree Blackbird, Fish House Trout,” to grandma and grandad on Mum’s side. “Marsh Way Pond Newt.” My mum politely pretends to like the smooth newt.

Val has started selling models at school, not the gods yet but minor characters like the Chief of Boars and the Very Black Witch, and is doing well.

“And for you,” she holds out a figure wrapped in green tissue paper, watches breathlessly as I unfold it carefully without ripping the wrapping.

I gasp. It’s the goddess Creiddylad. The nature goddess is finally finished. Every detail is perfect, from her sweeping bark-

brown hair to her toenails with little whorled crescents in them to the wrinkles on the petals in her hair. “I love it.” I want to kiss her. Not in front of my family. That can wait until later.

I take out her present. I had to do a lot of research, then search her room when she wasn’t in to check which figures she hadn’t got. I watch in suspense as she unwraps her present, opens the box, exclaims with glee, “Inflatable Denys Fisher Stretch Hulk 1979 with stretchy arms and a hand pump!”

Grinning widely, she pumps him up, takes him in her arms, dances with him around our Christmas tree, then asks me to hold him while she pulls his arms. She sits him next to her at the dinner table and serves him a turkey platter with extra roasties, and I curse myself for buying a rival.

“The Hulk is not coming to Dad’s remembrance tree,” I tell her afterwards.

“Then I’ll stay here with the Hulk. I’m too full to walk.”

“Fine, I’ll go alone.” Perhaps that’s what I need.

I walk up to the woodland burial ground with Castle Hill Owl for Dad. He always liked owl time. Dawn and dusk. The times between night and day when tawny owls could be heard hooting around our house. He liked to run at those times, to race the sun up and to race the sun down. There’s no sign of the sun today, just grey clouds scowling over baby Jesus.

Dad’s remembrance tree is a rowan. It bore bright red berries in autumn. Now it is bare. I take with me the medals I won for coming second in the school cross-country running competition against other teams from Lancashire on our home ground at Priory and the third from Ashton High School.

I hang them on his tree with his other medals. “Every time I run for you,” I tell him. “Every time my feet cross the finish line, I think of your feet. One day, I will run 426,000 miles for you over the hills and the bogs.”

Does he hear me? A whisper of wind through his tree. The song of medals clinking.

Lorraine

Brady comes round. He gets over his concussion, but still gets splitting headaches. Aidan complains about his arm because it isn't setting right. They're both mad with pain and furious with Carson. It couldn't be anyone else who sabotaged their bike in such a way that the police couldn't find the fault.

Unfortunately, they have no more success in killing him than I do. I'm the brains, they're the brawn, you see. He leads them a merry dance into the Mile Tunnel at Maudlands to get savaged by Ratty and his pack. He gets them pecked into the most toxic stretch of the canal by a huge Canada goose. He nearly gets them knocked down on the crossing of the Preston to Southport Line that's in the middle of nowhere on Farington Moss. They really should have known better than to try following him to Clayton Hall Landfill. The stink of it filled the house for days—like garbage men, they were.

I'm stubborn. I'll keep going at a hard task, like a hammer trying to hit a nail into a boulder, until the nail breaks. But I don't want to hit breaking point. I don't want to be a crumpled, rusty, useless, discarded nail. It looks like I'm going to have to have a chinwag with Mum and Dad.

I choose my time, on New Year's Eve, in the afternoon before the masquerade. They're congenial, then, preparing to put on their masks and gowns. Mum was a proper dancer, Latin, ballroom, before she took up lap dancing. She likes to take Dad by the hand, give him a twirl around our living room. It's a big thing, our New Year's Masquerade. Tickets only. Highest bidders win.

"Mum, Dad, I need a word." When I say, "At the table," they know I'm serious.

We sit down, all formal-like. Mum and Dad in their big armchairs, in their day clothes, with visions of glittery face masks, owl-feathered, golden-enamelled, be-jewelled, be-diamonded, with beaked noses, in their eyes.

“Mum, Dad, I’m at the end of my tether. I just cannot kill Carson. I’ve tried following him night and day and cannot catch him. I’ve tried getting at him through his sister’s girlfriend and look what happened to my brothers. They’ve tried to kill him and only come a cropper.”

My parents tut and exchange glances.

“You go first, dear,” Dad suggests.

“You’re getting predictable, girl,” says Mum, “with your ceaseless cruelty.”

“What do you expect? I’m trying to kill him, not swaddle him.”

“Perhaps you should change tactics and try a bit of,” she makes a lewd gesture.

“Not a chance. Some girls fancy him, but I like a bit of meat on my men. Besides, he’s asexual. He wouldn’t know a pair of tits if they slapped him in the face. When Alice tried to seduce him, she didn’t even get a wink.”

“What about trying,” Mum leans close, whispers in my ear, “kindness?”

My mind goes blank as a sheet of snow. Who would have thought of such a thing?

“He’d never predict it, good at calculations as he is,” says Mum.

“Agreed,” says Dad, “I’ve been watching the boy closing down the Summer lines and turning the Summer trade over to his business. He has done us a bigger boon than all the rest of the Winter Crew put together. Plus, like his father, I’d say he’s more Summer than Winter at heart.”

I think of Carson’s conversation with Gwyn ap Nudd and swallow.

“Get Carson to come to us,” promises Dad, “and I might buy you that little pony.”

Oh, I very much want a horse. I want a horse so much, but at what cost! “That’s insane,” I say, “you let that thieving rat bag

into the Winter House and he will vanish all our lines, all our drugs, take the house away with him."

"He might fool the Summers, but he won't fool us." Mum's face is pearly hard as her earrings. "We'll work him 'til he hasn't a spark of life left."

"Then," says Dad, "you can kill him."

By the Devil and all his demons, I love the way their minds work.

Chapter Fifteen

Chesney

"Come to the Green Viper to learn self-defence," Amina encourages me and Val.

After my bullying by Lorraine and her brothers, we agree. On a Monday evening, we walk to the industrial estate and enter through the green neon viper.

"Chesney Liddell," Mark takes my signature, "what brings you here?"

"I had a run-in with the Winters," I admit somewhat sheepishly.

"And Val Robinson," he looks surprised, "I've been concerned about you. Have you and your brother not heard me knocking on your door or my telephone calls? You should both be in care by now with your parents dead."

"We haven't heard a thing and no one told us that," Val speaks evasively.

"There seems to be a glitch in the online database; otherwise, the authorities…"

"We're both fine and Carson will be sixteen soon."

"You'd be better at New Horizons in Preston or ROC in Chorley."

"Are you trying to get rid of us again?" Val demands.

"No, no," Mark blinks his red eyes rapidly behind his glasses.

I'm not keen on the look of the gym. The brutal images on the walls. The masculinity of it, even the women, in the photos, killing faces on. I don't like the look of the ring, the thought of what goes on there. Some people call it the cage, and I feel if I was in there, I'd be a trapped animal.

"That must be where Brady Winter got taken down by Sunbeam," Val laughs, "got his knee popped out by a knee lock and cried like a newborn baby."

We take our places in the area where the gym equipment has been pushed to one side. However can anybody be strong enough to lift such weights?

"Daniel's late again," Amina notes.

"He used to work out before practice," Fatima informs me.

"You should have seen him," Aisha speaks admiringly, "squatting 160kg."

"Deadlifting 180kg," claims Fatima.

"But," Aisha looks troubled, "over the last few months, he's been working out less and looking more troubled and depressed."

"Something's been eating him," Fatima speaks.

"Here he is," Amina looks to her watch, "7.05 p.m."

I look towards the doors, see a large man, more than filling a black T-shirt and black trackie bottoms. His hair is shaven close. His ears are cauliflower-shaped. His nose is flatter than my mum's dough after a good rolling.

"He's been in a fight." Aisha observes fresh bruising along his jawline.

"And look at his neck, more…" Fatima whispers to Aisha behind her hand.

"What are they talking about?" I ask Amina.

"I know," says Val, "I know what's been eating him."

"Hickies," says Amina.

"What?"

"Love-bites."

"They're not just love-bites." Val stares in aversion.

I look at the marks and see that it looks like he's been bitten by a leech.

"That's Mel's doing," Val narrows her eyes, "I'd recognise them anywhere after seeing them on Dad. I'll bet she's got him walking in my father's shoes, serving the Winters and the Summers too."

"Should we leave?" I ask.

"We don't think he's fully in their thrall," states Fatima.

“I’d say he’s been putting up a fight,” Aisha looks at his bruises.

“But against who?” asks Val.

“Ssh,” says Amina as he approaches.

He introduces himself. “Daniel Green.” He has kind eyes, but they have a haunted look in them that reminds me of a mine shaft.

Once all the participants have filed in, Daniel leads us through a warm-up. Jogging on the spot. Air-punches. Air squats and lunges. I enjoy it. Val pants along with an expression of dourness and resentment on her face. He introduces the five D’s - decide, deter, disrupt, disengage, debrief. Then, we pick a partner. Val and I pair up. We run through some basic moves.

Val proves to already know an elbow strike and palm heel strike.

“Carson and I knew,” she whispers, between attacking and defending, “that the Winters have got two new fixers who work at the EE shop in Preston.”

Vicious, her kick to the groin, coming very close to my privates.

“We knew that their new trafficker is a big man in a balaclava.”

I retaliate and she gestures me to come closer and attack harder.

“We never imagined Daniel, him being a good working-class man.”

I notice how smoothly the Iqbal sisters flow, locking, striking, palms millimetres from chins, noting to steer well clear of Aisha’s hammer-fist punch.

Daniel watches Val as darkly and suspiciously as she watches him.

We’re led through a cool down - side stretches, then sitting on the floor with our legs in front of us, then in a V shape, leaning forward to touch our toes.

I leave feeling uncomfortable, and more so when Val points to Mark's neck on the way out. "Can you see what I see?" she asks, astounded.

"No, you're not suggesting…" I look back.

"Look closely."

I wouldn't believe it of Mark Denver, but the truth is there to be seen - a love-bite on his perfectly tanned neck just above his well-ironed white collar.

Lorraine

Being nice is quite some challenge. I ask Alice for advice. She shows me some nice faces. She tries to teach me to smile. "Imagine you're greeting a friend."

I don't have any friends. Not even her. My only friend is my knife. The only times I smile are when I've got one up on my brothers, bullied or knifed a victim, or been so good I get to eat a whole Booths chicken. I try it.

"No, that's a grimace," she says, "you look like a golem gurning."

"How's this?" I think instead of beating my brothers.

"Better," she admits.

"This?" I think of sticking my knife in Carson.

"Getting there."

"This?" I think of my chicken.

"Perfect."

I walk around the school with that smile on my face, and people flee faster.

I sit smiling nicely in English as Mrs Lancaster calls out the roles for our end-of-school play, Macbeth. One of my dad's favourites. I know the script well.

"King Duncan, Carl," "Macduff, Jason," "Malcolm, Lee." "Banquo, Johnny."

I smile so well that I don't get cast as one of the three witches. I hope desperately that I will get to be Lady Macbeth, but instead,

that goes to Alice. Everybody waits with bated breath to see who will be Lady Macbeth.

"Lady Macbeth, Lorraine."

I can't believe it, after all my smiling, they typecast me and my knife.

Who is going to be Macbeth? There aren't many males left. Just James and Carson, who is trying to make himself even more invisible, edging his chair right back into the darkness of the corner and shrouding himself in gloom.

"Macbeth, Carson."

No more perfect opportunity to form a partnership. I'm delighted.

Carson shrinks so far into the corner he almost disappears as I smile at him.

"Come, Carson," says Mrs Lancaster, "it is about time you stepped from the shadows, got up on the stage, came into the light. I know you've got talent."

And so he has. Hailing the witches, receiving their prophecies of his grandeur, lamenting their banishing into bubbles of the earth, to air and wind.

"Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor, greater than both," I greet him cordially.

He fails to spit the following words of greeting from his mouth.

"My dearest love," Mrs Lancaster reminds him.

He knows but he can't say them.

"My dearest love," I encourage him.

He glares at me, then at Mrs Lancaster hatefully.

"Imagine you're greeting your dearest lover," suggests Alice.

"You know I don't do sex or romance." He glances to his ring.

"How about your sister or your cat, Courtney?" Alice helps.

I think he settles for his cat as he mouths the words near-silent as a cat's yawn.

Chesney

It turns out we didn't need to learn self-defence. Lorraine Winter has turned uncharacteristically nice. It must be the drugs. It's scarier to see her smiling than staring daggers with her hand on the knife we know she keeps in a hidden pocket in her skirt, and everybody runs twice as quickly.

"She's even been sucking up to Carson," Val tells me, "what's more, they've been cast as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the end-of-school play."

It's a tradition for the fifth years to stage a final performance before they leave.

"She's been helping him learn his lines, mouthing them when she's off stage. As if he could forget 'Stars hide your fires' and 'is this a dagger I see before me?' He says, when she's performing the handwashing scene, saying 'out damn spot', she does it so authentically he thinks she's killed a man."

I don't like it. I'm certain Lady Macbeth has a dagger up her sleeve.

As the end of term arrives, the theatre is packed to the rafters. A sell-out. More than enough tickets sold to replace the stolen curtain. Students, teachers, parents. Others pretending to be them to get in. People crammed at the back. I can sense the ghosts of the dead have turned out for this.

They cut stunning figures in cardboard crowns, painted silver, and false ermine cloaks. They would have been a perfect match for each other but for the height difference the wrong way. Lorraine is 5ft 10 and Carson 5ft 6. Still, he makes up for it in stature, strutting in sultry majesty across the stage.

There's a tension between them that's electric. There's a film and I couldn't tell you its name where a hunter faces a stag and the hunter knows he's going to kill, and the stag, majestic and quivering, knows he's going to die. That's the look that passes between them. Only, they can't decide which is which, predator or prey. The balance shifts throughout the scenes. The cauldron boils and bubbles as they play out their baneful ambitions.

Johnny, in a white sheet, rants and raves as Banquo's ghost. Their relationship falls apart. "Your face, my thane, is a book where men may read strange matters," her accusation. "You," he says, voice dark, penetrating, observant, "look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under't."

If she's planning to kill him, she doesn't get the chance. The play ends, as it should, with Lady Macbeth going off wringing her hands and her suicide off stage and the vanquishing and beheading of Macbeth by Macduff.

The applause is deafening as the characters take their final bows. Carson and his papier-mâché head, so lifelike, both grinning, made to be on the stage. Lorraine, blood still on her hands, waving her crown, smiling, triumphant.

*

After the final day of school, at the Robinson house, Carson, Olivia, and Johnny burn their school uniforms and celebrate with shots of vodka and rum.

"Now Carson's sixteen and has left school, there is no chance of us going into care," Val speaks with relief, "there'll be no more knocking from Mark."

They have a drunken jam in the living room, Carson on guitar and vocals, Olivia on lead guitar, Johnny on bass, Val slapping her knees for the drums.

"We should form a band," says Carson.

"Yes," Olivia agrees.

Johnny nods. "What are we going to call ourselves?"

"The Doom of Kingsfold." "Moss Acre Road Rockers." They can't decide.

They practice all summer whilst I'm volunteering—helping lay a new path through Greencroft Valley as the last one has been so badly eroded by rainwater, mending the stairs, painting the bridges, planting more wildflowers.

At first, Val likes the band, but she soon gets fed up with them. "Terrible racket whilst I'm trying to focus on painting my models. What's more, there's electrical equipment all over the living room again. A collection of guitars, speakers, amps, a synthesizer, a huge drum kit with every kind of drum and cymbal. I wouldn't mind, but they haven't got a drummer. They've tried recruiting, but they all say the band is too experimental and off-beat."

I nod along with her, sympathising, thinking I wouldn't like the mess or noise.

"Anyhow," she tells me a couple of weeks later, "I banished them."

"How?"

"I lost my rag," she admits, "went down from my room, waving my paintbrush, splattering them with angry red paint, and they vanished to a room in the Mill on Aqueduct Street, Preston, and I haven't seen them since."

Lorraine

I've finished school. I didn't get very good grades, except in drama, I got an A* for my performance as Lady Macbeth. But I don't think I'll be taking up an acting career, going on the stage. I've got real work to do.

I refused my Dad's instructions to let Mel train me up. I know how she deals with customers and want to remain free to choose to whom I open my legs. I know she's playing Summer and Winter and gaming with Daniel. So, I'm going it alone, said I can handle the old customers, find new ones. Not easy, with the Summers about, Carson fixing here and there.

Damn it, I got so close, but he refused my offer of a private rehearsal. Happy now, he is, with his band. His sister with her ginger lovebird. As for me? Who needs friends? I've got a little bag of white magic. I've got a knife that can cut a rainbow from the sky, with one cold slash can turn joy to sorrow. We've got plenty of friends to meet yet. A long, bloody road ahead.

Chapter Sixteen

Chesney

"Mist Patrol." "No." "Patrolling Paupers." "Even worse." "The Poor Prestonians."

"AI is even poorer at coming up with band names than us," bemoans Olivia.

The band is sitting at the dining table around one of Carson's laptops. Val and I are seated on the work surface, and she is painting a model white horse.

Carson frowns, clicks the mouse, types quickly, and changes the algorithm.

"Rainbow Knights of Penwortham." "Cubs of Castle Hill."

"Makes us sound like Boy Scouts." Johnny shakes his silvery head.

Carson's frown deepens, and his typing is quicker and more irritated.

"The Lost Gargoyles of Gargareth Hill." "The Pied Pipers of Parbold."

"It's lost us now," says Olivia. "How about we go back to pen and paper, mixing up the words in one of your dad's old sacks, taking it in turns to draw?"

Carson shuts down the machine. "There has got to be a better way." To Johnny, "How did the ancient bards of Britain get their inspiration before computers?"

"They had rituals," Johnny replies. "Hunting, killing an animal, feasting on its flesh, then wrapping themselves in its hide to receive a prophetic dream. Sleeping in a cave with a stone on their chests. Then, there's hills, mountains, where it's said if you sit out all night, in vigil, you return dead, mad, or a poet."

Carson purses his lips.

"Don't be thinking of killing any deer," Olivia forbids.

"There's not any caves around here, proper ones, anyway," Johnny notes.

“No mountains,” says Carson. “So it will have to be a hill, Castle Hill.”

“I wouldn’t go there,” says Johnny, “according to local legend, there’s a fairy funeral procession, and if you see your corpse in the coffin, you will die.”

“Even better,” Carson refuses to be put off, “if there are Otherworld spirits.”

Val frowns at him. “You know full well Penwortham Wood isn’t safe. And I’m not talking about fairies but the other nefarious goings-on.”

“A risk I’m prepared to take to win our band name.” Carson looks out of the window at the half moon rising. “I’ll go on the full moon on Halloween.”

Lorraine

Wherever is he going, like a happy little camper with his bag full of kindling and a sleeping bag, kettle, and metal cup, on All Hallows’ Eve?

I recall from school that Carson was not one for outdoor adventures. He disappeared in the mist when we went orienteering up Beacon Fell. When we climbed Helvellyn for our geography school trip, we lost him on the aretes, Striding Edge and Swirral Edge, thought he had fallen into Red Tarn.

It’s a clear, dark night, the full moon high in the sky like a super-sized disco light. It’s not hard to find him. I didn’t need Cavall, who passed away two days ago. I just followed the clang, clang, clang of cup on kettle to where he’s walking the old pilgrim’s path from where the East Lancs train-line used to run by the caravan park, through the meadows, past the footbridge, into Well Field. Soaked with water, it is. Typical, when I’ve only got my trainers on and he’s no better in his flimsy little black plimsoles from the bargain bucket in Shoe Zone. He’s through it with barely a splash and I’m like a water-horse with big, white, water-churning hooves. Wet because of rain, not a well, because

St Mary's Well dried up years ago in the industrial period, when the aquifer beneath the hill was shattered, when they moved the Ribble 500m south to build Riversway Docklands. Some feat. Doesn't stop him from making a quaint little offering. A sprinkling of tobacco. A nip of vodka. Up the stairs to the A59. He nods to the war memorial. Damn him, he goes towards Fairy Lane, knowing full well it's Halloween.

Not afraid of fairies, me, of queer little men in black with red caps. What I am afraid of is Amelia Sullivan's ghost, hanging from the tree, in Penwortham Wood. What if she comes at me like some demented Cindy doll with a big rope burn round her neck, tongue lolling, cold, pale limbs?

Nervous, I am, as Carson pauses at the gate, speaks some formal words. "Gwyn ap Nudd, you who are far in the forest, for the love of your mate allow me to come home." A Pagan invocation. He waits. Wind through the boughs. A shiver up my spine as he walks onto the dark pathway edged on either side with trees between Penwortham By-Pass and Castle Hill.

He ducks under the leaning yew tree, near horizontal, near lying on the ground like a dead warrior. I follow, shadowy green needles tickling my hair. It's a night for shadows, it's a night for fae folk, a night for the returning dead.

It's a night for partying for the paupers, the vagrants, the tramps who've made their camp in Penwortham Wood, sitting at their fire, smoking roll-ups, drinking cheap 2-litre bottles of cider. They haven't seen a wash, those lot, since they were bathed in their mothers' birthing juices. Their hair and beards, full of burs and seeds, have never seen a comb. And their clothes are so thin and careworn, have so many times been patched and restitched, they might as well be sewn from leaves - yellow maple, brown sycamore, copper beech. Their tents spring up like mushrooms, place to place, as they avoid the police, sinking back into their mycelial network, re-arising.

Carson stops off, shares some vodka, passes round skins and tobacco, smokes a rollie. He waves away their cheap cider, moves

on. Now we're getting towards that haunted place. Will I see her swinging there, her accusing eyes, her doll face, like the scary doll in that Annabelle movie? A horrible creaking from the bough, but I see nothing but the echo of my fear.

He exits the woods, turns left, goes past the wall, up through the hole in the railings. Then, he begins to climb the castle mound, circumambulating it. Another Pagan rite. I'm saving each of these to my phone for the Inquisition.

When he gets to the top, he tears up an old newspaper, lays out his kindling, lights the fire with his Zippo and lays on a couple of logs. He speaks some ritual words, something about "a vigil" and "inspiration", then pours more vodka. Unfolding a stand, he hangs up his kettle. When it whistles merrily, like the steam trains that blow by beside the Ribble, he pours a cup of hot water. Steam rises. Warm, his hands must be on the cup, not like mine.

Seeing his gaze is steady on the fire, I edge my way round, get myself some shelter, sitting against the wall of St Mary's Church. Chilly, it is here. Cold on my bum bones. Cold on my back. But I've got Mother Mary watching over me, my guardian angels. I won't come to any harm tonight.

Why, you might ask, am I here? Well, I'm telling you now it isn't to escape the fair, the Fun House, Stanley Robinson's revenant spirit there. It's not to do ill to Carson. No, not tonight. I'm just waiting for my moment, when he gets all lonely, needs a friend, to have a little chinwag.

*

I'm bloody cold. He's all happy with his fire, not looking at all lonely. He's got his friend, the kettle to talk to, a friend that boils and whistles. What will I do? I snort a line of ket off the back of my hand to dull the chill.

The full moon is at its zenith. It's gone midnight. Nothing's going to happen.

Then, what's that? The sound of a cup on a kettle? No, it sounds more like a bell. I look up at the bell tower of the church, but it isn't coming from the belfry. It isn't coming from the heavens. It sounds like it's coming from the depths of Hell. And here they come. I can't believe it. Here come the shadow men. Here come the devils in their black garments and their red caps. They are carrying a coffin on their shoulders and singing a dolorous song.

And would you believe it? It's him at the head. Tall, black hat, funeral garments, face black, white hair flowing like a river of moonlight. The King of the Fairies, the King of the Otherworld, ringing a silver passing bell. I recognise him from the fair, the Hunter of Souls, Gwyn ap Nudd.

If they're truly fairies, I'm the Mother of God. I try to get a shot on my phone. It comes out all misty and blurry, my screen blanks, then goes out.

I look at Carson. He's up on his feet, trembling like a gazelle, wide-eyed and wider-mouthed, staring at the fairies, staring into the coffin. And who is in that coffin? I'm almost as surprised as Carson to see it's his corpse. A terrible shiver runs through him. He turns white as a bone, drops his cup.

Still, he regains his composure, greets the Fairy King, the spectral wayfarer. He offers him a nip of vodka and swiftly rolls him a cigarette. With the wave of a dark sleeve, the unearthly ruler turns his offerings down, points sombrely to the corpse, then to Carson, then he takes the boy by the arm.

The portent of his end has been swiftly enacted. He's being taken to Hell! He needs a friend. I'd rush to save him if I could, but my limbs are numb and frozen from sitting so long. My bum's stuck, as if by glue, to the ground.

The Fairy King is leading Carson down the hill, and at the front, he is opening a door. He's opening a tunnel, a long, dark tunnel, spiralling down.

*

And I, and I… I must be in a reverie, I must be dreaming, I must be in a trance, because I can see them, the Fair One, Carson, emerging in another land.

And oh, it is beautiful. And oh, it is sublime! Green, green hills, horses grazing on them. Wild white horses with rippling manes and flowing tails. And look at them, at how they're prancing, look how high they lift their feet, as if they want their knees to kiss the sky, as if they're walking on knives.

And oh, look at the rivers. Look at them sparkling like wine or mead. Fizzing like my mum's Prosecco at our masquerade on New Year's Eve.

And, oh, don't say he's going to get a horse. Oh, but he is! The white-haired god is whistling up a white stallion and a white mare. He's on the stallion in one vault, like a circus vaulter, whilst Carson's holding out his hand to the mare, letting her sniff it, patting her shoulder. Then, damn him, he's on. No saddle, no bridle. Just a piece of mane in his hand. How he clings on!

Oh, I'm jealous. The sound of hoofbeats. The sight of hoof-prints on the land. Horses are long gone from the fields on Lord's Lane and I am horseless.

And where are they going? To where are they galloping? Over the hills and far away to a glass castle, shining bright, brighter than the sun its ghost light.

They dismount. And what's inside? What a delight. What a feast! By God and all his angels, it's heavenly; by the Devil and all his demons, what temptation. There's dainty delicacies dripping with honey, all manner of sweet meats, sticky fruits in stickier fingers, fruited muffins, nuts, and seeds.

"Take your pick," the Fairy King invites Carson.

He politely declines with a shake of his head. He drinks not from the circling mead horn, dances not with the fair merry dancers in blue and red.

In the centre of the hall is a cauldron bubbling and boiling more beautifully and banefully than the one in Macbeth. And

around it, oh the treasures! There's a golden mead cup that never runs dry, a brazen beer mug that never loses its froth. A harp that plays on its own. A hamper of silver fishes, leaping forth, as if they're spanning Stainforth Force in mid-October.

And oh the spoils. Stomping his hooves on the golden coins, a brindled ox, a hundred knobs on his collar. A silver-headed beast. A white red-eared cow with horns, a treasure trove of stars circling around her head, like a halo.

"Take your pick," the Fairy King invites Carson.

He politely declines with a shake of his head.

The dull boy, the idiot boy, I can't believe he's turned such treasures down. I could sell them, make a small fortune, pawn them off to Charlie Watson who snoops for real antiques on the car boot sale at Charnock Richard.

Finally, a white red-eared hound approaches from beneath a table, lollops out long-legged, in his jaws an old brittle and hollow white bone,
drops it at Carson's feet. He picks it up, smiles, pats the dog on the head.

"A fitting choice." The Fairy King nods his white-haired head.

And it's done. They're riding back, Carson clutching the bone. They're coming back out of the door in the mound, returning to the summit, where the fire has burnt down, leaving only a black and red memorial of embers. I can't believe the stupid nincompoop has come back with just an old white bone!

He doesn't even know what to do with it. Look at him, confusedly conversing with the Fairy King. He's pointing at the bone. The king is pointing at him. Finally, a dawning look of knowing crosses his foolish face.

Carson meets the Fairy King's gaze. He nods. Some agreement passes. They hold the bone at each end. They shake. The bone disappears, the Fairy King with it. Carson gasps, as if in shock, as if in pain. He pulls back his right sleeve. There, on the inside of his right forearm, is the tattoo of a bone. An ulna, etched onto his arm, from elbow to wrist, ominous and hollow.

Finally, some evidence of his misdeeds that isn't going to disappear.

*

Carson stares into the embers and traces the tattoo with his forefinger. He mutters something about a "hollow bone" and says, "What have I done?" He taps the kettle, sighs, pours a cup of cold water from the spout, and adds a shot of vodka. He sits down and stares into the red-black glow, looking pensive.

Here's my chance to show him a little friendship. I stand.

Noticing movement, he drops his cup, is on his feet, with his pocket knife in his hand.

I hold out my empty hands. "I mean no threat."

"I'll believe that when you're dead and buried six feet deep."

"We've been closer than this before and you know I don't bite."

He's tense as a stag in the eye of an arrow or a bird in the face of a bullet.

"I saw what happened. Everything. You can talk to me about it."

"What exactly did you see?" he demands, narrowing his eyes on me.

"The fairy funeral and your deal with the Fairy King, Gwyn ap Nudd."

A tremor of surprise moves through him like a breeze through a tree.

"I've seen your tattoo," I take a chance, play a wild card, "and know what it means."

"You do?" Suspicion, unease, a swiftly covered glimmer of hope.

"Uh huh." I edge myself out of the darkness. "Can I join you on the mound?"

"It's not very warm up here with the fire gone out."

"I'm a Winter. I can handle that."

I don't bother circumambulating the mound. I just walk straight up, grabbing onto a chunk of grass here and there, avoiding the brambles.

"Vodka?" Carson offers.

I take a swig. "Ket?" I offer him a line.

"No thanks." He makes a rollie and offers to roll me one.

"Not unless there's weed in it."

"Haven't got any."

"Neither have I."

Niceties over, "So, you really saw them, him?" presses Carson.

Riled him, that has. "Him with his moon-white hair and them in red and black."

"And you know what this…" he reveals the tattoo again. Up closer, I see the bone looks disturbingly lifelike, is edged in black and a little red around the edges.

"It means you've made a deal with the Winter King. You're a Winter now. My dad's seen how well you've done closing down the Summer lines."

"He's been watching me?" Carson looks concerned but not overly surprised.

"He thinks you're doing a right good job," I tell him, "wants you to join us like your father. Imagine. With our existing power and your fixing skills, we could have the run of Kingsfold, Penwortham, South Ribble, Lancashire, the North West even, maybe Britain."

"We're not in Macbeth anymore," Carson speaks dourly. He pulls down his sleeve peevishly as if he regrets showing me and takes a drag on his cigarette.

"How," whilst I've got my chance, I push further, "did you get through that door?"

"There are places, times, where the veil is thin," he replies hesitantly.

"Why did you come back with just a bone and not any treasure?"

“You should read what it says in the folklore about fairy money and food.”

“What does it say in the lore about bones? Hollow bones?”

“I guess,” Carson says, “I’ve more reading to do.”

He takes a final drag on his cigarette and tosses the butt into the embers.

When he leaves, the clang of the cup on the kettle is not as cheerful as before.

I take a good look around, but for the life of me cannot find the doorway. Right place and right time, I realise, then the treasure will be mine.

Chapter Seventeen

Chesney

"Where'd you get it?" Val asks Carson as she stares at his tattoo. "It looks so lifelike, like it's just been robbed from a grave. Steve's Tattoos? Studio 81?"

"A little out-of-the-way place at the top of Penwortham," he speaks noncommittally.

I move closer, take a look for myself, it does look true to life, more like a holographic representation of a bone and I can somehow tell it is hollow inside. What's more, a shiver runs through me, I recognise it. That night, after Stanley Robinson's death, in the hand of Gwyn ap Nudd, Lord of the Dead.

My eyes meet Carson's. Bone-like shards of light in them. He knows I know.

"How did you get it?" I ask him.

He tightens, so do the band, looking from Carson to me and Val, back again.

They know and he's trying to hide it from me and his sister.

"I know that look," growls Val, "there's something you're not telling me."

"Alright," says Carson, "if you must know I will tell you, but it mustn't go any further. I could end up in danger for reasons that will soon become clear."

"As if you're not already in enough trouble," Val looks gloomy.

The curtains in the kitchen are closed, not so much in case of watchers who might look upon the incriminating tattoo but to shut out the grey sky. Since the full moon it has not stopped raining. I can hear it drumming on the roof and thundering down the newly repaired gutters into the drains.

"To find a name for our band I undertook a vigil on Castle Hill on Halloween."

"Where the fairy funeral walks," says Val, "did you see it?"

Carson swallows. “Yes.”

“You didn’t see your corpse in the coffin, did you?”

Carson changes the subject. “I met the Fairy Leader, who turned out to be Gwyn ap Nudd, the Fairy King, the Lord of the Otherworld himself. He took me to his realm, to his castle, offered me food and drink and treasures.”

“Ooh!” cries Val, “did you bring something back for me?”

Carson shakes his head. “I knew better than to touch fairy food or money.”

“Did you bring anything back?”

“Just one thing - a Hound of the Otherworld gave me a bone.”

Val winces. “You had the pick of all the treasures of Annwn and all you brought back is a dirty old bone. That is absolutely typical of you!”

“But how,” I ask, “did the bone become a tattoo?”

“I…” Carson gets up, checks no one is listening at the window, opens his phone to check the cameras. Satisfied, he sits back down on his kitchen chair and rocks on it as if he needs the rocking motion to help get the words out. “I made a deal with Gwyn ap Nudd.”

Gasps all around. It seems even the band didn’t know that part.

He saw his corpse in the coffin. Only that could push him to such an extreme.

“What kind of deal?” asks Olivia, her olive eyes large and concerned.

“He asked me to become a hollow bone.”

Her eyes widen further.

“You know what that means?” Hope and desperation on his face.

“Yes,” she replies, “there’s a very well-known saying by Frank Fool’s Crow, who was one of the religious leaders of the Lakota people of North America, my mother-line. He said: ‘When we become hollow bones, there is no limit to what the Higher Powers can do in and through us in spiritual things’.”

“Wow.” Carson shivers, and a shimmer runs along the tattoo.

“No limit to the power,” Val looks edgy.

“In spiritual things,” Olivia speaks markedly, “not in acts of crime.”

“Well, we’ve got that worked out,” says Johnny, “but whose bone is it?”

“I’m not sure,” Carson admits, “I know it is someone’s ulna.”

Yes, the tattoo is where an ulna would be, on his inner forearm, the same size and shape.

“An ulna, an arm bone,” Johnny scratches his head, “I can’t think of any legends, except,” he snaps his fingers, “in the lore surrounding Gwyn’s father, Lludd or Nudd, who was known in ancient Britain as Nodens. Nodens got his arm cut off in a battle against the giant, Bel, and it was replaced with a silver arm.” He stares at the tattoo in awe, “That means you’ve got…”

“The arm bone of Nodens, or Nudd, Gwyn’s father!” Carson exclaims.

The tattoo glimmers as we all stare and consider the connotations.

“Hollow Bone is a great name for a band,” says Olivia.

“And what a back story,” says Johnny.

Lorraine

“I’ve seen the evidence etched on Carson’s forearm,” I tell Dad proudly, “clear to see as skin is skin and bone is bone; he’s done a deal with the old gods.”

We’re at the Round Table, just he and I, our little secret this. I’m not having my brothers getting a whiff of it; too dumb to understand witchcraft, they are.

“What exactly has he got on his arm?” Dad’s white brows furrow.

“A tattoo,” I tell him, “of an old and hollow bone.”

“Hmm. Kids his age are always getting tattoos. What’s special about this one?”

"The way he got it by a ritual up on Castle Hill, calling on them spirits we call fairies but are really the dark powers beneath the earth." Greatly daring, "I didn't see them but I sensed them and he vanished into the hill."

I literally see Dad's hackles rise. The white hairs on the back of his neck stand up and I know that he believes me and I'm onto a goer with this.

"He came out with an ulna and I heard him talking to someone."

"Did he give a name?"

Even more daring, "Gwyn ap Nudd."

A coldness, a frostiness descends on his expression and on the room. It's as if the god himself has come in and frozen my Dad's face and our Round Table.

"And then?" He talks through teeth it is an effort to stop chattering like icicles.

Dad's afraid of Gwyn, I note, wonder if he's seen him. "Carson made some agreement. Some deal. Shook the bone. It then became his tattoo."

A shiver shudders over Dad. "This is devilish work," he asserts. "You go to your room a moment and I will call one of my friends at the Inquisition."

Yes! Finally I have got the evidence they need.

"You'll need to report everything you have said."

"What, you're calling one of the inquisitors here?"

"I know the perfect man for dealing with Carson."

This gets better and better. I'm almost jumping out of my skin.

I go to my room, sit on my bed, twiddling my thumbs, flexing my fingers, picking at my nails, and trying to call to mind all I know about the New Catholic Inquisition. Unlike the Spanish Inquisition, which was connected with their royal family and the Roman Catholic Church and had its own council, courts, and system of communications, interrogations, trials, and public ceremonies, ours has not got a formal structure and remains underground. Rogue inquisitors acting out of basements. Moving

about through the growing network of underground tunnels connecting the priest holes. Keeping in touch to share information and increasingly nasty torture techniques through secret databases and online communication channels. To be honest, a little scared, I am. Them inquisitors have nasty reputations.

"Lorraine," Dad calls.

By the Devil and all his demons, that was quick. Perhaps, as rumoured, like sewer rats, you're never more than a few metres away from an inquisitor.

Slightly nervous, I make my way to our meeting room and open the door. Beside Dad sits a formidable man with black, grey-streaked hair and eyes as grey as the pitiless November skies when the rain clouds cannot weep. His jawline is harsh, predatory, like that of a hungry lone wolf. He wears a black suit and grey tie, and I can just make out, etched upon his breast, in subtle stitching, the black cross that marks his role.

"This is Vance Jackson," says Dad.

I know that name. I didn't know he was an inquisitor. Vance is the owner of the Oblivion nightclub in Preston and runs the record label Oblivion Records. I've heard the rumours about people going to Oblivion and not coming out or leaving irreparably changed and about the bands he signs being driven into downward spirals of desolation and despair.

"Good afternoon," I say, "I'm Lorraine Winter."

"At last we meet," says Vance, "your dad has been telling me about your progress, since you were little, keeping watch on those iniquitous Robinsons."

I'm proud, but I'm finding this creepy, my guard hairs rising.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell me the story from the beginning."

So, I do, the whole thing, from my first meeting with Carson at primary school when all us kids were playing with toys and he with a pair of dirty old bones all the way up to when he got the hollow bone tattoo on his forearm.

"A hollow bone." Vance takes from his briefcase a black-bound book and looks through it. I catch glimpses of warts, extra

nipples, moles, birthmarks, black blemishes in all shapes and sizes—splotchy phantoms, black dogs. Thwarted, he turns to another book on bones and goes through a series of relics—the elbow bone of Saint Thomas Beckett, the shoulder blade of Saint Alban, the hand of Saint Edmund Arrowsmith. He pauses momentarily on a later page showing a Hand of Glory, then shakes his head. "An ulna, you said?" he double-checks with me.

"Yes."

He turns to the index, frowns, mutters. Then, he draws out a book titled 'Paganism, Shamanism and Witchcraft', turns to a middle chapter. "Ah. Here, it says some practitioners of neo-shamanism are drawing on the Native American concept of the hollow bone to become vessels for the old gods."

"Yes," I say, "that's it," finally understanding Carson's deal with Gwyn. "I'll bet he's done it to win the inspiration to write songs for his band."

"He's in a band, is he?" Vance's gaze is predatory as a shark's now. To Dad, "you told me he could act but not about his musical talent."

"I wasn't aware," Dad admits.

"They've only just started up. I didn't think to tell him."

"You keep a good eye on him and that band and his sins," says Vance.

"Aren't you going to capture and interrogate him?" I ask, disappointed.

"No," Vance shakes his head. "Not yet. Sounds like he's got a fine career ahead of him, amassing his sins, the greater they are, the greater the penance."

I can see his line of thinking, dark it is, darker than Satan's pits.

"You continue to keep up the good work, girl," Vance encourages me. "You make me a list of everything he does, no matter how big, no matter how small. Even the songs he sings if there's something devilish in them. And, especially, you keep an

eye on him to see if he goes back into the Otherworld and on any other treasures that he brings."

"Alright," I agree. "I will."

"And if you can give him a little push into further sinning…"

"Oh, I'm sure I can do that," an idea dawning.

Eyes narrowing, "Have you ever seen a god, girl? Or a devil?"

"No," I speak quickly but find myself averting my stare to the table.

"You're not sighted then?"

"Nope, haven't so much as heard a rattle in the night."

"A shame," says Vance, "I'm looking for a new assistant."

*

I splash across the Vernon Carus sports fields towards the new shed with the mural of Saint Teresa of Avila's ecstasy by Parle painted on it. The original building was demolished many years ago, but recently other New Catholics have rebuilt it as a shrine to pray at and do their penances. Mark has allowed it so long as they don't go too far and get blood on the floor.

They don't come here at night. And, anyway, they know better than to get in my way when I come to say my Hail Marys, to spend my time with the Holy Mother, when I'm using it to convert the unfaithful to the true faith.

There are sandbags around it to prevent the flood water from getting in.

I shift one away from the door, open it, shake off my white, blue, and red Rule Britannia umbrella outside. I put the sandbag back, close the door. The candles are lit. Right snug, it is, in here. There is a large cross, with Jesus crucified on it, in the centre of the wall at the back. A ceramic statue of the Virgin Mary is surrounded by bouquets of flowers. A large painting of Saint Teresa is lit by pillar candles, and there are offerings before it of prayer cards, floral wreaths, bracelets, necklaces, and coins. Dotted around the building are other little altars, lit by tea-lights, to Carmelite saints

- Saint Elijah, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Elizabeth of the Trinity, Saint Therese of Lisieux, my favourite of favourites, ‘the Little Flower’.

For formality’s sake, I kneel before Mary, light a tealight, speak the words:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

I know that some of my actions might be condemned as sinful, but look at what the Crusaders, what the Inquisition, did in the name of God. There are no commandments against taking drugs in the Bible. Ephesians states we should not get ‘drunk on wine’ but does not mention Prosecco or WKD. Peter says ‘be alert and of sober mind’ but doesn’t exactly say ‘stay sober’. It’s all down to interpretation, and my family is planning to make Britain a better place. Back to the days of Arthur - one King, one God, one Law.

“Mother Mary,” I say as always, “forgive me for what I am about to do.”

I glance at my watch. It’s nearly 10 p.m. Carson should be here soon.

Right on time, the door opens. He pulls away the sandbag. He looks like a drowned rat, wet through, like one of the otters I’ve seen playing upriver. Hair slicked to his head. Water dripping from his oversized waterproofs. If he wasn’t so wet, I might have feared he would burst into flames on account of his deal with that devil, but he walks straight in, unafraid and unscathed. He pours some bottled water into a shot glass and offers it to Mary, takes out his notebook, scribbles a prayer to Saint Teresa, rips it out, and lays it amongst the prayer cards. Whatever is he doing trying to get them on his side?

“Bad night,” he says, “but a nice place,” looking around further. Looking at me. “What do you think they make of your misdeeds?” He gestures around at the altars, Mother Mary, Jesus in his last agony. “Breaking fingers, forcing drugs on people, stabbing them in the back? What do you think Elizabeth of the Trinity, Edith Stein, who died in a concentration camp, would think of your collaboration with the far right?”

How dare he come here, on my invitation, on my territory, throwing accusations at me. Not good footing for a first meeting. I hold my temper.

“I didn’t invite you here to talk religion or politics. It can only lead to arguments.”

“Why exactly did you invite me here? Surely not for prayer time.”

“How do you know Elizabeth was Edith Stein?” I ask him. I’ve never seen him go near a church, and he certainly didn’t excel in religious studies.

“Grandma on my mum’s side was Catholic. Mum wasn’t. My mother, Winona Robinson, who your father or one of his minions drove off the road near Winter Hill to get at my dad for his double-dealing with the Summers.”

The pain in his eyes is like the mast when it’s cold and frozen, the hill so unbearably frigid that the stones stop singing and the sheep lie down and die.

That was always going to be a tripping point to getting him on our side. “It wasn’t Dad,” I reply, “just one of his cronies who went a bit too far.”

“Too far,” Carson growls, “he drove her right over the edge. Like you did with Amelia Sullivan. You’re sick. Why, Lorraine, do you, your lot, do it?”

“You should understand. We were underdogs too. Now we have the power to change Kingsfold, Penwortham, South Ribble… There are sometimes crimes we must commit for the greater benefit, and,” I admit, “there’s just something about drugs and murder that is satisfying to the soul.”

"I'm going," Carson stands, "we've got no common ground."

"Except Winter," I say. When that doesn't stop him, "And our hatred of Mel."

One hand on the door, he stops, turns. "I thought you were best friends."

I've got him. "To all appearances. Come and sit back down."

Reluctantly, he returns and reseats himself, an awkward hunch of damp waterproofs.

"She's done a few things lately that have really got on my tits."

"Such as?"

"Nearly getting me killed. She used me as bait the night she killed your father."

"You were there, at the fairground, in the Fun House?"

"Yes, ran him a right fun chase we did."

Carson's eyes flash dangerously. Like the lights of the police when they're searching a body of water for a drowned body. I can see he's angry. I can see he's hurt. Why can't I stop myself from driving my knife a little deeper?

"After a threesome, tried to rape me, he did. Luckily, I escaped. He didn't."

"She lured him there with the promise of sex with both of you?" He's furious now.

"Not just sex. He was planning to kill me afterwards for the Summers. Lorraine Winter, fuck her, then dump her, that's how Mel set it up."

"Then," he assumes, "Mel killed him?"

I leave him with his assumption. He reminds me, again, of Macbeth, his face a book, a black book, where men might read matters stranger, darker than any scene in a Shakespeare play where cauldrons boil and witches dance.

"I can tell you where you can find her, where she's alone, where she's vulnerable."

"How do I know," his gaze is sharper than the edge of my dagger, "that you both won't set me up, like you did my father, that you won't do for me?"

“What do you want?” I ask. “A guarantee? Written in blood?”

“I wouldn’t trust anything from you, be it written in blood, ink, or water.”

Ignoring his jibes, I continue, “You know she goes hawking her wares around the docks. Alone. She can’t swim, is afraid of water. Just one little push.”

“You think I’m going to be pushing a hefty woman like her around?”

“Perhaps an accident with a motorbike might knock her off. I know what you did to my brothers’ bike, very clever, the day they went speeding on the M61. That,” I say, “for all your high pretences, could have resulted in murder.”

Carson mutters something unintelligible beneath his breath and gets up.

“One more thing,” I speak up, hold his gaze, “you are going to invite me, your new best friend, to the naming ceremony for your band, aren’t you?”

Chapter Eighteen

Chesney

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Both mine and Val's phones. A familiar sound.

"Damn it," curses Val as she checks her screen, "it's a yellow bomb scare warning for Preston. It just had to be on the night of Carson's first gig."

"It shouldn't affect the Mill," I say, "it's right out of town."

During a yellow bomb scare, people are told to avoid the shopping centres, the town hall, churches, mosques, and synagogues, the bus station, and the train station. Public transport is cut down to a bare minimum. Orange is essential workers only in town. Red is a full evacuation. We get yellow warnings all the time. There have been six this year. So far, no bombs. I wonder who the police are tracking this time, considering the many threats that Britain faces, both from without and within.

"I'm still going," says Val, "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

I look at the clock on my phone. "We might as well, there won't be a bus for an hour."

"I'll ring Johnny's brother to give us a lift," decides Val, "he should be on his way now. He parks at the Mill, leaves his car there, so he can drink later."

The band have gone on ahead of us. Beforehand, Val put the last touches on their costumes and did their make-up. Black outfits sewn from the theatre curtain, with a time and genre-defying combination of rips and folds. "Medieval-gothic-apocalyptic," she defined the look. Rumpled collars. Padded shoulders. Hanging from their sleeves triangular pennants that had taken hours to cut and sew on, hanging like the heralds of a doomy carnival.

Then, she'd done their make-up. White face paint. For Carson, two black tear drops beneath his right eye. "One for my mother

and one for my father." Tear drops all around Olivia's eyes. "For the slaughtered Lakota." I'd thought Johnny's choice was more cheery when he requested a heart on his right cheek, until he said, "For a dead lover." On their left cheeks, a black star. "The last star to fall," Carson said. On their foreheads, a black door. "The Door of Death," Carson concluded.

Then, from the garage, they'd carried the bone. It had taken all three of them to bear it, on their shoulders, into the van of an acquaintance from the Mill. Carson had cut it from a sheet of silver metal with an angle grinder, then stapled fairy lights all the way around the outside to illuminate it.

No, I thought, butterflies of excitement in my belly, I don't want to miss this. I've never been to a gig before. Val helped me find some suitable clothes, clothes I would not want my mum to see me in, at Cats Protection. She helped me rip the jeans and sew band stickers on the oversized cardigan. "I'm going to design one for the band once their name is well known."

Beep. Beep. This time it's a car and not a reminder about the bomb scare. The stupid thing goes off every hour and you can't mute it and it still goes off when you turn off your phone. I don't know how they do that.

Bang, bang, bang, thud, bang. It's Kyle with his heavy punk music. He drives a black Ford Escort with stickers of skulls and guitars all over it. His face looks like one of those skulls. He's a skinhead. He's got more piercings than the spines on a hedgehog. A ring through the middle of his nose, dozens of earrings, several eyebrow rings, septum and lower lip pierced. He wears a black bomber jacket with multiple pockets and badges. He looks scary, but he's a nice guy with a soft voice, kind.

Val and I rush out into the rain, umbrellas in our hands for getting the bus home, coats over our heads. Feet wet already. The water, rising up from the drains, has made bogs of the lawns and rivers of the streets. Kyle's got his girlfriend, a mohawked woman with enough steel in her face to fund a steelworks, in the front seat, so we bundle ourselves into the back. Even Val, who likes

punk, puts her hands over her ears as we set off. Windscreen wipers working triple time to wash away the torrential downpour.

Driving down Moss Acre Road, a sense of the wetlands returning. Boggarts, lake beings, with arms longer, stretchier than the Hulk's, rising up. The road is wobbly, like the old wooden trackways on Padway. When we get to the part of Pope Lane where Helleholes once was, the car skids, lurches. I fear for a moment being pulled down by a hellish being. Kyle rights it. Penwortham Bypass is a long river until we get up onto the bridge.

"The Ribble's high tonight," Val comments as we pass over it.

A sweeping, grey torrent battling against the new flood walls on Riverside and Broadgate. Belisama beating her barricades in swollen anger. As we drive down Strand Road, onto Watery Lane, where the Ribble flowed before being moved 500m to the south during the building of Riversway Docklands, I feel the name was prophetic. A watery revenge.

Past Water Lane and onto Aqueduct Street, named after the aqueduct which carried the canal onwards, north, to Lancaster and then to Kendal. Kyle parks in the car park at the back of Aqueduct Street Mill, another red brick building typical of its kind with large windows to maximise the light for the intricate work of spinning and weaving. A tower for the water wheel, which turned Moor Brook, flowing down Water Lane, into the Ribble. A flash of those old watercourses, a wet latticework, a water sprite labouring at the waterwheel, turning it, with a hundred wet and clammy hands.

We splash our way to the front door and enter the reception area. Behind the glass window is a purple-haired girl with Pearl Jam purring in the background.

"Let me guess," she says, "you're here to see the nameless band?"

"Soon to be named," Val points out.

"It's quieter than expected," she says, "with the bomb scare."

We pay £5 each with our phones. Olivia had insisted that, because their inspiration comes from spirit, the proceeds should go back to spirit, to a worthy cause. They have chosen to put it towards the new scheme to clean up the toxic stretch of the canal at Canal View Road and buy food for the geese.

We go to the bar. Val fails to get served for a beer. We both get lemonade. It's quiet enough that we get a table to ourselves. Kyle and his girlfriend sit with other punks with multicoloured Mohawks and liberty spikes. There are several tables filled with faces I recognise from school, some from the doom crowd, some drawn by Carson's performance in Macbeth. Doom girls and some doom boys making eyes at him. Then, a table of second-year girls in newly ripped jeans and hoodies, drooling.

"Why don't they get it?" Val shakes her head, "he's asexual. Black ring. Full stop. Not waiting for one of them, the special one, to change his mind."

"One, two, one, two, testing," Olivia goes round the microphones.

Carson insists on making adjustments until the sound is just right.

"I don't know how they found out about it." Val points to the bar.

I see a group of old and skanky doomsters have just come in. Clad in long black coats, with long greasy hair and greasier beards, silver rings on their fingers, they bring an acrid scent of tobacco and rot with them.

The sound check complete, the band sling on their guitars. They've managed to recruit a drummer from the practice room next door for the night. At the back, for now, metallic, barely visible, is the sculpture of the bone.

"Welcome," says Carson. He looks nervous. He looks elated. He looks like a showman. "Thank you for coming out on a wet and water-sodden night to hear our performance. As the water spirits rise, as the lake maidens spread their watery gowns across the land again, this is Lady of the Lake."

Chords like rippling water. Subtle tush of cymbals like the wind in the willows.

Oh Lake Lady,
oh Lady of the Mill Pond,
will you hear the petition
of a supplicant?

Oh, gods beyond the veil,
beyond the waters will you hear?
I come here to save a good man's life.
I bring you offerings

like the ancient Britons.
I am no warlord, no chieftain,
have not any slave chains or cauldrons.
I'm not a Winter and I'm not a Summer.

I'm just a poor boy off the Kingsfold Estate.
Nothing to offer but my phone,
my iPad, my laptop,
with all my songs, my books, my films.

Oh why do you not hear me?
Why do you only show me instead
the image of an old and hollow bone
more hollow than his bones?

As the bone at the back of the performance space lights up, the fay lights flashing, from a place deep within me, in my bones, I know the meaning of the song. Val asked Carson to perform some rite for me to save my dad. My dad, with his bones hollowed out by the therapies. He tried and failed.

I don't think the audience fully understands it, but, on some level it moves them. I see tears in one or two eyes. Like the teardrops on his right cheek.

"This," he says, sinister chords, a darker tone, "is the Death of Stanley Robinson."

Lorraine

I'm late. I had to get my brothers out of a fix again. The arseholes got themselves locked in the bogs at the Ribble Pilot by some girl they attempted to assault, then called on me to let them out before the police did. Absolutely typical of them. Luckily, the docklands wasn't too big a diversion.

I'm wet through. I've got my Levi Classic jeans on. I considered cutting some rips in them with Carwenna, but Carson's not going to make me a doom girl yet. My only nod to doomsterdom is adding a little black badge with a bone on it, which I found on the floor of the Ribble Pilot toilets, to my white glittery Old Britain cardigan, above the Union Jack, on my left breast.

When I get in, there is only one table left, next to some skanky old doomsters. By the Devil and his cesspits, they reek! They hum. You remember I told you that my brothers smelt like garbage men when they climbed out of Clayton Hall landfill? Well, they smell like that, but twice as bad.

I make my way to the bar, manage to pass for eighteen, get myself a vodka and coke. I sit myself down, take a look at the band, in the mist, in the smoke, black-outfitted, banners flying from their sleeves like dirges. Carson singing a mournful song about a lake, a mill pond, about offerings. Damn it, I know that scene, remember it well, the flash of that old white bone.

The boy's got guts, he's got edge, I'll admit, singing about his dad's death.

In the hall of mirrors, I found him.
Dead, at a hundred different angles.
They'd made a clown of him,
the killers—red wig and red nose.

Not funny to me nor the god
with his white red-eared hounds
who ripped his soul from his body.
No apologies, no explanations,

for how he treated me, his son.
For his beatings, for my mother,
for my sister crumpled on the floor.
Just excuses from Stanley Robinson.

Dark, dark chords. The big, big windows of the mill are closed, have never been opened, are designed to let in light and not air. But, still, the wind comes in as if it needs to blow Stanley's miasma away with the smoke.

Just excuses from Stanley Robinson.
All I'm left with is an old and hollow bone.

The bone lights up, flashes, the sound of sirens. Carson looks up, looks out the window. Blue flashing lights there. Blue lights flashing in his eyes. Curses.

"A search. A search."

The police come rushing in. They're looking for the bomb, thank God. They're not going to be looking for the baggy of ket in my left bra cup. We all get searched. Just our bags and our pockets. The punks. The doom kids, Carson's sister and her ginger girlfriend at the front. I note a couple of the doomsters have escaped the search by going for rollies out the back. They search the band, checking the folds in their outfits, to their indignation.

Nothing here. The police leave. The show goes on.

"This is Vigil on Castle Hill," says Carson.

I know this story. Still, I can't help tapping my fingers and singing along.

Chesney

After the police have searched us, "Look," points Val, "at the back."

I follow the line of her stumpy finger, a bone painted on her black nail.

I can't believe it. It's that brazen bully, that dirty druggy, Lorraine Winter. What is she doing here? Is she here to spoil Carson's ceremony? She sees me looking at her and doesn't look away, her eyes like frosty daggers.

Meanwhile, Carson is singing of his journey to the Otherworld. The synthesiser, by some trick of his, is playing on its own, like an Annuvian treasure.

I ate not of the food,
fairy fruits, goblin berries,
meats and pastries dripping honey.
I drank not of the mead-cup passing.
I danced not with the fairy dancers,
male and female, blue and red.

Then, to me came a hound,
white, red-eared, in his mouth
a gift for a bard, for a poet, for a seer.
He came to me with a white and hollow bone.

The bone flashes again. I look back at Lorraine Winter. She's got a look on her face that suggests she knows this story intimately, as if she's witnessed it.

When I returned to Castle Hill,
on the summit of the mound,
the Fay King told me,
“You must become the hollow bone.”

The bone lights up even brighter.

“The hollow bone, the hollow bone,” a ghostly voice from the synthesiser.

Olivia takes to the mic. “The wisdom of my ancestors. The words of Frank Fool’s Crows: ‘When we become hollow bones, there is no limit to what the Higher Powers can do in and through us in spiritual things’.”

“Hollow bones,” the synthesiser, “higher powers,” “no limit”, “spiritual things.”

“The wisdom of the bards of ancient Britain,” says Johnny, “this hollow bone is none but the bone of Nodens Silver Arm, cut off in his battle with a giant.”

“I am, I am,” says Carson, the fay-lit bone behind him flashing with his speech, “the hollow bone, the hollow bone, this band, this band…”

“Our name is Hollow Bone!” All three declare to finish.

The bone is illuminated with blinding light.

Carson pulls back his sleeve and displays his tattoo. “Until Doomsday or my end.”

“Whoo!” cry the doom girls.

Applause from all the tables except the old doomsters and Lorraine Winter.

“Now,” says Carson, “for the Higher Powers, this is Spirit Song.”

Lorraine

I don’t like rock music. I don’t like goth music. I don’t like industrial, but it seems to fit with the mill, it seems to fit with our

times. In all honesty, I can't figure out what this is. It isn't eco-rock. It isn't post-punk. It isn't doom-punk.

What it is, clearly, is an invocation of the elemental spirits and the devils that my dad has listed in his books at home—some kind of musical black magic.

Not just Carson, that Olivia's got a hand in it for sure. Her and her medicine ancestors, her mother line. Johnny with his archaic knowledge. Been sent by the Devil, they have, to do his dirty work. Look at them, whipping up the crowd, singing about rising water spirits, the hordes of the dead rattling against Death's Door, the Lord of the Dead himself.

As for that story about the bone belonging to Nodens, Nudd, father of Gwyn… I know all about relics. The right arm of Saint Francis Xavier, the arm of Saint Jude, the hand of Saint Patrick. Saint Edmund Arrowsmith's Hand. The Fingers of Saint Thomas and Saint Catherine of Siena. Galileo's fingers. The bones of martyrs. We Winters take relics from our enemies. Such an annoyance, I lost the finger of Jessy Jones stuck in that clamp.

I'd find it hard to believe Carson bears a living relic if I hadn't seen it.

As the lights fade, as the bone disappears, as Carson drops his sleeve, as the band vanishes into the smoke, into the mist, I still can't believe it.

Chapter Nineteen

Chesney

"You were awesome." Val hugs Carson.

We help the band move their equipment back to their room.

Outside, we find some of the second-years in a quandary.

"I need to get back to Longridge and my only bus is from the bus station," says a girl, her hair in black pigtails, wearing a short skirt with stripy tights.

"We need to get back to Penwortham, the other way," say the rest.

"I'd walk you," says a redhead, "but we're already late. My mum…"

"We'll walk you to the bus station," says Olivia in a motherly voice, "won't we?"

Carson and Johnny nod resignedly, knowing there's no argument.

"Oh," says a girl with a blonde pixie cut, "she gets to go with the band."

"You two," Olivia instructs Val and I, "come with us."

I'm relieved as I don't want it to be just me and Val with the threat of a bomb. "Aren't we meant to avoid the bus station?" I ask.

"Yes," admits Olivia, "aside from for the last buses."

"We'll need to keep our eyes open," says Johnny.

I'm glad to see that it has finally stopped raining when we get outside. The water is, very slowly, beginning to sink down the drains. They are gurgling, like hungry water monsters, the all-swallowing spirits of the flues.

Olivia takes the second year's arm and asks her which bands she likes. "Slipknot, Ghost, My Dying Valentine. Now, my favourite is Hollow Bone."

I walk with Val. Johnny's on his phone. Carson's at the back. He's on his guard, looking behind him. At the old doomsters following or at Lorraine Winter?

Lorraine

Dodgy bunch, them, following along with Carson's band to the bus station. Going to keep an eye on them, I am, not just the stink of tobacco in their pockets. Could well have a bomb. Desolate world-enders, they are.

I follow to the bus station. A brutalist concrete megastructure they call it. Words that remind me a bit of my Dad. Four stories high with five stories of multi-storey car parking, its distinguishing feature the concrete curves of its balconies. It's a place renowned for suicides. Brutal place. Brutal times.

There are police cars outside, like angry wasps surrounding a dangerous hive. The police, in their black and fluorescent yellow jackets, are searching every person as they go in or leave, by the entrances, or by the 80 bus bays. The band and company submit to a search, as do the doomsters. I'm not convinced it is thorough enough. I know all about the pockets behind pockets in long black coats and micro-bombs smaller than a goth's fingernail.

Inside, it's floodlit. Countless wooden walls, like hurdles, divide the bays. Lots of people, packed together in long queues for the last buses. Convenience shops are shuttered up for the night. There is a small queue at the coffee machine. The police are also patrolling the entrances to the subways, which lead, long and winding as snakes, to the Guild Hall and the taxi ranks, where the buskers, living and dead, hark out their haunting bluesy tunes. They are particularly watching the Polish immigrants, heading back to Deepdale. Olivia, like a mother duck with her goslings, is leading the band to bay 46, for Longridge, ushering the ugly swan-girl, with her pigtails, onto the bus. Carson is at the back. Like me, he has his eye on the doomsters. They have sat themselves on one of the long, uncomfortable benches where you

sit when you are not waiting for a bus but something else. They are smoking rollies. So is Carson. Eying them over a red blaze. As I clock him, he clocks me. His eyes narrow. He puffs out an industrial smog.

Chesney

It's getting late. My mum's going to be wondering where I am. Finally, Olivia sees the second year onto her bus to Longridge and we go to wait for the number 3. Val's watching Carson. Carson's watching the doomsters and Lorraine, who is sitting at the end of the long, hard, uncomfortable settee. Somehow, she has got her knife past the police and is cleaning her nails with it. I'm beginning to pray, hard, not to God, because I don't worship him anymore, but to the god of the bus station, that the bus will hurry up.

"You could ring your mum," says Val, "say you're sleeping at mine."

It's tempting. I've been waiting for a long while for her to say that.

"You'll have to sleep in my bed. There's no room on the floor to set up the camp bed because of my model-making table and all the models boxed up."

Even better, but, "Will I have to share with the Hulk?"

"Yes," she admits, "but I can deflate him so there's room for us all."

"I am not," I tell her, "sharing a bed with the Hulk, inflated or deflated."

She doesn't hear what I say and I see it's because she's too busy watching Carson walking slowly, defensively, towards the doomsters. Two of them are standing, a grey beard and a brown beard, one is reaching into his pocket.

"Carson, be careful," gasps Val.

Her brother is measuring them by the length of his half-smoked cigarette. He continues to proceed. Grey beard takes out

his phone, shows the screen to Carson, who turns, looks back towards us. I turn and see that Kyle and his girlfriend have arrived just in time to get the number 3. Kyle is smiling, reaching into a pocket of his bomber jacket for something, his cigarettes, I guess. I turn to Carson, whose mouth is an O of disbelief, turn back as Kyle takes out a bomb, shouts, "Damn Britain. Doom! Doom! Doom!"

Lorraine

I'm watching the exchange between Grey Beard and Carson closely. Following their gaze, to the irony of it, Johnny's brother in his bomber jacket, with its multitude of pockets, too many to search for a tiny bomb. It will be the end of his sister, her ginger girlfriend, all his band, the bomber too. Its nasty blast might come near to searing my new snakeskin boots. Good job I've got my knife in my hand. Heroine, me, Lorraine Winter.

This is what she's made for, flying through the air with a blade that cuts through concrete, but tonight all she's going for is the softness of a throat. She's slicing through the voice of doom, shredding a cut, a ribbon of red. Arterial blood is spurting. That man, Kyle, is falling. The bomb is falling too. Could have been for nothing, if he's already activated it.

The police are yelling, "Get out! Get out! Get out!"

Carson's screaming, "Val!" as if his voice could lift her out of here. Then, as Kyle falls, as the bomb falls, "The code is 21002." Val, could you believe it, pudgy little thing, is moving quicker than electricity to catch the bomb, almost small as a fingernail, in her hand, like snow, whispering to it quietly.

Kyle hits the ground, his blood spurting, with a metallic ring of piercings. My knife rattles down beside him, drinks herself silly on his blood.

"I stopped it," gasps Val.

She'd better not be taking all the credit, though. It's me who saved the band. Me who saved the bus station, big and brutal like my dad. I'm a heroine, me.

I smile at Carson, who from hereon, will forever be indebted to me.

Chesney

The Explosive Ordnance Disposal team arrive to take the bomb out of Val's hand. The group of six men, in their heavy bomb suits, are disproportionate to the tiny slip of mini-bomb sitting faux innocent in her palm.

One of the bomb squad holds a scanning device like a microphone over it, listens on headphones, confirms to his comrades, "It is disarmed."

Sighs of relief all around. The police have cordoned off the area with red-and-white inner cordon tape and have ushered people away onto the buses.

"You are under arrest on suspicion of collaboration in the bombing."

Kyle's girlfriend, Sara, is read her rights, handcuffed, and put in a police car.

Johnny is slumped on the floor, staring at his brother's corpse. "I didn't know."

"You will all need to come to the police station for questioning," speaks an officer. He has a black moustache and wears a black and yellow peaked cap. We are escorted into the back of a black, yellow-striped police van. Olivia, Johnny, Carson, the two old crusty doomsters, and Lorraine.

"I am not giving up my knife," Lorraine refuses.

"I can't have you in a confined space with an illegal weapon."

"You really think the big heroine is going to kill the other little heroes on her big night? That I don't care what Daddy thinks? That I'd spoil my reputation?"

It's not so much her words but the daggers in her eyes that warn them off.

We sit tight, closely packed together, trying to avoid the reek of the two greasy beards at the front. Goodness, the stink. It's worse than when Val lets the milk go off, than the stinky blue cheese from the farm shop at Rheged services Dad left in the car in the sun when we went for a long walk.

I'm pressed against the back of the van, feeling shaky, a little sick. Val is beside me, staring at me, rubbing her palm as if she can still feel the lethal touch of the tiny bomb. Beside her is Johnny. He has smudged all his face paint. He is pulling his silver hair, little strands of it between his fingers, slithers of it on the van floor. Olivia is sitting across from him, trying to comfort him. Lorraine is opposite me, and Carson is next to her, and they are close but not quite touching. Like in Macbeth, there is an invisible force field between them. Lorraine, looking smug, is wiping the blood from her knife, polishing it with a handkerchief with the initials of a designer in the corner. She is looking at the reflection of herself and Carson in the blade, smiling. Carson cannot take his eyes off her or the knife. It's as though he's a prisoner, like the image within it, arrested not by the police but by her act. And, as for them, I look at the crusties, who are they? Where are they from?

We're escorted out of Preston Police Station, a plain red building on Lancaster Road. Inside, we sit down, and I have a chance to ring my mum, cringing as I hear her concern, explaining, "I'm alright, I'm fine, it's over, done."

Afterwards, I feel even more shaky, need to sit down. I'm not sure whether I can touch Val's hand, which moved quicker than the hand of a catcher in a baseball game, than the hand of the Catcher, Nodens Silver Hand. The hand that held a bomb in it. Will I be able to kiss the lips that whispered to it? How did she and Carson know how to disarm a bomb?

I'm not sure she knows. She's pale. Whispering to herself.

Carson is coming over, taking her hands, “You did well,” he’s telling her. He’s hugging her. They’re embracing in a black brother and sister huddle.

Lorraine is bestowing her knife with praises and congratulations.

The doomsters look tired and hunched as gargoyles, statues of stone.

Johnny, with help from Olivia, is guided into the police office. The walls are soundproofed, but in the back of my mind, I can hear Johnny’s dull voice repeating over and over, like the old record player he likes listening to old bands like the Beatles and the Doors on, “I didn’t know. I didn’t know.”

Carson, Val, and I are called in. The policeman’s moustache reminds me of a woolly bear caterpillar, black and fuzzy, a predecessor of the garden tiger moth.

He takes our names, addresses, asks for our consent to a voice recording, then switches on the recording machine and begins with the questions. He starts with Carson, “How did you know those men, Jeff Hughes and Jez Walker?”

“They live in the Doom Camp on the outskirts of Ribbleton. I’ve been helping them fix some of the broken appliances they’ve managed to salvage from the Preston Household Recycling Centre. I haven’t managed to fix them up with a shower yet due to a problem with the plumbing.”

The policeman nods. “And how did you know how to disarm a bomb?”

“I have some knowledge of codes, coding, from fixing computers.” Carson is very calm, his voice is casual, flows like dark underground water.

The policeman turns to Val, “You a catcher, girl, catching a bomb like that?”

“I’ve never played baseball,” she admits, “but Carson and I used to play cricket with the other kids on the playing field at Kingsfold Park, and I was never very good at running, so he put me behind the wickets to catch the ball.”

“I see,” says the policeman. To me, “Have you anything to add?”

“Only what a shock it was to see Johnny’s brother… he was so nice…”

“I’m coming to that,” says the policeman, to us all, “did you notice any signs?”

“His taste in music was getting heavier, louder, darker,” admits Val.

“I’d noticed,” Carson nods, “he’d been attending underground Doom Rallies and posting in the Damn Britain group on social media. Jeff and Jez keep an eye on that kind of thing and had been keeping me and others informed.”

“Like your father, you seem to get around,” the policeman notes.

Carson flinches. “Got to watch my back with Summers and Winters about.”

“As for your collaboration with Lorraine Winter, was that planned?”

“No,” he admits.

“Can you tell me more about your relationship?”

“It doesn’t exist.” He seals his lips tighter than the Death’s Door on his forehead.

Chapter Twenty

Lorraine

I'm a heroine now, me, Lorraine Winter. I almost thought Dad was going to buy me a pony. I started looking through the online ads in the Farmer's Guardian and Horse and Hound and found a few nice ones to look at. A grey thoroughbred mare, 16.2hh, up near Broughton Roundabout; ex-racehorse, runs cross-country. A dapple-grey gelding, down in Longton, used to steeplechase.

"No, you're not having a horse yet," Dad disappointed me.

A knock on the door. I recognise that knock. It's that double-crossing bitch. Still, I open it onto a cold, windy spring night. A night of the mad March wind. At dusk, last night, I saw a pair of hares boxing on Kingsfold Park, then going at it. Shameless, they were, right next to the roundabout. There aren't so many rabbits about anymore after myxomatosis.

As for me, I've been feeling a bit frisky myself. Now I'm a heroine, I've got a better pick of the men, even some not off the estate. I've got myself a good one from Broad Oak who lives on Bloomfield Grange. Nice trad lad. A bit too nice perhaps. Not one for giving it to the doomsters, who, as you imagine, have been getting theirs since the bombing attempt. Damn Britain has been shut down. Doom Rallies have been banned. Back to lover boy, he's good-looking, got a nice piece of meat, but the conversation. Have you ever seen Bay Watch? My brothers discovered it on Amazon Prime Video when they were thirteen, spent hours goggling at the bums and tits until Mum said it was unrealistic and banned it. The dialogue on there, that's as good as it gets between me and Sandy. Plus, he's started calling me "honey" and "love" and talking about relationships. It might be time for moving on. It's so hard to find a man who entertains me. I've only ever met one, but he's more distant than the last star in the universe. Even though I saved him, his sister, his band, Carson,

has been shunning my attempts to win him into the House of Winter.

Her, Mel, standing there, looks like something out of Bay Watch, past her time. “What are you doing here? Mum and Dad are out. They told me you and Daniel had an important job tonight that should bring in a lot of money.”

Mel looks sulky. She’s got a coat on, a fluffy white thing, but, of course, it’s open at the front and showing her cleavage and gold necklace. “I’ve been having some problems with Mark interfering with our business.”

That prying do-gooder is always on the prowl to report anything untoward to the police and to try to win lost souls back to God. Yet, I wouldn’t have imagined he would be too much of an obstacle to Mel. “I suppose…”

“Yes, of course I’ve tried seducing him,” Mel snaps.

“And?”

“It’s worked too well. He’s hooked. He’s following me round like a lapdog, won’t leave me alone, which is very annoying when I’ve got other business to do.”

Then, I can’t help myself, it just slips out. “I know what else you’ve been doing - double-crossing us to the Summers, with Daniel, like with Stanley.”

Mel laughs. “What do you think a middle-man and a middle-woman are for?”

“What’s your relationship with the Summer Twins?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“I’ll bet…”

“I know who’s who? Who’s better? Have had both at once?” She asks facetiously.

Damn her, she has. I can see by the look on her face. It prompts another thought, unthinkable, disgusting, almost unbearable to think about. The times she’s stayed here, when Mum’s passed out drunk or been in a k-hole. I’ve seen the way she shows her breasts to Dad and wouldn’t put it past her.

"Have you also," my hand on my knife, "been sleeping with my father?"

"Want to know what he calls me when he cums?"

That's too much. My knife's in my hand. She's ducking away.

"I'm only joking." She backs up. "I'd never touch him. He wouldn't. Your parents are closer than husband and wife, more like brother and sister."

Equally gross, but I perceive it's true and she hasn't slept with Dad.

As I lower my knife and she ceases backing up, I catch a whiff of her expensive perfume with notes of jasmine grandiflorum and centifolia rose. Putting it together with her new coat and necklace, I know where Daniel's money is going, not into our coffers, but into her wardrobe and perfumery. So she can make even more money from her seductions. The brazen whore.

"What're you going to do about Mark?" I ask her sharply.

She shrugs. "Hopefully find him a new friend in the Rabbit Holes."

*

This is a good opportunity to have a cosy-up with Carson. Not quite a rabbit hole in here, with the saints. No buck hare, more like them he is, with his eyes on his gods and not on mortal men nor women. Eyes like Milton's Satan, not raised to Heaven, but staring down into Hell, into the Abyss. That's where he's going, with my help or not, with his devilish songs.

A shame, because he'd make a good icon, one of those traditional ones on a wooden board, with layers of gesso, painted with egg tempera in translucent layers built up from dark to light, one by one, edged in gold. Only, his would move from light to darkness, the prayers and blessings curses. I could see the doom girls worshipping him with flowers and candles.

Here he comes, a little lollop in his step. It is spring after all. Over the growing grasses. The greening trees, leaves rustling like

cymbals around him. Still got that hoodie, those ripped jeans he wore in his school days on. Whenever, I wonder, is he going to grow up and buy himself some decent clothes?

"Wild day." His hair is scattered by the wind as tussocky grass.

"Wild times. Mel's not only sleeping with the Summer Twins but Mark Denver."

Carson's brows rise as he comes in and makes his nods of veneration and offerings. He's still trying to keep them on his side. Playing God and all his angels and his devils and all their demons like he plays Winter and Summer.

He sits in front of Saint John of the Cross and I in front of Saint Therese of Lisieux.

"How have things been in the Robinson house since the bomb?"

Carson picks up a book from Saint John's Altar, 'Dark Night of the Soul'.

On a dark night, kindled in
love with yearnings— oh,
happy chance!

I went forth without
being observed,
my house being now at rest.

In darkness and secure, by the
secret ladder disguised— oh,
happy chance!

In darkness and in
concealment,
my house now being at rest.

As I read between the lines, I'm jealous that he seems to have freed himself from his father's debts and found happiness with his fixing business and his band.

"How about the House of Winter? Your dad bought you a horse yet?"

"The headlines have raised our esteem above the Summers. The sisters might excel in charity fundraising with their sporting achievements, but none of them have stopped a bombing. It's won us trust. It's opened doors."

I don't answer the second part, but he knows. Would I be sitting in here with him on a fair spring day, when I could be galloping across the fields, the wind in my hair? When I could be out hunting down a juicy hare or two?

Returning to the reason I called this meeting, "I see you know bombs."

"A lot of them about these days. Like all things, they break and need fixing."

"Gives me an idea," I continue, "if you're struggling to think of a way to deal with Mel. If you could plant a small incendiary device on her, it would provide the push to send her on her way into the dock, down to your devil."

A flash of insight across his face swiftly covered by nonchalance. "I'm happy. My house is at rest. Why would I want to spoil things by killing Mel?"

"But is your father's ghost at rest? Does your god not demand vengeance?"

"He's got enough restless dead on his hands," Carson speaks breezily.

I thought I'd got a hold on him when I saved him, his sister, his band, but he is slipping through my fingers, like the March wind, like the spring breeze.

"I don't think Saint John'll mind if I take this," Carson tears a page out of 'The Dark Night of the Soul'. "I feel I might need it one day for a song." For a moment, he looks serious and melancholy as the saint.

Then, he's away, bouncing through the grass, kicking up the weeds, a dandelion clock stuck to his arse like the tail of a buck hare, as he bobs along.

Chesney

By the wind, the mud, and the leaves, I love spring. I love watching the celandines appear in Greencroft Valley with their yellow paint-splash flowers, and I love the buttercups on the green and holding them beneath Val's chin and asking her if she likes butter. I love the way she sits when I ask her to paint the common primroses on the steep banking, with her tongue between her teeth, her brush flicking white and yellow onto my jeans. I love the way she signs her paintings with a stylish V and a curly R. My mum has allowed me to put them up on my bedroom wall.

Today, it's her birthday. It's the first of April. She's an April fool. I've gifted her a special set of luminescent paints. Carson has bought her a potter's wheel so she can make bowls, plates, mugs, and vases when they have got their Old Gods and Oldest Animals figurines selling. The turntable is standing in the centre of the room, and she is sitting at it, her foot on the pedal, her expression intent and intense as the clay spins round. As she moulds it, shapes it, I watch her hands. Her fingers might be stubby, but they are skilled and responsive to the merging of vision and clay. Tensile. Flexile. How I long for the touch of her hands on my skin. I imagine her moulding me, massaging me, shaping me, like God made Adam.

I glance at her bed. The Hulk is there with his huge green inflatable chest, square green face, mouth open in a permanent roar. On May Day, I decide, I will battle him. I will cast him out of her bed and take her as my Summer Queen.

"What do you think?" asks Val.

Her first attempt at a bowl is squiffy, and the rim is irregular. "Uh…"

Bang! What sounds like an explosion from the garage.

"What was that?" I demand, nearly leaping out of my skin.

"Oh, that's Carson fiddling with his improvised explosive devices."

"You mean with bombs?" I squeak. "Whatever is he planning to do with them?"

"They're for blowing away the culverts to resurface our rivers and streams."

Lorraine

I'm dreaming myself a pleasant dream. I'm on my lonesome, walking beside the Ribble, just beyond the dockland, on a fine spring day. There's a mist coming down and I'm passing through and I'm in another land. The river is shining like mead and there's a little bloke in front of me, in green, pixie-like, a leprechaun, I think, leading me on. Oh, of course, he's going to lead me to some treasure. I'm following along. There are magical birds - blue-backed ducks, green-headed gulls, cranes tall as me with long red shanks. The little man is leading me to some reeds. He's parting them to let me see… oh no, it's not so pleasant now, it's some bloated woman's corpse.

Knock, knock, knock. On my bedroom door in the middle of the night. Only my stupid brothers would dare stir me from my sleep. I sit up, blinky-eyed and angry. I pull off my covers, put my dressing gown on. "Come in."

Fully dressed. I look at the clock on my phone on my bedside table. 4:00. Where have those gofers been? What have those idiot boys been doing?

"We've got some news," says Aidan hesitantly.

"Bad news," Brady is sharper.

"What kind of bad news?" I growl, a sinking feeling in my stomach, one that reminds me of when my rubber dinghy sunk when I first went paddling in it on the mill pond and my brothers left me struggling and splashing. Learnt to swim that day, I did, also learnt a bit about the nature of us Winters.

“It’s Mel,” says Aidan.

“She’s dead,” Brady speaks grimly.

A secret rush of glee runs through me. At last Carson has killed her, got her out of my way and also opened a way to me getting a firmer hold on him.

“How?” I ask curiously, hiding my triumph. “And how do you know?”

“We got a phone call from her,” says Aidan, “a call for help from the docks.”

Once more, my stomach drops. Why would Carson involve my brothers?

“When we got there,” Brady continues, “she was dead, floating there, drowned. Pretty fresh. In just a spring dress, hair swirling in a bedraggled mess. No signs of how she died. No cuts, no wounds, no bruising.”

“Fearing we’d be suspected, we decided to get rid of her corpse,” says Aidan, “opened the sluice gates, those ones at the little bridge, for the boats.”

“But those gates take forever to open,” I say, “for the water to balance.”

“Yeah,” says Brady, looking troubled, “I think I saw someone from one of the flats surrounding the dockland looking out of their window.”

“You idiots!” I cry. “You’ve fallen into a trap.” I can’t believe it. After all the effort I’ve made to help Carson, inviting him into my favourite hiding place with my favourite saints, tipping him off, nearly befriending him. I can’t believe he’s betrayed me by setting up my brothers. He was going to be part of our family, he was going to help us, we were going to rule Kingsfold, Penwortham, South Ribble, Lancashire, the North West, Britain.

As I hear the sirens outside, see their blue flash, look down at the police cars, I emit a scream of rage, terrible, pain-ridden, like a double-crossed ice demon.

Chapter Twenty One

Chesney

"It's well known that the Ribble takes a life every year," says Carson.

"Johnny said, in the lore, it's every seven years," I correct him.

We're on the roundabout on Kingsfold Park on a bright April day. He is seated on the post in the centre and Val and I are sitting on opposite seats. The hawthorns by the ditches are in full leaf and the blackbirds and tits are singing.

"It's every year," he argues back, "I've been recording it." He opens his phone. "Look, last year, Donna Donaldson, the year before, Marcus Doley."

"This wasn't Belisama's doing." I open the news report. "The police suspect that Mel Ripon was murdered. Although the Winter brothers are the main suspects, as they were seen letting her body out of the sluice gates, they are adamant that they came to the docks following a call for help. If that's the case, there was someone else with her, the murderer."

"Did you do it," Val asks bluntly, "as revenge for Dad?"

"As I've said before, do I look like I could kill a big, hefty woman like Mel?" Carson spreads his arms—a small, skinny black-clad scarecrow figure.

"No," Val admits, "but you have been messing about with incendiary devices. One planted on her, a tiny little explosion, a tiny little push…"

"Would probably still leave a bit of a mess," says Carson.

"Not if you invisibled it," Val growls, on the warpath, eyes dark and determined beneath her newly red-streaked fringe. "Where were you last night? You didn't come home until the early hours of the morning."

"I was providing tech support for our synthesiser for the band next door, Pandemonium, in return for Brian playing the drums at our opening gig."

“You know full well that synthesiser plays on its own.”

“She’s temperamental and won’t play without me.”

“I’ll bet the police will be knocking on our door.”

“Look,” I point, seeing two police cars, “over there.”

“You’re on your own with this one,” says Val.

We get off the roundabout and she gives it an angry push, leaving Carson spinning.

Lorraine

“Carson has really sinned now,” I tell Vance. “Not only killed Mel but turned against us, setting up my brothers, getting them life imprisonment.”

“Did you not predict he would go so far?” Dad asks Vance accusingly.

We’re at the Round Table again, and increasingly Vance has been present at his right hand, playing Merlin to him as Arthur, as his pet magician. Only, he’s a dangerous pet to be keeping in our house, with teeth sharp as a wolf’s.

Vance seethes. “In my opinion, this isn’t Carson Robinson’s work.”

“Then whose?” Dad demands.

“So far, this remains outside my vision.”

“Some prophet you are. Your scrying bowl needs a good clean.”

I don’t believe him either. I’m sure as the stars shine Carson killed Mel.

“I have foreseen a way to bring the boy down,” Vance parleys for our favour.

Finally, tell me, I’m sitting on the edge of my seat, like a begging dog.

“Lorraine has reported to me the growing popularity of Hollow Bone. It is approaching the time they started looking for a manager and a record label.”

"You mean you're going to send the band to oblivion?" I ask him.

"A slow descent," Vance determines, "excrutiatingly painful and one I believe both myself and the Winter family might profit from."

I do like the sound of this—the perfect revenge.

"Are you willing to assist?"

"Yes."

*

I'm going to set Carson up good and proper, but I am never going to let him into my favourite place, my favourite shrine, with my favourite saints again. Managed to talk his way out of being Mel's murderer, he did. An alibi at the Mill. Couldn't have made an incendiary device that didn't leave a mark. They don't know about his black magic and his deals with dark gods.

For setting up my brothers, his punishment will be worse than Satan's.

I head across the sports field to my favourite saint shack to say my prayers to Mother Mary, to pray to Saint Michael and all his angels, who banished that serpent and all his snakes to writhe in torment in the deepest depths of Hell.

I open the door. Blink. Can't believe my eyes. Can't believe the audacity. It's him, sitting there, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, as if sugar wouldn't dissolve on his tongue, sharing mineral water with Saint John.

Another hysterical scream comes out of me. I didn't know I had them in me, like frosty serpents slumbering in my belly, waiting to awake. My knife's in my hand, I'm lunging at him, she's thirsting for his blood. He leaps away, swiftly as a gazelle, towards the back wall, and I nearly stick Saint John.

"Murderer!" I shriek. This time I'll have him, my knife in his belly. With full force, I rush forward to plunge her into his twisted

guts, but he twists away, and my knife and I smash into the wall with a bone and metal jolting bump.

"Careful," he says from behind, "you don't knock Jesus off his cross."

Jesus sways, nearly loses his crown of thorns, and rights himself.

"He did suffer for you and all."

I swing and come within a millimetre of slashing his mocking face.

He stumbles over a candle, sears his pants, and knocks some prayer cards off one of the altars. "Lorraine, this is not an appropriate place for murder."

"It's perfectly appropriate—the perfect place to kill a devil."

"I did not kill Mel." He's got it down to a fine art looking truthful. Face dark and serious as if he's before the Judges of Hell with his heart on the scales. "I'm sick of being accused of things I didn't do, being hunted, persecuted."

"You killed her," I've got him on a knife's edge, "set up my brothers."

"I did not," he remonstrates, "want to cause any more trouble."

Happy, my house at rest, I recall him saying before her murder, now anguished. I weigh him, don't believe him. But my temper's calming. I could turn this around, take my turn to play the martyr, instigate my own plot.

"Alright," I say, lowering my knife, "for the sake of our relationship, I'll take the blow. Let my brothers rot in prison. Even if they were there for life, that wouldn't account for all the sins they have committed. I don't want to go their way. I don't want things, for us, to end like Lord and Lady Macbeth."

He's looking warier now than when I was coming at him with my knife.

"Why don't we start another story? I will be the bully, become the heroine, and you will be the nobody, become the rockstar hero. I will help you."

Saintly, me, with Mother Mary, saints all around me, candles burning softly.

"What makes you think I need your help?" Carson asks suspiciously.

Eyes very dark, candlelight in them, a legion of devils and dead rockstars. Yes, I could make a saint of him, send him the same way as the martyrs.

I think I hear the Litany of the Saints playing in the background. The version that my mother and I used to sing when we'd done very bad things.

Lord have mercy on us.
Christ have mercy on us.
Mother Mary, pray for us.
Michael, Gabriel, Raphael,
all the angels pray for us.

Saint Theresa, pray for us.
Saint John, pray for us.
Saint Ignatius, pray for us.
Saint Elizabeth, pray for us…

"You've got talent," I tell him, "but you've not got the nous nor the connections to make it in the music industry, whereas my dad has friends."

"I will never," growls Carson, "sell out to the market."

"You won't need to—just sing some songs fit for a record label."

"Not on a cold day in Hell or when Summer and Winter are in their graves."

He turns and walks out, but I can see, by his final expression, that I have sown a seed in the dark soil of his soul, and it will grow to flower between us.

Joan of Arc, pray for us.

Thomas More, pray for us…

Chapter Twenty Two

Chesney

I'm coming first in the 10,000 metres. I'm sprinting along the track. It's a burning, bright summer day at the end of term. My face is hot and red. I'm dripping sweat. It's running down my forehead, my back, the backs of my legs. I'm gasping for breath. My lungs are painful bellows. But I'm going to win.

I'm running for the end of school. I'm running for the school team. I'm running to beat Selina Summer, who is just behind me, her red hair on fire. I'm running for my dad to win another medal to hang on his tree. I'm also running away from my fears, my doubts, my suspicions about Val's secrets. My uncertainties about hers and Carson's obscure and secretive ways.

I've won and I'm over the finish line and the sun is bright as a medal above. All the crowd, waiting for the finishers, are cheering. Penwortham Priory High School the loudest for me coming first, Lostock Hall High School next for Selina coming second, Penwortham Girls High School for Ginnie for coming third. Laura, from Priory is fourth.

That means we've not only won the race but come top of the league. I'm ecstatic. Dad would be so proud of me. I'm decked with a medal, given a trophy.

Val comes over and hugs me even though I'm sweaty and sticky. I hug her back fiercely. She's wearing a white short-sleeved blouse, cotton and starchy.

On May Eve, as I planned, we slept together. I wrestled the Hulk from her bed and won. Ritually, we deflated him, folded him up, put him back in his box. Then, we embarked on a gentler kind of wrestling, our hands, our fingers finding the places they'd been longing for, for over two years.

I love her, I love her, I love her. I hug her hard. If only I could trust her. Last night, in her bag, I found a model of Gwythyr ap

Greidol with an invoice to Selina Summer and today I saw their exchange in the crowd.
The bright red streak in her fringe is ablaze and I'm afraid it will be a hot summer.

Later, when the celebrations are over, I confront her in her bedroom.

"You've been spying on me," she speaks accusingly.

"What do you expect," I demand, "when you keep secrets?"

"I love you and don't want to get you into any trouble."

"Why get yourself into trouble when your models are already selling well?"

"We've still got some ties with the Summers. Carson's done damn well to clean it up by exchanging models and other over-the-counter goods."

I sigh, suppose that selling a Gwythyr to Selina can't do much harm.

The next day, I see the headlines. There has been a fire at the Summer House.

Lorraine

Burnt down my hidey-hole, they have. My nice little shack with all my saints where I was so very near to making my worst enemy my best friend. All the altars the New Catholics worked so hard to create and tend. Jesus on his cross, Theresa, Therese, Elizabeth and John, all the prayer cards, all the offerings up in smoke. And, they nearly burnt it down with me in it.

It's a good job I heard them pouring the petrol and smelt it before the match was struck. As I opened the door, that quick, sharp "fssk", like someone zipping up a top or un-pulling Velcro, followed by the crackle of a flame. I saw the figures, clad in black, sprinting away. At that speed, at those heights they could only have been Sasha and Selina Summer. One chasing hockey balls, the other chasing running medals, fast as sunlight.

Helplessly I watched the blaze, flames leaping up all around. No way of saving it. Like a bonfire, it was, bigger than the bonfire we have every year on Bonfire Night on Pear Tree Park. Getting bigger, it is, now it's getting more famous. More people coming to see our fireworks. Catherine Wheels spinning, fountains to beat the one on Avenham Park, Roman candles taller than on any altar, rockets firing resplendent across the skies like comets.

Guy Fawkes burning nicely on top of the fire. I've got a bit of sympathy for him, a nice Catholic boy from the north, trying to win a bit of power. If it were me, however, I wouldn't have blown up the Houses of Parliament, just the people in them. Brought them, brick by brick, like the goblin builders to the north on a lorry or on one of those black freight trains without a name. Rebuilt them where Camelot Theme Park once stood alongside my medieval castle where I'm going to rule once my mum and dad are dead and gone and I can have as many horses and knights as I want.

I might even make Carson Lancelot and give him Martin Mere. It's barely bigger than his mill pond, now, England's largest lake, but if he blocked Main Dyke, it would return with the largest Lake Lady in England. He'd court her with songs and offerings of phones and iPads and laptops. He'd be happy there with his whooper swans and pink-footed geese, the widgeon and teal and shelduck. And, then, of course, I would take it away.

You see, I'm unhappy with him and his sister, for their own little gunpowder plot—setting fire to the Summer House, letting it backfire on me. I thought he might want to protect me, our sacred place, him coming here for drinkies with Saint John, reading the prayer cards, writing new ones. But, no, he showed us no respect. Dastardly plotter, like Guy, he is.

My little saint hut, where I said my prayers, kept my saintly ways, burnt up, a spectacle to match the blaze on Victoria Street. Saint Theresa, in her ecstasy, with a golden spear through her heart, lit by orange, gold, and red. At least she went out in style,

with ardour, with passion, not like me. I got the sole of my snakeskin boot singed, a raw red burn, had to limp home.

I'd thought Selina would have known better than to mess with me after the time at primary school when she and her family stole my pony. I followed her and the other Summers into Booths to the meat counter to buy their fancy cuts of meat—lamb off the salt marshes, Aberdeen Angus burgers, fish that lived in the ocean. Then, I snatched her into the back of the shop. In the walk-in freezers, I slit open a bag filled with ice, put her right hand in it.

"Where's my pony?" I demanded.

"I didn't steal your pony!" she shrieked, face paling, hair like a bonfire, flesh of her hand turning from white to blue to purple with the cold.

"Where's my pony? Where's my pony? Where's my pony? Where's my beautiful Welsh mountain pony who wandered the mountains with her pretty dished face, the clouds and the wind in her mane, springs bursting from beneath her dainty round hooves, rushing in waterfalls, like mare's tails?"

"I… didn't…" shivering, trembling, denying it…

Footsteps. I'd fled, left her there. It took some time for her hand to thaw. Thus, I've had her again, in the very same place. When she wouldn't confess, I cut off her right hand, took it as a trophy, put it in my handbag.

Finding a place for it, I am, now, in the winter freezers, in the small room that was once a bathroom in the bottom left flat. Cold, it is, in here. The sound of seven freezers humming reminds me of the wind over the North Pole. Every day, I monitor them to check they stay at -18 degrees Celsius.

It's also my job to make sure they're well stocked, whether that's by taking trophies from living victims like Selina or from corpses in the morgues. Sometimes we'll let the bodies be taken away, stored, autopsied.

Afterwards, Dad sends me with a skeleton key to harvest our pickings.

I open the third freezer. In the compartment on the left, we keep hands. Relics from our enemies dating back to when my family lived in Scotland. The right hand of Rory MacGregor, the right hand of Donal MacDonald. I'm making history by adding to our collection the right hand of Selina Summer.

I place it in a plastic bag and write her name, my name, and the date on it. I tuck it in, with Rory and Donal's appendages, take a quick glance at the lower arms, with and without hands, in the middle, the upper arms on the right.

I run my checks on the temperatures and briefly review the contents. In our number one freezer, we keep heads. Dad claims he has Macbeth's. I don't believe him. In number two, we keep torsos. Number four, our legs and feet. Number five is hearts. We've a few that Dad claims our ancestors cut raw and bloody from the chests of their enemies back in the Dark Ages. I've cut a couple out of bodies since then. The most recent I had to pick up in pieces after the autopsy as they dissected it to confirm a heart attack. Number six is livers and kidneys, not so prized as a good heart. Then, finally, number seven is the one my dad will not allow me to look in. He keeps it chained tight, he does, big old padlock. I've not yet found the key.

Chapter Twenty Three

Chesney

At the beginning of term, we are taken to the archaeological dig on Castle Hill. The school bus has to park on the road because the dig is taking place at the front of the graveyard of St Mary's Church, where the car park was. We get out. It is a grey September day with a damp, claggy mist in the air. The trees, in the graveyard, and in Penwortham Wood, are on the turn.

"What's that?" Martha Price points towards the lych gate. With a triangular roof and arched entrance, it stands in the midst of the iron railings.

"That is where the corpse bearers once waited with the corpse prior to the funeral," says Mrs Robertson, our history teacher. She is tall and thin and has sombre dark brown hair in a ponytail and large white-rimmed glasses. "If you look on the south portal you will see the words, 'Lord preserve thy going in,' and, on the north portal, 'Lord preserve thy going out'."

Mrs Robertson greets the archaeologists. The group, two men, three women, ranging from a woman in her twenties to a bearded man in his sixties, are wearing comfortable-looking shirts, outdoor trousers, and wide-brimmed hats. They all have southern accents. Our teacher tells us they're from Oxford University and have got funding to come and do the dig.

The area is screened off with metal barriers with plastic sheeting displaying the words, 'Penwortham Uncovered', with the South Ribble Borough Council, Oxford University, and National Lottery funding logos.

The barriers are parted and we're allowed in to see a near-empty clay pit.

"Four burials have been found, and the bodies have been removed to the Manchester Archaeology Unit for carbon dating," Mrs Robertson informs us. "Early evidence suggests that they

were monks who lived in Penwortham Priory, which stood near the church during the medieval period."

I recall that our high school was named after the priory. It's one of the first things we're told when we start school. Last year, we'd learnt about how it was founded in the 1140s by a Norman lord called Warin de Bussel, then handed over to Evesham Abbey, of which it became an 'obedience'. It wasn't very big—just room for a prior and three or four monks. They were of the strict Benedictine faith and wore white robes. The richer southern abbey had sent its monks to this bleak northern headland as a punishment. The most notorious of them was Roger Norris, who was referred to as a 'glutton, wine-bibber, and loose liver'. He hoarded the money for himself whilst the other monks were made to live on a diet of bread and water and were so poorly clothed they couldn't appear in public.

"We've saved a few bones for you to see," says a female archaeologist.

We pass round a finger bone, in a plastic box, labelled C143, an ulna, labelled C145, and a radius labelled C146. I think of the hollow bone that Carson brought back, the arm of Nodens, from under the castle mound. Uneasily, I recall the superstitions about disturbing the rest of the dead and the story about the curse of the Pharaohs from our studies of ancient Egypt.

"Why's that area cordoned off?" asks Val, pointing to a rectangle of blue tape that is at the furthest end of the dig to the graveyard and seems separate.

The archaeologists look uncertainly towards Mrs Robertson.

"Tell them," she says, "I think they will be interested."

"A fifth corpse," a female archaeologist speaks, "was discovered facing west, face down."

"Oh," says Val, looking like she knows something I don't.

"What does that matter?" Martin Checkers pipes up.

"Christian burials, such as the four monks," says Mrs Robertson, "are always laid out with their feet to the east and their heads to the west. This is so they are ready to greet Jesus when he

returns from the east, in the Second Coming. The corpses of criminals were buried facing the opposite way, sometimes face down, sometimes bound, to prevent their resurrection."

"To stop them from becoming walking dead," Val points out.

"Those remains are also in Manchester to discern a date and cause of death."

I shiver. My skin feels damp and clammy. I sense that something has been disturbed, think I see a shape in the mist, look again, it's gone.

"There are a few partial remnants that have survived from the burials." The female archaeologist passes round further labelled items in plastic boxes. A shard from a wooden cross. A piece of dirty white robing. A thin piece of paper with strange letters that looks like a stray page from a book.

*

When I get in from school, I can't warm up. Not even after eating one of Mum's stonking hot pasta bakes with steaming tomato sauce and melted cheese. Not even when I go to bed early with a hot water bottle and hug it to my chest like an Egyptian Pharaoh clutching tight a precious vase.

When I get to sleep, I dream I'm at Penwortham Priory with Val and Carson. The simple wooden buildings are organised around a central courtyard. Everything is permeated with a claggy grey coldness. In the refectory, we find the monks, four of them, seated at a plain rectangular table, hunched and miserable in dirty, threadbare white robes. Before them is a single loaf of bread and a jug filled with water. Still, they invite us to share. Val and I, even Carson, accept a piece and a wooden cup gratefully.

"They're even poorer than us," Val whispers to Carson with sympathy.

Once we have eaten, we follow them as they process out to the chapel for Vespers. There are only two pews, and we stand behind

them, mouthing the words. “Lord, we come at the end of the day, to offer our thanks, our praise.”

How can they be thankful for living a life of such abject poverty?

We follow them out towards the dormitory, where they split off into individual cells. Each is sparse. Nothing but a bed with a meagre mattress and thin sheet, a desk and chair, a cross on the wall, and a Bible. The first three monks sit down, open their Bibles on a marked page, and begin to pray.

The fourth monk follows for a while, listens around, then puts his Bible to one side. From a secret cubbyhole in the wall, he draws out a black-bound book. He opens it on the first page and begins to mutter beneath his breath. Not Latin, not English, but words that sound like Welsh, and as he speaks, he takes a reed quill and writes them down in a sweeping hand.

“Brythonic,” gasps Val, “like in the Black Book of Carmarthen.”

“In a strict bardic metre,” Carson speaks awed, “long lost to the North.”

Once his writing is done, he blows dry the ink, sketches designs around the poem. An enlarged capital G as the first letter and an ornate border. Then, at the bottom, to my surprise, he draws a hound with a bone in its mouth.

Val gapes and Carson, staring open-mouthed, touches his tattoo.

“Next,” says Val, recalling how an illuminated medieval manuscript is made, “he should add the layers of gesso, put golden gilding on the letter G.”

Instead, the monk sighs, looks painedly at the empty capital letter.

“I guess,” Val observes, “he can’t afford gesso or gold. But perhaps he might have some pigments to mix his paints: ochre for red, lapis lazuli for blue, umber for brown, verdigris for green, zinc for white, soot for black.”

His expression remains regretful. No pigment to be seen. Not even any firewood for soot. “At the very least,” he mutters. He pricks his finger with his reed quill and spots the ears of the hound with two drops of blood. As the bell rings for Compline, the monk puts the book back in its hiding place.

A veil of mist comes down, and when it lifts, we are in the Chapter House, a bare octagonal room with wooden benches around the outside. A different group of four monks, uncouth and ill-dressed, are standing in a circle. They are vexed, agitated, shuffling uncomfortably, one pulling at his hair.

“There’s no standing against Henry the Eighth and the dissolution of the monasteries. If we don’t leave, we will be thrown out or killed.”

“What are we going to do with the book?”

“You mean our Bibles?”

“No, that black book Prior Norton advised we keep hidden.”

“Leave it hidden, burn it, bury it. I don’t care.”

“What’s in it anyway?”

“Not the works of God. Old British myths.”

“Looked Pagan to me when I took a look—best burnt.”

“No,” a dark-haired monk speaks up, “it’s part of our bardic heritage.”

“Pah,” says another, “the pages are near-empty, just a few unintelligible poems.”

“They give clues to the rest of the narrative,” he argues.

“Take it if you wish,” says the hair-puller, “I’ll have nothing to do with it.”

“I will,” he says, “I’ll be taking it, leaving my robes and monasticism behind.”

The mist comes down again, and this time, the monastery is derelict. The ceilings are caving in, bats in the rafters; the walls falling, thick with woodlice. A man, in a plain black cloak, is walking through the monastery, clutching the black book, following the ways the monks processed. By his features, I recognise him as the son of the man who fled with the book. He

has unkempt shoulder-length dark hair and a fresh scar across his left eye. There is something familiar about his visage and decorum I can't quite place.

He makes his way to the fourth cell in the dormitory and sits down. He opens the book, reflects on one of its poems, begins to speak in the Brythonic tongue, mouth fumbling over the unfamiliar pronunciation. Then, the poetry begins to flow. He takes out a reed quill, copies it down.

"Listen, hoofbeats," says Val.

We go outside and see a group of riders with grim persecutory faces, approaching with weapons at their belts, flying white flags with bloody red crosses. We rush inside to warn him, but he cannot see us. We're more invisible than ghosts.

"By the order of King James, you are under arrest on suspicion of witchcraft."

"You don't understand, this isn't black magic, just ancient British poetry."

"Hand over the black book and its incantations to Pagan gods."

"No," he holds it close, "I won't let you burn the Black Book of Peneverdant."

"By the order of King James, hand over the book!"

"No!"

As he refuses, an ear-splitting howl. In the back wall, a vortex opens, like a black hole, and from it comes a huge white red-eared hound. The man tosses the book to the hound, and it departs with it, just one page escaping, flapping out and falling to the floor at the feet of the king's men. The man attempts to escape in the aftermath of surprise, yet he trips on his cloak. They recapture him, pick up the incriminating page. It features a wild boy with burrs in his hair kneeling before a bull-horned god.

"This is more than enough to condemn you for witchcraft."

The mist comes down again, and we're swept, dizzyingly, elsewhere. I see, to my horror, we are standing before the gallows on Hangman's Bank. We are part of a small crowd of people in grubby tunics and leggings. On the platform, the hangman, a surly

man in a dark cloak, is placing a noose around the neck of the dark-haired man, and his death sentence is being read.

"No," screams Val, with more anguish than you'd expect for a mere stranger.

"Stop!" Carson rushes forward, tries to grasp the cloak of the hangman, but his fingers slip through it as though they are made of less than mist or ether.

"Sebastian Robinson," the court official addresses him solemnly.

A deathly hand clutches at my heart. That's why I recognised him. He's a distant ancestor of Val and Carson's who lived here in King James's time.

"You are hereby sentenced to death by hanging on suspicion of witchcraft for attempting to summon devils from a black book."

Boos from most of the crowd, and a woman his age and two children pleading.

"Have you any last words?" asks the court official.

"Only that the poetry and the gods of ancient Britain will live on."

The hangman pushes a lever to release the trapdoor. I grip Val's arm, and the crowd cries out as the man drops, writhes, kicks, as his awful struggles lessen. I don't know what to do—can't help, can't look away, can't move.

His face pales, blues, his eyes roll up, his tongue lolls out. A final spasm. Val bursts into tears, and Carson sinks to his knees with his head in his hands.

The mist comes down again, and this time the man is just a skeleton, dangling from the noose with gaping eye sockets and an agonised grin.

Carrion birds are flocking down to tear the last strips of flesh from his bones.

A raven is flapping towards us with wings like a black book.

I wake with a scream.

Chapter Twenty Four

Chesney

The dream is so horrible, so vivid, I can't bear to tell Val. At school, I notice that she is agitated too, wonder if she dreamt the same, but don't ask.

I dream the same dream the next night and the next and the next, still can't speak it.

At the weekend, I sleep at Val's house and it takes us a long time to go to sleep, making small talk, to avoid what is waiting in dreamland's darkness.

"Aargh!" We wake with a scream together, clutching each other.

"What's the matter?" at once we ask, "did you just dream…?"

Carson's knocking on the door. "I heard you both shout." He's pale and dishevelled, as if he has awoken from a nightmare about hanged men and ravens.

"We had a terrible dream," we both say.

"I too," says Carson.

"About monks." "A black book." "A hanged man." We corroborate.

"I've been having it since we visited the archaeological dig," I confess.

"One of our ancestors hunted down and hung by witch hunters," laments Carson.

"I'm sure," says Val, "he was the man whose remains were found buried facing west and face down during the archaeological dig on Castle Hill."

"I wonder if those poor monks were the four buried near him?" I suggest.

"It would make sense that the dig disturbed their spirits," says Carson.

“What’re we going to do?” asks Val, “I don’t want to dream that dream again. Do you think they’ll rest when their bones have been reburied?”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” replies Carson, “I think they’ve returned for a reason.”

A horrible flutter in my stomach like the flapping of a raven’s wings.

“The Black Book of Peneverdant was never completed,” he says.

“What does this mean?” asks Val. “Don’t say…”

“We,” he glances at his sister, “are being called to complete it.”

*

Val and I go back to sleep, and thankfully, there are no more bad dreams. We get up to find that Carson is already awake and in the kitchen, on his laptop. Lips pressed, pupils small dots of intense focus, he is overlaying a sketch of the unknown layout of Penwortham Priory, drawn from his dream, on top of the location of the mansion house on the 1840 Ordnance Survey map, on top of a modern map of the location from Google Maps.

“Have you had any breakfast?” Val asks him.

“No,” Carson admits.

Val goes to the cupboard, takes out three bowls and a packet of Weetabix, stacks three in each bowl, pours on milk, sprinkles them with sugar.

“Mew.” Hearing the clinking pouring sounds, Courtney appears.

“You haven’t even fed the cat,” Val accuses Carson, putting down cat food.

Going over to her brother, she switches off his laptop, closes it, and places his bowl on top of it. “No more screen time until you’ve eaten at least two.”

A familiar scene. Carson eyes his Weetabix narrowly, as if they are sunken submarines, then, with silent determination, digs in

with his spoon. After we have eaten and Val clears away, giving Court his leftover milk, I see he has eaten two and a half. A continuous improvement. Since he started the band, he has been eating better and becoming more visible.

Carson reopens his laptop and beckons us over. “The medieval Priory stood in the vicinity of present-day Priory Crescent, Monks Walk, and Priory Lane. I estimate the fourth cell of the dormitory, where the portal that the hound came out of appeared in the back wall, was here.” He points.

“In the garden of 18 Priory Crescent,” I see.

“Isn’t that,” asks Val, “Mrs Robertson’s house?”

How does she know where Mrs Robertson lives?

Carson nods, “We will have to be extra careful, particularly considering the additional task I was given in a dream from Gwyn last night.”

“The Gatherer of Souls talks to you in your dreams?” Val looks jealous.

“It’s not always pleasant,” says Carson.

The look on his face leads me to believe him.

“He told me that the souls of three of the poor monks are trapped in this world. Due to their ill-treatment by Roger Norris, their lack of decent clothing, and their hunger, they lost faith and died without believing in God or in the old gods either. They remain, walking in an endless procession, treading the same ground, the same street, Monks Walk. They can be seen there when the veil is thin at midnight, which is when we must gather them.”

“How long have you been serving Gwyn by guiding the dead?” asks Val.

“I’ve only done it once before,” Carson admits.

“When?” Val demands.

“When Dad’s ghost returned last Halloween.”

“You took him back to the Otherworld? To where? Where do souls like his go?”

"You don't want to know." Carson changes the subject. "The fourth monk went with Gwyn and is currently acting as custodian of the black book."

"And where's the soul of our ancestor, Sebastian Robinson?"

"That's where it gets interesting." Carson taps his black-nailed fingers on the table, each reminding me of a feather at the end of a raven's wing. "Gwyn told me that after his death, to escape the rite that would seal his soul in his body and prevent it from leaving, even at the Second Coming, he sent it, instead, into raven form, and thus it remains here to this day."

"There's only one raven in Penwortham," remarks Val.

"Yes," says Carson, "I'd always wondered how that raven who lives in Crow Wood with the crows has lived so long and why he follows me."

I didn't believe Val that a raven might live in the suburbs until she took me to listen to the distinctive cronk amongst the more familiar caws and cahs of the crows, and I checked on the BTO App to be doubly sure. Even more unbelievable that the soul of a hanged man might become a raven.

Carson continues. "For this to work, we need to pick up Sebastian and the monks and enter the portal in the midnight hour between 12 and 1 a.m."

"What," I ask, "if Mrs Robertson catches us skulking in her back garden with three ghost monks and a soul in raven form looking for an invisible door?"

Lorraine

I've been angry with Daniel Green since Mel's death for shirking our dirty jobs. Ignoring Dad's phone calls. Refusing to answer the door. Putting on a show of being in grief, sinking into a depression, not coming out of his house.

Then, Mark, that despicable do-gooder, with his first aider's smile, going round every day with food and counselling as a sticking plaster. Getting his house all fitted up with cameras and

alarms. Got him back to work, he has, at the Green Viper, but not back to more important things.

To put the icing on the cake, to cheer him up even more, suggest there is a life outside the thrall of Winter, he has set him up with a new woman. Would you believe it, with Mrs Robertson, my old history teacher from school?

They're having dinner tonight, at her house, and I've been sent to watch. To see how their relationship develops and make sure he doesn't give away any of our secrets. She's got a mind like a sleuth, that woman. Her own interests in hidden histories, the darkest and most murderous. She's the only one who has ever caught Carson in one of his disappearing acts. When we went to Lancaster Castle, he slipped off in the dungeons and she found him in one of the closed-off rooms where they store the items not on display. In amongst the scold's bridles and the most ugly torture implements, he was, at a Romano-British altar dedicated to Mars Cocidius. Carson claimed he was interested in the altar because Mars is equated with Nodens, an old British god, on two silver statuettes on Cockersand Moss. But I know what he was looking at, getting ideas for his beastly pocket knife.

Thus, I'm up here, in upper Penwortham, amongst the big posh houses. I've got my all-black sneaking gear on, my black Assassin sneakers. Silent as a black panther and deadly as a pack of black cat burglars on amphetamine, I am.

Mrs Robertson's house is a white-washed semi-detached with big bay windows. The hedge is neatly cut. There are a silver birch and hydrangea in the front garden. Parked outside is Daniel's green sports car with its personalised number plate, DAN GR33N, and Green Viper bumper sticker.

I stick to the shadows and conceal myself beneath the dining room window, position my stick-on mic, and listen as they have what the upper classes call dinner and we call tea. Dinner, for us, is what the dinner ladies gave us at lunchtime—butties and sausage rolls and sponge cake and pink custard. For them, it's an evening meal beginning with an appetiser, pea and mint soup

served from a silver Bain-Marie and crusty bread. The main is beef bourguignon with celeriac mash and steamed vegetables, and dessert a trifle with layers of sponge cake, fruit, and custard topped by whipped cream.

Oh, I'm hungry, I am. Oh, I'm jealous. And all the while, Marian, which I learn is Mrs Robertson's name, is talking about the skeletons of the four poor monks that have been found during the archaeological dig up on Castle Hill and the results from the Manchester Archaeology Unit showing they lived under the notorious gluttonous Roger Norris as their prior and died around 1220 with signs they suffered from malnutrition and cold.

More intriguing, the after-dinner talk of another burial. A common criminal, with a nasty scar across his left eye, dated to 1622, the time of King James. His burial, face down, facing west, suggests he was a witch.

"Witch!" A boy's voice. "Ha, ha, ha!"

"Stupid brother," a second boy, "men can't be witches."

"They've created a digital representation of his face," says Marian.

"He looks like Stanley Robinson," Daniel remarks.

"Stanley Robinson's ghost is going to get you," the first boy.

"Aargh!" the second screams, "Where is he? Where is he?"

Oh, this is interesting, could he be a distant ancestor of Carson's?

Once the talk is done, the boys demand that Daniel wrestle with them, and he throws them about in the living room. Then they plead to stay up until midnight because the younger one claims that he has seen three of the poor ghost monks walking on Monks Walk and wants to show his mum.

Chesney

As we approach Crow Wood on the midnight hour, all is deathly quiet. There are dark rain clouds in the sky blotting out the moon, but as yet, no rain. The woodland lies to the west of the graveyard

in St Mary's Church. The crows shouldn't be up and about, but they are croaking in the trees.

"Cronk, cronk," the raven flies from the wood to greet us.

Carson holds out his wrist, and the black bird alights on it. He's magnificent. Black feathers soft and pluffed, shining with a blue iridescence even though there is no light to reflect from them. His beak is black as the dark side of the moon, and his eyes are blacker than witchcraft and thievery. He reminds me of Carson to a 't'. I see their shared ancestral bond.

"I know now," says Carson in a voice husky with emotion, "why you caught my attention when I was young, and you have watched over me."

"Kraa, kraa," says Sebastian, with a wing-whisper, alights on Carson's shoulder, and speaks something in raven-talk into his ear, bringing a sad smile.

He then hops onto Val's wrist, affectionately twirls her fringe with his beak.

I'm almost jealous I don't have so familiar a friend. The only pet my mum has allowed me to have is a rabbit, although I've secretly kept snails.

"You know what task lies ahead tonight?" Carson asks Sebastian.

"Kraa!" He thrusts his beak towards the black sky and returns to Carson's shoulder.

Raven on board, we make our way out of the graveyard, down Church Avenue, left through a little ginnel, onto Hollinghurst Avenue, Kingsway, then Monks Walk. There they are, three poor monks, balding, aged before their time, walking endlessly and aimlessly up and down the street.

"Greetings," says Carson.

They stop dead in their tracks for the first time in seven hundred years.

"Demons," one of them speaks in panic.

“No,” Carson tells them, “heralds of the truth. Recall how you died poor and starving, refusing to believe in the God who didn’t help you, or the old gods?”

“No,” they refuse to believe him, “we’re not dead.” “Just a bit lost.”

“You’re in limbo—what Christians call Purgatory and those who follow the old gods call the misty hinterlands or the place between worlds.”

“If we just keep walking…”

“Do you know how long you’ve been walking?”

“A few hours?” “A day?” “A week?”

“Seven hundred years.”

A collective gasp runs through them.

“I can free you from treading the same spot and take you to a place where you will never hunger, never thirst, have the clothing you need to keep warm and proper shoes on your feet.” He glances at their ragged sandals.

“But hunger and cold and thirst are all we’ve known.”

“Do you not remember Eveshomme?”

I recall the medieval name for Evesham.

“No.” “Only this desolate headland.” “Only Peneverdant.”

Then, it begins to rain, cold, resolute droplets, resolved to soak us all through.

Seeing the monks cringe, “I can take you to the land of no rain,” says Carson.

“Really?” Now their eyes light up. “No rain?” “How we hate the rain.” “The cold rain of Lancashire.” “The barrage of the headland.” “The misery of monks.”

“Yes,” Carson promises.

“Demon or not, we’ll follow him.” They shield their faces from the offending drops.

With the monks on board, we head towards Priory Crescent. Looking towards the back of the houses, Carson curses, and I follow his gaze to see a pair of curtains moving back, exposing a

pair of young boys' faces. "I'd never have guessed Mrs Robertson would let her kids stay up until midnight."

Lorraine

It's been a long night, this, listening to Marian telling the kids ghost stories. Traditional tales about the Headless Black Dog of Preston, the Legend of Penwortham Fairy Funeral, and the Boggart of Boggart Hole Clough.

Then, 'The Green Ribbon', a story about a woman whose head falls off when the ribbon around her neck is untied, making both boys shriek in horror.

"Up you go then," she tells them, "keep watch for those ghosts."

Afterwards, Marian quizzes Daniel about the history of catch wrestling.

Not much happens until I hear the youngest son shout from upstairs, "Mum, I can see those three monks, not only that, there are three more ghosts with them, and one looks like Stanley Robinson with a raven on his shoulder!"

Chapter Twenty Five

Chesney

"Do you think they've seen us?" asks Val.

"We can't take any chances," says Carson. "You'll have to keep Mrs Robertson occupied whilst Chesney and I lead the monks through the portal. You'll need to come through before 1 a.m. You remember how to use doors?"

"Of course," she replies with red-forelocked surety.

When did Val start slipping between the worlds? I'm shocked. As the rain begins to pelt down, this feels like more and more of a bad idea.

Val runs ahead, not complaining, not puffing, now things are serious. The monks try to fend off the rain, hands over their heads, to protect their near-bald, tonsured heads. I follow Carson, black-feathered ancestor on his shoulder, off Monks Walk, right onto Priory Lane, right onto Priory Crescent.

To my dismay, outside number 18, Mrs Robertson's house, I see a green car with a registration plate, DAN GR33N, recognise it from the Green Viper. "Mrs Robertson and Daniel Green," I gasp, barely able to believe it. Then, more worriedly, to Carson, "Daniel's a catch wrestler. Should he catch Val…"

We both look in concern towards where Val stands in the doorway. "Mrs Robertson, Mrs Robertson, help me. I've just seen the ghosts of three poor monks and the ghost of Sebastian Robinson in the form of a big black raven!"

I see Mrs Robertson, Daniel behind her, in the doorway.

"Valerie Robinson, whatever are you doing in upper Penwortham past midnight?"

"Mum," a boy's voice from behind, "she's one of the ghosts!"

"Nonsense, but she is one of them dodgy Robinsons," another boy says.

"Let me in! Let me in!" Val barges in like a rhino and pulls the door closed.

“Get her out! Get her out!” the boys protest.

“I’ve a message from those ill-clothed threesome, thirsting, starved, soaked with rain. They said you lot up here, in upper Penwortham, are to stop being so greedy and give some food and drink to those of us down below, who thirst and hunger. Help us with our heating bills, gutters, and drains.”

“Now’s our chance,” says Carson to me, “hurry along,” to the monks.

We pelt along with the rain into the back garden, where there is a patio, a well-kept lawn, decorative plants in pots artistically positioned. At the back is a patch of hosta, heuchera, and ferns, and a wisteria, leafless, climbs the fence.

Interposed, like on Carson’s laptop, is the echo of the fourth cell. The wooden wall, the darkness of the portal, swirling, filled with thick, dark mist.

A threshold I’m not sure I can cross without Val. What if Daniel’s got hold of her and won’t let her go, or Mrs Robertson has decided to detain her? As I look into the miasmic darkness, I’m terrified I might go mad or not return.

“Come on,” Carson steps into the portal and turns to me. Dark mist swirls around him. The raven cronks. “We’re in this together now. Trust me.”

“I don’t think I can do this without Val.” I need her so very much.

“In you go.” Val’s behind the monks, and she’s chasing them through the portal like a sheepdog, shaking its black and white head, baring its snarly teeth.

Carson’s taking Val’s hand, and Val is taking mine.

The Nine Inch Nails song:

You and me
we’re in this together now.
None of them can stop us now.
We will make it through somehow.
You and me

if the world should break in two
until the very end of me
until the very end of you.

Val follows Carson, and I follow Val into the swirling dark.

Lorraine

What's this? The devil daughter of that Robinson witch battering on Mrs Robertson's front door and delivering a message from the ghost monks. Then, far more devilish, his demon son, with a raven on his shoulder. A familiar.

Damn Carson, he's got those three half-starved Benedictines following him like lost sheep right past Mrs Robertson's dining room and into her back garden where the ghostly image of a monk's cell and a portal is appearing. Chesney's following along, like a lemming, crying out for Val. And Val's bounding, like a Hell Hound behind, chasing them, yapping, into the dark.

Oh, the intrigue of this will be enough to make Vance burst into pieces like one of those stage magicians who get sawed up and rise up whole again.

Damn those portals for opening, closing, vanishing at times only Carson knows.

"The ghosts have gone into our garden and disappeared," the young boy says.

"Can we stay up," asks the other, "see if they come out again?"

"No," says Mrs Robertson, "enough tall stories. It's way past your bedtime."

I hear her go up to tuck them in. "Would you like a drink?" she asks Daniel.

"I shouldn't. I'm driving."

"Just a little one."

"Ok."

The sound of her pouring a large glass of wine.

"That's not small."

The sound of her pouring an even larger glass for herself.

"Now, tell me," she says, "what happened to your last girlfriend, Mel."

Chesney

"The rules of space and time work differently here," explains Carson, "in fact, space and time don't exist; places come and go in accordance with our will and desire, moreover, in accordance with the will and desire of the gods."

I don't understand him, and from Val's blank expression, she doesn't either.

We are standing on and circled by dark mist, endless in all directions.

"We're in Purgatory," groan the monks, "bring back the rain."

"No, we're not," says Carson, "this is just the misty between-place. To leave here, to avoid getting lost in the mist, we need to keep to an intention."

"Which is?" asks Val.

"To find a place without hunger, thirst, or cold."

"Or rain," interjects a monk.

"Or rain for these monks to reside until they are ready to move on."

"Where?" they ask. "Where then?"

"To the next life. Up to Heaven. Down to Hell. You decide."

We walk through the mist for what seems to be an interminable period until we come to what looks like a bustling medieval village, with banners, a fair, all kinds of stalls selling sweet meats, flagons of foaming ale. Although there's no sun, there is a pleasant warmth in the air.

"It looks a bit like Eveshomme," one of the monks now remembers.

"Where we lived before we became monks, then got expelled to Peneverdant."

"But more fun. Look, there's a jester."

“There are games.”

“There are even some pretty women.”

They rush off, hitching up their robes to stop them catching their heels.

Sebastian croaks, a sound of laughter, or approval, or both.

“Well, that was easy enough,” smiles Carson, “next, we need to find our way to the fourth monk, who is the keeper of the Black Book.”

As if on cue, a white, red-eared hound arrives, sniffs at Carson, who shows him the tattoo of the hollow bone on his forearm. The hound barks, leads on.

The fourth monk is in a monastic cell, but it’s a stately place. He sits, the black book before him, at an ornately carved, subtly sloping wooden desk. At the top is a raven feather quill in a pot of black bone ink mixed with gum arabic. He is working on adding golden gilding to the letter G in the first poem. All around him are pigments for painting— carmine, vermillion, lapis lazuli, verdigris, umber, yellow, red, purple and brown ochres, zinc. A plump mattress with a goose feather eiderdown and pillow is on his bed.

“Welcome,” he says, “Sebastian, Carson and Val Robinson, and Chesney Liddell.”

He’s been waiting for me. I’m elated. Finally, I’m important too.

“I need to pass on this book, which has been a joy and a burden.”

“Bloody thing got me killed.” Sebastian flies above it, flaps his angry wings.

The monk quickly, skilfully, finishes painting the border of the poem blue and green, the hound and the bone white, adds proper red to its ears. Blowing the paint dry, he closes the book, turns it to face us. I see the title, ‘The Black Book of Peneverdant’. Stencilled beneath is a hill circled by a knot-work of animals— hounds, serpents, aurochs, wild deer, an owl, salmon.

“You,” he says to Carson, “will fill it with songs.”

“You,” he says to Val, “will illuminate it.”

And you,” he says to me, with a brief and sombre glance at Carson, as if he knows something we don’t, “will need to finish the story.”

“Cronk! Cronk! Cronk!” Sebastian grows bigger and blacker.

So, that’s why I was brought here. What does he know? What is going to happen to Carson that means he won’t be able to bring an end to this dark tale?

Brother and sister look equally troubled and perturbed. Yet, Carson steps forward, accepts the book, hugs it to his chest, “A joy and a burden.”

Val picks up the paints, a paintbrush, the gesso, the golden gilding.

“I,” I admit, “haven’t got a storyteller’s tongue.”

“You will find it,” the monk promises, “somewhere beyond the waters.”

What does that mean? We depart, Carson with the book, Val with her paints, me with a knowledge of fate and a riddle too hard to solve or bear.

Lorraine

Very interesting, this, listening to Marian quizzing Daniel about Mel’s death.

“Did you see any signs the Winter brothers were following her?”

“No,” Daniel admits, “in all honesty I don’t think they were capable of tracking a hare, a fox, let alone prey like her, unlike Carson Robinson.”

“So you’re certain Carson killed Mel?”

“He’s got a criminal mind like his father and plays with dark devices.”

“And how did our good friend, Mark, get on with Mel?”

In spite of the red wine Daniel's words do not flow as well. "They seemed to get on alright but he never approved and tried to split us up."

"Why do you think that was?"

"She had a bit of a reputation."

"For luring men into serving as middlemen for the Winters?"

I tense, preparing to step in before Daniel divulges our secrets.

Then, "Mum!" It seems the boys are still up. "Those ghosts again!"

I turn and see the portal has reappeared and stepping from it… I can barely believe my eyes when I see Carson, raven on shoulder, cradling a black book like a devil child. Blacker than the pits of Satan. Blacker than the holes of Hell. What spells is he going to cast? Why has he returned looking more fated than Macbeth when he spoke to the witches at the cauldron?

Val and Chesney look like they've heard some awful prophecy too.

Vance isn't just going to burst into pieces like a stage magician, he's going to explode like a supernova and never be put back together again.

Having a black book alone is enough to warrant that Carson ends up on the inquisitor's gristliest torture devices and a book like that and a familiar… as my gaze follows their departure I fear my smile might betray me as it's bigger than a fox's after eating every single chicken in a chicken run.

"Go back to bed," Marian tells the boys, "it's nearly 2 a.m."

"You've missed them," the younger speaks sulkily.

"I guess I should be going," says Daniel.

I'm not surprised he is taking his chance to leave after her non-stop questioning. I retrieve my mic, slip silently to his car, open the back door with one of Stanley Robinson's skeleton keys, and hunker down behind the driver's seat.

He opens the front door, gets in, an effort for him to arrange his big body in the small seat, wriggles himself comfortable, finds the accelerator and clutch.

As he goes to turn the key, “After dinner surprise!” I pop up, put my knife to his throat. In the interior rear view mirror, I see reflected the wideness of his eyes, popping out like a cartoon character, my demonic grin.

“Lorraine,” he gulps. His Adam’s apple bulges against the blade of my knife.

I’m careful not to cut him to be plastered up by Mark again.

“What are you doing here,” he demands, “with a knife, in my car?”

“I should be asking you what you’re doing up here in Upper Penwortham having a fancy dinner with Mrs Robertson when you’re a working-class man and belong on Kingsfold with scum like me and the Winter Crew.”

Daniel winces. “I’m nothing like you. There’s no comparison.”

“Yes, there is. You don’t belong here but with Ratty and his pack in the sewers doing our dirty work, and from there perhaps we’ll let you climb up.”

“I’m not going to give in to your threats again, let you ruin me.”

“You’re not afraid of my knife?” I angle the blade so a streetlight glints off it.

“You’re nothing but a teenage g…” he cuts off as I draw a slither of blood.

“I’m the leader of the Winter Crew, the most feared girl in Penwortham, don’t think I’m afraid to do what it takes, no matter how bloody, to have my way. Now you’re going to answer me some questions, firstly about Mel.”

Daniel tightens, his eyes shift from side to side, as if he’s playing one of those computer games where you have to shoot attackers coming from all directions.

“Did she lead you into double-crossing the Winters to the Summers?”

“Yes,” he admits, “she said it was the work of a middleman.”

“And you went along with it because…”

Pain in his gaze. Like a dumb, wounded animal. Like the dying deer I saw knocked down on the A59, unable to move or speak because of the agony. He loved her, I realise, in spite of his knowledge of her treachery.

"I think she was betraying everybody," he speaks sadly, "even herself."

"Did you know she was also sleeping with Mark?"

"What?" His eyes are wider than Pop Eye's. "Liar! Manipulator."

"If not, why do you think Mark was so keen to split you up?"

"He's a good friend and wanted to help me escape your grip."

"There's only one person who has ever evaded the claws of the Winters."

"Carson," Daniel spits, "Mel's killer, evasive as an oiled otter."

"You had a run-in with him?" I ask Daniel with interest.

"No, but Ratty and his pack are still squealing for his blood."

"If you want to help bring him down, you'll be picking up your phone from now on, answering your door, getting your sorry arse back into those tunnels."

"And if I don't want to kill him or go along with your schemes?"

"My dad's got a friend at the Inquisition who knows some nasty tricks."

Chapter Twenty Six

Chesney

"No," Val scolds Carson in frustration, "this is how you put the curls on the g's."

We are at their kitchen table, and she is giving him a calligraphy lesson.

"You're not writing in our book," she tells him, "until you get the letters right."

"Damn." He botches the g, smudges the ink, puts down his raven feather quill. "I'm beginning to wish I was back in the days of the ancient bards of Britain, who didn't write anything down, so I can just keep the words in my head."

A knock on the door. Val opens it, and Johnny comes in with the Black Book under one arm and a large sheath of notes under his other arm. He looks pleased with himself, his smile silvery as his hair. "I've got the translations."

We sit forward in excitement as he seats himself and begins to speak. "It wasn't easy, having only just learned Middle Welsh, working with Old Welsh in the Brythonic dialect of the Old North. What I couldn't translate, I managed to take to my mum without letting on too much about my questions."

"So what's within it?" Carson presses impatiently.

"It seems the monks were remembering poems passed down orally from a bard who lived in northern Britain in the days of Arthur. It opens with a prayer from an unknown bard to Gwyn ap Nudd. Like in the Red Book of Hergest, it recounts a version of the battle between Gwyn and Gwythyr for Creiddylad, but it is not Arthur who intervenes but Creiddylad herself who makes peace between summer and winter."

"That makes sense." I much prefer the land goddess arbitrating.

“Again, in this tale, Gwyn takes Gwythyr’s men prisoner in Annwn. He kills Nwython, a northern king, and makes his son, Cyledyr, eat his heart.”

“Then Cyledyr goes mad,” Carson recalls, “but we don’t hear of his fate.”

“In this book, we do,” says Johnny.

“Really?” Carson leans so far forward he almost falls off his chair.

I recall how Cyledyr’s story has long fascinated and moved him.

“Cyledyr Wyllt,” Johnny continues, “becoming wyllt or mad, wandered for many years amongst other madmen and spectres, roaming the wild, thorny moorlands of Lancashire and sloshing through the peat bogs. There are poems in his voice singing to the ghosts on Winter Hill and Noon Hill. Also, to the bog people, the bog bodies, the bog heads. It seems he wandered with the ghost of an elk and took refuge under twisted hawthorns.”

“Horace the Elk, I bet,” Val recalls.

I remember seeing his skeleton in the Harris Museum on a history trip.

“There are a couple of prayers in Cyledyr’s voice petitioning Gwyn’s father, Nudd, who was earlier known as Nodens, for healing dreams.” Johnny turns to an illuminated poem in the book where there is a sketch of a silver hand. “Here, he calls for the touch of his healing hand.” He turns to another page, where Nodens is pictured with a spear wound to his groin. “In this one, he is calling to Nodens as the wounded healer to heal his madness.”

“He must have healed,” says Carson, “to sing those poems.”

“I wonder if he went to the shrine of Nodens before it was lost,” I say.

“His recovery suggests he did, but,” Johnny speaks more solemnly, “it seems the earthquake and flood, a great disaster felt throughout Britain, led to Cyledyr losing his mind again and prophesying his own death.”

Carson, who was elated, now looks crestfallen. “How did he die?”

“He prophesied he would fall from a great height, be crushed, then drown.”

“A threefold death.” Carson looks haunted.

“That whether he died as prophesied is not recorded in the book leads me to believe that Cyledyr Wyllt is the bard who originally sung the poems.”

“So, Cyledyr is the singer of the Black Book of Peneverdant,” realises Carson.

“What,” Val looks awed and alarmed, “does that mean for you?”

“His legacy is my legacy,” Carson speaks grimly.

Lorraine

Today, I’ve called the meeting with Dad and his pet magician at our Round Table, and I am taking centre stage with my report. “I saw Carson with a raven on his shoulder leading not only his sister and Chesney but three poor Benedictine ghost monks into a portal to the Otherworld in Mrs Robertson’s back garden fence on Priory Crescent.”

“The location of Penwortham Priory,” Dad states obviously.

“I guessed who the raven is,” I state with pride.

“Glad you worked that out,” says Vance.

“You knew?”

“I’ve been tracking the Robinson curse for years.”

“They came back,” I’m determined to impress, “with a black book.”

Vance hisses.

Dad turns a deathly shade of white.

This has really got them. “Do you think it’s a book of black magic?”

“Worse,” says Vance, “an old bardic book like the Black Book of Carmarthen, the White Book of Rhydderch, and the Red Book

of Hergest, through which a bard might assert their power over the world by praising their friends and cursing their enemies. Those bards reduced the old gods to fairies and devils, but I suspect Carson intends to restore their power again."

"You think poetry and songs have that much influence?" I'm surprised.

"Myths and stories drive the world," says Dad. "Have you never wondered about where the battle between summer and winter originates?"

"Yes," I admit.

"It's with an old bardic story where Gwythyr ap Greidol, the Summer King, and Gwyn ap Nudd, the Winter King, battle for the maiden, Creiddylad. A band of northern men follow Gwythyr to Annwn and get imprisoned by Gwyn, who forces a boy called Cyledyr to eat his father's heart."

"Why would he do that?" I'm fascinated.

"Some say it's a form of torture designed to drive the poor boy mad; some say it's a form of bardic initiation or a way of passing on ancestral wisdom."

Cruel thing, an act of Winter, one I might inflict on my enemies.

"At this point," Dad speaks triumphantly, "Arthur comes in and commands Gwyn and Gwythyr to him, places upon them a fate that they must fight for Creiddylad every May Day until Doomsday and that, then, and only then, may one take the maiden. Only then will Winter or Summer win."

"So our battles must go on until the end of the world?" I ask dejectedly.

"Unless," says my father, "another bard tells another story, pens another book."

"Do you think that's what Carson's up to?" I'm mortified. "He has that power?"

"I believe so, but it's time I told you, we have our own book."

Unlocking one of his safes, with many locks, Dad brings out a leather-bound book with a white cover titled the White Book of

Winter. Showing me the pages, “We too have stories by which to control the gods.”

“And I’m guessing the Summers…”

“Have their Red Book of Summer,” Dad replies.

“Then the struggle could be pretty even? Or Carson could beat us both?”

“No,” speaks Dad, “because, like Arthur, I have Merlin on my side. It’s not spoken in the story, but it was his spell that bound Gwyn and Gwythyr.”

“Vance.” I look to the magician, knowingly observing our exchange.

“Carson, like us, was also born into a role in the story, as Cyledyr. His father, Stanley, like Nwython, sided with Summer, was killed by Mel for Winter.”

A shiver. He still thinks Mel killed him. But it was I, a true Winter.

“Then that means,” a thought enticing and terrible, “he must…”

“Be forced by a Winter to eat his father’s heart.”

*

I sit, staring at the rubble, the charred remains, of my saint hut. Wooden altars, wooden icons burnt up, no more saints with their halos to save me. Jesus all melted, nothing left but his crown of thorns, made from metal, blackened and singed. I pick it up. I count each thorn like a rosary, speak a prayer on each, for each of my sins, for those I’m yet to commit.

Then, I see it, the raven, blacker than the smoke from the blaze overhead, dropping from its claws a thin wafer, a piece of raven’s bread. Burnt into it are the words, ‘Record deal. Ready to speak. Mill pond. Carson.’

Oh, what strange and fortuitous turning of fate is this, perhaps written in his black book, which is driving us to meet again and him to play into my hands? What is this dark kinship like between

Lord and Lady Macbeth? I put the wafer on my tongue, swallow the evidence, like at communion.

For once, it's a bright November day. There are still patches of frost where the bare willow trees cast their shade, silently weeping. In their branches, blue-tits and coal-tits sing, quickly glimpsed, gone again.

There he is, at the end of one of the fishing bays, with a little raft made from planks, tied together with baling string, with a broom handle for an oar. No. I recall my sinking rubber dinghy. I don't want to sink into these waters again. What if, I worry, he is planning to drown me, like he did Mel?

"There's just room for two." Carson steps onto the raft so lightly it barely bobs and dips. "Come on, hop on, don't you trust me?"

No, I don't trust you, churlish boy, softly spoken, calm demeanour, with a look of fatedness in your eyes that reflects an end far worse than Macbeth's.

I'm not going to show any fear, I'm not going to let him help me, touch me. As I get onto the raft, I'm surprised, in spite of the weight difference, it barely tips. He oars at a steady pace across the pond. Beneath, I catch glimpses of fish, sunken treasures—old dishwashers, microwaves, washing machines.

He rows us out to the island in the middle of the lake with its sad willows. Said to be haunted, it is, by the ghost of a fisherman who sits, putting worms, long and squirming, on the hook, hooking them multiple times, leaving their tails wiggling, before he casts his line. Never catching any fish, never even catching a lousy rusty old bike wheel, still spinning. No, it's not quite known what he gathers, what fodder he reels in. He's not here today.

Carson steps off the raft. As he leads me into the trees, I notice carvings, odd mournful faces, half-covered in moss, watching me. Piles of stones at the roots of trees, mossed over, skulls of vermin.

"Why have you chosen this place?" I ask him.

"Because it's no longer my favourite place." He scrambles up a leaning willow trunk, taking a shaky ladder into an old and

rickety tree house. Dangerous, it looks, rotting planks knotted together with fraying string. Fall down from there and I could break a leg if not my neck. Is that his plan?

Still, I follow. He's got a knack for getting people to follow him about, he has. Like the Pied Piper of Hamlyn, leading his sister, her girlfriend after him. All the doom girls, all the doom boys, over the cliffs of doom to their deaths.

Up there, it's no match for my hidey-hole. Little makeshift altars with drawings of his Pagan gods who look like they were drawn by Val when she was three. An old Calor gas stove in the centre. An ash tray full of decayed dock-ends and damp ash. Empty vodka bottles. Scrappy old phones.

"I used to come here to get away from Dad," Carson divulges, "when we argued, when things at home got too much. I haven't returned since his death."

Look at him playing all vulnerable, plying for sympathy. It won't work. "I didn't come here to learn about your troubled past, but to plan the future. Why this sudden turn? Why, after your plot to burn down the Summer House and set fire to my sacred shack, have you suddenly come crawling to me?"

"You really think I caused those fires?" A look to douse a fire with water.

"I know you make incendiary devices and Val makes models."

"Think what you like," he shrugs. He moves to the stove, turns the knob to start, clicks the ignition to make a spark, and the main flame lights. Flames dancing. Saints burning. I can still hear them calling out my name.

"What bedevilled happening has brought you to call this meeting?"

He takes a moment to warm his hands, rubbing them, long, thin fingers, white knuckles. He leans forward, "Do you believe in portents, Lorraine Winter?"

A flash of a raven flapping overhead like a sinister black book.

"Can't say I'm superstitious." I glance at his crummy altars.

"Don't you feel the presence of the gods and spirits?"

A small shiver as I glance out, see a face in a tree looking right back at me.

“Don’t you hear the voices of your saints or your own God?”

Oh, if they spoke back to me, what would I hear? Better to keep my ears shut.

“Do you feel anything, Lorraine?” He looks at me searchingly.

Me? Feelings? Who does he think he is? He’s getting like Sandy. Only, it’s not romance in his gaze, no weepy blue loveyness, but a demand for something. Not love, but truth perhaps. Well, he’ll never get that out of me.

“Stop beating about the bush. Tell me why you need this record deal so much.”

“Dark days are coming.”

“You’re beginning to sound like an aged doomster. That won’t sell.”

“The veil between the worlds is growing thin, the gods beyond the waters calling. A time of descent is approaching, a time of madness, when many will pass between the worlds but only a few will return with healing dreams.”

“Save your poetry for the stage and give me an explanation fit for a record boss.”

“The songs of Hollow Bone need to be heard before it’s too late.”

“Better. I know a manager if you can arrange a show to impress.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Chesney

'The Lifting of the Veil'. I see the band have stuck a flyer to almost every lamppost advertising the unveiling of the Black Book as Val and I walk from the bus station along North Road, busy as ever, to the Moor Brook.

The pub is a large white-washed building with a sign outside depicting the Moor Brook, flowing happily, between two green and floral banks. Unfortunately, like the other brooks of Preston, it has been culverted and makes its way beneath the city by an underground channel to the Ribble.

"All proceeds are going to the resurfacing of the Moor Brook," Olivia is at the door with an app on her phone, making sure everyone makes a donation. It's her hope that, if Eco-Shift get in, they will agree to the plans. Carson has been making the incendiary explosive devices, Val has been sketching the designs of the newly exposed watercourses and planting schemes, and Olivia has been writing the documents to present to the local council.

It's busy inside, already filling with the usual mix of doom girls and boys, folks from the eco-crowd, a few doomsters including Jeff and Jez. Thankfully, they're looking and smelling a lot better. The showers must be in.

Val, as usual, heads to the bar. "Carson's sister coming through."

"Go on." I know how much she loves the craft beers.

She orders half an orange and gingerbread porter, sniffs up, "Mmm."

I buy myself a lemonade and we sit at a table at the front to watch the support acts. Kelly Mayflower solo with her guitar. Then, the Funky Druids, whose Druid robes with synthesisers and saxophones don't quite work.

Pheew! A blast on the smoke machine as the atmosphere begins to tense.

"Just getting another drink before Hollow Bone come on," says Val.

She returns with half a strawberry and mint IPA and a nip of 11% liquorice stout that Moss Acre Brewery have made especially for the occasion.

I strain my eyes, itchy with smoke, to watch the band setting up. Olivia runs the sound test and Carson puts a projector at the front of the stage.

Then, he and Johnny bring in a large music stand with the Black Book on top, for now covered by a black veil made from the theatre curtain.

They depart to change and return in white ragged robes with their hoods up. It looks like they're ready, except there is no sign of their latest drummer.

"Damn him," Carson mutters, "must be drinking in the Black Dog again."

"Typical," Johnny hangs his head, dejected as a poor monk.

"On this night of all nights," Olivia says, "we'll have to do without him."

"You missing a drummer?" A small man pushes his way to the front.

Carson looks up, surprised. "We might be. Who are you?"

"Midge," he replies.

"You can't call yourself that," says Olivia, "it isn't politically correct."

"I can," he replies, "I'm not technically a midget. I'm 4ft 10 and a half."

"Alright," says Carson, "we'll give you a try," gesturing to the drum kit and the music sheets. "However, your robes might be a few sizes too big."

Midge robes himself, rolls up the sleeves, picks up the drumsticks.

“Welcome,” says Carson, face concealed beneath his white hood, “to the Lifting of the Veil. Tonight we are going to tell a story old and dark beginning in medieval times when Penwortham was known as Peneverdant, ‘the Green Hill on the Water’, after Castle Hill which stood on a marsh.”

“A tale of ghosts and human greed,” says Olivia.

“Witchcraft, murder, and hauntings,” continues Johnny.

“Ancestral stories passed down to speak to our times,” speaks Carson.

“Their wisdom is old, but their meaning is eternal.” Olivia is solemn.

“We begin,” says Johnny, “with a story you all know well about a greedy old prior at Penwortham Priory. This is the Ballad of Roger Norris.”

The band start up with a catchy rhythm on the guitars and drums, begin with a big, “Ooh!” Together they sing:

Oh… he ate his way
through a thousand cakes.
Every loaf and wafer
he stole for his plate.
Whilst the poor monks
starved, he stuffed his face -
the gluttonous Roger Norris.

“The gluttonous Roger Norris!” We join in repeating the refrain.

Oh… he drank his way
through a thousand ales.
He ordered his beer
not in mugs but pails.
Whilst the poor monks
thirsted, he slept and belched -
the gluttonous Roger Norris.

“The gluttonous Roger Norris!” Everyone is clapping now.

Oh… he wore his way
through a thousand cloaks.
His tunics were gold-stitched,
knitted silk was his hose.
Whilst the poor monks
shivered, he warmed his toes -
the gluttonous Roger Norris.

“The gluttonous Roger Norris!” They end to loud applause.

“Now,” Carson and the band pull back their hoods to expose features gaunt and grey, cleverly painted by Val, “The Poor Monks of Peneverdant.”

Melancholy strums of their guitars and a ‘tss’ of misery on the cymbals.

Woe is us, and we are woe,
with hunger and thirst about we go -
empty bellies and dry tongues
our only companions.

Woe is us, and we are woe,
in dirty white ragged robes we go
to voice our sorrows to God -
he gives no consolation.

“Poor monks,” responses of sympathy.

Carson alone:

The only solace for my woe
is ancient poems of forgotten gods
inscribed in a black book
for future generations.

“His only solace,” Olivia and Johnny echo, “ancient poems”, a “black book.”

Then, the synthesiser, “A black black book, a black black book.”

The band together, “It’s time, it’s time for the unveiling!”

Midge plays a drum roll.

Carson snatches back the veil. “Behold! The Black Book of Peneverdant!”

A gasp from the crowd as the book is unveiled, with its black leather cover, lying open on the stand. Carson picks it up, displays the cover, then opens it so that the crowd can see the words and images within—the hound with the bone, Gwyn’s bull horns, Gwythyr’s fiery sword, Creiddylad’s flowers, the Silver Arm of Nodens, the heart of Cyledyr’s father.

“It’s beautiful.” “It’s otherworldly.” “It’s Pagan.”

“It’s the mid-sixteenth century.” Johnny shifts the scene.

“King Henry the Eighth and his men are coming,” Olivia warns.

“We’re going to have to leave. I will take the book to safety,” says Carson.

“This is Dissolution.” A grinding tune about the dissolution of the monasteries.

Then, they cast off their robes, to reveal black medieval tunics and hose. Carson ducks to pick up a red face paint and draws a scar across his left eye.

“The Hanging of Sebastian Robinson,” he speaks menacingly.

“Cronk, cronk, cronk,” the cry of a raven sounds from the synthesiser.

As the band launch into the story of Sebastian’s capture, Val nudges me. “Look, behind us, in the back corner, Lorraine is stalking Carson again.”

I glance over my shoulder, see her at a table at the back. Her make-up is pristine, her hair is in platinum waves and her eyes look only slightly glassy. She is wearing a black designer

cardigan with a silver necklace. Beside her is a man with black grey-streaked hair and grey eyes in a black suit and grey tie, and the seriousness of his expression makes my skin creep.

"And she is with…" Val is staring incredulously and blinking.

"Who?" I demand. The more I look at him, the less I like him. The way he's looking at Carson and the band, weighing them, assessing them, as if they are pieces of meat on a butcher's counter or pigs for the slaughterhouse.

"Vance Parker," she whispers frightenedly, "the owner of Oblivion Records."

"Never heard of him," I admit.

"He's got the Broken Hearts and the Knucklebones on his label. He's got a nasty reputation for pushing bands to their limits, breaking them, then making money off the back of the publicity. Like when Turner from Paradigm Shift died of a drug overdose, and he profited when their albums sold out."

"You think she's trying to set up a deal between him and Hollow Bone?"

"You bet, and," Val looks at Carson, "I think they've planned it."

Lorraine

"What do you make of Hollow Bone and their show?" I ask Vance quietly.

Shit scared, I am, but I'm hiding it behind my makeup and a sneaky line of ket. Vance is the only man who scares me more than my father. The way he looks at me, as if I'm horse meat, fit for nothing but a knacker's yard.

"I was expecting a gig, not a history lesson," he speaks derisively.

"By the order of King James, you are arrested for witchcraft!" Johnny and Olivia.

“I will never give up the Black Book of Peneverdant!” Carson speaks defiantly. The red scar livid against his pale face, he looks like a proper felon.

The deafening howl from the synthesiser makes me leap from my seat. Projected on the back wall, immense and ravenous, jaws wide as the doors of death, appears one of those white red-eared hounds of Gwyn ap Nudd.

“By the Lord,” Vance is astounded, “a Hound of Annwn in full view.”

By some trick of the smoke machine, the hound escapes with the book.

“Sebastian Robinson, you are sentenced to death by hanging,” says Olivia.

Johnny puts on a black hood and puts a noose around Carson’s neck.

“No!” scream the crowd, booing loudly as he pulls it tight.

As I danced the hangman’s dance…

Carson’s jerking imitation of a man on the gallows is alarmingly realistic.

As I took my last gasp,
as I hung in a trance,
as I took my last look
around my motherland,

foresaw by burial craven,
I sent my soul into a raven.

“He sent his soul into a raven,” Johnny and Olivia repeat.

“Cronk, cronk, cronk,” from the synthesiser.

The image of a huge black raven fills the rafters.

“The audacity,” Vance’s voice is half troubled and half admiring, “displaying the black magic of his ancestors on the stage for all to see.”

“Our bones disturbed.” The band have their white robes back on.

“My bones dug up,” quoth the raven, “where I lay face down facing west.”

“We sent forth our dreams, we sent forth our dreams, we sent forth our dreams.”

To where we had been walking
for seven hundred years,
on the spot, on the spot, on the spot,

to where we had been walking
for seven hundred years,
on Monks Walk, on Monks Walk, on Monks Walk

three came to lead us,
lead us, to lead us, to lead us
to the land of no thirst, no hunger, no cold,
no rain— the hateful rain that drowns our headland
and there they found the Black Book of Peneverdant.

“So we found the Black Book of Peneverdant.” The band toss off their robes. The hound reappears and by some trick of the projector returns the book to Carson, who puts it back on the stand, throws the veil back over it. “The veil is fallen,” he says, “but much remains to be revealed.”

Deafening applause. “More! More!” the crowd shout.

“You will have to come to our next gig - the Second Unveiling.”

The band steps into the crowd and begins handing out flyers.

“Not only is Carson a good showman, but he’s trying to sell,” Vance approves.

The audience is pocketing the flyers and asking for extras.

“Go and tell him I want him and the band for an interview now.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

Lorraine

I don't like the way Vance bosses me about, but he's got an authority that is impossible to resist, and I am desperate to ensure Carson goes to oblivion. To my frustration, his sister and her girlfriend are with him.

"I can't believe you're colluding with Lorraine to get a record deal," scolds Val.

"You don't know the wider picture, the full story; you've got to trust me."

By God and all his angels, he's good at obscuring his ill-doings with mystery and phoney words about trust. "Trust me, it will be alright." When he's like a black hole pulling everyone with him into the depths of the abyss. By the Devil and all his demons, he'll get his comeuppance with Vance.

"Carson," I catch his attention.

"Lorraine," his voice holds no affection.

Val's face is dour; her expression is dark as her liquorice stout. Her ginger girlfriend is pale, and her freckles are standing out like lakes of sand.

"Vance Jackson has agreed to interview you and the band."

"You didn't tell me," to his darkness, the liquorice stout holds no comparison; "it would be Vance Jackson. You could have chosen anyone else."

"No other major label would sign you after a performance like that."

He knows that Vance is one of the few producers who sign bands with edge and also knows too well what happened to Paradigm Shift and Liminal.

"It's not up to me but the others," Carson says.

I see him go over to them in turn. Johnny first, then Olivia. Talking, explaining, with hand gestures like a pantomimist from a black-and-white film. Working his magic. Getting their reluctant

nods. Then Midge. When his stage act fails to work, I see an exchange— something slipped behind the drums.

"We're ready." He brings them like pigs to the slaughterhouse.

"There's a room upstairs," says Vance.

Carson tenses. Johnny and Olivia exchange frightened looks. Midge is nonplussed.

I vaguely recall that whilst the last owners of the Moor Brook lived upstairs, the new owners are better off and have their own house and allow local groups and bands to use the space for storage and to hold meetings.

Vance leads us up the stairs and turns an old bronze key in a door. Five white foldable tables are pushed together to form a square with plastic chairs around it. Stacked around the outside of the room are cardboard boxes filled with tissue paper, wool, stage props, balloons, glitter balls. Vance clears away three of the tables in a series of sharp, quick-hinged snaps that remind me of gunshots or the snapping of limbs. With practised ease, he places two chairs behind the two remaining tables, four to face them.

Somehow, we all know our places, sit down. Vance is to my right. Carson is facing Vance. I am facing Olivia. Johnny and Midge are at the ends.

"Mind if I take a recording?" asks Vance, "to play to my colleagues?"

"No issue with that." Carson is acting calm, but he is tense as a bowstring.

The band shake their heads and Vance pushes the record button on his phone.

"Names."

"Carson Robinson." "Olivia Merton." "Johnny Loham." "Midge."

"That's not your real name."

"I don't give out my real name."

Into the voice recorder, Vance speaks, "Edward Todd."

"What the fuck?" spits Midge.

"Band name."

“Hollow Bone,” says Carson.

“What’s the story behind that?” Cold, steely eyes upon them.

“It’s a quote from one of my distant ancestors, Frank Fool’s Crow,” says Olivia.

“I’ve heard you tell another tale,” Vance glances at Carson’s right forearm.

“We’ve got a back story, alright,” he admits, “that I did a deal with Gwyn ap Nudd, a King of the Otherworld, became a vessel for the inspiration of the gods and spirits. A hollow bone. I even got a tattoo of it.” He pulls back his sleeve to display his tattoo, after a couple of years still bold, white, and shiny, near holographic. A strange, uncanny thing that is.

“Very impressive.” Vance’s expression is one of hunger and haunting. “Now,” he eyes the band intently, “tell me about the extent of your ambitions.”

“I’d like to play the Guild Hall if it opens again,” ventures Olivia, “or 53 Degrees.”

“I’d be happy with the Warehouse,” dreams Johnny, “to stand in the shoes of Joy Division, Ian Curtis, and his band, on the bottom floor.”

“Bolton Stadium,” puts in Midge, “I’ve always wanted a gig there.”

Vance shakes his head. He drums his fingers on the table. “Is that your limit?”

“I wouldn’t mind playing the Cavern Club in Liverpool,” says Johnny. “The Beatles…”

“I don’t need your history lessons,” snaps Vance, “we’re no longer at school.”

“Albert Hall, Band on the Wall, or the O2 in Manchester,” suggests Olivia.

“I would settle,” says Carson, greatly daring, “for Manchester Arena.”

“And is that the full extent?” Vance asks them.

They exchange glances and together they all nod.

“Well, I believe that’s possible,” says Vance.

They exchange hopeful, half-excited looks.

"With the necessary sacrifices," Vance continues, "what are you willing to give?"

"We'll work hard," promises Olivia.

"Night and day," Johnny volunteers, "all hours, practising, gigging, all weekends."

"Speak for yourself," humphs Midge.

"I'll give up my day job at the canteen in Booths," Olivia speaks.

"Mine at Action Records," Johnny speaks slightly regretfully.

When Carson does not speak, Vance says, "I've heard you've got a fixing business that does well, supports you and your sister. Are you willing to give that up?"

"I could prioritise, reschedule, restructure my time," Carson replies.

"I've heard it all before, is there nothing special you have to offer me?"

"Uniqueness," they try, "authenticity," "originality."

"Nothing more individual and personal?"

"What more could you want?" demands Carson. "Blood? Our souls?"

"That's a little Pagan of you. What kind of a man do you take me for?"

Carson's eyes narrow on the near-invisible black cross on Vance's chest.

"You three are dismissed," says Vance to Olivia, Johnny, and Midge.

Olivia and Johnny exchange uneasy looks and look searchingly at Carson.

"Go," he tells them, with quiet determination, "I can handle this."

After they have left, "Lock the door," Vance orders me.

How dare he, bossing me around, like I'm his little lapdog. Still, it's worth it to fulfil my wider ambitions, to see Carson's

face as I turn the bronze key in the lock with a ‘crrk’ that sounds like Hell turning in its sleep.

I return to my seat, with a satisfied smile, put the key in my handbag.

“How long,” Vance no longer beats around the bush, “have you been communicating with the Pagan gods and guiding the souls of the dead to Annwn?”

Carson looks at the voice recorder, then, again, at the black cross. You remember me telling you about that ghost fisherman, with his line and hook, who hooked a worm, multiple times, left its tail wriggling? Looks like that worm, he does, although, to give him credit, he’s not squirming.

“Mere back story,” he speaks softly, “to win over our audience.”

“Don’t tell me you got those tales from the Mabinogion, they’re older, realer.” Vance leans forward. Fingers steepled. Like the spire on St Walburge’s. Like the Vatican Obelisk. “They come from the unseen world.”

“And what do you know of the land beyond the veil?” Carson asks.

I tense. Daring, daring, daring. I hold my breath for the response.

Vance pauses. Eyes him narrowly. Eyes of steel. Like the steel girders that are made at the steelworks in Barrow-in-Furness by even steelier men. Considers. He pushes stop on his voice recorder and pockets his phone.

By God and all his angels, this is going to be interesting, a vision to witness.

“We New Catholics are not as black-and-white as you think in our theology. Neither are we naive. We know very well the rites by which our religion replaced the Pagan gods at certain sacred sites, how the Mothers were equated with Mother Mary and how Saint Michael took over Gwyn’s hills.”

“So what do you believe about Gwyn and the spirits of Annwn?” Carson pushes. “Do you believe they are demons and that he is the Devil?”

“Again, you suggest we know nothing of demonology, the levels of Hell. The differences between Satan, his minions, your devilish bull-horned god.”

“Say my deal with Gwyn was real, where would I stand with you?”

“That really depends on your capacity to be a channel for the full force of the fury of the spirits of Annwn and the darkness within our culture. Revelation, apocalypse, are needed for the Second Coming, redemption.”

“So you believe what it says in the prophecies of Saint John of the Apocalypse?”

“Oh yes— word for word, just as you believe your black book.”

“I can do that,” Carson swears, tracing his tattoo, “I can be that channel.”

“That is yet to be proven,” says Vance, “you’re both dismissed.”

Head spinning with intrigue, as if I’m pilled up, I get up, turn the key in the door.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Chesney

That was a close hockey match. We won against Lostock Hall High School 5-4. I scored the winning goal, but only just, because beforehand Selina, with her new prosthetic hand, nearly whacked my right ankle out. It hurts, and I'm feeling the chill of the late October wind as I cool down.

Val's in the audience and, to my dismay, is going over to confront Selina.

"How dare you attack my girlfriend like that!" Val's clenching her fists.

"You put an explosive in my Gwythyr ap Greidol, nearly burnt our house down!"

"No, I didn't," Val denies it.

"Yes, you did, you and your brother, him smoozing with Lorraine in her shack."

"You fucking bitch, he would never…" Val clenches her fists.

"It's his fault Lorraine cut my hand off!" Selina bawls. "You'll pay."

She lunges for Val and attempts to claw her eyes out, and Val punches her in the face, goes for her hair, and rags it out in huge clumps. Amina told me that in catch wrestling there are none but a few unspoken rules. In this fight, there are no rules at all. Selina attempts to hook a finger up Val's nose. Val grabs Selina's prosthetic hand, yanks it off, and stamps on it. Selina whacks her in the face with her stump. It takes two PE teachers, from either side, with their hockey sticks, to prise them apart. Selina has a bloody scalp and a black eye, and Val has scratches on her face and a busted lip.

They are taken away and given a telling off and a set of detentions. I can barely believe Val's behaviour, setting Selina up and fighting with her.

Katie Parker, from our team, seeing my expression, tells me, "She was always getting into fights at primary school. She wasn't too bad until Carson left. He seemed to keep her in check, but in the last couple of years…"

I've noticed the worsening of her behaviour now Carson's no longer at school. "She told me she got bullied."

"She did, but she gave as bad as she got."

"I can't believe you did that," I say to Val, after her scolding is finished.

"She deserved it." Val is unrepentant and still has blood on her teeth.

"I'm sick of this," I tell her, "I feel like you and Carson are dragging me into a terrible tangle between Summer and Winter with you Robinsons in the middle, and it's tightening into one big, hard knot that can't be undone."

"I've never dragged you anywhere. You've come of your own accord."

"Like I follow you everywhere, whereas you never come to my work parties, rarely watch me run or play hockey, only came today to bait Selina."

I go home in tears and don't want any cake when I get into the kitchen.

"I don't know what's got into you lately," says Mum. "Grades slipping, running less, and spending all your time at the Robinson house."

"Neither do I," I speak beneath my breath. "I'm going for a shower."

I storm upstairs. Now I'm home, in the shower, I want to be rid of the muck, the bad blood. It's no wonder, I think, as I scrub myself with eco-friendly tea-tree and lemongrass body wash, that Kingsfold is sinking into the depths of Annwn by a centimetre every year. Every time I come back from there, or from one of the grubby rock pubs where the band have played, it's like returning from the Otherworld. I've never smoked, never drunk, but the alcoholic fumes and the smoke from Val's multi-scented vapes

and Carson's disgusting rollies cling to my clothes. I feel like Creiddylad, walking between Middleforth and the gristly underworld.

I note the bruise from Selina's hockey stick has come up worse than expected. Why can't she and Val play nicely? Like normal girls? Why must Val and I be trapped, like Creiddylad, between Summer and Winter?

Lorraine

"Have you been chasing down your father's ghost again?" I ask Carson.

He looks like he's been wrestling the dead as he stands in his back garden looking at the patch, near grown over, where he told me he buried the black urn that contained his father's ashes, in pieces, in black shiny shards.

Last night, Halloween, I won a proper fight with Sasha Summer. At a cost. The top of my right arm is black and blue from a whacking blow with her hockey stick, and the bruise on my left shin is the colours of Blackpool sea.

"Even with Mel dead, he won't rest," Carson speaks, confused.

The sky is grey, and a ghost wind rustles the trees, sweeps his fringe from his face, then lets it fall again, like a mourner's veil he cannot cast off. "This leads me to suspect someone else had a role in his death."

Oh, he's getting close, so close his words, like the wind, make me shiver.

"I don't think he will rest until the rivalry between you Winters and the Summers that brought his end is tearing Penwortham apart, has ceased, and the natural cycles of summer and winter have been reinstated."

"You're blaming us?"

"I know you're trying to establish the absolute rule of Winter."

"The Summers are planning to rule the world too."

"Exactly," he says, "if only you'd accept the rule of the gods."

“Never will I bow my knee to a Pagan god like you.”

“Then you risk bringing the world’s end.”

“If that’s what it takes— apocalypse, then redemption.”

“Do you care nothing for Creiddylad and all trapped between?”

“They’re stupid, have no understanding of the workings of Winter and Summer.”

“Oh, but they will,” Carson determines, “after the Second Unveiling.”

*

Knock, knock, knock. That isn’t a human knock on the door. I get up to open it. It’s that damn raven, with its hard black beak, dropping off an envelope. It swoops away with a “Kraa.” Accursed thing. Blacker than Satan. Blacker than the snow clouds that are pouring forth the first of the snows.

Its hateful outline is stamped on the black seal - a raven in flight. I tear the envelope open and take out a piece of paper, yellow and parchmenty, with highly stylised writing in swirling letters in black bone ink.

‘To the Winter family and the Winter Crew, an invitation from Hollow Bone to the Second Unveiling at the Guild Hall, Sunday 21st December, 8pm’.

My breath draws in as if the coldness of the day has sucked it out of me. Not only is Carson planning to expose the origins of the battle between summer and winter to the public, but he wants my family to bear witness. Without a shadow of a doubt, he’s sent an invite to the Summers too.

I’m seething. If you can imagine a winter sea, in the icy depths of Hell, filled with a thousand serpents churning for revenge for Satan’s fall, that’s me.

“Mum, Dad, in the meeting room!” I storm back in surrounded by snowfall.

A phone call and Vance is here. The next second. Creeps me out, that.

I throw the invitation down on the table and they stare as if it's a bomb. "This could blow the Winter House up and bring the Summer House down."

"Dangerous," Vance admits, "of Carson to play with fire and ice like this."

"Are you going to let him go ahead?" Dad demands, his brows furrowed as closely as two snow ploughs stuck together by extreme mid-winter cold.

"Cyledyr's knowledge of summer and winter came at a cost. Remember?"

Oh yes, how well I remember he was forced to eat his father's heart. "It's time?"

Vance smiles like a wolf close to having his prey in his jaws. "Yes."

I think of Stanley's heart, in pieces, in a plastic bag in freezer number five. Alongside the hearts of other traitors. The wickedest heart of all.

"With it being so cold and cruel, you'd best start thawing it now," says Mum.

Oh, this is terrible, this is beautiful, this is some plot. "Will it," I check, "still work, even though it's been dissected, still drive Carson mad?"

"I'm sure it will," Vance reassures me, "even madder than Cyledyr ever was. Madder than the March Wind, the Winter Wind, the wind that batters the gates of Hell, and to there he'll descend, likely never to come back."

*

Tonight I will be colder than winter. I will be colder than the cold December moon, shining through my bedroom window, as I add a moon-like shimmer, with a shimmer cream, to my moon-white foundation. As I comb my hair, thread it with glittering

snowflakes, check my long white dress, with a split up one side, in the mirror. I hear my parents playing Oh Fortuna.

O Fortune
like the moon
you are ever-changing
ever waxing
and waning;
hateful life
first oppresses
and then soothes
as it fancies;
poverty
and power
it melts them like ice.

My icy facade will be unmeltable. I will be implacable as Winter's Queen. I will be unafraid. I cut a line of ket on my bedside table to numb me to my fear of Vance and to make me impervious to Carson's pleas. To stop me from giving any sign of my intentions, to stop me from playing anything else but the villain, like the moon, cold, immutable, cruel.

Fate - monstrous
and empty
fate, you whirling wheel
you are malevolent
well-being is in vain
and always fades to nothing
shadowed
and veiled
you plague me, too;
now through the game
I bring my bare back
to your villainy.

Playing with fate, he is, Carson. He's playing a fatal game trying to play Summers and Winters. Well, soon he'll know the meaning of truly being Cyledyr.

A quick check in my handbag. A quick look in the Tupperware box. His father's heart is fully thawed, took a while, it did, as though unwilling to do the task. In a dozen pieces. In the Bible, there are only seven deadly sins, but Stanley had at least twelve, and tonight Carson will eat each one of them.

Red, raw, slippery, shiny, the sight of blood never fails to reassure me.

Carson Robinson you'll pay the price for playing Lorraine Winter.

So at this hour
without delay
pluck the vibrating strings;
since fate
strikes down the strong man
everyone weep with me!

Chapter Thirty

Lorraine

With my mother and my father, I get into our four-wheel drive. We need it tonight. The snow is heavy. The snow ploughs are out. There are drivers with chains on their wheels to get a grip on the white, white roads. The clouds are black. The snow whirls down quicker than the wipers can shift it. Then, for a moment, it stops, a break in the clouds, a glimpse of the full moon.

It is snowing in the car too. Mum's glitter. Her perfume, Winter Nights - winter berries, bergamot, and vanilla. As she snorts a line of cocaine from the dashboard, swings back her head, puts her finger to one nostril, sniffs up, I see the Winter Queen in her. In Dad, at the steering wheel, holding steady as we are buffeted going over Penwortham Bypass, dominating the snow as we arrive into the midst of the steeples and high rises of Preston, I see the Winter King, not Gwyn, the true one, King Arthur.

Dad drives up the ramp onto the bus station car park, winds his way up the concrete spiral to the first, second, third, fourth, fifth floor. We get out and stand like the royal family on the top of a brutalist concrete castle. The moon, there she is! Riding across like the night sky, like the Winter Queen on her white horse, hooves high, prancing, leading the cold dance.

We will reign tonight. We will be invincible against the Summers.

*

How Carson managed to sell enough tickets to persuade the council to reopen the Guild Hall, promising to pay for it and to fill it, is beyond me. I'd suspected Vance, with his magic, but he said it was Carson's sleight of hand.

By the Devil and all his demons, I hate that man. He's beside me now, as we head to our designated seats, in accordance with our tickets, on the front row. The theatre is divided into winter on the left, summer on the right. We sit on the side decked out with snow clouds with blustery faces, icy demons, snowy monsters, the cold moon riding over all, as fake snow falls.

On our right, our most hated enemies. Dad locks gazes with the Summer Twins, in their red suits and orange ties, their hair styled into blazes; Mum with Lady Summer, she and her curls bigger than ever, in an orange shawl, as if she's wearing a sheet of lava on her shoulders. In her arms, she's got a cat, a fluffy white thing, sleepy, mewling. And the finest of my coldest stares for Sunbeam, Sasha, Silence, Selina with their red hair and fire in their eyes - I'll douse them, have them all. Their side is decorated with summer fruits beneath a beaming, smiling sun.

And all the seats filling. The doom crowd in their black, some with red hair, some with white, snowflakes or flames on their hoodies, pledging summer or winter. The eco-crowd, in green, like Creiddylad, in the middle. The aged doomsters, as usual, at the back, standing for nothing but doom. Then, the general public, drawn in by the hype, the living and the dead.

The curtain across the stage is black as the veil between the worlds.

Carson's voice. "This is the Second Unveiling." The curtain parts.

The band. Carson beneath a spotlight, in the centre, behind the music stand, the Black Book upon it, is dressed in black, in the guise of a court bard. To his left is Johnny, as Gwyn, black cape, long moonlight hair. In the centre, on a pedestal, stands Olivia as Creiddylad in a floral dress. And who have they got to play Gwythyr with his fiery sun-like hair? A familiar figure, sullen, red teary eyes. Not a man, but a woman, a girl. Val, not looking like she wanted to be roped in, a guitar slung on her shoulder, a line of empty half-pint glasses behind her and froth upon her lips. I notice Val's ginger girlfriend is nowhere to be seen. They must

have had a tiff. Midge is dressed as a medieval ruler with his drum kit as his court.

"For the first time tonight," Carson announces, "I will not be myself."

Puzzled, quizzical looks. He's pulling the crowd into his faux mystique again.

"I, the Hollow Bone, the channel for the inspiration of the gods, spirits, the ancient bards of Britain, will tonight be channeling the spirit of Cyledyr Wyllt. A mad one, a wild one, an inspired bard. Tonight, for the first time, his story will be heard. Let us sing a song of his times, not unlike our own."

"This is Dark Age!" cry the band together.

A dark, dark thrum of guitars, a boom, boom and clash of drums, the pounding of the synthesiser playing an industrial mash on its own. Projected on the screen, a scene of battling armies, swords breaking shields.

Cyledyr's voice is too distorted to make out the lyrics clearly. I hear snatches. "End of Roman rule." "Northern warlords." "Briton against Saxon." "Briton against Briton." "Internecine war." "Drought." "Famine." "Endless heat." "Eternal cold." "A boy is conceived to be dragged into a war."

"This is the Conception of Cyledyr and it takes place at Swill Brook."

I recall, vaguely, Mrs Robertson teaching us how this watercourse ran from Ribbleton, through Lark Hill, met the Ribble near the tram bridge; how there was a washing stead where local women swilled their clothes.

Quieter chords. The projector shows a poor ragged woman swilling soiled rags, washing blood out of them, as a battle rages.

Cyledyr sings:

To a lowly Lancashire woman
swilling clothes in Swill Brook
the tyrant ruler Nwython comes,

says, “To me, you will bear a child.”

She says, “I will bear your death.
It is your ragged clothes I wash.
Your blood, your heart-blood,
that in this river swills.”

A bairn is born at the river-edge.
For sixteen years Lancashire’s
bogs and moors he roams until
his father calls him to Strathcylde.

“To be dragged into a war,” sing the band, “an ancient and endless war.”

“Eternal Summer.” Gwythyr and Creiddylad take hands and he leads her a drunken dance around the stage as the projector shows vibrant meadow flowers, swaying crops, fruit trees, ripe baskets of fruit, and rich harvests.

Cyledyr sings:

A summer wholesome, much to eat.
Creiddylad stays in Gwythyr’s arms.
The thirsty flowers wither in the heat.
The fruits turn sour, the berries rot.
The water fails in river and stream.
In Swill Brook the women swill not.
Fire, famine, burning strife comes to rule.

“Wa ha ha ha!” Gwythyr emits an evil, drunken laugh. “I will keep Creiddylad forever as, with my Eternal Summer, I bring an end to the world.”

“Boo! Boo!” the Winter side. We shout our insults at the Summers.

“It is time for your reign to end.” Gwyn shoves Gwythyr who lurches and falls.

“Hoorah!” We cheer as Gwyn snatches Creiddylad offstage.

Gwythyr staggers up furious. “An army I will raise to win her back. I call upon Graid son of Eri, Glinneu son of Taran, Gwrg… Gwrg…” stumbles over the Brythonic names, “Gwrgwst Ledlwm and Dyfnarth his son. Pen son of Nethog and Nwython of Strathcylde and Cyledyr his son.”

“So,” says Cyledyr, “I was dragged into a war and from the north into Annwn.”

“The Battle of Summer and Winter.” A projection of cold and burning armies.

Cyledyr sings:

In the land of no pain,
an agony of fire and ice.
Who will win? In Annwn,
it can only be Gwyn.

Gwythyr falls in a drunken heap again.

And all his men go down,
with shattered shields
and broken swords.

“Wa ha ha ha!” This time it’s Gwyn who laughs the evil laugh. To Gwythyr, “You, your men, will be my prisoners. To my dungeons.” On the projector, an image of the armies of Summer being led off in chains by Winters.

“You too.” Gwyn puts silver handcuffs on Cyledyr and leads him off.

“Hoorah!” Our side cheer and throw jibes at the Summers.

“We’ll escape. We’ll take revenge.” They retort.

The stage goes dark. Ominous music. Cyledyr's voice. "What happened in the prisons of Annwn remains unknown." Tortured screams.

"Aargh!" Gwythyr's scream is overdone.

"But this is the story of what happened to me."

Oh, this will be interesting. Oh, this will be ironic. My heart skips a beat.

In the centre of the darkness, on the stage, under a spotlight, Cyledyr faces Gwyn and a stuffed figure in the dress of a medieval king, Nwython. Gwyn plunges his sword into the chest of the dummy, tears out a heart. A duff, plasticky thing, sticky with fake blood, not like my secret treasure.

As Nwython falls to the floor, "You will eat your father's heart!" commands Gwyn.

"Why?" Cyledyr stares wide-eyed. "Why torture me thus?"

"This heart contains the wisdom of your ancestors."

"I want it not. My father was a cruel man."

"Eat this heart and you might become an inspired bard."

"And if not?" Cyledyr looks up at Gwyn, afraid.

"Mad," Gwyn speaks casually, "or dead."

"Oh, what a price for becoming a poet."

"Eat it not and you will remain nobody— dead to the world."

"Is he going to do it?" The onlookers are tense. "He wouldn't." "Surely not."

Cyledyr stares at the heart as if he's preparing to go into battle again. As he bites into it, blood dribbling from his mouth, the audience cries out in disgust. In a series of chomps and gulps that leave far more heart and blood around his face than in his mouth, he manages to make the heart disappear.

"Horrible." "Disgusting." "That's cannibalism." Someone retches.

Cyledyr draws his sleeve across his mouth, further bloodying his face. "Wyllt am I!" he shrieks. "Mad! Wild!" He runs in madness from the stage.

To the backdrop of a wintery scene, he reappears with burrs and thorns stuck to his tunic, muddy with peaty water to his thighs, green with *Sphagnum*. A whirlwind of snow blows across the stage, coating his shoulders, sticking in his hair. Projections of ghosts swirl and howl around him.

Cyledyr sings:

For thirty years I wandered
the moors and bogs of Lancashire,
my only company madness and madmen.
I wandered an eternal winter.
Few green things, few fruits, few nuts.

"Boo!" The Summers fling insults at us Winters.

Lived on bog berries and witch's butter,
until I met an elk and a twisted hawthorn.

Projections of a ghost elk nuzzling Cyledyr as he sits beneath the thorn tree.

They helped me heal and say my prayers.
Then, in the Lost Shrine of Nodens,
beyond the Ninth Wave, beyond the veil…

Projections of a space with candlelit altars and an image of a god riding on a conch shell pulled by four water-horses surrounded by wind and water spirits.

I received the touch of the Healing Hand
and the bard light upon my brow.

A silver hand reaches down to touch his shoulder, and his brow begins to shine.

Thus, I went, an inspired bard,
to Annwn's hall, to the King and Queen.

"Hang on," says Dad, as the scene shifts and Cyledyr stands before Gwyn and Creiddylad as the Winter King and Queen, "isn't that Arthur's role?"

"Damn him," Vance stares incredulously, "he's changing the story."

With my songs, I melted their icy hearts.

"I will return to bring life," says Creiddylad, casting off her snows.

"I will let you go, but not my rival," speaks Gwyn.

"Then," says Creiddylad, "you will battle him every May Day, and he will win, and you will hunt him down and kill him every Halloween. This means," she addresses them strictly, "neither can keep me until Doomsday."

"Arthur was meant to set up that deal," growls Dad.

Gwythyr strikes Gwyn down with a hefty blow of a wooden sword. Gwyn groans. "Damn it, you didn't need to hit me that hard."

Gwythyr, still unsteady, and Creiddylad lead the men in a dance across the greening land to loud cheers from the Summers and boos from us Winters.

"But that," Cyledyr is back at his book at the mic, "is not the end."

"Oh," the audience is surprised, hopefully "is there more?"

"The story continues to unfold here and now in the Battle of Summer and Winter." He looks at my family and then at the Summers.

"The old gods are behind it." "Driving them." "Now I understand."

“Nonsense,” snarls Dad, “it is we who command the Winter gods.”

“And the Summer gods,” bark the Summer Twins, “jump to our orders.”

The audience looks in confusion from Cyledyr to the rival families.

“You,” Vance to Cyledyr, “need to know better your place in the drama.”

“The Second Unveiling is done, and the Third Unveiling is yet to come.”

The curtains close, and a pair of doom girls circuit with the flyers.

Val begins to lurch around with a basket of toys. “Now on sale: the War of the Gods. £20 a Gwythyr, £20 a Gwyn, £20 a Creiddylad, just £15 for Cyledyr. Get them all for £60. Get Nwython for £10 plus £5 for his heart.”

The cheek of it, not only outing our battle and retelling our story but making a profit from it too, and the audience greedy as cannibals for the hearts.

Chapter Thirty One

Lorraine

In a tumult of fire and snow, the audience spills out into the real snowstorm. The Summers edge their way out first, knowing we Winters are in our power.

"You know your plan?" Mum checks. She, cold as an iceberg, whose heart would never have been melted as easily as Creiddylad's.

"Yes." My fingers touch my handbag, the comforting hard edges of the box.

"Heart of ice, remember, no matter how hard he pleads."

"Mother, I've told you before, I have no heart."

"Good girl." She pats me on the shoulder fondly and departs with Dad.

With Vance, I make my way towards the stage where the band are unplugging their equipment and sweeping the fake snow into a heap.

"It's her again and him." Val has another half pint of stout in her hand.

"We should be on our best behaviour," speaks Johnny reluctantly.

Olivia smooths her floral dress and rearranges the flowers in her hair.

Carson sets down his broom, attempts to wipe the blood from his face with a rag from his pocket, makes it worse, plucks off a few burrs and thorns.

Midge harrumphs. "Best be quick. I've got another gig to play."

"You," Vance points to Olivia, "have proved your worth tonight. So have you," to Midge who quickly shoots off, "and you," to Johnny. "You, however," to Val, "are a disgrace and don't belong on the stage."

“Damn right.” She takes a swig of her beer and eyes Vance hatefully.

“And you, too,” Vance says to Carson, “have let your cohorts down.”

“How so?” Carson looks suspiciously from Vance to me then back.

“By showing no respect for the time-honoured variants of our stories.”

“On the contrary, the ancient bards always retold their tales in accordance with the inspiration from the gods and spirits. It’s only since writing…”

“If you want a deal, I want better proof than your wagging tongue.”

“Here we go, you going to shut me in your interrogation chamber again?”

“Dismissed,” says Vance to the band, who look to Carson uneasily.

“I handled him fine last time.” Carson casts Vance a derogatory glance.

Once they’re gone, “Doors,” says Vance.

There are a few more to lock this time, plus the fire exits to disable. Meanwhile, Vance lays out two plastic chairs on the stage for me and him and one opposite for Carson. “Sit.” He turns one of the spotlights on him.

Carson winces, shields his eyes, “If this is how you treat your rockstars…”

Vance dims the light but only a little. As I take my seat, I see Carson briefly look escapingly towards the little green figure following the arrow to make a hasty escape through the white door on the fire exit sign. No, Carson, there’ll be no running away for you, only torment and madness await.

He looks at us blinkily. “Why don’t you cut to the chase? What more do you want? For me to carve 4REAL into my arm? My signature in blood?”

“They are not your stories,” Vance speaks meaningfully, “Cyledyr Wyllt.”

Then, it clicks. Carson’s eyes widen. “You have got to be fucking joking. For one, my father’s long dead. For two, his heart’s long burnt, been scattered with his ashes down the old supply routes of the Summers.”

“So you have been led to believe,” Vance speaks sardonically.

“What do you mean?” We’ve spooked him. He tenses and pales.

“Tell him,” says Vance to me.

This is the moment of revenge I’ve been waiting for. For the horses. For killing Mel and setting up my brothers. For getting my hidey-house burnt. For the way he’s been playing me and my family for all these years. “I,” I lean forward a little, voice like the blade of my knife, “killed your father.”

“What?” Carson nearly shoots from his chair as if he’s had an electric shock. “I knew you and Mel lured him there but you allowed me to think…”

“You assumed, I said nothing. But, it was me, twisted his arm, stilled his heart.”

“You bitch.” Black, black hatred. “You played me along as your Macbeth, you let me sit with your saints, sat on my island, while all along…” His hand goes to his trouser pocket for his pocket knife.

Vance coughs. We both look, see the revolver, trained on Carson, in his hand.

Carson’s hand pauses, and all the colour washes from his face.

“Don’t worry,” says Vance, “I won’t shoot so long as you don’t try to kill us.”

“So,” Carson regains his composure, to me, “you killed my father.”

“How do you feel about killing Mel now?” I ask him mockingly.

“I told you I didn’t do it.” So adamant, I come near to believing him.

“Mel aside, do you want to hear how I got your father’s heart?”

“Don’t be feeding me some story about how you cut it out whilst I was waiting outside for the police. There was an autopsy, and it must damn well have been in his chest for the cause of death to be registered as a heart attack.”

“And so it was, but you know us Winters— how we’ve got a penchant for collecting frozen limbs and organs from freezers and morgues.”

“You didn’t.” Now he’s horrified. Now he’s looking like a frozen corpse.

“Oh, I did.” Slowly, savouring the moment, I take the Tupperware box out of my bag. I pop open the plastic catches, one by one, display the heart in pieces, sitting in their juices, swilling in a lovely red pool of blood, like his brook. “It’s all warmed up,” I reassure him, “ready for you to tuck in.”

He stares as if each little piece might start to beat again, those tiny pacemaker cells ticking away in synchronicity, and I almost see it twitch.

“But,” he gapes, “it’s been dissected, that wasn’t in the myth.”

“You’re not the only one with the power to change the story,” says Vance.

“In this version of the tale,” I speak encouragingly, “it will be easier to swallow.”

“I,” he stammers, “can’t,” angrily, “you don’t understand what you’re asking of me.” He’s staring at it as if every piece is a whole heart.

“Oh, but we do,” says Vance, “Cyledyr’s fate is yours— dead, mad, or a poet.”

“No, you don’t understand.” He puts his head in his hands.

It takes me a while, looking from the big old heart to the skinny boy, to get it. I’ve heard the rumours. I almost feel sorry for him, relenting to just one piece.

“To be the channel, you must play your full role in the story,” says Vance.

“Cyledyr,” I remind him, “devoured the whole of his father’s heart.”

Carson looks up with such dark hatred that his gaze nearly puts out the spotlight. “Very well. I will do what is necessary to bring your doom.” He snatches the Tupperware box from me and balances it on his lap. He takes the first of the slippery pieces in his deft fingers and bites into it like a cornered, maddened rat or a frenzied, rabid squirrel attacking an enemy. To give him credit, he does not drop any, but he does make a meal of it— a twelve-course meal as he swallows every one of his father’s sins. He makes it as painful for us watching as it is for him. With every bite, his gaze gets a little madder, a little wilder, until he has finished every last bit.

He wipes the blood from his lips, then, throwing back his head, he howls.

“Doors,” says Vance.

I open a fire exit, and Carson runs, raving in madness, into the night.

Chapter Thirty Two

Chesney

"Carson's gone mad," says Val.

I've managed to ignore her for over two months. I've been sitting at the opposite end of the classroom, with Katie and Rebecca from our hockey team. She hasn't got any other friends. She's been sitting, maudlin, all alone.

I've heard the rumours that she's been drinking heavily. Her appalling performance at 'The Second Unveiling' made it onto Blog Preston.

Still, it's been hard without her. I've missed her. Even the smell of her vapes. The scent of candy-floss or toffee apple as she leans in to kiss me. I was glad, secretly happy, a little turn in my tummy, as she came over to me at the end of science and asked if she could have a word behind the labs.

Now, I feel like I'm plummeting back down into the depths. No, "Hello Chesney". No, "How have you been?" No, "I'm sorry." Instead, Carson's madness.

"No doubt he's just playing the tragic rockstar. He'll snap out of it."

"Chesney," her voice is croaky with tightness and her eyes are red, "this is serious. Nearly as bad as the time, in his third year, he had to go to hospital."

I recall her telling me he'd been eating so little he'd started fainting. "But he's been so much better," I say confused, "with the band doing well. Didn't you say they were likely to get their deal following the last gig?"

"I think that's what's caused it," Val tells me, "Vance gave his approval to the other members but asked Carson to stay behind to give additional proof."

Vance, I recall, with a shudder, his steel-grey eyes and predatory look. "What do you think he wanted?" I don't dare imagine the possibilities.

"I can think of only one thing but I'm not sure if it's possible. Cyledyr's story…"

"Vance can't have made him eat your father's heart. He was autopsied, cremated."

"Unless Lorraine, the dirty morgue robber, robbed it?"

I'm beginning to feel sick. I was almost back to myself. Katie, Rebecca, and I had been discussing normal things like who's going to play right back, right wing, and centre forward in our next match and whether Eco-Shift have got a chance of winning the election next summer. Now I'm being dragged into an underworld of cruelty, cannibalism, and madness.

Yes, I could see Lorraine doing just that kind of thing, unthinkable as it is. "But if Stanley was autopsied, would his heart not have been dissected?"

"Yes," Val speaks pained, "but that wouldn't have stopped Lorraine and Vance forcing him to eat it; in fact, they probably delighted in it even more."

The horror. Particularly when he struggles to eat a basic meal. It cuts me to the core. Whilst I've got my grievances with Carson for the trouble he's caused, he's always treated Val and I well, and I care for him like a foster brother.

"When did you last see him? Do you know where he is?"

"Three nights ago, after the gig, he came back late, ranting about the spirits calling him to Noon Hill and Winter Hill like in the book. He took his guitar and his backpack and left, and I haven't seen him since."

"Are you sure this isn't one of his usual vanishing acts?" I check.

"Yes, he's left unfinished business. I've had customers coming for their phones, iPads, and laptops, that police constable Davies for a tracking device, the Summer Twins for their electric heaters. I can't find a thing in that garage, can't work out Carson's storage system at all."

“If he has gone up on the West Pennine Moors in this weather, he could have frozen to death.” I recall running up there with Dad with concern.

“I fear he thinks he’s Cyledyr Wyllt, who wandered the moors and bogs for thirty years living on nothing but bog berries and witch’s butter.”

“That’s but a legend,” I tell her, “nobody can survive like that.”

“Johnny’s just got his driving licence and said he would take me and Olivia up there to look for Carson after school, so will you come with us? We need someone who knows the land and can use a compass and a map.”

“It’ll be dark by then, dangerous; you should phone the police.”

“The police have never been able to find Carson. They’ll be of no help.”

*

This is a bad idea, I think, as Johnny starts the car and it jolts forward. It’s his first car, an old silver Renault 4 E-tech, only the second time he’s driven it. It’s snowing again and there is ice and snow on the roads. The only map we could find is a 287 West Pennine Moors dating back to 2015. The only thing we have plenty of is torches from a huge box in the garage.

“At least if we do get lost,” Johnny said, “we’ll be able to send up a display like the strobe lights in the Symphony of Light display at Blackpool.”

I’m in the back with Val and Olivia is in the passenger seat. I’m keeping a careful eye on Google Maps to make sure it is steering us in the correct direction.

“Turn right onto the M61.”

Yes, this is the way I used to go with Dad. I notice that Johnny is gritting his teeth, chewing his lip in concentration, as he accelerates down the slip road and judges the distance to slot into the usual heavy traffic. A long corridor of red lights ahead of us

and the red Winter Hill mast to our left. We traverse the motorway without ado, get off at Middlebrook, drive through Horwich, then onto the narrower, more slippery roads up to Rivington.

"Be careful!" gasps Val at a small skid, "my mum died up here."

Johnny slows down, fumbles for his full beams. Olivia finds them. Bright-lit faces of sheep through a farm gateway staring then suddenly bolting.

"Careful," I warn Johnny, "watch that boulder close to the side."

Thankfully, we make it to the Pigeon Tower car park. The tower is a tall building, four stories high with a steep-sided triangular roof and narrow windows. The snow on top makes it look like the Tower of the North Wind.

As I point it out, Val asks, "Where are the pigeons?"

"I don't think there have ever been any pigeons in it, although it was once called Dovecotes and pigeons and doves are names for the same bird."

"No," says Val, "those dirty rats with wings can't be doves."

"Same family," I insist, "*Columbidae*."

"Why'd they build it, if not for pigeons or doves?"

"For ornamental purposes," I guess, "as part of Rivington Gardens."

We get out of the car and put on our waterproofs and sturdiest footwear. Olivia and I have walking boots and Val and Johnny make do with trainers. Thankfully, the snow has stopped but there are a good few inches on the ground and icy dips and hollows sparkling beautiful but treacherous.

I open the map, unfold it, refold it on the right section, "Let's try Noon Hill first." I set the compass and lead everybody onto a north-easterly path which thankfully has been trampled lower by the feet of earlier walkers. Dusk falls but the waning moon lights the way up the trackway onto the moorland where snowy stacks of heathers stand against rough grassland. Just visible are shallower areas of glittery cottongrass marking out the bogs.

Whereas, when I used to walk or run with Dad, I had a spring in my step, it's an effort to put one foot in front of another as I trek through the snow. I started feeling like this the day we attended the archaeological dig and since then have been unable to shift the coldness in the hollows of my bones.

"My feet," moans Val, "frozen, soaked, can't feel my toes."

It's a long, painful, uphill slog, over a couple of slippery stiles, past the shivering sheep, to Noon Hill, where we can just make out the rounded shape of the Bronze Age burial cairn marked by a pile of snow-capped stones.

To my surprise, I hear music, a phenomenon I came across with Dad, who said some believe it's spirits, but others the song of the wind. However, as I listen more closely, it sounds like neither. It's an acoustic guitar, a familiar voice, pained, haunted by madness. Like the winter wind catching on the spurs and spikes of gorse and twisting the thorn trees.

I ate my father's heart last night,
I swallowed all his sins.
I ate the hole
that was eating him.
Now it's devouring me from within.

"Carson," Val recognises immediately.

I ate my father's heart last night,
I swallowed it in pieces.
I ate the sins
that were driving him.
Now I'm wild and restless.

I am Cyledyr Wyllt, I am Cyledyr the mad.

"Coming out of the burial mound," Olivia is puzzled, "how in the gods' names?"

The song ends with a blood-curdling howl followed by applause.

"It's him!" Val shrieks angrily. "Here we are thinking he's gone mad and he's cold, starving, shivering up on these hills and he's cozying up with the dead in their mounds and entertaining them with his latest songs."

"Ah, here they are." Carson emerges from the mound like a ghost. He's still clad in the guise of an ancient bard, although he now has a thick black cloak. A group of ghosts appear beside him — five males wearing woollen tunics and leggings, four women in tunics with long linen skirts, two children.

"Whatever has happened to you?" demands Val. "What are you playing at now?"

"I ate our father's heart." A brief glimpse of madness in Carson's eyes, holding the reflection of the ghosts around him and the wildness of the moors.

"Didn't save a piece for me, I see," snarls Val.

"Lorraine and Vance made me eat it all— every last bit." Carson shudders. "So now I need to walk the paths that Cyledyr walked, visiting the ancient dead." He takes out his phone. "I've plotted a route across the West Pennine Moors, visiting the burial monuments— these two on Winter Hill, Pikestones, Round Loaf," he points, "the cairn up on Rushy Brow."

"Why," Val asks mystified, "did he, are you, doing this?"

"When the living are against us," Carson speaks ominously, "our only hope is the dead. When the Lords of the World oppress us, the spirits of the Otherworld."

"You'd better not be staying up here for thirty years."

"I think I can finish my pilgrimage in just one winter."

"You can't live on bog berries and witch's butter. Have you anything to eat?"

"Yes," Carson is defensive. He reaches into the mound, pulls out his rucksack, opens the strings, and displays to all of us the contents. We gasp in surprise. It's like the stands beside the tills in a supermarket in there. Rows of flapjacks, energy bars, oat cakes,

crisps, packets and packets of hazelnuts, all neatly faced up, and bright, colourful bags of sweets.

"Gummy bear?" He passes a bag around for the living and the dead.

"How do I know they're for you and not the ancestors?" Val demands.

As the bag returns to him, Carson takes a green gummy bear and nibbles on its toes. "Did you know that Lindow Man ate a griddle cake of wheat, barley, weed seeds, and mistletoe pollen before he was ritually sacrificed, a threefold death; hit on the head, throat cut, strangled; buried in a peat bog?"

I have chosen a red gummy bear. It sticks in my mouth. It does not dissolve.

"No," Val eyes Carson narrowly, "you'd best not be following him."

"Lindow III ate hazelnuts before his ritual dismemberment, Seascale Man was buried with a hazel walking stick, the Briarfield Head with hazel. They might have been sacrifices to Nodens, who's associated with hazel trees."

He is mad. Like a piece of heart or a bog body, the gummy bear will not budge.

"I've plotted a route to visit the bog bodies and bog heads too."

"And what exactly are you going to do on these visits?" asks Val.

"Win their favour with songs, with offerings. They seem to like hazelnuts and oat cakes, but gummy bears are so far their favourite."

"This is madness. How is it going to end? Dead, mad, or a poet?"

A flash of fear, indecision, across Carson's face. He rolls the green gummy head, like a bog head, between his thumb and forefinger uneasily.

"I'm sure it will work out." He pushes the head into a snowy crevice in the mound.

“On the upside,” he speaks more cheerfully, “we can use my madness and visits with the ancient dead to gain publicity for the Third Unveiling.”

“How so?” asks Johnny.

Carson passes Johnny his phone. “I’ve developed a setting that can photograph ghosts. I’ll text you each weekend to let you know where I am, and you can come and take some photos, and Olivia can do a write-up.”

“Have the dead agreed?” Olivia checks. “Do they understand?”

“We want our stories to be told,” speaks one of the older males.

“Our existence to be known and our faces to be seen again,” a female.

Carson reaches into the mound for his guitar, then sits on top in the snow. He picks up a handful, tosses it in the air, so it falls to glitter in his forelock, to settle in the folds of his cloak as if on a midnight landscape.

“Aw-ooow!” He throws back his head and howls, and the melancholy sound echoes across the moor, bringing sadder responses from the ghost wolves.

Putting on his best mad face, which I’m not sure he’s faking, he strums his guitar. “This is the Twelve Deadly Sins of Stanley Robinson.”

Number one - wrath.
He punched my mum.
I swallowed it down.

Number two - sloth.
He gave me his dirty jobs.
I swallowed it down.

Number three - greed.
He met only his needs.
I swallowed it down…

Number eleven - lies.
He deceived until he died.
I swallowed it down.

Number twelve - hate.
All he knew now, too late.
I swallowed it down.

Gwyn, have mercy on me.

Johnny snaps Carson and the dead, applauding him, from all angles. Even though it is a show, I can tell that the pain and anger in his voice and his plea to his god are all too real, as is his fear and dejection, in the last few shots.

Carson looks back through the photos and nods in satisfaction. “That should get some attention, and if Lorraine Winter has a single caring bone in her body, a single caring heart cell in her heart, it might elicit some guilt.”

My gummy bear is finally dissolving, but my gums are still sticky with ichor.

“Meet me next week on Winter Hill, and we’ll do the two burial mounds and the ghosts of the thirty-five people who died in the plane crash in 1958.”

Johnny and Olivia agree.

“And what about me?” asks Val. “What about the house? Your business? Where are you going to shower? You’ll be stinking like those doomsters.”

Carson pulls open his tunic, sniffs experimentally, and winces. “I’ll nip back during the week, quickly, down the ghost paths, and deal with the essentials.”

As we set off back down the hill, I realise I’ve lost the feeling in my toes. My calves feel like blocks of ice, and the walk does not fully warm me up. I sit close to Val, on the back seat, and snuggle up to her for warmth.

“Are you ok, Chesney?” she asks. “You look pale.”

“Just tired and cold.” I hide my fear that isn’t all.

“Come and sleep at mine tonight. I’ll warm you up,” Val promises.

Chapter Thirty Three

Lorraine

"Those images are photoshopped," says Vance.

We are sitting in the living room at the Winter House. Christmas is approaching, and the tree is up, a real one, Scotch Pine. Its tip almost touches the ceiling, its branches fill the corner of the room, and its scent fills the full house. On top, instead of a fairy, are dolls of Mum and Dad as the King and Queen of Winter, coated in glitter, with silvery crowns. The tinsel is white and blue, and presents, on their ties, sparkle enticingly. I've always loved Christmas, still hope each time Dad will buy me a horse.

Before the fireplace is our Nativity scene— a stable with baby Jesus in a crib and Mary watching over him as the three wise men offer him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. A donkey stands in the stable, and sheep flock about. There used to be more sheep, but my brothers stole them to sell off. Who they forced them on, I don't know. They're dumb sheep, off-white, gormless. Christmas carols are playing. 'Oh little town of Bethlehem'.

We are scrolling through Hollow Bone's Facebook page on our phones. I look at the image of Carson, cold and forlorn at a cairn on Winter Hill, with only the spectres of the dead for company, wandering beneath the silent stars whilst our town rests and celebrates. I feel a twinge of guilt. Only a twinge, though, mind, small as a child tugging on tinsel.

As Vance peruses the ghosts of the Bronze Age people, one a formidable warrior, I see the suggestion of fear in his steely eyes, the flicker of a muscle in his jaw. Who would have thought he's afraid of ghosts?

"If Carson's done a deal with Gwyn, he might be able to raise the dead," I suggest. "We already know he's a psychopomp, leading them about."

"The rite with the heart was supposed to drive him mad," Vance looks shaken. "Driven over moor and bog by his

imaginings that he is being pursued by wrathful spirits, not entertaining them, as if he's at a tea party."

"Look at this one," points Mum, "of him breaking bread, or should I say some kind of cake with seeds and grains with Lindow Man, all brown and shrivelled. And the head of Lindow Woman, popping crumbs in her mouth. And him speaking in sign language to the bits of Lindow III."

I shudder at Carson's communications with the headless, dismembered ghost. I think of the body parts in our freezer and the possibility of them rising— fingers, hands, feet, our organ collections, livers, tell-tale hearts.

"If those images aren't photoshopped, what would it mean?" I ask.

"That Carson is cleverer than the scientists who are attempting to detect dark matter in the SNOLAB experiment in North America, 7,000 feet underground at a fraction of a degree over absolute zero temperature," says Vance. "That's the only way to pick up a weakly interacting particle, to record the trace of a ghost. And they still haven't managed to do it. I don't believe he could have designed a camera setting that can photograph the dead."

"It's not a bad publicity stunt," admits Dad. "If Carson survives his madness, does become a prophetic channel as we suspect he might, we will still be able to use him, make money out of his rise and his downfall."

Vance nods, but he doesn't look satisfied. He wants to see him suffering more. That's how he, his lot at the Inquisition, get their kicks. I don't want to be in his company anymore. He's not fit for Jesus in his cradle, doesn't belong in our little town of Penwortham, near-peaceful, during Advent.

I close my phone. "I'm going up to my room," I tell them.

"You'd better not be back on the ket," says Mum. "I don't want to be finding you in a k-hole again, begging Father Christmas to bring you a pony."

As Vance raises an eyebrow, “Shut up! Just shut up!” I storm upstairs.

I have been using more ket since I forced Carson to eat his father’s heart. I have been more desperate for a horse, a beautiful white mare, to stroke. To touch her soft, velvety muzzle, to pick out her hooves, to groom her. A mutual bond, a mutual calming. I need it more than horse tranquilliser.

Still, no horse, ketamine is all I’ve got. I cut a line on my bedside table, lie back as it takes effect, taking the edges off everything in my bedroom. My wardrobes, my shelves, my books. If the silver exercise ball I’ve been forgetting to tone my abs on had any corners, it would surely shave them off as easily as my Gillette Venus razor.

One thing it does not take the corners off is the Tupperware box. Not visible, of course, but I know it’s there, at the bottom of a wardrobe. Under countless pairs of white designer shoes with various heel sizes and buckles.

Even under the influence of the ket, I can’t help myself, I can’t. Opening the wardrobe door, burrowing under the shoes like a ferret, ferreting it out. Popping the catches, one by one, still seeing, within, the blood stains. For all my washing, I could not get them off, scrubbing like Cheryl Hargreaves who had OCD, like Lady Macbeth at her bloody hands. No amount of washing up liquid, no scourer, no scrubbing brush would do the job. I even tried using bleach. A whole bottle of bleach. And still it remains.

Do I still see it on my hands now, red and glistening as Carson’s bloody lips? No, I tell myself, it’s just the ket. I’m not as mad as Lady Macbeth yet.

Chesney

‘The Third Unveiling - What Lies Beneath’. A set born from Carson’s madness.

Beforehand, Carson returned, but he wasn’t himself. Some days, he almost seemed like the old Carson with his soft voice

and smile, but on most, he was obsessively driven, whether fixing or songwriting. Worst were the moments he became vacant, staring into nothing. The very worst, the first time I saw him crying, in a black huddle in his room.

Val and I put it down to the heart but only later learnt the full reason.

After half a bottle of vodka, Carson admitted, "I've been seeing things."

"Hallucinations?" Val asked.

"No," Carson replied, "visions of the future. Nothing set but possibilities of how things might turn out if there is no change. It's terrifying."

"Do you think it's because of what you ate?" she asked.

"Partly, but it's also because of my becoming the Hollow Bone. I'm becoming hollower— as there's less of me, there's more room for visions."

Val and I got off the bus to Fishergate, then walked to 53 Degrees at the University of Lancashire. In spite of spring coming, the sight of the celandines and the primroses, the scent of grass cut for the first time, I was feeling weak. I couldn't face the standing space, let alone the mosh pit, so we opted for seats at the back and ended up sitting near a group of university lecturers: Mrs Robertson, Daniel, Mark, and Barbara, who lectures on fashion.

'A prophetic conjunction of ancient history with our contemporary crises', the band had sold the gig to the university, hoping for academic reviews.

Val cursed on noting the academics and tried to conceal her pint of stout.

At the very back, we both clocked Lorraine sitting with Vance.

The band began the gig by rising up from beneath black blankets in the guises of the ancient dead, clad in Bronze Age garments, faces and arms, aside from Carson's tattoo, painted by Val in whirling patterns in woad.

‘We are the Forgotten Dead’, the first song, has bluesy melodies. The next, ‘Noon Hill and Winter Hill’, evokes a Bronze Age battle between rival families favouring Summer and Winter on the West Pennine Moors. “Snow falls, white noise from the radio mast, a plane crashes, burning engines.”

Midge smashes the drums to a projection of the plane crash.

“Wildfires rage across the peatlands and the fire fighters fail to douse them.”

‘Lindow Man’. Another of Carson’s death scenes. A sacrifice to Nodens for aid against the Romans, which wins a battle but does not win a war. Blood fountaining from his jugular and pouring from a fountain on the projector, “The blood of all the world’s sacrifices, of all the world’s wounds.”

‘Bog Heads’, the heads, projected, tell their stories then prophesy of the draining of the peat bogs and their return with the rain, the rising water levels.

“It’s hard to define,” the academics talk beside us. “It isn’t quite post-punk, goth, or industrial.” “It isn’t eco-rock.” “It isn’t doom.” “Lead singer, he’s talented but troubled.” “Reminiscent of Ian Curtis from Joy Division.” “Richie Edwards of the Manic Street Preachers.” “Turner from Paradigm Shift.” “Hope he doesn’t go the same way.” “Did you teach him?”

“Yes,” Mrs Robertson, “quiet lad, wouldn’t have known he had it in him.”

‘Ribble Ancestors’. The stories of the 23 people whose skulls were found at Riversway Docklands. “A stone axe to the skull.” “A weapon pinned my brazen tongue.” “Anaemic was I, deep pitting in my left eye.”

‘The Ribble takes a life’. A litany born from Carson’s documentation of all the people whose bodies have been found in the river with a plaintive chorus:

Poverty, depression,
murder and suicide,
the Ribble takes a life,

the Ribble takes a life…

Projections of the faces of the victims, the last one the ghost of Mel, hawking her wares on the docklands and seeking vengeance on her killer.

"Still an open question," Mrs Robertson remarks, "Mel's death."

"No need for that," Mark is shaking his head, "best forgotten."

Daniel is looking sad, staring nostalgically, as Mel's image fades out.

"What's it about?" the academics ask. "Ancestral trauma?" "Collective trauma?"

'Traumatised'. I know it's the final song. Flashing lights and a heart, cut into pieces, projected on the screen, awful screaming guitars.

Like bog bodies, we're dissected,
handless, footless, headless.
They tear out our hearts,
feed them back to us in pieces -
Francis Bacon's industrious observations
on the wheels of the mechanistic God of Descartes.

They tear us apart and try to remodel us.
They cut off our heads, they cut out our tongues,
with scold's bridles, they try to rein in our wild voices.

I see that Carson is looking at Vance, who looks unimpressed with the band.

We are traumatised, traumatised,
we want to live, but the urge to die
keeps rising from beneath
with relentless waters.

The dead are rising
and we cannot staunch
the red river's rushing flow.

We are traumatised, traumatised,
we want to live, but the urge to die
keeps rising from beneath
with the restless dead.

The red river rushes
too hard, too fast to bear.
We can only pray for the future.

"Traumatised, traumatised," the last words fade out.

The pieces of the heart dissolve into the river and float out towards the sea.

"What was that about?" the academics ask. "Post-traumatic stress disorder?" "I could relate it to the theories in the works of Bessel van der Kolk." "To Arnold Mindell."

"We have opened the wounds," speaks Carson. He looks tired, wounded, as his gaze follows the pieces of the heart beyond the waves of the grey sea.

"But who can heal them?" asks Olivia.

"We have raised the dead," Carson again.

"But who can appease them?" asks Johnny.

"Only Nodens Silver Hand," Midge's voice.

"The wounded healer," speaks Carson.

An image of an arm dripping blood.

"A healing hand reaching into the future," all the band speak.

A silver arm shining against a silver sea and sky.

"Thank you," Carson displays his tattoo, "we are Hollow Bone."

Lorraine

I'm surprised Carson hasn't included a song called 'All the Victims Lorraine Winter has Ever Bullied'. Still, when he displays the heart, in pieces, on the screen, I'm recalling his horror when he opened the box, bit in. Then I'm thinking of all my victims, from the most recent, to Amelia Sullivan hanging in the woods, to the kids whose dinner money I nicked. The looks on their faces. How none of them were the same again. How some of them went on to become bullies and some of them nervous wrecks.

I'm glad I'm numbed up on ket because that, combined with the image of Mel's ghost and Daniel staring appalled, might have tipped me over the edge.

After the show, Vance goes over to hobnob with the academics. He pulled a string or two with acquaintances in the Arts Department to get the gig.

"Enjoy the band?" he presses.

"Very good." "Very relevant." "Voices for our times."

"You'll write that in your reviews for your literary journals and arts magazines?"

"Oh yes." "I've already started." "Good review in the Metacritic."

Like a fish out of water, I am, amongst them, a bit like Daniel standing all awkward in an ill-fitting suit getting quizzed about the history of catch wrestling.

Only, the thing is, with me, I'm clever. If I'd put my mind to it, I could have got straights A's. I know more about tragedy than all the drama teachers put together and could have written a full thesis on New Catholicism and exactly why our sins are justified and theodicy is redundant because we do not believe in an all-knowing, all-present, and all-loving God. If there was still funding for poor folks, I could have gotten myself a fancy Master's and a PhD, but unfortunately, there isn't. Hence, I've had to turn my intelligence to stealing and pushing drugs— more authentic. And them banging on about intergenerational trauma. They don't know a thing. All we have in common is the fact that

they can drink. Big glasses of red wine, 250ml, gone in a minute. Then someone is going up to the bar again.

"This is Lorraine Winter," Vance introduces me.

They look at me as though I'm a waif, a stray, and a fiend.

"That's me— my only friend is my knife, and I eat Summers for breakfast."

"Band!" Vance summons them. Seems I'm no good as entertainment.

"Johnny, you tell them about the technicalities of playing guitar, Olivia about the history of protest songs, Midge about your favourite drummers."

"Don't you dare ask me about Keith Moon," growls Midge.

I notice Val and her ginger girlfriend appear to have gone home early.

"Carson, bring that black book and tell them about how you made it."

It's the first time he's been so close to me and Vance since he ate the heart, but he doesn't show any signs of fear or hate, instead walking up demurely and placing the book on a table, opening it, to admiring, "Oohs," and "aahs."

He tells them how Val makes the paint from organic pigments such as carmine and sepia, then goes on to describe how he creates the bone ink. "I make it from the bones of dead animals I have found around the local area. A dead fox on Penwortham Bypass. A pigeon stuck on pigeon spikes. A duckling who fell into the culvert at the end of Fish House Brook. A death-trap, that. A two-metre drop all around. No way out. The only choice: starve or drown. A bit like living on Kingsfold or being in a band with Vance."

The academics look uncomfortable. One says, "There is… help." Others, "People to talk to." "Talking therapies." "Medications."

"None of the fancy diagnoses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders have helped me or my friends or

family. I'm just plain mad. Like Cyledyr, King Lear. One of the wyllt. The only cure is poetry."

He moves on to describe how he puts the bones in a crucible surrounded by blazing coals and leaves the lid on to stop the air getting in and the bones becoming ash, then grinds the remnants with a pestle and mortar.

"Finally, I add a drop of my blood. Put my life's essence into the pages." This," he takes a small bottle of black bone ink from the pocket of his hoodie, "has a drop of blood from each band member as instructed by Vance because tonight we'll be signing our contracts, signing our lives away."

Vance interjects. "I wouldn't believe everything the boy says. He's got a tongue silvered with moonlight and madness from too much time up on the moors."

"Where do you get your inspiration from?" one of the academics asks Carson.

He shows them his tattoo and they gawk at it.

"Enough of your charms," Vance snaps. "It's time for your signatures. There is an upstairs area above the bar. It's closed off but within shouting distance."

"No." Carson refuses. Looking at the academics, "In front of them."

"Very well," Vance arranges the seats around one of the tables with two chairs for us and four for them and the academics gather round to watch.

Why, I wonder, as Carson sits, takes out the bottle of bone ink, after what we've done to him, has he still come back to Vance when he knows very well he and the band could get their own gigs if they tried? As he stares into the inky darkness I catch a glimpse of his plan like a murky ghost fox - to go to oblivion and take me and Vance down with him.

"This," announces Vance, "is a historic occasion - the signing of Hollow Bone." He takes from his briefcase four copies of a very lengthy contract.

“Surely you don’t expect us to read all this in one sitting,” gasps Johnny.

“Just have a quick look through and sign,” Vance commands.

“Best keep an eye on the small print,” warns Midge.

Carson pulls up an app on his phone and uses it to scan through. “It’s usually 1 or 3 years for new artists,” he notes, “but we’re only down for 2 years. And it’s usually 5 albums for established artists but we’re down for 4.” He looks puzzled, haunted by the exactitudes, suspicious of Vance.

“Estimates about your time at Oblivion based on your progress.” Vance has the look of when he’s seen a very nasty scene in his scrying bowl.

Carson narrows his eyes, continues to scan through, “The rest’s ok.” He takes out his black raven feather quill and begins to dip it in the black bone ink.

“Let me take a look at that,” Vance commands, “before you sign. I want to check you haven’t added any extra or otherworldly ingredients.”

Carson passes it. Vance swirls it, looks into it, sniffs, still looks suspicious. Yet he passes it back. “Behold, a signing that will see this band grow in popularity, prestige, infamy, win their desired gig at Manchester Arena.”

Carson stares long and hard. As if he is etching his signature into the skin of an enemy, he signs, dots the ‘i’ in Robinson as if he’s stabbing Vance.

The others follow suit. Olivia’s hand is reluctant, Johnny’s shaky. Midge is reprimanded for signing Midge, given another sheet, “Sign as Edmund Todd.”

Vance signs beneath with a sharp ‘V’ and their descent to oblivion is sealed.

Chapter Thirty Four

Chesney

A warm May Eve and an evening of lovemaking with Val. Always, afterwards, she falls straight asleep, sleeps on her back, head back, snoring unabashedly. I get up, close the curtain, used to her snores, close my eyes to rest. I can't. I'm uncomfortable because something is digging in my back.

"Val," reluctantly I wake her, "there's something in the bed." It wouldn't be the first time I've ended up sharing the space with one or more of her models.

She gets up, sweeps her hand over the cover sheet. "There's nothing there."

She gets back into bed, falls straight back asleep. But, there is, I know it. Still, I'm too tired to bother her again or look myself. Eventually, I fall asleep.

In the morning, we wake, get up. I take my nightdress off, pick up my bra.

Val gasps. "Whatever is that huge bruise on your back?"

I reach to touch it, wince. "I told you there was something in the bed."

Val undertakes a more thorough search, under the coversheet this time. "Oh." She grasps something in her hand. "That explains it. It's a bomb."

"What in the names of the gods are you doing keeping a bomb in your bed?" I'm relieved that it explains the big bruise but can barely believe she's not only been keeping a bomb under her bedsheets but let me sleep on it.

"It's not a real bomb but a tiny one from Warhammer." She holds out her palm.

"Oh." I look at the bomb, tiny, round, black, with a little taper. I then look at the bruise on my back in Val's mirror; huge, round, deep blue. I recognise the symptoms of leukaemia but can't believe it and daren't speak it.

*

"You are twenty-first in the queue."

It takes me almost an hour of holding on the phone to arrange an appointment at St Mary's Health Centre on Cop Lane. 2 p.m. I have to take time out of school and explain it, to the teachers, to Val, as "Something routine."

It's a fifteen-minute walk from school, but it feels like a marathon. Terrifying thoughts play over and over in my mind as I walk past the posh shops, people in the warm weather sitting outside the cafés, eating freshly baked artisan cakes and sipping frothy coffees and designer milkshakes.

All those things I liked make my stomach turn, and this increases my nerves. I know my grandfather and Dad had leukaemia, but somehow it escaped me that it might happen to me. I'm good. I try to keep my grades up. I run and play hockey. Of course, Dad was good too, but he didn't win.

Unfairness, unfairness, why should this happen to me when the likes of Lorraine and the Summer sisters remain healthy, get away scot-free? I've got plans, a life ahead of me. I want to be a scientist. I want to run 426,000 miles for my Dad. I want to see Hollow Bone play at Manchester Arena.

St Mary's Health Centre is a squat red building just off Cop Lane. I go in through the sliding doors and type my birth date and the first letter of my surname into the sign-in screen. A 38-minute wait. I have to stand for a while before getting a seat in the waiting room amongst a mixture of people, young, old, parents with small kids, a fragile man with an awful cough.

I'm down to see Dr Abara. I haven't met her before. There's a high turnover of GPs due to the state of the NHS and poor working conditions. Finally, I'm called in. She's an African woman, in her mid-thirties, with black hair in braids, a kind smile, and a sharpness in her eyes. I describe my symptoms. She takes one look at me and orders the blood tests.

It takes a fortnight for the blood tests to return. I get a call from reception. They can't tell me the results. This means it's bad. I'm told to come into the surgery that very same day for another appointment with Dr Abara.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but I think you already know."

I do, I feel it in my bones, in the treacherous hollows where healthy marrow should grow, but my haematopoietic stem cells have betrayed me.

But I don't want to hear, spoken out loud, the symptoms, the name of my sickness.

Still, she does her duty, as doctors do, breaking tragic news to countless people each day. News that sweeps the rugs, the carpets, the very foundations of houses, of life, from beneath the feet of patients and their families.

"The blood tests show that you have got low numbers of red cells and platelets and high numbers of abnormal white cells, which is suggestive of leukaemia. I'm aware, from your notes, it runs in your family."

There we go. The rug's gone. The foundations bare beneath. The open, gaping hole of a question of whether I'm to die or if I'll live to survive it. In a few sentences, a few breaths, I'm no longer a person anymore. I'm a patient.

"We'll need to do a bone marrow biopsy to be doubly sure," says Dr Abara. "But I think already you should be considering treatment options."

Yes, I remember this; the names of the chemicals remain etched in my mind.

"I've referred you to the Oncology Department at Preston Hospital."

"How long's the wait?"

"You know the situation with the NHS, but I'll do my best."

It's too late to go back to school, and I couldn't face it anyway. I can't even cry on the way home. Tears can do no justice to the unfairness of it all.

Mum, at her baking in the kitchen, intuitively knows something is wrong. When I tell her, she does her best not to let her face crumple, to iron it straight as her perfectly ironed bed sheets. "Well, at least this explains your being tired and grumpy and your running times and grades dropping."

She takes me to the bone marrow biopsy at Preston Hospital a fortnight later. The car park is so crowded that we have to park on a nearby side road. All the side roads are crammed with cars too. It's a large, grey, multi-storey building with stacks of large windows and a blue-painted main entrance.

Mum and I follow the labyrinthine ways through the corridors that we know all too well from Dad's treatments to the Oncology Department. I feel I'm following his footsteps and could have walked them in my sleep; like a sleepwalker dazed and hazy with sickness and disbelief. How, again and again, can this be happening to me, Chesney Liddell?

It's as if I'm watching myself, in a film, as, after a long wait, I'm finally introduced to my consultant, an Indian man in his late fifties, Dr Ahmad. He has short, thick black hair, greying in places, a heavy-set, sombre face. I wonder how many people die each day from cancer and how many are saved. His expression suggests that the former outweighs the latter. He explains the procedure, then, the student nurse, who is assisting, takes me aside, to behind a curtain, gives me a gown to change into.

Mum helps me onto the table. I lie on my side, pull up the right side of the gown to expose my hip bone, trying to disguise my fear. "Sharp scratch." The numbing of the local anaesthetic spreads across my hip. A hip, good for running, for turning, for playing hockey, that has been warmed and loved by Val's hands becoming icy and specimen-like. I feel like a piece of meat on a counter or a corpse in a morgue or Lorraine's freezer.

"Can you feel anything?" Dr Ahmad presses my hip.

"No, nothing."

I'm reminded of that Pink Floyd song, 'Comfortably Numb', Carson often plays and want to drift away to anywhere else with the melody.

"You may feel a brief sharp pain." Dr Ahmad warns me.

I try not to think about the needle, 11 gauge, 6 inches long. Impossible as it sinks into the hollow of my hip bone and draws up the liquid sample with an excruciating pain that makes me smother a scream in the cotton, starchy pillow. Then, another, pressing, tugging, as a second needle is inserted to draw up a small portion of the solid core of my bone marrow. Then, it's over, done. A thirty-minute wait. A much longer wait for the results.

I'm called back to the hospital and into Dr Ahmad's consulting room. "The tests show large numbers of abnormal white blood cells in your bone marrow."

Why me? Why this awful disease in the hollows of my bones when I have made no pact with Pagan gods and I have done nothing wrong?

"Acute myeloid leukaemia." He is able to identify the type. "The same as your dad. As you know, it is quick-spreading, so we will need to act quickly. The tests have allowed us to identify the specific gene mutations and chromosomal changes which will help us to develop a treatment plan."

I know what he's going to suggest. I share my genes and my chromosomes with Dad. "Chemo— cyclophosphamide or doxorubicin, administered by intravenous injection or in tablet form." I beat him to it.

"I can see you have a good memory and have done your research. I suggest," Dr Ahmad continues, "that because this wasn't caught as quickly as it might have been, and it is aggressive, we take the intravenous option."

"No," I argue, "that will wipe me out, I won't be able to go to school."

"It's your best chance, although you do have a choice."

My mum stares at me meaningfully, and I know they are both right.

"Okay," I submit, "how long until it begins?"

"I'll do my best to get you in within a fortnight," says Dr Ahmad.

*

I stare at the skeleton, and the skeleton, hanging in the science lab, stares back.

I'm sitting beside Val in biology. We have been learning about the structures of bones— the periosteum on the outside surface, the layer of compact bone, and the cavity containing the bone marrow within. How bone marrow regenerates in life and decays after death, leaving the bone hollow.

I haven't told her about the hidden disaster in the hollows of my bones.

"Whatever's the matter with you?" Val asks. "You've been staring at that skeleton as if it's Sebastian Robinson back from the dead for the last ten minutes."

I'm going to have to tell her. I'm going to have to sweep that rug out, lay bare the foundations, when already the Robinson house is sinking into the bog.

"I'll tell you at break," I put her off.

We make our way to our usual spot behind the science labs. It's late June. The summer solstice has just passed. It's a bright, hot day. Too hot. The sun hurts my eyes, and the grass is withering beneath its intense gaze. Already, we have been warned: there will be a drought. The hosepipe ban will be back in force. The reservoirs, well filled after the autumn rains, are running dry after a spring with barely a spot of rain at all.

Val takes out her vape. It's chocolate-flavoured like her favourite stout. Oh, I hope so much this won't tip her into heavier drinking. I know when I'm not there, she drinks most evenings.

“Just a drop or two to help with my model-making, with illustrating the Black Book, to cope with Carson.”

“You’ll drink on any excuse,” I pointed out, “or none.”

“Put it away,” I tell her, “I want your full attention.”

“This is serious, isn't it?” She obeys.

“I’ve,” I swallow, prepare myself to name it, form the word, “I’ve got leukaemia.”

“Leukaemia,” she repeats as if it should be familiar. I see her memory scrambling, dredging up the meaning: “The sickness your Dad had?”

“Acute myeloid leukaemia,” I speak the full name.

She gasps. “So, the tiredness, the bruising, we should have caught it quicker.”

“I know. I begin intravenous chemotherapy next week.”

“Then, you’ll be off school if I want to come to see you…”

“Yes, you’ll have to wash, wear a mask.”

“How serious is this? Could you…”

“It’s aggressive,” I admit, “and yes, I could die.”

“No,” she puts her arms around me, holds me, “I won’t let you die.” She squeezes me hard, almost so the breath goes out of me, as if she could hold me here.

“Ouch,” I gasp, “you’re squashing me. I can’t breathe.”

“Sorry.” She lets me go, backs away, as if I’m now a precious piece of china.

“Please don’t treat me differently because I’m sick.”

“We should tell Carson. Perhaps he…”

“He couldn’t save Dad and has far too much on his mind.”

“He needs to know— you’re family to us.”

Chapter Thirty Five

Chesney

Val knocks on Carson's bedroom door. No answer. She barges in. Carson is sitting on his bed with the Black Book of Peneverdant spread open on his lap, absorbed in penning a song, with his black raven feather quill.

He jumps, smudges a word. "Damnit Val." He looks up in annoyance.

"Chesney's got some bad news," Val tells him.

Seeing our expressions, his gaze turns softer, and he sets the book to one side. "What is it?" As he looks at me, with near-X-ray eyes, I feel he knows.

"Acute myeloid leukaemia." How many times will I have to repeat it?

"I felt it in my bones," he confesses.

"And you said nothing?" growls Val.

"I didn't know for certain. I haven't fully got the hang of prophecy yet."

"Anything else you'd like to predict, like whether she will live or die?"

"Val, don't," I say, "I don't believe in prophecies. I don't want to know."

"You've been in my visions," Carson admits, "with increasing clarity suggesting, like the Summers and Winters, Cyledyr, you've got a role in the book."

"Who?" Val demands, looking slightly jealous.

"Can't you guess?" Carson asks us. "Who has green fingers and loves the land?"

"You're Creiddylad!" Val exclaims. "I should have known."

Me? Creiddylad. I've felt I have her green fuse within me but never imagined. What if I am? The thought of her life bringing capacities buoys me up.

“Unfortunately,” Carson speaks more darkly, “and I hate to have to tell you this, but in my visions, like today, Creiddylad’s green power is compromised. Like you, Chesney, it’s possible our goddess of the land will die.”

What has he seen? My death? Creiddylad’s death? I’m frightened now.

He’s trying very hard not to give anything away, his face a mask, like in Macbeth. He takes out his phone. “To make sense of my premonitions, I’ve been plotting the major turning points in myth and history from time’s beginning.” He shows us a complex constellation of coloured dots. “This one,” he points to a red dot, “seems significant right now.”

“What is it?” Val asks, utterly mystified.

“The Battle of the Fiery Plain in the Water Country of Lancashire, where Martin Mere, once England’s largest lake, remains. The terrible struggle by which the gods won the rule of Britain from the giants. The burning eye of the sun giant, Bel, threatened to destroy the world. Nodens fought him, nearly defeated him, but he lost his arm. Then, Gwythyr finally triumphed to take Bel’s role as Lord of the Sun and Summer.”

“Is Bel related to Belisama, goddess of the Ribble?” asks Val.

“Yes,” Carson replies, “they’re siblings, and the Ribble is her tears for Bel.”

“Why’s that relevant now?” I ask Carson.

“Martin Mere is sacred to Nodens, who was equated with the Roman Mars. I have seen the lake, already drained, drying up, the Fiery Plain returning.” He points to other dots. “The Ice Age, the time of the bogs, the Industrial Revolution, the splitting of the atom, the invention of computers. They’ve all had a role in driving us towards the crises we face today and the visions I’ve been having of a nuclear winter or infernal summer.”

At the mention of atoms and nuclear power, I tense. “Windscale. It’s made my ancestors, me, Creiddylad, sick.” As I consider the implications, “Why is Nodens not healing her?” I think of Jesus crying out to his father.

"Yes, Carson," interjects Val, "who is Nodens in all of this?"

"I believe he's doing his best in our failing NHS."

"You mean the health workers," I realise, "Dr Abara, Dr Ahmad, Amina's Dad who works as an anaesthetist, and Amina who wants to be a doctor."

Carson nods.

"But their help might not be enough," Val speaks anguished. "And, anyhow, who am I meant to be? Have you not had any visions of me? I certainly don't want to be Gwythyr again and have to team up with the Summers."

"The way you're going," speaks Carson grimly, "you're going to end up being one of the Three Disgraceful Drunkards of the Island of Britain."

"How dare you!" she bawls offended.

"You're going to have to envision yourself in a better role."

"Perhaps," she speaks defensively, "I'm too young to be typecast."

I glance at the Black Book of Peneverdant. "I recall that I was meant to end the story, so perhaps this means there is hope for me and Creiddylad."

"The pivotal point is here," Carson points to a dot flashing all colours. "Later this summer, the day of the election, we need Eco-Shift to get in."

*

I go home with multi-coloured dots dancing before my eyes and my mind filled with troubling thoughts of ancient battles and future catastrophes. When, finally, I sleep, a treacherous dream, in which I am a powerless witness.

"We've got to save Chesney," Val begs Carson.

"I tried to save her dad," Carson looks dejectedly at his tattoo, "failed."

"But what if both of us…" she touches his tattoo then her right forearm.

Carson's eyes widen. "You'd become a hollow bone for her?"

"No, Val, no!" I shout. But I'm not fully there. My voice is soundless.

"I love her, Carson, she's a much better person than me, doesn't deserve this."

"You know what this means?" His expression is serious.

"Uh-huh." She's the most serious I've ever seen her.

"Alright - we'll have to find the radius."

He takes her hand, guides her with him into his wardrobe. It's filled with identical black hoodies, pairs of black ripped jeans, like an army of doom kids. He pushes through them and they are walking through dark mist.

"Where are we going?" Val asks Carson.

"To the Battle of the Fiery Plain where Nodens lost his arm."

"You're taking me into battle?" Val asks frightened.

I watch in horror as the mist parts and I see them running across a battlefield, dodging blows from the swords of gods and clubs of giants. Terrible things, the giants. Tall as mountains. Some have two heads. Some have five arms, some have ten, some have faces or mouths in their bellies. The gods are silver, shining, tall as trees, encircled by mist. And, up ahead, a terrifying scene. A one-eyed sun giant whose burning eye decimates everything in sight— melting flesh, searing armour, reducing gods to hunks of seared and smoking carcass for the ever-circling battle-crows.

The state of the land, of Creiddylad's body. Blackened trees. Singed grass. And Nodens Silver Hand, with his silver sword, like a deadly whirlwind, is rushing forth to take on Bel in a clash of club against blade.

Val and Carson on the sidelines. "Go on! Go on!"

But Bel knocks the sword from the hand of Nodens and uses his very own blade to cut off his arm, leaving him sinking into a pool of his own blood.

"Victory!" Bel raises the arm of Nodens above his head like a trophy.

“Grr!” A Hound of Annwn appears and sinks its teeth into the arm. A tug of war commences, see-sawing back and forth, neither party willing to give in. Finally, the hound tears free the ulna, with the bone in its jaws, departs.

“So that’s how the hound got it,” Carson realises.

They follow Bel across the scorched and seared plain, sidestepping puddles of blood and the fallen bodies and severed limbs of gods and giants.

The mist comes down and when it parts they are standing outside a tower, which I see is in the same place that Blackpool Tower stands today. It’s a similar shape, broader at the bottom, tapering slimmer, then widening out at the top to support a gigantic room with windows that are brightly lit.

“The light’s gone out,” says Val, “that must mean he’s in bed.”

Carson switches the blade on his pocket knife for a lock pick and picks the lock on the door. Together, they enter, see a staircase spiralling up and down.

Carson sniffs. “Down. I can smell decay and old bones.”

They follow the stairs and come out in a gigantic reliquary where there are a variety of different bones displayed in glass cabinets on stone podiums.

In one of the corners is a vat where fresh body parts are soaking.

“The cold water breaks down the tissue,” Carson explains to Val as he fishes through limbs in various states of decomposition but doesn’t find the arm.

Neither is it in the piles with the stiff brushes for removing leftover flesh.

“Perhaps it took us longer to get here than I thought,” says Carson.

He and Val begin to look around the rest of the bone collection, passing the skulls of gods and giants, the collections of ribs, thigh bones, hip bones.

“Here we are,” says Val, “arms and hands.” A big cabinet in the middle. “The Fingers of Fifty-Fingered Fagan.” She stares at

them lined in a row. “The fifth hand of Fintan Five Hands and the knuckles of Knucklebone Kiara.”

“Don’t be getting any ideas,” says Carson, “we’re here for one thing.”

“Here it is,” Val points, further down, “the Radius of Nodens.” She pauses a moment to stare at it in awe before she looks to the left and frowns. “There’s a label for the Hand of Nodens but it’s nowhere to be seen.”

“Perhaps Bel has it,” says Carson, “unless some other thief…”

“Do you think the ulna and the radius will be enough?”

“They’ve got to be better than just the ulna.”

Val picks up the radius, slowly reverently, strokes it with her fingers. I recognise that touch. “So what do we do? Do we need Gwyn?”

“It’s summer, he’s asleep.” Carson looks inward, touches his tattoo. “But, as I’m a hollow bone, I can stand in for him.” He takes the other end of the radius. “Val Robinson, do you agree to serve the gods and spirits of Britain, from this day, come what may, until your death, as a hollow bone?”

“Val don’t!” I shout. “You could end up like your brother, driven to madness or death by the Holy Powers. I love you and couldn’t bear to lose you!”

“Yes,” Val replies.

“Then let it be done - let bone become flesh.”

“Ouch! By the gods! Holy fuck!” Val cries out in pain as the bone vanishes and the tattoo appears on her upper right forearm. The perfect match for Carson’s - shining white, holographic, hollow, haunting. “Wow!”

It suits her, I’ve got to say. She puts her arm on top of her brother’s. They stick like glue. Their fingers interlock. They turn their arms up then down, displaying the ulna, then the radius, grin like happy six-year-olds.

*

Carson and Val return through the mist, but the dream is not over. The darkness parts to show them, standing together, on the edge of one of the fishing bays at the mill pond. Again, they lock right arms the same way.

It's a clear summer night and the stars are reflected in the pool. They remind me of the shining dots on Carson's map - his constellations of fate.

"Gods beyond the veil, beyond the waters," Val speaks, "hear the call of a supplicant. Lady of the Lake, hear my heartfelt cry for the life of my girlfriend," tears spill from her eyes, "Chesney Liddell, who's dying of leukaemia."

"I'm not dying yet," I want to snap at her angrily, yet my eyes too tear up.

"Please accept my humble offerings." With her left hand, she reaches into her bag. "All my Power Rangers." She throws in the boxes, one by one, painfully, regretfully. "All my X-Men." She kisses Wolverine a sad farewell.

"Val!" I cry. "You don't have to do this." I know what they mean to her.

Offering made, she and Carson watch avidly where they have sunk down. To the top floats Wolverine, shakes his yellow-blue masked head, sinks.

Val tries again. "All my Warhammer figures." In go the Black Templars, the Blood Angels, the Crimson Fists, the Chaos Space Marines, Shadowblade, Throgg. "All their armour, all their weapons, all their bombs."

"You didn't have to give everything away." Carson looks down. "It looks like Llyn Cerrig Bach— centuries' worth of offerings."

"Hopefully," Val replies, "that will do the job."

Floating to the surface, a spaceship of the Chaos Space Marines. Carson and Val hold their breath. It plays a song of defeat, sinks back down.

“My final offering.” Val parts arms with Carson a moment, takes from her bag an inflatable Denys Fisher Stretch Hulk 1979, pumps him up.

Val, no, I know how much the inflatable Hulk means to you. He was a gift from me.

She sends him off with a push, links arms with Carson again. He floats off, teeth bared, chest large, ridiculous in his tiny brown shorts. Something reaches for him, drags him down. Val emits a squeak of hope.

Could this sacrifice of all sacrifices work?

A few minutes later, he floats back up, flat, deflated. A sign of refusal from the watery powers in the lake, the gods beyond the veil, and the waters.

“No!” Val’s wracking sob almost rends the stars from their stations. “I’ve become a hollow bone to save Chesney, and I’ve given so much!”

“This still isn’t enough?” Carson clenches his left fist in futility.

Their sorrow dims the starlight and stills the waves on the pool.

My hope drops into the void where the poor drowned faces of the X-Men, Power Rangers, and Hulk will lie forever doomed to stare at the pitiless stars.

Chapter Thirty Six

Lorraine

I'm in Booths, heading over to the hot counter, to treat myself to a tasty chicken. I've been doing it every Saturday evening after a job well done. I've been twisting the arms of the customers who haven't paid and got far more than their regular payments. Not just by twisting arms. Since I've become assistant to Dad's pet magician, he's been teaching me more than magic. Some proper nasty tricks, he's got up his sleeve. Some proper nasty implements I've now got in my handbag and couldn't do without. Right skilled, I am, now, in the practice of his dark arts. I deserve a chicken.

Unfortunately, it's nearly nine o'clock and the hot counter is closing. Not a problem for me, though. I've got a hold on the girl who works late. A deal. She doesn't get hurt if she saves me a nice selection of chickens to pick from. There she is, thinking she can hide from me. "Hello, it's me again."

Out she comes, skinny thing, hair tucked in her hairnet, frightened, blanched.

"You got my chickens?" My mouth is already watering. I'm thinking of plucking flesh from bone, bone from bone, chewing off the last bits.

"Yes." A weak, thin, piping voice. Pitiful, she is.

She leads me behind the counter to a metal stand where there are three chickens cooling, still warm and greasy. A lovely rich chickeny smell. God, I'm almost drooling as I assess which is the biggest, the fattest, the juiciest.

Then, to my shock, a skeletal hand on my shoulder, a fleshy one over my mouth. I try to pull away, but the bone hand is too strong. My scream is smothered.

"Guess who?" Selina's voice behind me.

I can't believe it. The skinny little wretch has betrayed me to my enemy.

I find I can't move. Where the fuck has she got a hand with such strength? I've heard of Hands of Glory, taken from the grave of a robber. It must be one of them.

"Bring the guillotine," Selina commands the wretch, "a hand for a hand."

I can't believe it. The little bitch is taking out of a cupboard a miniature guillotine with a hole in it, not the size for a head, but for a wrist. She's putting it on the table, beside my tasty chickens. But she won't have the strength, or the guts, to grab my right hand, to put in the chopper. She's staring at it, as if it's a wild animal, as if it's a ferret or a rat. That's right, girl, you won't dare mess with my hand, you won't even touch me.

Then, quick as a catcher in a baseball game, as a wicketkeeper, she's got it. Damn her, she's not as weak as I thought. Pulling, yanking, she's got it through the hole and locked it in and is going for the release mechanism.

I fail to cry out as I stare at the blade, sharp and glinting as a winter's night.

"Chop chop!" says Selina to the girl.

She presses the release mechanism, the blade comes down, yet, at the same time, the bone hand releases me and my hand is released from the lock. Some magic. It's as if the hand, whoever's it is, doesn't want me hurt. I spin, driving my elbow into Selina's chest, my palm into her chin.

Working my full advantage, I slam her up against the cookers. Her head goes bang. I wrap my right hand round her neck, press so she can't breathe.

"I'll strangle you if you don't tell me where you got that hand."

I keep an ear out for the wretch behind, but she's just gaping in surprise.

"It's not what you think it is," chokes Selina, "it's not a Hand of Glory."

"Just a little something else you've robbed from a grave?" I squeeze harder.

"It's," she gasps, "the original hand of Nodens, Silver Hand."

Now, this is interesting. I think of Carson's ulna, his hollow bone.

"No good for a Summer, that. Nodens is water, Gwyn's father, winter. Much better for me the catching hand of the Catcher himself."

I unplug the wrist from her prosthetic hand socket with a good, strong pull.

"No," she pants, "you don't know to what lengths I went to get it."

"I'd love to know, and I've the shiny new tools in my handbag to have it out of you, and I will, but not tonight, as the shop's shutting and I want my chicken."

The bell is ringing for the last customers to pay at the tills.

I shove Selina out onto the shop floor and send the wretch into the corner with my glower. I put the Hand of Nodens in my bag. I take not one, or two, but all three chickens. Good night this, I deserve them all, I do.

*

"You'll never guess what I brought home last night," I speak boastingly as I take my seat at our dining table for tea with Mum, Dad, and Vance.

I can't say I'm hungry as I ate a full chicken last night and I had another for dinner. Not until I see the leg of roast beef, rare, leaking a little blood. Good cook, my Dad. Mum won't touch a saucepan. Never opens the oven. It's a good job Dad likes cooking as much as she likes the odd jobs.

"Let me guess," says Dad, "the Hand of Nodens."

Damn it, he's good. No playing games with him, he guesses right all the time.

"Got it in one." I take the skeletal hand out of my bag and place it between the tray of roast potatoes and the dishes of sprouts and glazed carrots.

Impressive, it is, trumps our paramount Hand of Glory by a mile. Silver-white shiny bone, shimmery, hollow-looking, perfectly put together, joints that move so well they might've been oiled with Stanley Robinson's best lithium grease. There's a life to it, sitting there, knows it's the star of the show.

"It can't be." Vance's jaw is tight and he is narrowing his steely eyes.

"I never would have thought…" Dad is genuinely gobsmacked.

"Oh well done." Mum claps her hands, titters. She's been on the white wine. "I think this deserves another drink." She fills her glass only.

"Can I," perhaps this will finally be my moment, "have a horse?"

"Perhaps," says Dad, "if you tell me what you can do with it."

For a moment I'm stumped. Then, I recall the myths. "Well, it's the sword hand of Nodens, so I guess it would be good at sword fighting. He's the Catcher, so it might catch fish; better catch us some loot. He's a healer, or at least later became a healer, so it might be possible it heals."

"And you can work it, can you?" asks Dad.

"Not yet," I admit, "but I could experiment." Looking to Vance, "Awaken it with a candle made of corpse fat or an ointment of witch's blood?"

Vance shakes his head. "You're following the wrong story, girl; in this mythos, it takes one sworn to a god as a hollow bone to make another."

"As Carson has done with his sister." Mum gets out her phone.

"What, he's made Val, that pig-witted drunken dyke, a hollow bone?" I can barely believe it. I can think of no less suitable vessel for the gods.

I take Mum's phone and see the photograph and text on the band's Facebook page. Val Robinson has joined her brother, Carson Robinson, as the backing singer and a fellow hollow bone in the guise of Seithenin. An image of her with a tattoo of a radius

on her right upper forearm alongside Carson with the tattoo of the ulna on his right inner forearm with identical smiles.

"What does this mean?" I ask Vance. "Will they have more magical power?"

"I seriously doubt it," says Vance, "particularly with her playing Seithenin, the disgraceful drunkard who left the floodgates open and flooded the lost land of Cantre'r Gwaelod and much of the Lancashire coast."

"So the only way to access its power is through Carson?" I ask, pained. "He's never going to grant me its usage and will indubitably want it himself."

"You'll have to find a way to persuade him," says Mum. "We've heard on the grapevine that Val's little ginger girlfriend has got leukaemia."

Well, there's a shock. I recall her dad died of it. It must run in the family.

"If," Mum continues, "he thinks there's a chance you'll let him use the hand to try to heal her, he might just make you a hollow bone."

"I seriously doubt, even for Chesney or Val, he'd give that power to me. You've got no idea how deep his hatred goes—deeper than the deepest abode of the Devil and all his demons and the deep abyss in which Nodens dreams."

"If that doesn't work," she reminds me, "you've always got the things in your handbag."

*

"Carson," I whisper.

I've been waiting, in the shadows, round the back of the Mill. He's slid closed the lock on the portacabin where the band keep their spare equipment, and he keeps the things for his fixing business he does not want Val to know about. He's just locked it with a double padlock and a code word.

He spins, sees me, reaches immediately into his pocket for his knife.

Mockingly, "Guess what I've got in my handbag," I say.

"I've heard the rumours." He looks disgusted. Eyes glinting dangerously, "I've got a set of devices far more deadly and dangerous on my pocket knife."

"Wrong answer. You'll never beat my dad. Guess again."

"The Hand of Nodens," he suggests acidly, levelling his knife at me.

"Well done, second guess, but still second best to my dad."

"Liar."

"No, I tell the truth," I smirk, "I got it from Selina Summer."

"And where did she get it from?" His eyes are very narrow.

"Ah, now there's a story. I got it from her last night." I take a brief pause to savour the memory. "After a little persuasion, she told me she got it from the reliquary in the Tower of Bel all the way back in the British fore-time."

A quick intake of breath from Carson. "Impossible. Selina can't walk between the worlds, she's not a hollow bone, psychopomp, or shaman."

"That's where it gets interesting. I guess you haven't heard of her Red Book of Summer or our White Book of Winter to rival your Black Book?"

"No," he admits. "You mean to say you're writing songs, stories…"

"Spells," I laugh at his surprise, "to control both our culture and the gods."

"No god, not even Gwythyr, would take the hand of Nodens to her. No spirit of the Otherworld either. I doubt any demon or any self-respecting ghost."

"But not all ghosts are self-respecting, Carson, can't you guess who it was?"

I can see it dawning, by his look of horror, by his look of disgust, as if he's seen a grave opening and the one he suspects crawling out at him. I know he's got it, but I've got to rub it in.

“The man who the Summers have always used for their dirtiest, most dangerous jobs.”

“You’re trying to tell me she used my father’s ghost? Surely he wouldn’t sink so far.”

“For the promise of new life, for resurrection.”

“Not feasible—his body’s been cremated.”

“I know,” I laugh again, “she didn’t tell him that.”

“So you’ve got the Hand of Nodens. What’s your game?”

“I’ve come to suggest a deal. You can borrow it to heal Chesney if, in return, you make me a hollow bone and grant me its power.”

Carson’s jaw drops. Never thought it of me, that I might find a way to equal him. I can see him chewing it over in his mind, like a dark horse chomping on its feed, one of those dark waterhorses who eats only bog weeds.

It takes him a while, vacillating like one of those stupid squirrels who stop in the road, in front of a car, run left then right, then get knocked down.

“I can’t,” finally he says, “not even to save Chesney. You’re not here to be a hollow bone. You’re here to be a Winter and that’s your story’s end. But,” he speaks more softly, not quite pleading, but coming close to it, “if you’ve got a heart, you might lend it to me to heal her, and I will give it back.”

“Do you truly believe Lorraine Winter might have a heart?” I mock. Still, I’m frustrated by his typecasting and disappointed by his reticence to do my bidding until I realise it gives me the excuse to use my new tools.

“Where is the Hand of Nodens anyway?” Carson asks.

The perfect opportunity. I reach into my handbag, pause, my stomach sinks. I can feel the cold metal edges of my implements but not the touch of bone. A small movement, towards the cabin, catches my eye. I stare in astonishment at the hand, walking on its fingers, silently as a ghost. I’ve been concentrating so hard on Carson I hadn’t noticed its departure from my bag.

“There,” I point to Carson, “look,” as it climbs the wall of the cabin.

“I’m not going to fall for any of your tricks.” He does not take his eyes off me.

“Seriously.” I follow it up onto the roof, where it dances on its fingertips. “Watch out,” as it crouches, prepares to jump, “here it comes!”

He almost leaps out of his skin, shoots into the air like a geyser, as the Hand of Nodens lands on his shoulder, squeezes it, pats it like an old friend.

I can barely believe it. “Here, you, come back to me, come back to Lorraine. Haven’t you got any loyalty to the one who rescued you from Selina?”

It simply gives me a wave. Carson laughs, half-mirthful, half-bitter. “Seems both Selina’s plan to use my father and yours to use me have failed.”

Chesney

“Give us one last chance to heal you before you start chemo,” Val begged.

The morning after my dream, at school, I told her what I’d dreamt. I asked her to pull up the sleeve on the long-sleeved shirt she was wearing in summer. Very impressive, her hollow bone tattoo, but I’m not sure what it’s going to do to her. A couple of days later, she decided to join the band as the backing singer in the guise of the disgraceful drunkard, Seithenin.

“To add some comedy value,” she said, swigging her dark pint.

Still, I’m at her house on the last afternoon before the long road of pain, nausea, tiredness, and dilapidation begins, too weary to care about her plans.

“Guess what we’ve got,” Val says as she draws me toward the kitchen.

“I don’t know.”

“Guess.” She refuses to open the door.

Following my dream, “the Hand of Nodens.”

“You guessed it in one far better than Carson.”

“Really?” A small lift of hope, but I dare not get too excited.

Carson is sitting at the table, making a spidering motion towards an impressive shiny white skeletal hand, and it is dancing back, pressing forward.

“It’s alive!” I gasp.

“Shake?” Carson holds it out to me.

“Alright.” It shakes my hand as if I’m a good friend.

“You going to help us heal Chesney?” asks Val.

Looking pensive, crouching low, it backs away.

“Come on,” she says, “we’ve got to give it a try. She grabs it by the wrist. “Now,” to Carson, “how exactly are we going to do this?”

“Let’s link arms, hold the hand together, channel some healing energy.”

“Sit down,” Val tells me as she and Carson glue their arms together, hers with the radius on top and his with the ulna on the bottom. Both hold the hand.

They move behind me, place the hand on my shoulder. “Nodens,” they speak in turn, “Healer,” “Dream Father,” “Catcher,” “Silver Hand,” “we pray to you for healing for Chesney Liddell.” “Please heal her leukaemia.”

I can feel their concentration, their focus, the heat of their prayers. Yet I feel no healing energy emanating from the hand or flowing into my body at all.

“I can’t feel anything,” Carson speaks, frustrated.

“Me neither,” says Val.

“Perhaps if we try again?” He doesn’t sound hopeful.

The hand squeezes my shoulder, gives it a little pat, then pulls away. With a leap, it’s back on the table, pointing to the tattoos on the arms of the siblings and shaking its forefinger at them disapprovingly.

I don’t speak very good hand, but Val and Carson have picked it up.

“It’s saying,” says Val, “that isn’t for use by hollow bones.”

It strokes its forefinger with its middle finger, shakes its forefinger.

“It’s not for healing either,” Carson notes. “I guess that makes sense as Nodens didn’t gain his healing powers until he got his silver hand.”

“Look,” says Val.

It is now making stabbing motions with its forefinger.

“It’s saying it’s a sword hand,” Val reads.

It makes a fist.

“For fighting,” she continues.

It then makes a grabbing motion.

“For catching.”

It jumps excitedly.

“I think it’s trying to say it’s for a fighter, for a catcher,” says Carson.

“I know,” it suddenly comes to me, “it’s for a catch wrestler.”

“Not one of those Summer Twins, I hope,” Carson growls.

It waggles a forefinger, backs up, makes a snaking motion.

“A green viper,” Val reads, “it’s meant for Daniel Green.”

Chapter Thirty Seven

Chesney

My chemotherapy begins. I sit like a dummy on a hospital bed as the nurse swabs my lower arm and inserts the cannula, then Dr Ahmad attaches the tube to the bag containing the cyclophosphamide and sets the dosage. As the infusion of toxic chemicals begins, I am aware of both the healthy and unhealthy cells in my bone marrow and my bloodstream screaming, dying.

I feel like my blood and bones are on fire. A wave of nausea washes over me, and I reach for the cardboard emesis basin and vomit profusely. As I'm retching and throwing up my breakfast, a sludge of half-digested Weetabix and milk mixed with orange juice and stomach acid, I feel like I'm divesting myself of the toxins in the land. The radionuclides released in the Windscale disaster - iodine 131, polonium 210, caesium 137, xenon 133. The nuclear waste stored at the Low Level Waste Depository in concrete bunkers at Drigg and the plutonium still stockpiled at Sellafield. The advanced fuel pellets being produced at Springfields. The fracking fluids that were injected in Blackpool and the polluted water. The heavy metals, sulphuric acid, and sulphates leaking from the coal mines. I am Creiddylad purging her ravaged body and crying out to her father for healing.

I walk from the Oncology Ward like the walking dead - a zombie amongst other zombies. All of us carrying our tales of pain, our tales of woe, our tales of healings that involve more wounding - needles in arms, incisions, lumps, tumours, deadly masses removed, skin stitched up again. I think of Nodens, the Fisher King, the wounded healer, blood leaking from the wound in his groin, and pray we and the wounded land will recover.

When I get home, my blood feels thin and my bones empty and hollow.

I spend my days watching the campaigns of Eco-Shift and the Traditionalists on social media and the accompanying rallies. The

eco-crowd, in rising numbers, in their colourful greens, blues and whites, led by Jinny Freesails, a weathered protester and hardened campaigner with a tough, wind-roughened face and green dreadlocks.

"We will ban the use of fossil fuels." "We will close down the nuclear power stations." "Scrap the nuclear submarines." "Halt the conflict in the Middle East." "Stop sending soldiers to the battlefronts against Russia." "Invest the money in green energy, in affordable housing, heating and benefit schemes for the poor." "Welcome immigrants."

The Traditionalists, with their union jacks, in white, red and blue suits, hit back. Tory Tucker, our Prime Minister, with his beefy red face, even redder than his red tie. A constant limp, caused, it's rumoured, by his chronic gout. His smarmy deputy, Morris Middleton. His spokesperson, Kieran Hanson, with his swaggering smile and social media hype. His son, Rimmer Tucker, and his bully boys, Max and Don, two suited rhinos.

"We will continue to assert our national values." "Rule Britannia." "We will blow up all jihadis and blast Iran from the face of the map." "We will win the war against Russia." "If they don't give in, send a nuclear bomb." "We will build nuclear power stations all the way along the West Coast." "New flood walls around Britain to keep the sea and the immigrants out."

I look out for notifications for livestreams on Max Pub from Hollow Bone. Carson has set up hidden cameras to stream impromptu performances at sites of resistance to gain publicity for the band and eco-crowd and win the favours of the dead and the powers within the land. They do one every couple of days at random times and places to avoid being set upon by the trads. '1842' at the site of the Lune Street riots before the memorial - concrete brutalist statues of a line of identical stone soldiers executing three helpless, cringing golems of men. Carson calls back the rebellious spirits of the cotton workers against the cotton lords.

They pulled the plugs.
They stopped the engines.
They broke the system.
Stopped the traffic on the streets.
Plugged the flow of fire and coal and cotton.
Paid the price in the count of bullets.
John Mercer, William Lancaster,
George Sowerbutts, Bernard McNamara
shot down and killed - they will be remembered.

‘Suffrage and Black Pudding’ outside Edith Rigby’s house on Winckley Square.

They marched for miles
for the women’s vote,
sat in hunger,
refused to be force-fed,
threw their black puddings
in the faces of politicians instead.
Pig’s blood, fat, suet, onion and spice,
that’s what Preston’s suffragettes are made of.
Edith Rigby, Grace Alderman, Beth Hesmondhalgh.
They won the vote - they will be remembered.

‘Fracked’ outside the Preston New Road fracking site where there had been protests in 2018 and 2019 and again when it had been reopened.

Fractured land. Fractured souls.
Lethal injections of deadly chemicals.
Poisoned water spilling from the holes
in our navels and new unholy wells.
Tankers stopped - three girls shot down.
Well maidens hydraulically fractured.
The upsurge of ghosts with the gases.

We're fracked. We're fracked. We're fracked.
We're a fucked-up fractured culture.
Julia Sullivan, Nell Roberts, Jess Flinn
halted the trucks - they will be remembered.

To my dismay, I see the band rise in likes and following not so much for their political stance or artistic talent but for Val's increasingly drunken performances as Seithenin - the most Disgraceful Drunkard in the Island of Britain.

They play a gig at the Flying Handbag in Blackpool to make a stand for LGBTQIA+ rights against the Traditionalist lashback. Carson and Val are interviewed on their experiences of being asexual and gay in difficult times. The band join Val dragging up; Carson and Johnny in dresses, Olivia in men's clothing, Midge reluctantly compromising by wearing a kilt.

Val shoves Carson, in his short black dress and stripy tights, off the stage. In 'The Most Disgraceful Drunkard' she calls out the notorious drinking habits of the Traditionalist Party.

I am the most disgraceful drunkard.
Even Morris Middleton can't outdrink me
with his nineteen pints of Stella a night
bawling at the football on his TV.

I am the most disgraceful drunkard.
Even Kieran Hanson can't outdrink me
with his flashy cocktails flowing like rain,
in the toilets sparkling lines of cocaine.

I am the most disgraceful drunkard.
Even Tory Tucker can't outdrink me
with his hundred gallons of red wine,
beefy face and gouty toe hot as spice.

Val swigs her pint and eyes her audience blurrily. “I Left Open the Floodgates.”

One drunken night I left open the floodgates.
What did I let in that night?

She calls the audience to give their responses.

“Immigrants.” “Gypos.” “Queers.”

She makes leaving the floodgates open a celebration of diversity.

“Now,” she drinks, belches, “I will open the Gates of Death.”

“No,” Carson returns to the stage, “that is my role.”

“It isn’t. I’m the Hollow Bone now.”

“No, you’re not. You’re nothing but a disgraceful drunk.”

They have a mock tussle, scrapping on the floor, Val pulling Carson’s pigtails, he kicking her with his stripy legs, finally, wig askew, he triumphs.

“For your disgraceful behaviour,” Carson berates her, “you’re out of the band.”

“Fine,” Val takes off her wig, “I don’t want to be Seithenin anymore.”

Still, the reputation sticks. A reporter from Blog Preston comes to our house wanting to interview me about what it’s like being the girlfriend of the most disgraceful drunk in the country whilst suffering from leukaemia. My mum refuses to let him in and she doesn’t let Val in to see me either.

Val’s soon back on the stage as an even more disgraceful drunkard, Vortigern, at the Ferret. Then, as the most disgraceful drunkard of all, Ceraint, on the bandstand on Avenham Park, singing of how, in her drunkenness, she set fire to all the crops and her people died of famine.

Like the Traditionalists
I sit and drink
whilst the world burns,

whilst the crops wither,
whilst the children starve.

Whilst I've been watching, I've noted, with growing consternation, the numbers of angry trads, including Rimmer Tucker and his bully boys who have come to help their father rustle up some additional support from the North.

"Get off the stage, you lousy drunk." Carson seizes the mic back.

Val refuses to leave. "Britain needs its drunken bards with the trads in power."

"This is Untraditional." As the band launch into their chaotic anti-trad song, with discordant guitars and disparaging vocals, "Fuck the blue ties, fuck the red ties, fuck the Union Jack, King Arthur and Britannia," the trads break through the barriers, push past the police, and swarm onto the stage.

"Eco-scum." "Doom-bringers." "Black witches." "Queers."

My heart's in my mouth as Rimmer goes for Carson, Carson goes for his knife, Rimmer for his. Max and Don attack Val at once. Olivia swings her guitar, shattering it on an attacker, uses the broken haft like the spear of one of her Native American warrior ancestors to fend off the bullies. Johnny, not a fighter at all, goes down, a gang on top punching him. Midge throws his drumsticks, hits a couple of trads in their faces, bolts.

Val's been pushed to the floor, hit her head, but has risen with a broken wooden plank. She smashes it over Don's head, and he falls. Wallops Max. Carson's slashed Rimmer's face and stabbed him in the side. Bleeding profusely from a cut on his upper arm, he's changing the blade in his pocket knife for something that looks like a cross between a corkscrew and a drill.

"Our Prime Minister's son!" The riot police rush through the crowd.

Before there is any more carnage, they make their way onto the stage. Carson manages to vanish his pocket knife before he's dragged off in handcuffs with Val, kicking, biting, screaming,

Olivia haughty. Poor Johnny isn't moving. Neither are a few of the trads. Ambulances screech up. Rimmer is first in, clutching his face, holding the wound in his side.

Val rings me a few hours later. "Did you see it? I've been fined for common assault, and Carson could be charged for grievous bodily harm. I've got five stitches in my head, and Carson's got seven in his arm. But you should see how much our likes and followings have gone up on Max Pub."

Chapter Thirty Eight

Chesney

"Your blood counts are looking positive," speaks Dr Ahmad on the phone.

"Does that mean I'm in remission?" I ask hopefully.

"For now, but we will need to keep a close eye on them."

I feel like Creiddylad leaving her father's house for the first time to dance with Gwythyr as I walk across Hill Road South and into Greencroft Valley, where the sun is shining on the low course of the brook.

I'm so glad the green is now a wildflower meadow because it's held the water better with the shelter of the wildflowers and long grasses. I walk through it, touching the flowers of purple loosestrife and knapweed, purplish stems of Yorkshire fog, fragile heads of red fescue.

Being alive is a wonderful thing, even though I've got to wear a wide white sunhat to protect my near-bare head and long cotton sleeves and keep my unzippable trouser legs on to cover up my sensitive skin. I'm like a newborn baby feeling the sun's rays for the first time, the itch of grass.

A couple of days later, I'm scampering like a newly released rabbit to Val's, unable to keep myself away in spite of her drinking and Mum's disapproval.

"I'm so glad to see you!" Val bursts.

The delight on her face as she opens her door almost makes up for her disgraceful behaviour. She looks as if she's just been bought a whole new set of Marvel Comic Books figures, far more colourful than in a comic.

"Let's see." She tries to pull off my sunhat.

"No." I'm ashamed. I don't want her to see my baldness. Just a few wisps of ginger fluff on my head and no idea how my hair will grow back.

“Please,” she begs, “nothing wrong with a bald woman. Think of Demi Moore in GI Jane, Charlize Theron in Mad Max, Elize Elson in Zombies Eight.”

“Hey,” I scold her, “you’d best not be making any walking dead jokes.”

“Sorry,” Val apologises, “I really missed you but knew you weren’t going to die.”

“How?” I demand as I see floral colours spinning in her eyes.

“Carson had another vision of you,” she admits.

“What has he seen now?” A shiver of premonition runs over me.

“You as Creiddylad in the coffin in our Funeral for the World march for the pre-election rally based on the Penwortham Fairy Funeral procession.”

“But that was a death portent.” I shudder.

“Doesn’t have to be - Carson thinks he can reverse the magic.”

She takes my hand and leads me upstairs to her bedroom. “I’ve already made the models.” With pride, she shows me her newly made figurines. Carson as the Fairy Leader in a tall black hat and black funeral garments. She and the band as fairies in black costumes and red hats. Me as Creiddylad, in a floral dress, in a perfectly made glass coffin. How uncannily lifelike they are, right down to the fine details of our faces.

“Carson’s foreseen that Daniel is going to be Nodens.”

A blue-skinned figurine in silver armour with the wrestler’s build.

“He’s planning to lead the procession from Fairy Lane to the Flag Market, taking in sites of resistance to rally both the living and the dead. The band are going to perform a set they hope will sway the vote for Eco-Shift.”

I’m only just better, and already I feel like my life’s being pulled out of control again, not only by Carson’s madness, but by forces bigger than me.

“How is Carson?” I ask. “I saw him fighting with Rimmer Tucker.”

“He lost quite a lot of blood and was weak for a few days.”

“Aside from that?”

“I,” she sighs, “I’m not sure. He’s so good at hiding things. Some days he’s fine, then others… he seems terrified, and I’ve never seen him afraid before.”

“Who of? Vance? Lorraine?”

“No, of what he’s seen in the future if his magic doesn’t work. Whenever he picks up his raven feather quill and writes in his bone ink in the Black Book, I perceive more of his life’s essence flowing into it.”

“Does that happen when you draw the illustrations?”

“Nah - I just treat them as drawings.”

“So that doesn’t explain why you’re drinking so much and behaving badly?”

“I’m afraid that’s just me. Although it does help with my worries. I’ve been having to keep on top of Carson’s eating again, telling him if he wants to stand onstage without fainting, he needs to keep his weight up.”

“That sounds tough.” I touch her hand consolingly.

“Feels like a lifelong battle, but at least I’ve got you to lean on now.” She squeezes my hand, kisses me, then our hands are travelling each other’s contours.

“You,” I notice, speak jokingly, “in contrast, are getting a beer belly.”

“No, I’m not,” she squeaks indignantly.

“Yes, you are.” I give it a tickle. “I like it.”

She giggles.

“Show me that tattoo.”

She pulls her top off. “I’m going to get more. The Hulk, Wolverine, Cyclops.”

“No, I’m not making love to you with them watching us.”

“I could create my own designs and some floral patterns for you. Or,” she grins, “paint your whole body with flowers so you look like Creiddylad.”

*

“Are you sure you want to go to Daniel Green?” Carson asks the Hand of Nodens.

It skips and taps an affirmative jig in his palm, and he pockets it.

As we set off to the Green Viper on a hazy summer night, I’m feeling nervous about how our plan is going to go, as the last time I spoke to Amina and her sisters, they’d reported that Daniel was going downhill again.

“It started when he showed up with a cut on his throat,” Fatima said.

“Like someone’d held a knife to it,” Aisha informed me.

“Soon afterwards, he’d had his thumbs broken.”

“Since then, he’s been showing up late again, and standards have slipped.”

A sense of dereliction surrounds the Green Viper. I notice the plastic V is hanging off, and the viper that refuses to be wrestled to the ground looks drab and faded and ready to retreat into its burrow, although it’s still summer.

Voices from within.

“You need to clean your act up.” Mark’s words.

“I’m doing my best,” Daniel replies, “you don’t understand the pressure.”

“I’ve been under intolerable amounts of pressure since taking this position. Trying to make this community safe. I thought I could rely on you.”

“I’m sorry, so sorry.”

The genuine sorrow in Daniel’s voice tugs at my heart.

Val barges her way in, and Carson and I follow, to the surprise of both men.

“Val Robinson,” Mark blinks in surprise, blinks again, twice, when he sees Carson. “Surely not, after all these years, Carson Robinson, is that you?”

“No,” says Carson, “I’m just a phantom on the screen.”

“And Chesney Liddel, you’d best all sign in.” He takes his seat behind the desk, and his face is smooth as the signing-in sheet and neutral as his tie.

We add our signatures, mine clear and neat, Val’s near illegible. Mark looks at Carson’s, curly and slightly blurry, once, twice, to check it’s still there.

“Are you here for the self-defence class or for the catch wrestling?”

“We’re just here to watch.” Carson’s dark, watchful eyes focus on Mark.

Mark’s face remains expressionless. “Pocket knife,” he speaks stiffly.

“I left it in my garage for sharpening after I blunted the blade on Rimmer Tucker’s square face, and I guess he’ll also be having plastic surgery.”

Mark almost manages to frown. “Pockets.”

Carson turns his pockets out.

“The hidden ones.”

Carson turns those out too.

“I heard you slipped from the grip of those Summer Twins.”

“I’ve got some moves you wrestlers could learn from.”

Mark’s blinky red eyes follow Carson carefully as we go to sit down.

The participants and audience begin to trickle in, and Amina and her sisters come to greet us, surprised and elated to finally be meeting Carson.

“I saw you onstage with that knife,” says Aisha, “can you teach me?”

“This is hardly the place.” Carson nods to Daniel approaching.

There’s a dark cloud surrounding him, blacker than last time I saw him. As if he’s surrounded by the woes of the underworld, the depths of the mines. I see the scar, pink and livid on his neck, his thumbs all bent out of shape.

“Line up.” Daniel speaks in a monotone to the small number of participants.

It's like someone has stolen not only his kill switch but his life switch. It's said Mel sucked the life out of men, but what's happened to him is worse.

In spite of his high profile, no one recognises or even sees Carson, sitting nondescript, hood up, unnoticed as the punch bag in the corner.

Val, on the other hand, they pick out. "Mum, isn't that that disgraceful drunk?"

"No, Rupert, the disgraceful drunk was a man."

"Looks like him, her, them, whoever."

"It is. She's a lesbian."

"Cross-dresses in men's clothes."

"That's her girlfriend with the bald head. A right pair of lezzers."

As the self-defence class commences, I observe how well Amina and her sisters have come on, then note their knowledge of the locks and holds as the junior and senior catch wrestling commences. "Sleeper hold." "Cross arm break-bar." "Look at that, Indian death-lock, got to try it on a trad." "Chicken wing, so simple, but so effective, he'll never escape from that."

Carson, hunched up in his hoodie, chin on his hand, closely observes the techniques as if he's a strategist watching commandos preparing for war.

"Daniel's missed a fishhook," observes Val.

"Ah-hem," coughs Mark.

Daniel catches it too late, and by that time, a boy's nose is cascading blood. Mark rushes on with his first aid kit and takes out a big wad of cotton wool to staunch the flow. It quickly turns red. He takes out another one.

"Dismissed," Mark says to the participants and audience.

Uncomfortable rumbles. "Danger." "Incompetence." "Not coming back."

After three wads, the boy's nose stops bleeding, and Mark apologises profusely and fills out a page in the accident report

book and assures his parents it will be reported to RIDDOR should there be any long-lasting effects.

"What are you still doing here?" Mark asks us. "I said dismissed."

"We're going to be marching at the rally with Stand Up to Racism," says Fatima, "need to talk to Daniel about extra precautions."

"Particularly after having a run-in with the rhinos on Avenham," speaks Aisha.

Mark does not look like he will bend until he receives a text on his phone. "I've got to go," he tells Daniel, "make sure you lock up and set the alarm."

"I know the protocol." Daniel looks wounded and offended.

"And," Mark glances at Carson with eyes momentarily not blinky, "don't trust the Robinson lad any further than you can throw Sunny Summer."

"Huh?" Daniel finally sees Carson, spooks, tenses in shock.

As Mark departs from the building, taking the comforting scent of his cologne that smells vaguely like TCP and his first aider's smile with him,

Fatima and Aisha soothe Daniel by asking about additional defensive moves.

Once they're done, "It's time we talked," speaks Carson.

"I'd rather not," Daniel replies, "I've heard about your serpent's tongue."

"From that leech, Mel? She was one to talk about tongues considering she had hers down the throat of almost every man from here to Winter Hill."

Daniel's gaze turns dark. Coal black. He clenches his fists. "How can you talk about her like that after your Dad corrupted her? You killed her?"

"She sucked the life from him as she did from you and I didn't…"

"Liar!" Daniel bawls in rage and goes to grab Carson in a headlock.

Carson's suddenly behind his chair with his pocket knife in his hand, a silver warning flash that sends the rest of us darting swiftly to the sides of the room.

Daniel tries to grasp Carson, again, again, fails, knocking over plastic chairs, plummeting into the ring, near strangling himself on a green cord.

"Problem with your catching hand?" Carson asks more sympathetically than mockingly.

"I," he speaks hesitantly, "broke my thumb."

"I've known Lorraine and Vance's torments too." Carson lowers his knife.

"But you and Lorraine seem cosy and you're signed up to Vance."

"At a hidden cost - they made me eat my father's heart."

Carson's words silence the gym, striking the barbells and dumbbells dumber.

The Iqbal sisters gasp, and Amina clamps her hand over her mouth.

Daniel gags, doesn't want to believe Carson, but does.

"In pieces."

"I saw it on the screen and heard your song about how the Ribble takes a life. I assumed you killed Mel because she killed your father."

"I didn't kill Mel," Carson tells Daniel in a voice with a cutting clarity that could banish the cyanobacteria and bloated bodies from the docks.

"Show him," says Val to the Iqbal sisters.

"Mark was having an affair with Mel," Fatima reveals.

"I'm sick of hearing this." Daniel shakes his head disbelievingly.

"Look." Fatima takes out her phone and shows Daniel a photograph of Mark and Mel sitting very close, her hip pressed to his, her hand on his thigh. Then, another of them, smiling, chinking their glasses, over a meal.

"However did you come by these?" Daniel demands dubiously.

“We managed to look at Mark’s phone,” Fatima says, “when he left it open next to the mats when someone collapsed doing too many ground-to-overheads.”

“Look at them in the Ribble Pilot on the docks.” Aisha shows him.

“No.” Daniel still refuses to believe it. “Mark’s my friend and not a killer. He’s a good man and as clean as the inside of his first aid cabinet. Perhaps he was trying to trace her misdeeds and free me from her grip. Unless you have evidence that it was he who wrestled her into the water…”

“Much more likely than me wrestling with her,” Carson notes acidly. “We have no proof as yet, and I’d ask her ghost if she had not fled out to sea.”

Daniel looks like a man drowning with her beneath tidal waves.

“I can see the Winters are trying to pull you down,” Carson observes.

“When you should be springing back up like a viper,” Fatima speaks fiercely.

“It was Lorraine,” Carson tells Daniel, “who killed my father, not Mel.
Together, we could fight against her and Vance if you joined me in magic.” He pulls up his sleeve and displays his still shimmery hollow bone tattoo.

“I heard the rumours you made a deal with a dark god. Not for me.”

“Gwyn is the son of Nudd, or Nodens, ‘the Catcher’. With his strong right hand, his catching hand, he upheld right rule and true justice.”

Daniel looks intrigued, glances at his own right hand, looks up again.

“And,” Carson continues, “he was known as the Lord of the Mines.”

“A god of miners?” Daniel is more curious. “So what’s the deal?”

Carson reaches into his pocket and takes out the Hand of Nodens.

When he sees the skeletal hand, Daniel almost bolts from the building.

“There’s no need to fear it - it’s friendly.” Carson puts it on his palm and the hand bobs, bows, waves a finger and performs an enchanting dance. “See? It wants to be yours, bone to flesh, like the ulna and radius of Nodens.”

“How do we…?”

“Just a handshake and an agreement to become the Hand of Nodens.”

“Alright.”

As Daniel shakes, speaks his vow, the hand vanishes and by the tattooing of invisible silver needles the skeletal fingers and hand bones appear on his skin, particularly striking over its rawness, its weight.

“My wonky knuckles, my broken thumb, it’s fixed them.” He stares in awe.

“The perfect catching hand for a catch wrestler,” beams Fatima.

Daniel flexes his new strong right hand. “Now for a chance to use it.”

“You’ll have the perfect opportunity at the rally,” smiles Carson.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Lorraine

"That band is getting out of hand," says Dad to Vance.

He's called his pet magician and me, his faithful assistant, to the table for an ad hoc business meeting after watching the latest Hollow Bone livestream.

I'm not in their good books, I'm not, not after losing the Hand of Nodens. I thought Vance was going to have my hand, or at least one of my fingers or some of my fingernails, but Dad told him I need to be kept in working order, undisfigured, so I can work my charms and win it back.

The band's last gig, at the Adelphi, was atrocious. They'd started with a song called 'Rimmer Tucker's Face' about how he'd concealed his scar with plastic surgery, then used it as a launchpad for a set called 'The Wounds that Can't Be Concealed'. Johnny, still looking battered, with blood pouring from a wound in his groin, as Nodens, the Fisher King. Olivia, as one of her Native American ancestors struck down in the Battle of Wounded Knee. The last, a song about the Holocaust and its denial, with Carson performing another of his notorious death scenes, with smoke from the smoke machine to mimic the gas chambers, in drag, as Edith Stein. "Come, we are going for our people." Silenced the audience, that did.

"Do you not want to see how close to the edge they can go before they fall?" Vance asks, a voyeuristic fervour in his eyes, a twisted smile on his lips.

"It depends on whether their edge-walking and fall brings us any profits. Their last few sets have alienated their more conventional followers."

Vance looks vexed. "I see your point." Reluctantly, he concedes.

"What do you make," Dad presses, "of Carson's gigs at sites of resistance?"

"It's a spell, no doubt," Vance speaks with certitude, "which he aims to complete with the Funeral for the World set to sway the vote towards Eco-Shift."

"You're aware of this, but allowing him to proceed with it?"

"He's playing into our hands, providing material for our White Book, which we can ultimately use against him when it comes to the determining moment."

"You have a plan?"

"Yes, but for now, it remains in the air, yet to be grasped, written down."

"And, meanwhile, you are going to let the band continue to run riot with their disgraceful drunkenness, cross-dressing, smashing and slicing up trads?"

"Very well," Vance decides, struck by some dark thought, "it wouldn't do any harm to give them a reprimand; it's time they visited my office."

"For now, they had better be leaving in one piece or at least with most pieces."

I know what happens in his office, worse, in his basement below.

"You as well," he says to me, "it's time you learnt your way around."

*

Oblivion is on Grimshaw Street, off Church Street, in Preston. It's part of a row of former mill houses for Grimshaw Street Mills, which were knocked through and joined together. It was a gay club until it closed in 2019. It used to attract all kinds of queers and weirdos, and Vance re-opened it as a honey pot to draw in the alternative communities so he could keep an eye on them and profit from buying and selling back their bands. The word 'Oblivion' forms an arch, in black and silver letters, over the main doors.

How many people have gone to oblivion and never come back? I walk in with Vance and turn right, into the Oblivion Records office. There, I am very annoyed to see that Vance has another assistant. Sitting at the desk, a young man in his early twenties, with short black, sleek, shiny hair and black thin-rimmed glasses, dressed in a black suit identical to the one that Vance wears with the black cross embroidered on it. He has two laptops in front of him. One of them is open on a spreadsheet. On the other, he has several windows open on social media channels.

"Good afternoon, Christian," Vance greets him.

As he looks up from where he's typing, I notice that he has very clean, well-filed nails, but is missing one from his left hand along with his pinky finger.

"A good afternoon it is," Christian speaks in a self-satisfied voice, "Annihilator have gone up by 151 likes on Max Pub and Veritas by 301. Unfortunately," a small frown crinkles his almost flawless forehead, "Hollow Bone have barely had a single like since that abominable gig at the Adelphi."

"That is why we are here today," speaks Vance. "I suppose you know who this is?"

"Lorraine Winter," Christian identifies me correctly, "what's she doing here?"

"She's my new assistant," Vance informs him.

"I thought I was your assistant." Christian glares at me.

"It's always useful to have a spare," Vance speaks callously.

And who exactly is the spare? I look at Christian competitively.

"Go and prepare the basement for Hollow Bone," Vance instructs his protégé.

"Do you want the usual band layout?"

"Yes," Vance replies, "also some music - binaural beats 4 - 7 hz."

As Christian exits through the door in the back of the office and I hear his footsteps on a metal staircase, Vance asks me, "Know how to alter your states of consciousness, girl, from

gamma, hyper-focused, through beta, everyday mind, to alpha, meditative state, down to theta, near dream-like?"

"I know a line of speed takes me up and a line of ket takes me down."

Vance sighs. "Then you might want to have a dab of speed because I'm going to be playing some background music composed of hypnotic theta waves that will help me get out of the band's plans for the rally."

As he speaks, from beneath, I hear the screeching and rolling of equipment being dragged out of the office and the snap of tables being put up. Slightly more reassuring than tables out and gristly machines wheeled in. Then, the sound of nails being pulled out, new ones hammered in.

"I don't need any speed," I judge, "I'm hyped enough already."

Voices from outside. The band are here.

"All done." Christian comes up and smiles smugly.

At Vance or me? Annoying little toff he is. We'll see who gets to be assistant.

Carson walks in with Johnny, Olivia, and Midge behind him. Talk about tense. You know those metal wires in security fencing that have to be tensioned and pulled tighter on a wheel, so they're completely taut? That's what he looks like. The ones that sing and thrum in the wind. Johnny, still fragile from his beating, looks scared out of his skin. Olivia is haughty but with a tremor in her strong jaw. Midge is entirely oblivious.

"My hollow bones," Vance speaks measuredly, "I assume you know why you're here?"

"For our royalties, I hope," says Midge.

"You'll not be seeing much of those following your recent behaviour."

"You owe me £560. I've been keeping tabs," Midge argues.

"You can't count," Vance derides him. Looking towards the door, "There's someone missing, that drunkard who has disgraced you all."

“Val’s just a casual backing singer,” says Carson, “won’t be signing up.”

Look at him, protecting her, like her guardian angel, or, should I say, devil.

“A shame,” says Vance, “it’s only due to her you neared your target in likes. But now, you are sadly on your way back down into oblivion. To where we will be going to discuss how to remedy your recalcitrance.” Provocatively, “I assume you’ve heard all about my basement?”

A collective shiver runs through them like a breeze through mist.

“Christian, lead the way,” Vance orders.

Ooh, I’m jealous of him getting to look back at them all smug and smarmy, like one of those swineherds of the Island of Britain leading his pigs.

Carson, so nervous he’s on his tiptoes, warns about “tricks, visual, auditory.”

It will be interesting to see how the band handles this with their musical know-how.

Ominous, tinny, the metal staircase spiralling down into oblivion. By the Devil and all his demons, it’s like the descent to Hell going down into that room with its black walls and the stench of the blood that’s been shed there. Yes, it’s been cleaned up, but the miasma lingers on, like on Lady Macbeth’s hands, like in my Tupperware box, still secreted in my wardrobe.

It’s lit by white globe-lights, flickering at a frequency to confuse and disarm. It’s almost empty except for the fold-up tables with room for four on one side and, to my consternation, the magician and two assistants behind.

Smarmily, Christian takes the seat to the right of where Vance will sit.

Displayed behind the table, nailed up especially for the band to look upon, are images of other bands. Paradigm Shift gigging, posing, smiling in the first couple, then looking sombre and dark, then an image of Turner’s body. Dead from an overdose. The lines

on his arms standing out as if pencilled. Liminal, at first happy, then the awful scenes of Passington's breakdowns onstage. A final photograph of him in a gown, in a mental hospital, staring blank as someone who has been lobotomised at the wall.

"Turner." "Passington." "He must have been there at their ends." The band murmur uneasily as they take their seats and Vance and I take ours.

From this side, the globe-lights seem less flickery, unlike for the band.

"Have you any apologies for your misdemeanours?" Vance asks.

"I'm proud of everything we've done." Olivia folds her arms.

"We've played across Central Lancashire," says Johnny.

"Live-streamed three albums' worth of music," Midge notes.

"And," Carson eyes Vance cuttingly, "the Black Book of Peneverdant is near full."

The lights flicker dangerously, making the band flinch and squidge their eyes. "Hubris. You've barely started out. No sense of reality. Have you nothing to say about your atrocious drunkenness or cross-dressing? Your brawling with the trads as if you're still the dregs of the Kingsfold Estate?"

They remain silent. When another flash of the lights doesn't work, "No fear? Then, perhaps, you will tell me how you will make up for your misdeeds, all about your plans for Funeral for the World."

I note the music, very soft, hypnotic. Yes, I recognise its subtle effect, very slightly like ket or the aftermath of being on a pill, to put you into trance.

Carson's nudging Johnny. "What's the frequency?"

"4 - 7 hz."

"Theta," says Carson. He kicks Olivia, who's already looking stary.

Midge, put him in front of Chevreul's pendulum, he'd feel no effect.

“It’s going to be based on the Legend of Penwortham Fairy Funeral,” says Carson.

“Fairies?” Vance stares wide-eyed in disbelief and dismay, “I said…”

“Don’t worry,” says Carson, “we won’t be putting our pigtails and glitter-dust on again. We’re going to be the true fae, the spirits of Annwn. The ones who shift between the worlds, snatching away the dead and the living.”

Is that fear on Vance’s face as he mentions the spirits of Gwyn ap Nudd?

“You are going to impersonate the spirits of the Otherworld at the rally?”

“More, we, Hollow Bone, are going to channel them and the dead.”

For a moment, Vance looks as if he’s going to explode like a stage magician in a grand pyrotechnic display, leaving nothing but dark dust and bone. Yet, “A tall claim for a small boy,” he regains his composure. “Tell me, what route are you and your unworldly procession going to be taking?”

“We’ll be starting at Castle Hill,” says Olivia, “then onto Fairy Lane.”

“Up the A59 and onto Fishergate,” speaks Johnny.

“Finishing on the flag market,” ends Midge.

“Not going anywhere in between?” as Vance speaks, the music loudens.

It washes over me like the waves of the sea and like a sea wall, I do my best to resist.

“Perhaps to visit the site of the L…” Olivia begins.

Carson kicks her. “We may make a few weather-dependent diversions.”

“You want to tell me a little more about those?” The music loudens.

By God and all his angels, that’s a sound you wouldn’t hear in the choirs of Heaven or with the Devil and his demons in Hell,

more like something from the fabled dreamland of Nodens, the land of Nod that is, I'm near nodding.

"I can see someone drifting away," Christian's mocking voice brings me back.

"We might… take in a couple of graveyards… ouch!" Johnny.

"So you're going to be calling up the restless dead?" Vance demands.

"So what if we are?" asks Carson, "it'll make good publicity."

"You think if the living campaigners fail, the dead will tip the vote for Eco-Shift?"

By the flash in Carson's eyes that has nothing to do with the lights, I see that Vance has succeeded in hitting on the plan they have been trying to conceal.

"Dismissed," Vance says to the band.

They all stand.

"Except for you," says Vance to Carson. Tapping his fingers on the desk, reminiscent of the skeletal hand, "I've got one more question for you."

I expect Carson to look more afraid after what happened to him last time, but instead, he looks perfectly calm, as if he expected this, sits back down.

"Will you…" Olivia looks concerned.

"I know their magician's games and have some tricks of my own."

Vance's eyes remain very narrow on Carson as the others depart up the stairs. Tap of feet on metal, like demons spiralling up from the depths of Hell.

What has he got? I tense. Some new contraption on his pocket knife?

Once they're gone, Carson gestures to a little red flickering light on his watch. "If you should dare to touch me and, believe me, I don't like being touched, should anything happen that sends my pulse over 160 bpm, there's an explosive device that will blow me, you, your office to smithereens."

Vance scowls, thwarted, “Who’s the little jihadi? What do you take me for?”

“I can smell what goes on here and when Eco-Shift get in, you’ll go down.”

“That’s hardly the way to speak to the manager of your record label.”

“You don’t own me. You just make money from me.”

“Well, now we know where we stand with each other, answer me one thing.”

Glancing at Vance’s hand, still tapping, “I don’t have the Hand of Nodens.” Carson stands, turns out all the pockets in his hoody and jeans, those that are visible from plain view and most of the concealed ones.

“He’s got more pockets than a magician has in his cloak,” remarks Christian.

“He’d make a better assistant than the pair of you put together,” Vance asserts.

God, I’m angry at how Vance is treating me, near to siding with Carson.

“If it isn’t in your pocket,” Vance taps his fingers tetchily, “where is it?”

“It’s got a new owner,” Carson pulls up his sleeve, rubs his tattoo.

“You mean to say you’ve created another hollow bone?”

“Somewhere, out there, is the Hand of Nodens, a warrior for justice.”

“I can’t believe it!” I cannot prevent myself from crying out. “The hand. My hand. The hand I went to such great lengths to win from Selina, to find out the story, the hand that I nearly delivered to you, you’ve given it away? That hand could have won me the Battle of Summer and Winter!”

“Good job it’s on the right hand,” Carson speaks mirthlessly.

He gets up, turns, spirals with demon feet back up from oblivion.

Chapter Forty

Chesney

"Toll, toll, toll, toll, toll." The sound of the passing bell from Castle Hill can be heard all the way to Kingsfold. It's so loud I conjecture that it might be audible across Lancashire, up on Winter Hill, out to Blackpool Tower.

Its call is irresistible. Val and I leave her house, where she has helped me put my costume on— a dress woven from stitched flowers. I have no idea how long it took her to make it, every bloom, every blossom perfect in its symmetry. All the leaves. The floral wreath on my head and garland for my neck. A wig of thick, wavy ginger hair adorned with tender white flowers. Hawthorn, Mayflower, starwort, stitchwort, wood anemone, all true to life.

I don't want to get dirty but know Creiddylad loves mud on her skirts and dirt between her toes. We go through the estate, then along the pilgrim's path; the path that was also the corpse road, the path of a dying goddess.

I'm not going to die, I'm not. Today we're both going to be saved.

Val is dressed in black with a red beanie as one of the fairies. Beneath it, her hair dyed black, a red streak in her fringe. She looks mischievous.

And, around us, also hearing the call, other costumed denizens drawn out. Goblins, fairies, sprites and imps, pixies and pucks, wraiths in spectral sheets, demons and ghosts, dark figures in hoods and capes— the crowds of Annwn.

It's a hot and sultry mid-August day but there is a cool grey mist swirling around the bottom of Castle Hill where St Mary's Well used to be.

"Is that Carson's doing?" I ask Val.

Val grins, "I told you he could do magic."

We ascend the stairs where the vegetation is just going over. When we reach the top, on the A59, the cars have their fog lights

on, the mist is so thick. We cross carefully and walk down Fairy Lane. On the mist-steeped path, I'm sure I see real goblin faces, tree people, nymphs, staring out at me.

Going up the back way, standing on top of Castle Hill, I see Carson. Small in size but infinitely grand in stature, wrapped in mist, in his tall black hat, face painted half black, half white, in black funeral garments. In his hand a blue-silver bell, a magical bell that could only be from the Otherworld. And its sound! It's like a choir of a hundred angels battling an orchestra of a hundred demons and both triumphing and losing and dying. Or a horde of the mournful dead shedding every tear they failed to cry in life.

"Toll, toll, toll." "Here ye, here ye, here ye," cries Carson like a town crier for a town that has cried its last and is doomed to be lost to the mist, "here comes our dying goddess, Creiddylad, soon to be dead and in her coffin."

"Creiddylad," "Creiddylad." Goblin hands reach out to touch me. "Green goddess." "Land goddess." Bows to worship me. "Soon to be dead." "Dead and in her coffin." Grotesque heads, ghoulish backs bow in misery.

At the bottom of the hill my coffin awaits. Made of glass. No expense spared. Behind it stands Daniel, dressed as Nodens. Earlier, I went with Val to watch as she painted his skin blue, dressed him in a silver wig and beard and plates of silver armour fashioned from cardboard and spray-painted, stood him on wooden platforms. At his belt is a silver sword, shining brighter than the mist, the original Sword of Nodens.

Olivia and Johnny, with Jill, Jen and Brian from Pandemonium, next door in the mill, dressed in black with red caps, form my cortege with Val.

"Are you ready?" Val asks me.

For Creiddylad, for the land, so Eco-Shift win. "Yes."

I allow Val to help me in, to lie me down on the thin mattress. She kisses my lips. Warm, sultry summer lips pressing strawberry-flavoured through the mist. It reminds me of Gwythyr and Creiddylad's last kiss. Val lowers the lid.

"Creiddylad is dead and in her coffin." "Creiddylad is dead!"

Lorraine

I can't believe I have to walk in this doomy procession not only with Vance but his other assistant, that po-faced sycophantic tosser, Christian.
All three of us are dressed in black hooded cloaks to disguise us. If it weren't for Carson and his mist, I'd be roasting like one of my chickens.

I've got to give it to him; he's got style, he's got magic. So far, I've barely seen Vance do a thing that isn't a trick of the light or some torturous machine. That bell, that's a thing the Devil and his demons have stolen from the choirs of Heaven and hung in their belfries for all the imps to swing on. The sound of it could make the Devil himself cry a river long and red.

Remember, stay alert, don't fall for his wiles, like the goblin crowd around him. Like Sleeping Beauty in her coffin and that big blue buffoon. I've no idea who's in that Nodens costume, but he looks ridiculous. No way am I going to let Christian see me taken in by Carson. I've got to be a good Winter and play my role in helping Dad's magician win. We've got to triumph in this election, we trads, red, blue, and white, united in hate.

I think of the Winter Crew and the Summer Crew marching, like the white and red dragons, in their processions, spiralling in to meet in the middle. Only at elections do we work together to beat the eco-crowd. I should be with them, with their bugles, pipes, and drums, bashing the heads of any immigrants, any freaks, any weirdos who get in our way. Pulling the hijabs off the Muslim women and the hats off the heads of the Amish men.

I'd have his hat, if I could, Carson's, pull the rabbits out of it. Trample it on the road, a stamp for every time he's caused me misery, or throw it into one of those big sinkholes that keep opening to be eaten by the Hounds of Hell.

"Stay alert," Vance reprimands me.

“I can tell you’re daydreaming about Carson’s hat,” Christian mocks.

“Watch where we’re going,” Vance commands.

We joined the procession at the bottom of Fishergate and I’ve been catching glimpses of the shops through the mist as we head up into town.

Brucciani’s, Greggs, people spilling their mochas, dropping pasties as we pass.

“We’re turning right,” I notice, not quite sure where we are.

“Onto Winckley Square,” Christian identifies the turnoff, getting one up on me.

“Carson is not going straight to the Flag Market,” I point out.

“No shit,” derides Christian.

Carson’s stopping. I squint through the mist.

“Here ye, here ye, here ye. A sad day is upon us. Creiddylad is dead and in her coffin. Who will pray for her? Who will awaken her? Hearken to my call.”

“It’s Winckley Square 28,” Christian identifies the house.

I wish it rang a bell but it doesn’t - the only bell I can hear is Carson’s.

“Toll, toll, toll.”

Edith Rigby, pray for her.
Grace Alderman, pray for her.
Beth Hesmondhalgh, pray for her.

“He’s copying our Litany of the Saints,” Christian speaks, appalled.

But that’s not quite as appalling as the fact he’s raising the spirits of the dead. Outside the tall, three-storey brick house, with its iron railing and its blue plaque, just visible as the mist ebbs and flows, amidst the ether appears Edith Rigby with her short blonde hair and mischievous smile, downing her black pudding to press her hands in prayer with two other suffragettes.

“Look.” I point.

"Like I've not seen a ghost before." Still, Christian looks edgy.

Vance even more so as Edith, Grace, and Beth join the spectral procession.

"Winckley Square 7." I get one up on Christian. "Francis Thompson." How dare he think about raising the ghost of a good Catholic, even if he was a poet?

Francis Thompson, pray for her.

Francis appears, a melancholy man with a drooping moustache and a beard. He puts down his book, 'The Hound of Heaven', prays, then follows.

Now, where are we going? Off Winckley Square, across the road. I might have guessed, Carson's favourite place where the mist wreaths around those ugly golems of men facing the straight, hard guns of the anonymous firing squad.

"Lune Street Riots 1842." I'm beating Christian two to one now.

John Mercer, pray for her.
William Lancaster, pray for her.
George Sowerbutts, pray for her.
Bernard McNamara, pray for her.

The ghosts of the dead cotton-workers rise, still nursing their gunshot wounds. Their awe at the procession, at Creiddylad in her coffin, erases their pain, and they sink to their knees in prayer, then get up to join the march.

As we go onto Friargate, I notice a group of monks in grey robes joining the procession, trailing them a huge black dog that has no head.

"I hope you've both clocked that," says Vance.

"Headless hound," Christian identifies it.

"The Black Dog of Preston." My identification is more specific.

What in God's name is Carson doing going to Saint Mary's Carpark where my favourite Saint Mary and Child look over the concrete parking spaces?

All the dead who remain, without their graves, pray for her.

Damn him, he's calling up the restless dead whose bodies were removed when Saint Mary's Church was demolished and haven't moved on.

"Sacrilege," Christian hisses.

"What, you Jesuits building a car park on it?" I taunt him. I know he's one of them by his favourite book by Saint Ignatius, 'The Spiritual Exercises'.

"You know what I mean."

Yes, Carson with the dead around him like he's the Pale Rider of the Apocalypse. Lord Death himself. Courting them. Like he's Gwyn ap Nudd.

And he's going up to Saint Peter's graveyard where the graves have been removed, back on himself to Saint Wilfrid's, then to Saint John's on Church Street. Windy way. Like the ways corpses should be taken, feet first, on labyrinthine routes, so the ghosts can't find their ways back to their homes. But he isn't trying to lose the dead, he's trying to shake off some other spectre.

He's stopping at the site of the Jacobite Rebellion in 1715. Don't say…

"Our good Jacobite martyrs!" Christian cries in outrage.

Richard Shuttleworth, pray for her.
Thomas Cowpe, pray for her.
Roger Muncaster, pray for her.
William Butler, pray for her.
William Arkwright, pray for her.

They appear, rubbing their necks, the marks of the nooses still upon them. A raven flies overhead, "Cronk, cronk, cronk." Nasty black gallows-haunter.

"A raven," Christian points out, "an evil portent."

I've really got a chance to get one up on him now. "That's not just any raven. It's the soul of Sebastian Robinson in raven form, one of Carson's ancestors who got hung in the time of King James. He'll have your eyes, he will."

Christian blanches as the raven swoops by with black, glinty pupils.

At last, Carson's heading for the Flag Market, surrounded by his sea of mist, his gremlins, his ghosts, parting his way through the eco-crowd on the left. There are dreadlocks, greens and browns. People dressed as trees. Colourful banners. Friends of the Earth, Guardians of Nature, CND. Then, with them, I see in disgust, Stand Up to Racism. A Polish bunch. Muslim women and girls in full-on black burkas looking like walking pillar boxes. Blacks who should be put back on slave ships and sent to work the cotton fields. Jews in their kippahs. Two Amish men. Hindus with bindis. There are white people intermingled in support with 'All Together' placards.

"Creiddylad is dead and in her coffin." "Creiddylad is dead!"

"Creiddylad is dead!" "Creiddylad is dead!" They are weeping real tears.

Even the general public, looking on, those who should be shopping, contributing to our economy, are stopped and moved and put down their bags.

"Why are you letting him get away with it?" Christian demands of Vance.

"The further he goes, the higher he rises, the harder he will fall," Vance speaks harshly, with steel and stone in his eyes, staring at his hated enemy.

Carson gets a leg-up from Val onto the top of the lych gate where he sits like a dark gargoyle. "Cronk, cronk, cronk." The raven alights on his shoulder. Chesney, as Creiddylad, in her

coffin, is carried in through the entrance which reads, ‘Lord, preserve thy going in’. The blue giant guards her.

Then, to the right of the Flag Market, separated by a line of barricades and police, the trads marching in, the white and red dragons joining in hate.

Chapter Forty One

Chesney

I'm still playing dead. Safe beneath the lych gate. What a strange journey. I feel dizzy, disorientated, like a corpse taken from her home, not allowed back.

The speeches are beginning. Eco-Shift first. Laying out their policies for renewable energy, ending the wars, taxing the rich, giving the money to the poor.

My stomach butterflies as I realise it's nearly time for my speech.

"I raise the dead goddess up to speak!" Carson shouts.

I sense that he is standing on the lych gate and in my mind's eye see him pulling back his sleeve, showing the hollow bone, raising his hand to the sky.

"No, you don't," Val objects, "I wake her with a kiss."

I hear the coffin opening, feel her warm lips on mine, open my eyes. As she helps me out of the coffin and onto the stage, I still feel woozy. I am aware of Daniel, close at my side, protecting and fatherly as Nodens himself.

Turning to face the crowd, I see my people, a sea of earthen colours to my right and the trads, an ocean of blue, white, and red to my left. The ghosts in the mist amongst them. Greyfriars and a headless black dog. Edith Rigby having a chat with the New Suffragettes and the cotton workers gathered round the Hot Potato Tram getting cartons of black peas. Everything is swaying and sickly as if I have disembarked from a long ship ride. As if I'm the land goddess brought back from the Otherworld.

"I'm dead." I point my finger at the audience. "You killed me."

The words, pent up within for so long, spill out like vomit. There is no emetic bowl in Preston, in Lancashire, the North West, the Island of Britain, in the whole world, walking dead like me, that can hold them.

"You dug out my insides with your mining— plundered my body for your coal, your iron, your tin, your silver, and your gold. Your streets are paved with stone from my hills, your houses with bricks from my brick-crofts, and roofed with slate from my quarries, but never once did you give thanks. Instead, you drill, drill, drill, for more gas, you frack me until I'm inside out.

You pour your poisons into the seas and kill my fish. You smother them with plastics. You have killed all my animals. Not just the big ones like the woolly mammoth, the bear, the aurochs, the lynx, the elk. The little things who I especially love— the large copper and large tortoiseshell butterflies, the Norfolk damselfly and the orange-spotted emerald dragonfly, the mining bees, the apple bumblebee, the horned dung beetle.

You hate and kill each other for no other reason than divisions between countries that do not belong to you, but to me, and religions that should be united by care for the world rather than divided by arguments about gods. You berate others who don't have skin the colour of yours when you should be a tapestry of browns, whites, blacks, yellows, reds with my green.

Oh my children, you have killed me, would you see me rise from death?"

"Yes!" "Yes!" cry the Eco-Crowd. "We love you. Want you to live!"

"Then pray for me. Pray that I will live. Pray that I will awake!"

"Pray for her." Carson's commanding voice. "Pray that Eco-Shift will win!"

I feel dizzy from the effort, the sight of the crowd, the eco-colours, the mist on the left, the trads in whites, reds and blues booing on the right.

A hand on my shoulder, strong and comforting, as Daniel guides me off stage.

Lorraine

Look at her, posing as a dead goddess, lousy eco-warrior that she is, with her eco-clap trap, banging on about dying insects. Plenty of them about on a hot August day. The cleggs are getting worse. One nearly bit my face. And the wasps, drawn out by the sweets, the candy-floss, the ice creams. A nasty one got it in for Christian when he got his jam butties out for lunch. A hoot to see him doing the wasp dance; swirling round, dodging, ducking, diving.

Got a few around him, up there, Carson, a dark buzzing swarm of them, like the Lord of the Flies, he is. Only they're not biting him. Confound him, he's talking to them, sending the darned cleggs as his minions to the trads.

"Ouch." Slap. "Ouch." Slap. It's a common sound today. A common sight: the red splash of a dead horsefly filled with more of your blood than its own. There's one tormenting Tory Tucker as he's giving his usual hate-filled speech.

My dad's wise to them; he's spraying himself with extra-strong DEET before he gets up and takes his role as guest speaker with the White Book of Winter and the Summer Twins opposite with the Red Book of Summer.

"Vote Traditionalist," speaks Dad, "and this Winter you will see the whitest Christmas there has ever been with all the immigrants, the blacks, the browns, the chinks deported from our shores and all our local jobs back."

"Who's going to do all the hard work then?" A voice from the left.

"Vote Traditionalist," the twins speak together, "and next Summer once we've got the mines re-opened, the fracking rigs up, once we're burning fossil fuels again, our economy will light up and we'll feast on golden apples."

"There will be no feast if we don't care for the trees." Another leftie.

As the Winters and Summers read, I see that Carson has got out his black book, is writing in it with his raven feather quill in black bone ink.

Cheers from the trads as the speeches end, but not as loud as the boos.

"We're losing," I note to Vance.

Carson is looping a letter, closing his book, looking very satisfied.

"Yes," Christian presses, swatting at a horsefly, "what is your plan?"

Vance casts Carson an ominous look that outdoes his impression of Beelzebub. "Don't say you neglected your scrying practices this morning?"

Vance has had Christian and I looking into scrying bowls, seeing who can best predict the events of each day, and so far the wretched little fart is winning.

"I saw," says Christian, "a fairy carrying a basket."

"I saw Val Robinson with a basket," I admit, although I'm not sure how this relates to Carson's downfall, particularly when she does not have a basket.

"Very good," says Vance, "one point to you, Christian, and two to Lorraine."

Oh, it's hard not to be childish, to thumb my nose, to cock a snook at him.

"Here she comes," Vance points.

So she does, just like in my bowl, Val in her fairy outfit, a basket under her arm. She must have got it out of the Hollow Bone van, parked beside the stage, which the band are taking their equipment out of to get ready. Looks like the witch out of Snow White with her basket of apples, she does. Only, it's not apples she's selling, something green, things black and red.

"£10 a Fairy Leader," she hawks her wares, "£5 for a fairy and six fairies for the price of five - get yourself a whole cortege of funeral bearers whilst the offer lasts. £10 a Creiddylad, £5 a coffin, a discount for both - £12.50. £10 a Nodens. £5 a Sword of Nodens - cuts the wind. £12.50 for both."

They're selling like hot cakes. Everyone's buying them. She seems to have an infinite number in her basket, fairy magic, that is, from the Goblin Queen.

"She's coming our way," says Vance, "this is our chance."

Oh wicked thing that she doesn't recognise us, that she's so guilelessly betraying her brother after he bought her all that clay and those paintbrushes. That she's betraying herself, all the fairies, poor dead Chesney.

"I'll take a funeral cortege on special offer." Christian buys the set.

"I'll take a Fairy Leader," Vance holds him up, glances at Carson setting up on the stage, notes the perfect likeness and smiles like a cat with the cream.

"I'll take the discount Creiddylad and coffin set." I disguise my voice.

Val puts Creiddylad in her coffin and takes my payment without noticing a thing.

"I've got to test this." Christian is grinning his preppy public school boy grin. He takes a pin from a pocket in his cloak, pricks his finger, puts a dot of blood on the heads of each of the six fairies, speaks, "Clay to flesh." Looking laughingly at Val, he sticks the pin in the arm of one of the fairies.

"Aah!" she screams, drops her basket, looks about, "who did that?"

Grinning wider than a Cheshire Cat, Christian jabs the other models. Johnny, bending to set down a speaker, shoots up clasping his butt cheek. "What the…"

"Ouch." Oliva drops her guitar.

"Uugh." "Aagh." Jill and Jen drop the projector.

"Aargh!" Brian's shout rages through the whole stage on a mic.

"Stop it," Vance scolds Christian, "you're making it too obvious."

When he pricks Johnny again, "Right, give them to me," Vance seizes the fairies.

Christian looks like a sulky schoolboy who has had his toys taken away.

"I feel like I've been shot in the butt, twice," complains Johnny.

"Me in the belly," says Jen.

"Elf shot." Jill points to a pair of elves with bows and arrows.

Funny that. Less funny, Vance eying the Fairy Leader and taking out a nasty long pin— like one of those needles at the hospital that sink right into bone.

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"And now for Hollow Bone with Funeral for the World," speaks the MC.

Carson takes the lead, with that beautiful, fay, devilish bell. Curse his glamoury, curse his hat, I'm going to have it off him, toss it into the canal where it's most toxic, or feed it to one of those huge geese, or throw it beneath the wheels of one of the ghost trains who scream far louder than his electric guitar as they roar like lightning down the Mile tunnel.

"I know what you're thinking about again," Christian laughs.

Damn him. I feel like modelling him and sticking him with a pin.

The band follow Carson onto the stage bearing their mournful load. "Creiddylad is dead and in her coffin! Creiddylad is dead!" They stand the coffin at the back of the stage and the lumox in the Nodens suit stands guard.

As he puts his right hand on the silver sword, my eyes are drawn to a tattoo. Skeletal finger bones and hand bones. Then, I recognise that hand. That big fist with its weighty knuckles and a scream of rage builds within me.

"Daniel Green!" I shriek, "has the Hand of Nodens! How dare he!"

Vance and Christian both look up with a jolt and stare at it.

Ha. A brief thrill. I'll be at least ten points up on Christian for spotting this.

"He's rebelled," Vance snarls, "gone to the old gods."

"Sided with Carson and the band too." I can barely believe it.

"He's got the Sword of Nodens," Christian observes.

Damn. I'll bet he'll get five points for picking that up.

The band take their positions and Carson strolls along the front of the stage, lays out fairy lights, looks menacingly at the trads. "Do not cross."

Dark and fay, he takes to his mic. "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye!" He rings his bell. "Today is a day of revolution and Preston is a revolutionary place."

As he speaks, projected on the screen behind, a silver wheel revolves.

"It is a place of resistance, of dissidence and dissent, and we honour that tradition. The industrial revolution started here, and here can be turned back again. A dead goddess can be brought back to life. Here we can turn back time. But only if your prayers, your votes, are in favour of the living world."

"We begin," says Olivia, "with a song about when the industrial revolution began with Richard Arkwright's spinning frame on Stoneygate."

"This is Devil's Bagpipes." Carson picks up a set of decrepit old bagpipes and plays an awful screeching sound to wake the dead. Jen and Jill spin around the stage, imitating Richard Arkwright and John Watson dancing a demonic jig as the dismal blowing heralds in industrial times.

They play '1842' then 'Suffrage and Black Pudding'. The left join in the chorus.

Pig's blood, fat, suet, onion and spice,
that's what Preston's suffragettes are made of.

The New Suffragettes and others throw black pudding and cartons of black peas over the division at the trads, coating them in sticky

oniony dark meat and mushy gooey peas, making a feast of them for the swarming flies.

"Beelzebub's going to love this," says Christian.

Yuck. For once, I'm glad I'm on this side of the divide.

'Fossils Not Fossil Fuels' and 'Fracked' raise an earthquake of cheers.

"Nuclear Winter / Infernal Summer," Carson turns a new page in the Black Book.

The Lords of Winter
are hunkering down under the snowfall.
They are crafting sleek and shining nuclear bombs.

The Lords of Summer
are blasting nuclear bunkers
whilst mothers hold dying children in their arms.

The Lords of Winter
are sending sunken submarines
across an ocean that has not known enough snow.

The Lords of Summer
are watching the eruption from
their bunkers like a volcano the infernal heat.

"Who's he calling killers?" "Us or you?" The trads exchange angry glares.

Nuclear Winter / Infernal Summer
death is all around - summer snowfall
the last glimpse of a whale who will never return.

Nuclear Winter / Infernal Summer
death is all around - summer snowfall
and beneath the snow the world lies dead and burnt.

“Curse the Lords of Summer!” Carson leads a chant. “Curse the Lords of Winter!”

Gone too far, he has, riling both the Summers and the Winters. Driven into a frenzy by the horseflies, by the song, being hotter-tempered, the Summers, led by Sunny and Daylight Summer and their offspring, storm the stage heedless of the minor explosions from the fairy lights.

And Daniel, as Nodens, steps forward to meet them. And, by some uncanny magic, he’s wrestling both the Summer Twins at once, one in an arm lock, one in a leg lock, slamming them down. He’s rising, the size of a giant, with that great catching hand, picking them up, tossing them off the stage, the rest of the Summers, as if they’re nothing but red rags.

Then, the Winters are taking their turn, storming up, led by my dad with his sword. And Daniel’s drawing the Sword of Nodens. And what a battle this will be, Nodens versus Arthur, blades singing like the winter wind through a forest of glass trees and clashing like a snow palace falling down.

It’s close, by the Devil and his demons it’s close, but, curse it, Daniel has got the upper hand with that skeletal right hand and he’s driving my dad back, swiping, parrying clumsily now, sword like a broken windscreen wiper that can’t cope any more with the onslaught of the sleet and the rain.

“No!” I cry out as he beats Dad back off the edge of the stage.

If only I’d bought a Nodens, not a Creiddylad, I’d have stuck him with a dirty great pin in all his most sensitive places and I’d have made him pay.

“Nodens!” “Nodens!” “Nodens!” The eco-crowd join the band in a chant.

Whipping up a whirlwind with his sword, Daniel blasts the Winters back and they join the Summers in a defeated heap, licking their wounds like dogs.

“Victory!” declares the MC, “for Daniel Green - the Hand of Nodens.”

Chapter Forty Two

Lorraine

Carson turns another page in his black book. “This is Doomsday.”

Vance tenses. “This is it. His apocalyptic magic begins.”

“Tick, tick, tick.” The voices of the band.

“It’s twelve o’clock.” A deep voice from the synthesiser.

“No one can help us now,” speaks Carson, “not the police.”

Sirens wail from the synthesiser and blue lights flash on the screen.

“No one can help us now - not the angels.”

The projection of a falling choir of angels.

“No one can help us now - not the Devil himself.”

The Devil and his demons sinking deeper into Hell.

“No one can help us but the old gods and the spirits of the dead.”

“We call them up!” “We call them up!” repeat the band.

“Join me,” Carson invites the audience, “in reciting the names of our ancestors.” Slightly reluctantly, “Stanley Robinson,” then “Winona White.”

As he continues, the band speak their own lineages and the eco-crowd join him.

Oh, if only I knew the names of my ancestors, but my parents have never spoken about their mothers and fathers and I haven’t met my grandparents, let alone got knowledge of the legions of grandmothers and grandfathers behind our family as I sense those of the speakers arriving. Some powerful magic this - an overwhelming rush of ghosts and spirits.

“Do not join in,” Vance reprimands Christian, “this is a dark ancestral spell.”

Yes, some witchcraft, summoning the dead of centuries here to Priest Town, where the priests were reputed to have expunged Paganism.

Back to the 16th century, to Sebastian Robinson, Carson recites his lineage.

"Cronk, cronk, cronk," the raven voices his approval.

The band take to their guitars and Carson sings.

They flow back to us like the red tides of the Ribble.
On Doomsday Death's Gate opens wide as the ocean's arms.
We open our mouths to swallow the bombs, we spread our legs
to let the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have their way with us.
We sell our souls, like every one of our ancestors did, for love or money.
We get spat out of the void and we run again into the next world.
This is Doomsday, this is Doomsday, this is Doomsday.

"Stop the clock. Stop the clock. Stop the clock." The band.

The devil is playing his bagpipes backwards on Stoneygate.
Arkwright and Kay are dancing their reel widdershins and not deosil.

Carson plays an even more awful screeching sound on the bagpipes in reverse.

The left dance a left-wise jig. "The end of industry!" they cheer.

The trads curse. "We need our factories to fuel Britannia's industrial rule."

A wild magic, this, one I've never seen before, I'd be jigging along if it wasn't for Christian, all sullen, keeping his eye on me, the steely eye of Vance.

God damn it, he's taking me in again, Carson, in his big top hat. It is impossible to believe the accursed thing has not yet toppled from his head like a steeple from a church or a man falling from the top of a crane. Going to get it, he is, a proper hard fall, he and his hat crushed beneath the crowd…

“Caught you again daydreaming about Carson’s hat,” Christian mocks.

“No, I’m not,” I retort, “but I can see you’re dreaming about your toy fairies.”

“I am not.” He denies my claim, but I can see he is.

“Quiet, both of you, watch what magic Carson is working now,” orders Vance.

“This is the turning point,” speaks Carson, “can we revive a dead goddess?”

“Yes!” All the eco-crowd cries at once.

“Then pray for her!” He presses his hands together.

“We pray for her!” The crowd follows, imitating him.

“Then awaken her!” He throws his arms in the air.

“We awaken her!” A sea of raised and outstretched arms.

“Who does he think he is,” Christian queries derisively, “Peter Pan, trying to bring Tinkerbell back to life? If you believe in fairies, clap your hands.”

“It’s more than that,” Vance shakes his head, “can neither of you see that he is invoking the energy of the living and the dead, not only for his stage show of raising Creiddylad but for swaying the people to vote for Eco-Shift?”

I can sense it, in the swirling madness, the gremlin faces, the spirits, the wraiths all around. In the wild jigs of the eco-crowd. The crazed retorts of the trads.

“Why let him go so far?” Christian demands, gesturing to the model of the Fairy Leader in Vance’s hand and that nasty big old pin. “Why don’t you?…”

“I’m but biding my time, practising patience, which you need to learn.”

“Can’t I…” Christian attempts a poke with his little pin.

“No, put that away,” Vance scolds him, “or you’ll be losing another finger.”

The energy is so intense it’s flooding through my body in a stream of light and prayer and flowers that remind me of Mother Mary as Madonna of the Roseto surrounded by roses and of St

Therese of Lisieux, ‘the Little Flower’, her hands filled with the flowers she promised to rain upon the earth.

There’s something inside me, a part that I didn’t know existed, that really wants to see Creiddylad live— the goddess of the land to rise again.

“You’re falling for his spell,” Christian, again, mocking me.

Damn him, it’s not just his hat again, I really want to kill him.

“Give me your pin,” I say to Christian, “I’ll stick it in Carson’s…”

“Hat?” He passes me the shiny object and I prepare for the deed.

But Vance gets there first. “Now.” As the energy peaks hotter than the sultry August sun, who seems to be suspended as if in time lapse overhead, Vance drives that big sharp pin into the Fairy Leader’s left knee. Right through.

“Then awaken h…” Carson screams in agony and falls onto his left knee. His face a scramble of pain and disbelief, his eyes like flashlights scanning the crowd for perpetrators, he attempts to get back up again.

Vance drives the pin into his right knee and he falls onto both knees.

“I said I’d bring his fall,” Vance speaks in satisfaction, “stop his spell.”

I sense the drop in energy as the crowd stare at Carson unable to determine what is wrong with him and begin to mutter about his fainting fits.

Anguish and anger mix in his gaze as he realises he has missed his moment, he has lost, then he sees us, eyes locking onto what Vance holds.

“Too late.” Vance locks eye-lines, raises the pin, plunges it towards his heart.

Chesney

They're praying for me. They're awakening me. I'm going to live. The quarries, the places of mining subsidence, the brick-crofts are greening and the holes that have been dug out are becoming lakes and to them are flocking all manner of waterbirds — swans, geese, lapwing, golden-eye, widgeon.

The rain is washing clean the wounds the mine shafts and fracking sites have left. Their healing will be long, may take forever, like the wound in my father's groin, yet together we are flying as kingfishers down Fish House Brook, in a vision of the future, when it's big enough to turn a water wheel again and there are abundant salmon and trout near the Fish House.

How they love me. How they're praying for me. Their prayers have the power to add strength to the Jet Stream and the Polar Vortex. Time is turning properly again, no longer trapped in the cogs and wheels of industry.

If only I could see them, my people, joining their voices in one.

"Pray for her."

All of them praying for me.

"Awaken h…"

Carson speaks the 'h' as if he's been stuck by the lance of a demon jouster. There's something wrong. I hear him fall to one knee with a knee-jarring crash. Then the other. People are muttering about his fainting fits.

"That's no fainting fit," Daniel's voice, "more like when a knee lock goes nasty and you hear the joint pop or when a knee twists and the ACL tears."

"Daniel, what's going on?" I cry, afraid to move from my coffin.

"The boy's in pain and the cause of it… I think it's dark magic… he's staring at three hooded figures and the one in the centre is holding the nastiest pin I've ever seen and he's plunging it towards the heart of a black figurine."

"No!" I cry out. "Please no!" I perceive what the threat means.

"Down Carson's eye line, swifter than a bullet, the flap of raven wings."

An appalling silence. A more appalling scream. An outbreak of screams.

Lorraine

"Vance, watch out!" shouts Christian, reaching for his wand.

He's too late. As Vance comes within a millimetre of driving the pin into the Fairy Leader's chest, the raven is upon him in a flurry of black wings, attacking, pecking, tearing his face. It's got his left eyeball in its greedy beak.

"Aargh!" Vance's tortured scream turns every head.

"Off him, demon spawn!" Christian raises his wand, crackling with blue energy.

The raven, task done, flaps out of the way, displaying its jellied trophy.

Vance's hood has fallen down, and everyone can see his face, his left cheek torn, his left eye socket gaping, bloody, a crimson pit for devils to swim in.

All around him, people scream in horror; the screams spread through the crowd. Like a crimson tide, a vast scream travels in a wave across the Flag Market, penetrating into the shops where I can hear the shoppers dropping their bags and bagels and burgers to give vent to this atrocity.

"Vance Jackson," someone recognises, "the manager of Hollow Bone."

The crowd looks from Vance to Carson on his knees on the stage, in confusion.

Sebastian flies back, alights on Carson's shoulder, with the eyeball. "Bad raven," says Carson, "can't keep his hunger under control." The raven tosses his winning up in the air, the steely grey eyeball still staring, swallows it.

"Now the interruption is over; let us finish our prayer— a minute in silence." Carson remains on his knees, head bowed,

hands pressed together. I'd mistake him for a stone statue of a monk if it weren't for his devilish costume. And, damn him, in spite of his pain, he didn't lose his hat.

And damn them, the eco-crowd, one or two of the trads following him. Kneeling in silent prayer, as if we're in the Sistine Chapel or at the Vatican. I know this is Priest Town, but this holiness has got to be a joke.

Vance slumps down, but I think that's from shock and blood loss.

"You've lost all your points," snarls Christian, "are you not going to help him?"

To be honest, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. As this strange and sacred reverential silence washes over me, as if I'm being bathed by the waters of Lourdes or the waters of St Mary's Well before it dried up, I realise that I'm still holding the model of Creiddylad in her coffin.

Pray for her. Awaken her. The silence all around me speaks.

"To complete our work, kill her," Christian nods to the pin I still hold. "Just a little drop of your blood on her head and the words 'clay to flesh'."

As I stare at Creiddylad, the pin, I realise I hold the fate of the world in my hands. Oh, Lorraine Winter, what will you do to poor Creiddylad, the green goddess, to poor little Chesney? Will I be kind or will I be cruel? Kill her and the Traditionalists will win, somehow I know forever. Another idea occurs to me. Let her out of the coffin to walk the green fields again, growing wildflowers and roses to adorn the altars of my saints.

"Carson's put his spell on you again," Christian mocks.

He's watching us, Carson, still praying, the raven fluffing its wings.

I drive the pin into Christian's hand. Once, then twice, for good measure. I leave it stuck in him. I do not kill Creiddylad nor do I raise her from death. I leave her there, amongst the eco-crowd, for them to save or trip over.

I do not look at Carson as his minute ends. I do not look at his hat. I certainly do not look at Vance as I depart through the mist, the goblins, the spectres.

Instead, I go to the Hot Potato Tram and get myself a baked potato, skin on, nice and crispy, with a slice of black pudding and a carton of black peas.

Chesney

I'm not sure what happened. All I heard was a terrible, agonised scream as if someone'd had their eye plucked out and seen it eaten in front of them. Carson saying something about a "bad raven" then the minute of silent prayer.

Beautiful, that was, as if all the living and the dead, every god and every goddess, every saint and every angel, the goblins, the gremlins, the devils, prayed for me. Before I had never known silence could speak louder than words.

Yet, I felt like there was an awful fate hanging over me. A turning point. The silver tip of the needle that stole the marrow from the hollows of my bones.

Then, it was gone, and I felt like I'd been cast away as just a nobody.

Still, I don't feel like I'm fully raised, live or dead. I feel like I'm between.

"Her breath's misting the coffin. She's still alive," checks Val.

I'm carried off stage, and the trad bands come on with their songs of hate.

We set off back home, at a limping pace, the passing bell dull and mournful.

Chapter Forty Three

Chesney

When Val lifts the lid off the coffin and helps me out, I see that the followers of the procession have dispersed like goblins to their holes and nymphs to their woods. Daniel departs awkwardly on his platforms. The cortege looks vexed and confused and are looking at me and Carson in concern.

Carson sets down the passing bell with a clang of frustration and sorrow. The aftermath of the ring feels as if it will be locked between my ears for days. Beneath his face paint, his face looks drawn and he has a large rip in the left knee of his trousers and a cut and a smaller rip in the right and a graze.

He tears off his hat, stamps on it, still not satisfied sets it alight with his Zippo. He then takes out his pocket knife and slices off his coat tails.

"Whatever are you doing?" asks Val, "first fainting, then going mad?"

"I didn't faint," snaps Carson, "I'm doing this with good reason. Give me your hats."

The certitude and authority in his voice convince them to obey.

Carson piles the red beanies up and sets them alight. "Your wreath and garlands."

Unwillingly, after all Val's effort, I hand them over to go up in flames.

"You need to explain yourself," fumes Val, "I know something went badly wrong when you went down on the stage with such a thud. I've never seen you faint as if a wrestler's taken your knee out before."

"I told you I didn't faint," growls Carson, looking around St Mary's graveyard to make sure nobody else is present, "I was the victim of black magic."

By the sultry pall overhanging the land, the dull ringing in my ears, the oddity of the day, the strain on his face and blood on his knees, I believe him.

"On the verge of completing the spell that would ensure Creiddylad awakens and lives and sway the vote to Eco-Shift, I was stricken by an excruciating pain in my left knee, like someone had stuck a lance through it."

"That's odd," says Val, "as I was walking away from selling a fairy funeral set to three buyers in black cloaks, I felt a terrible pain in my arm as if somebody had stuck a rapier in it, that made me drop my basket and spill my models."

"Me too!" Olivia exclaims, "a stabbing in my shoulder made me drop my guitar."

"My belly," Jen. "My arm," Jill. "My thigh," Brian.

"And someone stuck me up the ass, twice," Johnny states, outraged.

"We thought it was elf shot," says Jen.

"No wonder the elves wouldn't admit to it," Jill realises.

"How?" Val demands. "Who did it?"

At first, Carson is reluctant to speak, but he forces the words out as if he is pushing a reluctant animal into the slaughterhouse. "Your models."

"You're blaming this on me?"

"No, let me speak, this isn't your fault. Vance, Lorraine, and his other assistant managed to get hold of them."

Val gasps. "I sold them to, wait, your raven attacked Vance. The people in cloaks…"

"He and perhaps one or both of his assistants used them as poppets. I saw Vance preparing to stick his pin through my heart and sent Sebastian just in time."

"He could have used one of my models to kill you?" Val looks mortified.

"I'm not sure," Carson rubs his left knee, "whatever the case, it would have bloody hurt. And," he looks at me, "Lorraine had a model of Creiddylad, and I thought she was going to stick a pin in

it at one point, but instead," he looks puzzled, "she walked away, left it for the eco-crowd."

"I felt it, nearly saw it," I admit, "a big needle of fate hanging over me."

"That is why," Carson explains, "we need to be out of these clothes as quickly as possible, just in case somebody else gets hold of those poppets."

What a huge shame to have to lose this wonderful dress Val made for me. Yet, it feels tainted by Lorraine having had hold of my likeness. It also strikes terror into me that the model may enter another set of like hands.

"If your spell didn't work, where does it leave us now?" Olivia asks Carson.

"Although it didn't fully work," Carson appears confused, "it didn't quite not work either. I've felt a strange sense of limbo since our last prayer."

"Me too," I admit, "almost like I'm stuck between life and death."

"We'll have to wait for the election result next week to know for sure," says Johnny.

Lorraine

"I don't want to be Vance's assistant anymore," I tell Dad. "First off, he's already got an assistant— an obnoxious little pratt called Christian. Second off, he's incompetent. Third off, I don't want to have to stare into that gaping eye socket that looks like it's got all the demons of Hell in it."

"Vance has voiced his complaints about you." He eyes me sternly across the Round Table with one of his heavy-browed boss-not-Dad looks. He's been pissed off since his defeat by Daniel, in a bleak, foul, wintry mood.

"Has he now?" I fold my arms. "And what exactly has he said?"

"That you've been rude to Christian, insubordinate to him, and less than competent in anything except for twisting a few arms and pulling a few fingernails. That you show little talent for magic and almost fell under Carson's spell several times and have an unhealthy fascination with his hat."

"How dare he!" I'm aggrieved.

"He said you did nothing to help when Carson's raven attacked him."

"Didn't want to get my pretty face in the way of that great brute; get my cheeks torn up, lose myself an eye, wouldn't be much good after that, would I?"

"Moreover, you failed to take the opportunity to put a complete end to the possibility of Eco-Shift winning through the model of Creiddylad."

"If our land goddess dies, we might die with her."

"I can see you've been mixing with the eco-crowd."

"I'm fed up with being ordered about by you and Vance and sneered at by Christian, played along, treated like a foolish little girl, and," I finally see and speak the bitter truth, "I don't believe you are ever going to buy me a horse!"

"Is that all you ever think about," rages Dad, "getting your accursed horse?"

"I'll bet, if you hadn't been turning me against Carson since we started school, we might have been friends, and he might have got me a horse. A stolen racehorse, a beautiful black mare with a mane like the waves of the sea and a tail like the seaweed that washes up on Blackpool's shore. And my very own horsebox with all the fittings and fixtures for my saddles and bridles."

"I can see where your desires and loyalties lie."

"No longer with the House of Winter." Without packing a single thing, I depart with only my handbag and my knife into the deadly nights of summer.

*

“Carson let me in,” I beg. I knock again on his door. I know, although his cameras are invisible, that he’s watching me from inside, weighing, assessing. How much noise will I have to make until the unwanted attention and the possibility his sister finds out I’ve been here outweigh his reticence to see my face and his fear that I’m going to try to kill him again?

After I have knocked until my knuckles are red and screamed until my voice is raw and every curtain from the top to the bottom of Moss Acre Road has twitched, finally he comes to open the door. His face could be a screenshot from a film called ‘Anger’. His knees are still scabbed from his fall.

“Lorraine, what in the name of my gods and all your devils…?”

“I’ve left the Winter House.” My words gush like freezing water. “Fallen out with Dad, I’m going home. And I’m on the run from Vance and Christian. Should they find me, catch me, you know what they’ll do to me.”

A shock washes over him like the contents of an icy pail. “And you come to me,” he growls, “knowing what they’ll do to me if I harbour you?”

We share a vision of a black room, silver needles, blacker music.

“Why,” he demands, “have you come to me? I’m not your friend, far less your boyfriend. Why haven’t you gone to Sandy? One of your other smooches?”

“Sandy’s as much use as Mich Buchanan in Baywatch and he doesn’t understand me.”

“And you think I do?” Carson looks mystified and frustrated.

“Please can I come in,” I beg.

“How do I know you’re not going to try to kill me?”

“I have never…”

“You bloody well helped Vance make me eat my father’s heart, and you stood there whilst he stuck his pins in me and might have brought my end.”

“I was tempted, but I didn’t touch you.”

“You didn’t intervene either.”

“I froze,” I admit.

“Just like when you had the opportunity to either kill or save Creiddylad.”

“I know,” I hang my head, “frozen, numb, that’s what my parents made of me. But now I’m free,” I lift it again, meet his gaze, “I can change, I can thaw.”

Surprise and wariness as he hears ice cracking in my voice, the possibility of redemption visible beneath like deep and hidden waters in a pond in the shadows that has never thawed because it has never seen the sun.

“Perhaps your songs could melt the heart of Winter’s Queen?”

“I think I prefer you when I know where I’m at with you— frosty and cold.”

“Take my handbag,” I offer it to him.

He stares at it, backs up a step, as if it might explode.

“Take my knife.” I’ve never done this before. I’ve never shown her to anybody who has lived to hear the tale, my beautiful Carwenna, with her blade more silver than a moonbeam and her hilt whiter than the tail of any horse. I offer her to him, hilt-wise, lovely decorations, flowers and snow, glimmering. Blade pointing towards me— he’s got my life in his hands now, he has. I wouldn’t be so bothered if he took it. There’s not much to live for these days.

His hand hovers over the hilt. He looks at her and me appraisingly. With a reluctant sigh, “I know how much she means to you. I won’t touch her. I don’t like people touching my things and… I suppose you can come in. I might be able to pull a few strings and find somewhere for you to stay.”

My heart drops as I realise that he doesn’t want me, that he wants rid of me.

He leads me into his kitchen. I’d heard the Robinson house was once a tip, but now it’s got shiny new work surfaces with built-in cupboards, a cooker and combination washing machine

and dryer, and a state-of-the-art microwave. I don't see a kettle, but then I see the tea and coffee machine.

"Espresso? Latte? Mocaccino? I do a nice traditional Lancashire brew."

"Could I have an extra frothy latte with chocolate sprinkles on top?"

He touches a few buttons, puts a mug underneath, whilst it's boiling and whisking and pouring, pours himself an ultra-filtered glass of water.

Now this is how I like to be treated. I could move in here, I could. Lovely rich coffee taste, foam like the sea, chocolate richer than all the Tories. As he gets his phone out, begins sending texts, making enquiries, I see he is creating a different map for my life. "I'm not going to Ratty," I tell him firmly, "nor to the Doom Camps nor to any hotels for immigrants."

From the way he's biting his lip, I can see he's not having much success. "I haven't said who you are, but it seems there's no room anywhere."

I feel like Mother Mary, albeit without a child, turned away from every inn. "Can you think of nowhere, not even a stable, a wooden shack in your garden?"

His gaze flickers, "Actually, I know a place. In winter it will be cold, but you're a Winter and you're tough, and I could likely make some amendments."

Oh no, I know where he's thinking of - his little house on the mill pond where that old fisherman fishes, hooking his worms, the Lady of the Lake lingers, and at the bottom, all the monsters, green and hulking faces.

"You could decorate, rebuild your shrines, make a hermitage of it."

I like the idea. Lorraine Winter Hermit of the Mill Pond. I could give up bullying and torturing and have done with my plans to rule the world. Read Saint Therese and Saint John to the Lady of the Lake, do my penances, be properly good. My holiness might even draw the willow tits back.

"What would I eat? Not safe to nip to Booths for a hot chicken."

"I could get Sebastian to bring you what you need."

"Got a good appetite, I have. I'll not be fasting, living on raven's bread."

"Just give me a list of what you like and I'll make sure your needs are met."

"What about drugs? I've got bad memories, need my ket, know you can get it."

"I won't be getting you any dirty drugs."

"How about some nice home-grown green? Super Silver Haze with silver-tipped buds packed together tightly as newborn puppies in a basket or Purple Kush with its purple tips or some other old Indica varieties?"

"I'll send Sebastian with a joint every now and again."

It's good of him to offer to roll me one. Shame he can't come and light it with his Zippo but I've got myself a pretty good deal. It's going to be my island paradise and who knows what that raven might get once I get to know him. I let myself drift, as if on hash smoke, imagining the possibilities.

Knock, knock, knock on the door. A sinister knock. I know that knock, I do, from when I've gone round the houses with Vance, done to scare people. How could he have come so quickly? How could he know I am here? My heart almost stops and my blood turns cold as de-icer.

A swipe of his phone to check the cameras and Carson turns pale and livid. "You've betrayed me to them, led them here, how could you?"

"No, I didn't. I never dreamed they would come."

He's pressing through the functions. "Vance has got a gun. He's got a briefcase and in it he's got…" he presses another button, pales even more.

Knock, knock, knock. The sound of a skeleton key in the door.

“There’s only one place we can be safe, quickly, before he figures out how to undo the anti-skeleton key mechanism.” Carson leads me upstairs.

“You’re taking me into your bedroom?” I halt disbelievingly.

He opens the door. Dark posters on the wall. A mess of books, quotes, papers, an ancient-looking record player, an overspilling ash tray. On black, unmade covers with skulls on them, the blackest of black books.

What if his asexuality is just a ploy for disarming women, and he really preys on them like his father? “I hope you’re not taking me to bed.”

“You know I don’t swing that way or any way at all— into the wardrobe.” He opens the door. Black hoodies with hoods like a hangman wears and ripped jeans that look like a hundred legs of the walking dead.

I’m not persuaded. Why else would he want me in the wardrobe? Also a bad strategy. “I’m not going in there. We’ll easily be cornered and caught.”

“We’re not just going into the wardrobe but through it to the Otherworld.”

“What do you think this is, fucking Narnia?” I ask as he begins to push his way through the sea of hoods, and I fear I will lose his hood amongst them. Then, as he begins to disappear, “Wait for me, I’ve never done this before.”

At the panic in my voice, he turns, holds out his hand. “Trust me?”

Below, the click and turning of a key in the door, then a small explosion.

Curses from both Vance and Christian, then the voice of that smarmy little twat, “I can smell the bitch, that cheap vanilla perfume she wears.”

How dare he, that cost me a bomb that, by Best Brits, is my best fragrance. Not having me, him, nor Vance, going to make my great escape. Better than Houdini, this, vanishing off into the

Otherworld just like Carson. It's a shame I won't be able to see their faces once I'm gone.

"Yes." Like a surprise, it is, to fully touch his hand, to feel its flesh and blood. Then, it's the only thing that exists, as the rest is foggy, desolate darkness.

*

"What kind of an Otherworld is this?" I demand.

"This is just the between-place. We need to decide where we're going."

I know where I want to go. I know what I want to see. Dare I admit it? Dare I ask? Dare I expect he might take me? Worth a shot. "May I see the horses?"

Suspicion. "The horses of the Otherworld cannot be broken, tamed, or owned. Steal them, bring them here, they won't survive for long. They feed only on grass that is always green, always growing, never yellow and decayed. They drink only water from saltless seas. Their eyes are like crystal and they see through us like glass to the very depths of our souls. They can tell who is kind and who is cruel. They'd never come back with you."

Hurt me, that has. "I might be a Winter but I'd never harm a horse. All I want to do is stroke their muzzles and run my hand through their manes."

"Alright." He leads me through the fog and we emerge in a marshy, splashy grassland with long tussocky grasses and big juncus rushes. And grazing there, roaming there, wild white horses. And when they see us they whinny, they kick up their hooves, buck and leap. They come over on high-stepping feet to greet Carson and he feeds them Polo mints from his pocket, hand flat, letting their hungry lips snuffle them up. Pepperminty foamy mouths hungering, nudging, hooves pawing for more.

"Can I feed them?" I ask. "Can I come and touch them?"

They eye me warily with eyes like dark crystals or scrying globes and I know they can see to my soul. They know that I

carry a knife and what I carry in my handbag yet I don't have a whip and would never whip a horse.

Carson passes me a bag of apple and mint-flavoured horse treats and I offer them up, one by one, square greenish presents, to be snaffled by soft lips. How I love the horses. How they nod and spit. How they come back for more. I'd have been a good girl, I would, if Dad had bought me a horse.

Meanwhile, Carson's checking something on his phone, looking tense, then smiling.

I wipe the slobber off my hands on the back of my pants - thin, ghost-like. "What're you looking at? I never knew phones worked in the Otherworld."

"Vance and Christian have just found out what happens when people snoop in the Robinson cabinets," he replies, "hopefully they'll realise that looking around our house is a bad idea sooner rather than later."

"You ever ridden one?" I gesture to the horses.

He nods. "They're faster than the wind and the wild, otherworldy swans."

"Do you think…?"

"You can't choose one - they must choose you."

And a white mare comes trotting to me with nothing but love in her eyes, like balls of crystal foretelling a future where there might be kindness and horseriding. Carson legs me up, then he's on one, a stallion with a big, cresty mane, a tiny dot of a boy on a tall, great horse, with a tail like a waterfall.

Then, we're galloping across the land of no pain, hooves splashing in the water, a song in the sky. For the first time, there are tears in my eyes - tears of happiness.

Chesney

"It's close, so close." I can barely take my eyes off the screen as the votes come in.

Val and I are sitting, holding hands, squeezing so tight our knuckles are almost popping, on the settee in her living room in front of the huge flat-screen TV. It's gone midnight, and with the band, we've stayed up, drinking cups of strong tea and espressos to keep ourselves awake.

Carson hasn't drunk any coffee, but he's hyped as if he's had twenty, pacing the room, up and down, still limping slightly.

"For the gods' sake, Carson, sit down, I can't see," Val complains.

He perches on the edge of one of the foot stools, jigging his leg, biting his cheek.

"Anyone would've thought you were on speed," Val criticises.

"Don't you realise how important this is?" he snaps.

"Yes," she retorts.

We all do.

"South Ribble results," says Olivia.

We all tense, still as statues, pray that Emma Earthheart will win the seat.

"Draw," speaks the reporter.

"Godsdammit," Carson curses.

"Better than Mark Denver winning again," notes Val.

"There have been so many draws," says Olivia, "it's been so tense."

Following the spell, of the 16 constituencies in Lancashire, most have drawn so far. Spiralling out, an epicentre of draws, separating into more usual results in accordance with traditional voting patterns in the rest of the country.

"That's 646," counts Val, "just a few to go. The Traditionalists are leading."

"647, Bristol to Eco-Shift," says Olivia. "Equal again."

"648, East Surrey to the trads, damn them," Johnny.

"649, Waveney Valley to us," Olivia, "equalling up."

"Preston last," says Carson. He looks like one big nerve cell, like in my science books, hand-ruffled hair wild and electric, thrumming with electric energy.

“Please, please, please, let Eco-Shift win,” we pray together.

“650, Preston, draw,” the reporter speaks. “The overall result is a draw.”

“That’s a disappointment,” sighs Johnny.

“But not such a damning blow as the Traditionalists winning,” points out Olivia.

“If only, if only.” Carson’s head is in his hands.

I know what he’s thinking. If only he’d completed that last word. Put the ‘er’ on the end of the ‘h’ then Eco Shift might have won here. But instead he’d fallen, let the spell go, like a balloon, drifting up and away, without effect.

Val goes over, puts her hand on his shoulder. “You did your best.”

He picks irritably at a scab on his knee. “Damn Vance. Why, even when I make my best efforts, does something go awry? Some villain foil me? I’ve given so much, endured so much, become a vessel for the gods. Yet, in spite of this, we’re trapped in limbo, just waiting for the end.”

I don’t know what end he has foreseen, but as he switches off the television with an accusing push I fear it is blacker than the screen. Blacker than the midnight skies where the black moon sheds no light.

Blacker than the darkness of his room where he is swallowed in his efforts to complete the Black Book, to where he limps away, leaving his black look.

Chapter Forty Four

Chesney

"Rise up for Britain!" "Rise up for God!" "Rise up for stricter laws!"

Val and I watch in horror on her flat-screen TV as a new political party called Rise Up, who seem to have risen up out of nowhere, parade around the city of Preston with flags bearing blue, red, and white arrows, pointing upwards with their values written beneath. 'Strength', 'Law', 'Nation'.

The epicentre of their rallies has been Stoneygate, where the Industrial Revolution began, and the streets around it, with frequent gatherings on Grimshaw Street, outside Oblivion, to rile the alternative communities. The site of the Old Cock Pit is a frequent haunt, where they have resurrected the cruel tradition of having cocks fight whilst they place their bets.

"Rise up against equality." "Rise up for the rule of the strongest." "Rise up against gay rights, women's rights, black rights, trans rights."

Val and I are back at school and in the fifth year, and its malign evidence is already being felt. Some of the male trads are beginning to shift even further to the right, adopting its liturgies of hate, insulting and attacking non-whites and queer people, and being dismissive and abusive towards women.

Luckily, Val can hold her own. "Yes, I am a dyke and I'm fucking proud of it."

She's become a rallying figure for alternative folk at school. Kicked Gordon Spencer and Ronald Holdon off the back of the bus at the top and made herself cock with some of the doomsters from our year. A formidable sight with her red-streaked black hair, like a great black hen, pecking at anybody she catches bullying, dealing out her beratements. Never in a hundred years did I think I'd be one of the cool kids riding on that throne with

my ginger hair, now growing back, in a pixie cut, with a bit of dark eyeliner.

"I hope Carson and the band don't get caught in it," says Val as Rise Up are met by counter-protestors from the Doom Faction with black flags. "Doom to Rise Up." "Doom to Britain." "Doom to any God but the Old Gods."

"They should be back by now," I say edgily. Their first appointment with Vance, since he has returned to work, was at 3 p.m. and it's now 6 p.m.

"I can't imagine what's keeping them." She swallows.

She can imagine perfectly a hundred things, and so can I.

"There they are," she points, noticing on the television the band exiting the door and standing outside Oblivion, but hedged in by what is becoming a riot.

"I think they're all in one piece." Val moves closer to check. "They've all got two eyes, none of their noses are broken, they've all got ten fingers."

"Hollow Bone." Some of the doomsters greet and applaud them.

Don't say they're going to get pulled in by Jeff and Jez over there having a near full-on fistfight with a pair of uprisers, Jill and Jen kicking a man carrying a flag with a downward arrow beneath 'women's rights' in the nuts. There's already enough hatred on the streets without them adding to it.

To our frustration, the camera shifts to show a pair of trads battering a doomster and a 'Doom to the Right' flag with a right-pointing arrow being dropped.

To our relief, the band return an hour later, dishevelled but unhurt.

"We had to fight our way through," Olivia admits.

"Ugly sight," Johnny shudders.

Carson unfolds a small collection of flags with blue, white, and red arrows with 'Hate' beneath. "Less of these in the world the better," he sets them on fire with his Zippo and tosses them, ablaze, out the window, in turn.

Val coughs. “What is with you and burning? You becoming a Summer?”

“No,” Carson replies, “I suspect this is more black magic.”

“But they’re just flags,” she eyes him disbelievingly, “you’re being paranoid.”

“I’ve got a feeling there’s more to Rise Up than meets the eye. Don’t you think it’s odd how they’ve risen up from nowhere as if by magic and we just so happened to have to run the gauntlet through them after leaving Oblivion?”

A shiver runs through me like when I saw the needle hanging over me.

“I,” Val pauses, “you think they might be connected to Vance?”

“It’s just a suspicion at present,” says Johnny, “there’s no proof yet.”

“How did your meeting go?” Val asks them.

The band look dour. No one speaks.

“From hereon,” says Johnny shakily, “Vance wants us in his basement every day. That horrible, dark place where there’s no sun, black walls, flashing lights.”

“For eight hours a day,” bemoans Olivia.

“What’s he planning to do?” I ask, concerned.

“We’ve got to record our albums,” speaks Johnny.

I sigh in relief.

“All three of them,” Johnny continues, “‘Hollowed’, ‘The Unveiling’, ‘Fracked’, in three weeks and get them perfect or there’ll be hell to pay.”

“Afterwards,” Carson speaks with a fury to tear down a hundred Rise Up flags, “he wants us to write a new album from scratch with his title ‘Without a Prayer’ and you’ll never guess what he’s chosen for the cover art.”

“Oh no,” says Val.

“The photograph of me on my knees on the Market Square.”

It’s been a sore point with him, particularly as it’s been doing the rounds on social media. ‘Did he faint?’ ‘Was he trying to get a

sympathy vote?' 'Playing the tragic hero again?' 'Trying to be a pin-up for the doom girls?'

"It does make a good cover," Olivia admits, "has got us a lot of likes."

"And dislikes," Carson reminds her.

"Mainly yours," she replies, "from multiple devices."

"It's about time you got some albums made and sold," Val is unsympathetic. "I've brought in more with my models than you with your music."

"I've got a fixing business to run," fumes Carson, "will have no time."

"I could step in and shoulder some more responsibility if you're paying."

"We'll speak about it tomorrow. I need some time alone with my black book."

Chapter Forty Five

Lorraine

Right cosy, I am, here, in my little hidey-house on the island on the mill pond. I've got a comfy mattress and a goose feather quilt and my saints around me—altars to Saint Theresa and Saint Therese and Saint John. Mother Mary, in her halo, looking over me like I'm her favourite girl-child. Down below, I've got a compost loo and a battery-powered shower that warms and cleans the mill water so I can scrub myself soapy-clean every morning.

It's mid-October and the leaves are beginning to fall. Willow leaves floating down, long and thin, to lie weepy as autumn in the post-industrial waters. It's chilly, so Carson brought me a Fire Star V500 Infrared battery-powered heater with a built-in thermostat, so I never get chilly and cold.

I like to think my heart is melting as I sit here, watching nature turn, as I feed the birds crumbs from my bread. They all come to me now—blackbirds with greedy yellow beaks, thrushes sleek brown and mottled, coal tits, blue tits and great tits, scurrying dunnocks, jumpy pointy-tailed wrens. Remind me of Carson they do, the way they hide, how they're so good at being invisible and sound the alarm bell at the slightest danger.

"Listen for the wrens," he said, "they'll tell you when danger's coming."

No danger yet. No sign of Vance and his mediocre toffee-nosed assistant. Only the fishermen come and go, living and dead, with their maggots, with their worms, hooking a fish or the stiff body of an X-man or two.

Sometimes walkers pass through or kids gather for a smoke. It's the first time I've been without Mum and Dad and the Winter Crew. Without any business to do, no drug money to get, no arms to twist. Do I miss my work? Do I miss people? Am I lonely? Am I missing sex? I haven't been tempted to sneak off for a quickie with Sandy, Dan or Jake.

The one thing I do miss is my chicken on a Saturday night. "Too big for a raven," Sebastian said, "you'll have to make do with two legs and a breast."

Otherwise, I've got everything I need. An endless stream of books, music, and films on my phone. I've been listening to rhythm and blues, country and western, the type of music you can ride a horse to. I've been dreaming about horses every night—herds of spotted Appalachians, Welsh mountain ponies with dished faces and shaggy-fetlocked Fell ponies.

Here he comes, like a dark horse, with his forelock shadowing his eyes. Weary eyes. Carson paddling his raft like the ferryman of souls. Deserves good payment for the good he's done me—something better than a silver coin. When the inheritance of the Winter House is mine, I'll share my treasure. Like the Lord and Lady of Annwn, we'll sit amongst the spoils, then we'll give them away to the bards, the poets, the hollow bones.

He climbs up, nimbler than a squirrel, not those dumb grey ones, but the quick, dark-eyed red ones, near extinct, in the pinewoods near Formby Beach.

Rare species, him. Not a day passes I don't fear I won't see him again. Dangerous game he's playing with Vance and Christian in that basement.

Looks tired, but he's still got a small smile for me, one that breaks the once porcelain mask of my face into a fleshy one capable of smiling back.

He's brought me a gift. He's taking a spliff from his back pocket. I love the way he rolls a joint— nice tight roach end, big wide smoking end like a loudspeaker, seamlessly joined together. Just the right blend of weed and tobacco. Not like those useless, saggy things my brothers used to make. He's lighting it with his Zippo, blowing a puff of sweet and pungent smoke. End glowing like the sun at the end of the world, he hands it over to me. As he takes a seat beside me, on my mattress, he looks like he's seen the world's end. More and more frequent that look. Sad thing. My

fault. Blood in my Tupperware box, stains on my fingers, as I take the joint, breathe in.

"How is recording the albums going?" I ask him.

"Vance is a slave driver," his voice is slightly hoarse. "He's got me singing, us playing, all day long, barely a break. We thought our fingers were going to bleed at the beginning, but we found that is just a myth." He displays the calluses. "And that picky little shit, Christian, picking me up on my pronunciation, saying I don't put the 't' on my t's or say my p's and q's properly. To Johnny, 'up an octave', 'down an octave', to Olivia, 'slower', 'faster' on the bass. Telling Midge he can't keep a rhythm. Putting us through hell, they are, but by the old gods, we'll win our music back, by the power invested in me, by the Black Book, we'll bring them down."

If we'd been any other two people, I might have put a comforting hand on his or hugged him, held him, but I've only ever touched another person for one of two reasons - to hurt them or to use their bodies to satisfy my desires. And he's jumpy, nervy as a beaten colt. If anyone comes within an inch of him, he's in flight quicker than a kite leaping up, vanishing into the sky.

Instead, I pass back the spliff, and he takes a long drag and stares into the smoke. He's going to be good at what we've got planned ahead. An adept. Going to enjoy this, I am, using my magical knowledge to teach him how to scry.

Whilst he finishes the joint, docks it out, I get up and fill the scrying bowl from the 2-litre bottle he brought from the sacred well at Fernyhalgh. I love that place, Ladyewell shrine, dedicated to Our Lady, its ferny garden with its Stations of the Cross and the copper statue of Mother Mary near the grate. Shame you have to get the well water from a tap. Still, I always say a prayer as it flows cold and pure, slightly ironic, into my bottle.

O Mary, Queen of Martyrs and gentle Mother,
you have heard the cries of your children at Ladyewell for centuries.

Pray for us, that we may be faithful and courageous in love.
May we walk in peace and joy, confident in your maternal care.

I speak it now, feeling giddy and spacey, as I fill the bowl, take it through the lingering smoke to sit back down beside Carson. Perfect setting, this is. Outside, dusk is falling, the blackbirds are singing their repetitive dusky song.

"So, how are we going to do this?" Carson asks.

I see us sitting there, opposite as white and black ponies, in the water.

Recalling how I worked with Christian, with repugnance, "If we're going to do this together, share a vision, we need to sit so we're touching."

He looks uncomfortable. I feel uncomfortable too. He shuffles his bum a millimetre to the right. I shuffle mine a millimetre to the left. It takes a while. I'm not sure who shuffles last, but finally I feel his bony hip against mine.

"Now, we speak our prayers and intentions of what we want to see."

I pray to Saint John to see clearly and he to Gwyn ap Nudd for clear sight. Together, "Please grant us a showing of how Rise Up have risen up."

"Now," I say, "look into the water but not directly and let your vision drift."

Together, we stare into the bowl, at our own reflections, for a fragment in time closer than Lord and Lady Macbeth, before the scene shifts and wavers. Good at this, he is, far better than Christian. It's like, together we've got the power of the Ninth Wave, of the sea god's cloak, to ride through time, as if on the backs of big black water-horses, to the scene of the crime.

*

It's no surprise to see Vance, at the depths of midnight, in a corner of Saint John's graveyard, from where the graves have been dug

up, with a trowel digging a hollow, creating runnels with his finger. What dark thing is he sowing?

"By the power of God over the Devil and his demons I sow the seeds of hate."

He opens a Tupperware box, not unlike mine, filled with squirming, wiggling maggots. He picks one up, between thumb and forefinger. With his other hand, he removes his nasty old pin from his cloak, stabs it through the maggot's head, places the maggot in the runnel. Horrible, excruciating watching as he slaughters the maggots one by one—a whole batch.

He sweeps a little soil over them, then takes three bottles, blue, red, and white. "I hereby water them with the water from a fracking well, with the blood from a squirrel with rabies, with the semen from a poisoned sperm whale." As he speaks, he pours each bottle onto his unhallowed spawning ground.

"Rise up," he bids them, "grow in hatred, to bear the fruits of hate."

Oh, unholy thing, I see them rising, curled and hunched, huge holes in their heads, great and gaping pin pricks, to do the bidding of their master. Carson is tight and tense beside me. I swear I feel the pounding of his heart.

Vance lays out four Rise Up flags with upward arrows and the words, 'Hate', 'Strength', 'Law', 'Nation', and takes out another Tupperware box.

Carson gasps as Vance opens it and inside we see a spider with a big, numinous orange body, four spots on her abdomen, and brightly striped legs.

"A four-spotted orb weaver," says Carson, "*Araneus quadratus*. Sacred to Creiddylad. I saw them when I was up on the West Pennine Moors. In the morning, their orb-webs, dewy and beautiful, hang on the heathers. Their spots are the cast-off shells of the moon before she puts on her waning casing. They spin the fate of the world, and they catch ghosts in their webs."

Cruel thing to see the pin dropping down, once into the upper right spot, twice into the lower right, thrice into the upper left, the spider writhing.

"No!" Carson cries out, as the pin rises a fourth time, he plunges his hand into the water, snatches the spider before the beastly thing can fall again. But he's too late to save her. She's crippled, legs all bent up, dying.

"Who?" rages Vance as he stares into the empty box, "Where? When?"

Carson's staring at the spider, the hemolymph leaking from the three big white spots, twitching once, twice, thrice, then folding up. "She's gone."

A grief on his face to match the mourners in all the plague years.

I try to comfort him. "It's just a spider." Then I damn my quick lips because his expression tells me that the spider means much to him and more.

"It's not only a spider but the fate of the world." In the corner of his eye, a tear like an orb, like the last glint of hope fading from the gaze of a dying horse, and in it I see our desolate globe spinning tragically, bare and senseless.

Then, I do an odd thing, by an act of compulsion not fully my own. Something my thawing heart, my body, knows how to do. I put my arm around him. He does not flinch, but lets it rest there innocuous as a crocodile on a log, and, as the tear runs down his cheek, he blinks. No more tears flow. I sense he feels a certain comfort. A flood of warmth flows through me. A kind thing I've done, comforting a boy who mourns a spider, whose shoulders are so skinny, but so remarkably strong.

Chapter Forty Six

Chesney

It's so frustrating that Val and I are not yet old enough to vote. After school, we stand and watch the voters going in and out of the polling station on Woodcroft Close.

"Vote for the Eco-Shift coalition," she whispers as each voter goes in, whether they are eco-crowd or trads or folks who could sway either way. Her left hand is touching her tattoo as a way of channelling the magic.

I'm not sure if what she's doing is ethical or whether it's working.

She swats a couple of midges from her face. Strange to see them about on a mid-November day when it's grey and chilly. That's climate change.

They move on to me. "Stop it." I brush them away without hurting them. Thwarted, they move on to the next lot of voters, as Val whispers again.

"It won't work on them," I say, "let's get out of the way," as Old John Winter and his wife and the Winter Crew approach in white suits and blue ties. A few of their followers are wearing badges displaying Rise Up arrows.

It's painfully clear they are going to vote for the coalition of the Traditionalists, Rise Up and the New Conservatives rather than the coalition of Eco-Shift, the Liberal Democrats, and Old Labour.

We retreat, return, but are asked to move on by Mark Denver, doing his rounds, ensuring that all is in order, that no one is trying to sway the vote.

We return to Val's. "Carson, are you in?" she shouts.

No reply.

"Out again," she shakes her head, "when he's not rehearsing, he's out fixing, and for some reason, he's taken to visiting his old

haunt on the island on the mill pond where he used to go to escape from our Dad again."

"It's probably to get away from all the stress he's under," I surmise.

"I suspect it's more," Val speaks darkly, "that he's harbouring someone there. Food's been going missing, and the other day, one of our local growers came to drop off a big bag of weed when he barely ever smokes it."

Lorraine

He's not going to like this, he isn't, him who talks to the flies. I've been watching Vance in the scrying bowl all day, with his dirty great pin killing all manner of midges, mosquitoes, horseflies, deer-flies, which he's kept shut away in his Tupperware boxes somewhere since the season ended. Like one of those terrible splatter-porn movies, it's been.

Then, the bastard's been raising them up, sending them on to plague the voters. I've been watching them at the polling booths, in ones or twos, in small groups, or in big swarms where the eco-crowds are the strongest. Biting, gadding the voters into voting for the Traditionalist coalition.

I've got a plan and I'm hoping Carson will be impressed by it. I look at my watch. It's nearly 6 p.m. and he said he'd be here by 6. And he is, bang on time as usual, hasn't brought me a spliff. Tonight we mean business.

I show him the carnage in the scrying bowl, the splatter of bodies and wings. Vance's hand, the pin going up and down, mercilessly. His unholy words.

"By the power of God over the demons of Hell I send the minions of the Lord of the Flies to gad the people into voting for the Traditionalist Coalition."

Filamentous wings of pity and disgust sweep across Carson's face.

“I’ve got a plan.” I’m going to impress him. I’m going to excel.

“Tell me,” he speaks curiously and pressingly.

It’s staggeringly simple. Doesn’t take much of a Winter to dream it. I take Carwenna out of my pocket. “Right down,” I gesture, “into his hand. Make him drop that dirty great pin and make sure he doesn’t use it again.”

“He does have two hands,” Carson reminds me.

I feel a bit sheepish.

“But it isn’t a bad plan,” Carson says, “my only worry is that if you make an assault on his person, even from here, there might be a backlash.”

A vague reminder of a warning Vance had spoken to me and Christian. But I’m not going to be put off. Brave and bold, I’m going to be. Save them flies. Win the vote away from my father - him and his dastardly crew.

“I could probably help,” Carson eyes Carwenna weighingly, “if I aided you to plunge her down, send a mist to chill, to confuse, to dull any response.”

I consider. A part of me wants to go it alone. A part of me wants this partnership of a cold, chilling revenge and the touch of his hand on mine. “Let’s do it together. We’ve both been hurt by Vance, let’s make him suffer.”

He draws back his sleeve to display his tattoo. I’ve never seen it so close before. Lifelike as one of the bones in our freezers but all silvery and glowing. When, after a pause of reluctance, he puts his hand on mine, his touch is cool as the mist on a November morning in Well Field when the ghouls of those who couldn’t get their holy water from the dry well gather.

Carwenna, my best friend, didn’t foresee us doing this, did you?

Pretty as the mist, she is, White Hilt, in two hands. Even deadlier, she is.

Now, for our target. Our visions, our minds, as one move together.

Vance picks a sleepy horsefly from where he's kept it in a stupor from his box and adds it to the messy slaughter-board of blood, carcass, wing, and raises the hand with the pin. I raise Carwenna to heaven's height and bring her down with a force to drive his hand to Hell where it belongs. Carson's hand, glued to mine like quicksilver, helps her fall quicker than a bomb.

Vance's scream is almost as satisfying as one of my fat, juicy, roast chickens.

I feel the rush of Carson's magic tingling through my hand down the blade. Around the wound, Vance's hand turns paler than the mist. All manner of ghost flies, midges, mosquitoes, ghastly wraiths with sucking protuberances and big bug eyes surround him, beating fine filamentous wings.

"Quick! Remove your knife!" Carson urges me.

I pull back, but too late, or not fast enough, for from the blade, gushing up into my hand, comes a foul spout of black pestilence I am sure is born from Vance's blood. Oh, it's vile, oh, it's awful. It's far worse than what runs in the open sewers in the Mile Tunnel and in the Doom Camps. It's sicker than the pus-filled boils of the Black Plague and the oozing wounds of lepers. It's got a stench worse than the cesspits of Hell and the latrines of the Devil and all his demons after they've had one of their wildest parties. And it's flowing into my veins with an awful, terrible shrieking sound. Or is that me, is that me screaming, dimly aware this is the backlash?

"Push it back," Carson's voice, "I can help, but only you can do it."

"How?" I ask in panic. None of Vance's training prepared me for this.

"I'll send the mist. You drive them back with something beautiful."

And I send those gristly demons back, that storm of pestilence and plague, with a herd of white horses born from the mist, shaking their heads in defiance, bucking, leaping, tails flying like

the streamers of an army. I send them back into him, Vance, where they belong, like the Devil himself, screaming.

And Carson pulls and I pull and together we pull my knife from the water. Dripping, she is, Vance's blood on her, in my hand, his upon it. And we're both shaking and we're both terrified and we're both triumphant.

"Better than Macbeth, this," I speak with a wild grin.

His eyes are like the blackest of cauldrons and in them devils and ghosts spin.

Chapter Forty Seven

Chesney

I never thought I'd see the gallows re-erected on Hangman's Bank here in Penwortham, on Gallows Hill in Preston, all the gallows across the country.

As I stand with Val and the rest of the crowd, coming and going, muttering in fear and disbelief, a few uprisers laughing and joking, I feel as if I've stepped back into another day, another age, an image from one of the old history books that Mrs Robertson remains so fond of. It's like I'm back in my dream, the gallows the spitting image of the one that Sebastian Robinson was hung on, with its platform, uprights, and crossbeam.

The darned raven's even up there, for show, preening its feathers.

"Who do you think'll be first on?" someone wonders.

"Don Doom." "Carson Robinson." "Ssh his sister." "Lorraine Winter. She's left the Winter House, is on the run, under suspicion of witchcraft."

Sebastian cronks— a merciless sound on a pitiless late November day. Since the Traditionalist Coalition got in, it's like a spectre has overhung the land. Grey skies. The grey Ribble churning her miserable way past. There's been a plethora of suicides floating out to the murkier grey sea.

"Did you know about Lorraine?" Val asks.

"No," I admit, surprised to hear she's left her family home.

"I think I know who Carson's harbouring."

As I gaze at the gallows, I see Sebastian hanging there, then Carson, then Lorraine. Then it's me. The flesh is rotting from my body. Sebastian has had my eyes. My bones are bare and exposed, pale and hollow. It's then that I know my leukaemia has returned, and I'm not just down, weak, and weary.

Lorraine

I've been warned by Carson about the gallows on Hangman's Bank and the mugshots of my face on social media following the attack on Vance. Recognised my knife, by her white hilt, he did, the hand of Winter upon her.

Carson's sure Vance knew his hand too and is watching it carefully as he plays his guitar, his fingers, with their black-painted nails dancing over the strings. "Play again, Carson, play quicker." He's being worked to the bone.

I know, at this fatal point, it's essential I stay on the island like he told me. Here, where there's a hiding hole to climb down into beneath the leaves should they come. Where I've got wrens as my alarm bells. Where Carson's wrangled up some defences that I can detonate at the touch of a button.

I've been good. Very good. Yet, every Saturday night, the urge to go to Booths to get myself a nice big fat juicy roast chicken dripping fat is getting stronger. This night, I swear I can smell one on the wind. As if that little wretch has set her cookers up in the old carpark near the tram-road and they're turning there, on their griddles, one cooking just for me.

Oh, the reek of it's enough to drive me wild, and I swear I've been so good I deserve a chicken. Just one little outing isn't going to hurt. I'll be safe. To be sure, I tuck my hair into one of Carson's hats and put on an old fisherman's coat. Stinks, it does, like old wax and the earth it's laid on. No one will recognise me, hair tucked up, no make-up, stinky as a doomster.

Of course, Carson hasn't left me any way to leave, God damn him. Particularly when the scent is getting stronger, so thick and greasy, in the air. With forced patience, I rig myself a raft from fallen willow branches and bind it together with an old rusty reel of fishing wire. I get myself a nice big willow oar and row across the dark waters to the woods.

A strange sense of freedom. I hadn't realised I'd felt cooped up like a hen before. Good to be free ranging through the woodland. Treading over the soft fall of willow leaves, tawny owl overhead,

“Ke-wick, ke-wick.” Sounds something like a warning and I try to remember what Carson said about owls. Something about goddesses and nuns with human faces. How, if they fly neither at dawn nor at dusk, they are either a portent of danger or of the huntsman and horses of Gwyn ap Nudd and his soul-ride passing.

Could be something awry at that car park or Gwyn could be on the hunt. Yet, the scent is so strong I can see a chicken sitting dripping and dribbling just for me. As I approach the car park, by God, it is laid there. Who has brought this gift for me? Was it the raven? Or was it one of God’s angels? Mouth watering madly, I go over to it. Tasty chicken! Tasty chicken! Reach for it.

Then, it vanishes and someone behind me grabs my arms and someone else pulls a great black sky of a hood down over my head and I hear a familiar voice. No, not him, that smarmy little git, it can’t be, but I know it is.

“Straight into our hands - couldn’t resist a chicken could you?” Christian sniggers.

Chesney

For the first time I see Val and Carson fight in their living room. It isn’t a pretty sight.

“I know you’ve been harbouring that Winter bitch!” Val bawls.

She goes at him with her fists, and he catches them like snowballs and melts them. She tries to wrestle him to the floor, and he slips from her grip like an otter. He grabs her by the front of her hoodie, and with a strength out of proportion to his size, he shakes her like one of their old rugs. All the while, the cat cowers beneath the table, trembles, hisses, howls, and mewls.

Carson shakes the anger out of Val, and she collapses on the floor like a rag. “I hate her, I hate her. She’s been trying to kill you since primary school. She bullied Amelia to suicide, tried Chesney, and now is undoing you.” Unable to get her hands on him, she begins to pummel the floor instead.

"Sister, she's only a part of this; look at us." He squats, puts his hands on her shoulders.

"She killed Dad, and she made you…"

"His death liberated us, and eating his heart only made me worse. You know, this, whatever it is, runs in the family. You eat and drink too much. I can't eat. Remember hearing Mum making herself sick after Christmas dinner?"

"Yeah," admits Val uncomfortably.

"When I was in hospital in the third year, she admitted she was bulimic as a girl. I'm sure it came back when Dad started having an affair with Mel."

"She drank too much too," Val says, "was always chucking afterwards."

"She was unwell," Carson admits, "when she took that drive over the moors."

"I still believe the Winters killed her," Val speaks with certainty.

"Me too," says Carson.

An owl ke-wicking outside.

"That doesn't sound like a hunting call but a warning." Carson is on his feet. His hair is standing on end as if he's touched one of those hair-raising metal balls.

"Ke-wick, ke-wick!" A face half human, half owl, at the window.

"Lorraine's no longer on the island." His face has fallen like a madman off a cliff.

"What do you think…?" Val's mouth is wordless as Death's Door.

"Not even Gwyn ap Nudd and all his huntsmen and hounds can save her now."

Lorraine

They've had me, they have, now I'm a torn and tattered twisted thing. Like the walking dead, I am, or one of those broken doll

girls. Didn't bother to put my poor fractured left arm with all the holes where they'd driven their accursed needles into it, in a sling, or to splint the fingers they'd snapped, or put plasters on the fingernails they'd torn off. Just sent me out, walking wounded, with two legs so I could walk and with my right hand intact with Carwenna so I can still commit treachery and murder.

What you can't see is what they did to my mind and that's the worst bit.

I tried to be brave, I did, I called to all the saints and martyrs of Lancashire who got tortured and killed during the Reformation - Saint Edmund Arrowsmith, Saint Ambrose Barlow, Blessed Robert Nutter, Blessed John Finch, Blessed Richard Hurst. To all who died in the Pilgrimage of Grace. To the Jacobite Rebels of Preston. Even to Guy Fawkes on his bonfire. They came, they did, for a while, they were with me, but they couldn't stop it.

I wanted to call him, Carson, on his great white horse, to make me away to the land of no pain, but I didn't, no way I wanted him to come to suffer.

And worse than the physical brutality of it was the drone of the black music in the background and Vance's voice repeating over and over. "You are a Winter. You are a murderer. You are a dealer. You are a torturer. You will return to your role in the White Book of Winter and you will kill Carson."

I screamed, "I will not, I will not, I will not, I will never betray him!"

The room got blacker and the lights got whiter and the pain got worse.

Then, Carson came for me on a horse of whiteness and goodness and purity with a saddle and bridle of gold and a blanket like a floral tapestry. He sat me behind him and he let me hold onto his waist and he took me to ride across the clouds where the sun never shines but a tortured heart can soar.

He showed me the places where the rainbows dance and hide, and where the leprechauns store their pots of gold, and I was good and didn't steal them. Through all seven colours to a green land

where rainbows can appear without rain or sunshine shimmering like the impossibility of my vision.

I said, "I've got a knife that can cut a rainbow from the sky."

He said, "You cannot cut down the rainbows of the Otherworld."

Yet, I did. I got one, I put it in his hands, and he held it like a slinky.

Then we sat on the side of a pool with our bums just touching, and he told me how the frogs are not princes in disguise but ancient monsters who have shining jewels in their foreheads and stalk the world devouring souls. How the dragonflies have tens of thousands of lenses in their eyes, and each can see a different world, and he showed me one where I had a pony when I was growing up, and I was happy, and one where his father was an otter.

I wished my dad was a great white bear, and when I saw him standing over me, I realised he had dragged me back from the land of no pain.

"Dad, why are you here? Did you come to help me or torture me?"

"That depends on whether you will return and do your duty."

My mum was there too, and I wished she was a she-bear who loved her cub.

"Come back to us? Be a good girl?" Snow in her hair, or was it coke?

So, I gave in, but not fully. I told a few lies, I did. I said I'd go back to the mill pond with my sympathy story for Carson, then go back to the Winter House, and I'd bide my time, court Carson like a good girl, then kill him. But a lie, that was, I swear it. Not a doing of their twisting of my mind.

I'm going to the mill pond, I am, but not to him. Don't want him to see me like this. Don't want him to see me again. Don't deserve him. No, this is the end of me, Lorraine Winter, it is, the world would be best off without me.

I've got myself from Preston down the Old Tram Way in the dark. People shying away from me, from my poor left arm hanging like a broken chicken leg and the suffering on my face—scourged and delirious, me.

Here I am, back at the car park where my chicken betrayed me. I never want to see a chicken again, never plan to. I'm going where there's no greed. I'm going to the fishing bay where he ties his raft, where the faces of the drowned toys look up and ponder the terrible meaninglessness of the universe.

Why do we live? Why do we die? Why do we suffer? Why? Why? Why?

I see my reflection in the water with my tangled hair and mangled left side. Sorry, you are Lorraine Winter. I won't be sorry to see the end of you.

What will he think when he sees me lying sunken, just another dead doll amongst his sister's toys, broken, discarded, like hers I so cruelly tore apart?

Will he care? A thought that makes me swallow as if I've got a bit of moon rock stuck in my throat, as the moon watches over, shimmering on the water.

"Lorraine."

No, it can't be him. Not now. At this fatal moment. I don't trust myself. I'm terrified of what they've done to me and what I might do. "Don't come near me, Carson. They've done for me. You can't trust me. I might try to kill you."

"Lorraine," his voice is softer than the willows whispering, "you've been trying to kill me all your life. The last few weeks have been a novelty."

Hurts me, that does, really bad, because it's the cold and barren truth. Like the bare trunks of the willow trees stripped of their leaves, like me of my skin.

"Anyhow," Carson comes to stand beside me, "I'm not so afraid of death."

"Me neither." It's a lie. I don't walk on water or fly the Otherworld like him. I'm desperately afraid of those murky

waters and lungfuls of duckweed. Of the choking, of the pain of it, of the struggle between body and mind, with one wanting to die and one wanting to live, but I swear I'll do it.

"Living sometimes feels harder," says Carson, "getting up, trying to eat, the weight, the responsibility of it. I feel like half my life I've lived on the edge."

As we stand together on the dismal brink of the fishing bay, by his reflection, I see his eyes are like the hollows of the moon and he wears a sadness like rainwater that has long forgotten where it wants to go.

"You… sometimes feel like this?"

"Sometimes I fear I'm losing my mind," he admits. "I can't sleep, I can't eat. I see the world as a mess of broken springs and I'm haunted by the dead. The gates of Annwn can contain their fury no longer and their numbers are endless."

"My doing?" I choke.

"Not just your doing - I'd already swallowed half my father's sins."

"My mum and dad watched me being tortured and did nothing."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Come away from the edge?"

"No, I'm terrified, I'm terrified of the madness. Carson, they not only tortured me, but they did something to my head - brainwashed me to kill you."

He shivers, like a ripple through water. "You haven't killed me yet."

"No, a wonder. But perhaps it isn't time yet. Perhaps it's a programme. Just a push of one of Vance's buttons. Do I sound mad to you?"

"What does it matter if you are? It's a mad world anyway."

"You mean you don't mind if I'm crazy and pre-programmed to kill you?"

“Perhaps we can ride the madness together and find a way through?”

The thought lifts my spirits like the wind lifting the cloak of Winter’s Queen.

The “Ke-wick, ke-wick” of an owl screeches through my soul.

“Look.” He points in the waters.

By the gods I see the Wild Hunt crossing the moon in the water.

“I know it isn’t proper to turn and look,” says Carson, but he turns.

I turn with him to behold the Wild Hunt riding across the full moon. By God and all his angels, they are beautiful, and by the Devil and all his demons, they are terrifying. Gwyn ap Nudd, with his hunting horn, blows a blast more havoc-wrecking than all the Devil’s bagpipes put together. Then, his huntsmen, horned and antlered, on their great dark horses with crests like the tides at Blackpool, blowing sea-fog from vermillion nostrils. How they paw with huge round hooves bigger than the shields of fallen warriors. How they swish their tails, as if to erase all pain, as if to erase death.

And two of them are coming, two blue-black horses, flesh falling from them, near skeletal, with their great hearts leaping out of their chests on springs. Oh, that’s how I feel. In spite of my madness or because of my madness, my heart is beginning to beat again, and there is excitement in my belly.

“Shall we ride?” asks Carson.

“Yes.”

Chapter Forty Eight

Lorraine

Carson takes me to his house whilst his sister and her girlfriend are at school and splints my arm and my fingers and puts plasters on my torn-off nails. Kid's plasters. Favourites of Val's with cartoon characters like Mr Bump, a leopard with a cast on its leg, an elephant with a bandage on its trunk.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry as it's so incongruent with being tortured.

I laugh. He cries. We seem to have opposite ways of dealing with trauma. We fall in and out of madness, one falling, one picking the other up.

When we're not mad, we plot like Lord and Lady Macbeth back from the dead, with a whole coven of witches at the cauldron, on the Devil's dirtiest drugs.

He sits on his settee, stroking his cat, as we speak of what we will do to Christian and Vance and she hums and purrs like a chainsaw. She shows her claws and they are like carving knives or the scimitars of a legion of angry djinn swirling in from the Middle East to eviscerate their flesh.

I play the good girl back at home with Mum and Dad. I tell them that I'm back to selling drugs, twisting arms, using my apparel as a threat. "Don't want to be like this, do you, tattered, twisted, broken? You'll get what I got."

In reality, I'm helping Carson to twist the lines of exchange between the Winters and Summers, to deepen their conflict, to bring both families to an end.

I titter with Mum about how I'm courting him; how I'm so close to getting in his pants, how our bums have touched, how we've held hands. I spike her wine. I could kill her, I could, but that isn't part of our plan.

I tell Dad I no longer want a horse, that all my worldly desires are dead, that I'm happy being stabled in my room, mucked out, groomed, and fed.

Yet, as we head towards Christmas, that happy family time, there's something happening in my head. It's like a broken Christmas decoration. You know those silver baubles that sometimes crack and the cracks get bigger and bigger, then they break and you see the darkness inside? Well, it's like that. I can feel whatever Vance did to me cracking me and the visions of the black walls and the black music are getting stronger.

"Kill Carson." "Kill Carson." I won't. I won't.

I dream I murder Carson a hundred times and guiltily I recite them back to him. He plays them out on the stage - beheaded, crucified, hung, drawn and quartered, at the moment of death always locking gazes with Vance. Raven-like, premonitory, with a look to say, "Any of these could be your end." Each death-act takes a little more out of him, brings him closer to death.

*

It's Christmas Eve and all the silent stars are shining but our little town is not as quiet as Bethlehem and no one is waiting for Jesus to be born. There's no hope left. Every woman is a Mary wandering without a stable. More homeless on the streets of Penwortham than I've ever seen. Mad drunks. There's a doomster with a guitar on every street corner singing of the end.

"'Without a Prayer' has become a poison of despair," Carson speaks gloomily.

He hates to see his songs, produced by Vance, causing this milieu.

We light a candle for Mother Mary, but we don't sing Christmas carols. We climb down from the treehouse to where the fisherman fishes and we stand beside the waters and together we sing a spell for the rebirth of the sun.

Christmas is three days after the winter solstice - the return of the light.

But, as I sing, I see no light but only the dark cracks in the walls of the basement as the voice tells me to take my knife and cut his throat as he sings, his Adam's apple bobbing like he's swallowed the moon, in song-trance.

Somebody stop me, stop me, please. But there's no moon. She's hidden in her dark cave. There's no heron standing as his guardian. No owl to alert him.

Stop this. Stop this. I'm reaching for my knife. She's in my hand. One big arc. And he's scried it easily in our reflections, perhaps seen it before. He stops my hand within a millimetre of his throat. Carwenna's blade is shining in his eyes with all the stars who have constellated history and fate. His hand's on mine, like when we did for Vance, when we were almost friends.

Together, we lower Carwenna to the floor. My hand loosens. I let go.

"Not my best friend anymore," I tell him, "I'm going to throw her in the lake."

Then, I collapse, sobbing, with the shock, the near-miss of it all. "I tried to kill you, I'm so, so sorry, I should have gone to the water long ago."

Then, to my surprise, he squats down, puts his arms around me. Him who's never touched anybody but his sister and maybe her poorly little girlfriend. Skinny but strong arms and I'm snug in his hold as a fisherman in his jacket, and I'm safe and warm as if in a tent listening to the drum of rain.

Then, it comes, the clouds passing over, the pitter-patter. Still we don't move. It's as if the moment preserves us from getting wet and something washes over us like spring water from St Mary's Well, fixing up our wounds.

We stay there until we hear a bell ringing from the depths of the Otherworld, declaiming the birth of Christmas Day and the rising of the new sun.

"Should I," I ask, as sunlight seeps from the clouds, "take this chance to throw her in?" I gesture to Carwenna, "as an offering to the Lady of the Lake?"

I think of Arthur casting Excalibur away at the end of his career.

"We're not done yet," Carson shakes his head, "have roles to play."

"Then, will you keep her, so we don't try to kill you again?"

"Ok." He picks Carwenna up and vanishes her.

Yet, as I head home, she's back in my pocket, close to my hip as a prayer.

Chesney

"Watch," hisses Val.

We've invited Carson to my house for Christmas dinner in a bid to make him eat. He's speaking polite, "Hellos," handing out perfectly wrapped presents, small somethings each of us needs, and making conversation with Grandma and Grandad about their time working at the mill.

Val and I observe him closely as he hand gestures his way through the dialogue, upping and downing his knife and fork. We see he eats his turkey with two big dollops of cranberry sauce but disappears the roasties beneath the table and the Brussels sprouts into secret pockets like billiard balls.

"He hasn't slept," Val disapproves, noting his hollow eyes. "I'll bet he's been with Lorraine, in that treehouse again, plotting, like the Macbeths."

I'm glad he's here. His acts of charm take the concerned looks of my mum and grandparents away from me and the question of my treatment. I'm not that hungry either, but I make myself eat several slices of turkey to keep my strength up, good helpings of green and orange veg, thinking of them nourishing the remaining healthy cells in my body.

Carson is stumped by Mum's Christmas pudding.

“If you eat three bites,” Val sighs, “I will eat the rest,” as if it’s a chore.

After we have played board games, we go round to Amina’s.

“Come in,” she greets us, leading us into her living room.

Fatima and Aisha are in chairs in the corner looking at Aisha’s phone.

Their gran looks up from embroidering a prayer mat. “Who’s this?”

Amina looks pained, “Chesney, Chesney Liddell, your friend Dorothy’s granddaughter.”

“Oh yes,” her grandmother says, “and these are Winona and Stanley Robinson?”

“No gran, their son and daughter, Carson and Val.”

Amina keeps a brave face and gets us a cup of tea and Carson some water and brings in kitchen chairs so we can sit facing her and her sisters.

“How’s Daniel been since his victory at the rally?” I ask them.

“Classes have started picking up again,” reports Fatima.

“He’s back in the gym,” smiles Aisha.

“200kg on his barbell bench press.”

“250kg on his new leg press machine.”

“But he’s still struggling with depression,” Amina remains concerned.

“Have you had any more trouble with Rise Up?” Carson asks the sisters.

“We’ve been trying to stand up for ourselves, but…” Fatima stalls.

“I’ve brought you some presents,” Carson reaches into his bag.

“Muslims don’t celebrate Christmas,” Val reminds him.

“No matter.” Carson hands the perfectly wrapped bundles to the Iqbal family.

“The Complete Medical Encyclopaedia,” Amina is grateful.

Safir smiles as she unwraps a box of needles with beautiful golden thread.

“We’ll take these upstairs.” Fatima disappears with Aisha.

I notice one present is the shape of a knife and the other a gun.

Lorraine

"If our plan doesn't work, it will be the last time we sit here together," I say to Carson.

In spite of the heater on full power in his treehouse, I'm trembling like a leaf. We're in one of those Arctic blasts, and the mill pond has frozen over. People have been coming here to skate and fight, and last night it was like a spaghetti Western with a full shootout; then someone threw a grenade. It left a great crack in the ice and a huge black hole full of monsters— an abyssal reminder of where Carson and I will be going if our deadly gambit fails.

"The night of the Wolf Moon," Carson decided.

We scried for the best possible time to put an end to Vance in the bowl.

Since then, we've been making preparations to dispel his spectre from the world.

"The last full moon, in January, when the Wild Hunt will be riding out."

What madness, what wildness this will be, but at what a cost. A glance at the Black Book in which Carson has prepared the spell-songs for tomorrow night— Hollow Bone's much-awaited headline gig at Manchester Arena. Vance set up the gig, and the musical masterpiece will bring his downfall.

"By my bardic magic, I will drive him and his spectre from the land."

I watched Carson working fervently, dipping his raven feather quill in his black bone ink, writing in that ancient scrolling Brythonic script. It's taken so much from him, as if the ink is from the hollows of his bones. He's looking very worn, tired, and thin tonight, and as terrified as me.

"Can you see them?" I ask. "The demons spilling out of the black hole?"

“They’re just my sister’s old models— the mutants from Warhammer, from the Imperium of Man, who have been deformed by ionising radiation.”

“Oh.” I’m so relieved. I’d been so afraid the madness might be coming back, and I might not be up to the task ahead, and I might try to kill him.

It’s as if he reads my mind, so close we’ve become, by scrying together. “That’s gone now. I know it. The cracks closed up on Christmas morning. I saw it like one of those silver baubles you told me about on your tree. Like the moon healing over since those bastards sent a spaceship up there to try to mine out her helium-3 for nuclear fuel and her water ice for rocket fuel.”

“We’ll have her favour tomorrow.” I think of our shared suffering.

“Are you sure you want to go through with this?” Carson asks.

“Yes,” I speak in defiance of my fear, “I’m as sure as the Arctic wind on his wind chariot and the snow falling heavy as an axe on Winter Hill. I’m as certain as the ice that never cracks in Tartarus— the nether regions of Hell.”

“And as for you,” I ask, as he looks so trembly and wraithlike, “are you up to this?”

“I’m as certain as the course of the hunt that clamours its way along the spirit roads, sweeping up death, darkness, hunting ghosts and demons down.”

It’s like we’re in a play, like we’re in a movie. A part of me wants to act the villain and throw back my head and laugh with a manic “Wa ha ha ha!” But this isn’t funny. It’s serious as sin. The equipment we’ve prepared for Vance and Christian in our dark room in the Otherworld is not a laughing matter.

Creating the designs, my know-how of torture, his of mechanics, that was a devilish partnership, then getting the parts and getting it ready. All goes well and our revenge will be more perfect than Jesus on his cross. But should we fail, should Vance turn our mechanisms back on us…

I glance at Carson. If this were a Hollywood movie there'd be some last words, some romance. Nobody is ever asexual on the big screen. He's thumbing through his book, mouthing words, few thoughts for me. And what is it I want from him? "Not my friend, let alone my boyfriend," his words still haunt me and I wonder whether that is still where I stand. Whether I'm just a piece on a Warhammer board to be discarded after our game.

"Carson," I speak greatly daringly.

He looks up at the tone in my voice wary as a young red squirrel.

"Are we," I ask, swallow, "friends?"

He sets down his book and stares into the void in the mill pond and I can see that he's scrying deep within, trying to fathom the landscapes of friendship - an unfamiliar territory for me and him. Lost in a snowstorm, we are.

Returning from his trance, "It would be easier if we weren't."

"But are we?" I press.

"I suppose so."

It's almost a "yes" but it's still a poor penultimate scene in our shared script.

Chapter Forty Seven

Chesney

Val and I are on the train to see Hollow Bone at Manchester Arena - their long-promised headline gig, which we have both been waiting for.
It's my last chance of freedom before my descent to the underworld begins.

I've agreed to follow my Dad in a stem cell transplant. I will be having aggressive chemo and radiotherapy to kill off the malignant cells, which might well kill me, then, if I'm lucky, the healthy cells will be implanted. I might return, like Creiddylad, from the depths of Annwn, to rise again in spring.

It's the middle of winter. A cold mid-January. We're in the midst of another Arctic blast as the Jet Stream and Polar Vortex weaken and unravel. We're all living on the edge, on the tipping point, the point of no return.

Vance forced the band to go in a cab, saying he didn't want them to get mobbed, didn't want to pay out for the insurance. He's less bothered about nobodies like us, lets us stick to our ethics, take public transport. It's not just about the carbon footprint. I love the train. The sound of it, the rock of it. It reminds me of travelling with my Dad from Preston, to Lancaster, through Carnforth, Ulverston, Barrow-in-Furness, to Whitehaven, to visit my grandparents. Or to Oxenholme Lake District, Kendal, or Windermere, or to Penrith North Lakes for a walk or a run. I love the song of the station names. How it's recited every time we stop, counting down, getting shorter with each. Today it's Chorley, Bolton, Salford Crescent, Manchester Oxford Road.

"There's snow on Winter Hill tonight." I point to Val.

She joins me looking out to where the mast shines red and the hill top white. I imagine the Hounds of Annwn howling up there with sleek white coats, red ears and eyes, their master slipping their leashes one by one, free as snow.

Gwyn's in possession of Winter Hill, whereas, in summer, it is Gwythyr with his fiery sword. Summer and winter. Heat and cold. Fire and rain. Soon I'll have the fever again as the treatment wrecks my immune system.

I think of the Manchester to Liverpool line, which was built on rafts of floating timber over Chat Moss and managed to stay afloat until last autumn, when some boggart rose and grasped one of the carriages, pulled it down. I'm like that train, trying to keep myself buoyed up by positive thinking, that science can succeed, can keep the rise of genetic mutations and malevolent spirits who look like Hulk and the Warhammer mutants out. But I fear one day I will slip, fail, lose a wheel, a carriage, be pulled down.

We get off at Oxford Road, and I allow Val to get us a cab. It's cold. I'm weak. It's slippy. I can't decide if she's ladylike or gentlemanly as she helps me in.

We get out and go straight to the front of the queue because we've got special tickets. We head to the bar, see a man coughing, Val steers me away. "Let's go to our seats, then I'll get the drinks." We've got front row in the seating area. She returns with a pint of stout for her and lemonade for me.

We watch the last of the Broken Hearts, then wait for Hollow Bone.

"I'm worried about Carson tonight," Val says, "I can always tell when he's planning something by a little flicker he gets in a muscle in his cheek. He's been spending far too much time in that treehouse plotting with Lorraine."

I glance back to see her sitting with Vance and Christian.

"Whose side do you really think she is on?"

"Owing to how they treated her, I like to think Carson's."

It's still horrible to see her, left arm disfigured, half-useless, at her side.

The band set up, as usual, in obeisance to Vance with their 'Without a Prayer' projection at the back: Carson's silhouette, on his knees, in his top hat, with his hands pressed together on that fateful day on the Market Square.

They're dressed all in black, like silhouettes, themselves. They're almost paper-thin, the way that Vance has worn them down, mere shadows. There's a hollowness about them as if they are truly hollow bones.

None more hollow than Carson as he steps up to the music stand with his black book. He lays it down, like a bird with black wings, spreads the pages. From somewhere up above, Sebastian gives an ominous black cronk.

"We are living in dark times." Carson speaks softly, yet his voice is penetrating as the still small voice of God that Elijah once heard. "Some say that we are without a prayer, but I still believe our prayers are listened to and answered and that the gods and spirits hear our call."

I see he is looking at, defying Vance, who is staring back with eyes like razors.

The band launch into 'Hollowed' and 'Spirit Song' from their first album. It's good to see Carson, Olivia, Johnny, Midge coming back to life. Then, into a mournful song from their latest album, 'Cailleach Beara', about the Hag of Winter, with her blue skin, single eye, and white hair, raging against the fates of the pensioners who've died in the cold snaps.

"I see an old woman,
cold and grey, crouching
like a golem beside a heater
that gives less heat than
the frozen mountains
where Cailleach Beara
shakes her staff in rage."

Beforehand, the sea of fans had been swaying like a dark sea and joining in. The mosh pit had been alive with people hurtling back and forth like balls across a hockey pitch and with crowd surfers riding the pitching waves. To this one, they are still, becoming like the doldrums, or a frozen sea.

Next, ‘I Killed an Albatross’, the band’s take on ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’. Carson wearing an albatross with a gaping gunshot wound.

The day I shot an albatross
what evil looks from old and young.
Instead of the cross like a pendant
about my neck, it was hung.

Now I’m trapped between here and there.
Sea serpents biting at my heels
and wrapping my legs
with a skeletal crew.

I’m without a prayer -

I’m the ancient mariner
doomed to wander forever with my tale -
no chance of getting into Heaven
or warming my toes in Hell.

‘Polar Vortex.’ A twisting, turning song, about the tragedy of its collapse.
Carson spins, turns, looks like he’s on the verge of collapsing himself and calls the interval early, then vanishes like a magician from the stage.

Lorraine

The time has come to put our plan into action. As Vance and Christian head to the men’s toilets, I head to the ladies’ and open a doorway to the Otherworld. There, I meet Carson. Together, we create another doorway adjacent to the men’s and wait until Vance and Christian have zipped their flies. Then, like Annwn’s demons, we snatch them into our dark chamber.

Before they can scream, we have the scold's bridles on them, the jangling bits that have silenced the tongues of witches and cut into the mouths of horses. Worse than any harsh bit— gag bit, spade bit, English shank, Kimberwick or Pelham— these are. We put them in blue-grey chains borrowed from the King of the Otherworld, in which bards sing like the tides of the sea. They won't be singing anything but laments tonight. Far more harrowing than the songs from 'Without a Prayer' put together and multiplied.

I take great delight as they look around the equipment we have designed in dawning horror. This makes the dungeons of Lancaster Castle and the torture cells beneath the Tower of London look like a children's game show.

"Corkscrews like drills," Carson shows them, "with variable speeds and gears." He flits to another station. "Flamethrowers with a ranged incendiary effect." "Saws— circular, bowsaw, jigsaw, tenon saw, hacksaw." "A purpose-built rack with extra stretching horizontal and lateral."

"And don't forget I've got a knife," I say, "who can part skin from flesh or flesh from bone in one foul sweep or make the agony extend for an eternity— longer than the stay of one of Ratty's trains walled up in the Mile tunnel."

"Kraa, kraa!" Sebastian is sitting on a pinion, hungry for another eye.

Shitting themselves, they are. Chomping on their bits. I'll free them to scream.

Me and Carson could be grand inquisitor and grand inquisitoress tonight. Outdo the Spanish Inquisition, the inquisitors of King James, them at the Vatican. But he's showing no delight. He's looking a little sick, a little faint.

He fingers the calluses on his fingers from his endless playing and glances down at his knees, scabs gone, but the painful memories remaining. "You tried to break me, to enslave me, to bend the world to your hatred, but tonight we will be done with

your demonic possession. From your curse we will be freed and you will listen to the soundtrack."

Their mouths move up and down. They chomp on their bits like the tortured horses in Black Beauty who get knocked down, whipped, knocked down again.

Carson vanishes and I'm glad he's gone— he's not got the stomach for this.

Chapter Fifty

Chesney

Carson reappears on the stage, and I struggle to read the expression on his face. It's like he's been to Hell, seen the demons, and for a moment, been one of them.

"Our second set is called 'Depossession'. Will you join me in learning the origins of Rise Up and driving the Spectre of Hatred from the Island of Britain?"

"Yes!" The crowd cheers. "Yes!"

The band are coming to life again, but it's a sinister life. 'The Seeds of Hate' is a dark, crawling song about how an evil magician sowed maggots killed by pin prick holes in their heads into a grave, then raised their spirits.

'Four Spotted Orb Weaver' is a lament for a spider killed to create hateful flags. As I stare at her image, displayed on the projector, the pin piercing three of her four spots, I feel Creiddylad's pain, as if the pin is jabbing into me.

'Risen from Nowhere'.

Ghoulish maggots,
hate-fuelled riots,
bloody flags.

From nowhere,
they've arisen.

What will it take
to send them back?

'Gadfly' is about the antagonist sticking pins in all manner of flies and sending out their ghosts to harry the voters into voting for the Traditionalist Coalition. I recall the midges at Woodcroft Community Centre. Could this be true? Inside, I know his

opponent is Vance. I glance back and see that Vance, Christian, and Lorraine are now absent. I admire Carson's efforts to sing the Latin names of all who have died.

Tabanus sudeticus - dark giant horsefly.
Tabanus bovinus - pale giant horsefly.
Tabanus bromius - band-eyed horsefly.
Haematopota pluvius - common horsefly.

No other band could get away with singing for the cleggs, the midges, the mosquitoes.

"The Spectre of Hatred has arisen from the abuse of nature."

"Boo! Boo!" Hisses and down-turned thumbs.

"Are you with me in driving the perpetrator from our society?"

"Yes!" "Yes!" Cheers from the crowd.

Lorraine

I set upon Christian first so Vance can watch and see what's coming to him.

That smarmy little shit, top in his set at Stonyhurst, brown-nosing the teachers, arse-licking his way into Vance's office, is going to find his education is of no value now. He's going to get it for putting me off my chickens.

"Thumbikins." I begin as I've seen both of them do to their victims.

I put Christian's thumbs in the thumbscrews and turn the vice until I hear the nice, satisfying sound of bone being crushed like rocks in a quarry. He bites on the gag and twists his head like a tortured horse, yet I keep crushing.

Then, I smash his kneecaps with a mallet as roundabout revenge for Carson's knees, again and again, revelling in the sound of bone shattering.

Damn it, he's passed out with the pain, but he comes round again as I put him on the rack, fasten his ankles and wrists to the

rollers, take to the handle. As I turn it, slowly, like a witch at her cauldron, the rollers roll apart.

"No putting him back together again with your tricks," I mock Vance.

Dad's pet magician stares in horror as Christian's limbs are stretched to breaking point, his bones pop from their sockets, his ligaments tear and snap. He's long gone, beyond consciousness, by the time his body is torn apart.

Finally, I take Carwenna, cut into Christian's chest, take out his still-beating heart. I place it on the table, beside Vance, so he can listen to it failing.

He shakes his head frantically, guessing what's coming to him.

"Not yet," I say, "we've got some way to go."

"Kraa!" Sebastian eyes the heart hungrily.

"Not for you - you need to save your appetite for his other eye."

"What will it be first?" I glance around at the implements.

Finally, I spy it, a silver pin long and thick as a knitting needle. If only I could stick it through both his knees, but he will be needing them to run with. Yet, he's got two arms; he'll not be needing either of those. I smile. A smile that suggests I'm going to get my appetite for chicken back after this.

Vance quails in horror.

"It's time to banish the darkness without and within," Carson's voice above.

Chesney

"This is Depossession!" Carson and the band launch into an electrifying piece.

He sings like he, himself, is possessed, his voice doomy, shaking, jerking.

My life has never been my own.
There's always been something inside me.

I don't know who put it there,
if it's there to destroy or inspire me.

It's time, it's time, for a depossession.

My life has never been my own.
There have always been forces outside me,
destroying my dreams and the dreams of the world,
punishing children and shaming the old.

It's time, it's time, for a depossession.

As Carson sings, a horrible wailing rises from below. It sounds like the voice of a demon being exorcised from a body or someone being tortured.

My life has never been my own.
The forces outside have twisted me
as they've twisted our culture, usurped the vote,
driven us to torture and hatred.

It's time, it's time, for a depossession.

The scream grows louder, and people look about in fear.

My life has never been my own.
The forces outside have manipulated me
but I've seen the truth in the eye of the world—
the hidden is no longer hidden.

It's time, it's time, for a depossession.

As Carson sings, to the shock of everyone, on the stage appears Vance. His black shirt is drenched in blood from gory holes that look like they have been made by an extremely large and nasty

pin. Both his arms are broken, mangled, hanging useless as a pair of flippers. There is fresh blood around his lips. One of his eyes is a dark pit and the other a pitiful pecked-out mess. Lorraine stands behind him and Sebastian is above, preening, satisfied. He's been tortured, I realise, as vengeance for all the suffering he has caused.

"This is the devil who created Rise Up and sowed the seeds of hate. Will you drive him from this arena, will you drive him from our society?"

In spite of the grotesque nature of his fate, "Yes! Yes!"

"This is Hunted!" The band launch into a perilous drumbeat and a rhythm of dark guitars and I swear I can feel the coming of the Wild Hunt.

Vance runs. Lorraine, mounting a dark spectral horse, leads the hunt after him and a number of the doomsters get up to help her drive him out to the mad whirring of the music and whirling and thrashing in the mosh pit.

The mayhem calms, lower chords, a sense of descending peace.

"From his spectre we are released," speaks Carson, "thanks to the hundreds of rebels, activists, martyrs, whose deaths I have staged over the years." All their images show on the screen - a visual litany of the dead. "What has risen up will sink back down again and our contract is ended."

He tears up a sheet of paper with his signature on it and the band follow suit.

As the faces flicker out it's as if only the support of the dead sustains him. The powers he has been channeling for so long as a hollow bone. He sways on his feet, falls to one knee, then the other, collapses completely.

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The crowd cheers, used to Carson's melodrama and death scenes. The band members bow, but turn in concern when he doesn't get up to join them.

When Olivia goes over to him and shakes him, and he does not move, Val leaps up in fear and runs for the stairs. I follow as Olivia's calls for help ring out, and the medics rush onto the stage, put him on a stretcher, and bear him off.

"I'm his sister," Val barges her way backstage, tearing the curtains.

"Minor cardiac arrest, low pulse, low blood pressure, low blood sugar." The medics surround him with instruments, and the band surrounds them.

He looks so pale and fragile, unconscious against the white sheets, that I can barely believe he's the same person who was commanding the crowd onstage.

"When did he last eat?" asks a young male medic.

The band shake their heads. None of them can remember.

"His heart's beating again, but his pulse is irregular," speaks an older female medic, "he needs to go to hospital and will likely have to stay a while."

"Only the patient and the medical personnel are allowed to ride in the ambulance," the woman tells us as she closes the doors, "you'll have to get a cab."

It feels like forever until we manage to hail a black cab and climb inside.

By the time we have got to Manchester Royal Infirmary and been told that Carson is still in A&E but will likely be moved to the Avondale Unit, at Preston, we have found the bay his bed is in, and he has come round.

"He won't like being sent back there again," says Val, "he hated it last time."

"No," he is saying, "I won't consent to treatment, and I won't be force-fed."

"Young man," a middle-aged male doctor with glasses and a stern look is pointing to the heart monitor, "your heartbeat is

irregular, you're severely underweight, we need to run tests for liver and kidney failure."

"I'm fed up with others controlling my life. I and only I determine what I eat." His voice is like an iron rod sounding from an otherwise ailing body.

"Then why can't you do it?" sobs Val. "It's not difficult. Chew, swallow, repeat. Not compared to what Chesney has to do to fight her illness."

"Val, that's unfair," I say.

"You should understand," Carson says, "what it's like to have no control over your life. First, I was the fixer. Then, I got the band and thought I'd have freedom, but then I had even less due to becoming a slave of Vance and the accursed music industry, and even now I've won freedom, I can't escape Cyledyr's fate. My only freedom left is the choice of whether to eat or not to eat, to live or to die, and I'm not going to let you take it away from me."

"At this stage, taking your life into your own hands is dangerous," said the doctor. "You could end up with re-feeding syndrome. Your body drawing nutrients out of your blood to metabolise food might be fatal."

Defiantly, Carson reaches into his back pocket, takes out a packet of Parma Violets and puts not one, or two, but half the packet into his mouth and chews. The doctor stares in horror as if he might explode. Moments later, a little colour returns to his face. He throws off the blanket, gets up from the bed, takes a couple of shaky steps, thrusts back the curtain, then vanishes.

Chapter Fifty One

Lorraine

"I rode Vance down, I did," I tell Carson, "down Oxford Road, shrieking, eyeless, seen by all, on car, on foot, on the buses. All the doomsters behind me. All the riders of the hunt with their horns and wings and all the hounds and the birds who shriek above with their beaks and their slashing talons.
We drove him, we did, right out to the Manchester Mosslands where the four-spotted orb weavers hang like baubles on the heathland. Right through their frosty webs to where the will-o'-wisps dance and the water-horses pore, to where the snow never settles on the bogs and down he went."

"I saw him sinking," Carson admits, "I had a vision of him going down - attempting to tread the peat as if it was water, not the long slurp of something hungrier and the water-horse beneath with teeth like a shark."

"His hand was the last thing to sink, scarred by Carwenna, as if he was reaching for God, but he didn't answer. Without a prayer, he was. I might have kept it as a trophy, taken it home to our freezer, once, but I let it go."

"So it's done. He's gone." Carson looks to the mill pond beginning to thaw. He looks tired, weary, thin. There's not much left in him or of him.

"I heard that you collapsed on the stage and…"

He flashes me an angry look.

I'd been shocked to realise the severity of his anorexia.

"But now Vance is gone," I say to him, "we can be free. You and the band have enough favour and support; you'll be famous in no time."

"No, Lorraine," he shakes his head, "I'm not needed as a rockstar anymore."

"But it's all you cared about."

"No, it wasn't - the vision of the gods is bigger than me."

By God and all his angels, will I ever understand him?

"The battle is finished, but the world needs to mourn, the streams and rivers to flow again as the snow melts. A new spring must be born from grief."

"You sing a bloody good mourning song. You'll be good for that."

"Lorraine, I'm sorry, but me and my songs won't be around forever."

"What do you mean?" A feeling of foreboding and a clutching at my heart. When he doesn't respond, "Please tell me, you said we're sort of friends."

"I warned you it would be easier if we weren't." He speaks very sadly. His eyes are like the aching hollows in the bones of the unremembered dead.

"Why," a glimpse of what he's planning, so familiar, "when we've won?" I feel an overwhelming urge to catch him, hold him, pin him down and stop him floating off into invisibility, but I know he is wary of pins and control.

He sighs like the wind in the sails of the ship of the ancient mariner, ruffling the dishevelled feathers of the albatross with the hole in its chest.

"I've given everything, become too hollow, now I feel everything. It's too much."

There is such sadness in his voice it brings the little birds to flock outside, to hang there, blue tits chittering, great tits chattering, blackbirds flapping in panic, and none of the poor things able to decide what to do.

Carson lifts his sleeve and traces the outline of his hollow bone tattoo. Like him, thin, permeable, a periosteum that lets too many of the world's woes in. "I hear ants dying. Trees screaming as they're cut down in the plantations as far away as Gisburn Forest, Stocks, Billinge. The cries of jellyfish when they are washed up on the shore and cannot find a way home."

I see them lying there, stranded, think of how he looks stranded on this isle.

“Did you ever read the story of the Little Mermaid, Lorraine?”

“Yes, I did, how I loved her and how I hated that horrible prince.”

“I feel like her, dragged from the sea, but I’m not just walking on knives. There are knives everywhere. Princes, princesses, all striving to keep me here.”

And I’m one of them, a princess with a knife, trying to keep him in this world.

“I have been in many shapes and forms before I became Carson Robinson.” A strange fay light in his eyes as he speaks. “I have been an otter, slicking into the Ribble, rolling, playing wet and happy with other cubs. I have been a charm of goldfinches. I have been a red squirrel in Formby pinewoods, chasing my tail around trees, eating the strangest nuts. I’ve been a nut, a stone, a shell, an eggshell. I’ve been a cuckoo’s nest.”

“You’ve been a hare and a wild and beautiful pony to me.”

“If only this time I’d been born an animal.”

“If only we’d been Fell ponies up on Beacon Fell.”

“But we’re not,” he sighs, “we’re Carson Robinson and Lorraine Winter.”

“So where does that leave us, you and me, as we are?”

“Please don’t try to keep me here. You wouldn’t keep a seahorse from the water.”

How does he know about the seahorses that my brothers bought from a pet shop, brought home, put in tiny little tanks, took out, tormented? Fay little things, purple-orange bodies, spiny arched necks, curved faces. The twists of their tails long, winding as a rollercoaster, strong for clinging to plants. How I took the tanks all the way to Blackpool on the train, released them?

“No,” I say, “that would be a cruel thing. I’m kind now. Will not. But,” tears are welling in my eyes like meltwater on the lake, “what will become of me? Here. All alone. Lorraine Winter, the most hated girl on Kingsfold Estate?”

“You too could be free.”

“Follow you to the Otherworld?” My heart lifts in hope.

"Not yet," he shakes his head like a Fell pony, "there is hope for you in this world."

"You mean I might one day have a horse?" At present I cannot see how.

"Horses are not to be had," he admonishes me, "but they will come to you, find you, choose you. Shetlands, Exmoors, Fells, Dales, Shires and Draughts. You will have greys, dapple-greys, piebalds, skewbalds and bays. You will have chestnuts who no longer have to pull carts and ex-racehorses."

I see the horses in his eyes in an unknown future and know it is true.

"How long have we got, as we are, me and you?"

Carson glances out across the mill pond and eyes the heron patiently waiting there. "I've still got a few things to tie up, fix up, odd jobs, remember?"

Yes, I do, how we're fixing up Summer and Winter. "Me too."

"I'll be playing a last gig, a solo acoustic set, at the Coach House on Hurst Grange Park at the Spring Equinox - a small understated affair for my most dedicated fans, for family, for friends, and I would like you to be there."

"As a friend?"

"Of course."

Chesney

I'm back in bed again. Burnt out. Hollow. Mourning my dead cells. Not only the healthy ones but the cancerous ones - they were part of me too. I'm empty, but it will only be for a while before the good cells are put in. I've seen them under the microscope, the allogeneic stem cells that have been donated by Mum and Dad. Not only was Mum a suitable donor but Dad, too, who had seen ahead, got some of his healthy ones frozen for me.

In them I saw all the faces of my mum and dad, all my grandmothers, all my grandfathers, running back in a long line until humanity began. I saw my human ancestors, non-human too,

the apes, the monkeys, small quick-running mammals, trees, plants, cyanobacteria, microscopic bacteria.

I'm empty, but I pray I will be full again as the land returns to life. Every morning I look out my window at the roundabout and see the snow melting from the trees, from the grass, retreating into small patches. Then, the last meltwater disappearing down the drains and the long winter is gone.

Val comes to visit me in colourful masks with cartoon characters arguing over her mouth. She brings me paintings of the celandines in the valley.

"And how are you?" I ask.

And she plays dumb behind her mask.

"And how is Carson?"

And she plays dumber than a mime artist.

I know he's what's bothering her. "Is he eating?"

"Just enough to live." Downcast eyes.

"And how are the band?"

"They're taking some time off."

"I guess they deserve a holiday." I recall how Vance worked them to the bone.

Chapter Fifty Two

Chesney

They're in me now. I remember lying there, praying to Nodens, whilst Dr Amhad hooked up the drip and began the infusion of the allogeneic stem cells into my bloodstream to travel from there into the marrow of my bones.

As they entered, steadily, drip by drip, I felt my ancestors coming. My dad, all his stories, all his runs, his days decommissioning Sellafield. My mum, her cakes, her hymns, her knitting, every one of her jumpers. All my grandmas, all my dads, all the animals, the trees, the microorganisms.

I'm feeling positive, this evening, as I'm walking hand-in-hand with Val to the Coach House on Hurst Grange Park. Carson's playing his first gig since Manchester Arena - a solo acoustic set for fans, family, and friends.

Everything smells of spring, and the hatred has died down. Rise Up disappeared back to nowhere, like they sprung from nowhere, after the depossession. The Traditionalists remain traditional, but the gallows have been dismantled. Val and I can walk without fear up the entrance road to Hurst Grange, illuminated on the right side by white lights on black pillars. Yews stand evergreen, and hawthorns are coming into leaf. It's possible to see the shadowy promise of spring even when walking in the dark.

The Coach House welcomes us with soft lights in its windows. It is a red brick building with a flat roof of slate over the reception and the main corridor. On the left, a triangular roof and four square windows. On the right, a similar roof with a large arched window big enough for a horse and carriage to enter. It originally housed the horses and carriages of the grange.

As we enter, there is a small buffet - crisps in paper bowls, sausage rolls on paper plates, biodegradable cups with a choice of red or white wine or lemonade.

Val pours herself a cup of red wine, filled right to the top. I pour lemonade. We greet Johnny, Olivia, Midge, and Jill, Jen, and Brian from Pandemonium. We make small talk about small signs of hope, like Joyce Tailor replacing Tory Tucker as the Traditionalist Prime Minister and Guardians of Nature getting more funding for wildflower planting.

"Carson's disappointed that our plans for resurfacing the rivers and streams of Penwortham and Preston got turned down," says Olivia.

I see he's fundraising for a different cause tonight— Cockersand Horse Sanctuary.

"Has he ever sat on a horse?" I ask Val.

"Only the horses of the Otherworld— the steeds of the Wild Hunt."

Is she pulling my leg? Knowing Carson, probably not. It said the hunt was seen riding Vance Jackson down Oxford Road and across Manchester, out to the mosslands, Lorraine at the head, blowing a horn.

Carson is playing in the Exhibition Room. It's dark. Lit only by the candles on the tables, flickering to illuminate the pictures of the horses and carriages, the grange, the coach house, throughout their history. He is sitting quietly in a corner, in the shadows, barely noticeable. His wooden acoustic guitar rests against his right thigh, and his fingers are lightly strumming the frets to create some easy background music as we take our seats. On a table, just in front of him, lies the Black Book of Peneverdant. A dark grey banner, with black writing, hangs above. 'A Last Prayer'.

Val and I and the band take a table at the front, and Pandemonium and other faithful followers from the eco-crowd and doom crowd take their seats.

As Val scans around, I see her jaw drop. "I can't believe it," she growls.

I follow her gaze, see her just come in, standing at the back, Lorraine. How different she looks, devoid of make-up, her face

starker than the moon. She's dressed in a simple woollen jumper and a pair of blue jeans. And she looks so horribly and inexplicably sad that I almost feel sorry for her.

"Welcome," Carson speaks from the shadows, "to 'A Last Prayer'."

There's something shadowy and portentous about the name, although he's always doing his final this, last that— 'The Final Unveiling,' 'The Last Howl.'

"I will begin with songs of rain and thaw so the rivers and streams might flow. This is the last time the Rain of Nodens will be heard. It got many who felt the same way through the despair; it has served its purpose."

The all-too-familiar chords played on every street corner in the bad time. His fingers, like the pitter-patter of rain on the strings, nails like black raindrops.

Is nobody going to pray for me?
Is nobody going to save me?
I'm lost in the rain of Nodens
longing for a friend.

Does something pass between Lorraine and Carson as he sings these words?

Is nobody going to pray for me?
Is nobody going to save me?
I'm lost in the rain of Nodens
longing for the end.

Does something even more knowing pass between them?

He plays 'The Frozen Lake' about the ice on the mill pond, the shootout, the grenade, the great void, of ice melting and pond-skaters skating.

'A Heart of Ice'.

A heart of ice, glacial, cold, lost in a storm.
A heart of frost trapped in time like a frozen car.
A heart of snow perfect like a snowflake…

'The Thaw.'

Chariots at dawn of galloping horses.
Wheels of the sun releasing
rivers and streams.
High-hoofed to the oceans
we shall run again, we shall run again.

As everyone joins in with, "run again, run again," I see river-horses rushing.

We shall run again, we shall run again
out to clearer and better waters.

Everybody singing, even Lorraine, who I didn't know could sing.

We shall run again, we shall run again
like the horses of the new dawn.

Lorraine

Beautiful, this is. I can see he's done it partly for me, candlelight and horses. I can smell them, the rich earthy scent of them, sweet muzzles and sweat. The sweetness of the straw, the haynets, the oats and bran mashes. I can imagine them coming in with their carriages, spitting out their bits. The grooms rubbing them down, them gulping water, sloppy-mouthed.

And this song, "run again, run again," it lifts my spirits. It lifts my soul - a palomino mare, running up the Ribble, to salute the sun at the source.

"Now a classic about finding love in the darkness." I see him take from within the Black Book a familiar poem - Saint John's 'Dark Night of the Soul'.

On a dark night, kindled in
love with yearnings - oh,
happy chance!

I went forth without
being observed,
my house being now at rest…

There's a restfulness, a peace about him, like tonight he's comfortable there in the shadows, barely glimpsed, just a hint of a face beneath a dark forelock, a knee pale and scarred showing through the rips in his jeans.

In the happy night
in secret
when none saw me,

nor I beheld aught
without light or guide
save that which burned in my heart.

He's put the perfect chords to it. Saint John would like it. All my Carmelite saints would be singing along, all the saints, all the martyrs, who've had their dark nights. That's all of us really. Lorraine Winter included.

No longer lost to oblivion,
my face I reclined
on a loved one.

All ceased and I abandoned

myself leaving my cares
forgotten amongst the lilies.

“A Last Prayer.”

Gwyn ap Nudd
will you hear my last prayer
that the Robinson house remains at rest,
our little town of Penwortham quiet as Bethlehem,
that there will be rest for the restless dead.

As he sings, I feel them gathered here, glasses of wine in their hands, murmuring amongst themselves in the language only the dead talk.

“Finally, a song about a place of healing, a place known only from distant myths but a place we desperately need, and I believe we will find.” Chords that sing of a place and time where sky and sea meet on a liminal horizon.

“The Lost Shrine of Nodens.” As he turns the page, I see it is the last.

I will be waiting
in the place of no pain,
in the Lost Shrine of Nodens
beyond Morecambe Bay.

I will be waiting
where the seagulls soar
in the Lost Shrine of Nodens
beyond the Ninth Wave’s roar.

I will be waiting
beyond joy and sorrow
in the Lost Shrine of Nodens
between today and tomorrow.

I will be waiting
when ghosts walk the land
in the Lost Shrine of Nodens
beyond the sinking sands.

I will be waiting
where the curlew calls
in the Lost Shrine of Nodens
until the last star falls.

A round of applause like the shimmer of a silver sea. Small, polite, like the Coach House, yet I feel it will be felt far and wide like the influence of his songs.

There are tears in everybody's eyes, more sorrowful because they don't know.

"The Black Book of Peneverdant is complete." He closes it quietly.

I fear the night will go out with it. No more songs. Merely the candle flicker.

As his sister and her girlfriend, the band, the fans take it in turn to step up and praise and congratulate him, I see him politely averting their questions about when his next gig will be with words about the will of the gods.

It pains me to have to go out alone, not part of his friendship circle. Always doomed to be an outcast, by way of what I've done, how I've been done to. I lurk and skulk, just like my old self, round the back of the buildings, and a couple of doom girls see me and comment about drug pushing.

Still, it's worth it, to see him one last time, once the others have gone away down the road lined with lights, in small groups of friends or holding hands.

No light-lined road for us. No lamplit path. No ladder up to Heaven. Our closest to the light at the end of the tunnel is the headlight of one of Ratty's trains.

“I know what you’re planning to do tonight,” I tell him. “I’ve known for a while about the explosives you’re hiding in that portacabin outside the Mill.”

He looks small but determined beneath the shadows of a yew.

“Is that how you’re going to…?” I swallow.

“No, that’s just to free the rivers. Cyledyr Wyllt has another fate.”

To fall from a great height, to be crushed, then drowned. I can barely think of it. I want to hold him, to keep him here. Selfish. I hold myself instead, hugging my arms around my chest, trying to stop myself breaking down.

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

“Trust you to break my heart and leave me?” I burst out.

“I won’t be leaving completely.”

“I’ll see you again? Not sure if I can bear it if you’re a ghost.”

“It won’t make much difference.”

“Yes, it will,” I can’t help myself, “I like you here— flesh and blood.” I wrap him in my arms and am relieved that he does not flinch away. I speak tremulously, “I have earthly desires, although I accept you’ve got none.”

Momentarily, his heartbeat quickens in panic on my mention of desire. It quietens once I’ve spoken the last, but it remains flickery and irregular.

“You’ve got a big, strong heart, Lorraine. If only mine were stronger, I might,” he rests his cheek on my chest, listens to its beat, “have found the strength to stay.” A beep on his phone. “But it’s too late.” He slips from my arms.

“Thank you,” I say, “for redeeming me.”

“No, you did that for yourself.”

“Goodbye, Carson Robinson.”

“Goodbye, Lorraine Winter.”

Then, like a strange otter, like a hare of black moonlight, like a dark swan, he vanishes into the shadows of the yew tree, pauses, then he is gone.

Chapter Fifty Three

Chesney

I'm awoken in the middle of the night by a series of small explosions from the surrounding area. Whatever could it be? Fireworks? Grenades? Bombs?

When I get up, I check my phone, see the national news headlines. A series of impacts caused by carefully planted incendiary devices have resurfaced all the rivers and streams in Penwortham and Preston. The traffic in both the suburb and the city is at a standstill because so many of the watercourses ran along the paths of, or crossed the roads. Watery Lane is a-flow.

I can barely believe it. A dreadful feeling in my stomach. I can guess who did it. There may be no gallows, but still Carson will be in awful trouble.

My mum's in shock. "Never did I think I'd see the day…"

I can barely eat my breakfast because I'm so excited for going out to see Fish House Brook set free from the culvert that takes it under Hill Road South.

Ring, ring. It's Val. No doubt she's seen the headlines. I wonder if Carson told her he was planning it. If so, she had shown no guilty signs last night. No little flicker around the corner of her right eye.

"Carson's disappeared!" Her voice is high-pitched and distressed.

"I'm not surprised. Did he tell you he was going to free the streams?"

"I knew he had it planned but didn't know he was going to do it last night."

"I guess he'll have to go into hiding, but I'm sure he'll visit."

"No," Val's voice rises an octave, "I think this is for good. You've got to come round."

It isn't a school day, so I walk up to see Fish House Brook freed. The two sets of iron gates are blasted open, the culvert is

reduced to rubble either side. The brook is flowing happily right across Hill Road South, then down its newly blown course towards the yard at Rose Fold Cottages, where people used to tan hides in it. I can almost see them with the smelly skins.

There aren't any buses, so I have to walk. From the corner of Pope Lane and Kingsfold Drive, I see beyond the traffic lights jammed cars, cones, police cars, because Mill Brook has been resurfaced near Nutter's Platt. I'd be skipping in the bright spring air if I wasn't concerned about Carson.

My worries are accentuated by Val's face as she opens the door. She's utterly distraught, her face like a wet sheet caught in the wind, her eyes big and teary.

"He'll be okay," I try to reassure her, "he's vanished so many times before."

"This is different." She breaks down and sobs.

I put my arm around her and guide her to the settee in the living room.

"I think he's been planning this for weeks. Months. He's gradually been closing down his fixing business and tying the Summers and Winters in knots. He's slowly been cutting down customers and clearing the garage." She brushes tears from her cheeks. "It's empty. Totally bare."

"I can't believe it." I think of the gadgets on gadgets, machines on machines.

"Come and look." She leads me to the garage.

I still can't believe it when I see it with my own eyes. Those cityscapes of laptops, washing machines, dryers, the paving of video games, sky of instruction books, gone. It looks just like a normal garage. Freshly whitewashed with a concrete floor you can only fit one small car in.

"And," she speaks more pressingly, "he's cleared out his room."

This is bad. My heart falls like a lemming off a cliff as Val opens the door and I see all the posters have been taken down, the bed and bedding removed, the wardrobe and all his clothes, his

bedside table. No vodka bottle. No ash tray. No smell of smoke. Only his guitars are left and his music stand, upon it the Black Book of Peneverdant, open on the last page.

'The Lost Shrine of Nodens'. The elaborate writing in black bone ink. Val's representation of the shrine as a little bee-hive hut hidden in silvery mist. The raven feather quill tucked down the spine. I recall the plaintive song.

"The only thing he left was this." Val takes from her pocket a piece of paper with words in simple print written in black—'Trust me'.

*

The days pass. There's no point notifying the police because they're already looking for Carson to charge him with causing an explosion that has caused infrastructural damage with a minimum of 15 years imprisonment.

There have been sightings of him all over. Winter Hill and Noon Hill, at Pikestones and Roundloaf, on the Manchester Mosslands, on Lindow Moss. He's been seen with a ghost elk at Highfurlong and in Pilling. They're all over social media with people posting them to the band page. I've been dreaming of him making his visits with the ancient and more recent dead, giving them his usual offerings, only eating enough to live.

On an April night, I dream of him hitching a lift from the hard shoulder at Junction 29 up the M6 and getting out at the service station at Lancaster. To my surprise, he goes into the food hall and buys himself a burger. My hopes rise. Please say that he's decided to eat properly, decided to live.

He takes it up onto the bridge that connects the northbound and southbound sides of the motorway. Leaning out of one of the windows on the northbound side, he looks down at the passing cars with a terrible look of fatedness, as if each one is an angel of death on wheels. He opens the box, eyes the burger reluctantly, takes one bite, then another.

"Eat it all," I pray.

But he doesn't. He flings it and the wrapping away. The burger falls first, fastest, the cut-price beef and iceberg lettuce squished beneath the wheels of a car, which swerves, with a long white slither of mayonnaise. Then, the styrofoam box, flapping, like the white wings of a bird. The rain pours down to drown the poor thing, the tyres mushing it into a growing puddle.

He leans out further. "Carson, please, no!" The vision fades.

My panicked outcry wakes me from my sleep. I recall the threefold death of Cyledyr Wyllt— falling from a great height, crushed, then drowned.

I check my phone to see the reports coming in. Someone's seen Carson eating a burger on the bridge between the north and southbound sides of the M6. Someone's seen him dropping the burger. Someone's seen him leaning out. Someone's seen him falling. Someone's seen a car swerve. Everyone's trying to find the details of the driver from the number plate. No one's found a body. The driver can't be located. Nobody can find the burger.

Lorraine

He's broken my fucking heart, he has. Him who once said to me he's not my friend, let alone my boyfriend, yet became the only friend I've had aside from my knife. I can barely get out of bed. My heart is in pieces, like Stanley Robinson's heart, an irony in that. I don't think he did it for revenge.

How did he do it? I've slept with almost every good-looking lad on Kingsfold but never felt like this. We barely touched. I didn't even touch his arse. Yet, I've fallen into some strange kind of love beyond the flesh.

I lie here, heart broken, glued to my phone, fixed on social media, watching for new sightings and when I sleep I dream of him talking to the dead.

Mum is lost in a permanent k-hole in a snowfall of drugs in our living room with Nick Cave's 'Fifteen Feet of Pure White Snow' on repeat.

Doctor, Doctor
I'm going mad
This is the worst day
I've ever had
I can't remember
Ever feeling this bad
Under fifteen feet of pure white snow
Where's my nurse
I need some healing
I've been paralysed
By this lack of feeling
I can't even find
Anything worth stealing
Under fifteen feet of pure white snow.

Dad has holed himself up in his counting house with nothing but cash and cocaine, repetitively counting his money like a common crook with OCD.

I dream of Carson falling from the bridge that joins the northbound and southbound lanes of the M6 and I fall with him down towards the hurtling cars. There is a bump, a screech, a groan, a hand reaching for a burger. Then, torrential rain, a deluge, a watery black pool and we are vanishing into it.

We are falling again, clinging to each other, in utter darkness. Our fall is endless. I scream.

"Is that you, Lorraine?"

"Yes."

"I'm terrified."

"So am I."

Our voices bring a slowing of our free fall, but I still can't see a thing. Then, a white light, pale and numinous, certainly not the

headlight of a train. I know what this is: awe, terror, should have known, didn't expect it.

It's the lantern of a hooded figure, gaunt, death-like, black cloak swirling like theatre curtains with the wind machine on, even though there is no wind. Bloody big scythe with a blade to cut through the veil and life from death. Could separate darkness and light and night from day, that could.

As the light gets brighter, Carson is pulled away from me, light as mist. In a blink of my eyes, he is lying on a stone bier, dripping wet, hair slicked to his head, with his body at a horrible odd angle that bodies should not lie at.

"What's this?" The Reaper approaches. "A fallen, crushed, drowned boy?"

"Soaking wet and think I scuffed my knee again," Carson mutters.

"I'd say that's the least of your injuries," the Reaper says solemnly.

"Still, I rescued my burger," Carson looks to his hand.

The burger is a sorry mush, and his hand doesn't look much better.

"I… can't feel anything."

"A small mercy."

"I don't understand what happened." Carson's voice is small and frightened.

"Neither do I." The Reaper pulls back his hood. By his white hair, this time short, with a side-swept fringe, his harsh cheeks, I recognise Gwyn ap Nudd. He looks at Carson curiously, consideringly: "I'm sure we'll work it out."

He pulls back Carson's sleeve to reveal his tattoo. "Are you dead, mad, or a poet?"

"I… can't decide," Carson admits.

Gwyn tuts, puts his hand on his chin: "We'll have to find you another role."

"Can't I just go to sleep now?" Carson sounds hazy.

"You'll have your sleep," Gwyn promises, "your time to heal."

Behind him, slightly taller, appears another god who looks much like Gwyn, but with long silvery hair and a beard filled with bright barnacles. His smile is as kind as corals, sea creatures, and seahorses with bendy tails.

"Sleep," Nodens says. He puts his silver hand on Carson's shoulder.

All the tension goes out of his body, and for the first time, I see him at peace.

Chesney

"He did it. He jumped!" Val is in hysterics on the phone.

I get a lift with my mum to comfort her in the middle of the night.

I'm feeling confused, gutted, like I'm still in a weird nightmare.

She points to the words in the Black Book. "A fall, crushed, drowned. I hate it." She slams the book shut. "I hate the cursed thing. It's a curse on us." She bursts into hysterical sobs, shaking so hard she almost causes an earthquake. Models fall off the shelves. The flat-screen TV almost comes down.

"He hasn't left a body, so we can't even have a funeral."

Her crying drags me in as I think of all the times I've seen Val and Carson happy together, and we've had happy times, all three of us. His soft smile, his quiet voice, his charms, his songs, how he didn't deserve to die. How he was forced, like a rat in a cage, to fix, to play, to fight, to rage. I think of his tattoo and how that preternatural hollow bone ordained his fate. How he became the vessel of otherworld forces too big for his small body.

As we cry, the rain pours. The Rain of Nodens. I think of him lost in the rain.

Although there's no body, no funeral, there's a huge overspill of grief, washing through the band, the local music scene, the eco-crowd, and doom communities. Its flow is uncontainable as the rain, never seen before in the traditionally showery month of

April, overspilling from the drains, filling the newly resurfaced rivers and streams to bursting point, with their freshly renewed force cutting their new channels through the rubble.

Because there's nowhere for people to grieve, Val and I make Carson's room into a makeshift shrine. An unknown donor sends a wooden icon of Carson with the bard light on his brow, his guitar, his black book, a raven on his shoulder, and his black hoodie styled in the likeness of a monastic cowl. We set his guitars and the Black Book of Peneverdant before it. Offerings pile up— flowers, candles, jewellery, model ravens, scribbled verses.

"He'd have liked to see the streams freed," Olivia chokes, splutters, red-eyed.

Johnny, at a loss, pulls his silvery hair, bites back tears, and swallows.

Even Midge gives a hiccup of loss and a gruff, "Curse him for doing this. I was going to make good money from drumming in a band with him."

The worst thing is that nobody knows for absolute sure he's dead. Some suspect it's just one of his vanishing tricks, and he might reappear again.

Lorraine

A line of ketamine to numb the pain. I'm a broken racehorse laid up to rest. I broke my great big heart, I did, trying to win a race that I could not win. I'm a Shetland pony who lost a child rider. I'm a filly without a friend.

And, in my wardrobe, I know that accursed box is there. I want to fill it with the pieces of my heart, package them up, and send them to Carson like an apology. My hands are blood-stained, and they are no good for anything but cutting another line and getting a little food from the freezer every blue moon.

Around me, the world grieves, the land mourns, the streams and rivers run bluer than the blood in my treacherous veins, then

they are silver, and they are the fingers of the silver hand of a healing god, and I sink into deep sleep.

I dream of Carson walking as if he has only just learnt to use his legs, like a young colt, to where a farm with horses in the fields becomes an abbey. There is a dormitory, a cloister, and a refectory built around a central courtyard and an octagonal chapter house with a cross on the top. Carson is welcomed in by Premonsterians, White Canons, in white robes.

"No, thank you." He shakes his head when he is offered one. Like Peter Pan, he refuses to grow up, to grow out of his ripped black jeans and hoodie.

He lives amongst them, like a shy black colt, like a little black sheep, joining them at their prayers and their work upon the land. He smiles in wonder at the tiny seeds of lettuces, carrots, cabbages, in his palm. He helps to sow them, sprinkling them like rainwater in the furrows, waters them with an ancient watering can that clanks and creaks and pours like a fountain. He plants onions, garlic, potatoes, puts his ear to the ground to listen to them grow. At harvest time, he helps to gather in the big leafy green cabbages, the carrots with their topsy heads, the dewy-fresh lettuces. He digs up a potato and holds it above his head like a brown-spotted trophy.

And he helps them to cook a hearty stew and he eats. Not so much on the first day, or the second. They do not push him or force him. They say their prayers and secretly they pray for him and each day he eats a little more.

He begins to look forward to his food, approaching the table with bright eyes like a pony to a feed bowl and blows on his spoon with anticipation. He no longer looks like the carrots or peas or leeks have teeth to bite him. After a number of days, he lays down his spoon after eating a full bowl.

He thanks them, bows to them, pockets himself a bunch of fresh leafy carrots.

The scene shifts and he is in another building which belongs to an older priory. It's full of lepers, I see, to my fascination, to my

disgust. Lepers with patchy, flaky red skin, sores and ulcers, lumps and nodules, leaky bandages. Monks move amongst them, changing dressings, bathing wounds.

Carson follows, feeding them from a bowl of carrot soup, wiping their mouths. He tells them stories. He sings to them. His quick, black-nailed fingers become adept at unravelling and wrapping bandages. He blesses healing water before the statue of St Mary of the Marsh and dabs their faces. His tattoo dances silver, and beneath his fingertips, raw wounds close.

The scene shifts, and he is in a tiny hermit hut, engaged in deep conversation with a man in a tattered old cowl with a grey beard and wrinkles like the tide leaves on the sand or a sandpiper's footprints.

"Hugh the Garth." The hermit takes Carson's hands in his.

As they exit together, they stand on a marshland at the edge of the sea, with outfalls of reeds, stands of rushes, ebb and flow of intertidal waters, surrounded by the call of oyster catchers and the whistle of widgeon.

"Cur-lee qui-pi-pi-pi-pi," a curlew's haunting cry bubbles up.

Hugh leads Carson to a coracle made from animal hide with a paddle. The hermit points to a spot, invisible, on the horizon of the silver waters. Carson nods, climbs in with a sailor's ease, casts off, paddles steadily. No, don't go, don't leave me again, but he's steering away, he's a dot, then he's gone.

Chapter Fifty Four

Chesney

May arrives and Val cannot look at the bluebells because they remind her of Carson's passing bell. We make love, then she cries into the pillow. I still cannot believe how, for someone invisible, he's left such a big hole in our lives.

The nights are calm. The battles between Summer and Winter settle down.

We try to refocus at school and prepare for our exams. I do my best to keep a handle on Val's drinking, but know that when I'm not there she is quaffing at least three pints of strong stout every evening. I notice, again, I am tired, think it's due to the grief, then I see my blood results. In spite of the allogeneic stem cells, all the love and magic of my ancestors, human and non-human, by the curse of the radiation, my sickness is back.

I sit in biology and stare at the diagram for mitosis - at the daughter cell with her cytoplasm and organelles and the nucleus holding the DNA, the X shapes of the chromosomes containing the double helix of interlocking script composed of adenine (A), guanine (G), cytosine (C), and thymine (T).

I behold the differences between the daughter cell in prophase, metaphase, anaphase, telophase, as the chromosomes line up, the spindle fibres pull them apart, forming sister chromatids, as the cell divides, the sister cell splits off. Where, I try to pinpoint, does the mutation occur? Where and why does it go wrong? Why this disorder in the marrow of my bones?

What is it that was planted in me by nuclear fission that won't shift? If we can split an atom why can't we put it together again? If we can spill iodinating radiation why can't it be gathered back into the nuclear reactor? If a molecular signature can be changed why can't it be erased and reversed?

I read about the new genetic therapies that target specific mutations and proteins and chromosomal therapies that

translocate cancer-causing chromosomes, but they're still in trial and by the time they're ready it will be too late.

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"Look," says Val, eyes alight with hope for the first time in a long while. "You'll never guess what? The Big Nodens Sleepover is coming to Kingsfold."

We've been following it on Facebook, Instagram, and X. Noddy Nora, the Chosen of Nodens, has been taking her portable dream temple round the UK. We suspect it's a farce, too good to be true, with all her tall claims. People coming in on crutches and in wheelchairs and walking out on two legs. A man with bipolar stable. Tumours vanishing. Incurable diseases cured.

"There are just nine places. You've got to write a letter of application. I'm sure you'll get in. You've got to be the sickest person in the whole of Penwortham."

"Thanks."

"And the best eco-warrior."

"I guess."

"And the best girlfriend."

I smile.

"I suppose I'll give it a try," I say, more for her than for me. Then, "Perhaps you should come too, as it might help with your drinking problem."

"I haven't got a problem," she denies it, "I just like a drink."

"The first sign of alcoholism," I tell her, "is denial."

Lorraine

I can't stay here anymore. I'm suffocating under fifteen feet of snow and sorrow. All the horse tranquilliser in the Island of Britain cannot numb my pain.

I pack my bag. A change of clothes. A bag of weed. A bag of ket. The Tupperware box in case I decide to cut my heart out and

make an offering of it. I leave Mum under the snowfall with her mouth open in a wide o and Dad counting as if he's enumerating all the wealth of the banks of Hell.

As I step outside, how dare it be May? How dare the twisted hawthorns along the ditches on Kingsfold Park be in blossom and May flowers in the fields they have let grow long, when my heart is still trapped in a winter of grief?

Where am I going to go? No one will have me. I no longer want Sandy or any of the other boys from the estate, and my only friend is my knife. What am I going to do without my parents and their drug supply? I've got no exams. I've got no work experience. All I've known is selling and stealing.

As I pass a lamppost, I see one of Mark Denver's posters advertising his drop-in at Kingsfold Community Centre. 'Feeling low? Struggling with family problems? Suffering from addiction? Free drop-in and guidance. No judgement'.

I actually make my way to the community centre and enter the hallway. I see similar flyers pinned to the notice board: Northern Drugs Hotline, Lancashire Domestic Violence Helpline, The Samaritans. I look at the opening times for Mark Denver's office and see he is only in on Mondays and Wednesdays 1 - 4 p.m. Not there today. I'm not sure if I'm disappointed or relieved. On my way out, another flyer catches my eye. Noddy Nora, the Chosen of Nodens, is bringing the Big Nodens Sleep Over to Kingsfold.

Chesney

"Hello, my dears, my darlings." Noddy Nora is a middle-aged woman with near-waist-length dark hair, pencilled-in eyebrows, sea-blue eyeshadow. She is wearing a swirling gown of crepey purples and cerulean blues. On her head is a silver mural crown picturing Nodens on a chariot pulled by four water-horses and surrounded by water spirits and winged wind spirits. I recall it's modelled on the crown found at the temple at Lydney in Gloucestershire.

The walls of the community centre are also decked out with blue and purple crepe and decorated with images based on the mosaics in the dream temple. A pair of interlaced sea serpents. Salmon. Dreamy mermaids and men. There is an altar to Nodens laid out at the top of the room, behind Nora, featuring an image of the god with sea-weedy hair and beard, a silver arm, silver and bronze coins, statues of bronze hounds. There is lavender and sandalwood incense burning. It stings my eyes. In a bed in the corner lie two white hounds with reddish ears, slumbering softly, one eye open.

Val and I are sitting on the front row of two rows of chairs facing the altar. Behind us are nine beds, with flimsy duvets covered in sea creatures.

"Looks like a tacky farce to me," she mutters, "nothing to do with real gods."

At the front, alongside Nora are Mark and two other councillors and a photographer. Being willing to have our pictures taken for publicity purposes is one of the conditions of entering, and I wasn't allowed to wear make-up to disguise my sickness. We have to be authentic, look as sick as we can be on the way in, then wear our best smiles on the way out.

I glance behind me to see the rest of the invalids filing in. Firstly, Amina approaching, gently guiding her grandmother, explaining where she is over and again. Then Daniel with a sad expression and dark circles under his eyes. The others I don't think I've ever seen around Penwortham. A boy in his late teens in a wheelchair. A girl with white staring eyes leaning on her mother's arm. A large woman with her hand on her abdomen, gritting her teeth. A bald man with a dangerous yellow tint to his skin. Then, I cannot believe it, Lorraine with her crippled arm, her eyes glassy from ket.

"Welcome, welcome," says Nora, "to the Big Nodens Sleep Over. Those who have been following me on social media probably know the score, but for those who don't… Nodens is an ancient British god of sleep and healing dreams who was

worshipped by our oldest ancestors and the Romans. Pilgrims would come in their hundreds to his dream temple at Lydney, Lludd's Isle, above the Severn, on Dwarf's Hill, an old iron ore mine. They made their prayers and offerings in the temple, then they headed to the dormitory. There they drank a cup of dream tea to help them sleep. Overnight they received a healing dream from Nodens. In the morning they took it to the interpreter who told them what it meant. Last year, I, Noddy Nora, made my prayers and offerings at the temple, drank a cup of dream tea in the dormitories, and fell asleep. And I was gifted a dream in which Nodens told me I was his chosen and must take his temple out into the world to heal his poor, sick people with healing dreams."

Scattered applause. Nora smiles, "So now it is time for each of you, my dears, my poor ailing darlings, to come up and tell us your names and stories and make your prayers and offerings to Nodens, Lord of Dreams."

Amina's grandmother is called up first, and Amina guides her to the front.

"So why are you here, Safir Iqbal?" asks Nora as the cameras flash.

"I don't remember," Safir looks around, confused.

"Ah, you must be the one with dementia," Nora speaks knowingly, "some say there's no cure, but they haven't experienced the dream magic of Nodens."

Amina helps her grandmother offer a golden bangle and guides her back.

I am called up next. Val helps me up. Reluctantly, I speak to Nora and the audience about my battle with leukaemia and the failure of my treatments.

"What a brave young lady," Nora praises me, "what an inspiring warrior. I'm sure that Nodens will turn those nasty blast cells in your bone marrow back into new and healthy blood cells quicker than you can say 'radiation'."

I approach the altar and give up my favourite bracelet, with charms of all the animals I've ever loved and wanted to save, from when I was six until now.

I look upon the image of Nodens, his seaweed beard filled with barnacles. "Please help me," I pray, "you are my last chance." I bow my head.

Val follows. Looking at the audience defiantly, "I'm not an alcoholic. I just like a drink. A few pints of stout every so often. I don't drink every night."

"Nodens will have done with your addiction quicker than you can say seasick."

Val steps to the altar and reluctantly offers up her All New X-Men boxset.

Daniel is up next. Looking slightly ashamed, "I've had a lifelong battle with depression. Inherited from my ancestors. Miners, they were. It's as deadly as black damp and I'm struggling to find my way out of the mines."

"Dearie, dearie," Nora says, "I'd never have thought it from such a strong man. Nodens, Lord of the Mines, will bring you back from the depths."

"I lost a woman too. Her body dumped in the Ribble. Still don't know who killed her."

"Nodens knows all. Perhaps in your dream her killer will be revealed."

Daniel walks to the altar and gives up a gold watch, a woman's watch.

The four unknown invalids then get up. The boy in the wheelchair has muscular dystrophy. The girl with staring eyes has been blind since birth. The large woman has endometriosis. The bald man has liver disease.

Lorraine's up last. She looks haggard, deeply uncomfortable. "Well, you can see, might probably be glad, I got what I gave. I got tortured." She gestures to her arm. "I still have nightmares, flashbacks," she admits.

“PTSD,” Nora identifies her disorder, “Nodens can do away with those horrible memories with one sweep of his sea-cloak like a wave on sand.”

“I lost someone I loved from a faraway place and I’ve taken enough ketamine to put a hundred racehorses to sleep and it still hasn’t dulled the pain.”

“Nasty stuff, ketamine,” Nora sniffs, “silly to be addicted to it at your age. I could tell you’ve got a broken heart before you entered the room. I heard it rattling in your Tupperware box as you came down the street. Nodens will put it back together again quicker than you can say ‘heart surgery’.”

What will she give? To my surprise, Lorraine takes from her bag a bronze statue of Saint Mary of the Rose and surrounds her with red roses.

Chapter Fifty Five

"Good, good," Nora smiles, sweeps the offerings into a bag of purple velvet. "So you know, those offerings will go to a charity of a cause dear to Nodens."

"Is the hot water machine ready?" Nora asks Mark.

Mark nods, and Nora steps to the table beside the machine and makes nine cups of dream tea, then calls each of us forward to collect our brew.

"What's in it?" Val asks.

I sniff. "Camomile, lavender, valerian, and mint," I conjecture.

"For the sake of the gods, don't let Lorraine slip anything into it."

I cradle my dream tea tightly and defensively and drink it slowly. Once we have drunk our tea, the lights are turned down, and relaxing music plays. The two dogs are sent around to let us stroke them and to give us lucky licks. Smooth, wet tongues coat my hands and face in slobber.

"Now it's time for all our invalids to take to their beds," announces Nora.

Val guides me over, arranges my pillows, and makes sure I'm well tucked in. She then climbs into her own bed, wiggles a hollow, and plumps her pillow.

When we're all comfy, Nora recites a final prayer to Nodens for healing dreams.

"Oh Dream Lord Nodens,
you who dwell in the Land of Nod,
you who heal with the touch of your silver hand,
I pray that all here will feel your healing touch.
That those who go to sleep tired and sick
awaken bright and healthy as the dawn."

I'm not sure whether I'm going to be able to sleep at first with all my anxiety. But the dream tea takes effect, and I find myself spiralling down.

The last thing I hear is Nora's voice, "Now, Mark Denver, you seem like a kind and caring gentleman, can I offer you a nice cup of tea and a bed?"

Lorraine

Dream tea, I scoff. Some weak herbal mix, no stronger than my mother's milk. No sooner have those thoughts crossed my mind than I'm plummeting down into dream with all the force of some of my mum's best barbiturates.

Although I'm wandering through thick snow, I know exactly where I am. I know every twist and turn of the streets of Kingsfold, every lamppost, every manhole. You have to, when so often you're chasing or running. I'm being drawn, against my will, to my parents' house with a gnawing sense in my stomach that isn't drug or alcohol induced but feels like a deadly premonition.

I open the door and it's snowing within, snow so thick I don't see the bodies until I trip over them. Mum and Dad. No. I see the Summer Twins. Daylight no longer has light in his eyes. His throat's been blasted out. Sunny is no longer sunshine and smiles. His mouth is a big dark hole. Then, looking across to the other side of the room, I see my parents. Dad has a hole in his head, half his skull missing, brain matter and blood expunging from it and splattered behind him up the wall. Mum has a gunshot wound in her belly and her face is as blank as it was when I left.

Lying between them, the White Book of Winter and the Red Book of Summer, blood-splattered, open on their last spells, but not on their last pages. Neither of the books is complete. This must mean that, through the Black Book of Peneverdant, Carson has won. His sacrifice has paid off.

Then, someone comes through the door - literally through it without opening it. I nearly wet myself. A black hooded figure with a scythe. The Reaper.

"Good evening, Lorraine." He props his scythe in the corner, beside the coat stand. He takes off his snowy black cloak, shakes it out, hangs it up neatly.

He's wearing an unostentatious plain black suit. By his bright white hair combed into a stiff, side-swept fringe, I recognise him. "Gwyn ap Nudd."

"How well do you know your descent?" He draws from thin air a briefcase, then from it four pieces of paper and a shining black fountain pen. In looping black handwriting he writes my parents' names, their dates and times of birth, then those of their deaths, without looking at any clock.

"They never spoke much about their parents, either of them," I admit.

As I look curiously at the pieces of paper, I see my father's name, John Winter, and my mother's name, Susan Winter. "That can't be Mum's maiden name."

"Did you not know they were brother and sister?" Gwyn asks, amused.

I feel sick. So that's why they resemble each other so well, why I'm the spitting image of both. I thought they were both called Winter because they were married, not siblings. "I knew they fled from Scotland together, but I didn't know why."

"Do you know how many people they killed? How many drugs they sold?"

It seems Gwyn already knows the answer, for he is writing their stories, from birth until death, in black, scrolling handwriting that reminds me of snakes.

"No." As the snow stops falling, I see the suitcases in the centre of the room.

"Your inheritance," he says, "go and see what's in them if you like."

Money. Too much to count. Coke, ketamine, weed. Far too much to sell.

"I'm not sure if I want it."

"What do you want?"

I swallow, not sure if I can tell him what is so close to my heart.

"You lost someone you love, and you've always wanted a horse."

"Do you think you could…"

"I'm not your father, let alone Father Christmas."

"Oh," I sigh, "then I'm just left with money and cocaine."

"Give me some time, and I might be able to make a few arrangements."

My spirits rise, although I'm not sure how a death god can help.

"These are for you," Gwyn gives me a copy of my parents' papers to keep. He then gives me what looks like a business card, one side black as a Rothko painting, the other white with an address, date, and time on it. 'Cockersand Abbey Chapter House, May Eve, before midnight'.

Chesney

I'm back at Windscale, and it's burning. I'm rushing in, pushing my way past security, into the control room, past the wavering dials and panicking men, to the nuclear reactor where my great dad is pulling out a rod of uranium.

He's burning up. He's passing the uranium rod to my grandfather. My grandfather is running with it, out of the building, to the north. Past the bay, over Warton Crag, through Silverdale, Arnside, a lap around Gait Barrows. He's burning up and Dad is taking the rod and he's running further north, up the Old Man of Coniston, through Ambleside, around Windermere.

Something's bringing him back, all the way back to Whitehaven, back to Preston. He's burning up. He's giving the

rod to me. “Don’t keep hold of it,” he says. “Don’t hold onto the pain and the questions. It won’t do you any good. Go to Cockersand Abbey Chapter House on May Eve before midnight and lay this sickness to rest by throwing it into the sea.”

*

I’m woken by Val’s hand on my shoulder and soothing music. A dog licks my hand.

“Are you cured?” Val asks hopefully.

My throat is dry. I ask for water. Sip it. “I feel a little better.” I sense that something has shifted. Somehow I know I will live to see the summer.

“How about you?”

Val looks queasy. “I’m not sure I ever want to see a pint again.”

“At the end, I got told to go to the Cockersand Abbey Chapter House on May Eve.”

“That’s odd,” says Val. “Me too.”

“Isn’t that near where the Lost Shrine of Nodens was?”

“Rise and shine, my little darlings, my fully healed dears,” Nora’s voice.

“I’m cured, a miracle!” The boy in the wheelchair gets up and grins.

The blind girl, her irises, pupils, and vision restored, walks without aid to the breakfast bar and helps herself to a cup of tea and cereal in a cardboard bowl.

“No pain.” The woman with endometriosis follows.

Then, the man whose skin was yellow is now the shade of a peach.

Daniel looks a little less depressed, and Amina’s grandmother is helping herself to a coffee and telling Amina that she remembers her dream.

Val brings me breakfast, and I manage to drink my tea and eat my Rice Krispies. One by one, we are called in to recite our

dreams to Noddy Nora. We're not allowed to tell anyone else what we dreamt. It's part of the rules. A time-honoured tradition dating all the way back to the old Temple of Nodens.

"Excellent." Noddy Nora nods knowingly as I recite my dream to her. "That uranium rod," she discloses, "represents your leukaemia. I suggest you buy a replica, perform a ritual every day. Put your pain and sickness into it, follow your father's instructions, and on May Eve, offer it to the sea."

Chapter Fifty Six

Lorraine

When I get home, it's just as it was in my dream. My parents and the Summer Twins are dead in a shootout in our living room. It's all worked out as Carson and I planned, and I'm sure he had Gwyn ap Nudd on his side.

The suitcases are filled with drugs and money. The papers from the Reaper and the black-and-white card are within. What's more, I've got the perfect alibi. Everybody saw me at the Big Nodens Sleepover. I hide the suitcases in our secret vault with the Red and White Books, which I shall burn. I call the police and the undertakers, and they come to remove the bodies.

I put the house on the market cheaply, yet nobody wants to buy it.

I count down the days until Cockersand Abbey Chapter House on May Eve.

Chesney

"The Winters and Summers are dead." I can barely believe the headline.

"A shootout in the Winter House." Val's eyes are huge and alive.

"Does that mean…"

"I won't have to be the middle-woman between Summer and Winter."

We hug. I'm feeling better. Things will improve for Creiddylad from now on.

We walk through Greencroft Valley, and I enumerate the wildflowers: birdsfoot trefoil, yellow rattle, ox-eye daisy, ragged robin, cornflower, poppy.

I feel the energy of the goddess of the flowers running through me. I lie down in the flowers, and Val paints me as the newly healed nature goddess.

But I know I'm not fully better yet. To complete my healing, I've a rite to fulfil. I buy a yellow baton, the type you carry in a relay race, from Sports Direct. Every morning and evening I pray to Nodens and I place into it my pain and sickness and all the illness of my ancestors and I count down the days until Cockersand Abbey Chapter House on May Eve.

*

"Look at this," Val gestures to the headline on her phone, "Noddy Nora, the Chosen of Nodens, has been convicted of fraud. I'm not surprised."

"Really?" Disappointed, I recall how some things looked suspicious, but remain grateful for the healing effects of the dream that I received from Nodens.

"She's been recruiting actors to fake full cures," Val tells me.

I think back to the night of the Big Nodens Sleep Over. The boy in the wheelchair could have faked muscular dystrophy. The blind girl could have used contact lenses. Endometriosis is invisible anyway. The man with the liver complaint could have used body paint and rubbed it off in bed.

"And," Val rages, "she's been pawning the offerings, not giving them to charity."

"Oh!" This angers me. I'd thought my bracelet, with its animal charms, had gone to Nodens through a cause important to him. Knowing Nora has benefited from it triggers my rage and makes me uneasy because if Nodens hasn't received the offering, it's possible my rite will not work.

"Plus," Val continues, "she's been seducing local councillors into her beds. She tried it with Mark, but he's had his eye on her for a while, collated the evidence, and with others made a report, and she's gone down."

*

"We should make our visit to Cockersand a pilgrimage," I say to Val.

She's got the Black Book of Peneverdant open on the last page. "Cockersand Abbey was so very close to the Lost Shrine of Nodens." She looks at her image, the little beehive hut in the mist, on the silver horizon.

I will be waiting
in the place of no pain,
in the Lost Shrine of Nodens
beyond Morecambe Bay.

After reading the verse, she pulls out the piece of paper, 'Trust me'. "I wonder whether Carson has something to do with this, and we might see him?"

"His ghost, you mean?" A shiver. A great wave of sadness.

Tears well up in her eyes. "Better than never seeing him again."

We plot a route, based on Carson's journeys, plan the prayers and offerings. We start with the Ribble. From the bridge over Penwortham By-pass, we fling biodegradable confetti shaped in images of Belisama and her daughters. We turn left and walk up the A583, which kind of follows the Roman road, which was built on top of Kate's Pad, the wooden trackway our Iron Age tribe, the Setantii, once walked. We pass through Newton-le-Scales, Kirkham and Wesham, where we stop to eat our lunch. Then, on to Poulton-le-Fylde. We offer grasses, leaves and bark outside the fence of the house where Horace the Elk was dug up and an oatcake and a piece of meat where the Briarfield Head was found. Val drags her feet and complains about her blisters as we head into Thornton-Cleveleys where we've booked a B&B before the next leg of our journey.

On to Fleetwood and we throw more biodegradable confetti into the sea where we believe the Lost Port of the Setantii once was. This time we've made images of Nodens on his chariot with sea horses. We leave another oatcake for the head of the Lady of Pilling Moss at the edge of a field.

On Cockersand Moss, we each take out one of the silver statuettes Val has crafted and engraved with the name Mars-Nodontis in imitation of the statues once buried there, dug up, then stolen by some unknown thief.

Mars-Nodontis,
Nodens Lord of Dreams,
kind and generous with your healing,
know that you are honoured here,
please hear the petition
of a supplicant.

Please let this healing be complete.
Please grant us a vision of your lost shrine.

Mars-Nodontis,
Nodens, Lord of Dreams,
kind and generous with your healing,
know that you are honoured here,
please hear the petition
of a supplicant.

If my brother is with you, please
let me see him one last time.

On, along the coast, where flocks of waterbirds are scattered across the sand. It's a still, cloudy day and there is no division between the silver sky and sea.

Finally, we approach Cockersand Abbey Chapter House, an octagonal building, built of red sandstone, with a cross on top.

There's an information board detailing the history of how occupation of the area began with Hugh the Garth, the hermit who founded the Hospital of St Mary on the Marsh for lepers. Later, it became a Premonstratensian Priory, then the land was drained and it became an abbey, the third richest in Lancashire, until its dissolution.

"The Chapter House was built in 1230," reads Val, "and used for meetings by the Canons. In the 18th and 19th centuries it became the mausoleum of the Daltons of Thurnham Hall. I'm not sure how they got them in there." She circumambulates the building, tries to find a way in, fails.

We scatter our last oatcake for Hugh the Garth and the lepers. Looking out towards the sea I see a fisherman on a small boat in a traditional sou'wester, fishing for plaice, flatfish and cockles. He's got a long grey beard, almost seaweed-like, a bright sparkle in his eye for such a dull day. He reminds me of somebody. I know who it is. The time is right.

I take out the baton into which I have placed all my pain, sickness, anger and resentment at the people who plundered the earth for plutonium and uranium and drafted my great-grandad, my grandad and my dad into the nuclear industry. It glows, like a rod of uranium, I swear it. With my hardest throw, like a bowler in cricket, like a thrower, the Catcher himself, I cast the rod into the sea. It forms a radiation-lit arch then falls. A plop. A splash. Then, it sinks into the silver. The fisherman smiles at me.

"It's done." A sense of release washes over me.

Val continues to look out to sea.

"If Carson were there, he would have noticed that."

She looks downfallen, downtrodden, like the saddest of puffins.

We're about to depart when we notice two familiar figures approaching up the path. "Whatever are Daniel Green and Mark Denver doing here?"

"It's more than a coincidence," Val says, "let's ask them."

Daniel and Mark look just as surprised to see us as we do them.

"In my dream at the Big Nodens Sleep Over I got told to come here on May Eve," Daniel tells us, "and to bring Mark along with me." He glances at the tattoo on his hand, flexes it, as if he feels it's connected to the events.

Mark, in his suit and tie, looks edgy and out of place.

"And who's that?" Val points to the path.

Four figures in hijabs and abayas, three walking slowly, one on a mobility scooter which, as it gets closer, I recognise as my grandmother's.

"Amina, her sisters and her grandmother," I speak.

"I recall clearly from my dream," speaks Safir, tucked up amongst silky blankets on the scooter, "being told to come to the Chapter House on May Eve."

Lorraine

I park the old motorbike of my brother up at Glasson Dock, take off Aidan's leathers and smelly motorcycle helmet, and shake out my white hair. Good blast, that, up the M6. I'm glad I didn't have to go as far as Lancaster; I couldn't have borne it, having to ride past that place. Almost as good as riding a horse, a motorbike; just a shame I've no passenger for the back.

I pause to look at the little white boats bobbing, take a sandwich from my bag. I've been back on my chicken since Christian and Vance got theirs. Like Carson, I feed a few crumbs to the gulls, who flock down in a crescendo of white wings, arguing, squawking. A familiar sight: those jet pilots of the seas reduced to child-like squabbles. We've all got our weaknesses.

I go over the swing bridge, then follow Marsh Lane to Sunderland Point. Flocks of dunlin and knot, a pair of redshank, a solitary oyster catcher on the flats.

The place already feels faraway— I can see why Carson was drawn here.

I pass Plover Scar Lighthouse, then continue along the coast towards Cockersand Abbey Chapter House. Past the rows of twisted hawthorns bent against the near-constant west wind, conspicuous by its absence.

As I get closer, to my surprise, I see not just one or a small group of figures, but, by God and all his angels, by Nodens and all his seahorses, an entire congregation, and I recognise most of them from the sleepover. Val, Chesney, Daniel, Mark, then Safir Iqbal and her granddaughters. I'm hurt, disappointed, that I'm not the special one summoned here and that, once again, to Val Robinson and her friends, I will be the bedevilled outcast.

Not wanting to be seen, I slip up, hide behind the Chapter House.

Chapter Fifty Seven

Chesney

It's all so quiet. Nothing but the lap, lap, lap of the silver sea on the shore. The roll of the waves, forever the slaves of the moon, gently foaming and slapping over the seaweed they have washed up, shards of seashells.

"What do you think we've all been brought here for?" asks Daniel.

"A complete waste of time," Mark looks at his phone, "I've got errands."

I glimpse movement in the sea, in the lapping tide, where he's standing.

"Aargh!" Mark cries as a bloated hand with false pink fingernails reaches to grab his trouser leg, drags him, shouting, struggling, into the sea.

I stare in horror as I see Mel's ghost, pallid and bloated, bedraggled blonde hair. "You drowned me! Murderer!" She forces his head beneath the water.

"Mel!" Daniel pales. "Stop! You've got the wrong person. Mark isn't a killer." He wades out into the waves to try to wrestle his friend from her grip.

"Yes, he is." She refuses to let go. For a moment, Mark's mousy head bobs up out of the water, and he manages to take a breath. She forces it back under. "He not only bedded me but he stalked me relentlessly."

"Mark's not a killer," Daniel refuses to believe him, "less a stalker."

"He followed me everywhere I went, snatched me into his car at the docks, had his way with me, then got my arms in a wrestling lock and forced me to speak into a borrowed phone, to make the phone call to the Winter brothers. Then, he wrestled me into the water, held me down until I drowned."

Lorraine

I can barely believe it when I see Mel appearing from the depths, bloated and flaccid, like a leech, then latching onto Mark, nor what she says. Then, in the light of her mentioning being unable to shake him off, it makes sense.

I'm glad Mel's got hold of him, is pulling him down. I'd get in there if I could and help her if she wasn't doing such a good job of it already. The bastard killed her, set my brothers up, let the blame fall on Carson. If I hadn't thought he'd done it, I might not have treated him so harshly, might not have fed him his father's heart, and he might not have… the pain and the spitefulness of it. This is a worse tragedy than Macbeth.

"Stop!" Daniel's face is still a mask of disbelief. "You've got it wrong."

"Tell him," Mel drags Mark's head back up, "explain to your best friend."

"I," Mark coughs, splutters, vomits a mouthful of water, "I did it, but I did it because I care about you, as a friend, wanted to get her out of your life."

"So you could set me up with Marian?" Daniel asks.

"Yes, I'm a good person, just wanted everyone to be happy."

"But her murder destroyed my life and sent me into a depression."

"I was doing it for the good of the community. She was a leech."

Mel hisses and shows teeth like a leech's and her fat pink tongue.

"Hasn't the world been better without the Winter brothers?" asks Mark.

That's one step too far, I'm charging out with my knife to the edge of the sea. "You ruined my life, getting my brothers put away, turned me against Carson!"

"I'll make him pay," Mel promises, pulls Mark back down again.

“I believe you,” Daniel says, “please don’t kill him,” he begs, “no more murder.”

But Mel does not relent. “A life for a life.” “A drowning for a drowning.”

Strong as he is, Daniel is no match for the ghost of the revenge-driven prostitute. Just one more glimpse of Mark’s plastic face, red eyes blinking, before they sink together down into Lune Deep, his glasses floating uselessly.

I’m glad they’re gone, both of them, but I’m gutted as a fish to learn how cruelly and tightly the web of fate has been spun since she lured me into killing Stanley, setting into motion the chain of events that undid his son. The pain is enough to down me, where I stand, to lie gupping. Yet, there is a sense of justice having been done, the work of Nodens Silver Hand.

In my mind’s eye, I see the twisted mess being undone by black-nailed fingers that tend the webs of spiders, untangle the tails of the horses of the Otherworld, play guitar, and unpluck the chords of fate to herald new beginnings.

Looking out towards the horizon where silver sea and sky meet, I pray.

Please, by God and all his angels and Nodens and all his sea chariots, grant me a last glimpse of Carson, let me see him truly, as I see him in my dreams. Let us ride together on a conch shell pulled by four water-horses with only one eye in their foreheads whose single vision is straight and true.

Show me him surrounded by winged wind spirits with trumpets in their hands and mermen with tridents and a speckled salmon leaping like a rainbow.

Old gods, if you care for me, grant me this one and only prayer.

Chesney

“Dearie dearie me,” Safir shakes her head. “I always thought there was something false about Mark and how he changed his face and his ways.”

“I feel so sorry for blaming Carson.” My heart aches.

“Me too,” says Val.

“At least everyone knows now,” says Amina, and her sisters nod satisfied.

I glance at Daniel, who is still staring at Mark’s glasses, bobbing there like dead jellyfish, and Lorraine looking like a dead dolphin who has been washed up on the shore and had her innards cut out with harpoons. There is a sense of a final wounding but also a hand reaching out to close the wounds.

Is this why we’ve been brought here? So the truth can be brought out? The justice of Nodens Silver Hand be done before the silver sky and the silent sea?

The barest hint of a breeze lifts my gaze to the horizon. Then, I see the hooded figure on the lone boat, a coracle, a paddle in his hand yet sailing with barely a wind behind him cutting through water that is shiny as glass.

Val gasps.

Lorraine whoops.

By his dark forelock, wild in the wind, by the rips in his jeans, I recognise Carson. He looks thin, but no longer skinny; he’s healthier, filling his hoodie. He’s thin in the way a ghost looks, only he’s not quite ghostlike either. But he’s certainly not flesh and blood. He looks more like water.

“Carson!” Val cries, runs to the shore, reaches out to him.

He stops the boat, not quite within reaching distance, a hectic display of emotions flashing across his face like the carriages of one of Ratty’s trains. Joy at seeing us. Pain at being separated from us. The vestiges of returning memories.

“We’re sorry, so sorry we accused you of killing Mel,” bursts Val.

“What’s done is done,” says Carson quietly, “we’ve all carried the burden.”

“You most of all,” Val breaks down sobbing, “by your death.”

“It was a sacrifice that had to be made,” Carson accepts. “Only by winning free from the web could I weave the changes to bring us here today.”

“Why have you brought us here?” Val asks. “Just to show us this horrid truth?”

“No,” Carson replies, a bard light about him, “I’ve got a new role.”

“What,” Val demands, “are you doing sailing round the bay on that boat?”

“I am now the guide to and shrine-keeper of the Lost Shrine of Nodens.”

“So, in that song, when you told us you’d be waiting, you knew?”

“No, it was just a song then, but it has turned prophetic. Come with me and the healing that began with the Big Nodens Sleepover will be complete.”

A thrill runs through me, silvery and magical, at the thought of going to the shrine. In the hollows of my bones, the ailing marrow, I know he speaks true.

“Even her?” Val glares at Lorraine. “She killed our father and fed his heart to you— surely you can’t take her to a sacred place.”

“She’s paid her price,” speaks Carson sternly, “done her penance.”

By her twisted arm, the suffering on her face, I see that he speaks true.

“How are you going to fit us all on that boat?” Val demands.

“Just climb in,” Carson says, “there’s room for all.”

So there is. For me, for Val, for Daniel’s weight, Amina, Safir aided from her scooter by Aisha and Fatima on either side taking an arm.

“I’m not having her behind us,” Val scowls at Lorraine, “to stab us in the back.”

She takes to the front with Carson with elation. For a moment, I see them as the Lord and Lady of Morecambe Bay with a pack

of four seahorses plunging before them and winged wind spirits blowing pearly conches.

Then, we're just on a coracle again, faring across the silver sea.

Chapter Fifty Eight

The Lost Shrine of Nodens is just like Val's image— a beehive hut in the mist. As Carson paddles towards it, it shimmers, mirage-like, like a dream. Closening, I see it's built from wattle and mud, with a roof thatched with reeds.

Carson anchors the boat. As we approach the entrance, he speaks in a whisper, "You need to be very quiet in order not to wake the healing hounds."

Once inside, it's pitch dark. "Wait there whilst I light the shrines."

As Carson goes round with his Zippo, the shrine is illuminated part by part. "Nodens, Lord of Dreams." He lights a candle in an alcove holding a statue. "Nodens, Silver Hand." "Nodens, the Healer." "Lord of the Mines." "Cloud Maker." "Weather Shaper." "River-Keeper." "The Fisher King."

Nine shrines, nine names, I count. The shrine might look small from the outside, but it is spacious inside with cosy wolf fur rugs and a main altar at the fore— Nodens, on a conch shell, pulled by water-horses, surrounded by spirits of the waves and the waters, and a huge speckled salmon leaping overhead. Carson lights the large pillar candles on each side to illumine it last.

All around are sleek white red-eared hounds, lounging, spread-limbed, bellies and chests rising and falling easily, snoring softly. Scattered about are silver statuettes of hounds in various positions and one of a curled-up cat.

"Nodens wouldn't let me get a cat because it would fight with the dogs."

"Courtney misses you," Val tells him, "she hasn't stopped wailing."

Carson looks guilty. Guiltier than he's felt for the grief he's caused us humans.

To the right of the main altar is a silver harp with shining strings.

"Whatever do you do here all day, all alone?" Val asks him.

“I’m not alone.” Carson leans down to pet one of the dogs, who licks him, returns to slumbering. “I play,” he gestures to the harp, “I sleep.”

It pleases me to see the easiness about him. No one trying to harry him, to control him, to kill him. He belongs here. Like a dog to a kind owner.

“I’d now like to introduce you to my harp. She has many names - Silver String, Joy of the Ocean, Peace of the Shrine, Sleep Bringer. Her strings are made from the hairs of the tails of the horses of the Otherworld who a hundred hunters couldn’t grasp, slipping from their fingers. Yet, to me, who untangles their tails, they gifted their hairs for free. Her frame comes from the same silver as the Hand of Nodens, from beneath dwarf’s hill, known only to the dwarves who see in the dark and mine silver from the darkness herself.”

His fingertips dance along the strings like black raindrops - a patter of chords. “Sit,” he says, “better, lie down, make yourselves comfortable.”

Val and I snuggle up together on the wolf furs, warm and cosy. I’m aware of the proximity of the dogs, their warmth, their rhythmic breaths. They are drawn to sniff at Daniel’s tattooed hand. As the Iqbal sisters nest down with Safir snug in the middle, they are surrounded by a sea of white bellies, rising and falling to the rhythm of the tides lapping at the hut.

“Now,” Carson says, “I will play a song that will complete the magic. Send all of you and the world into the longest and deepest of healing dreams.”

I have been a spark, I have been a fire,
I have been a falling star and a dead rockstar.
I have fallen to my knees and got back up again.
I have fallen from a bridge and bridged the worlds
and I have exploded the streams from their culverts.
I have been crushed by a thousand cars on the M6.
I have drowned in the songs of dying whales

yet my swan songs and dolphin songs have kept
our heads above the water and now I am swimming
out beyond the motorways and the prison gates
like an otter, like a pond skater, like a water boatman.
I am the guide and shrine-keeper of the Shrine of Nodens.
I am Carson Robinson and at last I have found peace.
So let me lead you through the doors of dream.

Lorraine

Right cosy, it is, in here. I could stay here for eternity, listen to him play. Snuggle up close but not quite touching on a rug amongst the dogs. Much better than Cavall, these. Cuddle you one moment, rip your throat out the next.

Listening to him play, his songs, his story takes me back to when we were falling. Both of us together. I feel like we've been falling since time began. Good place to land, this. I wonder if he'll let me stay. Let me light the shrines and touch the harp with these torturer's hands. Perhaps he won't.

And what of him? What is he? He was an animal soul in a boy's body. Now I'm not sure whether he is alive or dead or whether he is real or not. What if he is a hallucination of my deranged mind, him, this, all of it, and I'm still at home trapped in a ket-fuelled daydream under fifteen feet of snow?

If only I could touch him it might convince me he was real, but I fear he would slip from my hands like water escaping from the culverts to the dark sea.

A song to drift away to, this, a song to fall asleep to, my eyes are closing. A hound is licking my hand. I'm falling into darkness towards the silver gates.

Chesney

I don't know where I've been. I recall some distant time and place, supernova explosions, dust clouds, a solar system forming.

Uranium, plutonium settling into the Earth's core and mantle, being stripped by miners and made into rods and bombs, exploding, burning up. Then, a healing, a greening, walking with Creiddylad amongst a greater explosion of wildflowers, in a multitude of colours, far brighter than all Val's paints. Walking hand-in-hand with Val and both of us as beautiful Summer Queens. As I blink open my eyes I'm still seeing after-images of bright and newly forming universes against the backdrop of the darkness of my retina.

Val's waking too. "What did you dream?" I ask her.

"I was in the belly of a big black hen being brewed before the beginning of the world, in a great cauldron of a womb, in a magical brew."

Daniel's also awake. "I was with the Lord of the Mines in the darkness before the mines were dug when the only gold in the universe was the stars."

Amina and her sisters are very gently awakening their grandmother.

"I remember it all," Safir's eyes are sparkling, "I was the weaver of the universe stitching the stars together into their constellations with golden thread."

Lorraine remains fast asleep, snoring gently amongst the dogs.

Carson, who is still playing very softly, ceases plucking his silver harp.

In the hollows of my bones, by my healthy marrow, I know we are healed.

"What did you do?" Val stutters, staring at Carson. "And how?"

"To heal what we've been through, I had to take us back to the place where dreams come from, to the myth time, before the beginning of the world."

"You can still do magic," Val speaks in awe.

Carson pulls back his sleeve and touches the still shimmery hollow bone.

"What are you?" she demands. "Are you dead or alive?"

“I don’t know,” he admits, “I haven’t decided yet, and it doesn’t really matter.”

“It does to me. Are you going to come home or stay here forever?”

“Oh, I can’t go back,” he says vehemently, “I’ve spent far too long in the Otherworld, and whilst I wouldn’t crumble to dust, it would not be comfortable.”

“Well, we can’t stay here,” says Val, “we’ve got our exams in a few weeks. I’ve got a model-making business, and Chesney wants to be a scientist. She’s going to run 426,000 miles for her Dad over bog and fell.”

“I was just about to say I’ll take you back.” Carson hops up.

As he leads us to the door, “What about Lorraine?” Val asks suspiciously.

“Let her sleep, and I’ll take her back when she wakes.”

“There’s something going on between you two.”

He neither confirms nor denies it. Instead, he paddles us out across a sea that is quiet and indigo-silver in the small, still hours of morning before dawn.

Carson stops the coracle just shy of the shore where sand meets water. He watches the slight ssh, ssh, of the tide, washing up seaweed with unease.

He really doesn’t want to come back to this world, I realise, with sympathy. For as many reasons as he had instruments on his pocket knife.

“Will we see you again?” Val asks him.

“You can come to visit every May Eve and Halloween when the veil is thin.”

She looks happy and relieved.

“For anybody in need of healing or a song, the doors are always open.”

“We can bring the band?”

“Yes.”

“We can bring our friends?”

“Yes, but I will want some peace and quiet to myself.”

“Can we hug?”

“I’m not sure, but we can try it.”

She does not slip through him like water or touch him like flesh and blood.

“I can’t tell if you’re real or not,” she sighs as she lets him go.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Thank you for healing me,” I say.

“Good luck,” he says, “make sure I look good in our story.”

I recall how, now the book is complete, I need to write the story of Hollow Bone.

“Thank you,” the Iqbals speak gratefully, nodding their respects.

“Yeah, and I guess I should say thanks.” Daniel flexes his tattooed fist, “to you for making me the Hand of Nodens and rescuing me from the mines.”

“We’ve all rescued each other, and our rescue is complete.”

Lorraine

I don’t know where he took me. It was somewhere deep, might have been the House of Nodens himself on the sea floor, where octopuses swill in and out of secret passageways, spilling their ink to fill the world with black books.

I vaguely recollect that, flowing in Carson’s handwriting, appeared a story. That, at the beginning of the world, we were seahorses, me and him. Purple and black. Green and brown. That he gave birth to my children from the brood pouch in his tail in a multitude of splashing colours, and they went forth to people the earth with seahorse souls, slipping from the waters into trees, plants, animals, humans, us, Lorraine, and Carson. Yet the world was too much, and they fled pain and knowledge back to the watery dark.

Somewhere beyond time. Somewhere beyond memory. If the world could only recall its dreams, it would be as different as Heaven is from Hell.

“Lorraine.” The touch of a hand on my shoulder, clean and pure as water.

I’d feign sleep a little longer so he leaves it there, but he knows I’m waking.

I blink, look up. He’s crouching beside me, two hounds beside him. Their eyes are playful, and they’re wagging their tails as if ready for a game. I look around and see the shrine is empty. His sister and friends have left.

Could it be he wants to be alone with me? That he might let me stay here?

“Come on, wake up,” to my disappointment, “we’ve got a journey to make.”

“Where to? Like you, I’m tired of that sad, weary world. You’d better not be taking me back to that house that won’t sell on Kingsfold.”

“No, no, I’d never take you back there into the snow. I’ve found a new place for you, where you will be happy, where you will have horses.”

“Real ones whose rumps and shoulders are flesh and bone, not mist and water?”

“Yes.” He offers me his hand. Not as cold as I thought. Not as slippery.

We set out in his boat towards the dawn sun, bathing in its orange light. The sandpipers greet us with piping songs, and the guillemots with trills. He anchors the boat. I get off onto the beach. Aware of his pause, I turn.

It pains me to see him looking for danger as he stands on the edge of the world.

“It won’t be like walking on knives, will it?” I check with him.

“Not so bad.” Still, he hesitates.

“You won’t crumble to dust?”

“That’s just stupid medieval kings.” He takes a deep breath. With a big spring, which is disproportionate to the gap, he leaps from the boat onto the beach.

I tense, terrified he will go up in flames or burst like a leaky pipe.

He just flinches slightly when he lands, points, “That way.”

Together, we walk towards the farm where Cockersand Abbey once stood. As we grow closer, I see the fields, the horses grazing, the barns, the stables. Every moment I feel I am getting a little closer to home. You know those stories where a cart horse takes a drunken driver back from the pub, remembering the route correctly? That’s my soul carrying me back to its abode.

‘Cockersand Horse Sanctuary’, as I walk through the gates, my smile outsmiles the sunbeams and outshines even Sunny and Daylight’s smiles.

“The owner just sold up,” Carson says, “you’ll be glad to know that your house in Kingsfold has just got an owner, and the transactions have been done. The money and drugs in the suitcases you hid covered the deficit.”

The things that can be done, in sleep, in dreams, they’re phenomenal.

“I’ll show you round,” he says. We head for the stables. He shows me a little Welsh mountain pony with a poultice on her hoof because she’s got an abscess. A shaggy Dales with a bandaged foreleg to support a splint. “Watch this one.” A nervy bay colt, skidding to the back of his stable as we approach. “Not been treated so well, but with a little kindness, he’ll be okay.”

Then, to the fields, a brood mare who’s lost her foal and a foal without a mother who are happily participating in mutual grooming. A skinny donkey tucking into good green grass for the first time since he was born. Oh, how I cannot wait to pick out their feet, to groom them, muck them out. With my hand, my arm, now healing. I know that running my hands through their manes, patting their shoulders, will help my fingers trust again.

“I said you could trust me, didn’t I?” asks Carson.

“I didn’t believe you, now I trust you with my life.”

“I’m glad you want to live, Lorraine, hope you will be happy here.”

“Will you come and visit me? I know you can tie a bandage.”

“I’ll do my best.” He’s still treading uneasily and looking over his shoulder.

And I know that keeping him here is like taking a mermaid from the sea, putting a seahorse in a tank, leaving a jellyfish stranded on a beach.

“Will I be able to come and visit you at your shrine?”

“Every May Eve,” he nods and smiles, “and Halloween when the veil is thin and whenever you need healing or a song, the doors will always be open.”

I’ve run out of words and fear it’s time for another awkward farewell.

Thankfully, the old brood mare and her foal come over with the skinny donkey, and Carson takes a bunch of leafy carrots from his pocket. We take it in turns to feed the horses and watch them chomping, sloshing, turning up their lips. The foal with his first carrot, the donkey too, with broken teeth.

As I watch the poor old thing chewing and slobbering, a horrible thought occurs to me. “What do you think it will be like for us, you staying like that, me ageing, hair whiter than this, dying?”

“It’ll not be so bad.”

When he says that, I don’t believe him.

“When I’m dead, will I be able to join you in your shrine?”

“If you wish, or you could go on to another life.”

“As a bay mare, a leggy chestnut, a palomino filly, a pale waterhorse taller than the ninth wave and tail longer than the grey mare’s waterfall.” A cascade of horses in all shapes and colours run like water before my eyes.

“As many horses as you like.”

“And what of you?”

“I will remain here waiting.”

“For how long?”

“Didn’t you listen to the song?”

“Until the last star falls,” I recollect, “that’s ever such a long time.”

Epilogue

Chesney

Since I returned from the shrine, my blood results have been immaculate. Dr Ahmad could not believe it. “A miracle,” he said. I nodded in agreement.

I passed my GCSEs with straight As, took biology, chemistry, and physics at college, then got a first-class degree in Biology and Chemistry with Molecular Physics online with the Imperial College of London. I wrote my dissertation on how mutations of DNA caused by radiation can be reversed. I brought in the theory of relativity, how perspective shifts everything, and molecular changes can be brought about by the power of dreams. “I’m living proof.” I appended the thesis with the graphs of my results.

I’ve just started my first job as a Molecular Biologist at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, studying the changes in DNA in *Sphagnum* mosses on the Manchester Mosslands as they evolve to cope with climate change.

Val’s model-making business outgrew the garage, and she’s renting one of the Kingsfold Shops. She’s named it ‘Black Hen Models’. She reminds me of a black hen with her dark hair and red crest, pecking at her staff when they don’t get a fold or a flower right, but overall, she’s good to them.

We’re living together in the Robinson house and are planning to get married. Neither of us wants to give up our surnames, so we’re going to be Liddel-Robinsons. Carson said he’d come to the wedding. He doesn’t come here much, but we visit him every May Eve and Halloween, and every time Val has a bump or a scratch or gets paint in her eye (that’s often).

I wrote the story of Hollow Bone but wasn’t quite able to write ‘The End’.

The band played on without Carson, calling themselves The Bones. Freed from Vance, they established a cult following, still playing the Moorbrook, the Ferret, the Continental, the

Warehouse, but also getting gigs in Lancaster, Manchester, Liverpool, Chester, going up to Carlisle. The fans still haven't given up on Carson. They hope one day he will return. 'We are praying for you', 'Carson come home', on their banners.

At the end of every performance, they play 'The Lost Shrine of Nodens'. It took me a while to understand the words. Now they're etched upon my mind. The last song in the Black Book of Peneverdant is becoming a classic.

After Carson left, Olivia and Johnny put a call out for a new vocalist. They interviewed dozens but couldn't find anybody to fill his shoes, small as they were. It was Midge who had the idea of setting up the projector with his avatar. This works well, only every so often, the technology plays up. Carson flickers and disappears, leaving an empty mic and an open book.

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