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STORIES IN THE SKIN: EMPATHY, EMBODIMENT AND THE NOVEL

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Bath Spa University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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in collaboration with The University of Exeter

School of Liberal Arts

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# Abstract

*The Listening* (Geen, 2018) and the critical piece that accompanies it examine the entanglement of the body, empathy and narrative. *The Listening* is set in a much changed future Bristol where the race of 'God Children' rule over the 'Ffieth' and magic, of a sort, is considered possible. The novel follows its agender protagonist Asha in its fight to take control over the narratives that are imposed on it, including the stories of its mother and societal discourses on gender and race. Through Asha's struggles, the novel offers an account of how narratives can impose upon the body as a form of violence but also how stories, and the sharing of them, can be an act of healing empathy. Its exploration of the uncanny territory between the body and language contributes to the field of speculative literature by offering a contemporary response to classic texts, such as Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969).

The accompanying ficto-critical work gives an account of the research that informed *The Listening* and acts as an analysis of the novel's treatment of empathy and the body. The work contributes to the dialogue on the ability of literature to evoke empathy by arguing that the process is not just a cognitive one, as is widely assumed, but is also embodied. Suggestions are made as to how a novelist can apply these ideas to their craft.

The thesis as a whole can be understood as an investigation of the power of words over the body and the power of the body over words, as both empathy and violence.

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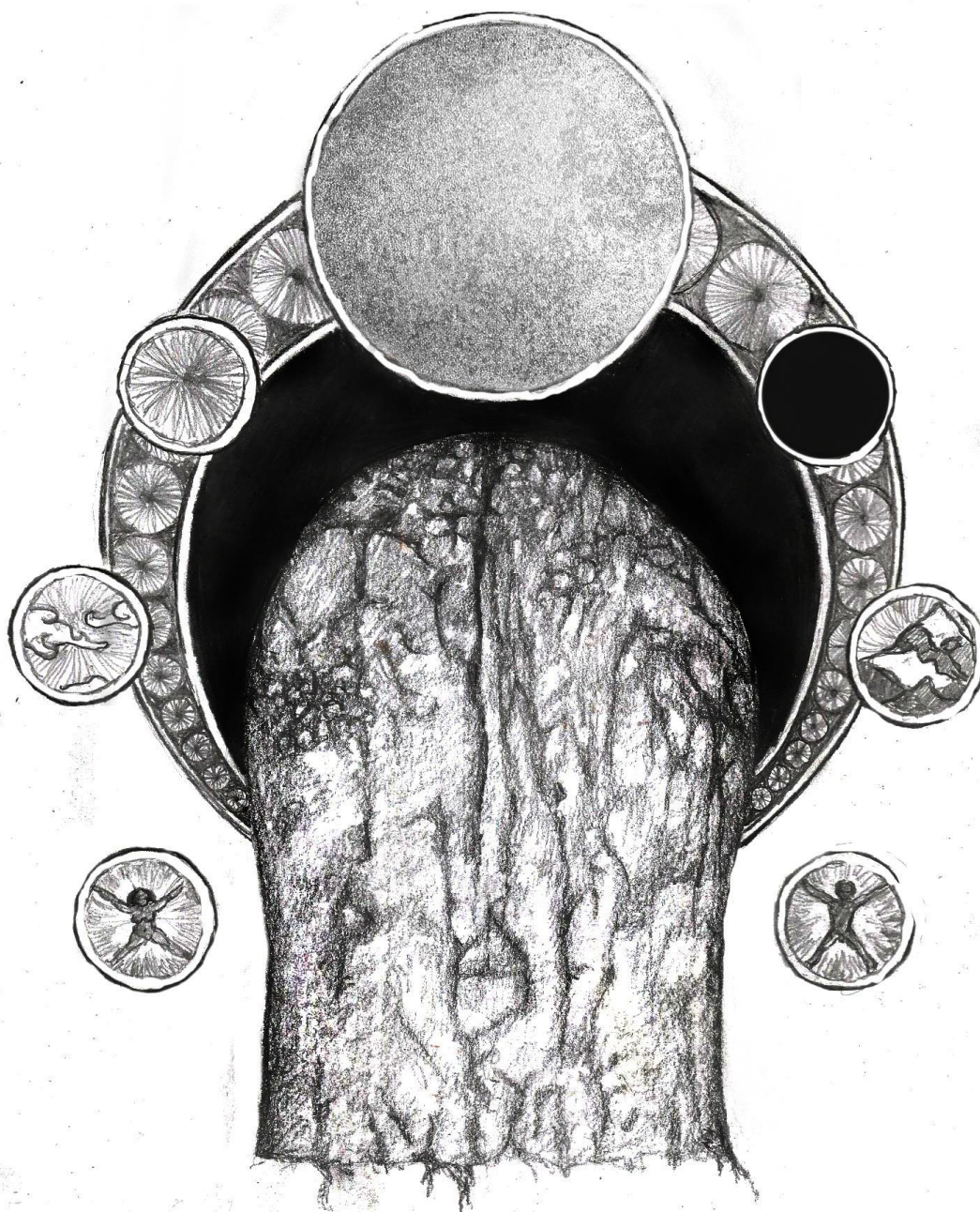
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# The Listening

*Creative Component*

# Part One





## Chapter One

Do you remember, Mother, the days when you could no longer stand me and you would drag me to see the Tongue? Perhaps I had been whistling or singing or dancing, or perhaps I had been having one of my screaming fits, which weren't uncommon at a certain age, but more often than not I'd simply been up to my usual chatter, which, out of all of it, got under your skin the most.

*Ain't no need for a radio with that childr in the 'ouse. Marm Daniels would say. Wind it up and off it goes, Lor' 'elp us all.*

Because it's true that lack of a willing conversation partner never gave me pause, not when it was possible to talk to strangers, or stones, or the ravens that hunched on the rooftops of the Ole Town, awaiting morsels of others' misfortune. Better still, I could share a story or two with your row of pans, an echo my face caught in their dim, copper bottoms. One day you even caught me talking to a cracked, laceless boot that had been lobbed into our back yard – it had seemed so much in need of the company, separated from its other half like that, and, with its long leather tongue, it reminded me of the street dogs that I'd steal scraps for. You clouted me over the head for the senselessness of it. *Speaking to shoes. To dead things. Whatever will you think of next?*

Remember?

But it didn't matter whether I'd been singing or screaming or chin-wagging, before the Tongue the breath would leave me. But then it would leave you too, the pair of us as dumb and numb as if it were us trapped inside the display case. It was a lyrical silence, expectant almost, and filled the small vestibule in the remote corner of The Page where the Tongue was tucked away. It was a deafening silence, too loud to hear yourself think and, faced with it, I would seal my fists and crowd into your skirts.

The worst of it was that there was so little that was tongue-like about it. It was a distended mass, discoloured and distempered, its suede pliability etched with lightening creases. At its root, small ligaments, softening to the point of disintegration, could be made out where the organ had been severed crudely. Hard to believe that such a thing once sat in the mouth of a man, let alone a man as holy as our Geist; it looked more like the bleached clots of flesh, once fish or rat or dog, that washed up on the banks of the

estuary at low tide and my gang would prod at with sticks, not so much out of disrespect but as an attempt to comprehend the pity of it all.

The Tongue didn't bear looking at for too long and so I'd turn my attention up at you. The urine colour of the embalming fluid cast a sallow sheen across your face, bringing out its weary contours and the dimples at the edges of your mouth that looked as if they'd been impressed with little fingers. I never thought of you as small – even now you're far from – but framed against the dark oak of the display case I would grow hot with an awareness of how very large everything else was.

Finally noticing my look, you would frown and your lips would part, but all that ever emerged was a shiver. No matter, I knew what you meant to say: *Keep on your hollering and the same will happen to you*. I could see it, clear as a frost sky – you, your sewing scissors keen from the whet stone, then fingers pressing between my lips and – *snitcky snack* – blood on the kitchen tiles and, in your hand, my tongue, the limp fillet of it.

I dreamt about that once or twice a month at least, though these were never nightmares, not exactly, they were too matter of fact. In singing and screaming and chattering, I knew that I was pushing at something in you that was spent and brittle, one day you must snap.

And yet, it is only recently that it occurred to me that this might not strictly be true. Ai, there's no doubting the Tongue, nor the times that you dragged me to it, nor that I drove you to distraction, you would testify to all this no doubt, but what you thought of saying or doing in those moments I have no way of telling. All I have is your silence. And we both know how easy it is to write one's own story onto that.

## Chapter Two

After visits to the Tongue a splinter of that silence would be lodged under my skin for days. I'd forget to talk to the stones, the ravens, the strangers, the people inside my head, would lose my enthusiasm even with folk who wanted to listen. A success to your thinking, Mother.

*We're cranky today*, you'd say to the local marms and their heads would nod nod nod on their necks, as if the lot of you shared the vibrations of one flesh. In Schooling, while Brother Oh chewed the dry cud of learning and we were supposed to practice our scribing, I would scratch holes into my writing cloth until the nib buckled and never wrote right again. Any rate, I didn't see the point of letters, if something needed telling I'd bleeden well just say it. Besides, who would I be writing to that could read? It's not that I disliked calculus or grammar or poetry, they had their own other-worldly beauty, but the foreman at the docks wouldn't pick out men for the day's work based on their comprehension of trigonometry, nor would a poem bring out the shine in a lavvy. Brother Oh could stuff our head with all the fancy thoughts he liked, but it wouldn't change the fact of our little fingers and we Ffieth were best not forgetting it.

The Geist had to write, now that his tongue was in the display case, I supposed. Most God Children could read though and he had no problem being heard when the Consort was there to do his speaking for him. Not to mention that his tongue could silence me even when cut from his head. It cowed me so much that I was old enough for folk to be dropping comments about my adulting before I worked up the courage to face it on my own terms.

I resolved to slip away during service since you would be distracted in your holy devotions, what with the swaying and moaning and your eyes burnt up as if with fever. If my luck was in you might even pass out. Lots of folk were Touched that year, the need for the release thrummed at the tips of arm hairs. Only a few months before the whole Ffieth congregation had dropped, one person, two, then three, followed by the rest in a great twitching collapse. *God felt our painen*, the old marms had said afterwards, *so tugged on our 'eartstrings to gis us quiet a spell*. Allabody that is, apart from me. I'd pretended though, after I was left standing, alone, in the carpet of bodies and felt your tug on my leg. Your eyes had turned back in your head and drool had run

from a corner of your mouth, but even in your ecstasy you still had thought for what the neighbours would say and, since I'd been afraid, I'd lain next to you and bit my lip until the last shudders had past.

'The sin in you, Asha. What am I to do with you?' You'd said once we were back home. I'd scratched at the hickey of those words for days. Ai, such sin in me, such a sinful childr I was, but what choice does a 'sinful childr' have but to be sinful? I'd love to know.

There was to be no swooning the day I took myself to see the Tongue, but you were distracted all the same. Dee slipped out too and went similarly unmissed, then the pair of us were fleeing down the cloisters, arms and shoulders bumping, half-drunk on our own daring. The blinds were down to keep out the cold clawing at the windows and the only light came from the spluttering bulbs. It was a good job that we encountered noabody since my thoughts were splintered at the bottom of my skull and I lacked the wits to talk us out of trouble. Dee could be charming enough when there was the need, but it wasn't as quick of tongue as me. Even back then, when folk were saying that the bleeds or manning must surely be on it soon, its slender features and off-white colouring gave it a delicacy that reminded me of the Brothers' porcelain jars, which you wouldn't let me look at squiff-eyed for fear of cracks.

*Pale as a Fallen, that childr. Seen plucked chicken with more colour in them, you'd say once Dee was out of earshot. Best hope it becomes a man because it sure hasn't looks going for it.*

And didn't Dee know it. This vulnerability came with a cruel cocksureness that cooled the attitude of many, but I didn't mind, not when it reminded me of the play of light on the edge of a knife and not when it jumped on my command. You'd tell folk that I had less grown up alongside Dee so much as after it, no doubt thinking of how it had to keep a hand on my scruff in two-legged races lest I kept it back or how when we were caught pie-stealing I'd always say that I'd only been keeping watch, which was true well enough, but what you misunderstood was that the decision of what we'd do was always mine.

*Ey up, Pint-Sized, the friends of Dee's oleman would say to say to it down the docks, 'ow bes it 'Alf-Pint can boss yous round when you 'as an 'ole 'ead on 'em?*

*Or Best 'ope our Asha don't grow into a woman or Lor 'elp the poor sod that marries them.*

And I'd laugh along, hard enough to give myself hiccups, because coming under the attention of the men made me feel big. And because any mention of my adulting set me

giggling in those days. See, what had once felt like a question for the future was now looming close enough to throw shadow and both manning and the bleeds looked equally unattractive. Dee would laugh too because even though it was taller and stronger it knew that my gift of the gab got us places. Though, admittedly, these places weren't normally as risky as the Tongue.

Before the display case we froze. Half-formed creatures pressed their arms and faces through the grain of the dark oak, this ornateness out of place in the minimalist aesthetic of The Page. I pretended not to see Dee's fingers itching to take mine and fixed my attention on the Tongue, thinking of the taut figure of the Geist at the head of the congregation we'd just left. My guts stirred as I understood the reality of what he'd had done to him. There'd been a macky load of pomp and merry-making on his ascension from Consort to Geist the summer before and you'd told me then that the cutting was undertaken so that he could lead us in the Unspeaking during the weekly sermons, but you'd been quiet on the particulars. Had they used scissors, like I thought you might with me? A knife? A cleaver? Or had it been tugged out? More importantly, what had the Geist felt knowing what he was about to go through? My own tongue twinged just thinking about it. The cut might have made him the most powerful man in the city, but, when all was said and done, it was still his tongue that they had removed from his head.

The courage almost failed me. I stepped back, only to find Dee there. We hadn't discussed plans, I hadn't made any, but we placed our palms against the glass and pushed. The case rocked on its heels, then lurched forwards, teetering back at the last moment to crash to its feet. The Tongue juddered. I snatched up Dee's hand and fled, tensed against the sound of shattering that never came.

We ran until we had no more breath in our lungs, then fell into the snow. In my mind's eye the Tongue still spasmed. My whole body was shaking. But then Dee's wide eyes met mine and we burst into laughter. The force of it doubled us over, the waves thrusting through my diaphragm, into Dee's, then back until my stomach hurt. But I couldn't stop; couldn't breathe; could barely see, save for Dee's feet paddling against the white sky.

My face was wet with tears by the time the fit had passed. We lay there a long time, just searching each other's faces, until my gut gave an acute kick and I rolled over to retch into the gutter.

## Chapter Three

Weeks passed. Dee and I stopped smirking at each other during service. Or, rather, I cultivated a habit of chewing on my braids whenever it tried to catch my eye. Dee was peeved and made a point of asking Toad to throw knives when this had always been our game and Toad couldn't handle anything sharper than a blade of frozen grass without cutting itself. It was a pathetic attempt to get back at me and didn't it half hit its mark.

'What have you done to upset that childr now?' You asked after Dee hadn't turned up in our yard for several days, but you weren't interested in the answer and continued to fuss the creases from my tunic. 'Is for the best. Foreman's childr it may be, but the pair of you bring out the worst in each other.'

Dee and I were good though, even after everything. It was the Tongue that I couldn't face. There had been no word of the case breaking, which would have no doubt caused a stir had it happened. Mind, I hadn't the courage to go back to check and so the Tongue slipped into my dreams, woke me some nights licked with sweat. I'd courted sin since I'd been old enough to understand that 'Ffieth' referred to someone like me, but it was only just sinking in that Dee and I had committed an act beside which pie stealing and hooky paled to insignificance; it couldn't go without punishment. You had always said that my wilfulness would be my undoing and that I had to forgo sin and accept the Faith into my heart if I wanted to be saved, which I had both believed, unquestionably, and ignored with all the fierceness of my being. Well, that dismissal was now biting back with vengeance, so when, some weeks later, you turfed me from my bed into a dark dawn, I thought that my time had come.

Or, at least, that's where my mind went second. My first thought was that the menfolk had come to guide me into the forest for whatever trials were required to enter my manning, since I was of the age and was yet to get the bleeds. Your comments about making up my mind had become increasingly pointed in recent months, not least because nobody would take me on as an apprentice without knowing whether I was going to be a man or a woman and our larder was an ache of bare shelves. I hungered for milk in our porridge as much as you, mind, I'd have given away the best flotsam finds from my biscuit tin of treasures for a meal that wasn't overly-chummy with oats or turnip, but adulating just seemed so— well, final.

That was the point of growing up though. Even Mi'luvver had sat me down to explain in kindly words that nobody could stay a child forever. She hadn't stayed over that night and I longed for the solid reassurance of her presence as you pressed my best tunic and a pair of woollen leggings on me. Mi'luvver wouldn't miss seeing me off for my manning, surely? But maybe Comfort Women weren't allowed since the child wasn't of their womb.

My badgering of the dock men about the ritual had only ever been rewarded with tall stories, so all I knew was that new men returned from the forest with an ugly gash on their left cheek that, with time, would scar into an arrow pointing to the ear. Why was a lughole essential to manning? I didn't get it, but when I asked the men they had a good old laugh of it and repeated the question to one another until it dawned on me that I'd missed the point entirely.

The scar though – no way of mistaking what was involved in that and the morning you turfed me from my bed I retched in the outhouse to think of my cheek being cut. Not that the hole put in the cartilage of a woman's ear for her ring looked pleasant either. For all I bore the bruises from my fights with pride, I was not good with pain and I might have attempted running for it had you not been leaning against the door with just such a possibility in mind. Yet such extremes of terror aren't sustainable and by the time you had hauled me to the front door I had surrendered myself to a blank acceptance. I squared my shoulders, stumbled over the step and saw – nobody. Save for the contemplative drift of new snowfall, the street was still.

*That's* when I remembered the Tongue. You weren't having any whining though and drew me on.

It was the timeless hour of dawn when the sky isn't yet light but the memory of it, when the veil between the world and dream is so slight that it feels as if a stray thought might punch through. The only sound came from the creak of yesterday's snow under our boots, though even that grew muffled and bright as the new fall settled.

There was a grim silence on you and I began to wonder if Mi'luvver knew where we were going. Lor' bless the folk that get between the two heads of a pair of Comfort Women, but I was old enough by then to have a gut understanding of the volatile forces of need and disapproval that kept you and Mi'luvver, if not inseparable, in constant orbit. Nobody ever said that love was easy, but it still made me sad when Marm Daniels and Marm Jonna had me over for pie and I'd watch the two of them cosy up on their sofa. Even the sound of their bickering through our walls made me jealous, at least

it showed that they lived under the same roof. But thoughts of Mi'luvver were only making me more hysterical since she was more forgiving than you.

'No, no, no, you can't, Ma,' I grizzled, though I could only guess at where we were going. 'You can't. Mi'luvver will bes proper baity, will eadfit. And Marm Jonna won't let you 'ave any more of 'er apples, sure as is.'

None of this was having any effect though and so my threats became increasingly improbable. 'Conni'll stop you. The fey'll turn yous into a toad, squish you. The bandersnatch'll 'ave you. 'Ll be eaten up, then you'll bes sorry.'

Your talent at turning a deaf ear carried you all the way along the canal to the archway into the Inner City where you beseeched the soiled sky.

'For once with the stories. One night of quiet. Is that too much to ask?'

I snapped my lips together and you smoothed your pinafore with a curt, satisfied flick. I wanted to shove you, I wanted to kick and shout but settled for dragging my steps and sneering at the way your skirt, so immaculately starched, had lodged itself in the crack of your domineering buttocks. You were supposed to look back and chastise me, but when the glance did come it skimmed right over my head – you'd been throwing these into the shadows since we'd entered the Inner City.

'I ain't afeared, *you* be afeared,' I said.

You twitched but spoke smoothly enough. 'Scared. Not afeared. How do you think folk must think of you to hear you speak like that?'

The way you stressed your 'h's always made my skin crawl. For all that you thought that they gave you the air of some fancy God Child, they only ever made your tongue clumsy. A true Four Four doesn't have to work on their 'h's; they're born with them, just like with everything else. They're my only real inheritance of Father's since the pair of you spoon-fed them me along with my soaked oats and curds, but I'd have happily relinquished the privilege. 'H's are so hard on the palette. I preferred to let the vowels howl and since joining my gang I'd done my best to clip them from my mouth. And yet, despite my best efforts, the Four Four tongue was my first, nothing I could do about that. It lay at the bottom of my mouth waiting for moments of weakness. Though I did get some joy out of perverting it to goad you.

'Hi ham hnot hared. *Hou* he hared,' I said.

You ignored me and a hot prickling sensation spread over my skin. It didn't matter that I was a sinful childr, who had pushed the Tongue and was going to pay the price, I tipped back my head and shrieked. You clapped a hand over my mouth.

'Asha Beh!'



I glowered over the wedge of your palm, but in truth I was already regretting the scream. The air, like body of glass, was still singing in answer and I could feel the vast ponderance of the night turn on us.

'Do you want to wake these goodly folk?' You looked around for the twitch of blinds, but all was still. I dug my little fingers into the fabric of my coat until they ached.

'Sometimes I think that there must be a daymon inside you.' You pressed your lips, then lowered the hand. For all the hardness of your eyes, your palm was soft and I let myself be drawn on.

Avon Gorge appeared ahead of us as a crack of star speckled sky through the black. At its edge, The Page shone white under the floodlights, the glare smoothing it of all imperfections so that it looked like a gurt, glowing cube suspended in nothingness. It stuck with me, that image, and for many years afterwards that was how I was to visualise Word whenever the Brothers spoke of it.

The flight that led to The Page was cut into the rock face with nothing but a railing between us and the sheer drop to the river below, so I kept my eyes on my legs, seeming to float against the endless march of light-washed steps. Though you made this walk every day you still had to pause several times to dab at your neck. Beauty had always looked such a chore, folk might turn to watch you in the street but maintaining a good weight took its toll on your knees and even then you were insecure about your looks. It almost made me regret taking so long about my adulating – on your cleaner's wage the rich foods favoured by God's Children rarely got a toe in. If I was foolish enough to get my bleeds and become a woman, I thought, I would eat nothing but cabbage broth and run everywhere I pleased.

I scuffed the slush off the step as I waited for you to catch your breath. The city was already small beneath us; though it had looked grey when we were in it, from up here the night's snowfall held its own inner light and traced the streets in silver to the tree-line where all was white and waiting. Even at this distance, the shush of the forest's Listening lingered at the edges of hearing and I turned on the spot to admire how it swallowed the horizon in every direction. Funny that the Four Fours should revere a shining cube when the forest was so endless and held more secrets than The Page could shake a stick at. But you would have called such thoughts sinful if you could hear them and, given your glower, mayhaps you could.

At the top of the steps I wondered whether to make a run for it, you were too worn from the climb to give chase, but, before a decision could be made, you were squatting

down and licking your fingers to seal away the wisps that had escaped my braids. My hair had always been more like yours than Father's in that regard.

'Look at you,' you said.

I dropped my gaze to my boots.

'I'm very proud of you.'

The leather was darkened by damp. I wriggled my numbed toes where they pressed against the ends. You'd have to haggle a new pair for me soon, though where we'd get the money for that I didn't know.

'Hear me? Asha?'

But you couldn't be proud of me – not after I'd screamed and woken all those goodly folk, not after I'd pushed the Tongue, not when I was such a sinful childr. But then you caught hold of my chin and the line of thought dissolved. Yes, you weren't as fat as Mi'luvver, but few in Brizzletun had skin so dark and of such perfect symmetry as yours. *Pretty as a picture, your ma*, folk used to say. It took me years to understand that they were talking of your beauty rather than the stiffness of expression that sometimes made it seem as if you weren't quite there even when you were looking at me. When your face came alive though, ai, then your eyes seemed almost molten. I'd have journeyed into the forest's heart and back if I'd known that it would make you look at me like that, but the truth was that I hadn't the first inkling of how to make you happy.

'Out of all the childr they could have chosen, they chose you,' you said. 'Not the childr of some God Child woman. Not the childr of some Inner City dweller. Asha. My childr.'

I wanted to ask who had chosen me, and for what, but you kissed my forehead and my mouth went dry.

Through the servant's door, you took ribbons from the pot to slip on our little fingers and I fidgeted with them as you set your satchel down for later. Your shift would start not long after you'd dropped me off, you explained. I hadn't known that you were going to leave me, but at my first whine your smile stiffened, so I bit my bottom lip and followed.

The Page was still at this hour, and dark. Most of the Brothers would still be abed, so you had us walk on tip-toes, though even this shuffling sounded monstrous within the empty reach of the halls. At least it wasn't cold, not as might be expected from the bare sandstone, and whenever we passed a vent in the walkway a balmy heat huffed up my leggings. I'd reported to my gang that I'd seen a great beast slumbering down there,

nostrils pressed to the metal, and though this wasn't exactly true, I'd repeated it with such conviction that I almost believed it.

*Say what you like about the Brothers*, you had a habit of saying after arguments with Mi'luvver about the Faith, *but they know how to warm a space*. Then you'd smooth your skirts and flounce off as if all further disagreement had been settled. And, I suppose, from one perspective it had. I still remembered how, when we had to sell our house in the Inner City for our current home with its generator whose growl was more of a cough, you'd had to leave me in The Page's servant's quarters during the days so that I wouldn't catch my death of cold.

After a maze of corridors and hallways, you led us off into the antechamber that housed the Tongue. The first light of morning stuck the liquid so that it shimmered in molten flame. My heart was beating so fast that I worried it might explode, then the beast beneath the grating would drag my dedun into the basement to suck marrow from the bones. But you were already tugging us on, round the back of the case, to a doorway that I'd never given any mind to before.

There were no windows in the anteroom beyond. A single lantern spat in one corner and threw its glimmer over the copper grille opposite, which was moulded in a pattern of flowers and animals so complex that it hurt the eyes to try and follow. Next to it hung a smelt iron bell and beyond that a doorway covered by a bead curtain. Several pairs of boots were lined to one side, from their dyed suede it was clear that they belonged to Brothers. Though my back was turned to it, the Tongue seemed to throb against my attention. Sinful or not it had once been part of the Geist. And I'd pushed it. Coors I must be punished.

*'Asha.'*

You had removed your boots, they bowed next to the Brothers' like knackered mules in a field of prized stallions.

*'Off now. Hurry,'* you whispered and knelt to snap the buckles open on mine.

I wriggled free of them, but by the time I'd righted myself you were already pushing through the curtain. The beads hissed back to stillness, then it was as if you'd never been at all.

I hopped around the stone flooring, cold now that it made contact with skin, and tried to see what lay beyond. Only darkness could be made out, but the blunt shape of the Tongue hung behind me. I plunged after you.

Through the curtain all was dim and still. The space held the quiet of a blizzard, alive almost, with a ringing that seemed to shrill just below the cusp of hearing. The expanse

blotted into blackness where the lamps faltered and gave me the fancy that the space continued forever. Only the sluggish remnants of light reached the scrolling on the high arch of the ceiling and threw long shadows from the structures that towered over the hall. These were made of varnished oak, set with bronze plaques, and reminded me of storage shelves from the dock warehouses, save these held not barrels but books. Books beyond counting. So many goddamn bleeden books that my throat knotted. Before that moment I could have counted the number I'd seen on the digits of my hands and feet and still had toes to spare. Only the enormity of the situation held me from running right back out of there. Because this was the Library.

I'd heard of it. Coors I had. You made a sheet of your hands whenever the word was mentioned to ward off the sin and there wasn't a childr in Brizzletun who hadn't been dared to pass its threshold. Toad claimed to have snuck in several times, though we were long past putting much store in its tales, especially when even Dee couldn't boast that and I, in this case at least, wouldn't have been stupid enough to try. It was likely that I was now the only childr that could claim to have been there, though in that moment it was an honour that I'd have happily relinquished.

You took my arm and drew me over to the Brothers. There were ten of them, sombre in posture, though there was an unusual restlessness to their expressions. Their hands were held neatly crossed at their abdomens, as if anyone could ever overlook the number of their fingers. As if anyone would think a Brother might be Ffieth.

The queer ache woke in my chest that always stirred at the sight of their orange robes and slender features, so like Father's. Yet their serious expressions couldn't have been more different.

'Is this the girl?' The one at the front said.

*Girl.* I took the word into me like slap. But then that was Four Fours for you, if their childr – their *children* – were split into either girl or boy then, to their mind, that was how Ffieth must be too. Though a Ffieth with any sense wouldn't start such an argument with a God Child. Or call them a Four Four within their hearing for that matter.

You tightened your grip on my elbow. 'We're both honoured, Maesters. Truly. Asha won't disappoint.'

One of the Brother was staring at the ribbons on my littles, so I shoved my free hand into a pocket. The cold had found its way through my soles into my innards. It was no great feat to know how they saw me – some Ole Town scab, like the hundred of others lurking on street corners: knock kneed, gap toothed, nose wonky from when Dee

lamped me that time, all scabs and bruises. *Ffieth*. There were many reasons to hate the Brothers, but the way they could jerk me from myself, hand me back in a vision that was alien and yet undeniable, was the worst of all. Though, coors, at that age all I understood of this was that their gaze would fill me with caustic, liquid shame.

I startled to find another Brother next to me, the knuckle of his nose lurching forwards as he crouched down, then an outstretched hand was in my face. It was an ansum hand, slender and tapered from the ball of the palm to the ring finger, like those of all God Children, but what caught me off guard was how unblemished it was, smooth and oddly featureless – a hand without history, I thought, as if the Brother was able to wash off the work and hurts that ate into the rest of us. The only mark of use showed in the blot of silver that crowned the index finger, so bright that at first I thought that it was jewellery, though it was contoured to the tip as if he had dipped it in a crucible of the molten metal. Ink, I realised, silver ink.

I must have passed that man at The Page dozens, if not hundreds, of times in the years since and never recognised him; that hand, though, I shall carry to the grave.

After several seconds of my staring, it withdrew.

'Well. Well met?'

'Asha,' you said.

'Hello, Ash,' the Brother – let us call him Silver Tip – said.

I cast a darting look among the gathered and it finally dawned on me that whatever this was wasn't to do with the Tongue. What *was* happening I couldn't say, but it didn't seem that I was being punished.

'Isn't that a lovely dress you're wearing?'

I yelped as your nails bit into my wrist – you had known I was going to tell him it was a bleeden tunic, not a dress – and so I settled for a glare. It wasn't my fault that I didn't like the Brothers when they were so stupid.

'Asha is a shy one,' you said.

'Ah.' Silver Tip smiled and raised his voice, as if this could breach my quiet. 'Nothing to be afraid of here, Ash. You're very important to us.'

'Hear that, Asha?' Your palm was damp and I found myself wanting to wriggle free of it even as I clung fast.

The bead curtain weighed on my awareness and I looked back, half-believing, half-hoping to see Father burst through. If there was ever a time for one of sudden appearances it was now. But the beads hung still.

Silver Tip put an arm around me, his grip too tight to be comfortable.

'Why don't you get on to work, Marm. We'll take care of her from here.'

You leaned in to paste my loose hair in place, only to step back as I tried to latch onto your skirts.

'Don't you worry. She'll be fine with us.' Silver Tip gave me a shake that left my ears ringing.

I pleaded with my eyes. Yours were round, flinching. But you walked away all the same. I squirmed against the silver-tipped hand that was proving to have a grip closer to iron.

'Ma. MA!'

The ligaments in your neck tightened and you paused – five heartbeats, I counted them – then walked on. You hadn't even looked back.

But I suppose that you know all this. Whatever gladness or regret you hold for that night, you can't have forgotten. What you couldn't have known was that the bareness of the stone slab where you had once stood picked open a wet-lipped wound at the base of my throat.

'Come on now,' Silver Tip said. 'Shush. You're a big girl aren't you?'

One of the others laughed, but Silver Tip ignored this to lead me away to the table set at the entrance to the shelves. Leather hangings led a procession away into the dark in both directions.

'See here,' he said and placed my hand on something. The surface was flat yet rough, but I was still straining to see if you'd return, so I jolted when the Brother nudged me and I saw that it was a book.

'It's older than the building you're standing in,' Silver-Tip explained. 'The Fallen still held the Earth when it was written. Can you imagine?'

I couldn't. Nor could I understand it since the letters had picked up their arms and legs to kick and cavort into shapes unlike any we'd been shown at Schooling. They must have been in the Fallen tongue and at the thought a nettle-burn sensation stirred on my palm. Silver Tip made encouraging sounds as I continued to stroke it in the way that he had shown me, though I'd have rather petted a bull in heat and kept giving casting looks back at the bead curtain.

'It tells the story of a very important Fallen man. One such as yourself wouldn't have heard of him, but he was a direct descendant of Woeman. It was Woeman, of course, who was the first sinner to corrupt The Word.'

I glared. Coors I knew about Woeman, I wasn't a babber.

But Silver Tip wasn't even looking at me. 'By studying such books we can understand how language has folded through time, becoming new sinful utterances and taking us further from the purity of The Word. And in following the words back to their former creasings we can unfold them, tracing the rot back to what came before until there will only be two left. Do you know what these will be?'

'There isn't the time for this,' another Brother said.

Silver Tip ignored him. 'They will be The Word and God. And in this way we will know how to undo Woeman's folding. You see, at times, we struggle with old texts and are unable to iron out their meaning. You, Ash, have been chosen for the extremely important task of helping us understand. You think you can do that?'

His stare left me little opportunity but to nod.

'Wonderful.' My hand was snatched back from the book. 'The procedure begins by tattooing the text onto your skin. Then, by examining how it changes with time, we can—'

But I wasn't paying attention, I'd just focussed on the leather hanging over the table. On first glance, I'd dismissed it as cow hide, but it was too small for that. Then there were the strange markings on it, almost like letters. At the end of the forearms were the florid blooms of fingers.

I stumbled back and was blocked by a pair of legs. A heel to the toes and I was free, only to run into the stomach of the Brother behind. He hoisted me off the floor.

'Of all the ingratitude,' Silver Tip said. 'The last time I show kindness to a—' But he cut off as my kick caught his chin and I lost sight of him.

'Get her down,' someone said. 'Prepare her.'

'I'm not a her!' I yelled.

'And shut her up.'

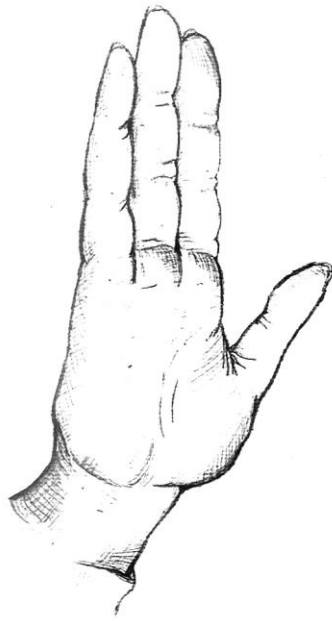
A stick was stuck between my teeth and I was manhandled onto the table. They cut away my coat and tunic with a few swipes of the scissors. My best tunic, it had been my best tunic, you'd spent every evening for a month stitching it. Yet the terror of what you'd do when you found out was forgotten as it struck me that my tongue would be next. I thrashed like a bird against a window, then the Brothers clamped down and all I could do was jerk my head back and forth. But once I was naked the scissors disappeared and my wailing gave way to sobs.

A pot of ink was unscrewed before my face, its moist mouth gaping. The needle gun thrust in, emerged dripping silver. Ink fell to my lips, tasting of salt and ash. Then the tattooing began.

At first the pain was little more than insect bites, it only hurt where the needle slipped under my squirming, the Brothers' blunt fingers were almost worse. My flesh welted around the letters, as if the words had lain dormant within me all this time and the work of the Brothers was merely drawing them into the light. I shut my eyes and cried dryly. But the pain was growing, a foreign body inside me. Time blistered, oozed. Then the needle met a nipple.

The world imploded to screaming skin. To agony. To fire, that drove me from myself into the cold comfort of nothing.





## God Child Hand

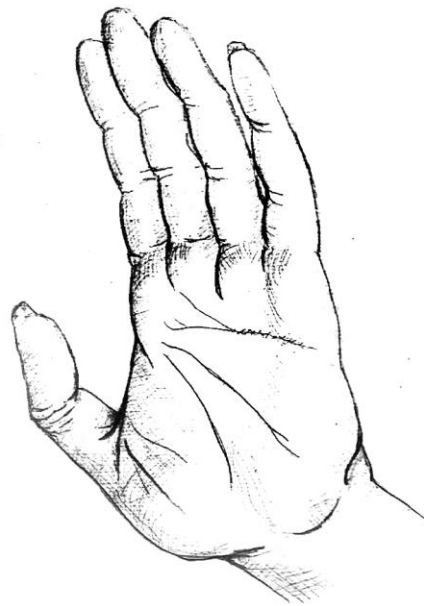
Attention of the student of anatomy is to be drawn to the ergonomic balance of the God Child hand and the elegance of its profile. Note also the smooth quality of the palmar surface and minimal creasing. As the following chapter details, the ratio of fingers to thumb reflects the perfect aesthetic and physiological geometry.

## Ffieth Hand

Attention of the student is to be drawn to the surfeit finger. This vestigial digital is not only diminutive, as recognized by its name 'little', but notably weaker than the healthier fingers.

As the student will observe through later plates, this abnormality comes with extra phalanges, joints and muscular groups.

In contrast to the God Child hand, the palmar surface of the Ffieth is thicker and lacks the pliability of the dorsal skin, lending itself to deeper and more extensive creasing.



## Chapter Four

In the beginning there was Word.

How many times did you tell me this story? Once a week at least. Where Mi'luvver tucked me into my nightly dreams with tales of derring-do and magic, you would send me off with an echo of the Geist's sermon to thunder behind my eyelids.

In the beginning there was Word. Complete, without distinction or skin.

It had sat there – everywhere – for time beyond being.

The true place for this story, coors, was The Page and it still reminds me of sitting in the warm press of the congregation, of kicking my heels against the back of the pew, or, if we arrived too late for the limited Ffieth seating, of bouncing on my toes, buoyed by an inexplicable glee that always resisted your pinch and even your cussing on the way home that I had a bit too much sin in me. Never mind the begged question of how exactly that sin got in if not through flesh or circumstance of your creation. You weren't one to poke where the answer could be troubling, were you. The same couldn't be said of me.

In the beginning there was Word. Complete, without distinction or skin.

It had sat there – everywhere – for time beyond being. Nothing more. Nothing less. For such is the way that things should be.

I always watched for when the Geist's lips would form around that part, straining up off my bottom if I had to. Even better, I liked to mouth the Unspeaking along with him. Though it took me many years to articulate why the small sacrilege delighted me – his sin, there for anyone with eyes too see. Most folk were too busy listening to the Consort speak the words to trouble themselves over whether language unspoken was language all the same.

*Sit down and stop fidgeting*, you would hiss, a shove to the shoulder achieving the desired effect more than the command. Oh ai, I had some sin in me indeed.

Yet so did the Consort. And so did the Geist. And so did the Creed. The whole sorry paradox of The Faith could be found in those few first lines, as bare as the naked pigling. Why then did noabody else choose to see it?

For how could the Word could have a beginning? To even give it a noun, or a name, or to refer to 'it', was a crease in its perfection. To truly be faithful would be to never

think of it at all. For the true Word was Unspeakable. The true Word was Totality. It was the Before and After, where lips aren't a temptation. No matter the farce of Unspeaking – as if language can only sully when given flesh through page or breath. More mind-boggling was the hypocrisy. The congregation wasn't stupid, though I spent many years thinking that they must be, any sorry telling can become as unquestionable as the sky itself if it was there when you looked up from the crib.

Even the Brothers couldn't avoid acknowledging the inevitability of some sin and so they'd shake their heads and offer mournful shrugs whenever one of their number was seen to indulge excessively in sex or speech, such erring was regrettable but shouldn't impede a soul from damning their own vices from the pulpit.

But I digress.

In the beginning there was Word. Complete, without distinction or skin.

It had sat there – everywhere – for time beyond being. Nothing more. Nothing less. For such is the way that things should be.

But then–

A ripple on the face of the waters.

Oh small, small sin!

An act of contemplation was emerging.

A single crease puckered Word's length as it turned to looking. And, as Word was all, this looking looked upon itself. In this way, looking grew a skin.

Word, the skin thought of The Word.

And of itself, God.

And so time was to drop its first grain.

Interesting, isn't it, how many acts of creation start as mistakes. But never mind, these things happen.

And so, there, in this tippi crawl of time, is God. And there is The Word. God apart from and yet still of it, marvelling at its – his – own perfection.

This looking was harmless enough, for it was only intended to be temporary and God would soon return to The Word. But, for the moment – whilst there were moments – why not let time tarry a while?

Such a quiet sin and all would have still been well had God not been lonely. For he had found what every man has since, that looking lacks without company. And so, after a small infinity, God decided to create another looking. This he folded from his own substance. And this he called Woeman. God looked at Woeman and saw that she was good.

Or so he thought. For Woeman was not patient like God and every hundred years or so she would point to The Word with a question in her eyes. And whenever she did this God would grow very scared indeed because with every jab creases appeared in The Word. Worse still, when Woeman looked at God he felt the creases grow within him.

There is still time, God. Still time to undo your folly. But no, another brief infinity passes in this way until the moment that Woeman spoke. It began as squeaks of breath and God was more baffled than scared, but then these gathered into words.

‘What is?’ Woeman said. ‘What is?’

And with this God was greatly angered, for with every word her creases grew within him.

And with this God was greatly saddened, for with every word The Word grew less perfect.

And with this God was greatly frightened, for when Woeman pointed he could see shadows stirring beneath the surface of The Word like the chick within its shell.

God reasoned whether to unfold Woeman back into his own being, but now that he had seen her eyes he did not like the idea of their corruption being part of his being. And so he let events continue until one day Woeman pointed and a whole sentence flew from her lips.

‘What is that?’ She said.

And, at the question, Word shuddered under a force greater than thunder.

God was greatly afraid then and struck Woeman across the right cheek. But still she kept on pointing and still she kept on speaking. And so God placed a hand over her mouth. But at this Woeman just spoke from the second pair of lips between her legs. And so God lay with Woeman and she had no more mouths with which to speak. This work tired God greatly and he fell into a sleep of such depth that there is no looking.

Have you ever wondered, Mother, what Woeman felt in that moment? It’s not a matter that I’ve seen a Brother ponder. Mayhaps only a true sinner, such as myself, could care for it or mayhaps every Ffieth has given it thought, not only out of sympathy for the hurt and pain and shame but the excitement. For, after centuries that stretched like unset rubber, Woeman’s oppressor had dropped his guard. And, with God without his looking, Woeman approached The Word.

How to even describe what she found? The Unspeaking says that The Word was larger than conceivable by man and spilt over the horizons of space; it *was* space, it *was* time, it was everything save God and Woeman. But where God saw purity, Woeman could see only imperfection. That is to say, potential.

Woeman reached out and at her touch The Word grew a cool skin like that of boiled milk. This Woeman gripped between her hungry lips and began to fold.

She folded the whole in half, thus turned The Word into The World and The Not.

The World she folded in two again, making Land and Heavens.

Land she folded into Earth and Sea.

Earth into Living and Rock.

Living into Animal and Plant.

Animal into Human and Beast.

And so on she went, folding and shaking with the sickness of her trespass.

Such is the sin of women!

When God finally woke he found himself in a glade. The blue of sky bore down and the earth dug into his back. He sat up in alarm then and saw that there were beings of many skins and hide, trotting and eating inside the forest.

At first he could not believe it. The Word was gone! Or rather not gone, for he recognised it in everything he saw, but it was corrupted, folded into thousands upon thousands of words and sentences. All around him they danced and ran and leapt and lived and died. For Woeman's lips had barely ceased their work when the words had begun to fold their own being. At this rate God didn't know if he'd ever be able to catch and unfold them all.

Seeing Woeman approach across the glade, God shouted at her. For now words were running and multiplying everywhere, he saw that he would have to embrace the sin of speaking just to do what he must.

‘What have you done!’ He said.

‘I created The World,’ she said.

‘And destroyed The Word! No telling how long it will take me to Unspeak it all.’

But at this Woeman was silent.

‘You folded Nothingness,’ he said.

‘And so created Being,’ she said.

‘You folded suffering.’

‘And so created fulfilment.’

God looked about then and saw that Word was everywhere, fighting and devouring itself in a hopeless attempt to become whole. And, in his wisdom, he knew that though these were joys they were brief and fickle ones. Being would be forever plagued by the Suffering of Nothingness until Word was unfolded back into itself.

‘I think it beautiful,’ Woeman said.

God was angry then and struck her on the left cheek. But when he pulled his hand away he cried out to see that there were folds in her brow.

Oh Woeman! There will be no stopping time now.

‘What have you done?’ He said.

‘You know what I have done,’ she said and stepped aside to reveal two children playing in the glade.

God felt the strength leave him, for though Woeman was corrupted she had been made from his own Being.

‘You folded yourself,’ he said. ‘If you don’t unfold them back into your being then there is nothing I can do to stop you from coming undone and unfolding into The World.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘This is what I choose.’

It was then that God saw that Woeman must be greatly disturbed indeed.

‘If you do not unfold them, you will die,’ God said.

Woeman merely smiled. ‘But first I shall live.’

And in her eyes there burnt a fire most terrible.

At this God was greatly frightened and ran off into the forest.



After you’d finished your telling, I’d lie in bed, the breathy words of the telling still pressed into my ear as I listened through the floor to you setting the bread for the next morning. The sheets would shake with my silent laughter, though there was never much pleasure in it. What a terrible childr you must have thought me to keep repeating such a story.

Whatever your intention, the tradition has stayed with me long after you deemed me too old for a bedtime telling. These nights when I lie awake under the onslaught of memory, shoring up against the tide with sticks and stones, it is to the thought of you that I find myself giving account.

*Sinful childr, all this folding, all this foolishness.*

And in the dark, I smile.

But this is how I have lived, Mother, and why.

## Chapter Five

Unbearable – being. Being the pain the tattoo made of me. So sip at sensations, then back to nothingness.

Face pressed to sky, flying – no, carried, then the jut of beams, the swaddle of furs. Your pressed lips. Mi'luvver's voice, angry.

Heat flared across the skin of the world as hands worked in greasy cream. An animal, all teeth and eyes, clawed up my throat. Someone was screaming. It was too much. Too much. I spilt beyond into the falling snow.

The muffled ground made a blank parchment, filled stealthily by the passage of living. The clawed print of a bird. Pause and bound of hare. Then dawn swept in, palimpsest under human feet.

But, ah, here – a four-toed paw picked, careful, through the drifts. Death. In gold and orange, she staked her territory, breath turning the windows milky as she searched for a way in.

I shuddered under my furs. There isn't a Ffieth childr that has entered the world without her name on their lips, but Brother Oh scoffed whenever the glimpse of an orange tail sent us diving under our desks at Schooling.

*Death is a natural biological state, he would say, it is when an organism ceases to function, not a– gigantic, salivating beast!*

But Oh didn't live in the Ole Town and had yet to make her intimate acquaintance. He wasn't used to passing the foetus huddle of homeless folk on the canal-side, the ravens on them before they could be stored in wait of the earth's thawing; or the friends who sat out play for a day due to a mild cough only to never be seen again; or the neighbours whose desperation was turned bestial by drink and whose loose fists, nothing remarkable by themselves, gave way to the body of a wife or childr who wouldn't get up, wouldn't get up, *don't be fooling around now! On yer feet! You 'ear me. 'Oney. Darling? Love?* Look into the snow after such incidents and there, among the scruff of boots and blood, right there – you see? Broad pads, four-toes and at the end of each a claw pin-prick.

No, we childr knew that Death was as real as her appetite, awlrite, and that was very real indeed.

Death's paw hit the window and its sticky groan drew down slowly...

'Oh, babber. Oh, childr. Let I in,' Death, she said, and a long muzzle squeezed sideways into the space between the shutters. That eye was green green green.

'Come out, come out, babber blue. Smells ripe for the eating does you,' Death, she said.

*Go away*, I wanted to say. *Bugger off and et someone your own size, I ain't even adulted yet.* But that hadn't stopped Death the year of the vomiting fever or when fire broke out in the Shires; from the number of folk she took in childbirth it could be guessed that she liked them young and tender best.

'No use dallying, wee one,' Death, she said. 'I'll et the lot of yous in the end.'

I sucked in a breath and held it. Snow stroked the windows. The eye vanished, but I knew that Death still stalked, if she found a way in I was done for.

When her voice returned it was as rich and thick as tippi syrup. 'Your olemun, Asha. Bes 'ere with I. Open the window and you'll see 'im.'

My trembling turned rigid. Father wasn't dead. He wasn't. But if Death had him...

I mustn't open my eyes. I mustn't.

But Death was already melting into the fresh fall, leaving only doubts and the carcass of memories.



I opened my eyes to find the room still save for the cackle of the hearth and the caper of its light over the shelves of jars. The smell of soup told me more than anything that this was Mi'luvver's house, though it didn't inspire the usual hunger since my stomach was broiling and for a while all I could do was focus on trying to keep my insides in and the outside out. The hairy blankets burnt where they stuck to me and even skin against skin hurt. Pus wept between the gaps in my dressings.

The mattress shifted as Mi'luvver settled her weight onto its edge. For a long moment she just looked at me. Such heavy eyes they were, none of their usual dance, but my mouth pulled down against tears at the relief of seeing her. With her stolid build, full breasts and domed stomach, I always thought that she could carry the weight of worlds and mayhaps she could. Not as dark of skin as you, mind, but a beauty all the same and never more beautiful to me than in that moment.

She searched my face, the burnt umber of her eyes flickering with the quickness of the fire. 'Babber. Bes awake?'



My throat was sticky, so I just nodded and she reached out to stroke my cheek, her fingers catching themselves into a curl at the last moment. My face was as hot as coals from the inflammation.

‘Bist, me babber?’

At the question my lip twisted further until even this gurning couldn’t keep the tears in. I lifted a hand to paw them away, only to find that it had swollen to a red club, symbols etched into the heart of the welts, and broke down completely. Mi’lurvver forgot her caution, swept me to her bosom, and I flung my arms around the neck of my mi’lurvver.

*My mi’lurvver.* Because that word has always belonged to her, not you. I was in swaddling clothes and still banging spoons when you taught me to call you Mother – *Mo-ther, say mo-ther* – far too young to understand the oddity. It was only when we moved to the Ole Town and Schooling started that I understood why the other cleaning women tittered to hear me use the word – all my friends had mi’lurvvers, only Four Fours had mothers. Marm Nelson had told me that I could call her mi’lurvver as soon as the pair of you had become lovers, but it was around that time that I took a particular pleasure in calling her by the name. Whenever you, me, her and Brunel were together as a family for an evening, I would wrap myself around her legs and croon it – *Mi’luuuuuvver.* It didn’t matter that you were the adult whose roof I shared and who provided most of my meals, it didn’t matter that it was your womb that had borne me into the world, I wanted you to know who my *real* mi’lurvver was. Brunel hated it, you never noticed. Or mayhaps not noticing was your own revenge.

So it wasn’t any great surprise that it was Mi’lurvver, not you, there to hold me after my ordeal with the Brothers.

‘There now. There. Better?’

I nodded, then, remembering that she might not be alone, looked about the room.

‘Just yous and I,’ Mi’lurvver said. ‘Brunel be at the door, won’t let them Brothers near.’

*Mother,* I mouthed.

She shook her head. ‘Told that *Mother* of yours that she can see you when she starts acting like one, I did.’

For all their fights, this venom was new. Then I thought of you standing before the bead curtain, not looking back, and the idea of facing you was even worse. But surely only a sinful childr could have such thoughts about their own Mother.

Mi’lurvver lifted my right hand and kissed the little finger.

*I painen,* I mouthed. *It painen.*

Tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes and she had to turn away, but when she looked back a smile had forced itself onto her lips.

'Know what you need. Up you pop.'

She led me over to her chair by the hearth. Across the room I could make out my reflection in the burnished mirror. Where I wasn't swaddled in dressings, my raw skin was pricked out in silver with the breaking and forming of the tattoo. Pale as a Fallen it made me. *At least you've got my colouring*, you would say when you were smoothing down my tunic before we prepared to step out, well, now I didn't even have that. The Brothers had shaved off my hair in order to write across my scalp and only my eyes and little fingers remained untouched.

The markings didn't look much like words and weren't of the same sort that Oh had shown us at Schooling. Instead of the flourished loops that we'd been taught, these made me think of spiders that crawled up from my belly button and spread outward in widening circles, meeting rib-cage, back, sides, in a giddy energy that only stilled where its edges met up the length of my spine. From there, they spun about my torso, then rode off up my arms, circling each finger before dissipating at the ends. Though against my skin they had a gross materiality, as if the spiders had been squashed, and there have been times since when I've scratched myself and imagined that it is they that bleed.

An image of the hides I had seen at the Library – with their gaping, vacant faces – loomed up through my memory. The marks on them had looked like writing too. But by this point I was all cried out and settled for sucking on my littles, never mind that I was much too old for such a habit.

'Now don't be giving that any mind,' Mi'lurvver said. 'We be sitting snug?'

I nodded.

'Thas me babber.'

Her voice was already beginning to mull with the spice of stories, so I lolled my head against the rise and fall of her chest and waited. It was important to let Mi'lurvver take breath before a telling, for it would puff from her with an almost respiratory need. Times were, just listening left me giddy and sore of diaphragm, but whenever anyone commented to the like Mi'lurvver would hoot with laughter.

*Ai, she'd say, the day I stop telling bes the day I no longer breathe.*

Her stories weren't just the work of her lungs, however, but took life in every sinew of her being. She'd fling her arms wide and scrunch up her face, like this, as if the characters did dwell within. And, through such tellings, I could feel them within me too. All the same, Mi'lurvver would wield her words like a knife so that their wound became

your wound and their tears, your tears. When Kelston lost his tail, I'd feel the burn of a limb that had never been mine. When the arrow struck deep into Harole's chest, the air would woof from me. And when Death dug her claws into Ser Raven I would writhe about on Mi'luvver's lap, her eyes so round and glistening that it was impossible for my own not to moisten. Through Mi'luvver's stories I could out-pace my own skin, live and die, and live again. Through her stories I was more than – I was more. Story's end would leave me bereft.

Ai, you were right, after a fashion, to cuss that stories were *nasty, violent things*.

'This,' Mi'luvver said, 'be the story of Keety.'

## Chapter Six

At story's start, Marm Keety is being one and 'undred years. 'Ad 'erself a long and good life, she 'ad, and, being of furrow stomach, 'ad brung up six childr that did adult into three strong men and three cunning women, all married and with four and twenty strong childrchilr between them and some and 'undred childrchilrchilr.

Well, Marm Keety, she looked after them childr good, she cook and she clean and she tend 'er 'ubber, afore the moon stopped visiting and ee moved onto younger wives. Anyways, that 'ubber weren't of the same yolk as Marm Keety and Death gotta sniff on 'im long afore Marm Keety were even slowing.

But best of all, better than 'er cooking and cleaning, Marm Keety could tell some stories. Ooh ar, such stories Marm Keety did tell – you ain't ne'er 'eard aught like! And allabody be saying that all Marm Keety's childr and childrchilr and childrchilrchilr be so strong and sexed up cos of them stories sucked off 'er teat.

But now Marm Keety were one and 'undred and she done 'er duty as was of a woman. I suppose that be the way that she been gone and let Death get a sniff. Were the local washerwomen that gotta cornereye first – a flash of orange, *quickness quick*. Sure as is, Death were on the prowl.

Well, them women run back to the village all ascream and the elders did come out, put ear on wind. Ai, were sad, but, no denying it, Death were come for Marm Keety.

Now, Marm Keety were a loved and respected woman, but Death be what she be, so allabody gathered at Marm Keety's 'ome, the six childr and four and twenty childrchilr and some and 'undred childrchilrchilr, and the passing meal were cooked. Then allabody did sit to share memories and watch Marm Keety 'ave a good suck of soup to finish the fattening. There were some tear that Death were to sink teeth in soon, but it were a right 'appy gather to member what a dutiful wife and mi'lurvver and mi'lurvverlurvver and mi'lurvverlurvverlurvver she 'ad been.

But when that soup 'ad all been sucked, well, time been gone and 'ave 'is way, so the childr and childrchilr and childrchilrchilr left afore Death did pounce. The childrchilrchilr did wail some, but allabody 'ad a song in 'er 'eart in member of that butter life.

Well, all quiet now. The moon did pour 'er milk through the window and across the floor where Marm Keety sat thinking and did find that 'er life 'ad been some good. Ai, a

proper bootie it 'ad been. Still, would've been nice 'ad she more time to tell stories and wander deeper into the forest, but she were nought if not wise and knew that life be what it bes.

She patted 'er pot stomach and thinks to 'erself, I must've sucked too much soup to smell so good. 'Er oleman 'ad always been saying that Keety 'ad been 'aving too much of a liking for the vittles when it were a babber and she looked forwards to seeing 'im and 'er mi'luvver again, so she laughed as the door opened and a cream growl did pour in.

'Awlrite, Keety?' Death, she did say. 'I been and come for you.'

'So I do see,' Marm Keety, she says. 'Guess I be smelling well good.'

'Ai, well good. I got the sniffer on you,' Death, she said.

And 'er eyes were two shinning moons the green of spring.

Marm Keety, mind, she just nodded. For though she were as shaken as the butter, that's be 'ow it be.

But time ee blew on and still Death were yet to pounce. So Marm Keety glanced up then and looked at Death as bold as she could. Death were as orange as the flame, near big as the mating bull and 'er bushy tail and coat were all as shine as tapper – some and more ansum as folk say.

'What the bleedenell you be waiting for?' Marm Keety, she did say. 'Want me to suck more soup?'

'Nah, you be smelling some good,' Death, she said. 'But I 'eard much of you, Keety. Even Death 'ears some, you know, and afore I pounce you is gonna gis I a boon.'

A boon! Marm Keety thinks. 'Oo ever 'eard the like? But then 'oo ever 'eard of abody refusing Death?

So, Marm Keety, she did laugh. 'I be fulla soup and ain't 'ave much choice with all them teeth in your mouth. So, bist you be 'ankering for?'

Death, then, she did make the sound of the kitten that licked the cream and Marm Keety knew that she were some pleased.

'Keety,' Death, she did say, 'afore sinking in me teeth, I be liking a story.'

## Chapter Seven

When I next woke it was dark and the tattoo had made fire of my skin. The blankets fought to keep me down and the floor snatched at my feet, but then there was the door, my senseless hand on the knob, and the blessed cold took hold of me. I made it two steps before collapsing, then lay there, throbbing out into the snow. Stray flakes pressed their embers into my back and I drifted, for a while nothing but skin and the ice sheet of the world.

A guttural breath announced itself above my right ear.

‘Now, that weren’t right sensible, were it?’ Death, she said.

A paw, the size of a carthorse’s hoof, tipped me over. The moonlight that fell across the street showed a stocky body that reached up, up, to a pair of pointed ears that tickled the stars and eyes that were but two more glints among their number. Her pelt was silken, but I needed no telling that the body beneath was all muscle.

‘On the small side you is but smells ripe for the eating, ey?’ Death, she said and paused to tease a knot in the puff of fur at her chest, not a rush in the world. I had half a mind to tell her to go suck a rotten egg, but I didn’t suppose it was rightly wise to say such things to Death. My lungs were screaming by the time she finished and brought the coolly damp tip of her nose to mine.

‘No more dallying, ey? Best we get ee over with.’

Her jaw yawned open, releasing the hot stench of carrion and a darkness that had no beginning, no end, nought but its own craving expanse.

‘No!’ I said.

Death’s shoulders sagged. So wearisome, this habit of mortals to resist devourment.

‘No use spuddling. All of yous find your way into me stomach sooner or later, and more often sooner than not. Best go quiet-like.’

‘I can gis you—’ I said. ‘I can gis you—’

‘Gis I what? Nought a squint like yous could be gissing to quench me ‘unger.’

‘A story,’ I said.

Her jaw shut and the shush of snow crept back around the void in her throat. A purr had started in her belly, though she didn’t seem well pleased.

‘And what story 'ave yous to be gissing as if it were sweetmeats? Ain't some gurt teller like Keety. Ain't even the compare of your Marm Nelson.’ The pink tip of her tongue flashed over her lips. ‘So what story bes we talking about?’

My thoughts scattered like startled starlings. Though I wasn't about it admit it and get my head bit off, Death was right. I had some magic in me for sure, there was even that time that I had cursed Toad, but Mi'luvver said that it wasn't right to teach a childr until the bleeds set in, lest they enter their manning, and so I'd never had the chance to hone it. Sure, I'd listened in and bundled away scraps here and there. I knew what story to tell at birth, bedside and burrow, but what story could a soul offer Death?

I pushed at the ground, only to be prodded back. The tips of her claws drew a distempered yellow ooze where they punctured skin and, at that, I remembered the tattoo – it had come from a book, hadn't it?

‘This un,’ I said and shoved a palm of words up at her, no matter that I knew what they said no more than she.

Her eyes narrowed to slits. ‘Bist ee?’ Death, she said.

I didn't rightly know the answer to that and the hand wilted back to my side. But this wasn't the time for doubts.

‘Them Brothers writ it on me. Said it be powerful, powerful enough to 'elp unfold the world.’

Death, she snorted. ‘Them Brothers, all 'igh and fancy like. But does they know where the sun goes on dimpsey? Or 'ow to stop time? Such glenners they be, think that their learning can stop even me.’ The tongue showed again. ‘Sides, if it be their story, 'ow can you gis it?’

‘It bes mine,’ I said. ‘On me, ain't it?’

Her head loomed back to consider me.

‘My story,’ I said. ‘You can 'ave mine.’

Her jaw cracked and then I was sure of it – Death was grinning.

## Chapter Eight

The following days were spent huddled in bed, warmed by Mi'luvver's soup and stories. Death was reasonable as they go, she knew that she wouldn't be getting a decent telling out of me when even walking to the outhouse left me spent. I was granted reprieve of a month and, bargain struck, she left me alone.

Or alone well enough. Her claws sharpening on the brickwork kept me from sleep most nights and the morning a starling bashed into the window I rushed over to see her bent over the steam of its cracked chest and nosing through the delicate gristle. One by one, she plucked out the organs with claws like cocktail sticks, then snatched up the remains, ready to finish them in a single swallow. Mayhaps I shuddered, for in that moment her eyes lifted to mine to reveal a gaze as studiously emptied as the dedun. The blankness was worse than the dismemberment, this was just what Death did. I fell back from the window and left her to it, trying not to think of her sorting through my juiciest organs. In the story, Marm Keety staves off Death, each time she is caught, by continuing her telling, until morning comes and Death is distracted by other prey. When Death came calling for me, I had better have a story ready.

Then there was the matter of the Brothers. After they'd gone to so much trouble to put their text on me, they surely couldn't just let me go? That Brother, Silver Tip, had said that I was going to help them understand the words. Mi'luvver didn't talk about it to me, but the worry found its way through the cracks in her face and I overheard her whispering to Marm Jonna that she'd set the neighbours to watching the street.

Even Brunel was roped in when he wasn't at his apprenticeship, for all that we'd been rivals ever since we'd become siblings. Besides, he was no longer a childr, though he seemed to often forget it. One day even he went as far as shoving a fistful of snowdrops at me. I kept them at my bedside until Mi'luvver put time aside to cut his hair, when I tore off the petals and hurled them into the hearth. Mi'luvver held me fast until I'd stopped screaming and, for once, I wasn't made to apologise. So, when I next had the house to myself, I climbed the shelves for the jar of dried newts, strictly not for childr's hands, and threw it to the flagstones. The newts lay among the shards, upturned bellies faintly translucent, and I dropped to the floor wailing. Mi'luvver found me in the fit of this but only tucked me into bed and swept up the glass, though it was Brunel's look



that was more likely to cut. You were right, Mother, there was some sin in me. Some sin indeed.

For the most part, however, my rages stayed in check and I would listen to Mi'luvver see to her visitors. I would want to use every telling technique I could when Death returned to claim her story. Any rate, the ills the folk that visited Mi'luvver lived with put my tattoo into perspective.

Take Marm Debra, she was a cleaner up at The Page with you, though I'm not sure that you realised this since she suffered from chronic invisibility. Ai, most Ole Town women have flashes of it now and then but none near as bad as her. The gang and I had played a game sometimes in which we had to say what power we would ask for it we were ever lucky enough to hook a geniefish and both Shar and Lou had said that they'd ask for invisibility, mayhaps thinking of pie stealing opportunities. Yet it was clear to me that there wasn't enough pie under the sun to make Marm Debra's condition worth it. People would run into her on the street or step on her feet during the Unspeaking and even her hubber and childr would forget her for days. Dee reported that, if you angled it just right, you could pass an arm right through her, but when I tried my hand glanced off her hip and I had to throw myself to the floor to pretend that I'd tripped. Marm Debra looked at me with such a cowed expression that a soul might have thought that I'd hit her. Which, I suppose, I had from one way of looking at it.

Then there was Marm Jones's habit of melting, which had only been a real problem since she'd had her first babber, or Marm Fischer, whose stomach was haunted by vengeful spirits that wouldn't let her keep anything but the blandest porridges down. She thought this was her father's spirit tormenting her for not growing into the son that he'd wished for and so putting such a fright into her that her bleeds had dried up early. But none of them scared me half as much as Mister Joulin who had a habit of dying at the most inconvenient moments – whether he was working on the plantation, haggling at the market, or drinking with friends – one minute he'd be as animated as the next fella and the next his expression would ice over. In such moments his interest could only be caught by loud noises or sudden movements, which his eyes would follow with the unblinking gaze of a snake.

Yet Mi'luvver never turned away a soul in need, whatever their ailment, and so she'd sit her visitors down and prepare their offering for the soup – mayhaps a bushel of teddies or a brace of carrots, a chicken leg if we were lucky – and bend her ear to whatever was on their chest until it was her turn to say: *I've lissened to your telling, now yous lissen to me*. Then the stories would begin. And blow me down, if Mister Joulin

didn't leave with a spark in the eye and Marm Fischer no longer clutching at her stomach and Marm Jones not melting down her thighs. And when Marm Daniel stepped out, well, you could see her do so without having to look for a shadow because that's the kind of witch my Mi'luvver was.

Your pride in Mi'luvver had always been more muted, given that there was no place for magic in the Faith, but you stayed sthum since her services filled our stomach full in the worst winters and silence was the best way the pair of you had of showing your love. It's not like the Brothers encouraged Comfort Women for that matter. I was to read some years later that one of the arguments the Four Fours gave each other to justify their rule when they first came to Anglelund was that their oversight was necessary to save our women from sin. They said that they would ensure the sanctity of marriage too, but try keep a Ffieth man around when his wife turns mutton. So, no, your adherence to the Faith was more lip-service than action when it came to Mi'luvver. But then you've always had the knack of ignoring facts where convenient. No doubt that you'd deny this, but that would only prove my point.

In this quiet way our days turned to weeks until the evening when Brunel came skidding through the front door.

'Be 'ere,' he said.

Mi'luvver stood and shooed her visitor out back – none of us needing telling that he meant the Brothers.

'Mi'luvver,' I said.

She pulled me to her bosom and I breathed in her scent of soup and rosewater. A fist shook the door until she could ignore it no longer and gestured Brunel to take her place. Cold stabbed in through the crack in the door, the shuffle and cough of many people with it.

'I'm here for my childr.'

The sound of your voice was like being plunged into the estuary.

'Asha be ailing at present,' Mi'luvver said.

'Which is why it needs to be with its mother.'

'Mayhaps you be acting like a mother, for all I know. But sure ain't acting like a mi'luvver.'

Another voice interrupted, 'Need we remind you that, as a Comfort woman, you have no legal claim on the child.'

Mi'lurvver looked fit to punch, but the Brothers had brought the Justice with them, the red of their robes blared through the window. She'd be no good to me, or Brunel, with her ribs caved in.

'Gis I a moment.' She shut the door and crossed back to squeeze me. 'Be only next door, you member that. Soon as they let me, bes with you.'

Then the blankets were peeled back and I was led out into the snow. The orange of the Brother's robes burnt in the early dusk and even you looked near ashen against their flare. A flicker alerted me to Death slipping under the water butt across the street, but I lost sight of her as you knelt to enclose my stiff body.

I had thought that the Brothers would lead me back to the Library, but they were content to escort us back to our house and leave me in your keep. For that day at least.



I stood by the front door as you hung up our coats. It was cold, noticeable after spending so long at Mi'lurvvers, that's what you got for having our house in Four Four style with separate rooms and blinds, pure foolhardiness for Anglelund. Some nights it got so bad that the walls bled dew. From the door mat, I could make out the living room, table laid with the plates belonging to you, Father and me. There was my wooden chair, the raggedly old rug that had gotten me a beating as a babber for taking to it with charcoal and your threadbare sofa whose cushions had moulded to your contours so that I could sit in that hollow and marvel at the size of you. Everything was the same as it had always been, save for myself.

I set to studying my toes wiggling against the floorboards. *Toes like pea sticks*, you'd say when you'd wrestle socks on me as a babber. And so I'd been painfully conscious of them for as long as I could remember, even after I'd tearfully admitted of their deficiency to Mi'lurvver and she'd taken this with such bafflement that I almost believed her when she said that there was nothing the matter with them.

You hovered in the kitchen. 'Don't just stand there. Come and look at all our new things.'

There was a shine on your words as if it were a festival day, though you kept smoothing your skirts. I squished my thumbs against my forefingers and stayed put. In my mind you still stood in the Library, your back to me.

'Come on.' You'd bent forwards, hands on knees as if trying to befriend a street dog, though I'd only even seen you give a mutt a kick to the ribs.

'Asha Beh.' The note of warning hit the back of your throat and you began to cough. My pea stick toes scrunched up. I hated those coughing fits, even though you got them less often than other cleaners. The dry sound would wrack you hard enough to set your beauty quaking. Your hand blindly found the wall and you rested your back against it as you heaved for breath. I ran for the pump and returned with a tin of water. You sipped until the shudders had passed. There was a red sheen on your skin and bruising under your eyes, but your mouth had sharpened into a smile. Because you'd won, hadn't you.

'Come now.' You crossed to the pantry door. 'Look. Look and see.'

I didn't want to. I had this vision, see, of you putting your foot to the small of my back and *thwack crunch snap* down the steps, my broken body bleeding out on the pantry floor. Any rate, I took hold of the rail and peered down to find the shelves filled with more food than I'd seen since Father had last visited.

You laughed at my expression. 'And there'll be more, more for as long as we live. All because of what you've done for us. Do you understand? Asha?'

My eyes travelled over the gleam of cans and bright labels – tippi preserves, bread, teddies, apples, beans and a pumpkin that looked big enough to set to sea in. There was meat too, so much of it that the space tasted of the buttery metallic of blood. If the Brothers had given us all this, if they were going to keep doing so, they couldn't wish me harm. Could they? I pushed the thought of the hides in the Library into the refuse at the back of my mind.

Your hand rested on my head, almost too light to feel. 'We're going to have roast pork and teddies for dinner. Your favourite.'

Yorkshires in fat dripping was my favourite. Roast pork was *yours*.

'Asha.' You turned me and my stomach sealed into a fist. Because you wanted to be as beautiful as when we lived in the Inner City, didn't you? That was what this was all about.

You were stumbling back before I registered that I'd punched you. There was a cut in your lip, pink as sunset. My knuckle had split too. The tears retched up my throat and you grappled me to you, no slaps, just a hand on my nape holding my face to your chest. The fit was shocked out of me before it had even started, then the pair of us stood there, just trembling. We stayed like that for a long time.



Don't get me wrong, I knew that you loved me. Or I thought, I hoped, that you did. For all the times that you'd admonish me for being such a sinful creature there were the careful stitches with which you'd darn the holes in my leggings until the light of the fire gutted. *Up and down and up and down and cross, cross, cross.* Then there was your fussing, though it made me screw up my fists, for was it not love that burnt my cheeks as you scrubbed with the spit-sodden corner of your apron? Not to mention the evenings when I'd be sat dreaming as the hours stretched their indolent bodies across the room and you'd come up behind me to thread your warm, humble fingers along the lines of my scalp. That, surely, was love if there ever was any. Or so I thought until I saw Mister Jane rubbing the head of his mutt in much the same way and ever after the words *like a dog* would play through my head whenever you did it. And yet, folk said that Mister Jane shared giblets from his plate with that dog, though he can't have seen meat more than once a moon. Ai, if your love was as strong as that Mister Jane bore his dog then that was a love that I could settle for.

So, no, I mustn't forget that you loved me. Or, most of me. Most of the time.

*A kiss for the head before bed.*

That's the song you'd sing as you drew my blankets tight on the good days.

*A kiss for the head before bed.*

*Kisses for fingers and thumb to rise with the sun.*

*One, two, three, four...*

But not for the little fingers, suddenly cold and twitching in wait of – what? That's the way things had always been.

The laughter of the other women didn't help. They'd whistle and smile to your face, but behind your back it was always the same. *Would 'ave thought 'er a sugar-drunk toddler when she shacked up with that Four Four. Now look. Childr as Ffieth as sin.*

Brother Oh would have called it biology, Mi'luvver bad luck, but on the lips of some it was nothing less than justice.

*A Ffieth upping above 'er station? Above the good, 'umble folk she'd grown with? 'Ow'd she think it go any other way? God Child seed can't be washing away Ffieth sin. Any soul 'oo think it must be fool as well as whore.*

Jealous mares. I got so angry to hear folk go on like that. If honesty is served, what Ffieth woman hasn't, in one idle moment or other, dreamt of a Four Four – a *God Child* – fathering her babber? Luck may smile upon her womb. Occasionally God's Child seed triumphs against sin. Occasionally the child is born with no little fingers. Occasionally.

But there's nothing more beautiful than a fall and, as history shows, the Fall always finds the Ffieth in the end.

It may have been foolishness that led you to dream that you could bear a Four Four off of Father, despite your blood, but you weren't stupid, were you. Soon as you laid eyes on those two little fingers of mine you knew that they'd parenthesise your life – "*God's Child*", *indeed* – wound thread round them tight. Nothing other mothers haven't done – for their childr, for their futures – and there's no doubt that I would have ended up bear-pawed if it hadn't been for Father.

*Screamed into the birthing room like Death 'erself*, Folk would say. *Cussing 'Barbarism. Backwater woman. Small-minded Ffieth.* *'Snatched you right out your ma's arms. Wouldn't give you back for days.*

Folk liked to tell me that story growing up, thought it funny that a God Child should want little fingers on their childr and, though it wasn't told out of kindness, I couldn't get enough of it – my Father, sweeping in, saving me from you, ourselves from ourselves. There seemed a promise in it and every time it was told warmth and cold would war over the hairs at the back of my neck. Still does. Fool.



Mind, it took years for it to sink in. I mean really, not just in fact. In the early drawings you kept, from when we still lived in our house in Whiteladies, you'd think that I'm a Four Four like Father. My body would be little more than a charcoal scrawl, but on the end of each arm there would always be a splay of neat, exacting lines – one, two, three, four. If the Four Four children kept well away from me, well, you said that they were just mean, though you didn't smile when I told you that the adults who ignored your greetings on the street must be cruel too. You were sure that they just had a lot on their mind and would shout at me if I pushed the point, even when we moved to the Ole Town and folk were more likely to sneer than steer clear. As your childr I learnt quickly that some matters were best left unspoken.

Was it denial? Or just what people were. In my early years, when the Brothers talked of the sin of *Woeman's Five Folding Fingers* it didn't occur to me that they meant *finger* fingers, that this sin might apply to me. If I ever noticed at the Uncreasing that the sky-raised hands of the folk down in the more spacious atrium were all of four digits it never seemed of much concern.

No, it wasn't denial, it wasn't stupidity, but the sheer disconnect between reality and my experience. Like every child, I had looked into my heart and seen it to be good. How then could I have little fingers? How could I be Ffieth?

It was a lesson that I had to learn many times and in many ways, but the truth truly dawned at Schooling during counting class. Brother Oh kept it in a small box, the cardboard soft from generations of sticky hands. Excitement rendered us mute as we passed it round, there was magic inside, even if nothing but rubber bands could be seen by the naked eye.

Blue fit me best, but I took red, that seemed right even though they were too small and pinched as I pushed them over the knuckles of my fourth and little fingers. The tingling started before Oh had even begun the counting.

*Hold up your hands.*

Arms thronged the air.

*Now count with me. One.*

The wriggling of thumbs.

*Two.*

Right index.

*Three.*

Right middle. The Brother's voice high pitched in many mouths.

*Four.*

Right ring – the little finger pulled along with it, sweaty in the grip of elastic.

*Now your next hand. Five.*

Left ring. The pinch of elastic loosed fireworks in my little fingers. No number for them.

*Six.*

Left middle.

*Seven.*

Left index.

*And?... All together now...*

The wriggling of thumbs.

*Ten.*

Just Ten.

Afterwards, none of us could meet the other's eyes. We milled about the yard, hands shoved into mittens, those blessed woolly zeros. I kicked up the brown remnants of

snow, gang hovering at my back, though I didn't much feel like playing on those days and it would fall to Dee to distract them.

The other childr would huddle under the concrete overhang, weaving whitedrops into armbands, their songs a little too loud, a little too bright. And, with noabody watching, I slipped away to hide by the bins.

Crouched like this, I ran lips over the slight indents the bands had left in my fingers.

Ten. Ten. Ten. But ten and what?

Ten and two question marks. Ten and an inheld breath –



## Chapter Nine

It didn't take long for the neighbourhood to notice the change in our fortunes; even before it started to show in your waistline there were the two new chickens scratching around our yard, Keety and Kelston, though you knew them as *those damn hens* given their crusade to scrage up your herbs. There was an egg every morning if I wanted it, sun yolk all humble and proud on its silk cushion – sozzled happy I was about that. Our table hadn't seen a turnip in weeks and there was no sign of the Brothers either. It almost made the tattoo worth it, even if patches of it had scabbed over and still bled.

More obvious than all this were the bars of light that sliced through our blinds long after all the other houses on our street had fallen dark. Some folk started muttering that it kept them awake nights, though that was more likely the bellyful of jealousy. There was chin-wagging over my tattoo too. Whispers started about how I was going to find a hubber if it was the bleeds for me or an apprenticeship if I became a man and, though you were usually deaf to a point when it came to such gossip, you told me that I mustn't worry, we wouldn't want for anything now. Yet, if that were true, why did my stomach gnaw, for all it was full on egg? But mayhaps you were right, there was no use listening to tattle. Better to focus on the renewed invitations to come in for pie from Marm Daniels and Marm Jonna.

*Poor duck*, Marm Daniels would say, *whatever shall we do with you?*

And I'd hold out my plate, licked clean – an easy enough answer really. I coasted on swede pie and apple pie and tatter pie for half a year at least.

What to do with me wasn't the real question though but what I was going to do with Death before Death did what Death does to me, since I still had no idea how to read my tattoo and, given the lack of an obvious solution, had been wilfully ignoring the problem. It took Toad to drive it home.

'Bist kind of baity be ee?' The childr said as it turned my right hand in its mitts. It was the first time that it had seen me after the tattoo and it was uncertain whether to be scornful or jealous.

I tugged my hand free. Old saliva made Toad's palms sticky and its free little finger was stuck in its gob – a right finger-biter it was. That was just Toad though, a dumpling without its broth.

'Looks a proper munter, you does,' it said.

'Takes one to know one.' I giggled, only to cut off as Dee met my eye and I heard the fear in my voice. Knew me too well that childr did.

The lot of us were hanging out with Lou and Shar in the storage bay where the canal met the estuary, our usual haunt when we weren't called to Schooling or to work. A low smog hung on the morning, trapping in the dock's stink of charcoal burn, fish, men's sweat and the sea's foul breath. Stopper all that and you'd have my childhood in a bottle. A right munt smell it was and yet to us it promised adventure as much as it now spells nostalgia, but that's the tragedy of time, isn't it – to spend childhood keening forwards and adulting yearning back. Dee and I had promised each other that we would stowaway on one of those boats when we were grown, mayhaps I'd even find Father out there, but that day felt a long way away, too far off to worry about. All the same, Dee had their man's swagger down to a pat in preparation and, since I was jealous of the fact, I told it that Sod's Law meant that it would now be the bleeds for it and got a wallop to the belly for my troubles.

Mostly though, we loitered down the docks for the mischief, which was easy to come by if you were of the mind – as was salted fish if you had nimble fingers. We weren't fool enough to try our luck on oranges or other delicacies from the Heartlands though, however sweet the taste, the threat on our fingers was literal.

Toad was still glaring at my tattoo, its snub nose scrunched up. 'Bes writ? Why ain't it reading then?'

'Why ain't *you able* to read it, munter,' Dee said.

I pulled myself onto the nearest crate. 'Ai, words don't read 'emselves.'

'Were only saying,' Toad said. 'Why you always be putting words in me mouth?'

'Taint put any words there you ain't put yourself. 'Sides, can't be reading it cos it ain't our tongue.'

'Bist other tongue be there?' Lou said. Shar nodded, its wide eyes following the bickering forth and back.

'Be loads of tongues, like,' I said and Lou cut me a look that let me know that my ignorance was noted.

Lou and Shar had kept their distance throughout Toad's examination, too respectful or afraid to touch the tattoo. From above, with their matted puffs of hair and thin builds,

you could see why folk mistook them for siblings, though they were little alike about the face. The resemblance truly showed when they moved – *smiles joined at the lips*, Mi'luvver said – or when a word, any word, spoken in innocence could squeeze laughter from them until they had to fight for breath. *Inseparable*, folk said. Said that Dee and I were like that too and I'd nod along, proud, even as the disappointment bucked within me because the truth wasn't anywhere close.

'Other tongues? Bist ee be then?' Toad said.

I stalled. The Brothers hadn't told me that, only that it was a language from which our own had been folded. The silence of my gang rang back.

'Don't even know what ee says, does you?'

'Bist that, Toad?' I said. 'Couldn't 'ear with them littles in your mouth.'

Toad was right though. And if I couldn't read the tattoo how was I to deliver on my promise to Death?

'Mutton-breath. Blad.' Toad swelled further with each insult.

Dee looked at me for permission to clout it, but I shook my head and extended a foot to poke Toad in the chest.

'Saw you t'other day, disn't I? Down Upton Alley with them sailors. One, two, three there were, gurt 'airy blokes. Sucked their little fingers for 'em, disn't yous?'

Truth is, I didn't really know what folk meant by the sucking of fingers in those days, but then Toad didn't know neither. It was just what folk said that Four Four men wanted from Ffieth and that we mustn't give it to them.

'Nom nom. With boogers all over 'em.' I stuck a little finger in either side of my mouth to pull it into a waggle-tongued leer.

'Liar! Disn't!' Toad screamed and tried to snatch my leg, but it was too slow. Its face was discolouring like it had the time I'd cursed it and my heaviness returned. Toad was too easy, but mayhaps that wasn't its fault when it was the youngest of us.

'Ain't a body that can read it proper,' I said. 'Not even them Brothers. Them Fallen spoke it, like, gurt frages ago.'

The lot of them tensed at the mention of the Fallen. Had I a cork to hand I could have plopped it right into Shar's open mouth. Our ancestors didn't exactly have a good reputation after burning the sky and all.

I rushed on, 'Proper important I bes. Them Brothers need me to 'elp them make sense of ee. Then they'll be able to unfold the world. And it'll be cos of me.' Which wasn't exactly a lie as far as my limited understanding of what Silver Tip had said went but did little to dismiss the strange looks that my gang were giving me.

'We been and 'ad meat twice this week,' I said and they perked up at that.

Toad squinted. 'Whas mean? Bes a book now?'

'No,' I said. 'No.' Though I hadn't rightly thought of it that way until then.

'Is too. Got words on you and them Brothers is going to read you.'

'No.'

'Gwahn. Asha be just fine now. Ey?'

 Shar, bless their soul, said.

Toad jabbed a finger towards me. 'It be writ all over.'

'Glennner,' I said. 'You be a spanner and an 'alf and allabody knows it.'

'*You* be a spanner,' Toad said. 'And 'em Brothers gonna read you. Must be a book.'

Dee wrestled Toad into a headlock and the plump childr sent up a noise like a rabbit in a snare. I dropped into the sawdust next to them and tapped Dee on the shoulder. It loosened its grip and Toad stopped squealing, though it was still clammy as I twisted down to grin in its face.

'Say whas,' I said. 'Ows about we drop by the Library and yous can ask 'em Brothers yourself. Ey?'

Dee laughed, but Toad sure as heckity didn't.



Your rules went ignored for the most part but staying away from the Inner City outside of Schooling was one that we were normally happy to keep. Still, you'd taught me how to hold myself around Four Fours, when we'd lived on Whiteladies we'd had it down to a tea, hadn't we. Not too fast and not too slow, since anything else from a Ffieth would look suspicious to the Justice. Smile, but not too much. Meet any eyes that looked to us, but not for too long. Always keep our hands crossed at our fronts, so that folk didn't go thinking we were out to stab or steal.

Loitering was tempting though when there was so much too look at and our feet dragged as we made our way up the Downs. Those colours! The lights! The Ole Town couldn't compare even in spring. Not to mention the smells. Out of every door came the sweet scent of tippi-rich cooking. For all their talk of Ffieth being lazy sauvages that would sooner sup straight from the tree, Four Fours ate more tippi in a week than most Ffieth could afford in a year. And their women were still fugly.

We were halfway up the stairs to The Page when the doubts began to set in. Most of our interactions with the Brothers were limited to being swatted around the head when we didn't get out of the way fast enough. Toad complained at being puffed out, not

untruthfully, and plonked its butt on the step, followed by Shar and Lou. Only Dee remained standing with me, though it rested a hand in the pocket where it kept its flip knife. There was no other way to find out about my tattoo though. Besides, I'd told my gang that the Brothers thought that I was important, I'd just have to hope that I'd right about that.

'Et jellied eel with more bone in 'em,' I told my gang, but they didn't budge, so I kicked snow at them. 'Aw, poor Lou-lou done in by lil steps?'

That hit home. It shoved past me in a march for the top. Shar followed, then the lot of us were on the move again. Mind, had I been asked in that moment, I would have said that Toad had the right way of it. Dee smiled at me and I glowered back. To reassure myself, I concentrated on the weight of the sharpened butter knife snuck away in my left boot. This was a new home for it and the weight still felt odd, but I'd had to stop keeping it down my leggings after the time it had nicked me and, on seeing the blood through the fabric, Marm Daniels had gone silly with joy thinking that my bleeds had started.

At the threshold to the Library we slowed again. Obstinacy had carried me this far, but now the practicalities couldn't be ignored. Could we just go in? Would a Brother be there? What would I ask? My heart seemed to have grown to twice its usual size. A right bantam my gang would think me if I didn't carry through now, but I seemed to have lost the use of my limbs.

I was saved by the clatter of the curtain. The beads parted over the womanly protuberance of a stomach, followed by a face made snug to its chest by the weight of the patchily shaved jowls.

'Brother Oh!' I burst out.

Oh stopped and blinked. His eyes always reminded me of a babber's because of the way they would skim short-sightedly over the world, as if it failed to leave a lasting imprint. None of us could ever tell if he recognised childr from Schooling or if we were one and the same to him.

As he hesitated, I took the opportunity to gawk at his hands. Instead of the slender taper that we so admired on most Four Fours, his were rounded lumps and sported puckered scars from the base of his ring fingers to his palms. Ai, bear-pawed, he was. But I doubted that his mother had succeeded in the thread trick that you'd tried on me as a babber – the Brothers would never let a true Ffieth into their ranks. No, the tattle was that Oh was a Regression. Good blood met good blood and still came out bad. A Ffieth

born to Four Fours. His parents couldn't have lived down the shame. I found the idea comforting and was passing fond of Oh, for all he was a monster in class.

His squint remained impassive as it skipped over Dee and Shar, but it focussed as it swung onto, like the shadow of a fish coming to the surface of an ice-locked lake. I was still adjusting to the responses that the tattoo inspired, they could range from horror to awe and everything in-between, but this hunger was new.

I shoved Toad in the kidneys, but it was discolouring again. This was down to me.

'If you please, Maester,' I said, 'we were wanting to know if I'm a book.'

The shadow of thought flickered behind his eyes once more, then he grumbled and pushed back through the bead curtain but not before waving a hand to follow.

'Boots,' I whispered at my gang and threw mine at the wall.

The smarting expanse of the Library awed me all over again. If anything it seemed even larger in full day, though the gloom of dimpsy still haunted the space. The little light that reached the floor was too soupy to make out the ends of the aisles that lengthened away from the entrance.

Blind emotion slithered under my skin, but Oh was vanishing into a doorway across the entrance hall, so I forced myself to give chase, pointedly not looking at the hides that hung in a row from one end of the shelves to the other. The room Oh had entered was little like the Library or those of the other Brothers I helped you clean up at The Page; claustrophobic and dim, he had no more than a bed, a chair, a desk, and some tatty orange hangings to keep the warmth in. A stove crackled in a corner and caked the air with wood smoke. Washed scrolls hung from the ceiling over it, though remnants of ink stained the fabric in rings like mould. Other books and scrolls were piled across every available surface with a flagrant disregard for gravity and a good few had already made their peace with the floor. This was alarming – the three books at Schooling were kept under lock and key.

By the time I had taken all this in my gang had joined me. Toad was already as red as a babber's slapped hiney, given that it had the habit of holding its breath around books lest it inhale something evil.

Oh was picking through one of the stacks by the bed and mumbling. I held out a shaking hand.

'Excuse me, Maester, can you tell me what it says?'

The text glittered under the firelight and the dance of Oh's eyes answered.

'I work with The Irons, you know, when I'm not attempting to hammer learning into your skulls,' he said.

I supposed that the Irons were the Brothers who had done the tattooing, given their talk about 'ironing out' sin. Such a boast was lost on me though and, realising this, Oh yanked my hand up to a height he could read and cleared his throat.

'The tongue isn't difficult for one of my training, though there is much of the old language to be unfolded. This passage, here, on the knuckles, it begins:

"Then Jesandi was led into the desert to be baited by the snake. Jesandi, after fasting fourteen days and fourteen nights, was hungry.

'With an apple in its vulva – no, mouth – the snake came to him and it was the rust red of dried blood. ... The apple was rust red that is. "You are starving. Eat of this." Said the snake to Jesandi.

'But Jesandi answered. "That is Apple of Magic" – or storytelling – it would be sin for me to take a bite for is written that: "Man shall not need food when he lives on the word that comes from the mouth of God."

Nothing on Mi'luvver, Oh was. He wrenched my hand over, squinting to read the passage as it curved around the blade of my palm, but it would be no good telling Death a story halfway through. I tugged the hand back to my chest, only to remember the snake on it and hold it away.

'How long will it take me to read it?'

'You?' His blinking increased. 'The text isn't for you to read.'

Heat hit my face. 'But– it's on me.'

'Ancient tongues take years – decades – to master, even for Brothers not–' His gaze slid over me.

Noise receded in my ears to a tinny whine. How could it be that the Brothers had written a text on me that I wasn't meant to read? And how was I supposed to give it to Death now?

'Asha be a book then?' Toad said, heaving for breath after holding its lungs for so long. Oh stabbed a look at it but was too preoccupied to comment, which was just as well given that Ffieth vernacular was punishable by the switch in class.

'Do you know why we lock up the books?' Oh said.

'Because they're bad?' Dee offered. Given its work for its olemun at the docks, it could masticate its words like a good little Four Four when there was the need.

'Sinful, yes. Though many sins path the journey to the Unfolding. We lock up the books because they're powerful.'

'Powerful?' I said.

'Hmm, here.' Oh returned to fumbling through his books, then with a soft 'ah', shoved past Toad to return to the main hall of the Library. He paused at a shelf that looked the same as any other to my eyes and teased a stout digit along the vertebrae bumps of the spines, then slowed, tapped, and slid a tome free. It was bound in dark red leather, which smelt of the sweet pungent of history that has been forgotten for a reason. I didn't recognise the gold lettering on the cover.

Oh waved it at us. 'Now, this tome recounts the story of a woman who thought that she could escape unfolding through telling her husband stories. It's a peculiar tale and sinful, very much so, but important. In unravelling it the Irons took a great stride towards the world's Unfolding.' He paused to read a little to himself and the dry paper hissed under his fingers so that I thought that there must be snakes in these words too.

'This passage is really quite funny. It tells of a man who goes fishing only to net apes – a small backwards type of man. Astounding, isn't it, that this should be but ink on paper to your innocent eyes but, to mine, it holds whole worlds: treasures, princesses, mules, magicians. All within in this.' And he hefted the tome, showing its lightness. There must have been weight in the words on me, though, for Oh to be going to this trouble.

'Understand the tongue and it can unfold the dead, the absent and that which never even existed from nothing but paper and ink. Such power is dangerous and allowed the Fallen to command the earth and sky, and eventually burn them. Through folding, a book allows there to be not just one world but many. And what hope does the truth of Word have against power like that?' He snapped the book shut and we flinched.

'But 'ow that be different from the writ we does?' Toad said. 'Our cloths ain't paper or folded, but they bes the same sort, ey?'

Oh silenced Toad with a look. The childr's left index finger was crooked from one of the goodly Brother's beatings.

'The folding of Woeman was tricky and complex. And grows more so all the time. God's greatest burden was the realisation that he must engage in Woeman's sin in order to succeed in the unfolding, which is how he came to bring the God's Children into being to aid him. Like God, we must work through sin to unfold it.'

Inspiration caught him once more and he waved us to stand before the nearest hide. The grisly sheet was the colour of a pigling and cracked with age. Rot had made tatters of the toes. In the daylight there was no denying that it was human, nor that the marks scribbled across the stiff, shiny surface were like those on me.



'It was the work of these texts, and is now the job of our current living text,' Oh jabbed a stubby digit at me, 'to see how the words act upon the soul and how the soul acts upon them. The text shifts and shows its hidden meanings. These insights aid us in our translations so that we can trace the tongue back to those that came before it. Given time, we will be able to follow the creases back their root.'

The hide watched over us with those vacant eye holes. I stared back. It reminded me of the dog that they'd found in the Hotwells warehouse one year, which had been there so long that it had rotted down to a desiccated mat of hair and bones that, when removed, left a black stain in the concrete with sharply defined legs, snout and tail. It had looked as if it had been running. I was fairly certain that the mutt had been one of those who followed us in our romp around the estuary, the one who wriggled its hiney so vigorously at the sight of me that it would topple over. My gang had taken weekly pilgrimages to the stain that summer, circling it in mutual silence as we tried to comprehend how so much life could be reduced to so little.

But now I looked up to see that Brother Oh was looking at me, his mouth slightly parted and eyes glistening like spring ice melt as they passed between me and the hide. It was an expression so rarely observed in a Four Four, let alone a Brother, that at first I did not recognise it. Embarrassment. Pity. It was this, not the savagery of the hide, that was my undoing. I ran from the Library, pursued by the stone shout of my bare feet.



My head was a blizzard as we trudged back to the Ole Town. The tattoo wasn't meant for me to read, its tongue took even the Brothers years to learn and all I had was less than a month and none of the means. So what was I supposed to tell Death when she came avisiting? Then there were the hides of those who had come before me. None of them had been small enough to be childr. They couldn't mean to cut the skin from me before I was no longer making use of it, could they? The memory of Death's stank breath touched the air, cold and stony, like decomposition under rain-beaten stones.

The questions were too great to hold within my skull. Out of the Inner City, I picked up my feet and set off at a pace down Avon Street, squeezing past the hawkers on Plimsoll Bridge, to head for the cattle shed where we would hide when the winter took out its knives. The cows moaned and snuffled as we entered, but my gang hadn't made a peep since the Library. I sunk onto a hay-bale and flexed my fists. Toad planted itself in

front of me and capered like a pixie that has guessed your true name and is now entitled to your first born.

‘Sthum it,’ I told them, ‘or folk’ll think you ‘as crabs.’

‘You bes a book,’ it said, ‘Brother Oh it said and all.’

Dee appeared next to me and slipped its hand into mine. ‘Seen a book do this?’

It brought our hands up to plough into Toad and the childr landed on all fours, wheezing. I panicked that the snake on my hand had bitten it, but it was well enough to pull itself across the floor to sulk under the feeding unit. Dee kicked sawdust after it, but it was me that Toad dogged up at.

‘Mind. Is a book, awlrite,’ I said.

Dee’s eyebrows went up. However much folk said that we were of one soul, the pair of us struggled to stay on the same page. I patted the hay hale next to me and it sat.

‘Books be powerful, see,’ I continued. Shar and Lou nodded slowly as I looked to them.

‘Lock ‘em up, don’t they? Whas think that be meaning?’

The flash rekindled in Dee’s eyes. ‘Be dangerous.’

‘Ai. And so bes I. Said I ‘ave a snake on me ‘and, Oh did.’ I held up the offending palm and they all shrank back. Did I believe what I said, even then? Not likely, but if I could make my gang believe then I might be able to.

‘Suppose I could even bite a soul if I wanted. Be dead in ‘ours, I’ll bet.’

Shar and Lou had wended their fingers together and Toad’s face was split under the feeder. It wouldn’t do to push this.

‘Books be powerful and dangerous and they be telling stories, that sounds like I awlrite. See, I ain’t told you the where ‘ow of ‘ow I got ee yet.’

Shar and Lou joined us on the hay bale and though Toad remained in the sawdust there was little doubt that it was listening.

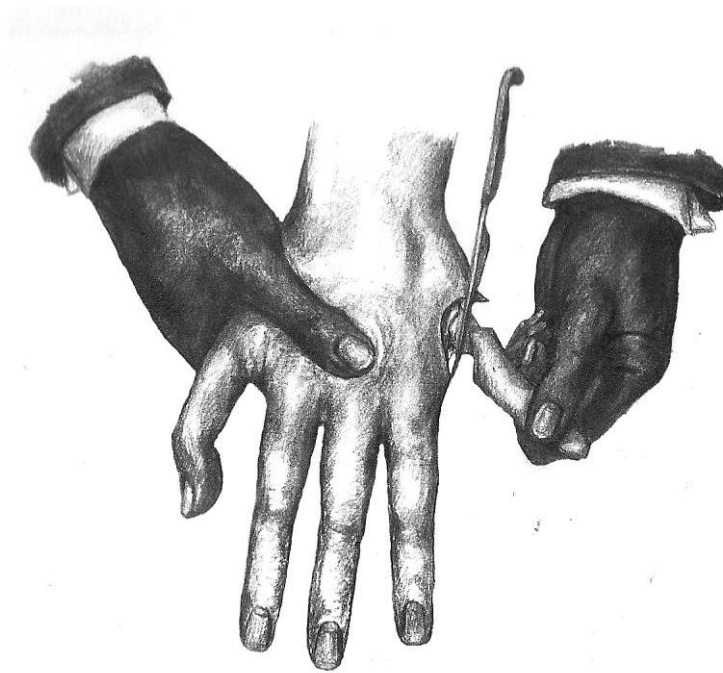
‘Any rate, were afore dawn when me ma woke me –’

I’d told this story to Mi’lurvver, between much sobbing, but this time the terror and pain was waylaid between my mind and tongue. I described myself climbing onto that table with heroic stoicism and, with my gang hanging on the story, I almost believed it. They murmured and gasped in all the right places and it felt right good. Because I was special, wasn’t I?

After a while Toad slunk back into our circle, so I began the telling again with more embellishments this time. I told them how the Brothers went around the houses of a great many childr to test them, prodding and poking and asking them to stand on one leg

or tell the best story until it became clear that each one of them was too short, pale, ugly or stupid and that, really, there was only childr for the task – me. Which could well have happened for all I knew. In fact, I even thought that I might have a faint memory of it. See, my living was going to help us return to The Word.

With each telling the pain and sickness shrunk until they were all but forgotten. Then we were so pumped up that we ran, whooping, through the streets until some muttuns got out their brooms to shoo us.



Medicians of respectability are strongly discouraged from performing the procedure known as 'The Snip', regardless of the subject's stature or promise of compensation. Not only are such transactions likely to remain unpaid but the upstanding God Child must ask himself if it is in God's work to remove the mark of sin that sets apart the impoverished of soul. In special cases a medcian may act upon the appeal of the Justice to remove the offending finger from a regression but only where a warrant has been secured that attests to the child's honest heritage.

## Chapter Ten

I was roused up when I reached home, cockiness over the pit of terror, and so the evening would have been bad enough even if Father's plate hadn't been missing.

You never understood what that plate meant to me. Remember, these were the days of hazy childr thinking when I could run with my gang beneath the latest hangings to make a game of throwing pebbles at them and yet a limp sparrow could hold within its broken breast a premonition of the world's ending. Augury could be found in anything and if the Brothers could read the folding of Woeman through the writing on my body, why couldn't I see shadows of the future in the resin of our plates? The days when snow erased the windows, I could lose hours to plumbing them. After all, at Mi'luvver's we all ate from the same dish, so the fact we used separate ones in our house must say something.

Mine was smallest and made of resistant rubber; it kept the imprint of fingers when I dug them in but, more importantly, bounced in the case of accidents. Yours was more expensive and made from tapper resin with depths like crow feathers. The years threaded cobwebs of grey glue through it that multiplied each time it was dropped. Father's was of the same material but baked longer and at a lower heat, it came out caramel on the cusp of burning and threw rainbows with a twist of the head. I'd never seen anything more luvverly – when it wasn't covered in dust. In earlier years you had washed it and put it away with ours every night, but over time the table had become its home, a golden pivot to our days – humming at the stove, General Mayfew on the radio, the snow's slow melt in bowls. Through all this, the plate went unnoticed, if never forgotten. But that was all right. That was how things were. In our house, a plate was a person and in our house there were one, two, three. Until there wasn't.

Father's plate had become so much a part of the scenery that it took me some time to notice. Besides, I was too distracted following you about the kitchen, hopping from one foot to the other, telling you about Brother Oh and the snakes on my hands and how important and dangerous this made me. You bore this gabbling with stoic deafness until the porridge was ready and you slammed the pan onto the table.

*'Asha. Enough with the stories.'*

I glowered from under my brows and you put the back of a hand to your forehead.

'What does a woman have to do for some quiet around here?'

I shut up then. Not because you'd told me to, which was usually only taken as further incitement, but because I'd just seen that where Father's plate was supposed to be lay nothing but a circle of darker varnish, as if its shadow still lingered even in its absence.

You'd gone still too, but you forced yourself to dollop out the porridge.

'I'll unpack it when he gets back,' you said.

My littles snuck between my lips. All my bravado about snakes and power had lost it shape like the remains of a burnt log under foot. Father would return. Coors he would. Why then was the plate gone?

'Dinner's getting cold. Get it down you quick.'

I sat. Kept on staring. In its absence the plate was more present than it had been for years. The creamy steam rising from the porridge turned my stomach. Father wasn't—

You caught my hand. The silence stretched, then snapped and you let go to readjust your shawl.

'Silly. We need the space, don't we?'

I couldn't meet that expression and you busied yourself eating, working your spoon just so. Between mouthfuls, you started up *that* talk again – of all the presents Father would bring on his return; how we'd have meat everyday; move back to the Inner City to a house that was bigger, better even than the one we'd had when I was a babber. I'd get a sibling, a one of my blood; a generator that could kick like a bull and would never stop running; not to mention fine clothes, toys, sweets... I stopped listening, the glut left me sickened. *Nasty, violent things*, you'd call Mi'luvver's stories, but at least she didn't pretend that they were true. Any rate, I could hardly hear when the plate's absence was so loud. Because Father wasn't coming home.

Coors I'd known. I had known the day that we watched his ship dwindle into horizon, but there's knowing and knowing with such matters. It had been so many years now that I couldn't even say who it was that I had lost. My own memories were more emotion than detail and your stories were too exaggerated to put any store by. Sure, I glowed when you talked about his important work as a Brother, how he held more knowledge in his head than any book, was ansum and had a voice that could drop crowds to their knees, but I didn't *believe* any of this. All I had that was true was the hazy outline of the absence he'd left in my breast.

Looking back I can see that there were natural enough reasons for you to remove the plate in the weeks following the increase in our fortunes, and no thanks to Father, but all I could think of was that if he wasn't coming back then he must be dead. Dead dead and

eaten. An image of him, foggy about the face, pinned beneath Death's gaping maw impressed itself on the back of my eyes. And if Father couldn't stave off Death, what hope did I have? I had promised her a story that I couldn't even read. She'd pick out my organs like she had with the starling, then the Brothers would tan my hide and I'd be left leering from a face like sacking, trapped in the Library forever.

Dead dead and gone.

In my silence you turned to humming, one of the songs that you kept to clean. The atonal sound put scratches and dinks into my thoughts. I pushed my chin against the tabletop. The absence of the plate had become a sob.

'You must eat something, luvy.'

I scooped up my spoon and pushed the porridge into mumps. The slam of your hand against wood made me jump.

'Do you want to go back to the hunger? Asha? Do you? Because I don't. Because I'm *trying* to put food into our bellies. For the both of us. Do you understand?'

I kept my glare fastened on the circle of varnish and you snatched up my plate to march it into the kitchen, but even the clatter of pans was muted by the missing plate's scream.

Wind tossed curtains of rain against the outside of the house and the windows rattled in their fittings. Death knew where I lived.

Your expression was studiously flat when you returned. In your hand was a jar of tippi preserved raspberries, a generous bribe by any account.

'We were going to have dessert, but if you're going to be like that?'

The jar was extended, all would be forgiven if I apologised, but the gob-stopper of my voice had lodged against my palette.

Dead dead dead and never coming back.

You marched back into the kitchen and I jumped at the sound of breaking glass. You wouldn't protect me when Death came. You were like the Four Fours, you didn't even believe in her. I slipped out of the house, over the wall and into the forest.



In the plantation, all was silver and watchful. The air was darkly saccharine and rows of pale tapper trees stretched before me, their neat corridors pinched by distance into black. I was afraid then of running into folk just into their adulating; we'd hear them giggling and crashing some nights, when they snuck in to suckle tippi straight from the

tree. My sweet tooth may have been legendary, but even I couldn't understand taking the risk when those that were caught were branded 'S.D', *Sugar Drunk*, the shrinking of their futures pressed into blistering lips.

*A pitcher plant for childr*, Mi'luvver called the plantation. If the tapper workers didn't catch you then there were plenty of spirits happy enough to sink their teeth in.

*Lynx, looking to feed 'er kittens.*

*Boar, gut a man like as look at 'im.*

*Death, stalking in white and gold.*

There was no time for fear though. I ran until the burning of my ribs made me slow, then kept on slogging one foot in front of the other, no idea of where I was going or what I'd do when I got there. It was only just starting to occur to me that fleeing into the forest hadn't been the smartest of plans since it was one of Death's favourite hunting grounds. But by this point I was already lost.

The crack of a branch came from behind and I looked back, thinking that it might be you. Even if you'd noticed me running into the trees, I didn't think that you'd dare follow. For all that you behaved like a mutton, from the bloodied rags that appeared in the trough for cleaning some weeks, I knew that you were still getting the bleeds. If news went round that you'd entered the forest while on your monthlies not even Mi'luvver would be able to keep the elders from our door. No matter that you followed the Four Four Faith, you'd do anything to avoid that kind of shame. Still, when I looked back and saw only darkness, my heart dropped.

The earth was iron under underfoot and my toes were already losing sensation. I rubbed my arms, wishing that I'd had the sense to grab my coat and shoes before leaving, though it felt right to be cold in a world where my Father was no longer. Under the earth he'd be so frozen that even the worms would have difficulty getting at him.

I kept going. The hush of the Listening gathered around, its attention passing over me in sudden shivers as it muttered from leaf to leaf. My skin tingled with the numbing knowledge of how small I was and I twitched at a rustling in the branches, but there was nothing to be seen.

*Ain't nought to be afeared of*, Mi'luvver always used to say when she snuck me away from you to worship at a treemum. *That ma of yours might follow the Four Four Faith, but got to know the spirit of your people, Asha. See, the Listening ain't gonna swaddle or save you, not like that Four Four bloke in them tellings. The Listening bes in everything and everything bes in it. That way a soul ne'er be alone. 'Ear me?*



'Ne'er alone,' I whispered and trudged on. If Father was dead, at least he'd have been returned to the tree roots and so would be with me in that sense.

I was hobbling now, the crystallised drops of sugar dug into my soles like buckshot while those still sticky stuck to my leggings, which had already gathered a feathering of leaves.

A branch groaned overhead and I twitched as a wan smudge of wings streaked across the edge of my vision. I started to singing to quiet my nerves, soft though, I didn't want to make my presence known to Death.

*A Four Four, went to the forest did ee,  
'Forest forest, what does you 'ave for me?  
Wants tippi for me tummy.  
Forest forest, what does you 'ave for me?  
Wants tippi for me tea.'  
But, 'nay.'  
Death, she said,  
'No tippi. Not for yous,  
Tears is all I 'ave,  
Tears for Four Fours,  
Tears for you.'*

I set my eyes on the peek-a-peek of moon in the canopy; thinking, mayhaps, that if I couldn't see any beasts, then they wouldn't see me, which is how I got so close before noticing the childr.

It was crouched at the roots of a tapper tree, rocking, rocking and whispering, though I couldn't hear any words in it. Was it even speech? The sound had a sing-song quality that seemed a breed apart from meaning. Yet it was the tone that really made me shiver – guttural, flesh-some almost, as if the act of speaking was expelling scraps of throat.

Its pitch was rising and the patter quickened to a cold river. Then the childr spread its hands skyward, those arms were tightly muscled and long. Too long. For this was no childr.

Worse still, the spigot of the nearest tree was shaking, seemingly free of any hand, and now popped forth like a loosed cork. A gush of tippi followed it with the sound of wood against wood. I blinked. In the dimness it was impossible to be sure, but where the spigot had been drilled in I could see nothing but smooth bark. I stepped back and collided with a tree.

The figure snapped round. Those eyes were owl-bright.

You see, it wasn't just stubbornness that kept me stum the times you asked what had happened that night – I didn't rightly know myself.

I ran, crashing through the scrub in panic. All sense had taken flight. I didn't know where I was headed, had forgotten that it was best to keep my quiet and had even begun to squeal when the ground tipped from under me and I went tumbling down a slope until a blow to the chest pinned me.

'Now, whas we bes doing out 'ere then, ey?' Death, she said.

I was in too much pain to answer. A shard of white protruded, stickily, from my thigh.

'Out for a stroll were we? Stretching them gams?' Death, she said.

I nodded, woozily.

'Piss on me face and tell me it be raining.' A snarl grated in her belly. 'Well, won't be made a fool of twice.'

Fear drove me wild, I rained fists against the hollow drum of her chest until my knuckles split. Her snout tipped back and she considered me, then laughed. It was a high, delighted sound, like Four Fours dashing their cocktail glasses at the feet of the betrothed, and I found myself joining in, for a moment soaring, only to croak off as Death's grin flat-lined. The tip of her nose brushed mine.

'Will enjoy eating yous,' Death, she said, and her mouth cracked open, wide, wider, wider still, her jaw distending to blot out the trees and the stars and the moon and the sky until nothing remained but the glint of teeth.

Into that dark came a word. One word. Mayhaps not even that. Mayhaps just sound, a breath. But in it was the force to crumble bone. The darkness snapped back in on itself and I blinked to see Death flinch as another word rocked into her. A slender figure stood behind her. The parting of its lips released no more than a wisp of condensation, but its speech ripped the air like a whip.

Death tossed her head and snapped. Her growls rose into a whine as the utterance thickened and pummelled. Even beneath the focus of the assault, I could feel the skin of my face pinch and burn. Had those words been directed any lower they would have made offal of me. But Death was in retreat now, twitching and snarling like a dog set on by wasps. Her wild eyes swung to me one last time, swollen with confusion and hatred, then she dived into the trees.

The speech stopped and silence sucked back into the wound. My ears popped and buzzed. Then the pain rose up to take me.



Drizzle against glass – that's what I thought the sound as I swum back to awareness. The bluster came in waves, clatter followed by silence, suddenly unveiling itself as words.

I opened my eyes to find myself lying on the forest floor, a shadow leaning over me. The voice was soft and warm – a summer rain and just as meaningless. The syllables tingled where they met skin, holding pain beyond. Fear couldn't touch me either, not even when I met the eyes above mine and saw that they were large and owl-bright.

The fuzz of words dispersed from my head to re-alight on my leg and I pushed myself up to watch the figure grip the thigh. Its eyes clenched as it jerked the bone back together, though there was no pain and I grinned like one sugar drunk. It didn't smile back.

Now the voice returned, a hive that poured over my leg with the itch of insect legs. Whatever this was, there was nothing I could do to help or hinder it. I shut my eyes and let the drone lull me back into sleep.



The thrill of birdsong woke me.

I sat, blearily.

Blue, uncertain, light filtered through the canopy. A crow coughed in the distance. All else was still.

When I moved ice crackled from my clothes where the dew had frozen in the night. My trembling fingers found my leggings torn and sticky, but the skin beneath was unblemished. I was afraid then. Whatever my saviour had done to me was nothing like the magic I was familiar with. I had seen Mi'luvver do many fantastical things over the years – she had tamed fevers, calmed the storm of raging bowels and started folks heart's skipping again after they'd taken a fall in the drink – but even she couldn't heal a broken bone in a single night. Whatever the answer, there was no sign of my saviour now. I stood, found I could walk, and, with no other ideas, turned home.

Finding my way was easier in the light and it wasn't long until the sounds of the city reached me. When I stumbled out of the plantation it was almost alarming to see our

house, standing there, unchanged. I pushed on the door, careful not to set the old hinges wailing, and paused.

There you were, on the sofa with Mi'luvver, the pair of you bent over your clutched hands and I was glad to see that you were speaking again. But when you looked up your faces were blank. Terror gripped me. Then you broke forwards.

My last word burst from me. 'Ma!'

You swept me into the soft nest of your midriff, with its scent of detergent and incense. Home.

The squeeze was short. You stepped back, took one long look, then struck me.

## Chapter Eleven

It's the sound that I remember more than the pain – the dull readjustment of meat and bone, followed by the crack of my knees meeting the tiles. All those years I'd imagining you coming at me with scissors or a knife or a frying pan; you pushing me down stairs, into freezing water, or in the way or a cart; shoving my hand in boiling porridge, fire or cleaning fluids, but the moment you actually hit me – really hit me, not just a slap – I was disbelieving. My first flash of anger was only for the treacherous ground that had betrayed my feet.

When I touched my throbbing lips, my fingertips came away pink. The force of your blow had driven my teeth into the inside of my cheek. You stood over me, heaving, and, for a moment, it seemed as if you were fit to finish what Death had started. The last time that your blood had been up so fierce was when I'd taken to the orange blinds that you'd had imported from the Heartlands with a pair of scissors. It hadn't been right that you should care more for an item of furnishings than me, see. But, for once, I hadn't broken anything. It was so senseless that I didn't think to raise a hand to defend myself.

Mi'luvver grabbed your elbow and began yelling. I sat back and probed the tattered inside of my cheek as my mouth filled with the wet taste of old pennies. The struggle didn't last long and you sagged back onto your sofa, pressing the balls of your hands over your eyes.

'Love can bes a heavy burden,' Mi'luvver whispered once we were out the door. 'But don't you worry, your mi'luvver bes as strong as any cow.' And, as if to prove it, she carried me back to her house, though it had been several turnings since she'd given in to my pleas for piggy-backs.

Brunel was less happy and, seeing me coming through the front door in his mi'luvvers arms, left through the back, but his mournful face ghosted beyond the frosting pane every few minutes until Mi'luvver drew the curtains. *Some just need a lil while to settle into their adulting*, she'd explain, though her patience was clearly waning. Folk said all sorts about those that didn't take to their manning.

Our generator was out that day, so Mi'luvver heated a tub next to her hearth. Stewing in it, I felt like one of her soups and crouched until only my eyes remained above the water, their focus going squiffy as I watched the bubbles from my nose plip to the surface. I was still in shock, truly. Death had found me without a story and I still

breathed. She couldn't have been scared off forever, but the creature – the folk, *whatever* I'd met out there – had driven her away for now.

After the state of my clothes, Mi'luvver was disbelieving to find nothing worse than scratches and bruises on me. I had checked both my legs myself and found only unbroken skin. A clever soul like her could put two and two together, so she cupped my chin.

"Oo did yous meet out there, me babber?"

My throat was too tight to work up an answer.

'Nought you want to tell your mi'luvver?"

I licked my cracked lips.

The crow's-feet at the corner of her eyes had dug their claws in deep. 'Bist you 'eard of the fey? Asha?"

I had, coors I had. Get a pint of coider in any hunter and they'll chill your ear off with a tale of their encounters with queer folk. Not that they were always known as fey – some had them as 'faeries', 'knabber-jabbers', 'them-beyond', 'the out there' – the names were as elusive as the stories. Could my saviour really have been such a soul? I dropped my glower to my fists, pruning gently in the water, and Mi'luvver didn't push the matter any further.

When the water was cold through, she ordered me out to dry me and smooth ointment over my bruises, then settled into her armchair. I curled myself into the shape of her like I used to with Father. Those were the best memories I had of him, when the depth of his voice would send quakes through me as if the very earth had opened its mouth. I would play with his hands, careful not to let my littles brush those long, clever fingers with their skin soft as leveret hide. I remembered his hands better than his face. In the light of day his death didn't seem so certain, but, either way, the truth sat sore and heavy in my chest – he wasn't coming back.

I was alive though. I had to remember that. *Always count your eggs*, Marm Daniels would say, *'atch or no, eggs be eggs*.

'Now,' Mi'luvver said, "ows about you tell I what 'appened? Ey? Know your Mi'luvver loves your stories.'

My eyes followed the cracks of the tiles, but my voice was cramped in my thorax. If I was to open my mouth either nothing would emerge or a scream.

Mi'luvver sighed. 'Then I shall gis you a telling. This be the story of 'Ansel in the forest.'

## Chapter Twelve

This bes the story of Ansel in the forest.

At story's start, Ansel be on the cusp of adulting and all were ajoy for its time of turning. If it ain't 'ad been that noabody 'ad a finger on whether Ansel's body would speak into itself into its manning or the bleeds. See, for some folk up be up easy enough, but for others it be 'arder. Time it were that Ansel venture into the forest to consult a treemum 'ose roots went deep, deep, into the earth.

Now, first yous must know that Ansel's olemun 'ad taken to another woman many turnings ago and its mi'luvver 'ad moved into the 'ouse of a jealous and tight Comfort woman. This step-mi'luvver dinn't fancy the idea of Ansel entering adulthood, for if Ansel were to become a man, then she'd no longer be the 'ead of the 'ouse and if Ansel were a woman, well, then she'd be 'aving the work of counting out a dowry. She weren't a gudden, mind, but she were cunning, as is the wont of mutton. And so, when she led Ansel into the forest to spend its fast, did tell that childr to toss a path of bread crumbs behind it so that Ansel would 'ave both vittles and a path 'ome.

Well, Ansel did as it were told; it threw that bread and, once its Step-Mi'luvver 'ad left it at there treemum, did sit its fast. Them days past, one, two, three, till it were time to turn 'ome, though Ansel still 'ad no knowing of 'ow to adult. Mayhaps I'll stay a childr forever, that silly soul thought.

But poor Ansel! Where be your path? Them birds and beasts 'ave done just as your cruel step-mi'luvver knew and gone and gobbled every last crumb –

Yum yum yum!

And so it were that that childr were all lost and all alone.

Ansel were, by this point, weak sommat awful and its stomach put up a groan like a badger down an 'ole, but luck would 'ave it that it chanced upon an 'ut.

Now, what might an 'ut be doing all the way out 'ere? Ansel, thought. Suppose it must be being a tapper worker's 'ouse.

And so it did trot up to that door and knock, three times, like so –

Dum. Dum. Dum.

A long silence did follow, into which Ansel's 'eart did knock –

Dum. Dum. Dum.

And on the third, that door did open to reveal a man 'oo were mighty strange looking, for ee 'ad beetle black eyes and an 'ide as wrinkled as the nut. But then, as all childr do know, spending too much time in the forest does change a soul.

'Scuse I, Mister,' Ansel, it did say. 'I bes lost and 'ungerful. Could you kindly lend I a 'eel of bread and point me on me way?'

But the man said nought and Ansel's 'eart did knock 'arder still –

Dum. Dum. Dum.

Then that man did extend an 'and of long, clever fingers, but afore Ansel could take it, them fingers did sprout into a bush laden with plenny a fruit. The man did shake this at Ansel as if to say, *et as many as you please*.

Ansel dinn't need no second asking. It gobbled, gobbled, gobbled until them berries were all gone and its tummy said –

Yum. Yum. Yum.

Ansel were so mindful of this eating that, when it looked up, it were betwaddled to see that all that remained of the man were a stick, rooted in the mud and straining west. Well, that were a Parcel of ol' Crams, awlrite, but 'Ansel dinn't need to understand to know that this were the way 'ome. It followed that point and, right enough, arrived lickety-split back in its village. Its step-mi'luvver weren't 'appy, mind, but what could she do.

Ansel rested and washed up, only to see that the juice from them berries 'ad stained its right cheek in the shape of a crescent moon. Well, that childr, it did scrub and, that childr, it did scratch, but nought Ansel could do would get rid it of ee. Were then that Ansel knew that it 'ad et the fruit of a fey and so been claimed. Then winter did enter Ansel's 'eart –

Dum. Dum. Dum.

The night that followed were dark as pitch and the wind did 'owl as if 'er 'ubber 'ad moved onto annuder wife, but even she couldn't drown out the scratching of a branch at Ansel's window. Save Ansel knew that there were no tree out there for a good stone's throw.

Upon the marnin Ansel did rise to see that a gurt bush 'ad grown from the outhouse and thick upon its branches were the fey's berries. Well, Ansel tore that bush up and burnt it good but were still mighty afeared, for it could feel its body coming to a decision and it were sure that if it were to turn to manning then the fey would 'ave 'im for a slave and that if it were to turn to the bleeds then the fey would 'ave 'er for a wife.



Well, time rushed on, for ee ne'er stops for noabody, 'owever nicely you do ask, and so it were a week later that Ansel did emerge from its 'ouse to find the garden thick with bushes, which stretched on and on till they reached the forest. And on them branches were flowers the red of a sliced finger.

That step-mi'luvver were furious at first, she took 'er axe and made to *chop-chop-chop*, but, afore she could make the first cut, them petals opened to reveal stamens bent under the weight of gold. And so she put down 'er axe and got to picking and the basket she 'ad made of 'er shirt soon overflowed with wealth. There were no song on Ansel's tongue, mind, and it pleaded with 'er that she leaves them bushes be, for they were clearly not proper like. But that gleam of gold were snared in the tight mutton's eye and she 'ad no mind for aught else. So she picked and plucked, right into that there forest.

Were no sign of 'er that evening. Nor the next day. Nor any other. Till a week later some 'unters did come back into town with a brown deer o'er their shoulders. Its frosted eyes were 'uman and gold with greed.

Ansel knew then that fey would come for it soon enough. So Ansel's mi'luvver did break off a branch and spent a night and day showing Ansel 'ow to fashion it into the truest arrow you e'er did see. Even as they worked them windows did darken, for them bushes grew gurt as trees. Then winter did enter Ansel's blood.

Dum. Dum. Dum.

Came the knocking at the door. And in Ansel's chest –

Dum. Dum. Dum.

For there were only one self it could be.

Nought else for it, Ansel opened the door to find itself eye to eye with them the black of beetles. And, in that silence, you could 'ear the forest scream.

The fey extended its 'and. But Ansel refused to took it. So them fey's fingers grew, berries popping out so fast that they split over. But Ansel 'ad no 'unger on them now. Next, them flowers, gleaming gold. But Ansel 'ad ne'er 'ad that sort of greed.

And so the fey struck. Its fingers grew thick and fast with thorns that wrapped round Ansel's legs. Then brave Ansel did reach inside its jacket and drew forth the arrow. The shot were true and pierced through bark, deep into that fey's 'eart –

Dum. Dum...

Then all them bushes did turn to dust.

Well, what else to do? Ansel went back inside with its mi'luvver and slept a sleep too deep for dreams. It woke to sheets spotted red. For Ansel 'ad become a woman. So she lived and, if she ain't dead yet, so lives still.

## Chapter Thirteen

For all that I was the one who'd just escaped the jaws of Death, I returned home to find you flat out on your sofa, a cushion over your face. I tip-toed past, up the stairs and out of my window onto the outhouse roof. The chill of the corrugated iron burnt my hands, but I huddled around my knees and breathed down the neck of my tunic. You disapproved of me sitting out here since it made you look a bad mother, though, when folk commented to the like, you said that I liked the cold and would flick your wrists – *what was a mother to do?* In all your nagging you'd never stopped to ask why I'd sit out here, nor why the habit would follow your bad moods.

The night held the kind of cold that reminded me what it is to be living and so I watched the forest and traced the unbroken skin of my thigh. The glow from the house lit the back of my hands. Ahead, trees fidgeted against the dark of sky, wind bringing tattle so tart that it set the leaves whispering. If Mi'luvver was here she'd tell me that the forest was Listening and, gradually, I stopped shivering. A heat flickered through me, though it was hard to say whether this was from fear or something with a different name.

Was Mi'luvver right to say that I was claimed? I didn't want fey with fingers of branches to drag me off as a slave or wife, yet the creature I had met in the forest had been little like that in Mi'luvver's story. It had been kind and gentle – it had saved me. A claim by such a creature was surely not the curse Ansel's story made of it? Look at it another way and didn't it mean that out there, in the forest, another family was waiting? Folk who could scare away Death with nothing but the power of their tongues and heal broken bone in moments. Surely such a power could remove the tattoo from me. I could find them, learn their magic, then I wouldn't have to be afraid of anyone ever again, not Death, not the Brothers, not you. Hope buoyed in my chest and, crouched there in the penumbra of light, I felt poised on the cusp of something better.

When I finally crawled back inside you were still on your sofa but sat up, stitching a tear in a robe. Always working, you were, even though we were now well off enough that there was no need for you to take on seamstressing. Wisps of hair that had escaped their braids made a soft halo about your brow. I stood in the doorway, watching the point of your needle dip in and out of the fabric and your hand flew to your breast when you finally noticed me.

‘Mother Bennett! How long have you been standing there?’

I tested my tongue against the roof of my mouth, then let it lie limp. You lent forwards and brushed your lips against my bruised cheek. The touch was so light that I felt for it after you’d pulled away.

‘Silly goose,’ you said. ‘Go set some milk on for the porridge, there's a good childr.’

I shook off the last of the cold and did as I was bid.

## Chapter Fourteen

Father, the traveller, was always good for a tall tale. Save from the strength of his arms around me, his stories are what I miss most. Even you, for all your distrust of any telling that hadn't emerged from the Geist's lips, would sit by on your sofa to stitch as he talked and lend, if not your ears, your presence at least. It's in this way that I learnt that north of Anglélund is nothing but ice while in the Heartlands it's so warm that folk go about without their woollens and the ground has dried into sand. So much sand that the people who live in such places have one hundred words for it, Father said, though he could list only ten or so. Imagine that! One hundred words for the grainy sludge found by the estuary? But I understood after a fashion, when you live in something so completely you can taste the differences. For after my trip in the forest, I took to living in silence.

Ask most folk and they'll tell you that silence is absence – a chill that descends like snow in the dusk so that, on waking, the world is white. Yet this must not be mistaken for its cousin that hits like a hammer and leaves the air ringing, nor the silence that does the work of weeping.

My silence was different again. My silence pushed against gritted teeth and sweated in clenched fists. My silence was a fever that broke out in angry pinpricks. My silence was glorious.

Befitting of this, Mi'luvver and all the marms in the neighbourhood bent to it. *More pie? More pie*, can never have enough of that. *Sit on your Mi'luvver's lap and lissen to a story?* Why, yes! I cared little that this took her away from her work. Mister Danlin even got his dancing dog on its hind legs for me. *'Ere, Asha, 'ave a go turning the 'andle on ee*, he said, patting his organ grinder. *That'll cheer you up some*. Won't it just!

The Geist had been no fool when he'd had the tongue sliced from his head. If you want folk to lean in close then you'd best talk real quiet or, even better, not at all. Sure, it wasn't the power of the fey, but it was something, awlrite. And when the fey claimed me, well, I wouldn't have to be afraid ever again.

Whispers reigned when I was out of a room and exclamations when I entered.

*'Ere be our Asha! Ain't it looking pert viddy today? Colour back in its cheeks.*

*Poor wee thing.*

*Been through so much of late.*

*Such a sweet dapper, don't you say?*

Sweet! I'd never been called anything like, not with my twitchy fingers. All the marms for a mile around had lost a pie to me at some point or other.

But you weren't one to lessen my name in front of the neighbours, no matter what you said behind closed doors, and so you'd nod and thread your fingers along the tufts of my newly grown hair, though the touch was brusque and pinched. Even this made me smile because, oh, I had you running.

After a week of this, you begged another marm to cover for you at work and took me down the docks to watch the ships. A sailor was gathering beer money by singing lewd songs as he flipped back and forth across a rope strung between two cranes, right close to the canal edge. All the talk of my being sweet and hard done by couldn't have worked on my wickedness, for, seeing that set up, a small voice inside me begged for the lout to take a drop in the drink. And, oh what sin, fall in he did. Took three men to pull him out. Pennies rained into his flat cap with the laughter and he grinned through his shivering in a way that made me wonder if it had been intentional. Either way, it froze our blood just to watch and you bought us a bag of hot chestnuts that burnt my palms through the brown paper. We munched on them as we walked around the head. A golden day it was. A golden day indeed.

We paused at the outlook. The wind plucked at the tassels of your shawl, though your face was fixed and blank. The same easterly front had hastened Father's ship the day we'd last stood here together. The tide sucked and groaned about the legs of the jetty and I kicked a loose piece of shingle into it. That's what I liked best about the sea – it did a soul's aching for it.

You laid the chill back of your hand on my cheek. All that was remained of your punch now were the three greenish imprints of knuckles.

'How are those chestnuts?' You said.

I gave a thumbs up and you exhaled.

'Asha. You can't hold your tongue forever.'

I pressed my lips together – not against the temptation of words, you understand, but the grin that threatened to split my face.

Brunel was the only one unimpressed by my silence, but, to tell the truth, there was little about me that didn't disgust him in those days. He would twist my arm as hard as he could, daring me to squeal, and when this failed he would snatch my belongings to hoist above my head.

'Knows what yous 'ave to do to get ee back.'

I would ignore him and keep jumping.

'Speak. Speak.'

It didn't seem rightly fair that I was the one Death wanted to eat when he was so annoying.

'Speak.'

'Knows you can.'

'Doing it for attention, ain't you.'

'Think it be a game?'

Never mind that he was the one making me jump. When I found the fey and learnt their tongue, he'd be sorry, but for the moment I was resigned to punching him in the belly and scooping up the pilfered items to run before he flattened me. Yet, for all that Brunel was the first, it didn't take long for others to follow him into explaining my silence.

*A fey. Was a fey Asha met out there, mark me good, Mi'luvver would whisper to you every morning when she thought I was out of earshot. Asha be spoken for, be why it don't speak.*

Yet you had always been a faithful woman and not given to superstition, at least not of that breed. If there were queer folk in the forest, and of that the Brothers were doubtful, you knew them to be little better than feral animals, not the sort to kidnap childr. You remained carefully deaf to any such suggestion and would keep on with your humming, as low and atonal as if a hive were lodged in your thorax.

Well, we'd breakfast quietly in this way, the hiss of rain or the scrape of spoons carrying the conversation for us. I chewed and chewed and chewed and still wasn't any clearer on how to find the fey. But I would, somehow.

Then the dance of coats and bags, the murmur of good wishes for the day, and out into the cold. The orange of your uniform sizzled like hot coals against snow, so pure and creaseless that the pride swelled inside me against my willing – my Mother, a cleaner. Sometimes the conflicting forces of my heart and stomach were so at odds that they threaten to tip me and I'd grab hold of your hand hard enough that you'd cuss me for being a babber. But, remembering my condition, you'd apologise and I would be allowed to cling as far as the Inner City.

So off we'd go, neighbours singing out to you – *Oo, allo, Doree. 'Ow bes the littlun? Still not speakin'? More's the pity. Childr do go through funny phases.* Some of them would even press a strip of jerky or a boiled egg into my hand and, though you'd thank them profusely, you'd make your excuses and hurry us on sooner than necessary.

Anything that got folk tattling was bad news to your thinking. I'd stuff the treats in my cheeks whole lest you were tempted to confiscate them.

So hurry, hurry. Along the canal, our boots kicking up the snow as we overtook the grumble and 'ssh' of canal boats. But don't look. Do. Not. Look. At. Them. Men. Oh, but sneak a peek anyway, yanked on by you as they started with the shouting.

*Awlrite, darlen. Gis I a grin.*

*Not mutton yet, luvverly! Even if yous act like one.*

*Tip some o'your tippi!*

I thought that they must confuse you with the other women of the canal-sides – those scrolls that lay in the snowdrifts like used handkerchiefs, naked skin clumped into a spider web of creases. Though plenty enough Four Fours manned the boats, the pictures were always of Ffieth women, littles in their mouth and sucking. The languid poses suggested a body without bones or muscle, nothing that could offer resistance to feasting of eyeballs, and still the women sucked and smiled. Such is the joy of being eaten.

But then we'd be leaving the coughing of the boats behind, off up Hotwell Hill where the dauntless sandstone of The Page shone against the sky.

*Shocks to the system can cause muteness*, was always Brother Oh's explanation when he met us at the gate to Schooling. *A tonic will help her re-cooperate. I could give you the recipe.*

He may not have been able to tell us childr apart but he remembered our mi'luvvers awlrite, the fatter they were the better. Yes siree, there were stories about our Oh. I suppose that he must have the found pink imprints of his fingers in flesh reassuring, four to a hand and no more. Yet you had learnt your lesson when it came to Four Fours, hadn't you.

*I'm sure you're right*, you'd say and a tonic was never made.

Now learning – of a sort – small and dry in Oh's mouth. God Child verses and the history of the Heartlands couldn't help me find the fey though. I peered out of the window and rubbed the thigh that fey had fixed. Oh gave me no mind. Childr would be switched for talking like a Ffieth – for how were any of us to go far in life like that – but silent is how the God Children like the Ffieth best.

The other childr respected my quiet less. On the fourth day of my muteness, a ball of fabric landed in my lap. I smoothed the note out and looked up to see Robert leering, a shrew-faced childr who'd never tried its luck before.

*Asha swallowed a frug*, the note read.

I took from this that folk were saying that my silence was the result of an unfortunate amphibian being lodged in my throat. That explanation wouldn't take root though, not after I cornered Robert in the yard and twatted it hard enough to make it gob blood. A good day's work.

So home again, home again. Along the canal-side, past Mister Callaway's station on the lock, his pale skin florid with cold and drink.

'Eard your childr bes dumb. Always knew they were a Janner. Whas else you gis for interbreeding?'

I was ready to kick him in the shins, but you were there first, calling him a useless old fool who stuck his twelve fingers in places that they weren't wanted. Then you marched home and wouldn't stir from your sofa all evening. I waited until you were asleep to creep out and hide a rotting fish head in Callaway's shutters. Yet the damage was already done – the next day you took me back to the Library.



My knees betrayed me to find myself back among the books. Even if I'd forgotten the pain and terror of my first visit, my muscles remembered. To look at those hides again made my skin itch as if ready to be sloughed off without any need for cutting. Then the story I'd been telling myself during the preceding weeks reasserted itself. Because I was important, wasn't I? Brother Oh said himself. I was important and powerful and the Brothers were going to read me. The shaking of my hands must just be the cold. For it was cold. Even in the full daylight, damp dewed the stonework and the sweet hint of rot hung on the air. I shuddered as you pulled my tunic and cacks off of me, gnawed at by doubts as much as the exposure.

*I'm important. Important.* I stuck my hands into my armpits and jiggled on my pea stick toes until your squeeze of my shoulder told me to stop fidgeting.

The high shutters drew blades of light through the dusty air and pared the Brothers' faces into black and white. Most of them were unfamiliar, though I glimpsed Oh at the back. His gaze was flat when it fell on me, but he managed a smile for you.

The beads hissed and thrashed, then there was the Consort himself. Such a man shouldn't be ansum, not when he was as pale as a Fallen and had the build of a man who hasn't done a day's hard lifting in his life, but that didn't stop the silver trumpets from opening their throats whenever he entered a space. Or mayhaps that was just the effect of being near one so powerful. Your grip tightened again, but it wasn't a reprimand this



time. I'd seized up too. To think that a man so important should concern himself with me!

Or, at least, with what was on me. Reaching the gathering, he turned his back on us to address the Brothers.

'Preparations? Ah, there is Oh. You have the tome? Don't hug it like it's your first born, man. Several centuries of sin in those pages. And who has my gloves? Ah, thank you.'

He turned, wriggling the fabric over his fingers, only to draw short.

'Will someone, please, get the girl prepared already.'

Girl, meaning me.

You ushered me forwards and, when I glanced back, you were still there, shooing me on, so I climbed up. My first time on this table I hadn't been in any state to notice the intricate carvings in the oak, nor the green leather inset, but now that I did a lump rose in my throat. The only times that I had touched such fine furnishings was to clean them. I perched on the edge and hugged my nakedness.

The Consort paused by the table, still trying to smooth creases from his gloves. 'Are we quite ready?'

He was watching Oh, who had been setting out his writing implements onto a small desk nearby but now dropped into his seat.

'Thank you.' The Consort flexed his fingers against one another and turned to me. 'Well, on your back.'

I did as I was told and his fingers imprinted into the soft flesh of my abdomen. As a childr, Brunel had delighted in tickling me there, knowing how the slightest touch could double me over in shrieking giggles, but the Consort's probing only made me wince. I peered up into his face, searching for any fellow feeling, but found only the dark hairs of nose topiary.

My story began, as they all do, at the belly button. The Consort followed the march of words from here, reading out-loud as he went. The other Brothers surrounded us in a semi-circle, listening with their eyes shut. Oh's pen hovered across the page of his tome in time with the Consort's words. It must carry the same text as the one on me, I thought, a guess that was confirmed when the Consort found a mole on the dimple at the edge of my right elbow that had apparently appeared since my tattooing and obliterated the word 'fish'. At this announcement, the tip of Oh's tongue disappeared between his plump lips and, with the care of a childr tearing off a single ant leg, the nib ran the word through. This must have been what Oh meant when he said that my living would alter

the text. Eyelids fluttered open among the Brothers, then lowered as the reading continued.

The Consort is poking me in the thigh, I thought. The Consort himself. This close, the angles of his skull were visible through his skin. Previously I had only ever seen him from across the chapel, a distance that had wrought him both smaller and larger than he was.

My attention drifted to the hide whose toes hung not far from my head. Had it – the person who had once worn it as their skin – been through this too?

Little was required from me save to follow the nudges of Consort's hands – roll over, or sit up, or display a limb so that he didn't have to crane his neck to follow the line of the text. A cramp dug into my left thigh, but that was the worst of it. After all my boasting and fear, the reading turned out to be underwhelming.

Perhaps the Brothers had expected more too, for when the last word had been read from my right ring finger, they withdrew into a huddle. I understood little of what was said, but the disgruntled tone was clear. Oh lingered at his desk, making a show of looking through the tome and straightening his pens.

I sat up and stretched my reclaimed limbs. The movement drew the attention of the Consort and he barked an order at Oh who set off at a jog and returned, some minutes later, with a whittled stick and a pair of tongs.

At the Consort's nod, Oh took hold of my jaw and began to probe the inside of my mouth with the stick. Mi'luvver had story about a Wendigo who lured childr in with tippipops, then tested their readiness for eating by prodding their fat with the left over sticks. The childr in the story had defeated the Wendigo by tricking it into eating a childr made of straw, then a childr made of sticks, then a childr made of bricks until it was so heavy that it fell into its own cooking pot and drowned. But lacking straw, sticks, stones or a body of water, I put up with the poking as best I could. It soon disappeared, only to be replaced by the tongs, which drew my tongue out far enough to hurt. The Brothers crowded in, hmm-ing and ah-ing with such interest that I strained to try see myself but was left cross-eyed and dizzy by the attempt. I focused, instead, on counting the Brother's bare toes. Each of them had five to a foot – I'd never noticed that about God Children before.

By this point, the Brothers were raising their voices in argument. My muteness was a sign that their text was taking hold, on that they all agreed, what they should extrapolate from this was less clear since the text had been changed little. Oh watched and made imperceptible adjustments in the tightening of an ink pot or the straightening of a pen.

It was unlikely, the Brothers claimed, that a symptom so extreme had taken place this soon. The quickening of a text on a body had been known to have drastic, even violent, effects on previous childr but silence? It seemed counter-intuitive until the suggestion was made that the answer may be more simple than everyone was reaching for and that I was simply an imbecile. Imbecile was what Mi'luvver told Brunel and me we had to call Marm Randel's childr Ducky, instead of all the other things childr would shout because Ducky walked round with a doll even though she was in her bleeds and would chase after a soul, laughing in huffs like a bulldog, if they made the mistake of catching her eye. I didn't do anything like that, which either meant that I was stupid without knowing it or that the Brothers were. My stomach hurt. For all that the conversation was about me, it seemed that I'd been forgotten.

A hand slipped into mine. 'Begging your pardon, Maesters, but I may have your answer.'

The Brothers looked among themselves, uncertain who had spoken. You raised your voice again.

'Asha has taken the Vow of Scheherazade, see.'

The Brothers didn't try to hide their surprise. I would have stared too had the tongs not prevented me.

'My Asha is very faithful, you know. We've been attending The Page since it – she – were little.' Your hand was tight around mine.

But I was a sinful childr, remember? After all those years of rankling against the description, the idea of it being taken from me woke winter in my breast.

The Consort looked no less incredulous. 'If that were truly the case then why would you have kept this to yourself?'

'Begging your pardon, Maester. I couldn't be sure if it was relevant. I'm only a simple cleaner, see.' Years of working at The Page had prepared you well. Though you couldn't keep the tremble from your voice, your expression was empty.

'A child could never commit.'

Did he mean child or Ffieth? As his gaze narrowed on me, I had the queer feeling that this was the first time he was seeing me, despite having just examined every inch of my skin. No, the Consort was not an ansum man, I decided. It didn't matter that he had every Brother jumping at his words – when the fey came for me and I gained the power of their tongue – I'd see that he never poked me in the stomach again.

Your eyes were still locked on the tightly curled hair of his toes, but your voice was firm. 'One is never too young for faith, Brother. Don't you always say it at the Uncreasing?'

Contempt clamped into the Consort's mouth, but he waved and the tongs loosened. My tongue was my own again. I massaged its raw numbness with my hands, but that tasted bad, so I popped it back inside my mouth.

The Consort stripped himself of his gloves with a series of precise tugs. 'Is this true, child? To dedicate oneself to Scheherazade is only for the pure of spirit.'

I looked to you and caught the tiny nod. In truth, I'd never even heard of the Vow and all I knew of Scheherazade was that those at The Page talked of her with admiration when most of the women that made it into their sermons were Fallen or whores, or both.

My lips puckered into the beginning of a denial, but then I saw the sharpness with which the Consort's gaze flickered to you. The memory of the night we had first walked here returned and how you had bristled when I'd asked if you were afraid. My hand was beginning to ache under your grip.

'Well?' The Consort said.

I stared down at the wriggle of my pea-stick toes and nodded, quickly. The Brothers murmured and, as they returned to their bickering, you slipped your arm around my shoulders. A rock had lodged in my throat, the gathering of saliva threatening to choke.

*Frying pan, fire*, I heard in Mi'luvver's voice – my best insights coming, as they did, as if part of her spirit were impressed into mine. *Frying pan, fire, me luvy*.

But, still, I didn't speak.

## Chapter Fifteen

Scheherazade. Sweet, sweet Scheherazade, so pure and so virgin and whatever else the bleedenell she was supposed to be. For someone who was supposed to have taken her vow, she was a stranger to me, but I was to learn soon enough for you explained the following day as we worked. Just refreshing my memory, coors. The pity in the eyes of the other cleaners had tightened into what could almost be called admiration.

Scheherazade. Speaker without tongue. Woman but not of Woeman. Created in sin to free man of it.

Your voice was given a sonorous reverence by the bowl of the toilet you were cleaning. I had pegged my nostrils shut, but the smell of cleaning fluid and excrement still crowded my head.

You recounted the actual verses, I remember that, but I was only paying half a mind and wouldn't be able to repeat them now. Any rate, the long and short of it was that, after running from Woeman, God had been plunging through the forest, beset by monsters and daymons. He unfolded everything he could get his hands on and so returned these beings to The Word. But his work was cut out for him, as soon as he unfolded one thing the work of Woeman had already folded itself into a hundred others.

The clucking of the other cleaners started up at this part.

‘Men, can’t ‘old more than one thing at a time.’

Toilet bowls multiply hooting a hundredfold.

But whatever God had his hands full with, the worst of the folding is thanks to the children of Woeman – the Fallen. With their hands of five and five, a surfeit made for sin, they folded great cities and ships that could cross the world in days or even reach the stars. But we all know how that ends. Under the custodianship of the Fallen, God watched The World sicken, God watched The World boil and God watched The World fold further as it died.

It’s then that God understands, it’s only taken him a couple of millennia, but he’s finally puzzled it out. As hard as he tried, the world just kept on folding, no end to the suffering. He cannot stop it, at least, not by himself and here is crux of it – to end sin, he must sin himself.

‘Aiyah! A name to fit his shame.’ The cleaners answered the liturgy as if you were the Consort himself.

See, God had come to understand that he must fold himself, just as Woeman, but this time he'd do it right. This time, he'd create folk to help him unfold. In this way he became the first Holy Sinner. And so God made the greatest sacrifice – he took his remaining being and folded it in three.

‘Aiyah! For us our Father did sin.’

The harsh scent of the cleaning fluid hit my eyes as I slugged it into the bowl, acid orange on white ceramic. In our outhouse at home all we had was a rusty bucket, but the Brothers cared even for the purity of that they shat in.

The greatest substance God kept for himself, for he still had much unfolding to do, but the two smaller parts were fleshings, mankind but of God. The first of these he called 'Ashitaka', man of God. And the second he called 'Scheherazade', woman of God.

But the proof is in the pudding. Or, rather, in the fleshing. For God's Children would bear only four digits to each hand. Ten fingers for unfolding. Ten fingers for the work of God.

Your twelve fingers curled around the toilet bowl as you paused to take breath. Their skin was raw and blood blisters pricked up your bared arms to their rolled sleeves. You smiled at me, head tilted in question, and I bent back to my scrubbing, eyes watering from the chemical stink.

With his moulding finished, God looked upon his children and saw that they were good. And so off he went, leaving the clay of his children to cook under the midday sun.

But, oh dear, our goodly god was not versed in folding. When he returned it was to find that he'd forgotten to shape anything twixst Man's legs.

The cleaners were quiet now, only coughs and the slop of brushes accompanied your voice. I bent my elbow to removing a stubborn streak that had welded itself to the bowl. The fey wouldn't force these bullshit stories on me. I'd spent the evening before behind our house –loitering on the forest side of the wall, skipping back into our yard, then creeping over once more, before losing courage completely and running inside to hide under my blankets. What the fey were waiting for I didn't know.

You lowered your voice and so that it growled around the bowl. Had you not been so wedded to the Faith, we could have made a mint storyteller out of you.

God panicked. It was too late to reshape man. Indeed, Scheherazade, being smaller and lesser, flopped about on the bank like a beached fish and the pink worm of her tongue wriggled in her mouth.

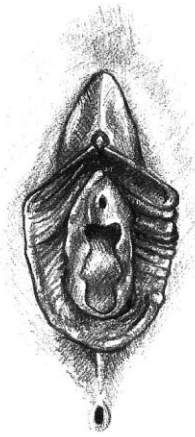
And now God saw that Scheherazade must make the sacrifice that comes of the creased womb. A second holy sinner. He reached deep into the darkness of her mouth and plucked that worm out to plant twixt man's legs.

'Alleluia. Man is saved.'

And so it came to be that God's Children served the Word with their fleshing, but, while Ashitaka was to unspeak it, Scheherazade unfolded through the silence of her dancing.

I pulled the flush and jammed my brush down the cistern hard enough to slop water over the sides.

What a load of –

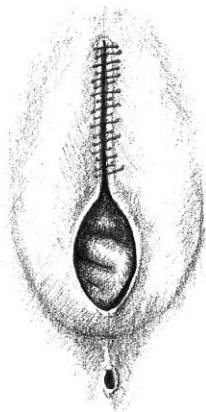


The sin of Woeman bleeds from the second mouth, this is how a man will know that it is time to take charge of the sin of his daughter and pare away the perverted lips so that she does no shame by him.

The father must take up his knife that he has cleansed upon the fire and make incisions through the flesh that guards the opening on Woeman's wound. The remainder may be sewn shut with thread or sinew until such a time when the body's own shame has sealed the offending parts.

The result will permit the woman to pass water and do her duty of her husband without the temptation of folding that would bring her ruin and shame upon the house.

In this way, the creasing may remain in hand.  
Aiyah, for us our Father did sin!





## Chapter Sixteen

The clipped chatter of God Children crammed the dance hall, 'h's slicing breathily like laughter or deep-chested respiration. It was a sound that had been locked away inside me, almost forgotten, but within moments transported me back to when I was a babber, coming at the world from three feet tall, when folk were all legs, waists and hands. It didn't matter that, at that age, I'd yet to understand the full meaning of my little fingers, it had been clear enough that we didn't belong. But oh, the glamour, the lights, the food, the colour. My saucer-wide eyes had never been large enough to hold it all. So don't misunderstand me, I could appreciate why you might want to return to that life, but attempting it was a different matter entirely.

I froze on the threshold and it took your palm in my kidneys to keep me moving. You'd dressed us in our best togs, but in such company I felt like a sparrow among song birds. It may have been our clothing and my tattoo that drew their attention, but their eyes flashed to our hands next. The Four Four have a sixth sense for little fingers. It didn't matter that mine were crushed to my sides in fists and yours were crammed alongside your ring fingers into Four Four gloves, the faces we past soured. Those gloves were new, I'd noticed, though the stained suede suggested that you weren't their first owner. A pretty penny they must have cost us, but by the end of that night the seams were too stretched to be worn again.

You led us forwards to settle us on the third row from the front. Despite the prime seating, the chairs nearby remained unclaimed and a woman, old enough to be mutton if she were Ffieth, wept into her hubber's shoulder at the end of our row. You settled your hands neatly into your lap, index finger itching against your thumb, and cast quick looks into the crowd, trying and failing and catch the eye of the other mothers. Just because I was angry at you didn't mean that I couldn't be furious on your behalf. None of those women had anything close to your beauty and they didn't have to burn it cleaning up after the Brothers. I slid down my seat to try and blend into the backrest, only for you to hoick me up. How could you have brought us back here? Even when Father had accompanied us to such places, we never belonged.

Eventually, you couldn't contain yourself any longer and you twisted around to the woman behind us.

'My daughter will be joining the dances soon. Taken a vow, you know.'

The woman's mute look passed from your face to our clothes and she pressed the head of her daughter into her side. I was glad when the lights dimmed and hid the bruised heat of my face.

*Daughter. Her. Joining the dance.* Call it foolishness, but until that moment I hadn't realised what you'd meant about taking the vow.

My horror only grew as the dancers of Scheherazade filed on-stage with their plump, self-satisfied expressions. Bells were stitched into their dresses so that their every movement tingled, sounding all together like rainfall on a high tin roof. You squeezed my hand and another two threads popped in your gloves.

There were ten dancers in all, arms held slightly out from their sides and staring into space. The girls were so ripe with premature sexuality that the fat pressed together into sharp lines at their joints.

It had been sometime since I had been this close to girls. Though, coors, when we had lived in the Inner City, folk had said that I was one. The relief was still with me from that day, all those years before, when Mi'luvver had sat me down to explain that such nonsense was Four Four thinking. I was a childr and had plenty of time to grow before deciding. It was that evening that I'd shredded my dresses and you'd spanked me for claiming that it was mice that had got at them. Still, you'd fashioned the salvaged fabric into tunics.

The harsh chord of a shamisen cracked the quiet, then the dancing started – if that's what it can be called. The girls had none of the wild abandon of Ffieth at ball, when folk spin and leap and flail as if trying to shake themselves out of their own skin. The dancers of Scheherazade had the measure of tippi from a spigot. Their arms and hips swayed or drew small circles, each girl following the precise moves of the next, and their feet hardly left the ground. If Scheherazade had communicated by her dancing she couldn't have had anything much to say. I glanced up at you to share my disgust, but you were dabbing at your eyes with the edge of your shawl.

I couldn't bear it any more, I slid to the floor and pulled myself through the tunnel of chair legs to the end of the hall. The brightness of the corridor outside left me blinking and even the squeak of my boots against the glazed floor tiles seemed to come at me as if from distance. I floated along, looking for somewhere to hide, and paused outside a set of doors that were marked with the symbols Four Fours use for washrooms, though it had slipped my mind which was for men and which was for women. Why the Four Four were so horrified that a man should have to smell a woman's shit or vice versa had always been a mystery. I pushed on the nearest door and stepped in.

The room beyond was tiled green and set with benches and wooden shelves to house rolled up clothes. There were copper showers at the far end too, though how God Children could afford to throw away warm water with such abandon always awed me. There was little time for wonder, however, for a gaggle of girls was gathered on the benches. They gawked at me and I sealed my little fingers inside my fists, though that rabbit had long since slipped its snare.

For all that I had been considered one once, I didn't understand girls. At least boys would venture into the Ole Town at times to trade fists. Girls, though, were a species apart.

'Gotta pity 'em,' Shar had said when we had climbed a tree to spy on them at their Schooling one time. 'Born with the bleeds.'

Dee, perched on the branch above, had aimed a kick at Shar's head. 'They don't be getting the bleeds till they adult proper, spooner. Four Fours just know 'oo'll be getting them.'

It hadn't been looking at me when it said this, but I'd squirmed all the same.

'Me Mi'luvver says that be nonsense talk,' I'd said. 'What 'appens if it ends up going into its manning?'

'The Four Fours know. They lissen to the body and it tells 'em its decision afore the childr knows itself,' Dee had said. 'Me olemun said that they be right almost always.'

I'd hunched in on myself then. It couldn't be right that our adulting should be inside us, waiting and growing like the burrowing parasite Toad had got in its heel after we'd gone romping in the marsh that one time. Adulting was a decision. Admittedly, not one to be made like when deciding whether spend birthday money on tippipops or a ball, nor even a choice like the ones of those just into their manning might force on us when they had us against a wall and told us that we had to choose whether to bite the head off a bird babber or walk home with icicles shoved down our leggings. But it was a decision all the same and our mi'luvvers reassured us that it would only announce itself when the time was ripe.

'Almost,' I'd said.

Lou hadn't forgotten the kick Shar had received and had mugged up at Dee. 'Ai. Me olemun says that many of the men at the docks work there cos them Brothers who own the plantation say they be women and won't 'ave 'em. Even though all of them 'ave ne'er ever 'ad the bleeds.'

Dee flicked its hair aside. 'The Four Fours know stuff. Gissed their knowing from books.'

We'd laughed and Dee had jumped down, pretending not to hear. Then the rest of us had spat in the direction of the girls and followed.

But that day now seemed a long time ago. The brassy groan of the pipes filled the quiet and I fidgeted in the doorway. The girls didn't seem poised to attack. Now that the initial shock had past, they'd gone back to muttering to each other behind their hands, looking anywhere but at me. This wasn't uncommon among the Four Four – up at The Page, the Brothers would only notice childr when they didn't get out of the way fast enough. But just because the girls weren't looking didn't mean that they weren't watching.

I should have just left, I should have stayed in the hall, I should have done many things, but stood there, unseen, I was marooned. Remembering Mi'luvver Daniel's bouts of invisibility, I looked down at my hands, half expecting to see the tiles through them, but they were unchanged. Or rather, they were the hands I'd always known, though they now looked to me to be more creased than I'd remembered and claw-like about the fingers. I curled their throbbing heat back into fists at my side and the closest girl, a maze of freckles on her puffy cheeks, flinched. No. I wasn't invisible, I was a monster.

'Filth.'

At the first mutter, I couldn't be sure that it hadn't been my own imagination. Several pairs of eyes shot away as I searched for who'd spoken.

Another voice chimed off the tiles. 'Cleanliness is next to godliness.'

My skin crawled. You had scrubbed until me until sore before we'd set out that evening.

Feeling returned to my feet and I began to back out, but, at the movement, the freckled girl squeaked.

Monster. I was a monster.

Monsters eat little girls.

And why not? I thought. Why not?

I swung out a hand and the freckled girl fell back with a shriek, though there was too much distance between us to make contact. A gasp swept the room. My next step and they were on their feet and backing up against the walls.

I breathed hard through my nose. They were Four Fours. I didn't want any trouble.

Or, mayhaps I did.

And now the dancing really started. I pounced forwards and the girls scattered. There was no need to run since they could do little more than waddle and were already

wheezing through their sobs. My scarred body took flight over benches and lockers. I leapt and spun as the girls toppled and split open their knees. The screams came shrill and bright against the tiles – I could have caught every one of those girls and smashed their noses in, but scaring them was better.

The moment swept me clean. I forgot that they were Four Fours and that I was Ffieth and everything you wanted for me. I was glory itself. But a moment like that can't last forever. The clamour of footsteps approached down the corridor, then the door burst open. I scrambled over to the nearest window and had wriggled the top part of my body free when hands clamped on my legs and wrenched me back into the changing room.

Every eye was on me as the Justice carried me into the corridor and bashed me into the wall. Then the shouting started. No telling what was said since my head was ringing from the blow and every time I righted myself they shoved me down again. Feet and words planted into my ribs. I curled in on myself, away from the world, into the aching egg of my body. But then red robes parted to orange and I was hauled onto my feet.

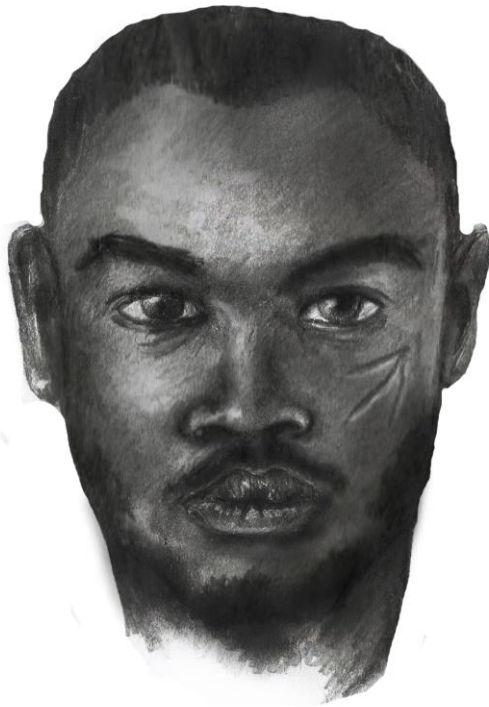
'Are the lot of you blind?' The Brother sprayed spittle at the Justice. 'Or do you want to let the Consort know that you broke his pet project? The bruises alone will make a reading impossible for weeks.'

Through my wooziness, I made out the cluster of the girls crowding the changing room door. The freckled girl drew a line across her throat and the lot of them giggled. I would have snarled back, but my lips were split so I settled for making eyes at the floor.



I loitered at a distance as you led us home. My swollen mouth had pushed the left side of my face into a hot, stiff mass. You were so angry that you hadn't been able to spit my name out when the Brother had dumped me on you. Well, I wouldn't have replied even had I been speaking.

Waiting to be claimed was no longer a possibility. The fey, whatever they were, would never put me through such indignities. I would have to hunt them out myself.



The backward thinking of the Ffieth is nowhere more apparent than in their risible misunderstanding the simple and self-evident matter of sex. Humanity, as they see it, is divided into four types. The first, 'childrhood', is applied to all their children. Sexual differentiation is only applied upon adolescence when those individuals that menstruate are then known as women - and are given an earring to signify this - and the remaining individuals are called men - and are marked as such by scarring on their left cheek. Upon menopause women are believed to enter a forth type 'mutton'. Though female pronouns are still applied, these individuals are no longer considered to be true women and martial bonds are voided.



## Chapter Seventeen

*Schooling will make something of you*, you had always said in response to my complaints. What an expression! It brought to mind your blunt hands working the moist clay of my body. What would you make of me? A jug like the blue glazed one that Mi'luvver kept spring flowers in – fat bellied and thick lipped? Or mayhaps a necklace of beads for counting my sins? More likely you'd make a miniature bust of yourself but better this time, little fingers out of the picture and a tongue of porcelain. It didn't matter to me that your olemun had kept you home from Schooling to look after your younger siblings as a childr, if anyone was going to make something out of me it would be myself. Yet, there I now was, after all my moaning and attempted truancy, putting my Schooling to use – I was writing. And you might have even felt vindicated had I not flinched from your cleaning rags for the task.

The message I'd written for my gang was near disintegrated by the time I reached them and the inside of my pocket was grey from the charcoal. Lou and Shar craned in together as I held it out, lips shaping the words as if with tongues of vinegar. Toad didn't even try and had retreated to the other side of the storage bay to scrape a hole into the snow with the heel of its boot. It was Dee that worried me though; it was a good reader, its olemun made sure of it since he wished for Dee to follow him as foreman, providing it didn't come into the bleeds. Despite this, it was sat on a crate, picking its nails with a flip knife. It had been like this ever since I'd stopped speaking.

Toad gobbled into the snow. 'Bleeden say what you mean.'

'Asha be taken ill. Gotta be nice,' Shar said. It had lost its voice the winter before due to a lurgy that had put it in bed for weeks and so considered itself an authority on the matter. Its quiet had been different though, Death had sharpened her claws in its whisper and that had demanded respect.

'Bist the lot of you spanners? 'Ow can Asha expect us to follow it with ee?' Toad snatched the cloth.

Dee was on the childr in seconds and strung it up by an ear. The relief was short-lived, Toad took a swing at Dee, so unexpected that the first punch landed. Dee knocked Toad onto its arse, but the lot of us were left reeling. Toad would normally only dare trade blows with Shar or Lou. If it had hit Dee, what was there to say that it wouldn't go for me? The situation was spiralling, but I was going to fix everything, I just had to

convince them to follow me on this. I scooped up the fabric and passed it to Dee. It read without even a squint.

'We are going in search of the fey.'



It was cloudless that day and cold cleaved the morning to the bone. The crunch of our boots meeting tippi pellets splintered through the trees, louder than it had any right to, and the shrill of hammers came at us as if from every direction, though I'd chosen to explore an area in fallow. If we crossed a tapper worker we would be in real trouble and my gang knew it. Lou and Shar had glommed together and Dee had taken up residency by my elbow. Their hesitancy wasn't only for the threat of branding, none of them were too sure whether the fey were the kind of creature that you wanted to find. Dee's mi'luvver, now she'd turned mutton, was making a name for herself as a hunter and had to take a stiff drink of tippsey whenever anyone mentioned them. The man in Mi'luvver's telling was just one version, in others fey were said to take the shape of young women, lightening forked antlers crackling from their hair, or were reported to appear as childr, save for their habit of scuttling through the canopy after lost travellers. Not to mention that several tellings had it that fey took the sisters of Death as their steeds.

We hadn't been walking long when Lou and Shar began pushing and tugging at each other in one of their games whose rules were unfathomable to anyone else. The swing of Dee's hand bumped up against mine, its little finger hooked ready to be taken like when we'd walk home from Schooling in the dark as yunguns. I picked up my pace to pull ahead and, when my side was still bereft a minute later, I glanced back to see that Dee had taken up residence at Lou's side. It tilted its chin up and unslung its bow.

'Ey up. Best this.'

Its arrow sunk into the trunk ahead of me with a wet thud.

Minutes later and the lot of them were letting loose, half their arrows had been lost to the undergrowth. Only Toad hung back, flinching with every shout. Before my silence I could have stopped this in moments but now... I rubbed my thumb along the bone haft of my butter knife.

My worry was unnecessary, their hysterics burnt out before I'd resolved to march off and they pulled their arrows free to lap at the sugar. Lou and Shar's took turns to flick small pink tongues over the same arrowhead and giggled at accidental collisions.



Neither of them had folks with the money to put tippi in their porridge more than once a moon.

Toad tried to swipe the arrow from Dee. 'Don't et it! They'll know.'

Dee shrugged the childr off and uncapped a spigot to suck its amber ooze.

'They'll brand you!' Toad jittered at its side. 'They'll brand you like Rupurty Green. My mi'lurvver says she'll ne'er get a 'ubber cos of it.'

'Just as well I don't want an 'ubber then.'

Toad made another grab at it and got an elbow to the stomach.

'Noabody bes 'ere. Only way they be finding out be if you keep on with the squealing.' Dee rubbed a sleeve across its glossy lips but only succeeded in sticking fibres to its face.

'Taint worth the risk. *Eating through a reed for months*, me mi'lurvver said. *Rupurty Green ne'er be the same again and for what?* Now you be all gummed up, no way they won't be knowing, and they gonna—'

Dee wedged Toad against the trunk and gathered two fingers of tippi to drool onto the childr's mouth, though it squirmed so much that most of the sugar ended up in its hair. We didn't have time for this. I tried to catch Dee's eye, but it was ignoring me. Toad broke free, spitting, and pawed at the sticky mess.

Shar offered me a lick of its arrow, but I shook my head.

Lou took it instead. 'When I grow up, I gonna be a tapper worker.'

'Me too,' Shar said.

Apparently none of them had taken it into their skulls that we were, right now, searching out the fey and when we found them it wouldn't be tapper work or farming for any of us. As far as I knew. Truth be told, I had no idea how fey spent their days.

Dee had finished with the spigot and put its foot on its bow to unstring it. I cocked my head at the path but may well have been shrugging off flies for all the effect it had, so I pretended to have been shrugging cramp out of my neck.

Dee winced as it unhooked the bowstring. 'Tapper work be the work of fools.'

'Ey!' Shar said. 'Alf me mi'lurvver's sibilings be tapper workers.'

'Then your mi'lurvver's sibilings be glenners.' Dee coiled the freed hemp around its hand. 'Tippi ain't for the workers, mind. Me olemun says yous can barely afford it on the coin. 'Sides, if you were both tapper workers that'd mean you'd both adulted as men.'

Lou and Shar exchanged a glance that carried a whole conversation and Shar broke away, rubbing its neck.

'Like Dee says, tapper work be 'ard. Would mind none if it be the 'earth for me. Yous know, if...'

Their faces were bright with beamers and Dee snorted.

'Bist you planning on being anyways?' Lou snapped. 'If it ain't the bleeds.'

'It'll follow its olemun to the docks, spanner,' Toad said.

'Like that be any less fool work.'

'Bist you meaning?'

For all that Lou was a head shorter, it dogged Dee right back in the eye. 'Meant what I said.'

'Which bes?' Dee's bow was unstrung, but it held the riser as if ready to lash out.

I flexed my tongue to bring fluid back to my mouth.

Lou took a step forwards. 'You know whas.'

'Does I? 'Ows about you freshen me memory.'

But none of us needed any reminding, Dee least of all, of how the Macabees had meat even in the hardest winters and yet when a passing cart had splashed mud up the manager's legs, during a visit the winter before last, Dee's olemun'd had to strip down to his cacks in the middle of the docks to give over his clothes to that Four Four.

Shar, frozen mid-lick, looked to me with pleading, but what could I do?

It raised a shaky voice. 'Bist you gonna be, Asha?'

'Asha ain't talking, member,' Toad said.

'No need. We all knows the answer.' Dee released Lou from its glare to turn to me. The quickness of that expression had the bite of unfiled metal. 'Asha gonna be a witch.'

'Oh. Coors.' Shar went back to licking its arrowhead, but my every hair was tingling as if the skies were fit to fissure. Sure, that they thought I had the magic was something to be proud of, but you had to have the bleeds to be a witch.

'Not if it ain't speaking. Can't 'ave a mute witch.' Toad sneered at me. 'Sides, all it be good for is cursing folk.'

Because it'd never let me forget that.



I didn't mean to curse Toad, whatever folk said. Yes, I was a sinful childr, I broke things and tramped mud into your carpets and there was that time that Dee and I had broken into the roof of The Page to throw rotten apples at passing folk, but Toad's curse was an accident.

Toad, or the childr we were to later give that name, always had it in for me, see, though it was barely out of swaddling clothes when it started running with us. Why, I'd never quite been sure. Mayhaps it was its way of coping with its olemun's fists. Mayhaps when it looked at me it saw that my influence didn't come from strength but the size of my mouth and figured that, if mouth size predicted power, it should have had other childr eating out of the palm of its hand. Or mayhaps it just didn't like my face. Whatever the answer, the childr was on me like a cloud of gnats from dawn to dimpsey. If I said yes, it'd be for no; if my suggestion was to go down the Docks, it'd say it'd be warmer at the cow shed and I was 'a spooner' regardless of my actions. The rest of us tried changing up our haunts to shake it, but that's when you caught on. *Poor dapper, wasn't so long since you didn't have a friend to your name.* Well, that was truer than was comfortable to admit. I let Toad back in and it picked up where it had left off.

My lashing out wasn't planned and it seemed little different from the other times that I'd put Toad down, though the boil of my gut made my voice harder than usual. I forget the exact words, but the crux of it was that I jumped on top of a barrel and told the childr some rubbish about it coming from a muddy puddle and that its olemun and mi'luvver were toads. That was why it had such a big mouth and why it was so ugly and pudgy and a finger-biter and why nothing good would ever come of it. The rant swept me up so completely that it took the sound of wheezing to bring me back into myself.

The air had given way on Toad's throat. Our laughter stilled as the childr buckled to onto all fours. Saliva glistened on its lips.

'It can't breathe.'

'It be clammy.'

'What be 'appening to it?'

'Bist? Bist you?'

A green distemper had broken through its cheeks, shiny with the slick of sweat. When it opened its mouth all that emerged was a hiccough.

'Be croaking!'

'A toad.'

'A toad!'

'Asha turned it into a toad.'

I stumbled back, but the cries had stirred Toad and its bloodshot eyes snapped onto me. The closer it crawled, the fiercer the name set in. It hunkered smaller and smaller until I had a fancy that, had it had to drag itself any further, I would have been able to

hold it in one hand. It took hold of a fistful of my leggings and tried to pull itself up, but I shook it off.

‘Ple– ple– ple–’ The childr’s words broke open in croaks, then language abandoned it completely. Its peeled eyes pleaded. But I had no clue what I’d done, let alone how to fix it.

It took Mi’lurvver a whole evening to talk Toad back into a human skin, but by then it was too late, Toad’s name had already been lost. Such a small thing it had been, could have swallowed it with spit, but it had meant the world to the childr. It walked around for a month after, head cast down, as if it still thought to find its old name glinting in the gutter, but it never did.



Distracted by this memory, I didn’t notice the landscape change until Dee’s arm blocked me. The trees up ahead had parted into a clearing where foliage clotted over a collapsed wall. This wasn’t the plantation any longer, for sure.

The ruins, for that was what they must be, were little alike the structures scattered up Shirehampton, where the God Children had yet to build over the old Ffieth structures. Struts, chewed by rust, jutted through ivy and where stone did show it was pitted and crumbling. Beyond the wall, an aisle of poles, tall enough to challenge the trees, led a possession deeper into the forest, though most were bent or strewn across the forest floor. Such a place seemed as suitable a home for fey as any. I slipped my butter knife into my left hand and picked my way over the toppled poles, glad to hear my gang follow.

Five minutes later and we’d yet to reach the edge of the ruins. It would have been a large village, or even a town, before the forest reclaimed it, but that must have been gurt frages ago since oaks crowned in the place of roofs and had closed brickwork in their wooden gums. Dee stooped to take up a handful of loose earth and crumbed black stone filtered through its fingers with the dirt. It looked to me then and I chewed my bottom lip.

At a squeak from Toad, we looked up to see three figures through the trees ahead, standing and considering the sky. I pushed Lou’s notched bow down, arrows would do nothing against statues. Closer we could see that lichen etched their skin and weather had worn their faces to pitted fists. I stepped up to join them on the dais and a sheet of light winked into being at its centre. Shar squawked and Lou’s bow came back up, but

the light only continued to shimmer. My heart found my throat. The bluish white of the light was scratched through by lines and swirls that paraded from one end to the next.

‘Asha—’

Dee, back on the ground, had lifted its hand after my own, which was halfway to the light. But I was still the leader here, it was time to remind them of that. I plunged my hand forwards.

‘Don’t—’ Dee began, but my hand had already passed through, I snatched it back to my breast. The fingers tingled, but there was no chance to consider this for the dais had started to shake. When I righted myself it was to see that an opening had appeared in its surface. A flight of stairs descended into the dark.

‘Fallen,’ Shar breathed.

*Five Folding Fingers*, the Consort warned during service. *The Five Folding Fingers of the Fallen folded and sickened the world*. Their magic had given them the power to fly, it was said, to visit the stars and to even cheat Death. It was the same magic that had blackened the sea and set flame to the sky – making a hole appear in the ground would be a small ask.

Dee’s voice came unsteadily, ‘Me olemun said that their ruins were out ‘ere. The Brothers at our Page got ‘alf their Library out of ee.’

I’d heard similar. Word was that the Fallen had cached their knowledge underground when the sky began to burn so that they might rise again. The Brothers spoke of this with disdain, but that didn’t stop them from taking what power they could from such books.

At the scrabble of feet, I turned to see that Shar had fled. Lou was a step behind. Dee held my gaze, though its feet pawed backwards. *Stay*, I tried to command with my eyes, but its look closed over and it ran. Then it was just Toad and me. That should have been warning enough, but I was too entranced by that opening to give this much mind. I risked another step. The depths breathed back, smelling of stony abandonment.

Toad’s quiet finally plucked at me and I turned. Too late. Its hands landed in my chest and the step tipped beneath me. The world ripped through black, white, black, white, black. I heard more than felt the grind of bone, then my head met something hard and the dark burst into brilliant shrapnel.

## Chapter Eighteen

A stank, damp smell stung me back to myself. My skull was held by a fist of lead and my neck wavered under the weight, but I forced it up and glimpsed the grey hint of a step meeting the floor before my nose. Behind lay a mouth of darkness, whispering in cold. I pressed my cheek back to the floor and squeezed my eyes shut against the pulse that was tenderising my brain.

Standing wasn't going to be possible, or even crawling, that much was clear. I'd broken something, or several somethings. The wrongness peeled through me, though there was no pain, not exactly, it was as if my butter knife had smeared my awareness across the space leaving me too vacant for extremes of feeling.

My 'vow' lasted all of ten minutes.

'Help! Dee! Shar! Lou! Toad!'

The apathetic space picked up my voice and threw it back and forth over my head until it whimpered out. The quiet that replaced it was so total that I began to doubt if I'd even spoken. My gang must have been long gone.

Time bled out. I began to long for the sound of another tongue, anyone's – Mi'luvver's, Dee's, Marm Daniel's. Funny, isn't it, where our mind goes in moments of desperation – most of all I hungered for yours. Even your nagging or gospels of gloom would have been welcome. When I shut my eyes I could almost evoke it – that sound, like whipped cream with a jot of whiskey, trembling up through your meat. Even your other voice, the one that could snap steel and set me trembling from a street away, I missed that too.

As the silence stretched, my thoughts turned increasingly strange. A memory surfaced from when we'd lived in the Inner City – one that had been submerged in the silt of my mind for years, not so much because it'd been forgotten but because there was no place to put it in the life that I now lived. It was of a day when Father visited. When he was around I felt as if I was living the life of another babber. The blankness of your expression would chip open to reveal a shy smile, almost childlike, and the pair of us would totter after him, falling, famished, on the treats he conjured from bags and pockets.

This time, nestled among the usual sweetmeats and clothes, was a large box wrapped in brown paper. Just the look of it – that ribbon, those corners so precisely crimped and

taped – would have been gift enough. I turned to Father and he lifted me into his lap, which is what I'd really wanted, and sucked on a thumb as he ran his letter knife under the tape. Inside was a model theatre, though I didn't understand what this was since you'd only ever taken me to mummer plays in cow sheds or pubs. Regardless, my breath drew tight and I pressed my face into Father's chest. His laughter vibrated into my cheek and I snuck another look. Those tiny seats were fit for beetles in their iridescent finery and the scarlet walls were decorated in gold scrolling that must have been painted with a brush of a single horse hair. Father showed me how, with careful coaxing, the blinds could be drawn over the stage and the responsibility that came with that fragility was like a tuning fork pressed against my bones.

The stage had paper figures stuck on card so that they could be pushed about the stage. There was an emperor and empress, in flowing orange robes; courtiers and musicians; a fool, a Brother, a little girl and boy. Later, when I had weathered several years in the Ole Town, I would note that, though the hands were barely larger than a porridge oat, the artist had painstakingly painted them with four digits, but in that moment those figures were perfect in my eyes.

At first, I thought it was an object that fell firmly into the category of *look, don't touch*, but then Father took my hand and squeezed it around the coarse paper of a figure. In my memory it was the little girl, though perhaps that is only my mind forcing order on the clutter of living. Whichever it was, he began to puppet my arm so that the figure skipped about the stage. He accompanied this with a squeaky ventriloquist's voice that could have as easily been meant to be mine as the cut-out's. I watched him swing my arm with a baffled muteness. This game, if it was a game, was not one with rules that had been made known to me, but, after a while, the spark caught kindling and I began to add my own suggestions for what the girl might say.

You were watching on and giving appreciative stamps of your foot, for Father as much as me, but it was all the encouragement I needed. The flame flushed through my body and I snatched my hand free of Father's, the story searing out of my lips as I seized up another character and they began an animated discussion. Then the walls of the small theatre became too small and the cut-outs leapt over the blinds in a single bound to pony across the sofa onto the crest of your braids. I'd normally get a clout about the lughole for putting my feet on the cushions, but in that moment you only laughed and so I flew. The walls seemed to fall away, the roof lifted off the house, and the story took me up completely. Your eyes were so wide and shining that they held whole worlds.

But how could that laughing, flying child be the same as the one now lying in the ruins of its body? Cold hardened around the memory and pain hustled in closer. Thirst filled my mouth with its dry need. Where had I gone wrong? Because I must have, somewhere. Was it when I'd stopped speaking? When you'd taken me to the Library? When I'd pushed the Tongue? Tears slid their cool path down the bridge of my nose.

A light footfall was descending the stairs, but the cry of hope died in my chest as a familiar breathing filled the dark. Ai, there was one voice that I'd rather not hear.

'Ere we bes again. Will be a kindness to gobble you now. Ey? Ey?' Death, she said.

I whimpered and her voice returned smaller, 'No need to be like that.'

The last smudge of light had been erased by black, but those green green eyes scorched with their own phosphorescence.

'That friend of yours? Bes about?' Death, she said, and those eyes flickered back and forth. Little doubt that she meant the fey.

'No,' I croaked. 'But I be ready to pay what I owes.'

Because I was ready, I realised.

'Does you now?' The dark pulsed with her purr. 'In flesh or words?'

'Words,' I said.

I had you to thank for this, after a fashion. Yes, there was no chance of my translating the tattoo, but the truth hadn't stopped you when you had told the Brothers that my silence was a vow. Nor had it stopped Mi'luvver when she'd tried to persuade you that I'd been claimed by the fey or Brunel when he'd said that I was playing. Meaning didn't count as much as how a soul narrated and since Death couldn't read the tattoo either there was nothing to stop me from making it up.

The knife slit pupils in those green fires expanded.

'Words, ey?' Death, she said. 'Ain't 'ad many of them since we last met far as I seen. Known deduns with more to say.' And she blew a long raspberry like the sound of voided bowels.

'You want the story or not?' I said.

A pause, then. 'Bes lissening.'

I licked my lips, though my tongue was stiff. Making up what the tattoo said was one thing, but I still had to decide on the story itself and what telling do you give Death? Her watchfulness danced like the massing of fireflies.

In the story about Keety the mutton has to hold Death's interest every night until the hunt calls Death elsewhere. I might not have the power of the fey's tongue but all I had to do was stave her off, so mayhaps the tale didn't matter so much as the telling.



I squinted up at Death. ‘Sitting comfy?’

She cackled softly. No use stalling. I launched into the first story that came to mind.

‘This be the story of Marm Cherry and Pinnichoo...’

## Chapter Nineteen

This be the story of Marm Cherry and Pinnichoo, though you must forgive me if it doesn't come off the tongue as me mi'luvver would tell it. Try I might, other's stories come imprinted by me mouth.

At story's start we 'as an ole Marm by the name Cherry. Married young, she 'ad, though nought came of that and 'er 'ubber soon moved onto anudder wife. So it be that our Marm turned mutton without a soul to 'er name. More's the pity.

But life don't slow for shine nor shower, Marm Cherry still be needing food in 'er belly, so teaches 'erself the making of furniture, she does, and with 'er bleeds blotted out could venture deep into the forest for the best timbers. Got a name for lissening to the wood, she did. Made works you ne'er seen the like of, cabinets and chairs and spoons and bowls, varnished till they looked like dawn were trapped in the grain.

Well. One night, came a storm that did 'owl like the cow with 'is balls 'tween two bricks and blew so fierce that an ole treemum were felled. Proper sorry Marm Cherry were about that, but no use wasting good wood. She did chop, chop, chop and carry back as much as she could. A fine table, ee'll make, she thought. But she 'ad no sooner put plane to the first log when it did squeal sommat awful.

Squealing wood! You ever 'eard the like? Marm Cherry 'adn't either, but she weren't the sort to abandon wood, not after putting 'er back out dragging ee all the way 'ome. So switched the plane for a chisel, she did, and chipped away careful like, shifting the blade every time that wood cried out. A day and night and annuder day she worked, till the dimpsey did fill in the sky again. Then she did stand back to see that she'd been and carved a wooden childr.

Fancy that! Queerer still, that childr could kick its little wooden legs and wave its little wooden arms and wriggle its little wooden nose and waggle them little wooden fingers like it were a proper soul. So Marm Cherry calls it Pinnichoo and takes it on 'erself to raise it as 'er own.

Now, Pinnichoo dinn't want for much, being wood and all. It dinn't 'ave an 'unger for water and it dinn't 'ave an 'unger for vittle, nor an 'unger for much at all, save a roof to keep the damp off and Marm Cherry's love. But this were Marm Cherry's first time as a mi'luvver, after all but giving up 'ope, and she wanted to do it proper. No childr of 'ers

can be walking out without little tunic, she thinks, nor a little pair of shoes, nor a little 'at for its clever noggin, nor little gloves. If only she 'ad the coin. But no matter, can be fixed easy enough. Off she sends Pinnichoo to work down the fair in the puppet show of 'Onest John.

Now 'Onest John were skilled with them strings but nought like Pinnichoo when its feets were itching after all them years in the ground. So 'Onest John, ee ties strings to Pinnichoo's little arms and legs so that folk would think it bes part of the show. And when them curtains parted it, were lucky that that childr 'ad no shoes for its feet set up a fire! Up and down them legs did go, leaping and doing the splits, and them little arms of its did spin and throw shapes – folk 'ad ne'er see the like! And so coins did thunder into 'Onest John's 'at like 'ail onto a tin roof. Fancy that!

*What a masterful puppet maester you is*, Folk says to 'Onest John then and, well, ee ain't about to turn down praise like that.

'Ai,' says ee, 'all in a days work like.'

And a single tear of tippi did seep from Pinnichoo's eye.

But don't cry, wee soul, that coin be enough to buy fine red cloth for Marm Cherry to stitch the sweetest wee tunic a soul ever saw. What a smart childr Pinnichoo did look when it were dressed in ee. Marm Cherry were so proud that she missed that tear of tippi, which 'ad dripped onto Pinnichoo's nose and given root to a new leaf bud. But ne'er mind that, none will even notice when they could be feasting their eyes on that there tunic. Ey?

But Marm Cherry still weren't 'appy. Can't send me childr out into the world without a neat pair of shoes, she thought to 'erself, if only I 'ad the coin for such. So she sends Pinnichoo off with a pair of 'unters to 'elp with their work. And all would 'ave been well, 'ad they been 'unters true, but, once they 'ad Pinnichoo into the forest, they strung that childr up over the canal. Now, 'aving a neck of wood, Pinnichoo weren't too bothered by the rope, but it dinn't appreciate swinging like an 'am, so it kicked and fussed a dance as lively as it 'ad for 'Onest John. But no good, that rope stayed firm and all Pinnichoo could do was thrash.

'Ey up!' Them 'unters shouted as a barge passed. 'Stop and 'and over your goods or we'll 'ang you like this 'ere soul and that'll be the last of you.'

Well, them sailors did look up at Pinnichoo flailing and squealing and goodness know what, then winter did enter their 'earts. The childr tried to warn them, but all it could do were squeak and groan and moan. And so them sailors did gis them 'unters everything they asked.

Then them ‘unters did cut Pinnichoo down and sent it on its way with pockets weighted with coin and ‘eart with sorrow.

But don’t cry, wee soul, for the coin be enough for Marm Cherry to buy the neatest pair of wee boots a soul ever saw. She dressed Pinnichoo in these and stepped back to clap. Ain’t that the badger! So ‘appy she were, she did miss that Pinnichoo’s tippi tears ‘ad bled onto its cheeks and grown a thicket of fresh leaves. Well, ne’er mind that, none will even look at ee when they could be feasting their eyes on them boots.

Well, now Pinnichoo did ‘ave boots and tunic, Marm Cherry did think it time to send it off to Schooling. For it were no good dressing a childr up fancy if there were nought but a block of wood ‘tween its ears. Even if this were the case, rightly speaking.

Pinnichoo were a keener, even if none of that learning took root and the twigs of its fingers couldn’t ‘old the pen none too good. All the same, it bent the stiff wood of its back to the work, but when it came to reading out them answers, well it ‘ad no tongue. So Marm Cherry did peer at its scribbles and, since she could make neither ‘ead nor tail of them, gave the answers as she thought. Did a proper job of it, Marm Cherry did, and that there Brother rained praised on Pinnichoo. Though none of it ‘ad been rightly earned and so that childr went ‘ome and cried all night long.

Such tears its shed that, come the marnin, poor Pinnichoo were all bark and bumps and leaves. Its right foot ‘ad taken root to the frame of its cot and it could barely move, though it waved its canopy and tried to ‘op skip and when Marm Cherry called –



Death, it turned out, was an even more impatient creature than I’d reckoned. She was on her feet before the story’s end had even neared and my tongue faltered as I watched her pace to the foot of the steps.

A thin gruel of light had spread down the opening during my telling and the flicker of her tail could be seen. The wet sound of her sniffing echoed through the dank space – someone, or something, out there smelled fit for the eating.

‘Will return for me ending later,’ Death, she said and, without a backward glance, streaked up the stairs.

I let my head fall back and drifted.

## Chapter Twenty

When I woke it was to find myself on your sofa and our living room packed out with the coarse heat of menfolk. The clink of flagons joined the hum of voices and the sweet sour of coider was on the air. Even your vases were being used as drinking vessels. It appeared that, on top of their pay, you'd had to cash out on a barrel for my rescuers. We'd be back to eating frugal for months.

You emerged from the kitchen then, shiny faced and beaming, a jug in both hands with which you filled mugs as you pressed your way through the crowd. I pushed myself up to reach for you, only to come over woozy. There were splits tied to my left arm and leg and, now that the adrenaline had passed, the pain had slipped its hooks under my skin

'Not a word, not a peep,' you were saying to Mister Jane, too wound up in your telling to notice the coider overflowing his mug.

'Easy, woman!'

'Let me.' You flustered at his jerkin with your tea-towel. 'Not a peep, all the way back. Kept its vow. If that isn't holy I don't know what is.'

My tongue crawled back down my throat. Mister Jane grumbled into his coider and turned away, but there was the next flagon and the next ear to fill, you didn't miss a beat.

At least it seemed that I wasn't in trouble, though there was no telling if you'd change your story once the menfolk had left.

I pulled the blanket over my head and sought the forgiveness of sleep.



Toad, I was later told, had been gleeful on arriving home, until its olemun had knocked it up. Not as punishment, mind – like most olemuns he gave little thought to what his childr did – it had just been the usual trinity of drink, frustration and sorrow, but nothing new about that.

Still, Toad hadn't been so jubilant afterwards, but took the knowledge of its victory to bed. Yet regrets grow like bulbs, best in the dark, and, as Toad had stared into the night, its doubts gave bud to fear.

It had sat through Schooling the next day with the look of one not long destined for this life and, when Dee had asked it if it had seen me, it'd fled. A knock at the door later that evening – a neighbour as it had turned out – and Toad, who'd spent the afternoon awaiting the Justice, had thrown up all over its mi'luvver's shoes. The sorry, sticky story had followed.

When its oleman heard, Toad's other eye was blackened and its left arm broken. What sorry mirror images we were.

Along with my fractures I had a bump on the back of my head the size of a goose egg. I liked smoothing it and dreaming of all the marvellous thoughts that it would hatch, but you slapped my hand away whenever you saw me at it. *Times I think you must have a death wish.*

Ai, it must have been the knock to the head that made me miss your voice. But this was the only comment you had for the incident and that was cause for thanks. Because I was still breathing, I had to remember that. I had sat nose to nose with Death for a whole night and lived to tell of it.

Ai, Asha Beh was still breathing. Eggs be eggs, awlrite.

## Chapter Twenty-One

'The Grace of Scheherazade was to channel the ineffable, the divine, the unsullied.' The scratch of the Consort's pen fretted his scroll as he talked. 'Yet in this case I fear the child channels a herd of cows.'

This seemed unfair, for all I had delighted in how the thud of my splint had made me sound like a pirate with a wooden leg on the walk into his office. Even with my injuries, I moved better those girls had. You clutched the handles of your handbag hard enough to make the leather creak.

'It only bes a broken leg. Asha bes better soon—' But you choked off as you realised how you'd spoken. Anxiety had a habit of stripping your tongue back to your youth.

The Consort, absorbed in his writing, appeared not to have noticed. 'Of course. It's not only the girl's lack of co-ordination, though that is considerable. There is the matter of her iniquitousness and all the goodly souls distressed by being chased.' His eyes flicked up at me before following his pen back to the inkwell. 'Given her heritage, I suppose that some sin is to be forgiven. But a dancer?'

Your jaw had tightened, the pulse of a vein was visible in your neck. It made me uneasy to see you het up like that, especially when it wasn't my fault. Or, not my fault directly. Well, I suppose that it was my fault true enough, but I hadn't intended this to happen. Not that I wanted to join the dancers but we'd reached a peace, of sorts, since I'd been rescued from the ruins and I didn't want to unsettle that. You fussed over my injuries and I kept my tongue. Regardless of the fact that we'd found ourselves in a situation that neither of us had bargained for, it felt like balance.

'I— You see— If—'

You gave up and squashed the ends of the bag handles together. I itched in my chair and glanced around. The only time that either of us had come close to the office of a senior Brother before was for cleaning and, out of those, this was certainly the grandest. Tall velvet curtains draped from the windows, lined with deep creases — a sin that could hardly be overlooked because of their orange colouring. A series of yellowed skulls filled the shelves of the display cabinet behind the Consort and the long pin that affixed his scrolls to the desk was topped in what looked like an eyeball set in tippi.

The sliding door onto the Geist's office was only open a crack, but this glimpse showed bare walls and a desk free of ornamentation or implements. The Geist himself

stood with his eyes shut, resting only lightly on the lip of a wall-rest. I wondered if it wasn't painful to be standing for so many hours at his age, but they do say the Unspeaking gives a person powers over his own body.

The Consort screwed the lid back on his pen and reached for the wax. 'No. To consider the girl a dancer is inconceivable.'

My heart leapt, for all that he had called me a 'her'. No dancing meant no dress and no more girls. But you didn't know a lost cause when you saw one.

'The text though. Brothers Fairwax said that it would change Asha's behaviour. That it – her – quiet was a sign.'

'We'll leave the interpretation to the experts, shall we?' The Consort's grin showed gums white with bone. He lit the sealing wax. 'We know that you put your daughter forward in good faith, but even the most faithful can err.'

Whether or not you had believed that I had taken a vow when you first claimed it, you had no doubts now.

'But she so dearly wished to dance, ever since she were small. Why else would she been and taken the Vow of Scheherazade?'

Wax sizzled as it slipped down onto the flame and the Consort held it over the join of the scroll. 'I have talked with my medician about the particulars. A blow to the head is a more feasible explanation than a feat of sudden piety. She is a child, remember, and Ffieth.'

The mask of your expression squalled. It was easy to imagine what the neighbours would say. *Laid with Four Four and gis birth to a Ffieth. Soft in the 'ead at that.* Not that I relished the thought any more than you, but neither did I want to go back to the dance hall.

I looked past the Consort to the white gape of sky. The fey were still out there, somewhere. Regardless of whether I was truly claimed or not, my trip to the forest was a minor setback. Once my leg had healed, I'd find another way to reach the fey, then I'd be free of the text and the Irons.

Wax pooled, red, onto the scroll and the Consort twisted off his ring to stamp it. 'We'll continue to keep an eye on the girl. Don't you worry.'

You shrunk in your chair. The Consort discarded the scroll and settled back into his seat with a long sigh. I looked at you, uncertain whether we were dismissed, but you didn't seem to know either. The Consort rotated his neck, gingerly.

'I am not deaf to the situation. I understand that it is asking much of one already inclined to folding to bear so much sin on their skin. But what choice have I?'



The signet ring gave flat clinks as he tapped it against the arm rest.

'I know what they say about me.' He lurched for the bell perched on the corner of his desk and shook it. 'It pays to keep an ear to ground in my position.'

A boy materialised, bearing the dulcet jangle of a glass and carafe on a bronze tray.

'Out of step. Wedded to a by-gone age. *Antediluvian*.' The Consort sounded out the syllables and waved his hand over the mouth of his glass to slow the pour of wine. The boy began to retreat, but the Consort snapped his fingers and pulled a slender object wrapped in gold leaf from a carved elm box. He pinched it between his lips and a lighter appeared in the boy's hand, the flame hissed as it met the quavering tip. It was a raggy, I realised, though it was laughable to think of the men down the docks huffing on those plated in gold leaf. I gave the boy a toothy sneer, but he tilted his chin and stalked off with even more ceremony than when he'd entered.

You'd become very still, though you'd set your face into the picture of attentive interest, for all that the Consort's eyes rested on the vase of ferns in the far the corner of the room.

'These are dark times. Even in the Heartlands.' He took dilatory drags between his reflections. 'Men forget. Every day it seems these—' he wafted a hand, 'scientists, unpack more Fallen knowledge – engines, guns, these *automobiles*. They forget that such works are the product of folding. They forget that the God Children were put on the Earth to *unfold*. But some men, it appears, care little for their sin. Some, even, question whether the Word ever was.' He gave a snort that turned into cough.

What this soliloquy had to with me was unclear. I let myself slide down the back of the chair and you jammed a heel into my toes.

The Consort continued to suck and muse. 'Even our own number grow doubtful about the old ways. Before I took on the mantel it had been fifteen years since the last attempt to create a living text. Fifteen.' The Consort's turgid pupils swung to you. 'But you know this.'

Only blue slivers of his irises remained. Whatever he smoked smelt sweeter than the Purple Ffieth had a taste for, but it was clearly having a similar effect.

'I'm not avaricious, see, whatever men say. I care little for power. Titles. Chattels.' He tapped ash from the sizzling end of his raggy. 'My only concern is to do God's work. To further the unfolding.'

Those fathomless pupils swung to me now and that vacuous look held me until I began to squirm. A creak escaped your throat before you succeeded in pushing words out.

'I dare say. I dare say. And I would never dare question the thought of a man so much more clever than myself. Certainly never. But a Mother doesn't know what a childr is up to half the time and I'm not nearly learned enough to understand the working of the text. Weren't it better if Asha were close by? Surely if she joined the dancing there would always be a goodly Brother to put an eye on her.'

The Consort blinked and seemed unable to stop now that he'd started. He levered himself against an arm rest to push further back into his seat.

'Yes. Perhaps. It is true that the Vow can have other callings. Yes. Yes.' He studied his raggy, the gold leaf had bubbled into a blackened nub at its end, and, coming to a conclusion, he dropped the hot tip into his drink. 'I shall look into installing her in the Library.'

You let the fight sag from you. I, however, bolted upright.

The Library. He couldn't mean that. But the Consort's word was enough to make anything happen. An image of the Tongue asserted itself in my mind – my and Dee's hands on the case, then its rocking, back and forth. Now, after all these years, it seemed to me as if that vibration had tipped it forwards once more to crash down in teeth of glass and a silence that was total.

## Part Two



## Chapter Twenty-Two

There's a Fallen saying that we all turn into our mothers sooner or later and, as the years languidly stretched and took to their feet, I was to be no exception. Not that I could see the resemblance myself. Your beauty had an honest bluntness, with its bee-bitten mouth, flared nostrils and eyelids that suggested drowsiness even as your gaze stabbed. I inherited your jaw, but it swamped my features, which always had more of Father's subtle inflection.

Then there were our bodies, chalk and cheese, and no doubt which of us was which. For all that you could now afford to dollop tippi into your cooking and I grew upwards with the famished proliferation of the ivy on the side of our house on a summer, the years added little to my waist. *Easier to get me arms around you*, Mi'luvver said, *stubborn* in your words, *ugly* in Brunel's. Ai, in all your wheedling and coaxing to hurry up and become the woman that you were convinced that I'd become, it never occurred to you that if I did I'd be a right munter. Add to this the appearance of paleness that the tattoo gave my complexion and it's a wonder that folk even recognised that we're related. But, no, *just like your ma*, they would say, *pair of you could be sisters*. It was uncertain which of us was more insulted.

What was it that incriminated me? The eyes? The mouth? The sullen imprints at the corner of my mouth? I examined these, and more, and yet nothing divulged anything that was incontrovertibly yours. Rather, you were simply in me, in the way I walk, smile or tug at my hair when angry. It's telling, isn't it, that we look most alike when peeved.

The proof of it showed in my tattoo, for, just like you, time pinched the bridge between my eyes into two tight creases, as sharply as if pushed in with the blade of a butter knife. The creases claimed three whole words – an 'and', a 'verily' and an 'own'. Such obliterations weren't uncommon – any word is at risk of extinction through moles, freckles or scars, and my recklessness had claimed many over the years. More unusual was how the callus born of rubbing my right thumb and fore-finger – our habit in moments of indecisiveness – dulled, then cracked the word 'snake' down the middle to make two beasts of it, so that it now read 'or' and 'blood'. It rendered the sentence it had belonged to nonsense. The Irons were delighted. It's so much easier to impress your own crack-pot theory onto a text if there's nothing to displace.

So while the Consort crowed that my tattoo was carrying us closer to The Word, I think the truth was that it revealed you.



My body may have been contriving to bring us closer but in attitude, at least, we were still at loggerheads and on our last walk together to The Page you weren't speaking to me. I'd filched a pie from one of the hawkers on Plimsoll Bridge and, though you refused to bring shame on us by returning it, your fury made two hillocks of your shoulders as you stamped on ahead of me. Since our conversation was necessarily one-way when I couldn't get at my journal to write, quiet was usually welcome, but the emotion tamped inside you in the preceding weeks had frightened me. Every day I spent as a childr only worsened your temper. Coors, it hadn't passed you by that allabody born the same season as me had long since adulated. It hadn't gone unnoticed by the neighbourhood either. The searching looks that would dart to my ear, then cheek had long since given over to disapproval or amusement. It was fitting, wasn't it, that your cross-breed, mute and marked childr was tardy about its adulating too. There were times when I wondered if these facts might be connected and that the menfolk would have come to lead me into the forest for my manning if it weren't out of fear of the Brothers and their text, but this was just speculation and, since manning held little attraction for me, I hadn't enquired.

The worries squatted with the pie in my gut and, by the time we reached Hotwell Hill, I was paying for my straying fingers with the hot ghost of gravy and beef that kept rising into the back of my mouth. I shouldn't have crammed the pie down, not right after breakfast, but you might have attempted to wrestle it from me otherwise. You clucked when you glanced back to see me struggling.

'Serves you right. You're too old for such mischief.'

I grimaced. Exactly. What other reason would I get up to it now that my gang had all adulated? My cheek was unscarred and there was no ring in my ear, I was a childr and noabody could tell me not to act like one. Still, now that you had seen that fate was duly punishing me, you slowed so that we could climb to The Page in step.

The morning was as bright as a vinegar-cleaned penny. In the last few weeks the skeletal throng of the forest had filled out with a budded busyness that, though not yet green, was poised to launch into spring when the cold eased off. How did the fey survive these harsh winters? Could their tongues warm as well as heal? Did they have

houses or even settlements hidden out there, too far into the trees for Ffieth or Four Fours to find? Or did they stay on the move? These questions had only amassed over the years, but I hadn't given up on answers. When Oh didn't have me running errands or cleaning I would carry myself off to a quiet corner of the Library to research.

Most promising were the accounts of the early God Children to land on our shores, who wrote home of not one but two native breeds. The first wore a God Child's face, if their base nature showed in their two extra fingers like the other sauvages that the Empire had taken under its beneficence. Yet the second native was of a much stranger ilk. The accounts on these 'queer folk' were patchy since they were forest dwellers who were hard enough to find, let alone subdue. The few illustrations that I'd found were as crude as they were unlikely – stick-like humanoids with two snarling heads, a child with a mouth of lynx teeth or ogres with sow teats that would look more fitting on a treemum. Comparisons were made to the inferior furred men that had been found in the wooded areas of hotter climes. For the queer folk, the explorers wrote, were beasts and make no mistake of it; never mind their tools and clothing or the reports that they rode *vulpes magna*, the apex predator of this god-forsaken land that struck such fear into the locals that they imagined Death itself to take its form.

Back in the civilisation of the Heartlands, sharper minds scorned such conjecture. The queer folk were more likely a figment of the Crying and the other plagues that struck God Children who ventured too deep into the forest. One book boasted a particularly grisly plate depicting a man weeping from every orifice, which, from all I'd heard, was a fair representation. Goodly scholars reasoned that it was only natural that fear should turn the uneducated minds of the colonists to superstition when faced with such a gruesome threat. For if the queer folk truly existed how could they have evaded the glory of the empire? Ffieth, wherever they were encountered, crumpled before gunpowder and military minds, too scattered and tribal to offer serious resistance, and while the furred men of tropics were too base to bend the knee their retaliation was limited to throwing fruit.

Folk in the colonies remained unconvinced. There was a connection between the queer folk and the Crying, this they didn't doubt, but they reported that it was the Crying that had been created by the queer folk. After all, Ffieth were mysteriously immune to the sickness. The Heartlands had little patience for such debate and, as incidences of the Crying increased, entertaining talk of the queer folk became incitement. One Brother who was insistent that he'd lived among them for a year was burnt at the stake. Interest fizzled out, literally or otherwise.

Such insights were piecemeal, but I'd recorded what I'd found in my journal. The reading would lead me to the fey eventually, then they'd teach me their magic and I'd be rid of the tattoo for good. It was the belief that got me out of bed most mornings.

At the entrance to The Page, you tugged out the creases in my tunic and sucked your thumb to smear a spot of gravy from my chin. The hand fell away to rest on my shoulder and the taut lines of your face eased.

'Don't give those Brothers any bother now.'

I dipped my head and left you for the Library. Given the early hour, the corridors were filled with more cleaners than Brothers, but the gaggle polishing the metalwork in the vestibules spared me little more than a glance before returning to their whispered conversations. Carpets had been laid in the past year, one of the Consort's expenditures, and their weave took even the sound of my boots. That was the thing about being mute, it left me feeling like a wraith. There were times over years when I'd been tempted to speak, when I'd poised with lips parted, but then I'd remember that I was the mute childr and my dry throat would tighten around the words. How easily a label becomes physiology becomes truth. I didn't speak because I didn't speak because I didn't speak.

The Irons were waiting for me in the Library. Coors, it was the morning of a reading. Oh was perched at his desk, knees drawn up like a schooling childr, and the Consort was pacing. This frenetic energy usually meant that he was coming down from one of his raggies.

He spun as I entered. 'Ah. She graces us with her presence.'

One benefit of being mute was that answers weren't expected. I turned my back to undress and he clapped the Brothers into position.

The weight of the pie reasserted itself as I lay down and the Consort planted his hands onto my stomach. I tipped my eyes back and sought out my quiet space. There was a join inside my mind that I could shrug off to allow me to coast on the Consort's words, neither here nor there. Yet the press of his fingers across my bladder brought the hot taste of beef to fill my mouth and it became clear that zoning out wasn't going to be possible today.

'Still now,' the Consort said.

I swallowed back the sickness and clenched my jaw. Once I learnt the tongue of the fey, I would make him pay. It seemed to me that the torn eyes of the hide hanging over the table were in approval. The people who had given over their skins were owed vengeance too. I'd read about their lives – or, rather, what was available, since the records only listed their sex, the weight of their internal organs and age of death. None

of them had lived beyond forty-four, but I didn't intend to carry the tattoo long enough to find out how much of a hand the Irons had in this.

For now, however, the Brothers seemed pleased with the progress of my text. The flicker of the Consort's expression that accompanied some alteration would happen at least once a reading. I may have still been a childr but that hadn't stopped my body from changing and the tattoo with it. My once sleek hips had begun to jut out to throw themselves on the edges of desks or door jambs and swathes of the text were obscured by new thickets of tightly curled hair. Then there was my chest with its new, sore swellings that smeared its passages like water damage.

The nudge of the Consort's hand let me know that it was time to turn and I flipped onto my side. At this angle, I could glimpse the text open in front of Oh, its pages were flush with red. The white scars up the side of Oh palms were puckered from his grip on the pen in readiness for the next correction. I tried and failed catch his eye, then the nudge came to push me onto my belly and the kernel of pain lodged itself into the small of my back. This was more than indigestion, the beef must have been bad. You'd have found justice in that, no doubt.

The Consort's fingers pinched the flesh of my back – I'd been shifting around again. My stomach was so tender that it felt as if childr were trying to inflate a ball from it while it was still inside me. Since we'd been able to afford good cuts I'd grown unused to food poisoning. I dug my attention onto The Consort's words and tried to coast over the pain, but then his fingers drove into my kidney and my throat opened in an aching belch. The Consort jolted backward and I heard the crack of glass meeting stone.

'Stupid, filthy girl!'

I sat up and hugged my nakedness. Oh was flustering at the ink spillage over his tome and a bloody slick had spread across the flagstones. Brothers lifted their robes over their ankles and edged away. My stomach was still frothing like week old milk. Oh pulled up his robes to swab at the spill. Under the mound of stomach, his legs were slender and pelted with thick hair, ends curled as if licked by candle flame.

'For goodness sake, man. Have some decency.'

Oh dropped his robe at the Consort's bark, though its front was already smeared with crimson.

'The tome,' he said.

'That which is dirty cannot be stained.' The Consort swung round to me. 'And, you. We pay you keep this place clean, don't we. It would appear that the reading is over for today.'



I slipped off the table and reclaimed my clothes as the Brothers left, save for Oh who'd crumpled back into his chair to stare at the mess of his book. Attempting to comfort him wouldn't have been welcome – he'd been so proud of helping the Irons until I'd turned up. I crouched to gather the shattered glass, but the pain had become a band of iron around my lower back and I had to curl in around it.

'What is it now?'

I opened my eyes and found myself level with Oh's heaving stomach. The clammy wedge of his hand rested on my forehead and I listened to the wet snuffles of his breath.

'Well, you don't have a fever.'

I pulled my journal from its pocket, but the sickness was too bad to write so I flipped through until I found a previous scribble.

'I think I'm dying'?" Oh exhaled. 'Aren't we all. But I very much doubt that your hour is today. Come on, up with you.' And with that he hoisted me to my feet.



I'd brought order of a sort to Oh's room since I'd started working at the Library, though it was still more of a glorified storage room than a home and housed my cleaning materials as well as the scrolls that were used in the upkeep of the Library. He can't have opened the window since I'd cleaned the week before for, on entering, the stench of alcoholic sweat hit the back of my throat. Oh kicked aside the scrolls on the floor foot to create a clearing and I sunk into it in a foetal huddle.

His hairy big toe twitched against the flagstone in front of my nose. 'I could get a medician. But I don't suppose that you could afford it.'

I shook my head and pressed my face into my knees. Mi'luvver said that the meddling of Four Four medicians was as likely to kill as cure, even though they had reclaimed some of the magic the Fallen over the body. Sending for Mi'luvver was a possibility, but, huddled up, the pain had sunk to a murmur.

Oh shuffled over to his desk and I heard the sounds of writing.

'Here.' A coil of paper dropped in front of me. The text wasn't readable, but it was likely a quotation from one of the holy texts – the Brothers used them for colds or minor headaches. I placed the musty parchment on my tongue to chew and Oh grunted, then left.

By the time the paper had dissolved to pulp the pain had dulled. The soft stodge slid down my throat and I sat up. If the Consort came back and saw that the spill hadn't been

cleaned then there would be trouble, or, rather, more than there was already. I pushed to my knees only to feel the flagstone rock beneath me.

This was odd. The Brothers had no qualms about leaving their mess for the cleaners and they cared little for the health of their books, but they were meticulous about the upkeep of The Page itself. I lodged my fingers under one edge of the flagstone and lifted it. In the scraped out hollow beneath was a cluster of books and scrolls. The queasiness rose into my throat again. Because what kind of books need to be hidden in a Library?

I reached in and pulled out a tome with a naked couple on the cover. It was made of paper, flaky and faded, and the images had the eerie reality of those created by the Fallen, as if the artist had been able to impress the image directly from his eyeballs onto the page. These images continued inside, pasty flesh twisting and baring itself. I'd noticed from other antique texts that the Fallen had a thing for ugly women. Or, at least, I assumed that the figures were women – they had barely any fat on them but it was hard to imagine men, even those as strange as the Fallen, submitting to those poses. It was impossible to be sure though when they were naked and had neither scar nor ring.

I put the book aside and fished around once more, only to drop the next tome as its the title came under the light – 'Easy Origami: 70 Simple Projects'. I looked back at the door. It had been quiet since Oh had left, so I risked slipping a sleeve over a hand to fish the book into my lap. Why would anyone take the chance of being discovered with such a cursed item? Given that Oh kept it with pornography, it seemed safe to assume that he got off on it, but the Brothers accused folk with such filth of being a follower of Woeman. No jerkin' the gherkin was worth that surely?

The paper cracked as I opened the cover, even though I handled it with care and barely dared to breathe as page after page revealed line drawings instructing how to fold the purity of paper into a frog, a box, a crane, a bird, a boy. Seventy of the damned rituals. My eyes fell on a scroll next to my knee. It would be easy to try – just once – so that I could look at you and know that your own flesh and blood had partaken in such a vulgar act. But I was a wimp, I slid the origami guide back with the rest of the pornography and continued with my search.

The rest of the books were thicker and leather-bound or rolled on wooden scrolls like Four Four texts. It was hard to see Oh's interest in them at a glance, though given their company they must be forbidden. I peered at the embroidered ribbons, skimming the titles and finding little of interest until the last scroll – 'The Travels and Trials of Professor Day in his search for the Queer Folk'.

The sound of Oh's steps had returned, so I shoved the scroll into my bag and slid the stone back into place. The mop and bucket were in my hand in time for Oh's entrance and I left, flashing a smile, feeling the press of the scroll through my bag.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

With the promise of the scroll to look forward to, I made quick work of the cleaning, though the ink had already stained the stone. The Consort would likely punish me for it when he realised, but there was nothing I could do about that now, so I dropped off my cleaning materials and set off deeper into the Library to find a private nook.

Dimness settled here, even in the day, but the place no longer frightened me, not like it had on my first visits. I knew the best routes through the labyrinth of shelves and even had a good understanding of what they held, though a dozen lifetimes could be spent in their reading.

Once I was far enough to be away from the prying eyes of any Brothers that might venture into the Library, I hitched my satchel higher onto my shoulder, then hefted myself, hand over foot, up the shelves. The Library was kinder from a height. Light broke through the windows cleanly, making the runs of dust that carpeted the top of the bookcases shimmer like new snowfall. I laid out my satchel to sit on, you'd given me an earful for returning home covered in dust before, and slid out the scroll from underneath me. It was made of well-thumbed cloth and used the lettering we'd been taught at Schooling.

As the name suggested, the scroll was an account of gentleman scholar and adventurer Professor Julian Day on his mission to apply the piercing light of science to the myths about Anglelund's queer folk. There was a great deal on his preparations and provisions, so I skimmed over the details about the crude jewellery that he'd packed for bartering, though slowed when the list came to: one net, large and weighted at the edges with iron; one handheld saw; one scalpel, with five blades sharpened to fine edges; ten pickling jars; four quarts of ethanol.

Safely settled in Anglelund, Day's initial missives to the Society were perfunctory. He had identified a trail thought by locals to be used by the queer folk and mapped the route to a 'mump', the word given by natives to the peculiar conical hills of the area. A team had been gathered to lead him through the forest. The mump had been found and he had set up camp to await the fey. It was just under a month later that the first of his specimen jars arrived on the doorstep of the Brizzletun Page. In it was a heart.

The organ was the talk of the town. Within the day a specialist had taken care of it and begun the precise work of unpicking its abnormalities. Immediately obvious was

the diminished size – though it could have been mistaken for a human specimen by the uneducated, the expert eye easily discerned that it was less developed, likely due to the retardation of moral sentiment in the queer folk.

Yet the heart had hardly been pinned to the dissecting board when another jar followed, in this a pair of lungs. Their insides were blackened as if they had inhaled great quantities of smog.

Another jar arrived each day after, providing: liver, spleen, gall bladder, twenty feet of intestine and a pickled brain. The brain caused as much excitement as the heart had, for it was the size of a woman's or Fieft's and scholars drew particular attention to the 'meanness' of certain lobules, the paucity of which was associated with criminal behaviour in man.

After this paroxysm, there was some disappointment in the eyes, which were much smaller than those reported in stories about the queer folk. Yet word of mouth often exaggerated and, after some discussion, it was agreed that they were likely those of a pre-pubescent. Given the 'soft humours' of the eye, it was also becoming apparent that each specimen was increasingly fetid. The rigours of the forest had clearly prevented Day from preserving the organs as he had intended.

The very last of the parcels held the scientist's diary and a leather bag stained rust red – for inside was the goodly Professor's gutted head.

I put the scroll down and rubbed my stomach, its ache had dulled to a low hum. The Professor had set out from Brizzletun. The mump mentioned in the account couldn't be far, a day or two's journey at most. Someone familiar with the canal networks running through the forest might have heard of it.

As I sat there, letting my thoughts eke out into the quiet, I grew aware of a wetness between my thighs. There was no one to see, not on top of the shelf, so I wriggled down my leggings. In my cacks was a mark. A spot. Full stop.

It was red, damp and slightly tacky to the touch. I sniffed my fingers and smelt blood, then sat back, not thinking of anything.

It was still there when I looked again. Red, like a clarion call.

Now that I thought on it, the pain of that morning hadn't felt like normal food poisoning. I could just be sick. I'd seen enough folk with blood complaints visit Mi'luvver. Or I could have a dislodged scab in my climb. There were many explanations for the Spot, but there was no doubt what you would make of it if you saw.

I spat on the mark and scrubbed with a thumb until it smudged out. If only it could have disappeared from my mind as easily.



It does not take a scholar's astute eye to note the difference in Ffieth physiology extend beyond the surfeit finger. Most detrimental is the impoverished cranium of the Ffieth, which is not only deficient in size but bears all the hallmarks of a criminal and backward soul. The largest cranium of a Ffieth male is no greater than that of a God Child woman and these physiological failings are apparent in his behaviour.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

Professor Day's account slipped into my sleep that night like oil into water. There was the fey – its owl-bright eyes and beckoning finger that grew, verdant and sinister, to press thorns between my lips. Then there was Woeman, God's hand sealed over her mouth as he moved within her. A sluggish finger of blood ran down the inside of her thigh to pool with the crimson tears of my cheeks.

Dread jarred me back into my room, though the familiar sweep of my bed and chest of drawers was obscured by fear as my heart paced the journey back to the waking world.

A dream, just a dream.

Its taste lay on my tongue like old cardboard. You were over at Mi'luvver's that night and, without the gentle sawing of your snores through the wall, the house felt as empty as a freshly carpentered casket. The pain had returned to push its fist into my lower back, so I slid out of my blankets and went to window to peer through the blinds. The distant yap of street dogs split the night, but all else was still.

The fey were out there somewhere. Mayhaps even at Day's mump. After years of searching, I could be weeks from finding them. So why this fear?

I searched the sweep of the tree line for Death, but it didn't seem that she would be making a visit. In the years since I'd started telling her stories it had become clear that there was little pattern to her hunger, some weeks she might visit every night, and I'd fall asleep over my cleaning in the Library, only for her to stay away for months. This was another trouble that I'd be able to leave to the past when I found the fey.

I returned to bed, pulled back the cover and froze. There, among the snarled creasings of the blankets, was a dark mark. The Spot had bled through my nightmares into the sheets. It would have my life if I let it.

I spat on it and rubbed, but this time spit did little. I tore off the blanket. The Spot had bled through to the one below, so I wrestled that off too, then rushed the bundle down the stairs into our back yard. Dawn had slashed the horizon open in a rusty smear and the air was jagged in my lungs as I shoved the blankets under the pump. The water was freezing bright and my hands were raw in moments, but I scrubbed until the brush chewed through the weave. Wet earth glistened darkly through the hole. I'd once read an old Fallen story in which a pirate had been presented with a spot that meant Death

had a sniffer on him. The end of the book had rotted away, but when Death has your scent it can only end one way.

I was stuck, staring, when the creak of a hinge alerted me. You stood in our doorway in your night clothes, copper pan raised over your head. Its bottom was dented from the last thief to take our electric lights as an invitation. You must have heard me moving about the house and thought that it was too early for the sounds to have been mine. The pan slumped as you recognised me, but a different alertness took its place. I whipped the blankets behind me. The guilt was all you needed. You'd been waiting years for this.

I dodged back as you rushed forwards and the breath hissed from you as I danced free of your lunges. You raised the pan again but this time to block instead of hit and, with nowhere else to go, I bounded onto the wall adjoining our garden to Mi'luvver's. The slate cut into my heels, but there was no chance of you climbing up to reach me. We glared at each other. Your parted lips smouldered in the cold.

The stand-off was broken by the scruff of boots on gravel. Brunel had emerged from Mi'luvver's house, dressed in his tanning clothes. The sleep blinked from him as he focused and I bundled the blankets from my back to my side. His mouth cracked open. This is it, I thought. But then a hard sound hacked up his throat – laughter. I was jolted back into the pain of my heels bleeding onto the slate. His reaction must have had a similar effect on you, for you tugged your shawl to cover your shoulders.

Brunel's laughter stilled and he rubbed a sleeve across his eyes. They had the hard edges of canal ice after the breakers have been through.

'Childr you may be, but ain't you too ole to be pissing the sheets?'

'*Asha.*' You bit down on the word and the hunger of your eyes blinked out. 'Clean up. Go on. Clean up now.'

Then you returned inside. Brunel's brightness melted with the slam of the door. He was watching me with the half-smile of a cat.

He seen. Coors, he had. The question was what he intended to do with the knowledge. Helping me was hardly a habit of his. I lowered myself off the wall and sat. The crunch of his boots tore up the dawn quiet as he crossed to join me and he rummaged around in his jerkin to fish out his hip flask. I hugged the wet blankets to my chest as he took a long slug. His quiet in that moment was more frightening than any of the threats of his youth. Manning had been harder on him than most; as a childr it had made no secret of wanting to follow Mi'luvver into witching, but Mi'luvver was a traditionalist and wouldn't hear a word of it once he'd returned from the forest, cheek bloodied. Even years on, when it seemed that he'd come to a sullen acceptance,



Mi'luvver despaired at his lack of commitment. Young women, as fat as you please, often joined us for dinner at her table, but Brunel would pointedly talk to me during these meals. If he hadn't got the adulating he'd hoped for mayhaps he'd only think it fitting that the Spot should close down my future too.

He shook the hip flask at me and I snatched it. The whiskey blistered my throat and his grinned broadened.

'This,' Brunel said, 'bes the story of childr, one, two, three.'

## Chapter Twenty-Five

This bes the story of childr, one, two, three. The first were tall and fast. The second were stout and strong. And the third, well, were neither strong nor fast but good of 'eart. Together them childr lived on the forest's edge as 'appy as can be.

Childr they were, but time stops for noabody, 'owever nicely you do ask, so it were that one day their olemun called 'em to 'im. Said ee, that they must start fetching water for their keep and so gis 'em a bucket, then off they toddle, quick like.

The first ran so fleet that the leaves of the trees took flight at its passing, the second carried the bucket on a single finger without a lick of sweat on 'em and that third 'ad neither the bucket nor the speed but did its best to keep pace with the patter of feet.

At well's edge them three childr did stare into those depths. It were as deep as it were dark and dark as it were deep, and so the 'earts of them childr did shake. But that first sibling weren't one to stay still long, it took up that bucket and down it went. Its siblings watched on, nervous like, but it were 'ardly any time at all till that first childr climbed back, bucket full. Then the childr turned for 'ome and their olemun announced it were time the first sibling enter the forest and consult the treemum, for were clear that its manning were on it.

Well, life did flow on, and soon enough that bucket needed filling once more. So childr two and three 'urried along to that well, as any goodly childr would. The second carried the bucket on a single finger without a lick of sweat on 'em and the third 'ad neither the bucket nor the speed but did its best to keep pace with the patter of feet.

At well's edge them two childr did stare down into those depths. It were as deep as it were dark and dark as it were deep, and so the 'earts of them childr did shake. But that second sibling weren't one to let its courage falter, it took up that bucket and plodded down them steps. And it weren't too long till it did climb back, bucket full. Then the childr turned for 'ome and their olemun announced that it were time for the second sibling to enter the forest and consult the treemum, for it were clear that its manning were on it.

Well, life did flow on, and soon enough that bucket needed filling again. So that third childr did 'urry along, as any goodly childr would. For though it 'ad neither strength nor speed, 'ad no mind to fail the task gissen.

At well's edge that childr did stare into those depths. It were as deep as it were dark and dark as it were deep. And 'ere the third childr did pause – long, much longer than its siblings 'ad.

I may ne'er lift the leaves in the trees with me speed like me first sibling. Nor be I strong enough to pull the plough like me second but must fetch water all the same and so shall find me way – that third sibling thinks to itself. And so it began its descent.

Them stairs were as worn and slippery as a mutton trying to keep claws into 'er 'ubber, so that the childr often near fell, but it kept going all the same, deeper, deeper, deeper, until the world above 'ad shrunk to a single star in the dark.

At the bottom it found itself afore a stone plateau and a pool the blue of a storm. And so the childr did swing the bucket to the water's edge, only for two wet eyes to rise to greet it.

"Oo be this come upon my well?" The creature did say in a great croaking voice.

'I only bes wanting a little water if you please,' the childr did say.

"Ark at ee," that voice croaked back. 'A little water? Me pond ain't for any 'appy Larry to sup, 'owever fast or strong they be. First you must do me service, then you may 'ave as much of the water as you please.'

The third childr were none too sure about this, its two siblings 'ad emerged so fast that they wouldn't 'ave 'ad the time for service and it guessed that its siblings 'ad been the 'appy Larrys that the creature spoke of. For, no doubt, the first sibling would 'ave dipped bucket, then run and the second sibling would 'ave punched the creature in the noggin. But the third childr couldn't 'it or run and neither were it too sure that it should take from this creature without its saying so. And so it did bow its 'ead.

'Be it so,' the creature did say. 'You shall stay 'ere as me servant for a full blink of the moon. Then you may return 'ome with all the water you please.'

This said, the creature did pull 'imself onto the bank and the third childr saw that ee were a frog as macky as a man.

Well, 'oo in their proper mind swears fealty to a frog? But there weren't much doing for it now and so it did set about seeing to that there frog's needs. It did fluff 'is bed in the morning, shaking that there quilt so 'ard that the feathers did fly. It did scrub and scour them stone flags till could 'ave et your vittles off ee. It did pick fungi to cook the frog stew. And, with the frog supped, the childr did scrub 'is warty back till ee were as smooth as a babber's 'iney. In these ways and more, that third childr did labour till its 'ands were raw and its blood 'ad stained the inside of that there bucket red.

That frog, though, were right pleased and so, when the moon closed 'er eye once more, ee did call the third sibling to ee to say that its service were over.

'You may now fill your bucket to the brim. But must ask one last favour of you afore you leave. I beg of you, strike off me 'ead and burn me body.'

And that be what the childr did. It gathered up them brambles and set them aflame, then struck off the frog's 'ead and chucked ee upon the pyre. Them legs did kick and leap, but, by the time the flame 'ad died, that ole frog were a still, black, crisp.

And so the childr did dip its bucket and climb back into the light.

But, oh childr!

Under the sun it did look into the bucket to see that its blood 'ad stained them waters pink. Yet it 'ad barely begun its weeping when an ansum man did step up and take it in 'is arms.

'Cry not, luvverly,' that man, did say. 'For I were the frog of this 'ere well and you 'ave been and released me from a most munt curse. Now I shall become your 'ubber and take care of yous with the riches of me family.'

Which be just what ee did, for the third childr 'ad come into 'er bleeds. And so she lived 'appily and in gurt comfort till Death did come with 'er 'ungerful stomach that ends all tales.



By the time Brunel's telling had ended, my queasiness had grown to a roiling pitch. He laughed and punched me in the shoulder, already getting to his feet.

'Don't fret. Ain't saying nought. No skin off my nose, be it? But some of us 'ave work to be seeing to.'

He set off whistling and I sat, listening, as the shrill note melted into the sounds of the waking morning. Then I returned to the pump to attack the blankets until all sign of the Spot was gone.

You kept your gaze pointedly on the stirring of the porridge as I returned inside and hung the washing over the stove. I pushed more sticks into the fire and sat, watching the flame. There were only two ways that this could go – I had to destroy the Spot or it would destroy me.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

I spent the rest of that morning scrubbing at the flagstones of the Library until the brush spat bristles, but still the ink stain wouldn't shift. I couldn't be a woman. It didn't matter what the Spot was. Women were glass, tippi, the considered grace of cattle; when I looked inside myself I found only gristle, brambles and the lilac lightening of turning weather. Women couldn't enter the forest on their own, or in their bleeds; they couldn't wield a bow, or run, or speak too loud or too much. Women smiled, women gave, women listened; they suffered, cooked, stitched, cleaned and waited until they either bled out giving birth or their bleeds gave out on them and they could no longer say that they were truly women but mutton.

I stopped scrubbing and crouched there, on my fours, breathing hard as the stain filled my vision. Surely allabody bled a little, now and then? There had been so much more blood when I had come across Lou in the cow shed. Though our gang had drifted apart after our adventure in the forest, I still hung out with the cows on occasion to read or play with the feral dogs that bedded there. That day, however, I'd climbed the bales to find not dogs or farm hands but an inconsolable Lou.

Its cheeks had been pasty and gloss with dried liquid and the mute scent of straw was tinged with the bitterness of vomit. Lou never cried though. Shar must have died or its olemun fallen ill or the landlord turfed its family out, I'd thought.

'Oh, Asha,' it'd said, seeing me frozen on the top rung of the ladder. 'Oh, Asha, it be 'orrible.' Then it had stuck a hand into its leggings and pulled it free with wetly pink fingertips. 'Look.'

And I had looked, not so much because of the command but because of that pink, the thrush of a sunset's throat, swollen with hints of red and brown and blue. I had looked because that pink drowned out all else.

*What have you done?* I'd wanted to shout. *What have you done, you glenner?*

Because adulting was a choice, wasn't it? That's what the marms had always told us – that when our time came we'd make our decision. But, stood there, staring at the colour glowing from it – her – fingers, it had only just dawned on me that the body could make different choices than the soul.

She must have found the horror she'd feared in my expression, for she'd covered her face and retched great clots of sorrow into her hands. Lou had always been difficult to

read, even when we'd hung out every other day, and writing to her was useless since she'd never been much good with her letters. I'd hovered by, but, as soon as my hand had met her shoulder, her shaking had hardened. When she'd pulled her head free, her expression had been steely blank.

‘’Ll ‘ave to get fat, suppose,’ she'd said, and snuffled back her snot. ‘Lor knows ‘ow though. Me family ain’t good at it in the least.’

It was true, folk had always said that Lou would make a terrible woman. She'd been so thin that her spine showed through her back like a knuckle. Her fingers had torn strands of hay to scraps.

‘Only me mi’luvver’s second sibling be anything near ansum and that only be cos ‘er ‘ubber make enough selling to them Four Fours that ee can feed ‘er tippi with most meals. Suppose I’ll be a snow swallower. Mind, me mi’luvver says it only leaves you bloated ‘alf the time.’

And I'd nodded, because I knew that I’d be the same if I was ever unlucky enough to get the bleeds.

‘’Unting won’t bes so ‘ard to give up. Pulling a bow always put a crick in me shoulders. But can you see me cleaning?’ There'd been a flinty set to her eyes and, if it hadn’t been for the glistening snail trails of her cheeks, you’d have never known that she’d been weeping. Ai, it was clear, even then, that while she'd make a terrible woman, she’d be a terrifying one.

‘Shar’ll ‘ave to be a man now. Can’t wait till I’m ole and mutton.’ She'd giggled. ‘Shall ‘ave to call it *ee*. Can you imagine?’

‘Appy Larry Shar, always ready with a song and a smile – a man. It was too much and, as our eyes had met, the giggling had become hysterical. The whole affair had been so desperately sad.

That same sorrow came over me now as I sat back on my haunches and forced my hands free of their vice on the brush. My palms were red and sore. Everywhere I looked seemed stained.

The fey would know how to stamp out the Spot. The one I had met as a childr had stitched the very flesh and bone of my leg back together. They could get rid of the Spot at the same time as my tattoo, but there could be no stalling now – I had to get to the mump.



The rabble of conversation and song reached me before I had even turned off from the canal towards Goose Fingers. A sour front of drink and sweat followed close on its heels, then I was standing in the light flooding from the windows, a sight so uncommon in the Ole Town that the cheer came to me despite my nerves.

At a younger age the inn had held a similar fascination for my gang as the docks. That you cursed the sinfulness of the place only made it more attractive. I could hold a drinking song as well as those you cleaned to and Dee was able to swill a whole flagon of watery coider in one tip of the neck. Some men liked to get us drunk and laugh at us stumbling home, though most of the time we made it no more than five minutes on tip-toes at the window before being hosted off by our scruffs. The inn was a place for men to be men and women women, childr *best run 'ome now, ey*. A fact that I remembered all too powerfully as I stepped through the door.

Inside, the pungent of drink was mixed with salt and sweet, for the inn was close enough to the plantation and the estuary to bring in both dock and tapper workers – their combined stench worked on the back of the throat like sandpaper. Clusters of warm bodies muffled the space under the sallow lights, their laughter and cheer felt cruel after the inheld breath of the Library. I fingered my ear, but, realising what I was doing, let go. No need to invite more attention – eyes, shock white in flushed faces, already followed me over the rim of mugs, though my tattoo had likely caught their attention as much as my childr's tunic.

‘If it ain’t lil Asha Beh.’

The speaker was lounged on a bench by the hearth, their pale face drawn down the middle by the penumbra of flame. Its flicker traced a cheekbone like a knife haft and the pucker of a scar. I tightened my hands around the strap of my satchel. Dee and I had spent so many hours playing at being men as childr that it was hard to shake the belief that, if I were to run a finger down that scar and press it to my lips, it would taste of unripened blackberries.

The scar stretched as he showed teeth, browned in the way that only Ffieth who could afford tippi boasted. "D say you be all grown up but, well–'

His companions laughed and he pressed the metal of his flagon against his lips. I fought the beamer that rose to my face with little success. How could this– *man*, be Dee?

'Not like you to stay sthum.' Dee squeezed the thigh of the woman on his knee. 'Nought to say to what the cat dragged in?'

Her full mouth puckered as if I were a sup of soured milk. Though she was young enough that she must have been fresh into her adulating, her girth could have easily challenged your beauty, Mother.

'Cat still gissed its tongue by the looks of it,' she said.

Dee's squeeze became a slap.

'Be that resentment? Surely nay? Dare say Asha 'ere 'as more to 'old against you since, as I member it, last the pair of yours met you shoved our Asha 'ere down an 'ole and near broke its neck.'

Toad squirmed as if to break away, but let herself be hugged back into Dee's lap. I gave a feeble grin. I'd heard about Toad's adulating. Even in my limited circle, such news spread as fast a death. The real surprise was that I hadn't seen it coming. Toad had made a rotten childr, squat, sullen and none too good with a bow, but the years had only ripened fat in all the right places and her wide, pouting mouth was the sort that folk wanted in a wife. Dee seemed to be enjoying it well enough and I was left looking about the pub to avoid staring as that kiss continued beyond the length of time that seemed humanly possible for a soul to hold breath. They parted at last and Dee slapped her arse.

'Now 'ow about you does your job and gis our cocker 'ere a drink.'

'Would be doing me job if it weren't for your squid arms, Dee Macabee. 'Sides, don't serve childr 'ere.' Toad looked my tunic up and down and the men let loose again. I was beginning to regret not seeking Dee at his house where it might have been possible to grab him alone.

'Gis I and the lads annuder then.' He pushed her off his lap by the buttocks and she gave him a glare that was more seductive than annoyed, then sashayed away.

If this nonsense happened to folk when they adulated then all the more reason to stop the Spot now, but Dee laughed at the look on me. He anchored his elbows onto the table behind him and spread his legs. It seemed that the fragility he'd carried in his youth had melted like snow on a summer and underneath was a bedrock of knotted muscle.

'Don't mind 'er, Asha. Know what womenfolk be like. Might even know it for yourself if you 'urried up about your adulating.'

The man at his side spluttered into his drink. 'We looking at the same soul? Seen rats with more meat on 'em.'

Dee hooked an arm around his friend. 'Ll 'ave to 'scuse, Emilie 'ere. Could take a crap in 'is mouth and leave it no more filthy. Not trained in them airs and graces of your Brothers like.'

The pair of them gave a bow and flourish.



This was rich talk from Dee – with his Four Four top-knot, crisp linen shirt and silk scarf the blue of sky. Allabody knew how he and his olemun ducked and doffed and *if you pleased* whenever the Four Fours came to inspect their docks. There were other rumours about the lengths Dee went to stay on the good side of his betters too, but, given that we'd been friends once, I owed him not entertaining those.

He shielded his mouth to Emilie's ear as if in whisper, but he was near enough yelling to the whole pub. 'Might not look much now but always 'ad our Asha 'ere pegged for the bleeds, even when we were babbers. That ma of its, *ooo ar*, a bootie if I ever seen un.'

The whole table was staring at me now, adding pounds in their imagination. I slammed my journal onto the table and the revelry choked out. It didn't matter that it wasn't technically a book, it looked like one well enough.

Dee cocked his head. 'Dinn't the lot of you 'ave a gamble on the darts.'

It wasn't a question and they didn't need asking twice. I dropped myself onto the emptied bench.

'Risky move that. Bringing ee 'ere.' Dee had given up on the lounging and cradled his mug between blunt hands, their calluses were the thickness of suede. I remembered then, with regret that caught me in the diaphragm, how, when we were yunguns, a smaller pair of those hands would reach for mine in times of worry. Little chance of that now, but manning couldn't change everything. I flipped open my journal and turned to the page that held the explanation of how I could hold a conversation through writing – or try to, given that there were few Ffieth who could read and even fewer Brothers interested. Dee glanced over the words.

'That ma of yours always said you be too stubborn and an 'alf. *See if you can speak some sense into that childr, Dee*, she were always saying. Well, mayhaps she 'ad the right of it.'

I let my glare be the answer to that and opened the page where I'd written my question about Professor Day's mump. If I reckoned rightly, and I'd have bet good money that I had, the foreman's son would have a good enough know-how of the local canals to have heard of it.

He flinched as I pushed the journal at him, but, perhaps realising how cowardly this looked, slid it closer, brow furrowing. When he reached the end of the message, he turned the page and waved me off as I tried to reclaim the journal. So I sat like a right lummock, fidgeting with my fingers, as he pawed through my work. As a childr Dee never would have had such a presumption, but he was the adult now.

‘A fey, ain’t it?’ He tapped a drawing that I’d gummed in from another book. Unlike most of the fantastical drawings that I’d found, this one could have almost been human if wasn’t for the large eyes and a gauntness like the grass worry dolls that Mi’lurvver gifted me on harvest days.

‘Bist ee?’ Toad had returned, beer jostling over the sides of the mugs she carried as she eyed the journal. Dee shoved it back at me, but his answer was cut off as a man bounded up behind Toad.

‘Asha, it really bes you.’

Adulthood couldn’t disguise that smile. Shar was taller than it had seemed possible for the squint who’d run with us as childr and the scar made it hard to read him as anything other than a man, but he was little broader than when I’d last clapped eyes on him. *Bit of a tapper tree about that childr*, you’d say when we were yunguns. I couldn’t talk when I was just as slender, but it was hard not to feel sorry for Shar when Dee was sitting there with shoulders like a bull on him. It was easier on new men when they had the heavy lifting of the docks. I rose to step into Shar’s outstretched arms, but, then there was Lou, catching his elbow, and, remembering himself, Shar grabbed me by the wrist instead. We shared an awkward shake and he sank onto the bench.

‘Feels a lifetime since we’s seen you.’ Lou remained standing, threading her fingers through Shar’s hair. Her reddened lips were pulled into a taut bow. There was nothing of the despairing childr from cow shed in the woman in front of me now but little that was feminine either. A kind heart might have called her plump, but she’d had as little success with putting on the fat as she’d guessed.

‘Well?’ She stuck out her left ankle and turned it to show off the knot of purple silk tied there. An inch of the same fabric was tucked under the hem of Shar’s trousers. No surprise there. Even as childr, we all knew that they’d tie the knot.

Dee slid his hand on top of my journal and pressed it towards my bag. I glared, but he was right after a fashion, there were plenty enough eyes on us as it was.

He nodded at the couple. ‘Still ain’t talking.’

‘Nay? Poor wee—’ Lou said.

But Shar had spoken at the same time. ‘Bes rough. Right—’

Lou shot a look at Shar. ‘Praps ee’ll return on your adulthood. Allabody goes through such changes at the time.’

Dee raised his cup. ‘Adulthood will come upon you soon enough, be sure of it.’

‘Change be good, I always say. Don’t I, Shar? You agree, Asha?’

Dee raised his eyebrows at Shar. Lou could have hardly missed it, stood right next to them, but she continued with her smiling and smoothing of her hubber's hair.

'Say, ain't we the finest pairing ever come your nose?'

'She ain't be saying aught,' Shar said.

'Praps that were my thought. Can't be disagreeing that way,' Lou said and kissed him.

*Joined at the lips*, Mi'luvver had always said. I eyed the fabric around Shar's ankle, the purple was already faded and muddy. Toad nestled into Dee's side and fidgeted with her earring.

This was a parcel of ol' crams if I ever saw one. The lot of them were acting as of they were mummers playing parts that they were yet to learn the lines to. Was that what adultering was? I patted the shape of the journal in my bag and gave Dee a meaningful look, which he pretended not to see.

Lou's voice had jumped an octave. 'Toad, bist you think about Asha with side bunches.' She snatched for a fist of my braids and coiled them above my left ear.

Yes, I was a childr, but Lou was a good few seasons younger than me. I warrant that the childr she had once been would have wished to slap her as much as I did, but I was saved the need.

Shar put his mug down with more force than needed. 'Woman.'

Lou dropped my hair and the lot of them returned to nursing their mugs. Even I felt a need to fill that quiet and I was the mute one. I looked at the two women with discomfort. Lou had yet to sit down and leaned on Shar's shoulder as if her weight was the only thing keeping him seated. Meanwhile, Toad had done nothing but suck on her bottom lip since the others had joined us. That wide mouth of hers had finally bought her the clout she wished for – the daughter of a drunk carter courting the dock foreman's son no less – but didn't she miss the tongue wagging? It had taken cursing Toad to get it to shut up as a childr and even then it didn't stick. And if you found out about the Spot then this was in store for me. I slipped from the bench – there were other dock workers that I could ask about the mump – but Dee rose with me.

'Will walk it 'ome. Ain't safe for a childr this time of night.'



If I had hoped that Dee would give me answers away from the others, I was to be disappointed. Free of the noise of Goose Fingers, he furrowed his hands deep into his

jacket and let out a long breath. The dropped coin of the moon hushed alongside us in the inky waters of the canal.

Without the backing of his lackeys, Dee walked with a stoop that softened his new height, though his bulk was still crude. He'd been strong as a childr but lithe as a willow bow – work at the docks had made hams of his arms. A fistfight between us now would be a slaughter. Yet such thoughts were clearly far from his mind and, as we passed through Victoria Lock, he began to pick out the isolated notes of a tune between his pursed lips.

I resented that easiness. I resented that he'd rushed on ahead, leaving me behind, to become *this*. We had spent countless days as childr swinging our arms and legs in mimic of the dock workers or dropping our voices into our abdomens to bark out overheard phrases: *Another pint, woman. Bist you spuddling at? Come 'ere and 'ave a taste of me knuckle sandwich. Look at the pins on she!* But there had never been any intent to it, not on my part. He wasn't supposed to make that play real. But my glowering must have become a stare for his eyes flashed to mine and I looked away.

He stooped then, so abruptly that I thought he'd tripped, but he straightened with something in his mitt and spun it out across the water. The pebble bounced, once, twice, bursting the moon into splashes of milk, then was lost to the dark.

I could have just walked on, he may have been the adult but he was little older than me and I didn't need escorting. But instead I stood there like a numpty, rubbing thumb and forefinger in my pocket, as he continued to skim stones.

I felt sorry for him, I supposed. It had been on a night like this, and not far along the canal from here, that his brother Kylie had bumped into the Justice when he'd been running a message to the dock manager's house. They'd said afterwards that he'd had a pistol, but there wasn't one when a barge had butted into his dedun, face down in the drink, the next morning. Kylie had been Dee's only sibling who'd lived long enough to adult. We'd never talked about it much as childr, Dee would grow sullen whenever the subject was brought up, though Mi'luvver had reminded me of it on occasion and told me to make allowances.

I watched the leather of his jerkin bunch and stretch over his back as he threw. The childr was one thing, but did such a man need sympathy? I suspected that he'd rather two fingers to the eyes.

The approach of a night barge sent golden bows ahead of its prow. That light punched out the dark, embers of fine spray caught in the beam. Dee's eyes showed the blue of beaten ice.

Then the boat was past and we were plunged back into darkness. The water churned and frothed.

I pushed ahead and Dee seemed content to follow, the garble of water our only conversation until we turned off into the streets and arrived at my gate. He placed a hand on it before I could pass through.

‘That there mump...’

I turned to him with crossed arms.

‘Bes about a day or two journey by barge along the Stoke to the Parrett. Charcoal burners nearby in the summer. But weren't it better you—’ he trailed off.

There was no hope of writing to him in the dark, so I resorted to tapping him on the side of the head, but then he caught my wrist and that was even more uncomfortable than the quiet.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘Look. I ’eard about a lass down our way, bleeds not setting in, so wet ‘er sheets with pig blood. Once the ring were in ‘er lug noabody gave any mind.’

I wrenched my hand free.

‘Just saying. Look at your ma. Get some fat on you and could still be a right ansum woman.’

I shoved him in the chest and he stumbled back with a grunt that turned into laughter as he reclaimed his footing.

‘Guess you really is still childr.’

He grabbed the gate again as I made to march through.

‘Ey now, ey. Only being friendly like. You let me know when you want to go to that there mump of yours. Taint no skin off me nose. Mayhaps once you get them childish ideas out your noggin, you'll even be ready to adult.’

I was fit to punch this time, no matter the size he had on me, but he had already raised his palms and was backing away.

‘We'll make a lady of you yet, Asha Beh. Ooh ar indeed.’

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The greatest change that came with manning, it appeared, was making a soul insufferable. The gall of Dee words made our evening stew stick in my caw. Because who had led the gang to victory over Duncan's crew? Whose idea had it been to stowaway on the barges to Caneshum? Who had been the one to decide to visit the Tongue? Certainly not Dee. I didn't care that he was a man and I was childr, nor that he was the foreman's son, I was the one who led and it – he – followed.

You caught my temper and clattered our dishes away to set about your darning with precise, savage stabs. Mayhaps you thought that my anger was for you, or mayhaps I hadn't been forgiven for that morning. You turned in early, complaining of a headache.

In bed, my thoughts flocked across the ceiling with black, unsettled feathers. The bloating pain was back. But there would be other folk I could travel with. I might even be able to reach the mump by myself with what Dee had told me. I would owe him nothing.



Sleep must have come eventually because morning found me bone sore and twisted at the foot of my bed. I bolted upright with sudden panic and ripped the blankets back.

There it was. The Spot was back.

I sat, staring at it. It had even been in my cacks when I'd removed them the evening before. But this dread was getting me nowhere. I tugged the blankets from the bed and tip-toed down the stairs.

A dusting of snow had appeared in the night, so I slopped my feet into boots to head into the yard. The pump griped rustily in the dawn stillness, *too early, too early for all this kerfuffle*. Yet I wasn't the only soul up. At the sound of footfall, I spun.

There you were, swathed in shawls and your nose shrammed red from waiting in the outhouse but a look on you that could end worlds.

I had imagined many times what would happen if the two of us fought. Or mayhaps imagine is too active a word; in the dark hours, blinds would flash open on the freak show horrors that my mind conjured of its own accord. *Roll up, roll up*, see my hands

cradling the yellowed haft of your knife as it jutted from my sternum. See my head caved in, its crimson lustre running down the side of your copper pan. See you, lying in the street – front bisected by the blunt edge of a carter's wheel. See the exclamation of your mangled limbs carving an impossible letter at the bottom of a flight of stairs. These friezes didn't hint at the events that led to them, because the how didn't matter as much as the who. I'd always known that one of us must break the other eventually.

We fought quietly, tugging the blanket between us with no more than soft grunts. The ground was sodden under the pump and snow gave way to mud, so that we were soon leaning against each other for purchase as we wrestled.

I had always reassured myself that youth and fitness would be on my side, but you had years of desperation to call on. You latched your arms around my chest and the hammer of blood swelled into my cheeks. I wriggled and thrashed, but your arms were built for wringing clothes and scouring dirt, their grip remained fast. Then the blunt enamel of your teeth dug into my shoulder. My grip slipped from shock as much as pain, but it was all you needed – by the time I'd recovered you were already drumming down the path, precious cargo clutched to your breast.

My skin rang out into the cold as you disappeared around the front of the house. You were heading for Mi'luvvers or mayhaps you hoped to see a Marm on the street. Once another woman had corroborated the Spot nothing would keep the ring from my ear.

The fight didn't have to end. I could give chase and tackle you or leap over the wall to cut you off at Mi'luvver's door. But it was a futile, I saw that now. After this you'd check on me every night and every morning until you'd secured the answer you wanted. I picked myself up and stumbled in the opposite direction.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

When I'd think of you it was of an evening, nestled into the sofa, your needle a firefly in the candlelight. The flames would throw shadows, though your expression would be calm, a still life as much as a portrait. These were the only hours when you looked at peace.

Just as well since there were always new clothes to make or be let out, if not ours then the Brothers', and the work of darning was never finished. *Must be half moth*, you'd tell me, *the rate you put holes in togs*. It was the work of moments to catch a tunic on a rusty nail or graze bloody mouths in the knees of my leggings, I didn't think of the hours that they took to mend. You'd cuff me around the lughole, but a day or two later the clothing would be rolled up at the foot of my bed, freshly laundered and whole save for the scar tissue fibre of the darning.

Memory is like this, I think. It can be worn for years without acknowledging the seams, but modesty is the work of constant seamstressing. Only when the fabric rots or tears, as it invariably does in time, do we pause and recognise our nakedness.

The morning after you wrestled the blanket from me was just such a moment. I hid a while, I think, in Mi'luvver's woodshed. That would explain the smell of damp rot and the sensation of bugs crawling over my arms, but the cold must have driven me on eventually, the next image that comes to mind is the lopsided shimmer of my face in the burnished metal of a rain bucket and the bite of my hand around a gutting knife. Its edge tested my cheek, but I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. The thought of the pain only made me shake. Besides, even if a cut was all it took, I had no more desire to live as a man than a woman.

I slipped the knife back inside my jerkin. It, and the trousers I was wearing, belonged to Brunel and their piss stink of the tanners made my eyes water. In the hours I'd lost, I must have snuck into Mi'luvver's to grab them. Still, the smell was a blessing from one way of looking at it. There'd be a right spuddling if I was caught in man's clothing, but few folk would want to venture close enough to the reek to recognise me with a scarf over my face, which wouldn't raise an eyebrow in this cold snap.

In my raid on Mi'luvver's house I must have recovered my satchel too, for there it was, packed for a journey. I looped it over my head and rested my hands on the weight



of its contents. Even after all these years of searching for news of the fey, I felt ill-prepared. This trip should have been weeks in the planning, though there was no helping that now.

Then there was the gut lurching truth that a return journey was looking unlikely. The blackness crackled and spat in my head again, but, after a swallow, it subsided. Everything was shifting so fast. My day-dreams about this trip had always ended with me back home once the fey had removed my tattoo and taught me their tongue, but now you had seen the Spot I didn't see how that could be possible. Even if the fey stopped the Spot, you had my blankets and nothing more was needed to put a ring in my ear.

But if I didn't want that fear to come true before I'd even found the fey, I better get a move on. I pulled my scarf over my mouth and nose, tugged the knot tight, and left the alley to head towards the docks.

*Walking on mud*, my gang had called holding ourselves as men when we were childr, thought that we had the formula cracked – head up, stance wide and arms pedalling as if fighting feet free from the silt of the estuary. Shar, Lou and I looked comical about it and Toad never wanted to try, so what was it about Dee's act that made it so compelling? Mayhaps it had never been playing. Or mayhaps it was still playing but the deadly serious type of game that calls itself real. Either way, I was now wishing that I'd taken our larks more seriously. Marms, slaving over steaming coppers in their sheds, knuckled their backs to watch me pass and a cluster of yunguns loitering outside The Sailor's Refugee spat at my feet. I swung my arms harder. *Head up, stance wide, arms pedal*. My mouth was as dry as a mutton's dugs.

Two men leading a bull up the cobbled street paused in their grunts to shout.

'Cock first, kiddie, cock first!'

'Let ee swing proud.'

Their dog danced around me on its heels and I shirked inside my jerkin.

'That be it, get 'em shoulders back.'

'One, two, one two.'

The bull bucked at their laughter and they stopped taunting to bark it back in order, giving me the chance to hurry to the end of street and steady myself. All men new into their manning look like they're pretending at first, there was that to be thankful for, and, as I set out once more, it was clear that the looks thrown after me were more amused than suspicious.

The docks were crawling with their usual industry, every soul with somewhere to go and no time to give mind for me. After some minutes, I found Dee lent up against a

crate, watching over the unloading of a barge. He only looked up when I touched his shoulder and even then his look glanced right off of me.

'Work been assigned for the day. Come back on the marnin.'

I pulled out my journal and that put the life back into him. He shoved it into my satchel and closed the flap.

'Creased teats.' The whites of his eyes flashed left and right, then he grabbed me by the lapels to yank me behind a row of crates and tug my scarf down. But, seeing my cheek was unmarked, he exhaled. It wasn't beyond reasoning that the menfolk had come to welcome me into my manning overnight. Yet his relief was short-lived, he began to walk away, fist to mouth, only to turn back and jab a finger. Because if I wasn't a man then I had no right to be wearing their clothing, did I.

'Fock me.' The finger drooped. 'Be a parcel of ol' crams, awlrite.'

He pulled off his cap to rake through the hairs that had made their way free of his top-knot. What a swellhead he was, wearing Ffieth dress over Four Four hair like that. I propped myself up against the crate opposite and shook my journal at him, though I was having to fight the weight of my eyelids. If I hadn't had to make my escape now then I could have slept till the chickens bedded themselves.

'When I said it were possible to kid folk with pig's blood, I weren't meaning this,' he said.

I flipped through the pages and found a drawing of the fey to jab at.

His chuckle was void of humour. 'Chinny reckon. 'Ave score an twenty troubles, Asha Beh, but the fey ain't one of 'em. Can't go marching round as if you were in your manning. Tell that Mother of yours and she'll 'ave Brunel make your 'ide into a leather jacket. Will 'ave mine while she be at it if I don't get you 'ome lickety quick.' He caught hold of my sleeve. 'Talking of Brunel, ain't this ee's?'

I pointed at the picture again.

'Put ee away. Should ne'er 'ave gissen water to them fancies.'

He reached for the journal, but I dodged.

'Asha,' he barked but, remembering himself, dropped his voice. 'Enough of this, best gis you 'ome afore folk catch on.'

It was hopeless. Dee was as wedded to tradition as you and if he found out about the Spot then he'd never let me leave. I darted out of our hiding space into the mill of sailors.

"Ey! 'Old up!"

Folk paused in their work, but I was already across the storage bay and when the clench of my chest forced me to slow Dee was nowhere to be seen. He'd forgotten that I'd spent near as much time here as him when we were childr and knew all the twists and turns.

I hauled myself into the dark space of a shelving unit and sat there, shaking, until my heart slid back down my throat. I didn't need Dee. He'd told me where the mump was. There would be plenty of barges headed that way.

Though, as I crept out once more and made my way along the jetties, I was reminded that Dee had one thing going for him – he could read. Nor was he overly afraid of books. After one pucker faced God Child sent me fleeing from his gangplank with a broken bottle neck, I was forced to tear out the page with my request for passage and from then on presented captains with the loose sheaf.

The sun had already thinned by the time I found myself in front of a wide barge that was covered in more lichen than paint, though someone had recently taken care to pick out the name in red lettering – 'White Empress'. A crude image of the domed towers found in the Heartlands sat below it. Not that I knew what these looked like in life, mind, but Father had told me about the land of his birth when I was a babber.

The deck of the barge was loaded with rugs in colours so bright that they must have come from the Heartlands themselves. The barge would likely be carrying them inland, mayhaps down to the Janners or up north to the cities before the Wastes, though Four Fours with money tended to avoid those parts. An old Ffieth lounged on the stack of orange carpets on the bow, working at the gaps in his teeth with a fish bone. I smoothed my paper against a thigh and walked up the gangplank. The sailor's gaze was gaunt and his cheeks were hollow. It was tempting to back off, he'd likely be unable to understand anyway, but it would be more suspicious to leave now, so I stuck the message under his nose. His eyes barely flicked over the words before making a more considered sweep of my figure. I turned to go.

The fish bone sucked free. 'Five coppers afore, five on destination.'

Ten coppers. I felt the weight of coin in my pockets. The fare was more than expected, but I had enough and was in no position to haggle, not with you and, now, Dee searching for me.

The sailor's eyes followed the drop of each coin into his hand, then he palmed them with the finesse of a pickpocket.

‘No room in the cabin, but plenny enough among them rugs.’ He tipped a thumb back at the mound near the baulk-head, then the fish bone returned to its grind against enamel.

I hid my satchel within the roll of a shag rug and wormed in after. The sailor was right, though my throat was soon raw from the winter air, the roll trapped my body heat and so I dozed, fretfully, until the engine growled to life. Then the barge was slipping through the first lock and away from the only home that I'd ever known.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

*Love fierce*, Mi'luvver would instruct as I lay with my legs hooked over her hearth, whiling out the hours, *fierce like a cat that got 'is teeth in the figgy pudding. Or'll be only loving when it be too late*. Was she thinking of her hubber when she said this? She couldn't be blamed for not loving him when she'd had the chance. I'd spied him down Goose Fingers several times – a pork-chop of a man, downing the coin of his new wife as if he didn't mean to see the next sunrise. But whatever, whoever, Mi'luvver had been thinking of, I'd done no better than her. Because I hadn't loved my life. For all its privileges outside the expectation of most Ffieth, it had been so small – everyday, the thankless repetition of cleaning, then home, dinner with you and Mi'luvver, and sleep ready to start all over. My feet had walked the route to The Page so many times over that my own steps had worn a prison out of habit and if I stayed that life would only shrink further – a ring in my ear, marriage, childr. Then, if the births didn't do me in, living out my last years as mutton, watching over my childr to see that they didn't stray from the same order. If, coors, the Brothers didn't finish me off first.

And yet Mi'luvver had been right. Because it was only as the barge carried me away that I realised that I did love the life I'd had. It had been small, but it was the small things that I'd miss. White days, watching dandelion heads of snow peck the windows until the world was a blank sheet that could be folded into whatever my imagination desired. Then the dance of bread and hands as we took turns to sup from Mi'luvver's soup. Or still hours in the Library, when I'd rushed my chores and could sink into a book. Not to mention the rasp of Mi'luvver's voice breaking into a telling, the song in her voice as captivating as the words. Even Brunel and the solidity of his shoulder slipping against mine when he dozed off on the sofa after a hard day's work – I'd miss him too.

I had loved that small life and now it was too late.



The sailor who had taken my pay was the only crew of the White Empress. I was thankful for this, since he rarely left the tiller and left me alone well enough. If he had

suspicious he kept them to himself. Still, my pulse quickened whenever the deck creaked under his footfall. Bundled in leathers, scarves and carpet, there was little of me from that I could be made out as man, woman or childr. Or Ffieth or Four Four for that matter. Yet every grisly story about what happened to folk who entered the forest in their bleeds played through my mind. Folk told those stories with stiff nods and hardened voices. *Gissed whas were coming to 'em.*

The landscape we passed through was muffled, mourning, under ice. Blue mists or night's spilt ink awaited me whenever I stuck my head from the rug. Other than the shadow of a dingle or hewn rock face, there was nothing but trees. Tappers were less common beyond the outskirts of the city – instead birch, oak, or pines paraded under crowns of snow. It was if Brizzletun had been the only real now the world could only roll out the same motif.

The Listening was thick enough to cut into fist-sized slabs. Mi'luvver said that the network of tree roots connected the four corners of the forest. Whenever I missed her I'd have to let the Listening settle over me and think of how it held the both of us. And with this thought, I pulled my face into the warmth of the carpet roll and, at last, managed to break through worry into the blankness of sleep.



The jab of a fish bone to my scalp jolted me from my misery. Many hours must have past for I was hungry, thirsty and bursting for a pee. But first there was the sailor to deal with. He stood over my rug, cupped hand held out and fingers twitching with impatience.

I wriggled from my shag pile and looked around. The trees were the same here as they had been for the rest of the journey and there was little to set the place apart from the others we'd passed, save for the flattened scrub of the bank that we were tied to. The sailor tipped his head.

‘That a ways, mile or so. Can’t miss ee.’

I squinted and made out a path of sorts between the ferns. If he was lying, if he'd got it wrong, if this wasn't the mump, this would end poorly. But what alternative did I have? I counted my last coins into his hand and they disappeared into his jacket. If the fey wanted compensation for their services then I'd have to find another form of payment.

I tossed my satchel off the boat and landed after it, nearly twisting an ankle. By the time I'd made it up the slope, all that remained of the barge was its purr blending into the prattle of leaves. I chewed on my curled right little, then set off up the path.

It was barely past dawn, the day freshly hatched. Frozen dew crackled like shells underfoot and my milky breath curdled on the sunshine's yolk. Fresh. Chill. Could have wept for an egg in that moment, poached, on bread, with a slab of butter. Could have wept to see our hens and smooth their gloss feathers. Had already begun to weep. But that was silly and I blinked back the tears. The cold alone was pricking at my eyes bad enough. Wrapped in my carpet, I had forgotten how bitter it can get in the forest. The stony chill throbbed through the soles of my boots and my cheeks, even under my scarf, were already stretched and raw. My bum cheeks fared little better when desperation forced me to wrestle with the unfamiliar buckle of my trousers and drop them to pee. It would have been wise to bring more clothing, but it was too late for that. All that could be done was to keep moving.

My boots slipped and stumbled over the outcrops of stone that were hidden by the ferns that grew over the path. The vegetation grew unshackled from the sinister symmetry of the plantation and trees closed the horizon in a knotted maze of brown and yellow. Spring wasn't here yet, but, even under the snow, the keen scent of green bruised the air.

A buzzard dipped in and out of view between the branches, circling the white bone sky. Hunting, or monitoring? Besides the sailor, it was the only other living creature that I'd seen since leaving Brizzletun. Could fey speak to beasts? Or even take on other hides like Conni from Mi'luvver's stories? Nothing in my research had suggested this, but now that I was nearing the fey I realised that my ignorance was near complete. Finding them was only the first step. Would I be recognised? Understood? Welcomed? And if not, what then? I had no money, was deep within the forest in the middle of a cold snap. But such thoughts were too desperate to contemplate, so I focused on the setting of my feet.

The path had long since wended out of sight of the canal and crossed a near frozen stream by the way of a fallen trunk when a rustling in the undergrowth made me turn.

'Smells black pudding, I does. Black pudding and piss.' The Listening pulsed with a purr. Then there was Death, pushing out of the bramble.

Free from the confines of Brizzletun, she had grown to challenge the reach of the trees and her gloss fur fluttered against their branches like the flame atop kindling.

'Well, I smell carrion and offal,' I said. Or, rather, thought – in the way that Death could always seem to hear.

'Best smell there is,' Death, she said and set a pace with me.

'They're Brunel's,' I said, 'the clothes. He works at the tanners, hence the smell.'

Her belly grumbled. 'The piss mayhaps. The blood though, ee bes a different story.'

'I'm dealing with it.'

'Are yous now.'

'I'm not becoming a woman if that's what you're asking.'

A flash of pink tongue showed, then snapped back behind black gums. 'Good.

Quickest path to me stomach, one way or annuder.'

'Growing on you, am I?'

She showed her teeth.

'Owes me a story first, member? Talking of which, about time you gis I the ending,'  
Death, she said.

'Well, then.' I cleared my throat. One more telling cost me little, not when she wouldn't be a cause for concern ever again once I'd found the fey. I dropped my voice into my diaphragm, like Mi'luvver would when preparing for a telling, and tried to remember where I'd last finished off. The telling had wandered from one story to another so many times that the thread of it was too tangled to try and unpick. Luckily Death wasn't one for fretting over plot holes.

'This,' I said, 'be the story of Maiti and the bandits.'



## Chapter Thirty

This be the story of Maiti and the bandits. The telling begins like most others –

Once, there were a childr.

A childr like any other, yet, like all childr, different from allabody.

Now, our childr 'ad no a name to call its own. See, during them times of Burning, names were gissen on adulting when it were safer to 'ope a soul might stick around a spell. Our childr 'ad five nameless siblings too and the lot of 'em lived with their mi'lurvver in the ruins of a once mint city.

What an 'ome it were! A place of rotting marvels. Were doors that bowed afore a soul and walls that took on the face of those that looked on 'em in the 'ope of selling fares no longer made. Were boxes that enticed folk in with a jingle only to go nowhere and fake souls that could tell you the where to of any place on earth but were blind to love. Them wonders 'ad one foot in this world and one in the next and so our childr, 'oo 'ad a foot there itself, were passing fond of 'em. What an odd life it were, surrounded by wonders while the sky spat ash and crops shrivelled. Most days there weren't enough to fill a belly, let alone six.

So when a group of bandits offered to take a childr off that mi'lurvver's hands for five loaves, well, she didn't even 'ave to think twice. She'd 'ad other childr, childr she kept only the faces of now, 'oo 'ad been taken by sickening, sea or spirits and left not a crumb in their place. So she pulled our childr forward and pressed 'er ole looking glass into its 'and. Times were when such magic could join souls on one side of the world to those on the udder. That magic 'ad long since run dry, but that mi'lurvver gissed it thinking that the childr would, least, know that she be thinking of it.

'Ard years followed. Blood and indignities. Sights that stain a soul and no washing out. Within the first moon the leader of them bandits 'ad taken our childr's looking glass and smashed it after our childr 'ad tried run. Still, our childr kept them shards and would whisper to 'em nightly.

*I member, Mi'lurvver, it says. I member and one day I bes back for you.*

For it ne'er forgot, just like that mi'lurvver 'ad 'oped.

Well, in that life a soul either thrives or dies. Our childr chose the former and so opened its 'eart to winter. Stubbornness and jamminess kept it among the living. 'Ad put

ten and ten names in the ground afore it were gissen its own. And when it became a she, did take the name Maiti.

As a childr, Maiti 'ad been sommat frightful, but it be so much easier to fear that which 'as a name. Tongues soon curdled to say Maiti, lest 'er wrath come upon them. For now 'er bleeds were on 'er, Maiti set out to bleed every soul that 'ad ever painened 'er.

Within a year 'ad bludgeoned and poisoned 'er way to second in command. Within two 'ad the skull of that bandit 'oo first took 'er by 'er bedside. And now there were none to stop 'er, Maiti called 'er bandits close and told 'em to make five loaves of the lightest bread. And into that dough she did tell 'em to bake the cutting shards of that looking glass. Then Maiti took up them loaves and whispered to 'em.

'I bes coming, Mi'luvver. And this night you shall 'aves your bellyful.'



Death had fallen back during the telling and was sniffing in the direction of the canal. There was always someone or something dying and Death wasn't one to say no to a meal.

'Don't want to stick around for the ending?' I said. Not that I had any intention of being eaten, but we'd been through this enough times. Her left ear flicked towards me, though her nose remained twitching on her quarry.

'Will be back,' Death, she said and dived off into the trees.

## Chapter Thirty-One

Once Death had left me, it wasn't long before the rut of the path wended its way up hill and the trees gave way to a grassy mound. Little doubt that this was the mump.

Despite myself, I began to slow. The thrill of a thrush sliced the quiet. Cloud was scudding in from the west, bringing wind with it and it set the grass up the mound shivering. Though there appeared to be some kind of dwelling on the crest of the mound, there was no sign of life. But what had I expected? Professor Day's account had said that the fey frequented the mound, not that they had a settlement here. I started up the slope.

The incline soon had me on hands and knees and my breath was sparse by the time it evened out into a plateau. A ruin cropped up from the centre and set jagged teeth into the sky. Its hewn sandstone wore a thick cape of ivy and an elm grew in the lee of one of the walls that still stood. It must have been a building of significance to drag the stone all the way up here.

Most of the structure had collapsed, but a door, dark with rot, was wedged into a corner where there were the remains of four walls and, along with a sheet of corrugated tin, made a rough dwelling. Dee had said that charcoal burners worked nearby, they likely settled here on a summer. Though, as I knocked on the softened wood, I couldn't help but think of the hut of the fey in the story about Ansel. My heart knocked back, but there was no other answer. I pulled, or rather lifted, the door and was welcomed by a front of fetid damp. The single room was empty save for a rusted bed frame, covered in patchy furs, and a lopsided chair. There wasn't even a hearth, only a circle of scorched stone. The window had shutters instead of glass. The lethargic air tasted of mud and blackberries turning to pulp. Noabody had lived here for some time.

Back outside, I looked over the white etched forest – trees, unending. Of Brizzletun there was no sign. The mutter of the Listening picked at my loose hair and cuffs. Even if the fey did frequent this place they weren't here now.

I shrugged free of my satchel and made a circuit of the hilltop. There was little to see save for scattered deer bones – yellowed, brittle, ready to return to dust – but halfway round I spied a footprint in the mud. Needle toothed ice had set its shape, preserving the smooth press of a heel and toe dimples. Only a glenner would have invited the frostbite. A glenner or a soul with feet that didn't feel the cold.

Once I'd found one footprint, it was easier to pick out others. In places they were layered on top of each another so thickly that the mud had frozen choppy and crusted. However many folk had been here, they couldn't have made the prints alongside – these were almost dog like, save that they were as large as the humanoid ones and boasted a four-toed paw. I crouched down to lay a hand in one and was reassured by the crusting of ice. It had been sometime since its owner was here. When Mi'luvver had first taken me into the forest she had taught me to run upon the sight of such a print. *Vulpes Magna*, Four Fours called them. Or, in the words of Ffieth, The Sisters of Death. Folk did say that the fey rode the beasts. So many stories were told about the fey that I had taken this one as hearsay, but here, my hand swamped by the print, scepticism wasn't so easy. If these were the fey's, I'd just have to hunker down here until their return. I left the prints and went in search of wood.

The day passed numbly. After much swearing over damp branches, I started a small fire in the hut and, hustled close to the flames, coaxed my numb fingers to make snares from bundles of twine that had been hidden in a nook by the furs. Every small sound sent me running to the window, but I was only ever rewarded with the sight of rabbits, then the dark made it too hard to see. Exhaustion tugged at my body with cruel insistence and I crawled into the furs to give myself up to sleep.

It was still dark when I next awoke. Midnight sheered in, blue, through the gap in the shutters. Cold had made my body formless and blunt, but it wasn't the discomfort that had woken me. I lay, wide-eyed and unseeing, until the sound came again.

Something, or someone, was climbing the mump. More than someone – two pairs of feet. Their footfall paused outside the hut to be replaced by laboured breathing. Hope and fear warred in my gut, but I took hold of myself and crept from the furs.

I had been prepared for the fantastical, the beautiful, the terrifying, for folk that can break or mend bone with nothing but their tongues and send Four Fours home, organ by organ. I wasn't prepared for the sight that greeted me as I yanked the door open.

But then you know this part. Because standing there, flushed and heaving under the wash of starlight – was you.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

There was a gash on your forehead, still bleeding. Your skirts were torn and muddied, and creases snaked through the fabric; it would take a firm elbow and reheating the iron many times to press them out. The cussing would wake Marm Daniels and Marm Jonna, even through the wall. But then I met the thunder of your eyes and remembered that your skirts were the least of my worries.

Dee was at your elbow and looked to be only reason that you were still upright after the climb. There was no chance of slipping out past the pair of you, even if I was to take the window, and what would be the point. If you'd followed me all the way here then you would pursue me to every corner of the earth to put a ring in my ear.

I stepped back and lent against the far wall as you limped over the threshold and Dee lowered you into the chair. Bleeds or no, I felt like a right childr. How could I have expected this to go any other way? Coors Dee would have gone to you after I'd run off in man's clothing and he'd known where I was headed. The real surprise was that you'd come yourself, since you were of the Faith and had no stake in a treemum. I hadn't known you to enter the forest in years.

You rested a hand against your pitching bosom and took the hut in. To see it through your eyes rendered it even more abysmal. I knew you, you would have spent every moment of the journey rehearsing the dressing down you intended to give me, but for a long moment the words seemed to fail you. Dee was waiting on you, having taken up position by the door. Eventually, you swallowed. The sound was small and wet in the dark.

'Bist this awful place?'

I flinched. Your Ffieth tongue only reared its head in moments of true desperation.

Dee must have thought that events needed taking in hand too, his fist came down on the table.

'Bist you thinking? Shirking adulting? Entering the forest in your bleeds? Setting the fear into your Mother? Into the lot of us? Should 'ave seen 'er on the barge, 'asn't 'ad a wink of sleep since I brung the news. And all for some blad fancy.'

But you blocked his advance. 'Dee. Dee. *Dee Macabee*.'

He stopped.

'Give a mother a moment with her daughter. Please.'

He weighed one fist in another, then stalked out. What had he meant to do? Beat the childr out of me? The eyes you set on me were as bright and full as the pregnant moon, but for some time all you could do is shake your head. I shook my mine back.

'Asha,' you croaked.

The leaden pulse of a headache announced itself at the back of my skull.

'My Asha.'

A sob choked from me then. In all the drama and dread, I'd forgotten that you might love me.

You reached into your bag and unfurled the blanket. It was ghoulish in the moonlight. The Spot punched through it like a bullet wound.

'What do you think folk will say? Asha? Look at me!'

My throat closed around the sticky clot of feeling. Despite the creases and mud you had already recomposed your face. *Pretty as a picture*, folk said.

You sighed then. 'It's not too late. Get the fire going, quickly now.'

I didn't understand at first, but then you delved into your bag once more and withdrew the wicked length of a knitting needle. The headache drove its nail through my skull into soft tissue. You really meant put the ring in me there and then.

'I hate you.'

I said.

Words, from my mouth. Spoken.

I looked to you in alarm, but the portrait of your face was fixed, as bold and resolved as the work of a palette knife. Then I wasn't so sure that I had spoken after all.

'The fire,' you said, words of stone. 'Now, Asha.'

I licked my lips, tasted salt and earth.

'I hate you,' I said. My ears crackled as if surfacing from underwater.

A flicker crossed your face this time and the blanket drooped in your grasp. 'Never mind. The embers will serve.'

I stepped in your way as you hauled yourself up to make for the fire.

'I. Hate. You.'

There was no malice in it, only enunciation. Even so, the words scratched my larynx and left me coughing. Your hand had closed in a fist around the knitting needle.

I swallowed back the dryness of my throat.

'I hate you.'

You started to cough then. A Cleaner's Cough. The force rattled your insides, but when I looked into my breast for the old stirrings of pity, it was empty. I watched you redden. On your first step to the door I was there, blocking you.

Your coughing worsened and you had to lean against the back of the chair, heaving to get air into your lungs. I bit my fingers around your hand. Your look was small and afraid.

'I hate you,' I said.

Your pulse gave a sparrow's flutter under my grip. Then your eyes turned back in your head, emptied of seeing to become all whites. The sound of your skull bouncing off the floor was like a canal boat run aground. But that was only the start of it.

Your spine buckled, as if trying to break loose, and your limbs flailed. Every muscle fought against itself. There was a commotion was under your skin, in your very bones. The fingers of your left hand crawled at stone, reaching for nothing, and the pink worm of your tongue thrashed on its hook. The hut filled with the warm scent of urine.

I fled.



'Asha! Asha!'

Dee chased me down the slope, only to plough into me as I stopped to vomit. After a day without food there was little in my stomach and the dry heaving didn't last long. The earth bucked under my feet, but I pushed against my knees and swayed back upright.

Dee was talking, a blunt edge to his words, but my attention was lost in the dark host of trees. Trees, as far as could be seen. No light. No movement. Nothing but us and the Listening. It rang back with a kestrel's shrill.

I sprinted back up the mump.

You were on the floor where I'd left you, though the fit had ebbed into a fever's shiver. Your arms were bunched at your chest, fingers pedalling as if at the buttons of a tin whistle and it sounded as if one were crammed down your throat.

'Witches' tits.' Dee halted behind me.

I was on the floor next to you then, inching a hand under your shoulders to try to lift you, but you were too heavy. Dee stared from the door.

'Help me,' I said.

He blinked at my lips.

'Dee,' I growled.

He darted forwards and between the two of us we got you back on the chair.

The whistle of your lungs had calmed, but, under the moonlight coming through the shutters, the ravages of the fit were written clear. The left side of your face had collapsed – there's no kinder way to put it – its cheek hung slack while the eyelid twitched with stray electricity. You were like Ickers, flown too close to the sun.

'Kim Kadashi,' Dee whispered. 'Bist 'appened to 'er?'

I didn't have an answer to that. Or rather, what had happened was me, but I had no idea what I'd done.

I cradled your right cheek, but was too afraid to touch the slack flesh of the left. My heart played staccato against my ribs. A goodly soul would say that this was guilt or dread, but I wouldn't lie to you, would I now, Mother? What I felt, in that moment, was excitement.

'Ma? Ma?'

Your eyes roved over the ceiling but found no place to rest.

'Ma? Bist?' I said. Then remembering how you hated me talking like a Ffieth. 'Are you awlrite– alright?'

A stupid question.

'What's happened to you?'

Your quaking hands found mine and seized hold with all the fierceness of your being. The right side of your mouth plopped open and shut, though the left remained flaccid. Your tongue, that moist creature, probed at your gummy lips, then withdrew as its croaking became a cough.

'Ma. Come on, Ma. Ma!'

The tendons of my hand stood out as I fought the impulse to shake you. You couldn't let me win, not even once.

'Leave it. Bes 'urting 'er,' Dee said.

I jerked away. The reality of the situation had finally worked its way under my skin with a devastating tingling.

All my life you had grated on me, on and on and on. About Father, how lucky I was to be his childr and wouldn't I just know it when I saw the gifts that he'd bring us on his return; then your nagging, about how I misused my clothes, the dirt in my nails, behind my ears, in my very soul and let's not forget your nightly retellings of the Geist's sermons or the *sit up, sit down, now don't you move an inch or what will people think,*



*Asha Beh, Asha Beh, don't you dare look at me that way, Asha Beh* – until I wanted to leap up and screech, 'Stop! Please, stop! Silence!'

Silence.

Never once, had I imagined that nothing could be more terrible.

I crushed my arms around you to try and stop the trembling, but this did little good since I was now shaking the most out of the pair of us. Still, you calmed, though it seemed that this was more to do with breaking through distress into the blurry realms of self-preservation than recovery. My fingers threaded through each other behind your back and I realised that it was possible to enclose you in my arms. When had you become so small? I'd never been able to do that. Though how long had it been since I'd tried? I couldn't remember our last hug.

My fingers unknotted and I stood, taking a convulsive breath. Dee was back at his post by the door, right little teasing at the corner of his mouth, though it snatched away as I faced him. I patted my pockets for my journal, then remembered that I could speak.

'We've got to get her to Mi'luvver,' I said.

He nodded, but didn't shift his stare. I smoothed the braids from your face and pulled down your dress, which had hitched up over your thighs during the fit. Nothing to be done about the wet patch in the crotch though and a lump rose to my throat as I remembered how much you loved that dress. It would need washing with baking soda, then darning and ironing. But I'd do it. We'd sort it all out. Wouldn't we?

It was still some hours until dawn, but waiting with you in that state was inconceivable. Dee and I propped you up between us and we began the long walk back to the canal.

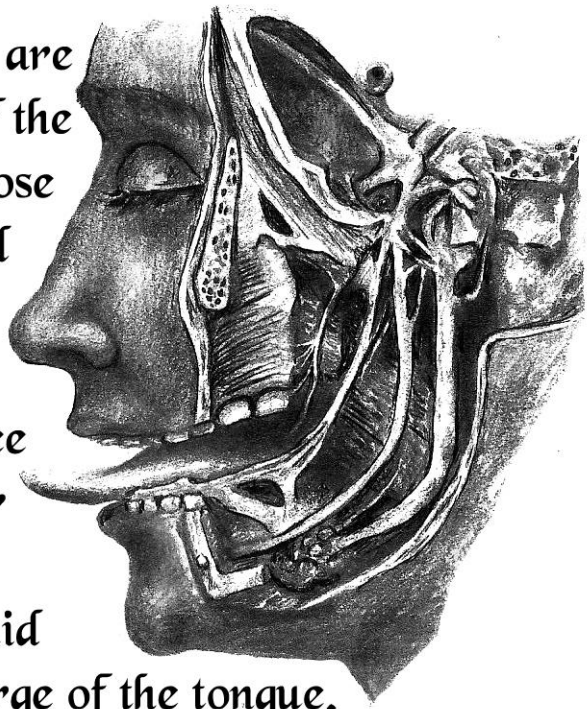
Death and life are  
in the power of the  
tongue, And those  
who love it will  
eat its fruit.

Our Lord, he  
will redeem thee  
from the power  
of the word.

Thou shalt be hid  
from the Scourge of the tongue.

Neither shalt be thou afraid of destruction  
when it cometh.

For thou shalt be in league with the  
stones of the field and the beasts of the  
field shall be at peace with thee.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

You taught me the importance of family. *Can't get blood from a stone*, you'd say, *so best know where your blood flows from*. In this spirit, the first time that you took me to see my mi'luvverluvver you made a picnic of it – a flask of nettle tea; a handful of bilberries, still bitter; and cheese and pickle sandwiches, I remember because the sourness made me shudder with pleasure. It was Summer Solstice and we sat on the wall across the yard from Mummer's Well, chewing and enjoying one of the rare days where the sun tempts a soul to throw off its woollens. This seemed as good a reason as any for celebration, but when a mutton shuffled up to the well to drop a coin in you pointed her out.

'There's your mi'luvverluvver,' you said. The term sounded odd in your mouth, I would have expected you to call her my grandmother like Four Fours do. Though I knew that I must have one, you'd never had cause to mention her before.

At first all that could be seen of her were the neat rags of those with more pride than coin, but when she turned from making her wish I got a good gander. Had the look of a wizened apple forgotten at the bottom of the barrel, I thought, bite into her and she would have been all powder. Though she must have been ripe in her day – she had gurt macky buttocks still, even if they swung flaccid under her skirts. While all this had been going on you had busied yourself with packing away our crumbs and papers, so I took my cue from you and bent my face over the steam of my tea, glad of your nearness and solidity.

How odd it was that I should have come of you and you of her – not just because it had always seemed to me impossible that you should have been born and not sprung fully formed from the stony bones of the earth but because I could have walked past that woman in the street a hundred times over and not known that we were related. Still, I didn't press for more details, I had an instinctive sense of which topics would end in your shouting at me.

The bloated weight of the bread squatted in my stomach as we walked home. Family. I held the nugget of the word to my breast and wondered at it.

For several Summer Solstices after, I took myself back to the well, though I knew well enough not to let you know what I was at. Mi'luvverluvver didn't always come alone, once or twice childr toddled behind her – babbers even, their cacks swollen up

with swaddling – and she lifted them up to drop the copper in. I didn't need telling that these were cousins of mine. All those folk with my blood in them, though what did that mean when it came down to it? I'd spent enough time at Shar's with its siblings and aunties and uncles and cousins and cousins twice, three times, removed to know that family shared not just blood but bread and bugs, elbow room, gossip, jokes and enough body heat that they could make a house balmy even in the heart of winter. In that press it wasn't always easy to say where their skin ended and yours began. I never even got to hold my mi'luvverluvver's hand.

This Summer Solstice tradition lasted me long into my mute years until I got too bold and she saw me. There was no recognition in that look, but I squatted down and pretended to be seeing to my boots, then hurried home and developed a habit of breaking out in shivers whenever I passed an old mutton who looked a little like her.

But worse still was how, when I reached home that day and came through the door to find you at your usual stitching, you looked up from the sofa, with those large, bovine eyes, and smiled. It undid me. The simple warmth in it.

But you had no idea, did you? You returned to licking your thread, so I climbed to my room and sat on my bed shaking. Because I did have family. I had you.



The journey, which had been an hour's stroll in the light, in the night, and with your slack weight, almost defeated us. You were walking, just about, though the ground kept tricking your feet, taking us with you, and the terror in your face had softened to a mellow vacancy that set the fear in me. Despite the bitterness of the air, hot sweat soon stung my eyes and crept between my shoulder blades. The world closed down into one step after another. Even Dee, sweltering only on the other side of you, was lost to me. The terrible truth of what I'd done loomed against the dark, but I couldn't afford to think about that.

When, at last, the dark gleam of the canal broke through the trees, we hauled you the last few yards, then sank onto the embankment. Your eyes were open, but you were dead to the world. Breath coursed in and out of your mouth like bellows and panic battered at my thoughts with its clammy mitts. You were just tired. That was all. We were all tired. Dee, slumped to his knees, was barely more responsive, though this was likely fury as much as exhaustion. Well, sod him.

The dumb reach of the canal wended into the trees in either direction, sluggish with ice, though nothing that would be too much for the breakers. A barge would be along eventually and, until then, I slept.



The trees were flat under dawn's grey stirring when the chortle of an engine pressed aching wakefulness against the back of my eyeballs. I pawed to my knees and saw that Dee was already on his feet at the water's edge. Your breathing had evened into the shallowness of sleep, so I joined him. He kept his gaze on the bend of the water.

The engine was louder now and joined by the groan of ice, which became a roar as the low slung shape of a barge emerged around the bend. It was another freight boat, proud green and red, its deck covered in barrels. A stout figure stood at the tiller and, remembering myself, I tugged my scarf up over my face. Dee spared me a glare but made no comment; what a childr – a woman, a whatever I was – was doing out in the forest in man's clothing was a conversation that would do none of us any good.

We'd been seen now and, at the cry of the sailor on the tiller, a second man stuck his head from the cabin. The boat slowed to meet the canal side in a hollow embrace. The blunt snout of a rifle was slung over the shoulder of the second sailor, a crude looking instrument, and Dee's throat bobbed at the sight of it, but he didn't let the fear enter his voice as he shouted.

'Ow be on?'

'Marnin.' The sailors kept their positions, but their caution could be excused given the stories of bandits about these parts. The sick traveller trick was infamous.

'You folk come from Towton way?' From the lightness of his voice, Dee could have been greeting folk at Goose Fingers, but his littles were twitching like when he hoped that they'd be taken as a childr.

'That be ee,' the older sailor said, not without warmth, though his gaze picked at us from head to foot. My tongue felt as if it had grown to twice its usual size, but, in the dawn and muffled under scarves, Dee and I were equal as men.

'And what brings you folks out this way in such piss-poor weather?' The sailor with the gun said.

Dee glanced at me then, the silver shape of his thoughts raced plainly over his eyes. We had no bows, so he couldn't claim that we were a hunting party, which was the reason most folk ventured into the forest at this time of year. I felt the shape of my

journal through my bag, but pulling out a book wouldn't do us any favours. Then I remembered again that, coors, I could speak.

'Were visiting the charcoal works north of here— 'ere,' I said.

The eyes swung to me then and Dee took a step to bring their attention back to him.

'What me companion means to say is—'

I spoke over him, 'Our brother, were a burner, see. Went missing some months back, so mi'lurvver and we thought that we might find sign of 'im. But luck taint shined on any us. Now our mi'lurvver been and taken a turn with the worry.' My tongue had to be coaxed around the unwieldy shape of the words, but they had come with an obedience that was surprising, even if my throat now gave way to coughing.

'Missing you say?'

The pair of them were frowning, but at what I'd said, not that I'd spoken and shivers pricked out over my skin. I'd talked and a stranger had replied. Dee stepped in then and I was happy to let him.

'Ai. Ai. Our mi'lurvver be quite aside 'erself.'

The older sailor had tightened his grip on his barge pole, it would cave a head in as well the rifle if there was a call. 'Charcoal works up the mump? Funny stories you 'ear about ee.'

Dee wriggled his scarf down his chin to let them get a good looksee. 'Say, dinn't catch your names. Bes the son of foreman down Brizzletun Docks. Folk know me as Yungun Macabee. Gis us a ride 'ome and sure we can figure sommat out like.'

'Macabee you say.' The barge pole lowered a little. 'Met your olemun last I was in these waters. Good man.'

'Ai, all say it. And what say you? Passage for we three? Sure I can 'ave a word with me olemun about berthing fees.'

The older sailor nodded and the rifle was passed over so that the younger could bound onto the bank to clasp arms with Dee. He was a beefy fella, hands like canned meat. Even if we'd meant harm he would likely have had the better of us.

'Muchly obliged.'

'Cheers, drive.'

'Awlrite, dearie?' The sailor had knelt by you and put a hand to your brow. His expression was grim when he lifted it to us. 'Taken a proper turn.'

'Sorry business. Sorry indeed,' his companion said from back on the barge.

'Will be sprightly enough once we get 'er 'ome,' Dee said and, though he still refused to look at me, his eyes grazed close enough to mine that I knew that this was for my benefit.

The sailor returned to his feet and spared me a wink. 'You know mutton. If only our ole boat 'ere were 'alf as strong could plough through ice all winter long without putting a dint in the paintwork. Now, 'ows about you 'elp me lift 'er.'

I slipped off my gloves to pat warmth into your face.

'Ma? Ma?'

Your eyes trembled open, but they travelled over me without recognition, though mayhaps that was to be expected given that I was dressed as man.

The younger sailor got his arm under you. 'Op we get now.'

Between the three of us we got you shuffling towards the gangplank and the older sailor came forwards to help you aboard but, at the sight of him, you drew back. You might not have been aware enough to understand what was afoot, but you had enough sense to realise that several unfamiliar men were ushering you aboard a boat. Your arm ripped from mine and you slumped to your knees.

'Ma. No.'

Your eyes showed all whites and the fitting started once more. I knelt and drew your chattering head into my lap, pressing on your jaw to try and prevent you from biting your tongue, though this only panicked you more.

'Ey up! Thought we 'ad a deal.'

I looked up then to see that the younger man had retreated onto the boat and Dee had caught hold of the barge pole, which the other sailor was trying to push off with. I half rose, but you were still spasming in my lap.

Dee tipped forwards then and had to release the pole before he ended up in the drink.

'Sorry, lad,' the older sailor shouted over the growl of the engine. 'But that ma of yours taint sick. Cursed.'

'Cursed?' The word hiccoughed out of me.

'Cursed or me mi'luvver be blind.'

Dee spun on me then, the little colour he'd had burnt down to ash.

'No. It wasn't-' I whispered. Little good it did us, the barge pulled away from the bank.

Cursed. I'd cursed you, just like Toad.

The gap between the boat and the bank yawned and the older sailor tipped his hat. 'Nought personal you understand. Got our own 'ides to think of.'

I tried to lift you with me, but your weight bore us back down.

'What are we supposed to do now?' I called out.

'Walk,' came the reply.

I cradled you to my stomach and watched our ride home sail away.



You were right, Mother, oh you were right. There was sin in me. All my childhood I had wished for magic like Mi'luvver or the fey, but what had I ever done but curse folk. And ignorance didn't mean that I hadn't meant it in the moment.

The fit spluttered out and left you as slack as a half-filled water-skin. I held the back of a hand over your lips and was relieved to feel the stirring of warmth against my skin.

'Couldn't just accept your adulting, could you?' Dee turned from glaring after the boat. 'Couldn't just take the ring and dress like allabody else.'

The lack of sleep made his steps drunken. 'Why does it 'ave to be so 'ard with you? Mulish. Senseless. No care for what 'appens to your family.'

I flinched at that, but I didn't have to roll with insults now.

'Wanted none of this,' I said.

'Want? Want? Well this be what you got.'

'You weren't meant to follow.'

'Ai, proper appreciation that be for sticking me neck out. Why, thank you, Dee Macabee, for coming all this way to save me from shaming meself and me 'ole family when you got work a be doing, when we ain't even related.'

Speaking or not, there are some situations where no words can beat a glare. But Dee wasn't finished.

'Would ee been so bad? The ring? The 'ubber? Childr?'

'And what would have you done if you'd got the bleeds?'

'This ain't about me.' He was shouting now and I was glad that the barge had set off at a speed.

'If it ain't about you then you can mind your bloody business.'

'Not when you gotten me stranded in the tit-end of nowhere.'

'Go on then, bugger off and get a barge without us. Problem solved.'

His began to turn away, already vacating the argument. 'Young mutton you is.'

Such a delight, our young Dee Macabee. He and Toad would make a fine pair.

'Good. Never wanted the bleeds in the first place.'



'But you do 'ave 'em. Can't just wish 'em away. And you entered the forest in 'em.  
Bist you think would 'appen?' His gesture swung at you and then I was furious.

'You think all this is because of my bleeds?'

'Shaking up the order of things 'as consequences.'

I settled your head carefully on the grass and stood.

He stepped back a pace. Exhaustion had darned the whites of his eyes in red thread.

'Whas? Gonna curse me too?'

'No,' I said and twatted him.

It had been some years since my last proper fight, mind, and I had to look away to hide my wince at the scream of my knuckles, but the blow had knocked him off balance at least. His fists shot up.

'Gwahn then,' I said, massaging my hand. 'Beat me.'

The tendons pulled out against his neck, but he muscled the fists down to his sides.

'Ain't the sort of man to bloody a woman.'

'You were threatening to well enough last night.'

'I came all this way to *'elp* you.'

'Help me then.' I bent to you and began to tug you back to your feet.

'Bist now?'

'I'm doing what the sailors said. Walking. Unless you prefer freezing to death just to make your point.'

He hesitated, then came to your other side. I had told you that I was going to get you home, Mother, and that was what I was going to do if I broke my bleeden neck in the trying.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

The white shard of the sun could be glimpsed between the branches and the icicles were sweating softly, but your tongue was still frozen. It was this that worried me most as the morning turned over to midday. There had always been periods when you wouldn't speak to me, when my mischief would toe over an arbitrary line and you would set upon addressing me only through Mi'luvver. Given my adventures of the last days, you would be angry enough for such a move, but the slackness of the left side of your face spoke a different story. Dee's coaxing received no more response than mine and he soon lapsed into quiet too, though from the working of his jaw I guessed that there was plenty enough that he wanted to say.

Our plan had been to follow the canal and hail another barge, but it was short lived. This far into the forest the canal was left to care for itself and a tangle of brambles overhung the waterway. I was left supporting you while Dee went on ahead to beat out a path, but our progress was measured in scratches. When a hunting trail intercepted the route we had little choice but to follow it.

Mi'luvver had stories for such travels, if told correctly they timed a journey – like that of Nigel of the Hunter, whose poking into the knowledge of the Fallen got him turned into a tree. His story paced out the travel to our treemum. Or that of Marm Sharon who strayed into the woods while in her bleeds and got what was coming to her. Her telling led a soul to Caneshum lake where, it was said, folk camping would be haunted by her cries. These stories weren't just the way to hold a path, however, but were how a soul could tell man from a beast – a fox or toad might be in ringing with the land, but they could never speak its stories. Yet neither I nor Dee knew any tellings wedded to the trails this far into the forest and so we had no more than the sun to guide us.

Besides, stories had never been to your taste. *Nasty, violent things*, you always said, not that this dissuaded you from telling them about Tapper Daniels when he drunk his wife into the grave or when Mister Thalin found himself pregnant. Nor did it stop you from bending the ear of every marm you passed in the street about any good deed of mine. Such tellings were different to your mind because you said that they were true, regardless of the fact that not all folk would agree. Still, in that moment I would have welcomed even such tattle from you.

'Ma.' I pinched you when we stopped for rests until your foggy attention drifted to me. 'Tell Dee about that time I ran off into the forest for a whole night.'

Or, 'Let's hear the one where I ate a whole jar of tippi and puked in your boots.'

Or, 'How about when I cut up your blinds?'

You had always taken such glee in my sin, but now your gaze would skim over mine, then waft away in chase of the breeze and I'd start up my pinching again, from frustration as much the attempt to make you speak.

The Listening, however, was never quiet. Trees let down their leaves in a sigh and timber groaned with the weary bones of grampfers. Streams spat bubbles under ice, then, breaking free, sung and spluttered their long tongues along the banks in a holler towards the sea. Perhaps what I had thought of as silence was only a failure of the ear – during rests, when exhaustion overcame our cold and we spread ourselves over roots or a fallen trunk, the mute grain would offer up the still, small mulch of jaws within. Woodpeckers were at it too, sounding out the trees with their lilting tattoo, nowhere and everywhere at once. Jays cackled and robins wheedled, *we we we hehe*; chaffinch *what what what how how who?* Then, as the light dimmed, the little owl replied with, *oh ai ai ai ai*.

The tightness of my chest lengthened up my throat and I began to put breath behind my muttered curses. Even after all these years, the old sin was still in me – once I'd started it was hard to stop and so speech coiled green from my mouth. What I said mattered less than the taste of my tongue in flight, so I glutted on vocabulary –*rosewood and woodland; spruce, yew, alder, heartwood and larch; coral tooth and pig's ear, lichen and golden-gilled bolete, sandy stiltball*.

Saliva and repetition digested them into their individual notes with hints of bilberries and liquorice. *Bla-ck-bir-d, br-am-bl-ing, chi-ff-cha-ff, me-a-ly Too-th, meee-lee, meeee*.

At last Dee drew us to a halt, his eyes screwed tight.

"Oo did I 'arm to deserve this?'

I shifted my arm to get a better grip around you. My back felt as if each of its bones had fused and hunger had set its teeth into my belly but the soreness of my throat? That felt good.

'Talking to me again?' I said.

'Makes no difference to 'ow you wag your tongue. Sound like a bleeden Four Four.'

Well, that hit its mark. I hadn't stopped to consider how, now that I was speaking again, my first tongue, the one you had taught me as a babber, had emerged.

'Liked I better mute, suppose,' I said.

Dee sneered and he was right, it was forced.

'Liked you better when you acted proper.'

It mattered little that you weren't speaking when it seemed that Dee was doing as good a job of nagging as you would have.

Though I'd just adjusted my grip, you were already slipping. You wouldn't be able to continue for much longer. We'd soon have to think about how we were going to pass the night.

'You'll settle into it,' Dee said then.

'Speaking?'

'Adulterating. My ma always said it rode harder on some than others. One day we'll look back on this and laugh.'

'I don't think—'

But his hand came up. 'Quiet.'

'Don't tell me to—'

Then I saw the alertness in his expression and we strained together, listening to the creak of the forest until his hand lowered.

'Thought I 'eard sommat,' he said.

'What? '

'Not rightly sure. But 'ad the sense we been watched. Ever since that there mump.'

'The mump?'

'Ai.' There was an echo of my fear in his gaze and we set out again in an unspoken agreement.



I had thought that I had known what cold was. There had been opportunity enough to acquaint myself when we had first moved to the Outer City and we had a roof and generator but only the funds to run it for an hour a day and winter had joined us, unbidden, in our beds. But a roof was still a roof and, as the forest night sealed over, cold pressed its frigid body close and whispered its true name.

You must have had it worse. At least the men's clothing I'd stolen from Brunel was designed for this wear. So when Dee made out a glow ahead through the trees, no discussion was needed to approach.

We paused at the edge of the encampment. Three men sat around the fire, though they were muffled in so many layers that the only part of them that could be made out was

the pinprick reflection of the flame in their eyes. There was a bloody smell in the air and my look travelled up to see that flames were caught up in the trees – fox hides. Row upon row of them. The men must be fur trappers. The Brother's love of orange muffs kept the trade afloat in even the hardest winters. I was glad then that Death wasn't with me, folk that hunted her cousins were courting the darkness of her belly. Mayhaps we should have left, pressed on and made our own fire, but there was the dark and the cold and, before I could signal any doubts, Dee had stepped into the circle of firelight.

‘Eyup. Room for three more?’

"Ow be on." The man who stood had a scarf of scarlet wool tied about his face and, in the fire's flicker, he looked like a soul who had been brought down from the gallows still breathing and so had a second grin slit from ear to ear. The hands of the other man had inched closer to their knives. 'Bist we then?'

'Macabee's the name. And me cockers 'ere be Marm Doree and– Mister Asha.' Dee's subterfuge didn't go as far as hiding his distaste. 'Just travellers 'oping to share your fire for the night.'

'A good eve to you, Macabee, Asha, Marm.' Their look danced over you, even swathed under your clothing and passing as a mutton it was clear that you were a gurt beauty. 'Goes by the name Pinkee. Me fine associates 'ere bes Stump and Clanger.'

Restrained nods were shared and we brought you forwards to rest on the log by the fire. The scarf over your mouth was shivering with the spasms that passed up the left side of your face. The trappers could hardly look any more kindly on a cursed mutton walking into their midst than the sailors had, but the fit stayed in check.

'Marm 'ere don't be looking rightly well, don't mind me saying,' the man, crouched by the fire pot, said. Stump, Pinkee had called him.

"Ad a nasty shock. Journey ain't gone as 'oped,' Dee said and gave me a filthy look.

'Can gis us the telling as you fill your bellies,' Red scarf said. 'Plenny to go round.'

In the pot was the red shimmer of offal, which likely gave the camp its stench. Snakings of intestines hissed in the cooler parts of the coals. Dee rubbed his palms together.

'That be the badger. Proper ansum of you.'

'Nought of it. Won't be long now, ey?'

Stump dipped his head, he was smaller than the others and rubbed his left cheek through his scarf as he stirred. Good money was on his only being recently into his manning.

I settled myself next to you. The spit of the fire cast trembling shadows across the clearing and the Listening hushed in close around the dreaming light. The Brothers might say that we unfold into The Word upon death, but it's the Listening that had always seemed to me to be total.

Now that we'd given explanation of ourselves, there was no demand for talk and the trappers hunched over their own thoughts. Folk of the forest were like that, words as spare as the fat on them. I knew well enough from when you'd sent me on a hunting trip the year before in the hope that it would quicken my adulting one way or another. Dirt and moss had crept into the secret crevices of my skin and what had once been pliable flesh seem to calcify so that, for the first time, I had truly understood how it was said that folk could lose themselves to the forest. Why, spend half a year or more out there and growing a hide or the shell of a hoof around fingers would be a blessing. Even the hunters' stories had been pared of all but the gristle – a mouse courts a cat spinning wool, the cat eats it. A man marries a woman with a golden arm, then she dies and he digs up that arm up to sell for cattle. A stick aids the escape of a coal and a bean by lying itself over a stream only to catch light as the coal crosses, then the bean splits its side as the pair drown. The hunter had interrupted his own telling with laughter at that part.

From under my eyelids, I watched Dee shed his gloves and check his fingertips for blackening. The campfire knuckled pits of darkness under his brows. Cold had long since reduced my fingers to a dull pain inside my gloves, but taking them off would only worsen the feeling, so I crept a hand across the earth to take yours.

Once I had you safely back home, I'd return to the mump, but what then? If the fey could stop the bleeds what would that make me – a childr? A man? Manning was as unappealing as you had always wanted me to find it. Though I couldn't admit that, not when you didn't think I had it in me. *Soft-hearted and soft-headed that childr is*, you'd say to our neighbours, *should have heard the racket it makes when I go after the pine-martins nesting in our roof*. Though I hadn't wept over this in years, not since I had learnt that you were more likely to catch your own head with the flails of your broom. Still, you'd keep your arm around me when telling it, as if the story belonged to the pair of us.

I stared into the intestines crisping on the coals. The blind flesh had a naked honesty, little wonder folk thought that they could read the future in it.

'You know the 'ow of 'aruspicy, kiddie?'

Red Scarf held my look over the flames. That crimson seemed to pulse against the dark.

I shook my head, not wanting to start a conversation, but, given that Dee was glaring at me, decided to reply.

'Not rightly,' I said. 'Was taught the basics once by some hunters.'

The men looked to each other and I realised that I had pronounced the 'h'.

"Ave the fancy to learn though," I said, though the 'ave' now felt clumsy. Damn your upbringing. Damn all my time around the Brothers. I found myself patting the knotting of the scarf and forced myself to leave it.

'Know what ee reads?' I pointed at the intestines on the coals. Pinkee broke away from studying my face to lower himself next to them and pulled down his scarf, the face beneath was grey and worn as a rock face that has been through years of freeze and thaw. His cragged forefinger followed the sweep of the intestine to where it swelled into a purple, tumid lump.

'The Raven's Watch, see.' Vapour poured, orange, between from his cracked lips. "Ard spell coming afore spring is sprung. Ice thick enough that them canal breakers won't be of use. Mark me." His point followed the coil of the gut. 'And Ee 'ere, 'Umpty's Ascension, new birth.'

The cadence of an owl call struck the darkness and I shivered. Reticent wisps of heat rose from the intestines. The bluntness of the steaming flesh gave the trapper's words ominous weight.

Clanger took up post over Pinkee's shoulder. 'Silly begger. Bes 'Arole's Arrow if I got eyes. Ending not a birth.'

'Arole's Arrow?'

'Ere, stand 'ere.'

I rose to see what the trappers were bickering about.

'Bist ee?'

Stump was pointing at my rear. My fingers flew to the seat of my trousers and found a warm, sticky patch. The Spot. Though the cramps had quietened over the past few days, snakings of blood were still left on the ground when I peed. I looked to you then, afraid that you'd be shocked into another fit, but your face was still save for your trembling eyes, as round and golden as Father's plate.

'Damp.' Dee's eyes cast daggers at me. 'Ground be damp 'ere.'

The men were still staring. I sat, hoping that they hadn't had a close look.

'Damp. Ai,' Pinkee's red mouth clipped around the words and he pulled his scarf back up. The men retreated to their hunch on the logs, intestines forgotten. That quiet was as taut as a pulled bow. The hunch of the trappers reminded me of the crows that would watch rough sleepers from the roofs of the Ole Town. Those crows knew when meat was soon to be had.

'Ee should be ready about now. Don't you say?' Pinkee nodded at the pot. 'Offer some to our friend 'ere, ey.'

Stump ladled the crimson broth into a mug and shoved it at me, but I couldn't eat without drawing down my scarf, then they'd see my cheek was as unblemished as a babber's hiney.

'Not 'ungry? Bit of drink then?' Pinkee waved a bottle.

We should leave. They knew, or guessed well enough and what was to stop them searching me in the night or seeing the blood clearly when the sun was up. To leave now though would confirm their suspicions and with you in tow there was little chance of giving them the slip if they decided to follow. My thoughts raced and tripped. In one of the stories Mi'luvver told about Keety the mutton seeks vengeance on a group of wicked trappers not through the magic of her tongue, which was her usual way, but by being such a good ear to their stories that they continue chin-wagging and boasting until Death finds the group and does the breaking of bones for her. There was little chance of turning these men to stories now though.

Pinkee winked at Stump, who burrowed a glove inside his jerkin to pull forth a pouch. Clanger held out papers and pinched dried hydrangea leaves into them.

'Childr ain't a man till they been gone and puffed on the Purple,' Pinkee said.

Coors, they didn't want to search me by force, that would be unfortunate if it turned out that I was a man, but what kind of men would they think themselves if they let a soul in their bleeds continue on through the forest? At least, I hoped their thoughts were on this track – there were darker paths to take.

'Think we best be 'eaded on,' I said, but Pinkee rose with me.

Dee stepped between us. 'Ain't what you think. 'Er bleeds only just started. Panicked like. Be taking 'er 'ome now, making good. No need to fret.'

'No need to fret, ey?'

Save for you, allabody was on their feet. I planted myself in front you.

Pinkee pulled down his bloody scarf to spit. 'Will thank you not to decide what we should be fretting over. Bringing bleeds into the forest. To our fire.'



The pitiless glint of a blade had appeared in his grip and Dee had slipped his hand into the pocket where he kept his flip knife. A fat lot of good that was going to do against the three of them though.

'Got it under 'and,' he said. 'Once we be back in Brizzletun none will be the worse for it.'

'Done is done. Can't go unanswered.'

'Ain't no call for—'

'Step aside, kiddie. '

Dee tugged a branch from the fire. I brought my fists up, but only a fool brings knuckles to a knife fight. I shoved Dee to one side.

'Stand back. I'm a witch!'

'That you are, coming 'ere in your state.' Red Scarf chewed his words as if they were sauerkraut.

'I'll curse you,' I said and the men hesitated. 'I've cursed before.'

I yanked your scarf down then, revealing the droop of your mouth. 'This woman hasn't been able to utter a word since.'

'Asha.' Dee was caught between a groan and a sob, but now I'd taken this course there was nothing to be done but follow it through.

'Fine words, lass. But be only words.'

'Ai. Words are what you should be afeared of. Come any closer and I'll curse the willywonkers off you.'

This was a gambit, and I knew it. Though men liked to put pride by their cocks, most men that were mules had none in the first place. I loosened my own scarf and the trappers recoiled at the silver glint of letters.

'Told you, I'm a witch. Now drop the knives, slow like, or your members will shrivel up as sure as if I'd tossed them on the fire with those guts. '

Stump gave a laugh that turned to a yelp as I swung my look to him.

'Kiddie.' Pinkee steadied the young trapper. 'We don't know that this lass can do aught.'

'You don't *know* that I can't.'

A log shifted in the fire and sent up a spray of sparks. The men had yet to come any closer, but they weren't backing off either. Blood sung in a gnat's voice through my skull.

This was a mistake. No matter what I'd done to you, I couldn't curse anyone's willywonker's off. Not even Mi'luvver could do that.

Yet Stump's hand now crept to his crotch, exploratory at first, then scrabbling. His knife fell to the dirt.

'Kiddie. *Kiddie*.' Pinkee tried to keep his locked gaze on me, but Stump had loosened the fastenings on his breeches and was now stumbling back as if he could put distance between himself and the darkness that lay within.

'No,' he said. 'Taint—'

'Pull your 'ead toget—' But Pinkee cut off as he turned to the younger man. With Stump's breeches fully unlaced the cause of his dismay was clear – in the crotch was a pale, grub-like tuber, pulled into the meat of his abdomen.

'Fock me grampfer,' Clanger said.

Willywonkers weren't an expertise of mine, though sailors had flashed them at you enough times for me to know that they weren't usually so small. Dee's expression only confirmed it.

Clanger was now peering into the horrors under his belt too.

'Keep your 'ead, man, it only be the cold,' Pinkee shouted. 'Clanger! Put ee away! Clanger!' He seemed barely mindful that his own hand was patting at his leggings.

'It be shrunk up. Right up.' Stump spoke with the small voice of a babber.

Clanger, meanwhile, had doubled over and was clawing at his willywonker, as if to prevent it from burrowing into his nether regions. A chill hit me down there to just watch, for all that I'd never had a cock to lose.

Stump stumbled back, trousers about his knees, and planted a foot in the fire. His shriek split the night. Then Clanger was plunging into the trees at a half-crouch, Stump hopping close after.

'Ey! You liverworted fools. Get back 'ere!' Pinkee's expression churned with disbelief, but there he was, alone and hand on crotch. He took a haltering step back, then broke after his fellows.

Dee stood, his branch dying back to embers, staring after the men as he clutched between his own legs.

'Stop your fretting, you never had one to begin with.' I told him and lowered myself next you. The barge bell of my heart was withdrawing, slowly, into the Listening.

Dee tossed the branch down and stalked off, but I could hear him stomping about the dark. I raked up the embers and put more wood on them.

There was a fine quality on the air, a thinning out, sweet almost, though there were no tappers nearby. The forest creaked as it settled down for the night. I fidgeted with the calluses of my palms and watched you from under my brows. The fire licked its orange

tongue across your dark eyes, but there was a quickness there that was more than the flames. I had the sudden urge to suck on my littles.

Oh yes, Mother, I was sinful awlrite.

'I know.' I said. 'You don't need to tell me.'

You pulled the sacking Clanger had dropped towards you. It was already dark with dubious stains, but you tugged it and, seeing that you were too weak to tear it, I slashed it with Stump's knife. You pointed at my nether regions and I was so tired that I stuffed the sacking down my trousers without protest. The material was scratchy, but it was better than the stickiness.

'Come on. You need to sleep.' I dragged over the bundle of furs left by the trappers and fussed them out next to you. It took little persuasion for you to lower yourself into them. Perhaps it was unwise to camp here, but it seemed unlikely that the trappers would be returning any time soon.

I was too pent up to sleep, but it was cold and I didn't know what else to do with the jangle of limbs that I seemed to have become, so I crawled in after you and pressed against your back. You reached over for my hand, pulled it to your chest and squeezed.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Dee was up and picking about camp with the dawn. I slipped from the furs, careful not to disturb you, and crept into the trees to shit.

Back in camp, I saw that Dee had made a grim package of the indiscernible meats left behind by the trappers and set the pot of bloody broth in the pile of still warm ashes. As unappetising as it looked, my stomach griped. None of us had eaten since you'd arrived at the mump and that already felt like a life that had belonged to someone else.

Dee slapped his gloves together over the ashes and the sound of hide meeting hide caught the sharp edges of air.

'Needs more wood to get ee going,' he said.

I opened my mouth to goad him on his lack of talent for fires, then sucked the breath back and followed.

We broke up to search and I kicked through the dry powder of the snow, unearthing little more than brambles and, once, the stiff dedun of a squirrel. Most of the wood was too damp for good use. Dee's stooped figure dipped in and out of view through the trunks, smothered by his upturned collar and scarves.

Now that the adrenaline of the night before had worn off, I felt as taut as dried drum skin. First Toad, then you, now the trappers. What kind of witch could only curse? That it had been in self-defence was little comfort, those that used such magic in Mi'luvver's stories were never the heroes – quite the opposite.

Dee reappeared, arms laden, and, on an unspoken agreement, we turned back. Exposure and exhaustion had whet his cheekbones into sore, pink lines. He'd still been tramping about the dark when I'd fallen sleep, but when the cold woke me some hours later it was to see him huddled on the other side of you.

I dropped into pace with him. 'Not going to scold me?'

His heavy brows were a reprimand of themselves, but we had covered half the ground back to camp before he found the words.

'You be a macky jammer. 'As to give you that.'

'Don't feel lucky.'

'Ai. Mule-'eaded would be a better way of putting it.'

'You used to admire that.'

The scarf covering his mouth twitched with a grin, or mayhaps a grimace.

'Took work off for you. Told me olemun it'd only be a day or two at most, now look at I.'

'Forgive me if I don't weep.'

'Got a reputation to keep.'

'What, with that Four Four who has the lot of you jumping? You used to hate them as much as me.'

'A man has to et.'

'By dobbing in folk to the Four Fours?'

His mouth curdled, but he didn't deny the rumours.

'Look. I ain't fool enough to slog out the piss poor existence most Ffieth lead. Freezing their arses off 'unting. Eking out coin at them tapper trees.'

I laughed. 'The tapper plantation wouldn't even take you. The Four Fours would never think you a man if they got a closer look. You think that manager is going to let to become foreman after your olemun?'

He stopped, then picked up his pace and I had to hurry to keep up.

'I ne'er 'ad the bleeds, not even once,' he said.

'Didn't say you had. Not that the Four Fours could care less.'

He grumbled under his breath.

'What's that?'

'I said Oh always called me by an ee.'

'He never got a look at your nether parts did he.'

'What 'ave ee got to do with aught?'

'Nothing! All I'm saying is God Children have a different way of seeing at things. Comes from reading all those Fallen books.'

He'd gone sthum again.

'Don't play the glenner, Dee. You know well enough how the Four Fours think. You were the one who told us as childr. I mean, why else bind your breasts?'

The clearing showed up ahead, but Dee rounded on me.

'I ain't the one that should be soul searching. Trappers be one ilk, but can't curse an 'ole city.'

I looked down at my boots, dense with mud and snow, and shivered. Dee had said before that he'd felt as if we were being watched, well I felt it now. It could be the trappers, looking to get revenge, but there was nothing to be seen but trees.

No doubt that Dee was watching me though. His shoulders were bent inward like a mutton tinker carrying the clanking, singing avalanche of her life on her back. I liked

his pity even less than his distaste, so I barged past him and now it was Dee that had to skip to keep up.

'Really do think you can be childr till the be wind blown.'

'Mayhaps. '

"Ave the *bleeds*, Asha. Folk can be man or they can be woman and you be woman awlrite.'

'There are mutton and childr too.'

He grabbed my arm and I couldn't dislodge him without losing half my load.

'Bist it so terrible to be woman?'

His hand swung towards my face and I began to duck, but the blow never landed. Instead, the cold leather of his gloves brushed the bridge of my nose, then he resettled his grip around his load and tramped back into camp. I stayed put and fumbled the nub of bone that, years ago, he'd broken.



It had been grey that day, a storm had not long passed over, but the clouds held the heat in well enough that I thought to take the gang to the estuary. There was often flotsam after bad weather at sea and it made the trek worthwhile. One time Dee even got itself a shirt like Four Fours wear, though it had hung on it like a robe and was brown from water damage. Still, it was a find awlrite. Most trips unearthed nothing much of real value, there were men that made their homes here and scavenged anything that might be exchanged for coin before we got a look in, but any pebble or strangely shaped piece of wood could get a shine about it if you pretended that it was part of an Emperor's lost treasure chest. One day, Dee and I promised each other, we'd find a ship's figurehead. So we worked our way along the sands, pushing the dark muck with sticks. Toad wasn't there that day, being lain up after its olemun had hit the bottle too hard and then it, and Shar and Lou wandered off after an hour or so.

Dee watched them scabble off up the bank. 'They best 'ope that they don't both adult the same.'

I was too intent working my stick through the mud to pay much notice. Dee, though, was set on making its point.

'If it be the bleeds for both of 'em then at least they'll be comfort to one another in time, but as men they'll ne'er be together.'

I grunted and wedged my stick under a rock to try and turn it.

'Which'll be the woman you reckon?' Dee said.

'Parps they don't 'ave to adult. Could be like Pan,' I said.

'You know that bes a story, spanner.'

'Nowt ever be just a story,' I said, parroting a phrase of Mi'luvver that I didn't fully understand. Dee snorted and squatted nearby, watching me worry at my rock.

'Them Brothers call yous a girl,' it said eventually.

'No they don't.'

'Does too.'

'No.'

'Ai. And me Olemun says them Brothers almost always be right. Four Fours know these things.'

I kicked the stick out of its hands. 'Take that back, Dee Macabee.'

'Don't 'ave willywonker does you?'

'Whas ee to do with aught?'

'Folk with willywonkers ne'er come into their bleeds. Thas what me Olemun says.'

I scrunched my face up and bent back to my rock.

'Seen you peeing. Does it squatting you does.'

'So does you.'

It pushed me and I thrashed my stick in front of its nose. 'Mayhaps it'll pop out later. Mayhaps you be a poopface fart fart.'

'So you doesn't 'ave one?'

'Do!' I shouted, at the same time as being aware that I wasn't sure if I did want one.

'Show it I then.'

'Can't see it. Bes small now, but be macky once I grown.'

Dee laughed and my face grow hot.

"Aving a willywonker don't make a soul a man. Allabody knows it,' I said.

Dee stood up and drove its fingers under my rock, grunting as it tried to lift it. I watched on with crossed arms. Dee wasn't sure what made a man any more than I did.

After much sweating, the mud let the rock loose with a sucking sound and Dee stumbled back, dirt covering its front, then righted itself with a defiant look. I tilted my chin away, so it threw the rock at my feet and smeared its hands down its leggings. 'You better get the bleeds, mind.'

'Won't.'

'Will. Cos I gonna come into my manning and marry you.'

I shoved Dee only for it to dance away, miming a large belly.

'Ll brung you loadsa meat so you grow ansum fat.'

'No!'

'Ll make me babbers plenny.'

I shrieked and ran at it, but it dodged easily. Furious tears seared my cheeks, but every move I made Dee was one step ahead. It wasn't right, wasn't how things were supposed to be – I was the leader of the gang. Dee had to listen! My last lunge left me face in the mud and weeping. There was a piece of rotten flotsam not far in front of me and I calmed my tears to scuttle over to it.

'The figurehead!' I shouted.

Dee came bounding over and I swung the flotsam hard into the back of its knees. It landed in the mud and rose up with its face a mess of brown and red.

'Girl!' It screeched.

I got two punches in before Dee flipped us, then the pair of us were rolling down the slope flailing and squealing to the estuary's edge. The freezing water drenched my back as Dee pinned me with its knees and walloped me right in the face. Waves smashed the inside of my skull. My vision split.

Then I was up on the bank, spitting out the water Dee had splashed on me. There was a swollen scream between my eyes because Dee had only gone and broken my bleeden nose.

I shoved Dee off of me. 'Ate you. Effing 'ate you!'

It didn't look much troubled by this and as I stumbled away, pawing mud and tears from my face, its shout rang after me.

'Doesn't care if your nose be wonky, Asha Beh! Gonna marry you all the same!'



## Chapter Thirty-Six

When I stamped back into camp, Dee was bent over the fire pit, knacking his gloves with clumsy strikes of the flint. I dropped my wood and hissed. A splinter had gone right through my glove. I should have stolen Brunel's leather pair before leaving instead of bringing my cloth ones.

'Ey?' Dee said, but I ignored him and pulled off the glove to chew at the splinter, but it had dug under the skin and couldn't be dislodged. Never mind, there were more pressing matters at hand. I went to the furs only to find them empty.

My intention of giving Dee the silent treatment died before I'd even had the chance to let him know it. 'Where's ma?'

He didn't look up from his work. 'Call o'nature, like as is.'

I peered into the trees. 'Ma?'

The open sky bore down, blankly apathetic.

'Ma!'

Dee lowered his flint. 'Mother Bennett. Leave the woman to 'er pissing.'

But what he couldn't have understood was in that moment I was back in the Library, that first visit, as you stood with your back to me, then walked on.

'She's unsteady on her feet. Can't even talk.'

Dee dashed the ash from his palms and nodded at the snow churned up by your boots.

'If you want to bother a laydee about 'er business be my guest.'

I left him cursing over the sparks and followed the slurred imprints as they took off between the trees and down the slope. There was a fear on me then, worse than when the trappers had threatened us, worse than the orange flash of Death. I picked up my steps.

The high note of water, fractured by splashing, came from up ahead and I began to run, down a thicket-strangled bank to the edge of the river. You'd left your dress and jerkin there, rolled atop of your boots as neatly as if you'd laid them at the foot of a Brother's bed. I stood over them, catching my breath, then turned to the river.

Your nakedness had always been your own. Coy, to the point of miserly, you were. Even when I imagined the circumstances of my birth it was with you lain back in full skirts and shawl, legs parted only wide enough to permit me passage and no more. The

most that I had ever seen of you, besides face and arms to the elbows, was the dark flash of domed shoulders and a back like a wall as you dashed from one dress into another.

But ours was a life built on scraps and so I made do with what was on offer. Remember when, still a babber, I had the habit of lingering by the outhouse when you were shitting? The slit between the door and wall was a glimpse into a murky kingdom of obscure shadows and compelling smells, until you would realise what I was at and bang on the metal sides. *Can't bear to be left alone for even a minute that childr*, you'd tell our neighbours. But that wasn't it, not even close.

I worshiped the bound muscle of your arms, those great vessels that could have lifted me to the sun had you been willing. They had twelve moles on counting, at least up to the elbows, which was where my knowledge ended. Sometimes, I'd draw constellations from them – the pan, the broom, the cudgel. There would be others too, under the rolls of your sleeves, mayhaps even scars. I would see these, one day.

How surprised I was when Marm Nelson became my mi'luvver and she'd spend half a morning in a state of undress – leaning over the soup, singing as she stirred, so that I'd grow tense with fear that her dugs would be splashed. Your modesty was uncommon, see. Why, I knew that Dee had shared a bed with his parents until his adulting, mayhaps even after. How wonderful, to share sweat, skin, smell and heat under the winter's indifferent breath. But I wasn't worthy of that part of you. It must be the sin in me.

So to see you there, in the river, stripped to your animal duress, your rolls of fat wedged into layers and buttocks as big as udders, I felt if I'd been plunged into those freezing waters. I didn't want this. Not after all these years. To see you so reduced.

You were scrubbing at yourself with a fistful of moss. There were three holes in the thin ice by the bank where you'd waded out and it looked cold enough that the whole river have likely would be solid if it weren't hastening on at a speed. You could slip, go under, if the current caught you or if you started fitting. I shook myself free of the shock and tugged off my boots to wade in after.

The water flayed where it met skin and stole all feeling within moments so that my footing was clumsy over the stones at the bottom of the river. How you hadn't gone a pisser already, I didn't know. You were flinching from the cold, but you showed no sign of stopping your cleaning. The moss had covered your skin in smears of green.

Reaching you, I took your arm and pulled, only to stop as you turned.

'That's–' I said. 'That's–'

You shook me off.

Because there, spiralling out from your belly button as if it were birthing the world was a swirling hive of silver. The marks were greyed and veined, puckered by child-birth, but that they were words was clear enough. My throat knotted to a point of pain.

You had about five passages in total. The text didn't make it as far as your second tire.

'That's—' But I couldn't make myself say it.

You shoved back with your eyes, though the left side of your mouth twitched.

The anger reared at me side ways. I kicked out of the water and up the bank, no care for the knife of the frozen earth on my bare feet, nor for the splash that followed my retreat.

Because the Brothers had written on you, Mother. You had known, intimately, what their tattooing meant and offered me up for the same.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

*If the snow comes, your face will freeze like that, you would say whenever my expression was less than polite. All the marms I knew were full of such warnings. Go abed with wet 'air be asking for fever. Piss on spring's first frost and your pee will burn for a week. Sup the soup when it ain't your turn and Keety will come cleave off the 'and at the wrist. Death, it seemed, took slight easily.*

But unlike most of these mutton tales, the warning about my face freezing stirred my fearful scepticism. Snow did freeze, no doubting that. Stamp around our yard for too long and it would seize up my toes and littles. It had even blackened the tip of Mister Pallin's nose so that it fell off, but my littles always thawed back by the hearth and Mister Pallin had got a leather replacement made. Might my face fall off too? Stranger happenstances had come to pass and I was too young to be safe in my assumptions.

The doubts gnawed at me until they were worse than whatever the snow could do and I decided to test the saying. I sat at the window for a whole morning, waiting for the first snowflake, then rushed out and twisted my face into a snarl at the clouds. See, if I was doomed to wear the same expression forever after then at least I would look macky scary.

I stayed there, in this grimace, until I could hold the sneer no longer, but indoors, before the looking glass, my face moved as easily as it always had. The muscles were stiff, sure, but frozen was an exaggeration. I was relieved. And disappointed. Because I cared little for the truth of some mutton tale, the real question had been how much you could be trusted.

And yet mayhaps something of that snarl had stuck, deep in the muscle, in the very bone, because it was there now, ripping up through my face as I stormed away from the river.

The slip and scratch of the bramble slope gave away to ferns, their covering of snow burst to powder under my march and dusted my trousers white. The cold didn't touch me though, my whole body throbbed with heat, it threatened burn through me and leave nothing but brittle bone. I thrust through the lashings of willow branches and stumbled, steadying myself against the trunk. Realisation had lodged its gallstones in my innards. The willow curtain whipped about my head, slashing yellow and white. Then the back of my throat gaped, bending me over to disgorge a bellyful of air. But this stilled,

slowly, and my eyes refocused on the delicate star of a wood anemone that had secreted its face through the snow at my foot. White on white. Blink and you'd miss it.

I forced myself to stand and smeared my mouth over the shoulder of my jerkin. What did I want of you? Not an apology. A sorry couldn't rid me of the words blazoned into my skin. Pity served me little better, I'd been enfeebled enough over the years. I didn't even wish for understanding – not now that I knew that you, more than anyone, should know what offering me up to the Brothers had meant. I suppose what I had wanted was nothing that you could give me but what I could give myself. To look in your face say, *you did this to me. You knew what it meant and you did it anyway.*

I stumbled on, pausing only occasionally as emotion glugged in my caw, and found myself back at the campsite. Dee was still there, feeding the fire. I slumped onto the log and the ringing of my ears subsided.

'Asha?' Dee's wan face appeared, level with mine. The gap in the canopy showed enervated clouds, yellowing with the warning of rain. Time had slipped its cogs, I couldn't say how long been I'd sat there or when I'd walked away from the river and the splash that had followed me.

Mother. I was afraid then. If another fit had started when you hit the water...

Dee followed as I hastened back to the river. Walking, because if I ran that would be admitting that I'd left you there to drown.

We froze at the top of the bank. You lay half-in, half-out of the water, arms knuckled to your chest as the last sparks of the fit died out. Two figures were crouched over you. They glanced up at Dee's curse. Those eyes were wide and owl-bright.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Honey and lemon; Suffolk wool smelling of hillside heather; spiced coider, golden in the glow of the fireside – these were the comforts brought to mind by the voice of the fey that had healed me. The whispering of those that worked on you was the hum of winter through ill-fitted windows, rusted hinges and the husk of leaves skittering along cobblestones.

I held Dee back at the top of the bank. Once they had seen that we weren't approaching, the fey quickly had dismissed us. Turned away to your care, they could have almost been Ffieth. It was the eyes that had betrayed them, they were limpid, their surfaces swimmingly moist as if in sorrow, though their faces had carried no other mark of emotion.

As we watched, their speaking gathered to storm that stung the air like a tuning fork and I grew afraid. When the fey had healed me it had felt like the work of minutes. Why then weren't you back on your feet? Perhaps the fey were wondering the same question, for a look passed between them and they lifted you. A whimper escaped you then and all thoughts blinked from my head. I ran down the bank and latched onto the nearest fey. The arm, which had looked childlike from a distance, revealed itself, under my grip, to be bound muscle and sinew. The fey tried to shrug me off, but I kept hold and its face snapped up, eyes flaming. Then its mouth opened.

That voice was velvet – it reached me, at first, as a caress, the word so slight that it slipped into me like a blade, barely felt, until the flicker of warmth spread in fire across my abdomen. I didn't let go, but now I was holding on to the fey to stay upright as much as to try and free you. The second word wasn't so subtle, it ploughed into me and the jerk of my stomach answered. Stars frizzled in the thinned air as bile hit the back of my throat. But still I held fast. The third word ripped the ground from underneath me and pain ground its heel into my body.

Then Dee was there, dragging me back and I blinked up at the blank sky as the agony fizzled into nausea.

'Asha.' Dee was patting the side of my face. 'Asha. We gotta go if we ain't gonna lose 'er.'

I staggered to my feet and we kept our distance as the fey carried you north along the line of the river.



Their campsite was positioned in a hollow that made it near impossible to spy out until you were on it. Dee and I crouched on the incline and watched as they carried you into one of the tents that were strung between the trees.

There were ten on my count, each stitched from a unique mishmash of hides and cloth that looked like it had once been sacking or good linen. Whatever their previous lives, the colours were now muted and muddled, bringing to mind a forgotten fairground.

There was no sign of other fey now that those that had been carrying you had disappeared inside, though, given the number of tents, it seemed safe to assume that others were around, mayhaps many. Dee had his flip knife out, but I shoved it back in his pocket, it would be even less use here than with the trappers. Not that my magic would do us any good either.

As we watched, smoke began to curl from a slit in the tent that you'd been whisked into. I had to hope the fire was for warmth.

'Bist they doing?' Dee whispered.

I shook my head. The fey must know full well that we were here, they'd glanced back several times when we were following, but now that we weren't trying to grab them they appeared to have lost interest.

'Healing her,' I said, though there was no way of telling this.

'Sure weren't 'ealing they used on you.'

'No.'

Though the sickness the fey's words had faded it had only been replaced a stronger malaise. Everything was wrong. It was as if the world had been unpicked and stitched back together with the lining on the outside and legs for sleeves. Mi'luvver had said that I had been claimed, yet the fey had only shown interest in you. Because you were sick, I supposed, but why then weren't they concerned with my tattoo or bleeds? The disappointment should have crippled me, but that day had already drained me of feeling.

I stood. 'I'm going in.'

Dee tugged on my leg, but I set off down the slope and, after hissing my name several times, he hurried to keep up.

The hollow was situated in a grove of pines and a carpet of browned needles crunched under our step, but I wasn't trying to be stealthy, even though it was soon clear that the campsite was far from empty. The shadow of movement came from within canvas and a gaunt faced fey, smaller than any I'd seen, peered out at us from a tent flap, only to drop it as we looked back.

A fey was crouched outside the tent that they had taken you into, though it only watched our approach. Under its furs it wore clothing that was little different to the tunics and leggings seen on any street in Brizzletun. The quivering cadence of whispering came from behind it.

I looked to Dee and he shook his head, though whether this was a warning or an admittance of ignorance it was impossible to say.

'You have my mother,' I told the fey.

Those incandescent eyes blinked.

I licked my lips and looked to Dee again and received another wan stare.

'You have my mother.'

'Don't think ee understands,' Dee said.

I searched the fey's face and found it as placid as Caneshum lake in mid-winter.

'I'm going in,' I told it, then flinched as its lips parted, but the wet flash of its tongue was only a yawn. It settled back into its blank watchfulness and I lifted the tent flap.

Inside was a dim space, tall enough for me to stand in at a stoop, and so thick with wood smoke that my eyes streamed. You'd been laid out on a rug next to the fire. Though your eyes were open, you showed no recognition as I inched closer. The fey were still bent over you, three of them now. One was probing the slack contours of your face with fingers like twigs from the bottom of a fire pit. It glanced up at my entrance and I stopped short of the rug.

'What's happening to her?' I said.

Yet these fey gave me even less mind than their companion outside and returned to their work.

I withdrew to the side of the tent and bashed my thigh into a barrel that smelt of salted fish. I lowered myself between it and what appeared to be a bedding roll. Across the tent was an open crate of round, colourful objects – they were so out of place that it took me some moments to recognise them. Oranges. I'd seen them plenty of times in freight from the Heartlands, but how they'd made their way here I didn't know.

I fretted at the splinter in my thumb. In my panic about you I'd forgotten to retrieve my glove when I'd pulled it off to inspect the damage and the unfamiliar heat of the tent



made white fire from the life returning to my fingers. At a rustle of fabric, Dee appeared and perched next to me. The grey query of his eyes blinked, as if unbelieving.

We waited. A flat exhaustion nudged behind my eyes. The events of the past hours felt muffled by the dimness and the susurrations of the fey's whispering. None of this seemed quite real.

'They say aught?' Dee breathed in my ear and I shivered with the warmth of it.

I shook my head.

'Try writ to 'em. Still 'as that journal of yours, ain't you?'

I patted my pockets and found that I did. My pen and ink was back with my satchel at the trapper campsite, but there was a short length of charcoal in the same pocket that hadn't been crushed, so I found a blank page and scribbled out a message, then pushed myself up to approach the nearest fey.

It took a long time for it to notice me, since I was too afraid to tap it on the shoulder after what had happened by the river, but, coming to what appeared to be a natural break in its whispering, it lent back and swung those lamp eyes on me. Its pupils caught the light of the fire and disgorged it in a green shimmer.

I extended the journal with shaking hands and, after a moment, the fey took it from me and turned it with a dull curiosity. Finding the hinge of the spine, it opened and shut it several times, then pressed the journal back into my hands. It hadn't given the message a second glance.

'Please. Just— try,' I said.

I reached out to take hold of its sleeve, only to catch myself as I remembered. But it had already fixated on the hand.

'I didn't mean—' I began only for it to take the hand up and lift it to its face.

That touch was cool and dry. A small noise squeezed from its lips, more of a peep than speech, then it let go and returned to you.

I cradled the hand with my other. The fey had done something to it, I could feel that, but whatever it was had been was so slight that at first I couldn't tell.

I held it up to the thin orange light that came through the canvas. The silver lettering on the hand was the same as it had always been, but then I saw it — the splinter was gone.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

The fey camp kept the timing of glaciers. Dee and I were given free rein, as far as we could tell. No attempt was made to stop us in our wanders, though we were tailed whenever we left your tent. Save for the childr, telling the fey apart was difficult, but I came to recognise our guard from its mantle of lynx fur and laconic stroll that looked almost like a limp until closer attention revealed the taut poise. Then there was the orange robe it had taken to wearing since our second day in camp, though it was cut in an unfamiliar fashion there was little doubt that it had once belonged to a Brother. I'd tried talking to this fey on multiple occasions but to no avail. It wasn't clear whether the fey even spoke, not in the way that we understand it. I certainly never saw them in conversation.

Needless to say, all my pleading about the Spot and tattoo had fallen on deaf ears. Lack of understanding was one explanation, but I'd begun to accept, with dull disappointment, that the fey didn't seem to think that any of my ills needed fixing. It wasn't fair to be angry at you for that though, not when you lay unseeing and unmoving in the furs. That didn't mean I wasn't. In fact, I was bleeden furious. After all those of years looking for the fey, the only interest they had was for you.

Dee had lost his terror but remained on edge. He didn't like to leave the tent, save to piss, and had taken up residence between the crate of oranges and a sack of teddies. He spent the hours watching you but mostly me, when I was around. It was better than the lecturing, I supposed, but it irritated me more than I could explain. Then, most things were pissing me off. It was that tension, as much as the guilt, that drove me on my stalks around the camp.

The third day saw me take my usual stomp around the perimeter, driven by these bitter feelings. Primroses had opened at the base of the trees since the day before and spring could be felt in the easing of the cold. It was still bloody freezing, mind, but, once I'd picked up my feet, it was bearable.

Most of the fey were inside their tents or off in the forest, they would return at odd hours with a basket or spray of rabbits, though if they had other tasks beyond hunting it was hard to say. One adult was taking advantage of the rare sun to hunch on a rickety stool in the clearing between the tents and scrape flesh from a rabbit hide. A babber

sucked on a rock at its foot and stared at me with unblinking absorption, though the adult didn't even look up. It had no scar on its face or ring its ear, so it was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman; if, indeed, the fey divided themselves in this way.

As I paused, the adult stopped in its scraping to draw the knife along a whetstone in long, measured strokes. Some might look at their way of working and call them lazy, but I had spent enough time in the camp by then to note their deceptive industry. They might pick through the tents, cooking or working at wood, with the sluggishness of tippi but if I let my concentration slip when I looked back it would be to find the task complete and fey vanished.

I turned up the collar on Brunel's jerkin as I followed the line of tents further into the bowl of the campsite. The light had a yellow cast and the clouds threatened more snow despite the sunshine. The iron scent left the air stale. No birds sang. All was held inside itself, watchful, patient. I stamped as I walked, trying to keep the tingle of feeling inside my toes. *Toes like pea-sticks*. And because I was angry. *Childrish*. Ai, your nagging wasn't needed to know this – if only I had the excuse of still being a childr.

The orange gleam of the vulpes showed through the trees up ahead and I slowed. Unlike the fey, the vulpes were most certainly interested in me, though in much the same way that they stared at the squirrels that chattered at them from the trees. Their brushed coats were tied with strips of cloth and rodent bones that clinked as the beasts tossed their heads. It was easy to see why folk said that the fey rode Death, their golden eyes were quick with her wit.

I made sure to stop out of the reach of their halters and, seeing this, they yawned black gullets to show rows of enamelled knives. The closest stretched its front legs in doggish friendliness that I wasn't foolish enough to trust and, seeing this, its eyes narrowed and it launched itself at me only to be cut short by its tether. My fey guard slapped at its flank and the vulpes slumped back on its haunches to slash a look at me from under its long lashes.

I hurried on, beyond the line of the camp. The childr had gathered by the river and were leaning in over a young tapper sapling sprouting from the bank, clicking their tongues. I wandered to the edge of their huddle, nervous about disturbing whatever this was. There was nothing spectacular about the tree to the naked eye – it was a crooked line of chalk barely thick enough to support its own weight, though its branches were pricked with the clenched buds of leaves. Whatever this was, the childr were absorbed in it enough to forgo their usual staring and I was preparing to continue along the bank when I noticed that one of the leaves was partly unfurled. It had been shut moments ago,

hadn't it? Or had I missed it? I strained my eyelids to watch. It was just a leaf yet there was so much detail to the careful feathering of the bud when studied closely.

The chattering had stopped and four sets of gleaming eyes peered up at me. I looked back and the nearest fey shuffled aside. As I knuckled into that space, their taut silence pricked across my skin and I licked my lips, then sucked my tongue against the roof of my mouth in a click. The fey chattered at the back of their throats.

I clucked again, more forcefully this time, but the bud remained impassive. Mayhaps it wasn't a matter of what was said but how. I experimented with varying my tone, first commanding, then angry and finally pleading. The childr to my left bent forwards, catching my eye as it did so, and slowed its whisper to the individual syllables. I copied, exactly to my ears, but nothing happened.

By this point, the fey childr were clasping each other with their bony arms, pushing and chattering. Laughing, were they? My patience snapped and I shouted at the tree. Its leaves shifted on my breath, just a fraction, then resettled, apathetic to the burn of my throat.

The childr, however, had fallen quiet and all at once they scattered, leaving me, alone, on the bank with the sapling that wouldn't listen. I closed my fists around it and shook it, but when I unsealed my hands it was to find that the bud had broken off.



Dee was waiting outside the tent on my return, peering about the camp, though he let up when he caught sight of me.

I stamped the snow off my boots. 'Don't worry. It's not like I'm going to run off to find they fey.'

'Least I wouldn't 'ave to follow you 'alf the way across the forest this time,' he said. His hands were deep in his pockets and his was back hunched. It wasn't hard to see the childr he'd been when he was in such a mood.

I gave him an ugly smile and thumbed the torn leaf bud, then let it fall into the scrub. Dee noted this and a soft 'v' pressed into his brow. I didn't want to stand there with him, feeling his eyes make their endless parade of my face, but I couldn't bear going back inside to the muttering of the fey and your deflated form either.

A crack diverted our attention and we looked up at the fey working on the hide. It was skinning a new rabbit now and the sound of the legs being broken resounded through the trees like gun fire. Then that job was over and the fey nicked the coat with

its knife so that the skin could be rolled off the dedun like leggings. The babber dropped its rock and tipped over as it reached for it, hiccupping a gullet full of tears. The adult picked it up with one arm, pressed its lips to its ear and the babber sucked back its tears. Within the minute it was happily sucking on its rock once more.

'They're just people,' I said.

Dee startled. His eyes were coruscating blue ice. I spoke to my feet instead.

'For so long, I thought that if I could only find them then – I don't know. I guess they were never going to save me. Or destroy me. I don't think they thought of me at all.

They're just – people. '

To hear it in my ears made me feel even more stupid than when I'd been thinking it. What else would they be?

'There be other folk that think of you,' Dee said.

My hand lifted, reaching to rub my nose, but I caught myself and hooked my braids behind an ear instead. By the time I had gathered the courage to lift my eyes to his, he'd already looked back to the fey.

'Wonder though,' he said. 'If the fey ain't descendants of the Fallen too.'

This was surprising. 'Their magic is so different from the stories though. The magic of the Fallen was like that the Four Fours are recovering, all in machines.'

'Mayhaps. But the Fallen 'ad powers that them Four Fours daren't even dream of. Power over earth and limb, could stave off Death 'erself. Mayhaps the fey are those that kept 'old of some of that knowing.'

I shrugged, it's not like we had any way of telling. The fey had now slipped the glistening musculature of the rabbit free of its coat and was scraping gristle from the hide.

'Asha.' Dee had turned back to me. 'Bist you gonna do when we reach 'ome?'

My innards gave a sudden stab of sympathy for the rabbit.

'Can't shirk the bleeds forever,' Dee said.

'I'm not ready for that.'

'Don't think any soul be fully ready for adulting.'

'Why do we have to be though? I don't want to be woman, man, or childr.'

My stubbornness must have finally worn him down, his tone was more weary than angry. 'Whas doest that leave?'

I parted my lips and was surprised to find the answer waiting. 'I'm going to be a witch.'

His exhale met the cold air and dissipated. The fey had finished its work on the hide and returned inside its tent, rabbit under one arm and babber under the other.

Dee spoke so softly that I almost missed it. 'Could marry a witch.'

He must have had something of the fey's magic him, the words met my face with blunt force. I didn't dare look into his.

'Mayhaps,' I said. 'Mayhaps, Dee Macabee.'

Then I pushed inside the tent to see you.

## Chapter Forty

The fey continued to work on you for two more days. You alternated between blank watchfulness and fitting, as if their speech was an affront to your broken body. But, with time, the attacks grew more infrequent and gave way to a vacant glassiness. You stood, ate and saw to your toilet by yourself, if with an aching carefulness, but the left side of your face was as slack as ever and you lowered your gaze whenever Dee or I talked to you, as if our words were in rebuke.

The fey, however, seemed content with this progress and, one by one, they left their whispering and didn't come back. My fey had chased away Death herself and had stitched broken bone back together, so what did it mean that they couldn't they fix you? We waited another day, uncertain whether the fey would return to finish what they'd started, until I stepped out to see that the camp was being dismantled.

How they'd made the decision to move on was hard to say, there had been no signal that Dee or I had observed, but within hours we'd been ushered out of our tent and the canvas had been stowed into the panniers looped over the back of the vulpes. We sat by the remaining fire pit, abandoned in the rush.

The first fey mounted their beasts and set off without any farewell. A rock, quartz or sharp edged slate, had crystallized in my chest.

But the fey astride the nearest vulpes was watching us. It held my gaze, long enough to be intentional, then patted the fur behind it. At first I didn't understand, but then it blinked and patted once more.

'Asha?' Dee said. There was more fear in his voice than warning.

My heart was entangled in briars. How easy it would be to pull myself up behind the fey. Because what would my life be if I went back to Brizzletun? Cleaning and the Brothers, mayhaps even an early death whenever the Brothers tired of reading me.

But there was you to think of. The curse had been my doing and if the fey couldn't fix you it was all the more important to get you home to Mi'luvver. She was your last hope now.

The fey tipped its head to one side, as much of a question as had been asked during our time in the camp. I swallowed, then blinked back and dug my fingers into the frosted earth beside me. The fey turned away and, without so much as a nod, dug a heel

into the vultures' flank. The beast leapt forwards, then it was just the three of us once more.



It took us another two days journeying before we reached home. They were grim, foot sore days. The toe of my left boot flapped open and chewed small rocks and strands of fern between the insole and rubber. Dee pulled a shoulder hoisting you to your feet on the first morning and made no qualms about giving us regular updates about his pain. It was becoming increasingly easy to forget the years that had come between us, or perhaps he was erasing them. At times of distraction his face would sag into the expression of placid bafflement that he had worn as a child, only to hurry into a grin when he noticed me watching. The vulnerability of that smile found my chest like a knife twist and I was glad to have the excuse of your unsteadiness to keep you between us. Evenings, when the dark settled in to smooth away the rude bluntness of our weary bodies, the gentle sound of his breath lodged itself in the base of my throat. It was hard to know what to feel about that.

You hadn't fitted since the fey had left and could walk without support, though a limp tugged on your left side as if there were two souls within you, fighting for control. When I nestled against you beneath the furs and traced the pliable, dullness that had sunk into your brow with my eyes, my fingertips would tingle with the urge to sink into that tensile flesh and mould. *Pretty as a picture*, folk had always said. *Pretty as a picture*.

The bustle of the city was garish after our time in the forest – the forthright angles of buildings carved the sky into rigid proportions and we shrunk from the clatter of horses and the stink of too many bodies too close together. The city should have been shrouded in thorns, swept with dust, sails lowered and clocks stopped, but nothing had changed. Save, mayhaps, me. I flinched at the cries of hawkers and childr as we travelled the last streets to our end of the city.

We were nearing Wells Lane when Marm Peter came running, putting creases into her skirts in her haste.

'Doree? Be that you, Doree?'

You didn't look up at the name, though the left side of your face had started its shivering.

'Ain't seen you at work in days. Doree?'



Dee put himself between the pair of you and I drew you into my side, though when I looked back it was to see Marm Peter's frowning in thought as she peered over his shoulder. I was thankful then that he had let me keep my scarf up, there would be gossip enough as it was without folk realising who the 'young man' at your shoulder was.

Then, at last, were standing at our gate. The house we called home was shuttered up and dark – I couldn't bear the thought of going in and trailing mud over the rugs without you calling me out on it. Dee laid a hand on my shoulder.

'Best get 'er to Marm Nelson.'

I was so grateful that he was still with us that I forgave the touch.

At Mi'luvver's door I found myself awkward at the thought of pushing in unannounced and so took hold of the cast iron knocker, something that I'd only done out of play in years.

I'd wanted change, some sign that our leaving had left its mark, but I hadn't wanted the sight that greeted us. The woman who answered the door was much reduced, the beauty had sloughed from her and her dress, stained with dirt and sweat, sagged about her shrunken form in creases. The flat eyes that met ours without really seeing were pressed in by dark coins.

'Mi'luvver,' I said.

Bafflement gave way to emotion – relief, joy, fear – each too fast to settle, then she let out a bellow and crushed us to her. For a while all was lost to the shudder of her bosom.

'Bes back. Bes back. *Bes speaking.* Oh my childr.'

She pulled away to squish my cheeks, but free of her support you slumped. Dee had you by the armpits before you reached the ground and Mi'luvver's witching took over. We got you sat by the fire, then Dee and I stood back to let Mi'luvver see to her work.

Exhaustion, as thick and soft as a feather-down, settled on my shoulders. I'd done what I'd promised, I'd carried you home, but now there was the matter of what was going to happen to me. I'd cursed you, dressed as a man, run away from my bleeds. Hell, I was in my bleeds. I looked to the door and found Dee watching, my gratitude of earlier dissipated. He still thought that I still might run, didn't he.

'We should get her a fresh dress from home,' I said.

'Gis yourself one while yous at it.'

'Hardly a bouquet yourself.' But I didn't feel the lightness with which I said it.

Our house was still and cavernous. I didn't delay in fetching my spare tunic and one of your dresses. Dee stood outside my room as I changed. He must have forgotten how I

used to sneak out through the window onto the outhouse roof as a childr, but I was too tired to try or even know what I wanted.

Back at Mi'luvvers I thought that someone must have put damp logs on the fire, that's how the crackle sounded until I saw that it came from your mouth. Mi'luvver's own lips had pressed into a pale pleat. Her magic was both listening and telling, it was harder to work when she had to rely on her words alone. And what would she do when she found out that it was my curse?

My sleep-numbered feet tripped on the rug, but Dee caught me. Mi'luvver had drawn out her furs ready and there was little I could do to resist any more. I sank into their softness and through into a dreamless dark.



Mi'luvver was still about her telling when I woke to morning streaming through the window, though your face was peaceful with sleep. She stopped when she saw that I was awake, the coins under her eyes had deepened.

'Told me the 'ole of ee,' she said with a nod towards Dee's sleeping form on the other side of the hearth. I pulled myself over and laid my head on her knee rather than meet the disappointment in her face. She stroked the curled hairs at the nape of my neck, but it was a brief touch, the hand withdrew.

'Curses be 'ard to put to right.'

I sat up and drew my knees to my chest.

'Least you look ashamed of yourself.' She sighed. 'Little good that does your ma.' And we both turned to you. Sleep made a loose pit of your mouth.

'She's not a poor anything,' I said, then realised how that sounded and crushed my curled little fingers against my front teeth. 'I saw the writing, on her belly.'

Mi'luvver was quiet for such a long time that I risked a look at her.

'Our Doree were always a silly mare.'

I wasn't about to argue with that, but Mi'luvver was still struggling to gather her words.

'Suppose she ne'er told you the where 'ow of ee?' She said eventually.

I shook my head. She took up her mug and wet her mouth, though it was miraculous that she had any telling left in her after working all night.

'This,' she said, 'bes the story of them Brothers and a childr.'

## Chapter Forty-One

This bes the story of them Brothers and a childr. Grew up in Brizzletun Ole Town, our childr did, not so long ago and not so far from 'ere. Might even seen that 'ouse of its birth yourself.

‘Appy it were, or 'appy enough, 'appy as any childr that comes from a family of too little food and too many mouths. But that were just the way of it.

Coors, that family got 'ungerful in the winter, what with so many bellies and so little vittle, so when a Brother came calling saying ee'll pay good money for childr, well that olemun said, "ere 'as one of mine." So that Brother took our childr and led it to that there library.

Our childr were afeared then, but fear were an ole cocker of its, and so when that there Brother told it to strip, it did, and when that there Brother told it to lie on a table, it did, and when that there Brother took out needle and ink, it lay there pretty as them Brothers set to making words upon its belly.

It 'urt though, it 'urt real bad. Not just from the prick of the needle but the cramps in its stomach like none it 'ad ever known. So that childr groans and rocks till them Brothers 'ad to stop. Then that childr felt for the dampness 'tween its legs and saw them fingers 'ad come back red.

Ai, wouldn't you know it, while them words 'ad been pressed in, that there childr 'as been gone and become a woman.

Well now, what should 'ave been a cause for merry-making made them Brothers gurt worried, for they thought the bleeds the sin of Woeman. And so they did tell that childr – that woman – that she were no longer use to them.

*Can't tattoo a woman that already come of age. The sin of Woeman would stop the text from settling in proper,* they said.

So they called for that woman's olemun to come claim 'is daughter, though ee'd 'ad none on the gissing.

Up that olemun puffed, red in the face from drink as much as all them steps, and went right to the Brother in charge, ee did, waved a finger in 'is face.

"Ad a deal," said ee. 'Gissed what were asked, dinnt I? Can't be demanding pay back.'

Cos the truth were that ee'd already drunken 'alf of it.

But them Brothers pointed to that there woman of ours, the red trickling down 'er thighs, and said that she be damaged goods. *Now, pay up, like.*

But if that man 'ad 'ad no use for a childr, ee 'ad even less need of a daughter.

'Money be all spent,' ee said. 'Can't be gissing it back. So keep 'er. 'Ave no use for she. Do with what you will.' Then ee barged past that there Brother and out ee went, carrying the stink of drink with 'im.

The childr – the woman – were afraid then, no matter what 'er olemun said, for folk that crossed the Brothers like so were as like to swing from the gallows afore the week were out and ee were still 'er flesh and blood. Yet into 'er despair did come a voice like the skylark in spring.

'I'll take her and pay off the debts,' that voice said.

Our woman looked up then to see a Brother lay an 'and on 'er shoulder. And this were 'ow our childr – our woman – became a wife. Or not wife, that wouldn't do with 'er being Ffieth, but you catch me drift.

The pair of them lived in an 'ouse on the Downs, proper fancy like, with three floors and large rooms and a generator that filled them rooms with growling – growling like that of the Brother as, in each of 'em rooms, our woman put it out and ee put it in. And even though at times it 'urt and ee wants of our woman appetites that she 'ad ne'er 'eard of afore, she were 'appy cos she loved that goodly, keen Brother that 'ad saved the life of 'er olemun and 'ers from ruin. She loved 'is fine chin and the gentle bow of 'is back from pouring over them books all day long. She loved 'ow 'is eyes grew large behind 'is spectacles and their owl blink – for 'ow fine a thing be it that a soul should 'ave the luxury of sitting about to wreck 'is sight? Imagine any of the brutes she 'ad grown up being able to boast such! But even better, she loved the meat and tippi and lard ee put on the table. On that love, she grew proper macky till she were known as the most ansum woman in miles.

And so she were 'appy. So 'appy, she spent much of 'er days sleeping – fancy 'aving the time! – and eating – ne'er want of anything that woman – so 'appy she wept for it most days. So 'appy that at times she would return to that 'ouse where she grew up, even though the folk there shared daggered words behind 'er back, then to 'er face and finally told 'er she could no longer dip bread into their bowl. Then she were so 'appy that that she din't think she could 'old it inside no longer and she wants to open 'er mouth and –

But 'appiness and vittles ain't all that filled 'er. Afore two years were out, she were with babber.

That babber did grow and in no time at all it were kicking to be out in the world. Such a look on the midwife's face when she pulled it forth that our woman thinks the childr must be a dedun or, worse, that she 'as been and gone and birthed a loaf of bread

or fish like in them tales. But, no, were worse still. The squalling babber were pointed on 'er breast and our woman saw that on each of them wee 'ands were a little. She been gone and laid with a God Child and birthed a Ffieth.

Ne'er mind, there be cures for that, so she told the midwife to fetch 'er darning thread and wrapped ee round those littles tight. Save that Brother of 'ers don't see that right. Came roaring in, ee did, ripped off that thread, and told 'er that she be a backwards woman, simple in the 'ead.

It 'urt, coors, but she knew it ain't 'er Brother's fault. Not really. Were the babber's – such a wilful creature, so full of need it clawed 'er dugs raw day and night. There were sin in it, plain as them littles. And when that there Brother of 'ers suggests that they send that babber away to a place for such childr, she were almost tempted.

But no, it ain't right. Cos she loved it, that babber, for all its sin. It were 'ers, 'er fully. Not like all them fine things the Brother 'ad bought – the 'ouse and the larder and them dresses – deep down she knows that them could melt like snow greeting summer. But she 'ad made that babber 'erself and not a soul could take that from 'er.

And so time ee blew on, as well ee will, and, as that babber grows in 'eight and wilfulness, that there Brother visited less and less. Ee were important, see, becoming more so still and when ee told our woman that ee must follow 'is work back to the 'Eartlands, she understood well enough. Ee loved 'er, ee'll be back, and so she let 'im kiss 'er and 'eld that babber close as ee went, up onto that boat, then were lost to sight. And she were 'appy.



The folding of the womb is a process that is highly difficult to study in action given that any cutting of the growth vessel is likely to end in the death of both child and mother. Some progress in our understanding has been made through examinations of Fallen texts, observations that have been confirmed by dissections of women from the gallows who were known to be at specific points of gestation. Given the creased nature of Fallen knowledge, further studies are required before accepting their conclusions.

## Chapter Forty-Two

There was a little more movement in the left side of your face. I'd comment on this to Dee this every morning and every night before turning in. Mi'luvver's stories were working their magic. Why, then, had you yet to talk or look me in the eye? I chased away these questions by telling myself that you were tired, which you were – most hours would see you slumped by the hearth, chin on your chest, snuffling through dreams.

Dee tailed me around my tasks, lending a hand when they were befitting a man. He was lucky that his olemun was foreman, is all I can say, given how long he'd taken off work. It was doubtful that you'd have a job to return to once you'd recovered, though none of us were cruel enough to raise the matter. As for mine, those Brothers would have to drag me back to the Library, my place was with you. So I stoked the fire, cleaned, topped up the soup and split wood – the numb burn of the axe handle in my palms was a blessing.

Noabody had tried to wrestle Brunel's jerkin from me yet and so I wore it over my tunics and leggings. Mi'luvver wasn't exactly approving, but, for the meantime, she had you to worry about. Little doubt that there'd be proper spuddling when you were better. Brunel laughed and called me a munter. I said he smelt like the whole of Goose Fingers had pissed on him. He told me that he'd preferred me mute. Well, that was likely true enough. Mind, I didn't stray further than our yard, not all folk would be so lenient to see me dressed in such a way.

The week wasn't out before Mi'luvver dragged herself from her watch over you and led me away from my work with the logs. We stamped off the chill in her porch. Within a matter of days the tree line had broken out in green, though the cold still left us hot mouthed.

'Curses be a tricky business,' Mi'luvver said, rubbing a muddy footprint from the tiles with the toe of her boot. 'Only so much a witch can do if it ain't been lifted.'

'Can't you lift it first?'

Her eyes darted up then. 'Only the soul 'oo placed ee can do so.'

The stone in my throat hardened.

She slipped her hands from her armpits to puff into them. They had a greasy sheen and smelt of green, furtive things from the ointments she'd been massaging into you.

'I didn't even know what I was doing,' I said.

Exhaustion had etched a decade into Mi'luvver's broad, honest forehead. She squeezed my bicep, then returned inside to you. But I stayed there a while and finished scrubbing the muddy footprint until only a smear remained. Cursing was natural to me, but when it came healing I didn't even know where to start.

The pair of you were asleep by the time I'd finished chopping the wood, your head on her shoulder and hands entangled. You looked restful and I could almost imagine that it was years past and you were getting forty winks after a long day slaving over toilets. Dee touched the back of my hand and I let him hold it for a moment, then turned to giving Mi'luvver's jars a dusting.

I was glad for the knock at the door, even when I opened it to reveal Toad, Lou and Shar. Toad's face was puffier than usual and her eyes were swollen from crying. Lou looked fit to punch. Women didn't stoop to such though and in that moment I was thankful for it.

I took the sight of them in. 'How be on?'

'Talking now bes we?' Lou pushed past to look around the room.

Shar gave me a pained look. 'Ey up now, love. Taint polite.'

Lou spun on me. 'Where ee to?'

'He?' I said.

Lou put an arm around Toad, as if my confusion had been meant in hurt, but at that moment Dee puffed in through the back door, stamping off snow, and the lot of them swung round to him.

He finished knocking the snow off of his boots and crossed to the hearth to set down his load. 'Suppose we should be 'aving an ear to ear, Toad Brown.'

Lou gave Shar a push. 'Take Asha out for some o'that scummy Purple.'

Neither of us fancied sticking around for what was to follow, mind, so we tramped into the cold and settled ourselves on the wall adjoining the gardens.

'Rough,' Shar said. 'Rough awlrite.' Though for who and how this was meant was anyone's guess.

I worked a scrap of skin from my thumb nail with my teeth. There had been an easiness about being mute that I missed at times.

'Purple?' Shar pulled a small leather bag from inside his jacket.

I shook my head.

'Don't do ee often,' he said and thumbed out a pinch.

'You remember what it did to Mister Finkley,' I said.



He laughed then. 'Mr Finkley, years since I 'eard of ee. You remember the flickers?'  
'Ai.'

'And 'is canal boat? The mushroom farm?'

But I wasn't much in the mood for merry-making. 'Those schemes of his returned his wife to the roots before her time.'

I continued chewing on the scrap of skin and a bright berry of blood oozed around it. Shar stuffed his pipe.

'Eard why you ran,' he said. 'Know 'ow folk tattle.'

Little surprise there. His match hissed and a bitter aroma spread on the thin air as he put it to his pipe.

'Shame about your ma though. Were always fond 'er.'

'Fond!'

He hadn't taken his first puff yet, so I couldn't blame such talk on the Purple.

'Coors.'

He took a draw, no rush in the world, then blew a wonky smoke ring. We had marvelled when the men did that as childr, now it just looked feeble.

Some of his old bounce lifted his voice. 'Used to gis us those biscuits, member? Shaped like flowers.'

'The nutmeg ones.' I'd forgotten that.

'Ai. And that time she we membered it were me birthday, brung all that pottage 'ome from the kitchens at The Page. The lot of us stuffed ourselves silly.'

I swatted the smoke from my face. 'Takes more than food to make a good Mother. And you shouldn't smoke that stuff, it rots the head.'

His lips sealed back around the mouth of the pipe and we sat in quiet, trying to ignore the raised voices from inside until the back door slammed open.

'Shar!'

"Ere we goes.' He pushed himself up on his knees and sauntered back inside, somewhat unsteadier than when he'd left. Lou and Toad hadn't waited to tell me goodbye.

You were out cold, a thin rattle on your inhale. Mi'luvver had taken Dee aside for words I didn't care to hear and Brunel was at work. It was, I realised, the first time that we'd had to ourselves since the mump.

I knelt before you and lay my head on your knee. The starch of your skirts, usually coarse to the touch, had been softened by wear and sweat. We'd been trying, but you found it hard to change and had been forced to give yourself over to Mi'luvver's careful

hands. I would have to see to laundering your clothes properly tomorrow. The left side of your mouth twitched, as if trying to shape itself into a smile or frown.

Shar had been right though, there had been good times – now he'd reminded me of the biscuits, they came tumbling back. Those days when you'd help me scribe verses from the Unfolding onto old wash cloths and we'd decorate them with pressed flowers from the garden. Or when the clearing skies would lift your soul on the walk to work and you'd swing arms with me or let me gambol, lamb-like, about your skirts. Then there were the times when you'd bake figgy pudding for holy festivals and would give me the bowl to lick out, so large that you had to sit me on the sofa and rest it in my lap. There were more such memories than the bad, yet the bad had so much more weight.

So how could I lift the curse? Because it had been true, well enough. You had taken me to the Brothers and hurt me in countless, creative ways. I hated you, I couldn't take that back.



Though I was to grow into a child of a robust constitution, I had made a sickly babber. Coughs, earache, fevers, there was always something ailing me, though you had scarce sympathy. *Always with the drama*, you'd say, then wedge your balmy hand against my forehead and frown so that I would imagine that you were like the fortune-teller who set up their pinstriped tent on the Harvest Fair. Yes, you see, a man – a jester – bladder in hand. You see, a white horse under moonlight. You see, a child, one foot in the grave and one hand with fingers crossed behind its back. Believe me or not, the struggles bored you and I was normally allowed to stay home, with a compress for my head, and curl up in the window seat of the attic where I could watch the street and search the faces for Father's.

Imagine my surprise then, when on our move to the Ole Town you fretted over my ill-health. I was lethargic, had a headache, no, an earache, both, a bad stomach, a rash, didn't want food, not even honeyed ham, wanted you to take it away, wanted *you* to go away, wanted nothing but sleep. Because if we lived in the Ole Town that confirmed the whispers and side-ways glances that you'd told me to ignore all my life. We were filth.

You stayed by my bedside when you could, smoothing my hair, and didn't even raise your voice when I threw up over your boots.

After two days of this, you appeared at my bedside with a paper figure in your hand. It was the little girl from the theatre Father had bought me.

The paper girl planted herself on my stomach and did a little jig.

'Gosh. Isn't it exciting to be in a new house,' you said, though your intonation was little different from your speaking voice. I watched over the blankets drawn up to my nose. A storm rattled against the roof. At home – the house we had called ours on the Downs – the walls had been so thick that the weather had never interrupted the indoors.

The paper girl leapt to my eye line and continued her dance.

'Don't I look forwards to making new friends. Won't it be an adventure?'

I buried my head.

'I don't know 'ow to do this,' your voice came muffled through my blankets and when I peeked out it was to see that you had turned your face to the window. The hand with the girl was sealed against your breast.

'Ma?'

I sat up then and pawed at your arm, but you gave no response. You were a jigsaw of missing pieces, I'd get the measure of your rages, your elation, your silences, only for you to change the game once again.

The rain stopped tapping at the window and still you sat. I placed my hand over yours and squeezed my voice through my nose.

'Gosh, a new house. A new house.' I wet my lips, uncertain how to do this either. But your hand had pulled away from your breast to add its tremor to mine.

'Look. A new bedroom. Isn't it – small,' I said.

'Comfy,' you said. Your free hand brushed the skin under your eyes, though they were bone dry.

The girl hopped down to examine the bed and found it hard.

'Good for the back,' you said.

Once my room had been surveyed, we took the girl downstairs and made an examination of the living room – 'dark', 'pretty' – pausing to assess the furnishings before heading into the kitchen and larder – 'empty', 'all we need'.

At last we reached the yard, with its bare flagstones and the grey beast of the outhouse. The girl took one peep inside before fleeing.

'Smelly.'

'Very smelly,' you agreed and we giggled.

"Ark at the pair of yous.'

The woman smiling at us from on the other side of the wall was the largest I'd ever seen. Her dress was rough and its neck had slipped to show the curve of a domed shoulder, while her hair stuck up in bunches. I was smitten at first sight.

'Marm Nelson,' Mi'lurvver, or the woman who would become my mi'lurvver said, and wedged her laundry basket onto a hip to shove out a hand. You placed yours into it limply.

I pulled myself up on the wall by my elbows and kicked my feet.

'I'm Asha. You're beautiful. How did you get so fat?'

'Well, 'ello, Asha,' the woman laughed, because that's what this woman did – laughed instead of spoke.

My elbows gave way with the shiver of pleasure and I had to scrabble at the gaps in the dry stone to keep my footing.

'Mayhaps by – eating childr!' She said and made a mock lunge. I fled behind your skirts with a squeal, but when I peeped out it was to find that you stood stock still.

Two, sharp lines had appeared in the flesh between Marm Nelson's eyes as she considered you. I let go of your skirts and put myself in front of you. It had never been good news in the Inner City when women considered you like that. Their scorn made me so furious that I'd want to fly at them with fists, but such behaviour only ended in you screaming at me.

"Ave an eye for when a soul bes needing some soup, I does," Marm Nelson said. 'What say you, Asha? 'Ow about you ask your mi'lurvver 'ere if the pair of yous can come over to share a nice, warm bowl.'

I didn't understand what she meant by mi'lurvver, but the rest of the offer was clear.

'Ma? Can we? Can we?'

You shook me off to draw your shawl across your bosom. 'What kind of soup?'

The lines between Marm Nelson's eyebrows deepened.

'Soup,' she said.

Latched onto your dress, I felt your involuntary shudder, but if Marm Nelson noticed she gave it no mind. It was already too late – I hadn't eaten for two days, had turned down honeyed ham no less – before you could think up a polite excuse, I was drawing you by the skirts out of the yard to find the entrance to Marm Nelson's.



You twitched in your sleep and gave a sound close to a groan. Even if we still had the paper figure it would do you no good, it had been my cure not yours.

I rested my head on your knee.

Yes, I hated you, but that wasn't the whole truth.

‘I love you,’ I said. But if you heard, you showed no sign of it.

## Chapter Forty-Three

*Life, ee, comes in circles, Marm Daniels would tell me when I'd visit her and Marm Jonna as a childr. Grow as ole as me and you'll see it always bes the same sort, again and again.*

That line, she'd say it every time I visited and so she was right in that at least. She'd sit there, a hand on Marm Jonna's knee as she knitted and nodded, while I perched across from them, hands shoved between my sweaty knees, kept in that wicker chair by the promise of pie alone. It tore me up inside that quiet acceptance should be the comfort of the Ffieth. Folk had never spoken like when we'd lived in the Inner City, not that they'd spoken to me much at all. Marm Jonna, brow neatly pleated, would note the bunch of fabric about my fists and Marm Daniels would pat her, speaking to soothe her as much as me.

*No sense in getting uppity over spilt milk. Eggs bes eggs.*

And yet, Marm Daniels was right. As I grew older, I came to see it. Events do come back round. And so mayhaps I shouldn't have been surprised when, a fortnight after our return, the Brothers came for me.

The fist at the door meant business, but Mi'luvver made no hurry of putting down her ladle. I remained by you, nursing your hands, but, seeing Mi'luvver's body go rigid, I stood.

'The girl, where is she?'

I knew that voice. It had been weeks since I had been to the Library, the Brothers were bound to come for me eventually, but I hadn't thought that the Consort would himself.

Mi'luvver's hand tightened on the door, but, even if the same events keep coming around, I wasn't the same person as the childr of all those years ago. I took her place at the door.

'How can we be helping you, Maester?'

I didn't attempt to hide the scorn from my tone, but the Consort's anger stumbled and narrowed into curiosity.

'You're speaking,' he said. Coors, a change like that would be seen by the Irons as having great significance to the text. 'Since when?'

'Two weeks or so.' This was a topic that I didn't wish to pursue, since they'd want to read me as soon as possible now. There wasn't the time for that, not with you in your condition. This was the Consort though, I couldn't just shut the door in his face if I didn't want it beaten down. 'Can we offer you a mug of tippsy?'

He looked at me strangely, then bent to pass through the doorway, holding his robes tightly lest they brush anything. I kept an eye on him as I fetched the jar from the shelf, noting how he took in the bare walls and frayed rugs. The Justice crowded out the space and Dee was left pressed up against the wall. With the Justice there it would have been better if he'd stayed outside.

'I don't mean to shirk work,' it was difficult to keep my voice light, but I tried all the same. 'See, my mi'luvver is sick.'

I chose that word to spite them, not you.

He ignored the mug I held out to him and crossed over to you. Faced with his sweet perfume, the rank scent of sickness on the house only seemed worse. He laid a limp hand on your forehead and I jerked to stop him before remembering myself and ended up slopping tippi stickily onto my tunic. Sweat made your face shiny and I was sorry that he should see you like that. You would have shook with the shame of the creases in your skirts had you been awake.

The slate flatness of his gaze lifted from you to me, though his hand remained on your brow. It was so heavy with rings that it had the look of the knuckle dusters used by bouncers.

'I was informed that you had run away.'

'I'm back. As you can see.'

He sighed then and I exhaled too as he removed his hand and wiped it on the back of your chair.

'We never managed to impress the importance of our work on you, did we? It was foolish to expect understanding from a Ffieth.'

I didn't try to deny it, but his gaze was thoughtful and withdrawn. 'Life is fickle. Its folding blinds us from what matters. Your mother is inconsequential—'

I shook my head at Dee as he began to take a step.

'You are inconsequential. Even I matter little in the great task of unfolding. That text on your skin, though, sinful as it is, has more import than all of us.'

'If you say,' I said, focusing on the jewels of his rings and he withdrew the hands into their sleeves.

‘We can employ a medician to look over your Mother – on the condition that you move into the Library. We cannot risk losing the text again.’

‘Asha–’ Dee left his position by the wall, but Mi’lurvver took hold of him. The Justice had turned too. Dee’s foolishness couldn’t help right now.

I looked down at you and your hollow cheeks, once so ripe with beauty. The left side of your mouth quirked, as if your dreaming had shocked you, though it was hard to say if it was in happiness or sorrow.

‘Let me gather my things,’ I said.



Dee caught up as we were leaving and, mayhaps seeing that they’d already won, the Justice let him pass. He took me up in his arms and I rested my face against his chest. The thrum of his heart smarted through his breasts.

‘Don’t do this,’ he said.

I pressed my lips to his and their softness gave way to the shape of my mouth, warm and dry. Then I rested a hand against his shoulder and pushed myself away.

‘Keep an eye on Mi’lurvver,’ I said.

‘Asha–’

But the Justice were already closing around us and I let them lead the way.





A medician will likely make no more important an incision in his lifetime than the cut that frees a Consort from his tongue and it may well also prove to be the most troubling. While the use of anaesthetics has been experimented with in the Heartlands, and was found to have some pleasing effects on recovery, the Council of Four has since released a statement disapproving of the practice given that the accession to Geist is not for the weak of spirit.

The medician may wish to enter a discussion with his subject in advance of the operation to guide him through any potential risks that come with age and infirmity.

## Chapter Forty-Four

They put you in a small room off of the east cloister of The Page – a window, a bed, a chair. Simple fare and yet you would have been delighted had you been well enough to take note, for the walls were bone white, without a dot of mould, and you knew the price of cleanliness. As it was, your gaze hovered, indifferent, on the ceiling as they led me on to the Library.

My quarters were less impressive. It was a cell on the far end of the shelves that I had dusted many times. They hadn't thought to install a bed, but someone had tossed furs into a corner, along with a pail to pee in and a broom so that I could at least tidy after myself. The window was a postcard of sky.

When it was time for the reading, I shed my clothes and climbed onto the table, barely feeling the probing of the Consort. Yet, if my speaking had led them to believe that the changes to the text would be spectacular, they were to be disappointed. The words were crisper around my midriff than they had been, having lost what little fat I had on our journey, but the text was otherwise what it had been before I'd left. Perhaps the alterations that ended my muteness were simply yet to take hold, it was decided and the Consort decreed that, until the matter was settled, he would conduct a reading everyday.

I was trusted, at first. A Brother would walk me from my cell and leave us together in the limpid light of your room. These visits never crossed with those of the medician and yet his work was clear, there was bruising up your arms and a belt had been looped under your jaw to support the subsidence of your face, though jolts still arced from your mouth down to your left hand and foot.

Improvements were erratic. Some visits you'd be sitting up in bed, watching the rain draw patterns down the window, but others would see you laid out, a pillow over your face. In neither state did words return to you and your expression remained empty. That muteness was contagious and so, with no idea of how to hold a one-sided conversation, I would sit with you in silence until the Brothers came to return me to my cell.

Four days in and you were curled up in bed, the curtains drawn so that the dimness hid the damage to your face.

'Better today, Ma?' I tried, but your only reply was to turn to the wall.

I had to accept it then. The medician was having little more success than the other souls that had tried to heal you.

If the play with the figurine had been my cure, what would be yours? You disapproved of stories and would snort even when Mi'luvver told them, though as a childr you had seen me off to sleep with repeats of the Consort's sermons. Mayhaps one of those would provide comfort. The problem was that I'd never really paid attention when you'd told them, so I sat, squeezing my hands, until the bones of a story returned to me.

'This,' I said, 'is the story of Woeman's passing.'



And at the end, there were words. Words beyond counting. Broken, unfinished, divided. More with every exhale. For the sin that Woeman had dealt only festered.

It was in this age that God and Woeman crossed paths again. Much had changed since the two halves had last locked eyes and the world was corrupted beyond recognition. And yet in God's breast was that old pity for the fleshing that had once been his.

God was as he always was and always shall be, yet Woeman was scarce recognisable. The sin had eaten into her flesh and ran rivulets through her skin so that she looked as paper that has been crumpled then discarded. Her body was so ill-used that she could not lift more than a hand and lay in the dip of the clearing, rooted to the ground by a tree that grew from her navel and wept golden sugar.

Her creation was similarly ill-used and all about her were strewn the carcasses of the once great buildings and boats of the Fallen, rotted through to show skeletons of iron.

God sat besides Woeman then and laid a hand on that which had once been his.

'You see now the heartbreak that folding brings.'

'There is some truth in this,' Woeman said. 'All these years, I have struggled, folding and folding my troubles. To what end?

'I folded time into day and night, and the two have wrenched the world back and forth twixt them ever since.

'I folded man and woman, and man cast woman down so that she was only just above the beasts.

'I folded beasts into those with teeth and those that flee, and they fight each another without end.

'In each being is the pain born of incompleteness.'

God bowed his head then. 'Did I not tell you? Folding brings only fickle joys and so creasings will tear at each other until they are whole once more.'

But, at this, Woeman shook her head. 'To return to the Word is no better, for to be everything is to be as good as nothing. And so I fold and so they fight. Because what is day without night? Man without woman? Humanity without beasts? West without east? If I had a choice, I would be a crease, neither one nor the other but down the middle of all things. And so now you see now why I look as I do.'

And here Woeman gestured to the deep wrinkles of her face and neck and wrists.

Yet God had little time for such sinful words.

'You will unfold soon,' he said.

'But first I lived,' she said.

'You folded suffering,' he said.

'And so created fulfilment,' she said.

'You folded Nothingness,' he said.

'And created Being,' she said.

'You destroyed The Word,' he said.

'And so created the World,' she said.

God swept a hand across the blackened ruins.

'Yes, you folded this,' he said.

And Woeman paused then, her old eyes filmy with sorrow. 'But it was beautiful for a time. And it will be again.'

Still, God was generosity itself.

'You need not die. I can unfold you back into my own being and we shall be as one again,' he said.

And so he reached for Woeman to undo what he must, but, in that moment, she picked up her being and twisted it so that one end was sealed to the other and she formed a spiralling circle, which was at once all inside and all out in an endless running towards itself.

God wept then, for Woeman had sealed herself off from him forever.



Your eyes had reopened by the telling's end, but they weren't looking at me. I followed your gaze to see that the Brother who had come to collect me was standing at the door, his face white with outrage.

'Daymon. Harpy,' he said.

I had no idea how to react. Was it so sinful for a Ffieth to speak the words? You never would have done so if that were the case.

The Brother's lips shook so fiercely that spittle flew. 'To so corrupt the divine words. To lie. To twist—'

Then I understood. I'd never paid proper attention to the sermons and it was possible, more than possible, that my memory may have distorted the telling somewhat. But it was too late to plead innocence. His hand closed around my arm and I was dragged back to my cell.

## Chapter Forty-Five

The Brothers stopped my visits to you. I wasn't even allowed out for my cleaning duties. Meals were shoved in through the grating in the door – pottage in the morning, pottage in the evening – and with only itself for company, my mind turned its teeth on itself. It seemed to me then that there wasn't one correct decision that I'd made in the previous weeks.

When the Irons pulled me out for my next reading, I stood, naked, before the table and spoke to them plainly.

'Let me go.'

'Get onto the table.' The Consort was focused on smoothing the crinkles from his gloves and didn't look up.

'I'll curse you,' I said.

He ignored me and leant over Oh, directing him on matters of corrections.

'I'll curse you,' I said again, hearing my voice quaver.

Then the Brothers advanced and shoved me down. Sweet raggy smoke was thick on the Consort's robes as he joined them.

'I'll curse you.' I didn't fight the hands holding me down, but I stared at the Consort until I'd caught his eyes, however briefly. They were dark and gaping from his smoking.

'I've cursed many times now,' I said.

'There's no such thing as a curse.' The Consort waved at the Brothers to make space for him and leaned over my belly.

He started, as he always did, at my belly button and followed this line out, only to return to the beginning once more. The finger traced out, then back. Again and again.

This was new. Fine beads of moisture had pricked out on his brow.

'Maester?' The Brother holding my shoulder said.

'Turn her,' the Consort said. The Brothers hesitated, this wasn't how the reading was supposed to go.

'Turn her already,' the Consort snapped.

Hands shoved at me and my nose was squashed in the leather inset. My back tensed as the Consort's clammy touch flurried between my shoulder blades, but he quickly retreated.

He mumbled beneath his breath. Mayhaps the words were only meant for himself, but nothing stirred in the Library and every soul must have heard him clearly enough. 'It doesn't say anything,' he said.

'Maester?'

'Read that. Tell me what it says.'

With my face pressed to the table it was impossible to see, but one pair of hands released my right arm and, following the sounds of polite shuffling, met my back. The Brother gave a dry cough.

'Well?' The Consort said.

'I'm not trained in the reading, Maester. I think it best to leave it to you.'

I squirmed against the hold on the back of my head and tried to look around but was only rewarded by having my nose pushed into the table.

'This has been a trying time for all involved.' This was another Brother, his voice came from down by my feet. 'It would seem sagacious that we delay the reading until the morning.'

'Yes, that would seem wise,' the Consort spoke quickly. 'Adjourned.'

I stood and went to recollect my tunic only to find that it had been replaced by an orange dress with black trimming like the women who clean for Inner City households wear.

'Where's my tunic?' I said, but the Irons were already dispersing.

Only one remained, burlier than most Brothers. He tossed the dress at me, but I let it fall. The Brother eyed it.

'I have a pile of books this high to annotate. If you don't dress, you can go naked.'

That suited me just fine and so the Brother escorted me back to my cell and then I was alone once more. I curled up under the blankets for warmth and traced the frenetic silver markings around the length of my arms. There was an odd comfort in the familiar imperfections of my body – the mole by my right elbow with the single black hair that grew from it and the darks ghosting of veins on my wrists or the way that the text bunched with the criss-cross tracings of the joints. I could read those letters no more than when the Brothers had first put them on me and yet, when I looked at them now, I only saw my arms. I saw me.

The Brothers came for the next reading in the morning.

'Dress.' The Brother tossed a bundle into the cell ahead of him, but I left it lying there.

'I'll only have to take it off for the reading,' I said.

'If you want to freeze, be my guest.'

The Irons were already gathered at the table, muttering to one another, though they fell quiet at the Consort's entrance. He tangled with the bead curtain and kicked himself free. The sweet scent followed him once more but this time it was sharpened by the hint of sweat. There were creases in his robes and it didn't look like he'd changed it from the day before, which was irregular for a Four Four.

'I'll curse you,' I told him again. 'Let me and my mother go or I'll stop your heart.'

'Yes, yes, curse.' He waved at the Brothers and they pushed me down as he pulled his gold leafed raggy from within his robes. The hot tip quivered in his lips as he came to stand over me, but when he lifted a hand to steady it, the shaking only increased.

'Let's finish this, shall we?'

'Dead,' I said.

'Quite.' His free hand met my belly button and the skitter of his touch trembled into my flesh.

'Death will eat you.'

'Will one of you please explain why you haven't shut her up already?'

A handkerchief was produced and shoved into my mouth.

The Consort didn't even make it a minute this time. He flinched from me, returned to my right arm and jerked it over to look at the other side, then finally retreated to sink onto Oh's desk.

The Brothers shared a look over my head, then their meaty hands worked at me too.

'Stop it!' The Consort said. His raggy dropped to the floor and the tip cooled to the colour of the stone. 'Stop already. They all read the same. Every last word.'

The Brothers looked to each other, that quiet a shout, and the Consort picked himself up to push back through the curtain. The beads had barely stilled when the whispering started.

'The work absorbs him.'

'He forgets his duties to the Geist.'

'This would be better ended.'

'But how do you mean broach the matter? The man is obsessed.'

'The medician could—' one the Brothers began, but another hissed at him and cast a meaningful look at me.

Then it was back to my cell.

I ran fingers across my lettering, looking for whatever the Consort had seen, but they were still only me.



The next day, it was the Consort that appeared at the bars of my door. Exhaustion had hollowed him out and his bones had sucked the flesh to them to make a skull of his face.

'Here she is.' Splinters caught on the crack in his high voice. 'Our naked wonder. Thinks that she's a man, they tell me.'

'I don't think that,' I said.

He stuffed a raggy between his lips to suppress the beginning of laughter. His blinking had increased to an insensible flutter, a gummy residue was caught in the lashes.

'Neither! You hear?' This was said to a Brother out of sight of the bars. 'And this is our— our— harpy that says she will curse me. Curse me. Go on then. Tell me that you're going to kill me.'

I smiled at him and his face closed over. The lock released with a clunk and the burly Brother entered my cell. Yet he recoiled as his hands met my bare shoulders.

'What is the matter?' The Consort hung back. 'She's not some lady to be courted.'

The Brother tried again, but he hissed as his skin met mine.

The Consort hit the door. 'Now.'

As the Brother grabbed me. I could feel the quake of his fingers fighting to keep hold and he only managed to drag me a step from the cell before he had to snatch his hands free. Red eruptions had broken out across their surface.

'I gave you an order,' the Consort shouted.

'And I told you that I'm a witch,' I said. 'If you don't release me—'

'Back!' The Consort screeched. 'Get her back in the cell!'

The Brother shoved me over the threshold and the door slammed in my face.



The pottage stopped coming. No water either. I waited through the waxing and waning light, my thoughts turning gruel like as I awaited Death.

Then, at last, she came.

'Could 'ave 'ad a thought for me. Will be all bones and gristle going down,' Death, she said.

That green green eye peered through bars and I sat, slowly, steadying myself against the wall.

'Good,' I said. 'Then I might choke you.'

The eye blinked as if I'd jabbed a finger in it.

'Now that don't be any way to treat an ole cocker, be it?'

'An ole cocker that wants to eat me?'

'Ain't nought personal.'

I had to give her that.

I pulled myself upright and swayed over to take the bars of the door. 'I take you're here for your ending.'

'Ai, that I is.' And the pink of her tongue lolled across her lips.

My heart was making an upset like when we'd climb into the loft at the cow shed to jump down into the hay bales as childr. There was no telling if this would work. I took the plunge.

'This,' I said, 'bes the story of Mary Gingly.'

## Chapter Forty-Six

This, bes the story of Mary Gingly.

Mary Gingly were young and Mary Gingly were fair and dinn't Mary Gingly knew it. All them men knew it. And dinn't 'er mi'luvver just know it, though it set the fear in 'er sommat awful.

'Be an ansum tune you lead all them men by, me luvy,' Marm Gingly, did say to 'er Mary. 'Like the Pied Piper you lead 'em to drown in their cups. I be all for the joy of youth, but will be bloodshed if you carry on much longer. Settle down, lass, and get you married.'

And it were with these words in 'er 'ead that Mary Gingly did receive Maester Fox when ee came acalling.

Now, noabody knew 'oo Maester Fox were, zackley. Ee weren't from these parts, for sure. But ee were surely brave and most certain rich.

'Give me your hand, Mary Gingly,' Maester Fox, ee did say. 'And you shall never want for anything again.'

Well, fancy that, that ee should desire 'ers when it 'ad five digits to 'is four. Certainly, ee were the only one out of them lovers that did make the 'eart of Mary Gingly quiver and what could that be but love? So Mary Gingly said *ai* and there were much merry-making.

Well, such a fine gently man couldn't go living in that there 'ovel of Mary Gingly and Marm Gingly, so Maester Fox did say that after the wedding day ee would carry 'is young bride off to that there large 'ouse of 'is.

'Though I don't be liking leaving you 'ere all on your ownsome,' Mary Gingly did say to that mi'luvver of 'ers.

'Don't you worry none, lass,' Marm Gingly, did say. 'Ain't a mutton tougher. Could split logs on me and would only dull the axe.'

'Could ask Maester Fox,' Mary Gingly, did say. 'No reason why you ain't able to live with us.'

'Nah,' Marm Gingly, did say. 'Nought be wanting with your ole ma when you be starting life anew.'

And now Mary Gingly 'ad no choice but to out and say it.

'Will miss you,' she did say and Marm Gingly did set to chuckling so 'ard that all four of 'er chins did jump and jiggle.

'No doubt you'll do awlrite. Why, 'ad always thought that, if you weren't so ansum, you'd 'ave made a proper man,' she did say and tapped 'er knuckles against 'er daughter's noggin. 'So when in doubt, member me words. Be bold, Mary Gingly, Be bold and bolder still.'

So that wedding did come and go. Then off the 'orse did carry Mary Gingly, 'oo were now rightly Marm Fox, to that large 'ouse.

A fine strong 'ouse it were, with 'igh walls and a gateway of iron and words set across its top in gold that read:

*Be Bold, Be Bold.*

And behind that gate were great gardens with macky hedges and flowers and statues and a long, long path up to that there door, on which were writ:

*Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold.*

And beyond that, what an 'ouse, what an 'ouse indeed. It 'ad more rooms than Mary Fox 'ad fingers, with a fireplace in each and so many candles from the ceilings that you would 'ave thought the roof were bared to them 'eavens. Into each of these rooms Maester Fox said Mary Fox were welcome to wander, save for 'is office. And the mantle of that room were painted in gold lettering that read:

*Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold, Lest Your Heart's Blood Should Run Cold.*

Well, Mary Fox were right content with all them rooms after sharing only one with that mi'luvver of 'ers and so agreed willingly. And all would 'ave been well 'ad not the words of 'er mi'luvver come to 'er every night to say:

*Be Bold, lass, Be Bold, And Bolder Still.*

Some nights this went on till Mary Fox could take it no longer. For while 'er 'ubber were a proper gently man, ee 'ad a way of watching 'er when 'ee thought she weren't looking that set winter into 'er bones. And so she did creep out of bed and take up a candle to tip-toe into 'er 'ubber's office and open that door as bold as she could. Behind that door were steps, down, down, down into a darkness that stank of death.

But in 'er 'ead were 'er Mother's voice.

*Be Bold, lass, Be Bold, And Bolder Still. Gold Should Not Be As Cold.*

So she picked up 'er skirts, she did, and down she went. Down, down, down, till she found 'erself in a cellar of sorts. And what does you think she found there?

Why, many an ansum young woman, five digits to an 'and a piece. Though these were split from their wrists and the neck of each were bloodied and slack.

Ai, Maester Fox spoke true, none of them women would want for anything e'r again.

Well, a fright came on Mary Gingly then. She grabbed up the nearest 'and and flew out of that cellar and out of that 'ouse and out of that gate, all the way back to 'er mi'luvver's 'ovel where Marm Gingly took 'er in 'er arms and said that she ne'er did 'ave to leave again. And so things were for a day or two, till Maester Fox came calling to demand 'is bride.

'No siree,' Marm Gingly, did tell that man, for all ee were 'igh and fancy. 'Not with what you bes doing in that cellar of yours.'

'You don't know what you are talking about,' Maester Fox said. 'How dare you slander me.'

'Slander! Oh, I wish it were. But speak the truth and 'ave the 'and to show it, I does,' Marm Gingly said and did pull out that lady's 'and from under 'er skirts to point at the 'eart of Maester Fox.

'So I see,' Maester Fox, did say then. 'That is unfortunate. I do wish that you heeded the signs, Mary, for I now have no choice in the matter.' Then ee did crack 'is jaw wide and gobbled both Marm Gingly and Marm Fox up 'ole.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

Death was confused at first. That eye shut and opened. She waited, expecting more, then, when it did not come, let out an screech that set stone trembling. The door groaned as she crashed into it and her teeth worried at the bars. I backed away to the far wall as the hinges whelped under her blows.

'That ain't be 'ow it ends. Gis I the proper ending. Gis I it now,' Death, she said.

It was hard not to feel a little sorry for her. After all those years of bringing endings to others, nobody had ever given an ending to Death and she'd liked it as little as I'd guessed.

'Why tells a story likes that if only to kill the 'ero?'

'Make up your own then,' I said and crossed my arms, trying to see past her to the Library beyond. Death yowled and I had to laugh, though she answered by smashing the door so hard that a crack ran down its middle. Another blow like that and she'd make splinters of it.

None too late, the sound of footsteps approached.

'What is this racket!'

The Consort pushed past Death to the window. He didn't see her, didn't even believe in Death. His pupils were swollen pits and there were stains in the armpits of his robe.

'What is the matter with you?' He said. 'Haven't you sinned enough?'

'I told you,' I said, 'that if you didn't free me that Death would come for you.'

He laughed, but the sound was weak.

'The infirmity of the Ffieth mind.'

Yet no sooner than he'd said this, a quiver passed over his face and his grip loosened on the bars. He stepped back, frowning, and found himself nose to nose with Death. He saw her true enough then – right before she swallowed him.

When I dared to return to the bars, Death was licking her chops and her hackles had settled.

'Better?' I said.

Her look turned inwards and she coughed up the Consort's keys in a glistening puddle. I fetched my broom and poked them under the crack between the door and the

floor, then stuck my arm through and jiggled them in the lock. Death was waiting for me when I inched out, hands up.

‘Easy. That wasn’t the true ending. You’re right,’ I said. ‘I needed the Brother’s keys. See.’ I jangled them to emphasize the point.

‘Gis it I then,’ Death, she said. Her eyes were narrowed, she knew that she was being played, but the hunger for a better ending was on her.

‘Later,’ I said. Because I’d have to give one eventually, but I hoped that this wouldn’t be for years, when my hair was white and joints frozen. ‘Besides. You must be full already.’

She growled, but it was a lethargic sound and she stretched herself out on her side, belly so macky with her meal that she looked ready to give birth. I stepped around her and went to Oh’s room in search of my tunic and jerkin. He jolted from his chair to see me naked and tearing through his junk.

‘Who let you out?’ He’d cringed away from me, into his desk.

‘You might want to stay in here for a while,’ I said and dropped the pile of cleaning cloths that I’d been searching. My clothes weren’t there, so I left the Library naked, pausing only to steal a pair of boots from the vestibule.

The Tongue hung before me as the last of the evening strained, golden, through its fluid. That old power pulled at me, willing me to stillness and quiet and I walked around the case, searching. Mayhaps it was just my imagination, but I thought that I could make out a faint smudge on the glass at the height where childr could have reached. I placed one hand over the ghostly palm and pushed. There was no teetering this time, gravity snatched up the case and smashed it to the ground. Preserving fluid gushed across the floor, carrying flashes of glass through the bead curtain and on into the Library. The sad slug of the Tongue lay in that pool – limp, mushroomed and pale to the point of white. I brought a heel down on it, but it slid from under the sole, leaving a slick of necrotic fat, so I kicked what was left and it slopped to the floor a few feet away, then left in search of you.

You showed no sign of recognition when I entered your room. Grey tinged your skin and your braids had frayed and snaked about your head. The stillness on you drew me short, but then I made out the stirring of the sheets with your breathing. I knelt by your bed.

‘We’re going home,’ I said.

Your eyes slid open at the word and you let yourself be drawn upright.

As I pulled you out into the corridor, a scream came from the direction from the Library. We didn't want to stick around for whatever came next. You were blinking faster now, as if waking from a long sleep, though the left side of your face was no better. Another scream shook the cloister.

'Best speed up,' I muttered and you managed to pick up your feet into a limp, though my shoulder still bore much of your weight.

We hurried on to the heart of The Page. Cleaners working late paused in their polishing to bring cloths to their mouths. What a sight we must have made, you with the belt around your head and my silver nakedness. There'd be gossip this night, awlrite, but I couldn't care less and, for once, you seemed unperturbed too.

Then we were at the entrance hall and out through the doors. Brizzletun spread before us, silver under the dusk. You were shaking, but the cold and the adrenaline had crystallised your attention. I hurried you to the steps, only to see the red robes of the Justice climbing towards us. There had been no contingency in my plan for this.

I propped you up against the wall as I cast around for something to defend us with.

But then Death was at our side. She belched and blinked at me. Had she asked for the story's end in that moment it would have likely been it for both of us, but instead she took one look at the Justices and stretched out her front paws.

'You want me to scratch you? Really? Now?'

'Mother Bennett,' Death, she said. 'You 'opping on or not?'

'On?'

'Taint sticking round with me butt in the air.'

Had I more time to think on it, I might not have believed the offer, but the Justice were halfway up the stairs now. I helped you climb between Death's shoulder blades, then slid on after, hugging you close as I gripped the mane at her nape. Death's sharp spine pinched into my buttocks. With her thick pelt I had never realised that Death was almost a skeleton herself.

Death chattered at the back of her throat, then launched down the steps. You slipped, for a second poised over a fall, but through blind desperation and luck I heaved us forwards onto her neck. My head bounced and yours was jerking back and forth. The force drove my teeth into my tongue. But down we went, bound after bound, caught between flight and falling. We were on the Justice in seconds and the first went bowling over the cliff edge, then we were over and onwards. I'd have looked back, but it was all I could do to keep my seating.



Down the steps, we went, into streets. The few Four Fours late about their business scattered ahead of us. Screams lit the air, winked out behind. Windows made a staccato of dark and light, melting into one silver note. Singing cold braced my cheeks.

I let out a shout and dug a heel into Death's flank but was met with a growl.

'Don't be pushing your luck,' Death, she said and I made sure to stay very still for the rest of the journey.



There's a story, just a silly one, that Mi'lurvver would tell me when I was young about what to do when you find Death at your door unwelcomed.

'Knock knock,' she would say, accompanying the words with the rap of her knuckles against the underside of her chair, then her voice would drop into a purr from her abdomen.

'Open up. Open up. Be 'ere to et you, I am.'

This was my turn, though I often forgot the words and she would have to peck the top of my head in reminder.

'Go away!' I'd cry out. 'I ain't 'ere, come back...'

'Next Tuesday,' Mi'lurvver would whisper.

'Next Tuesday!'

'Mmm.' Mi'lurvver would stroke her double chin, hand in a loose fist to represent a paw. 'Guess you bes out. Best I come back Tuesday.'

Poor Death, the tales never do her justice.

Now *knock knock*. 'Bes I 'again. Tuesday now. I been and come to gobble you up, flesh and bones and 'air.'

'Go away! I ain't 'ere, come back next Wednesday.'

'Mmm. Guess you bes out. Best I come back Wednesday.'

*Knock knock*. 'It bes Wednesday now. I been and come to nom nom you up, down to your pinkie toes.'

'Go away! I ain't 'ere, come back—'

But you get the idea. Mi'lurvver never gave me the story its true end, which, given Death's hunger, was inevitable, but some truths have to be broken to a babber gently. And so we'd continue until the giggling had me hiccoughing through my nose and she decided that this was enough for one day.

Either way, Mi'luvver must have forgotten her own advice, for when Death come acalling, her steamy breath melting the snow on the porch, what Mi'luvver actually did was swing her door wide and yelp, then trap the sound behind two palms and step aside. Death bowed her head and pulled her shoulders in to squeeze through the door frame. Her huffing filled the room, its solidity rendered doll-like by her presence, and she shrugged the snow from her coat, tossing us to the floor with it.

I pulled you up. Your step was unsteady and cheeks flushed, but it had been weeks since I'd seen colour in you. Mi'luvver took you in her arms and there was such sobbing and cheer that I almost missed Death turn, taking out a couple of jars with her tail as she squeezed back through the door.

'Hey up.'

Her look flashed back. Green green green. Such eyes could devour as well as her teeth. Mayhaps Mi'luvver should have told a second story that advised that if Death comes to you door and leaves of her own accord then you don't go running after. But I couldn't let her go without saying it.

'Thank you.'

Those green flames danced.

'Don't be getting used to it,' Death, she said, then with a single bound made it to the roof of the house across the street, where she lifted her nose, sniffed the wind, and streaked out of sight. Pity the poor soul that she had her sniffer on, but it was not us, not that night. I turned back inside.

Mi'luvver already had you propped up in her chair and tucked up your legs in blankets. Your shoulders were buckled, but your eyes were travelling around the room, taking it all in. I settled myself before you and Mi'luvver draped another blanket over my shoulders.

You met my look then. That stillness was contagious. The knot of your throat bobbed and I felt the ungainly shape of my tongue against the roof of my mouth. But silence has never served us well. Has it, Mother.

'Ma.'

The quickness of your gaze was almost guilty. Yes. Even though the years had coarsened and changed your face, in it I could see the woman who had taken me to the Library. The woman who, when I'd called her name, had paused with her back to me – five heart-beats – then left.

I couldn't trust what might come out of my mouth, so I rose to the chopping board and set to preparing vegetables. The rhythm of the knife against the wood was soothing,

though the onions hit my eyes fiercely and when, there was no more chopping left, I scrubbed my face on a sleeve and addressed you.

'This is how it's going to go. You'll tell me your story and I'll listen. Then I'll tell you mine and you'll listen. We'll keep doing this, for as long as it takes.' My little fingers had risen, unbidden, between my incisors and I forced them back to my side. 'We've the rest of our lives after all.'

The left side of your mouth fluttered, but, after a pause, you nodded. I pushed the diced vegetables into the pot and by the time the ladle was in my hand you were talking, a stutter that swelled to a trickle that became a flood, then you wouldn't have been able to stop had you wished to.

Was the story true? The question is mayhaps too simple. But you believed it and it was one that I hadn't heard before.

I bent over the stirring over the soup and let the heat warm me.

Through the window, snow drifted in swirls that absorbed all sound. Creatures of the silence crept onwards towards an ending. The hop of sparrow, ellipsis. Here, a hare; feet, dot, then dash – make your own meaning. Now four-toed paw, Death picked her way to her next meal. One by one, the mist summoned, then took them.

And beyond, beyond, through the horizon's edge and over, where weather twisted like white ash, ice danced and the forest listened.



# **Love In The Time of Einfühlung**

Vernon Lee and the empathetic potential of the embodied  
novel

*Critical Component*

# Introduction

“You never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...  
until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

*Harper Lee (Lee, 1960, p.81)*

In 2013 the psychologists David Kidd and Emanuele Castano published a paper entitled 'Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind'. As the name suggests, the study provided evidence of a correlation between reading literary fiction and improved scores on tests of Theory of Mind,<sup>1</sup> though most of the extensive media coverage that the paper received reported it more broadly, and arguably inaccurately, as proof that reading improves empathy. Regardless of whether the paper can be considered a true study on empathy, it followed in the tradition of other empirical examinations of the relationship between literature and empathy by measuring the impact of fiction on a specific cognitive faculty and by giving no consideration to the role of the body. This focus may seem commonsensical given the ostensibly internal, still and reserved quality of reading as it is traditionally conceptualised and performed in contemporary Western culture but is surprising in the context of broader empathy research and its history, in which bodily processes play a fundamental role.

Inspired, in part, by that peculiar omission, this thesis has three questions<sup>2</sup> at its core.

1. Can the novel be thought of as embodied?
2. If so, what is the role of embodiment in novelistic empathy?
3. Finally, how might a novelist apply these ideas to the practice of their craft?

The answers that this critical piece offers informed the philosophy behind, and techniques employed in, the creative strand of this PhD, *The Listening* (Geen, 2018). As such, the exploration of these questions in the following chapters provides an analysis of some of the novel's key themes. For instance, the question of whether novels can be considered to be embodied relates to *The Listening's* focus on the materiality of stories, which finds its clearest manifestation in the text that is tattooed on the protagonist Asha's body (Ibid., pp.22-23). The role of embodiment in novelistic empathy is

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1 Theory of Mind is the ability to understand that other people are minded and possess perspectives different than one's own, and to infer those thoughts and feelings. Empathy differs from Theory of Mind in that most of its definitions also include the ability to 'feel' what the other person is feeling. (Goldman 2012)

2 The novel, of course, raises questions beyond these but the attempt to analyse all of them would not only be reductionist but impossible in an academic piece of this length.

embedded in *The Listening* through its preoccupation with the relationship between stories and empathy, which is represented by the healing magic of Asha's step-mother Mi'luvver (Ibid., pp.40-41). This magic calls on both parties to share their story and to listen to each other's, and is the key skill that Asha comes to master through the course of the novel. The entanglement of narrative, empathy and the body are also, conversely, built into *The Listening*'s interest in how a lack of empathy in narrative can be a form of physical violence dealt to the body, both as an idea and as a sensed reality. This concept is another theme explored through the Brothers' tattooing of Asha but is also seeded throughout the novel in the ways in which God Children talk about Ffieth (Ibid., pp.45, 51, 54, 78, 111 & 17), how the stories of Asha's mother impact upon Asha's body (Ibid., pp.11, 42, 82 & 118) and how Asha's words curse others (Ibid., pp.97-99, 157-158, 176-178 & 221-229). Finally, my understanding of how these issues impact on craft have directed the prose choices made throughout the novel.

To formulate my thoughts on these issues I read the work of literary critics, scientists, philosophers and authors, and combined their ideas within a phenomenological perspective. As the name suggests, phenomenology is the study of phenomena – of how the world appears to us. This is not to be confused with introspection but is an examination of the structures of consciousness<sup>3</sup> as experienced from a first-person point of view. Interdisciplinary synthesis, of the kind I undertake in this thesis, is common among phenomenologists. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, arguably the most influential phenomenologist to write on the subject of the body, regularly employed neurological case studies, such as those on aphasia in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), and other phenomenologists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1938, 1945a, 1945b, 1949), have used the novel as a key vehicle for their philosophy. There is even a precedence for the synthesis of such perspectives within contemporary fiction, which the literary critic Patricia Waugh has named the 'neo-Phenomenological turn' (2013, p.26). In the work of influential authors, such as Jonathan Franzen, Hilary Mantel and Jonathan Coe, Waugh perceives a tendency for the contemporary novel to act as an answer to living in a world caught between the neuroscientific, capitalistic and post-postmodern that she argues is a form of phenomenology, "to the extent that the novel creates a pre-reflective place which positions embodied minds in imaginary worlds and confers on them depth and thickness" (Ibid., p.24). Not only does *The Listening* attempt to confer this type of depth and thickness on the embodied minds of its characters but the following critical chapters bring together a similar synthesis of disciplines to explore how the imaginary

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3 Opposed to the contents of consciousness, which are the objects of introspection.

embodied minds of characters are positioned in imaginary worlds and how the *real* embodied minds of readers are positioned in imaginary worlds.

With these aims in mind, Chapter One opens with a brief history of the development of the definitions of empathy, presents the account of empathy that will be employed in this thesis and offers an overview of the research on empathy and the novel. Chapter Two explores why the novel is often thought of as disembodied and then re-examines the evidence to argue that this apparent quality is better understood as a dampening of the senses in order to allow the *imagined* embodied experiences of the text to come to the fore. Having argued that the absence of the body is deceptive, Chapter Three makes the case for the novel as a psychosomatic entity by exploring some of the ways in which words have tangible impact on bodies and gives examples of how *The Listening* employs these ideas. Chapter Four takes these ideas further to argue that the ability of the novel to evoke bodily responses that echo the content of the text can be thought of as a form of novelistic empathy and explores how *The Listening* portrays empathy. Finally, in Chapter Five, I reflect on what these ideas might mean for the writer's craft.

To emphasise how empathy has been entangled with the body and the novel since the origin of the term these chapters have been structured around an account of the nineteenth century writer and empathy researcher Vernon Lee. This synthesis of narrative and critical thought falls under the umbrella of 'ficto-criticism' – a term that covers a diverse range of hybrid writings that blend theory and fiction, academic discourse and narrative, and is best understood in Amanda Nettelbeck's words not as a tradition but a "strategy for writing" (Kerr and Nettelbeck, 1998, p.4) that oscillates between "the poles of fiction ('invention'/'speculation') and criticism ('deduction'/'explication') of subjectivity ('interiority') and objectivity ('exteriority')" (Ibid., p.3). This hybrid strategy allows ficto-critical writing to explore spaces occluded by traditional academic discourse and has been employed to realise a variety of diverse aims. To give a few examples, in author Hazel Smith's *The Erotics of Gossip* (2009), a ficto-critical approach allows her to address her audience in a manner that is both playful and thought-provoking, meanwhile, the writer Anna Gibbs (1997) uses ficto-criticism to create a space in which she can blend analysis with poetic discourse. Ficto-critical techniques are also used by writers whose concerns aren't primarily literary – the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993), for instance, introduces fiction into his research in order to demonstrate that writing is, itself, an anthropological act.

Such transgressions of traditional boundaries not only afford the ficto-critical writer new ways to explore their world through language but offer expanded possibilities for



understanding their world. Pertinently, for the purposes of this piece, the blurring of boundaries that occurs in ficto-critical writing resonates with the renegotiation of margins that takes place between self and other in empathy and between the text and reader in the act of reading.

Ficto-critical writing can also create space for Waugh's phenomenological 'embodied minds' within academic writing. Characters, and the subjectivities that they invite, are normally barred from critical discourse under the auspices of objectivity. The desire to address this occlusion, and the assumptions that underlie it, drove some phenomenologists, such as Simone de Beauvoir (1943, 1945, 1946, 1954), to embody their philosophy as fiction, so that they might write from the point of view of the lived experience of individuals entangled with their worlds (Fullbrook and Fullbrook, 1998). This approach is of particular importance to this thesis, given its aim to explore the act of one consciousness feeling towards another in empathy, in which the lived experience of *another* person's lived experience is the subject of enquiry. Such an examination calls the theorist to write from the perspective of individuals entangled in both their world and the people that live alongside them – a call, in short, for exploration through fiction.

## Chapter One

“Bells are always ringing... whenever we two meet.”

*Clementina Anstruther-Thomson (Colby, 2003, p.130)*

Later, the day will sprawl over the hills in sluggish heat, but now, in its infancy, the morning is a crisp body of light. The air, like a spoon-struck champagne glass, carries the shiver of wedding bells all the way from Florence to the exposed arms of the two ladies out for their morning stroll. At the sound, their eyes snare, then pull away.

They are an odd pair by all accounts. The first is the Victorian author Vernon Lee – a slender, almost lanky, woman who blinks furiously through the moon glasses that cling to her long nose. Friends know her to be intelligent, outspoken and troubled, while those who no longer count themselves among that number know her to also be argumentative, dogmatic and domineering. Her companion, the artist Clementina "Kit" Anstruther-Thomson, is thankful to still be counted among the former. Though her intellect may not be as sharp as Vernon's, her physique never fails to impress and there is an almost Amazonian air to her as she sweeps her mannish skirts through the white dust of the road.

As the bells continue, a harmony of feeling grows between the two women – tingling all the way down to the tips of their little fingers that ring, ring with the awareness of how little it would take to brush against one another, so little that they must be vigilant against accidental straying, against straying into oneness.

It is incredible that an imagined touch should be so loud this close to the champ and creak of the horse and cart – a clumsy affair upon which a plank bed jolts and shudders (Colby, 2003, p.48). A similarly serviceable smile trembles on the face of Eugene, Vernon's half-brother, who is currently strapped to the bed and orating on the subject of his latest poem, though his throat pinches with every jolt in the road. The women take it in turns to dab his forehead, but he makes no comment on their attentions, just as they refrain from remarking on his illness, or his unaccepted work, or that of Vernon's that has been published. It is just the age, it is just the demands of blood, it is just the way things are, though these omissions must unsettle them as surely as the stones under the cart. If the singing of bells announce how little divides one flesh from another, Eugene's voice renders that distance in miles.

Kit runs a hand along her arm hairs as she searches for the words to fill this space. Vernon, an art critic herself, has listened with interest to her musings on 'what is art?' and 'what does it do for us?', or rather '*with* us', so Kit remarks how she has often observed that works of art affect her body in different ways – a violent painting, for instance, will quicken her breathing, while a pastoral scene will calm it (Burdett, 2011, p.256).

There can be no doubt as to the effect Vernon's attention is having upon her breathing now and, reluctant to let that look pass, she presses on to note how these visceral aesthetic responses are entangled with her emotional ones. Vernon's blinking quickens and she ventures that they should visit an art gallery together to explore the phenomenon. Colour creeps from under Kit's collar and she returns her gaze to the blaze of Florence below.

In this way the odd party continues – the grumble of the cart, the crunch and clatter of their words, the pools of silence that spread across the Tuscan hills. None of them could know that Vernon's interest in the workings of Kit's body has just positioned the women at the heart of an exciting new research area, so nascent that it has yet to even enter the English lexicon.

But when it does, it will be known as 'empathy'.

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According to the modern Cambridge Dictionary, 'empathy' is: "the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" (2018). While Lee is regularly and erroneously accredited with coining the word, this definition would have been foreign to her since 'empathy' has been, and still is, used to refer to a wide range of different, if similar, phenomena. To fully understand these confluences it is necessary to delve into the development of the terms that preceded it – 'sympathy' and 'Einfühlung'.

'Sympathy', derived from the Greek word for 'fellow feeling', entered the lexicon several thousands of years before 'empathy', but for most of this time it was associated less with the idea of 'fellow feeling' between people, implied by the Cambridge Dictionary definition, and more with the "co-affective bond" (Schliesser, 2015, p.4) that was thought to exist between parts of the body, the body and soul, and the 'world soul'<sup>4</sup>. Such 'sympathy' was thought to bind alike entities across space and time and, as such,

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4 The idea that all life and matter on the planet are interconnected (Schliesser, 2015, p.41).

the term was associated with the occult and magic (Ibid., p.75). It wasn't until the seventeenth century that sympathy shook off these connotations and entered the common vernacular as a term for fellow feeling between people (Ibid., p.101). This new veneer of acceptability paved the way for its enthusiastic adoption by influential eighteenth century theorists, including the friends philosopher David Hume and economist Adam Smith. For Hume and Smith sympathy offered an essential tool for loving one's neighbour in the face of an increasingly secular and divided world (Ibid., pp.208-247). Artists were equally enamoured by the notion of sympathy and the English Romantics were soon extolling it as a form of imagination that affords writers the ability to penetrate the divide between subject and object to obtain a full, if temporary, comprehension of the observed – as can be seen in Keats's proclamation that: "[i]f a Sparrow comes before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel" (1817).

These aesthetic theories found an echo in the nineteenth century term 'Einfühlung', coined by the German philosopher Robert Vischer in his doctoral thesis *On the Optical Sense of Form* (1873). For Vischer, Einfühlung explained how humans project themselves bodily into visual objects through a process known as 'mimicking', in which seeing the 'spread' branches of a tree might evoke in the viewer a sense of physically spreading their arms. This theory was soon developed beyond visual psychology by the psychologist Theodor Lipps<sup>5</sup> who believed that Einfühlung encompassed a number of different qualities, including the ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of others. "Ich Fühle mich so in ihm" (1903, p.186) – 'I feel myself so inside of him,' Lipps writes of watching a tight-rope walker. Yet we could reposition that comma to create: 'I feel myself so, inside of him', because Lipps also understood Einfühlung as being the interpersonal act that allows a person to both comprehend that other people are minded and that she is, herself, an individual self.

Though Lipps thought that Einfühlung was equivalent to the old concept of sympathy (Jahoda, 2005), the psychologist Edward Titchener believed that the two ideas differed sufficiently to warrant new terminology when translating Einfühlung into English in 1909. He based this new term on the Greek word 'empathia', from em – 'in' – and pathos – 'feeling' –, to create 'empathy' (Lanzoni, 2012).

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5 Who was, perhaps not coincidentally, also a translator of Hume.

## Definitions

Fast forward to 2018 where I write this and the terminology is still developing. Despite the recent attention from psychology, neuroscience, sociology, zoology, philosophy and English literature, consensus on the definition of empathy is yet to be established within these fields and has certainly not formed across them.

Consider the following definitions given in recent and well-reviewed books on empathy:

Frans De Waal, primatologist:

Empathy is the process by which we gather information about someone else. Sympathy, in contrast, reflects concern about the other and a desire to improve the other's situation. (2009, p.88)

Simon Baron-Cohen, psychologist: Empathy occurs when we suspend our single-minded focus of attention, and instead adopt a double-minded focus of attention. ... Empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion. (2011, pp.11-12)

Roman Krznaric, sociologist and political scientist:

Empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions. (2014, p.x)

Though all three definitions appear, on first brush, to gesture to a similar entity, differences become apparent on closer reading. For Baron-Cohen and Krznaric empathy entails an active component that De Waal calls sympathy. Where Krznaric identifies the empathetic act – or art – as 'stepping imaginatively', De Waal's definition encompasses a much broader range of processes, including any that are involved in how we 'gather information about someone else'. This broader view is echoed by Baron-Cohen's 'ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling' but shares the sense of 'doubleness' in Krznaric's definition, which is, in turn, lacking in De Waal's.

The psychologist Daniel Batson (Decety, Ickes and Litfin, 2011, pp.3-16) exposed the extent of this confusion by analysing the most common definitions to show that they refer to no less than eight distinct phenomena.<sup>6</sup> These phenomena bear little agreement on the valence, scope, accuracy, frequency or effort thought to be involved in empathy and, I would argue, their only reliable concurrence is the idea that empathy involves some form of synchrony between the self and other.

As is to be expected, confusions in definition have created conflict in the discourses surrounding empathy. For instance, Octavia Butler's critique of empathy – *The Parable of the Sower* (2000) – features a protagonist who suffers from 'hyperempathy' (p.7) and is consequentially frequently overwhelmed by the pain of those around her, including

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6 To make matters even more confusing, these eight phenomena are each referred to by multiple names.

those she must hurt in self-defence. This critique, however, relies upon understanding empathy to be what scientists more often call 'emotional contagion' (Decety, Ickes and Litfin, 2011, p.19), a process through which one person's emotions directly provoke the same emotion in another person. While emotional contagion is an important facet of empathy, most accounts of empathy stress the involvement of cognitive processes as well as emotional ones (Davis, 1980, 1983), both of which are subject to more conscious control than Butler suggests (Hodges and Wegner, 2007). Similarly, I would argue that psychologist Paul Bloom's recent (2017) dismissal of empathy as a destructive and morally reprehensible entity is grounded in his unhelpful rendering of empathy as a simple, instinctive and limited emotional impulse, opposed to understanding it as a nuanced and complex, if fallible, tool that can be employed, among others, as part of rational decision-making.

The debate over the processes behind empathy is just as vehement, with theories tending to fall into one of two camps, known as 'Simulation Theories' and 'Theory Theories' of empathy. 'Simulation Theories' are marked by the belief that empathy arises through a person enacting processes in herself<sup>7</sup> that have the potential to produce the same behaviour as that observed in the person being empathised with. Simulation theories are of particular importance to this thesis because they are often embedded in the body. For instance, 'mirroring' involves automatic mimicking of another person's expressions, posture, vocalisations, movements and fine physiological processes<sup>8</sup> and, as many psychologists understand emotion to be based in bodily states, this is thought to also result in a replication of the emotions associated with the bodily states that are being mimicked (Iacoboni, 2008). In contrast, 'Theory Theories' of empathy argue that empathy is a purely cognitive process that uses folk psychology, active knowledge or imaginative reasoning to make inferences about what another individual is likely to be feeling in a particular context.

A third position, known as the 'Hybrid Theory', has emerged in recent decades. Hybrid theories assert that empathy relies on both simulation processes and the active application of theories and inferences. For example, Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich (2003) point to the complexity of mind-reading when arguing that it must arise through many routes and methods, some of which are automatic and simple, some of which are conscious and complex, and some of which don't fall easily into either category.

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<sup>7</sup> These processes can be enacted consciously or unconsciously.

<sup>8</sup> For example, heart rate or breathing rate.

As this piece draws heavily on phenomenology, it is important to acknowledge a fourth position that some have called The Phenomenological Proposal (Burns, 2017). Though accounts vary, phenomenologists tend to reject both Simulation Theories and Theory Theories due to their reliance on the idea of 'mental supposition', which assumes that the minds of other people are closed away from us behind corporeal bodies. If minds are 'hidden away', the phenomenological stance claims, providing definitive proof of their existence becomes an intractable problem – for we would have no way of seeking minds in other bodies, let alone the inclination to, whether through a Simulation Theory or Theory Theory or any other. If, however, as phenomenologists believe, mind *is* body then the mind of the other is not closed away but directly observable in the flesh. In the words of Merleau-Ponty:

Anger, shame, hate and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another's consciousness... They exist *on*<sup>9</sup> this face or *in* those gestures, not hidden behind them. (1964, pp.52-53)

Empathy for phenomenologists is therefore, as the phenomenologist Dan Zahavi defines it:

[A] specific mode of consciousness... which is taken to allow us to experience and understand the feelings, desires, and beliefs of others in a more-or-less direct manner. (2001, p.153)

Phenomenologists do not believe that the body gives us infallible knowledge of other minds, however. They theorise that most of a mind's profile is occluded from us in much the same way that one fixed visual viewpoint cannot provide total knowledge of a physical object. This limited perspective on the minds of others is not considered to be a failing but a necessity. According to Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, if a person had the same access to the consciousness of another person as they did their own then they would be the same self (1950a, p.139). His student Edith Stein (1989) was thinking along similar lines when she critiqued the idea of empathy as 'sharing' in another's emotion, which does not reflect the indubitable 'foreignness' inherent in our experiences of other people. Even when we understand another person she and her feelings are inherently not *us* or *ours* (Ibid., p.64). As such, Stein believed that any account that seeks to collapse this distance cannot authentically reflect our daily experiences of empathy.

However, The Phenomenological Proposal explicitly focuses on quotidian experiences of face-to-face empathy. Zahavi admits that we occasionally ascribe inner states to others (2008, p.517) and that cognitive processes, such as perspective-shifting, imaginative projection or inferential attribution, are employed when faced with these

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<sup>9</sup> Italics in original.

more complex acts of understanding the other. As a result, there is a space, albeit an uneasy one, for The Phenomenological Proposal to exist alongside Simulation Theories, Theory Theories and Hybrid accounts, so long as one is cautious about when each account is being applied.

## **A Working Definition**

As the above discussion shows, there is considerable disagreement over the nature of empathy and, consequentially, there is no widely accepted definition to be adopted. In this thesis I therefore propose my own account, which brings together the elements of other theories that strike me as the most compelling. This account understands empathy as a complex and multifaceted form of imaginative and emotional 'travel' between the self and the perspective of another person that aims to deepen the self's understanding of the other in a way that openly queries and seeks to learn and grow as a collaborative act, instead of forcing the experiences of one party on the other. This approach is evocative of the words of the essayist Leslie Jamison, who talks of empathy as a form of questioning similar to how: "you'd enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: what grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?" (2014, p.6).

To unpack what is implied by the metaphor of a curious traveller, firstly consider how travel is an endeavour that must be conducted by the whole person, body and mind. This account therefore calls for the embodied and direct access to the experiences of the other involved in The Phenomenological Proposal and Simulation Theories and the top-down, active and cognitive elements of Theory Theories. Secondly, travel, like empathy, tends to be both mindless and mindful. A traveller both consciously chooses a destination and reflects on their journey but also leaves the actual work of walking to their feet - it can therefore be active and intentional and/or automatic and subconscious. Thirdly, travel is an act that transforms the self and offers the opportunity for growth without the traveller being subsumed or, if rules for ethical travel are observed, oppressing the lands and citizens with which the traveller engages. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the metaphor emphasises the quality of being immersed while retaining an outsider status and the inexhaustibility of understanding another person. Even the most skilled act of empathy lacks the originality of self-perception, yet – as Husserl argued – this not a failing so much as a crucial differentiation that delineates the self from other. The successful empathetic 'traveller' must therefore



respect the gap between their self and that of another person while working to shrink it by refining their understanding.

One important feature of this account is that there is no one discrete route to empathy, nor does it have one defining shape; instead this thesis treats empathy as a class of behaviours with a shared end. Given this approach, it is important to clarify what conditions are necessary for empathy and I refer here to those proposed by the psychologists Jean Decety and Philip Jackson (2004), being:

1. Affective and/or cognitive mirroring between self and other.
2. An understanding of the distinction between self and other.
3. The mental flexibility and regulation needed to take the perspective of another person while maintaining a clear sense of self-other separation.

The third point, evocative of Husserl's above, is of particular importance given that much of the critique levelled at empathy arises from the idea that it involves a harmful dissolution of the boundaries between self and other. In these cases, understanding is occluded by the self either mistaking its own mental states for those of the other or by allowing itself to be overrun by the other. Though these interactions have similar workings to empathy I believe that they are failures of understanding between self and other and, as such, do not qualify as empathy itself. Instead, I visualise these processes as inhabiting a continuum that has an exclusive focus on the self on one end and an exclusive focus on the other on the opposite end, with empathy as a point of balance between them.

The idea of this continuum preoccupies much of my creative work and I explored one extreme in my first novel *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (Geen, 2016), whose protagonist Kit becomes mentally unwell after spending her teenage years projecting into the bodies of other animals. The events of the novel lead Kit to recognise that, while the act of trying to understand other creatures is crucial, she has to avoid subsuming her entire identity in others and, in this way, she is finally able to achieve empathy with her friend Buckley. *The Listening* can be understood as exploring the other side of this continuum through the existential threat posed to the protagonist Asha by her mother, who projects her own perspectives onto Asha (Geen, 2018, pp.11, 42, 82 & 118), and the dehumanisation of Ffieth by the God Children (Ibid., pp.45, 51, 54, 78, 111 & 17). *The Listening* also offers a representation of successful empathy in the healing 'magic' used by Mi'luvver, which works through the 'witch' and her visitor telling each other their stories and listening attentively in return, thereby finding a balance between their perspectives (Ibid., pp.40-41).

Definitions of the other key terms of this thesis – 'the novel' and 'embodiment' – are not without contention but boast more consensus than 'empathy'. For simplicity's sake, I shall follow the literary critic Ian Watt (1957) in understanding the 'novel' as a literary tradition of book length fictional prose that arose in the eighteenth century and is invested in representations of reality and the individual experiences of idiosyncratic characters, including their relationships. Though much of what I have to say in this critical piece could refer to other narrative mediums, I focus on the novel to reflect my own practice and its historical connection to the concept of empathy.

I refer to 'embodiment' as the third term of this thesis, rather than 'body', as it refers to an aware entity that is more complex and rich than the brute tissues and organs that make up the object body. Husserl (1950b, p.203), aided by his native language of German, dissociated these two types of body as 'Leib', the lived experiential body, and 'Körper', the externalised body of geometry and science. Leib is of particular importance to phenomenologists as it deals with the body as a lived experience that is actively engaged in its environment. It also emphasises the body's role in receiving and shaping how that environment is experienced – in the words of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “the body is our general medium for having a world” (1945, p.115). By referring to embodiment, this thesis therefore gestures towards the state of *being* a body as both subject and object.

## **Empathy and the novel**

“The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves” (1954, p.299), George Eliot wrote in 1859; a sentiment that has been echoed by many authors throughout the history of the novel. More recently, for instance, the author Azar Nafisi exclaimed that: “empathy is at the heart of the novel” (2003, p.111) and the novelist Ian McEwan praised this empathetic ability of “imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself” as being “at the core of our humanity” (2008). “Writers themselves may in fact be the primary source of this widespread belief, so often do they repeat it”, the literary critic Suzanne Keen notes and suggests that the increasing enthusiasm with which it is expressed may correlate with the novel's shrinking economic viability (2010, p.62).

For, while the empathetic power of the novel has always had its supporters, it has never lacked critics and detractors. As early as 1773, the literary critic Anna Laetitia Aiken wrote of the emerging form, that novels are:

[G]enerally thought to improve the tender and humane feelings; but this, I own, appears to me as very dubious... young people, by a course of this kind of reading, often acquire something of that apathy and indifference which the experience of real life would have given them, without its advantages. (Ibid., p.289)

In short, Aiken believed that the fellow-feeling inspired by novels can only desensitise readers. Other critics have similarly derided the empathetic novel as causing readers to 'waste' finite resources on imaginary people or of being 'vampiric' and 'pornographic' towards the suffering of others (Ibid., p.47). "The dirtiest thing the Western imagination ever did", the literary critic Marcus Wood writes, "is to believe in the aesthetically healing powers of empathetic fiction" (2002, p.36).

Though these critiques can be over-stated, it is equally important not to exaggerate the benefits of literary empathy for, even if empathy can be accepted as axiomatically good, novels don't automatically invite empathy towards all characters and can even incite dehumanisation. One example that is particularly pertinent to *The Listening* is the work of literary critic Edward Said on Orientalism, which postulated that the novel played a crucial role in the "formation of imperial attitudes, reference, and experiences" (1993, p.xii) and cited the works of British writers such as Austen, Conrad and Kipling in constructing 'cultural others'. Said's work in this vein is an important reminder that any medium with the power to define which bodies are deserving of empathetic investment must also possess the ability to define those which are *excluded* by this scope. As such, *The Listening* is written with the intention of demonstrating how narrative can harm as well as heal. While Mi'luvver's narrative magic can cure or act as a palliative for ailments (Geen, 2018, pp.40-41), Asha curses people (Ibid., pp.97-99, 157-158, 176-178 & 221-229) and the religious stories of the Brothers (Ibid., pp.25-29) and some Ffieth stories (Ibid., pp.129-131 & 149) are repressive of female bodies.

The debate over the role of literature in inspiring literary has been waged since the novel's conception and will likely continue as long as the form exists, but it is only in recent decades that science has weighed in. Though these studies have tended to assume that empathy is always positive, they offer a valuable contribution to the discourse by providing empirical corroboration for the idea that novels elicit empathy. The most famous of these studies is Kidd and Castano's (2013) paper 'Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind', which not only supports the idea that reading leads to better performance on tests of Theory of Mind but suggests that literary fiction appears to be

significantly better at improving Theory of Mind compared to non-fiction and popular fiction. The paper was not without its flaws and has been criticised for presenting data that was only weakly significant and for using poorly chosen sample texts (McDermid, 2016). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that 'low-brow or middle-brow' fiction may be better at evoking affective empathy (Keen, 2010, p.ix). Regardless, the paper, along with Kidd and Castano's follow-up study (2017), garnered a spread of press coverage that is rare for scientific research. Unfortunately, many of these pieces went beyond the remit of the article's findings, for example, *The Atlantic's* piece on the study was entitled 'Now We Have Proof Reading Literary Fiction Makes You a Better Person' (2013). The press also often erroneously reported the 2013 paper as showing that fiction improves empathy when it actually studied Theory of Mind, which can't be conflated with empathy as it doesn't necessarily entail caring about or sharing another person's thoughts or emotions.

The body of scientific research on empathy and the novel is more comprehensive than these two papers, however. To cite a few examples, in 2006, the psychologist Raymond Mar and colleagues provided evidence that frequent readers score better on tests of empathy and social ability than readers of non-fiction, followed by another paper by Mar in 2011 that suggested that brain areas associated with Theory of Mind are employed during story comprehension. In 2012 the psychologist Dan Johnson provided evidence that transportation into a story correlates with empathy and that narrative engagement impacts on prosocial behaviour. Soon after, in early 2013, the psychologists Pieter Bal & Martijn Veltkamp showed that empathy appears to be increased for a week after moving reading experiences. Kidd and Castano ride a bandwagon. So, while there is room for further studies, such research is making it increasingly difficult to doubt that literature can evoke empathy.

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As they look out over the sun stroked hills of Florence, Vernon and Kit could have no idea that their discussion has positioned them within a research tradition that shivers all the way back to Greek theories of the occult and forwards to the human sciences of the twenty-first century. The word 'empathy' meant nothing to them then and even when it was to enter their vocabulary it would mean something quite different from the definition now given by the Cambridge Dictionary.

Given that the lack of consensus on definitions of empathy is an ongoing problem, this thesis understands empathy as form of imaginative and questioning travel between the self and other. Such imaginative travel has been enthused over by philosophers and artists alike and now inspires psychologists to search for empirical evidence linking literature and empathy. As the following chapters will question, this research predominantly focuses on top-down, cognitive processes and ignores bottom-up, embodied routes emphasised in broader empathy research, an oversight that likely results from a cultural tendency to understand reading as disembodied.

For Vernon and Kit, however, this is all still to come and, as the peal of the bells grow, Kit reaches out an itching little finger towards Vernon's, only to pause, then drop the hand.

Never mind, it won't be long now. The two women are about to embark on a programme of radical experimentation that will not only shape the future of empathy research but their personal relationship.

## Chapter Two

"The body, I think, often presents us with a fall from language."

*Peter Brooks (1993, p.7)*

The rose lies on the pillow. At the sight, blood rushes to Vernon's head and she steadies herself against the bed frame. There's no letter but none is needed to know that it is from Kit – the green stem is a key that unlocks a history of pregnant pauses, its white petals are a surrender. The mattress springs draw a sharp breath as she sits and buckles into her hands.

It is 1887 and Vernon is mired in her first nervous breakdown after the love of her youth Mary Robinson has sent word that she is to be married (Colby, 2003, p.128). To say that Vernon is shocked is an understatement: Mary's fiancé is a man who was unknown to either woman the last time that they were together, mere months before.

Eugene perceives the engagement as a betrayal. After a furious flurry of letters determines that Mary will not break off the match, he confines himself to admonishing the couple not to have marital relations, lest the dwarfism of Mary's fiancé results in a "scrofulous abortion" – a monstrously deformed child (Ibid.). This odious prejudice was little balm for Vernon's heartbreak and without the comfort and care of Kit it is unlikely that she would have coped. Now it appears that this friendship could be something more. Vernon weeps not only out of grief but hope.

Later, she is to preserve the rose in an envelope marked, "neue Liebe, neues Leben" – 'new love, new life' (Colby, 2003, p.123). This new life marks not only the beginning of their romance but the intellectual endeavour that will define their relationship.

London, Florence, Paris; with time the art galleries begin to look the same – gilt frames against vermilion wallpaper, sun muted curtains, stale air. There is the sense that if you picked the right door you could step from one institute to another. The mission of Vernon and Kit in each of these galleries is always the same; though at times it is more of a spectacle than others. Such as now, when Kit plants her wide body before a Greek urn and begins to sway. The urn's smooth contours suggest a self-certain femininity that mirrors Kit's solid build and this resonance is only amplified as she pushes her hips forwards to echo the urn's belly. Breath rises through her in clear lungfuls. Her pulse is steady. Nearby, Vernon makes observations in a careful hand.

This strange display is not courtship, or not explicitly so, but part of their research. Excited by Kit's comments about the impact of art on her body, Vernon has encouraged Kit to respond physically to the artwork and record the alterations on her physiology, such as the:

[P]articular manner and speed with which the right side and the left side of her lungs filled with air, how her balance shifted from side to side or up and down, the plant of her legs and feet, the tensing and relaxing of her muscles and so on. (Burdett, 2011a, p.265)

Vernon provides these observations with an intellectual framework informed by her extensive reading into psychology. In particular, she draws on the 'Father of American Psychology' William James's James-Lange theory (Cannon, 1927), which claims that emotion is grounded in physiological responses and so offers the women a route for understanding how Kit's aesthetic experiences can arise through her body reactions to art. In Vernon's words:

The contemplation of a beautiful thing... elicits a motor response in the viewer, who unconsciously imitates the formal properties of the object of vision and, as it were, projects their own bodily movements back onto it. (Fraser, 2014, p.96)

In this way, the women are later to understand themselves as having independently come to what other theorists call the theory of 'Einfühlung'.

Vernon also applies these ideas to her own craft of writing:

There are words which make the reader think and feel, in a way live, slowly; and there are other words which make the reader think, feel, and live quickly... . Above all, there are arrangements of words... which, by opening up vistas or closing them, make the reader's mind dawdle, hurry, or labour busily along. (1894, p.577)

She is also to later assert that "empathy is what explains why we employ figures of speech at all" (1913, p.62).

By finding active qualities in inert objects and transcribing these in writing, Vernon can be thought of as describing a form of 'empathetic fallacy'. Yet, where her contemporary John Ruskin (1860) argued that the technique makes for unskilful and false poetry, Vernon believes that such language is not a fallacy at all but rather 'accurate' with regard to how we experience the world. It is:

At the bottom of numberless words and expressions whose daily use has made us overlook this special peculiarity. We say, for instance, that hills roll and mountains rise... . We attribute movement to motionless lines and surfaces; they move, spread out, flow, bend, twist, etc. They do... what we should feel ourselves doing if we were inside them. (1912, p.18)<sup>10</sup>

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10 It is important to note that, though a novelist, Vernon did not relate this theory to the bodily responses of sentimentalism, which require an identification with a narrative. Vernon's work with Kit instead focused on the instinctive and physiological processes related to responding to form.

This approach to the literary craft is employed regularly in her short stories and novels, despite the fact that her stories are often framed as if taking the form of reports or letters and so use descriptions with a light touch. For instance, in her short story *Oke of Okehurst* in the collection *Hauntings* she writes:

It must be a good mile and a half since we had passed a house, and there was none to be seen in the distance—nothing but the undulation of sere grass, sopped brown beneath the huge blackish oak-trees, and whence arose, from all sides, a vague disconsolate bleating. At last the road made a sudden bend, and disclosed what was evidently the home of my sitter. (1890, p.112-113)

Here, grass undulates and the road makes a bend, suggesting active, bodily movements in inert object. Bodily qualities can also be found, in a slightly different fashion, lines such as the following from her first novel *Miss Brown*: "Hamlin pushed open the green and blistered house-door and entered the wide hall, with rickety eighteenth-century chairs and tables marshalled round the walls" (1884, p.11). Not only does 'marshalled' present the chairs with an active quality but both 'blistered' and 'rickety' gain their meaning from reference to the afflicted human body.

Despite Vernon's clear interest in the importance of the body in her writings and research, her relationship towards it in her personal life is more fraught. For Vernon is puritan to the point of prudish and, despite her great love of Kit, refuses to indulge in the most innocent demonstrations of affection, preferring – in the words of her associate Ethel Smyth – to understand her romantic friendships as “merely intellectual necessities” (1940, p.28). This rejection of physical sexuality has prompted some critics to understand Vernon's intellectual interest in Kit's bodily observations as displaced sexual desire (Burdett, 2011a).

If their research is a projection of a sexual desire then it must also be a projection of romantic doubt, for Vernon herself has never been able to experience anything like the aesthetic bodily sensations that Kit reports. She keeps these reservations to herself, but they surely trouble her, such as now when she pauses in her scribbling to see that Kit has tipped her head back in song. Her lover's deep voice vibrates like a sonorous body of clay and the ladies who have gathered to watch titter behind their hands. Vernon feels herself tugged from the scene, as if she were suddenly not by Kit's side but among the crowd, noting with them the blotches of colour pricked out on stocky flesh. Her knuckles tighten around the notebook clutched to her chest and the nib of her pen brushes against her bodice, bleeding black into the fibres.

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Vernon can be excused her doubts when they have been echoed by many before and many since. Given that the power of art is its ability to draw the audience out of their material situation to new times and places, the role of the body can appear minimal or even null. To take Vernon's own craft, a good book has the power to distract the reader from their own flesh to such an extent that many report near out-of-body experiences and make comments to the effect that: "I just think I'm in the story, like floating above them" (Blackford, 2004, pp.19-20). Even the author Philip Pullman, who writes that the belief he'd most like readers of *His Dark Materials* (1995, 1997, 2000) to come away with is "the value and centrality of bodily experience" (2017, p.235), believes that the act of reading prompts the reader to "leave their bodies here" (Ibid., p.263), while "their consciousness, is partly elsewhere" (Ibid.).

This dissociation between book and body is, in part, based on a deeper perceived disjunction between flesh and words. "The body, I think, often presents us with a fall from language" (1993, p.7), the literary critic Peter Brooks mused, "[w]e tend to think of the physical body as precultural and prelinguistic" (Ibid.). This linguistic fall is understood by the literary critic Andrew Bennett as creating:

An intimate and ineluctable paradox at the heart, as we say, of the discourse of the body because any representation of the body 'endeavours to make the body present'. But this making-present is always, necessarily, marked by its absence. (Hillman and Maude, 2015, p.73)

Literary critics David Hillman and Ulrika Maude call this seemingly incommensurable relationship between language and the body the 'hard problem' of body studies:

Not only is there no obvious way for the concrete materiality of the body to be fully present in or on the written page; even more profoundly, there would seem in the face of it to be an apparent mutual exclusivity of the body and language. (Ibid., p.3)

It is a mistake, however, to leap from these observations to the assumption that the body necessarily exists outside of language. After all, for Bennett's paradox to be a paradox the body has to be present as well as absent and, despite the 'apparent mutual exclusivity', Hillman and Maude write that:

Literature might in fact be understood as *the* place par excellence for the body to express itself. ... Writing can forcefully return us to the body, or perhaps better, return the body to us. (Ibid.)

Whatever one's theoretical stance, it cannot be denied that language, whether written or spoken, emerges from bodies, through the hand or breath, and bears traces of these origins. The receiving of language is also necessarily physical – to take the act of reading, the book must be held, pages turned and the eyes make careful movements across the page to bring the words to our awareness in the intended order. Some people

may even use 'vocalisation', in which small, inaudible, movements are made with the lips, tongue or throat while reading. The physicality of a book, or e-reader, also impacts on reading experiences, including affecting the ease of understanding and absorption in a text (Jabr, 2013), and the sensory experiences associated with reading — including the visual quality of the words on the page, the feeling on fingertips and aroma — are of great importance to many readers (Ibid.).

Sensory and bodily components are also deeply embedded in prose itself, to such an extent that I can illustrate this by taking up any novel, in this case Jeff Vandermeer's *Borne*, and by turning to a random page, 224. Let's take a few lines below the passage break as our example:

Back by the dead, burned bear, someone waited for me. I had never seen him shine so bright, there in the darkness, in the rain of ash. Standing so tall and straight he eclipsed the bear completely.  
(2017, p.224)

This passage is both sensory and bodily. As with the majority of novelistic descriptions the sense modality employed is visual – implied by 'shine', 'bright', 'darkness' – though the description could have just as easily been 'I had never smelt him so fragrant', or 'heard him so loud'. Meanwhile, the bodily qualities of the passage are apparent in both the protagonist's descriptions of the man – 'standing', 'tall', 'straight' – and in the implied relationship between their two bodies – to stand 'tall' and 'eclipse the bear' requires the protagonist to have a size and position in space relative to the man and bear, thereby resulting in his blocking of the bear from her vision. To emphasise this point, imagine if the passage were written instead from the perspective of Mord, the five-story high bear that haunts *Borne*. In this scenario the man could hardly be said to stand 'tall' and, given the aerial-like perspective of the bear, it would be difficult for the man to 'eclipse' anything.

Of course, these descriptions are not sensory or bodily in the same way as real world experiences. Thankfully, when I read the passage I don't smell burnt bear in the same way that, if I pull my attention from the book, I can smell the packet of Mini Cheddars I have opened to sustain me through these edits, nor do I feel the injuries of the protagonist in the same way as I am aware of the sense of fullness that comes from eating my snack. However, when I read I am not immediately conscious of the sensation of my body against the cushioning of my office chair or even of the wailing guitars that are playing on my phone, instead I am *there* with the charcoal stink of charred bear and the uncanny iridescence of the man. And, to the extent that you can understand what I have just described, you are currently not fully conscious of the sensory and bodily

qualities of your own situation but immersed with me both in my bodily experiences as I read and in my reading experience of the passage. While it is possible, to some degree, to hold both an awareness of one's real sensory experiences and the meaning of the page in mind at once, this is taxing and comes with a diminishing of the quality of both experiences. The rich scenarios brought into being by reading a novel are not grounded in the reader's present world but they have a sensory reality and this imaginative vitality could not come into being without real-world sensory experiences falling out of focus.

It is my contention that the paradoxical absence of the body from the novel can therefore be understood as a necessary part of the process by which reading returns us to materiality. To understand this in phenomenological terms, it is the body's ability to self-efface that allows for the appearance of the world. The body becomes Merleau-Ponty's "darkness needed in theatre to show up the performance" (1945, p.115). Successful action, in the majority of cases, requires the experience of the body to be subsumed into consciousness of the task at hand, a process that the phenomenologist Drew Leder called 'dys-appearance', in which:

The successful acquisition of a new ability coincides with a phenomenological effacement of all this. The thematization of rules, for example, of my own embodiment, falls away once I truly know how to swim. (1990, p.31)

A similar process takes place in sensory focal disappearance: "insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it describes" (Ibid., p.14). Though the action of your eyes is necessary to read this page, to attempt the impossible task of looking at your eyes or to become overly cogent of their movement around the page would distract from, if not prevent, successful reading because "[t]he body conceals itself precisely in the act of revealing what is Other" (Ibid., p.22). For an act to succeed, the body must disappear as the object of our direct awareness and perhaps no more radically than in reading. Merleau-Ponty made a similar point when he wrote that: "[t]he wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion" (1945, p.115). This effect is so powerful that the rupture of language is required to bring its materiality into our awareness, which is one of the reasons for Merleau-Ponty's focus on aphasia in *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Just as language promotes its own oblivion, so does the body of the reader through the act of reading: "[f]or when written down, word and the ideas they express seem to develop a career independent of human bodies" (Leder, 1990, p.123).

The apparent immateriality of reading is therefore best understood not as the fall of the body from language but as a consequence of the reader directing their consciousness away from their own materiality and towards the contents of the words, allowing the

imaginative world contained within to flourish. This paradoxical power, of making the present absent and the absent present, is a crucial process in the 'magic' of reading and in the next chapter I will delve deeper into this uncanny spell that language holds over the body.

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Vernon is startled from her doubts by Kit's gaze and, in that moment, her lover is reassembled, not as meat but the embodiment of the wholesome strength that has led some to remark upon an likeness to Venus de Milo. These concerns are foolish, she has everything a woman of her temperament could hope for – a kind and beautiful lover, enough money to travel and the purpose that research provides. Why complicate matters? Vernon pulls the notebook from her chest and continues to write.

Only later, as she undresses, will she notice the filigree of ink that has run from the pen into her bodice. But, by then, the dress is already ruined.

## Chapter Three

“Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other.”

*Roland Barthes (1977, p.73)*

Let us back-track to 1873, Lisbon, where Vernon's half-brother Eugene is stationed as a secretary in the British Legation. It is here when, on a day like any other, his legs give out and he collapses in agony. Time does little to improve his condition and he returns home at the age of twenty-eight, defeated (Villari, 1908, p.183).

Vernon, fourteen years old at the time, almost doesn't recognise the man who washes up on her doorstep. In a house of too much quiet and too little love, Eugene's energy and affection has always had the power to draw palpitations from her child's heart (Colby, 2003, p.6), but, seeing him now, she pauses. There is a sheen of sweat on him and a sharp light behind the eyes. She holds back as the others rush forwards to help him into the parlour.

Eugene has always been their mother's favourite (Ibid., p.7) and now he is home once more, and so grievously ill for such a young man, all her energies are bent to caring for her son; Vernon helps where she can and so will Kit when she arrives on the scene.

Looking after Eugene is not easy work, but then it is not easy being Eugene. By February he is confined to bed. The doctors cite over-work, yet time and rest only give rise to more symptoms – "chest pains, sensitivity to light and sound, paralysis of the legs and back, and general debility" (Ibid. p.44). When Vernon looks into her brother's face she sees an old man.

The experts are baffled. Behind shut doors, Vernon hears the muffled talk between stiff medical men and comes to know of their suspicion that the mysterious illness is more than physical. This is the nineteenth century, however, and while so-called 'conversion disorders' have been relocated from 'wandering wombs' to the brain (Shahid, 2015) they are still considered to be the prerogative of women. For lack of a better term, Eugene is said to be suffering from "a most perilous case of cerebro-spinal disease" (Villari, 1908, p.183).

It is to distract himself from the torments of the flesh that he first turns to poetry. His pen is largely driven by lust, jealousy, fear and the uneasy liminal spaces between religion and atheism, sanity and madness, and love and hate (Lee-Hamilton, 2002), but other poems aim directly for the heart of his suffering.

To keep through life the  
Posture of the grave.

While others walk and run and  
Dance and leap. (1882, p.209)

Success is hard won. As Vernon's publications progress from papers to books, Eugene's poems manage to venture no further from the house than him. As Vernon grows into a healthy young woman in love, Eugene's intransigent body tightens its grip. As Vernon and Kit walk and run and dance and leap about the gallery, Eugene's verses and flesh lie together in the dark (Colby, 2003, p.45).

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## **Word Made Flesh**

Symptoms aren't always the preserve of medicine. In 1962 the Japanese scientist Yujiro Ikemi carried out a study on children known to experience rashes when exposed to lacquer trees, in which the experimenters stroked one arm of each of these children with a lacquer leaf and their other with a leaf from a non-allergenic plant. What the children didn't know was that the leaf that they were told came from a lacquer was harmless and the leaf that they were told was harmless was from a lacquer tree. As was to be

expected, a few children experienced allergic reactions to the real lacquer leaf, but, alarmingly, even more children developed a rash where they had been touched by the non-allergenic one. Wherein then did the allergen lie? Not just the non-lacquer leaf itself, which was normally harmless. It would be more pertinent to say that the words used to describe the experiment had provoked a visceral response. Yet while these words had been fictive there was nothing imaginary about the symptoms that they had caused – the blotchiness and agitation was tangibly real to the scientists, not to mention the children. There was nothing ‘mutually exclusive’ between language and body. In the flushed skin of the children, signifier had brushed up against soma and blended with it as an empirical inversion of Bennett's paradox – instead of language making an absent body imaginatively present, imaginary words had made themselves materially present in actual bodies. Words, fictive or not, have real consequences for the body and having made the case for the novel being embodied in the previous chapter, I will now proceed to explore the uncanny entanglement between words and flesh.

Ikemi's study is a startling example of the relationship between words and flesh, yet language acts upon and shapes our everyday materiality. Language is received into our bodies through the mechanics of the ear and eye but also through its impact on the physiology of our feelings – if I am praised, then heat rises to my cheeks, while criticism can provoke tears and an almost physical pain. The psychoanalyst Maggie Turp believes that this effect reaches back to our childhood when “the word is just one aspect of bodily experience. To the newborn infant, it is all cadence, rhythm, volume and tone. Words soothe, tease, excite or shock; sustain or cut across the infant's own sense of its being” (2001, p.3). For these reasons, she goes so far as to claim that the: “nature of our being is essentially psychosomatic, in the original meaning of the word... 'of mind and body together'” (Ibid., p.4).

Most of the psychosomatic responses that make up the fabric of our everyday life are benign or helpful. It is only when they impair our ability to function that they become psychosomatic *disorders* (Ibid., p.5). These disorders have a strong cultural basis and are often specific to time and place,<sup>11</sup> for instance, 'Koro' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.264) is seen almost exclusively in Asian men and involves the delusion that the sufferer's penis is going to disappear into their body causing death, a belief that is self-perpetuating since the fear it inspires causes natural shrinkage of the

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11 This is not to deny that non-psychosomatic diseases are also affected by cultural issues but the connection isn't quite so intimate as in psychosomatic disorders.

penis, which, in turn, reinforces the fear.<sup>12</sup> An even more extreme example is that of the nineteenth century hysteria researcher Jean-Martin Charcot, who, by bringing hysteria to popular consciousness and supplying it with a socially acceptable aetiology, was unwittingly responsible for hysteria reaching epidemic levels that spread through France, then Europe, only to wane dramatically within a year of his death (O'Sullivan, 2015, p.122-123).

Psychosomatic effects can also be palliative, in this context they are called placebos and were wittingly prescribed by doctors as part of their standard practice well into the nineteenth century (Shapiro and Shapiro, 2000). In ancient Greece and Egypt language based prayers and spells were a standard medical intervention, such as in the instruction: "These words are to be spoken over the sick person. 'O Spirit, male or female, who lurks hidden in my flesh and in my limbs, get out of my flesh'" (Sturmberg and Martin, 2007, p.7) and in the Middle Ages the "magic efficiency of words" (Skemer, 2006, p.1) was used to heal ailments through a variety of inventive practices, including hanging biblical passages around the neck on a ring of parchment or eating sacred passages written on ingestible substances (Ibid., p.2).

Though placebos aren't of such importance to contemporary medicine, recent research has shown that they can be beneficial in treating some conditions (Vance, 2016, pp.20-111). Even when they aren't actively employed, their power is acknowledged to the extent that good scientific design is required to give due attention to mitigating their effect, such as in double-blind trials where knowledge has to be kept from the experimenter as well as the participant to prevent belief and language from affecting the results.

The healing power of language is employed even more directly by talking therapies. For instance, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy talks the service-user through their beliefs and behavioural patterns to challenge "errors in thinking such as overgeneralizing, magnifying negatives, minimizing positives and catastrophizing" with "more realistic and effective thoughts, thus decreasing emotional distress and self-defeating behaviour" (Hassett and Gevritz, R.N, 2009, p.396). Service-users are also encouraged to use written worksheets and journaling to help control and moderate distressing thought patterns outside of sessions (Williams, 2001). The particularities of word use are even more important in psychoanalysis, which perceives language "not simply as a 'package'; for carrying ideas and feelings, but as a medium in which thoughts and feelings are created" (Ogden, 2009, p.1). Even more pertinently, psychoanalysis understands

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12 An effect that Asha employs with the fur trappers in *The Listening* (Geen, 2018, pp.176-177).

conversion disorders, such as the condition that was likely experienced by Eugene Lee-Hamilton, as trauma that “cannot be voiced” (O’Sullivan, 2015, p.91). This trauma is theorized as having an aetiology that is, at least in part, literary and symbolism is given particular importance. This can be observed in Freud’s discussion of one his patients, Miss Elisabeth R:

She related a conversation with him<sup>13</sup> and a remark that he made which aggravated her very much. She then suddenly grasped her cheek, crying aloud with pain, and said, “That was like a slap in the face”—with this both the attack and the pain came to an end. ... it seemed that for years, aggravations, especially through words, produced new attacks of this facial neuralgia by way of symbolization. (Freud, 1912, p.71)

As words are thought to lie at the root of such suffering, psychoanalysis works to relieve the patient by bringing their trauma into speech and their body into language. In Freud’s words:

Words are the essential tool of mental treatment. A layman will no doubt find it hard to understand how pathological disorders of the body and mind can be eliminated by ‘mere’ words. He will feel that he is being asked to believe in magic. And he will not be so very wrong, for the words which we use in our everyday speech are nothing other than watered-down magic. (Freud, 1953, p.283)

We will return to this ‘watered-down magic’ later, but, magic or not, considering case-studies such as that of Miss Elisabeth R, it is hard not to give credence to the words of the psychoanalyst Richard Kradin that: “[m]etaphors have real consequences for both mind and the body” (2012, p.12).

## **Embodied Semantics**

Metaphors may have real consequences for both mind and the body, but, as Lee’s research on the ‘empathetic fallacy’ of figurative speech showed, the body also has real consequences for the metaphors that we use in language. The English literary critic Benjamin Morgan sees Lee’s work on the subject as anticipating George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s ‘metaphorical concepts’ (2012, p.37). In *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), Lakoff and Johnson theorised that people understand complex concepts by basing them on familiar objects, actions and situations – in this case the body. Language, they argued, maps onto the body via metaphor, image schemas and prototypes in order to structure human understanding and meaning, which they evidenced through providing a meticulous collection of embodied conceptual metaphors. For instance: “if an object has gone over one’s head, then one hasn’t grasped it” (Ibid., p.125).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Miss Elisabeth R’s husband.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson takes these ideas further in *The Meaning of the Body* (2007), which champions an embodied aesthetic theory as the source of meaning. “We are born into the world as creatures of flesh,” Johnson writes, “and it’s through our bodily perceptions, movements, emotions and feelings that meaning



The work of Lakoff and Johnson has found recent support in the neuroscience of embodied semantics,<sup>15</sup> which claims that reading action sentences activates the action circuitry of the brain. In other words, when one reads about an action, pre-motor areas of the brain respond as if one were carrying out that action oneself. Though embodied semantics is a relatively new field, the neuroscientists Lisa Aziz-Zadeh and Antonio Damasio (2008) have undertaken a review of the fMRI literature and found that, overall, there is strong support for the role of embodied semantics in literal action sentences, if not for its recruitment in metaphorical language. A more recent paper by Desai et al (2011), however, compared sensory-motor system activation in abstract, metaphorical, idiomatic and literal sentences and suggested that sensory-motor systems are employed for all of these but less so as abstractness and conventionalized meaning increases. Embodied Semantics studies have also been carried out using narrative texts, suggesting that the reader uses their sensory-motor system to simulate and comprehend the actions of characters (Wallentin et al, 2011a). This may even lead to long-term changes to bodily-based neurology. Gregory Berns and colleagues found changes to connectivity in the bilateral somatosensory cortex<sup>16</sup> that persist for several days after reading and suggest that this may not only be a result of embodied semantics but of reading placing "the reader in the body of the protagonist" (2013, p.598).

This line of thought has been championed by the literary critic Guillemette Bolen, who argues that: "readers spontaneously produce dynamic perceptual simulations when silently reading texts" (2012, p.13) as an essential and automatic process of story comprehension. The literary critic Marco Caracciolo takes this idea even further to suggest that: "some passages provide the reader with a fictionally actual body on which to ground his or her virtual body" (2011, p.117). This virtual body plays a role even when prose is written from the perspective of a third-person omniscient narrator, for descriptions are always implicitly bound to particular embodiments<sup>17</sup> and when a

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becomes possible and takes the forms it does." (Ibid. p.ix) For Johnson, art is not just mimesis - an imperfect copy of the 'real' - "the processes of embodied meaning in the arts are the very same ones that make linguistic meaning possible" (Ibid. p. 209).

15 It is worth pausing here to note that the arts and humanities need to exhibit caution in embracing the 'neuro-turn' (Samson & Wormold, 2015) of modern cultural thinking. Doing so runs the risk of, among other problems, embracing the implicit hierarchies that our society creates around different types of knowledge, of misinterpreting of data and of reductive thinking. However, drawing on neuroscientific evidence is of particular importance here, given that, as Chapter Two argued, reading involves an active suppression of first-person experiences of the body. In this scenario, examining the body through the third-person perspective of neuroscience can help draw attention to the importance of its role in first-person experiences.

16 An area of the brain concerned with the experience of touch, pressure, pain, position and other sensations that arise from the body (Purves, Augustine & Fitzpatrick D, 2004, p.189).

17 As I explored in my treatment of a passage from *Borne* in Chapter Two.

narrative describes something a small or large, hot or cold, near or far, or of a specific colour or aural tone, it must assume an embodied position with certain qualities.

We can go even further than Caracciolo. Novels not only employ the central nervous system but the wider body, including muscles, glands and organs. Emotions (Dalglish, 2004), whether provoked by real-world events or those of novels, recruit physiological processes that can include anything from a racing heart to sweaty palms, upset stomach, or even sexual arousal. For a novel to play on our emotions is for it to impact on our physiology. To cite a personal example, reading Ben Marcus's *The Flame Alphabet* (2012), in which the speech of children physically sickens adults, left me so viscerally nauseous that I didn't want to eat for a day after finishing the novel.

Scientific evidence supports the idea of physiological involvement in reading and has shown a correlation between the emotional intensity of a fictional passage and heart rate (Wallentin et al, 2011b), breathing variability (Brouwer et al, 2015) and goose-bumps (Wassiliwizky et al, 2017a). fMRIs have been used to show the involvement of areas of the brain that are associated with the sensation of 'shivers down the spine' during reading (Zemen et al, 2013) and the goose-bump response is so reliable that some researchers have started to use it to measure of how much a text 'moves' the reader (Wassiliwizky et al, 2017b). In the light of such research, it makes sense to see the reader as not only embodying the descriptors of an omniscient narrator but psychosomatically simulating the actual characters within their own body.

The idea of embodied reading might be unfamiliar to twenty-first century readers but would have been of no great surprise to Vernon Lee. "It is at times hard to apprehend how profoundly corporeal the writings of the period are", Hillman and Maude write, the reader of these texts finds "the body at every turn – not just as metaphor, symbol or allegory, but a thematic and indeed literal protagonist" (Hillman and Maude, 2015, p.41). For example, the delightful turns of phrase such as 'thoughts of the heart' and 'the bowels of compassion' (Ibid.) were commonly used. The Victorians were not only fully aware of the physiological effects of reading – such as goose-flesh, shivers and tears (Ibid., p.47) – but actively sought them out (Ibid., p.43). These readerly effects were employed with great enthusiasm in the popular genre of the 'sensation novel', which "preached to the nerves" (Mangham, 2013) and made 'no bones' about aiming for effects such as that perfectly described by a line from Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* in which "in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop" (1860, p.20).

### **“Wizardry is Artistry” (Kunzru, 2014)**

In this chapter I have summarised some of the ways in which language and narrative are grounded in the body and explored how this connection between words and flesh plays a role in reading experiences. These ideas may appear strange to modern Western sensibilities. That speaking and writing should have the power to actualise its signifiers in the flesh sounds less like the preserve of science and more like 'watered-down magic' (Freud, 1953). Yet the causal power of words is so inherent to our understanding of them that it can even be found in the etymology. One of the most popular folk etymologies for 'abracadabra' suggests that it arose from the Hebrew phrase 'I will create as I speak' (Kusher, 1998, p.11), glamour, a spell spoken properly, is derived from the word 'grammar' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2017a) and the origins of the word 'spell' can be traced back to 'to tell' or 'story' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2017b).

The power of words is also reflected in the ways in which witchcraft has been understood throughout history. "The tongue is a witch" (Reis, 1998) wrote the Anglican minister George Webbe in 1619, or, to be more specific, a woman's tongue is a witch for, according to the historian Jane Kamensky, in Puritan New England "the witch's crime was often, at root, a crime of female speech" (Ibid., p.27). The threat of such 'crimes' was made possible by the way in which "speech functioned as the central arena for the definition of self" (Ibid.) in seventeenth century New England. Contrary to the extant nineteenth idiom that teaches that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me", in Puritan New England it was preached that "the tongue breaketh the bone" (Ibid., p.28). A similar philosophy of speech emerges through anthropologist Jeanne Favret-Saada's study of magic in twentieth century rural France, where witchcraft existed as "a set of words spoken in a crisis situation by someone who will later be designated as a witch are afterwards interpreted as having taken effect on the body and belongings of the person spoken to" (1981, p.9).

This history is echoed by the treatment of magic in fictional literature, where spells commonly involve a spoken or rhymed element, often accompanied by bodily gesture (Encyclopaedia of Fantasy, 1997). The author Ursula Le Guin considered this power of words "a very old idea in magic, all over the world. ... A writer, an artist whose medium is words, is likely to find the idea of magic as naming, words as power, a quite natural one" (2014). Her novel *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) is one of the most powerfully articulated renditions of this notion and conceptualises magic as knowing an object's 'true name' in the creator's language, thereby granting the speaker power over

objects, creatures and people. As such, there is a word that will make “a snail look out of its shell” and a “name that calls a falcon down from the sky” (Le Guin, 1974, p.4).

For a long time, *A Wizard of Earthsea*'s system of magic appeared to me to be one of the most compelling accounts offered by a novel, but my feelings on the matter changed during the months prior to dreaming up *The Listening*. I was, at this time, studying Michael Foucault<sup>18</sup> for my philosophy MA and learning about the radical evolution of words such as ‘madness’, ‘criminality’ and ‘sexuality’. ‘What is dirt?’ a lecturer had asked us one particularly troubling lecture, only for him to provide examples that broke every definition we put forwards. Eventually he took pity on us and presented us with the philosopher Mary Douglas's answer that dirt is “matter out of place” (1966, p.165), but this was little more reassuring since we were unable to come up with an understanding of ‘out of place’ that remained consistent across all contexts and socio-political situations. In the face of such thinking, the magic of *A Wizard of Earthsea* began to strike me as disappointingly structuralist in flavour. Similar to the Christian idea of a divine and immutable Adamic language (Mazzocco, 1993, p.159), in *A Wizard of Earthsea* a true name is always a true name, it is this a priori nature that allows the novel's protagonist to call a falcon from the sky with the same word as that used by the creator of the world. A constant law of language lies beneath the surface phenomena of the *A Wizard of Earthsea* and after studying Foucault this metaphysics no longer rang true for me. There is power in naming to be sure, it can be found in the Bristolian phrase ‘me lover’ just as much as in a taboo word like ‘cunt’,<sup>19</sup> but without a cultural foundation, such words are only breath passing over the larynx. For while names refer to concrete bodies, their meaning and power arises through their socio-political context and history. I therefore began to wonder whether ‘magic’ wasn't words in their singular state but language woven into systems – contingent, shifting and evolving.

What, then, would a metaphysics of magic look like if it wasn't structuralist but post-structuralist? If Foucauldian it would certainly be bodily, given the importance that he gave to ‘bio-power’ (1984, p.141), a concept that posits populations are controlled through the creation, subjugation, and normalisation of behaviour for the human body. I was less certain whether my magic could be discourse itself since Foucault emphasised

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18 It is worth emphasising here that, while Foucault was an inspiration for the initial idea behind the novel, *The Listening* is not supposed to be a literal translation of his philosophy.

19 The origins of ‘cunt’ are hard to place given that the word is so old but it appears to have been used in both the ancient west and east and not as a pejorative. In the *Women's Encyclopaedia of Myths and Secrets* (1983), Barbara Walker noted the shock of the Egyptologists when they found the word *kunt* in the writings of Ptah-Hotep, a twenty-fifth century BC Egyptian vizier, who appears to have used the word as a term of respect. As Walker remarked, the word's “indelicacy was not in the eye of the ancient beholder, only in that of the modern scholar” (p.196).

that power isn't wielded by people or groups but is dispersed, pervasive and in a state of constant flux (Ibid., p.93). Regardless, Foucault believed in action and resistance, for, while there might not be an underlying 'absolute truth' to be sought, the individual is encouraged to question socialised norms and to attempt detaching "the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time" (1980, p.131). The problem then became how the characters in my novel could undertake the questioning of the reality production of power. The most apparent answer appeared to me to lie in the art of producing *other* realities and knowledge. Magic wasn't words, it wasn't naming, it lay in the etymological root of 'spell' – in story-telling.

This line of thinking is embedded in the metaphysics of *The Listening* and the magic of the novel exists as a vehicle for exploring the relationship between word and flesh, narrative and body, and discourse and materiality. The reality of the novel is markedly discursively different to ours, in particular through how it constructs race (Geen, 2018, p.24), gender (Ibid., p.93) and sexuality (Ibid., p.41), and the bio-politics of this world subjugate and shape bodies to these fictive social-constructs. Ffieth, people who possess bodies that we would think of as normal, sometimes cut off their little fingers to render their bodies more similar to that of the imperial race (Ibid., p.59) and thin women eat to become fat (Ibid., p.133).

This philosophy, which understands society as shaping the body through social constructs such as the idea of gender, sets *The Listening* apart from the other Le Guin novel that inspired it – *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). This work of science-fiction features an alien race called the Gethen who have no fixed sex but develop 'male' or 'female' sexual attributes for short periods once a month. Le Guin intended this premise to serve as a literary experiment that "eliminated gender, to find out what was left" (Cummins, 1990). Quotes like this appear to imply that Le Guin wished to position the novel in relation to constructivist ideas of gender (Alsop, Fitzsimons, and Lennon, 2002, pp.64-93) and for it to invert gender binaries. However, the quote also suggests that Le Guin thought that eliminating gender required creating an alien species that was radically biologically different to homo sapiens and that, for Le Guin, gender, and sex, could be reduced to physiology.<sup>20</sup>

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20 The premise has also been critiqued for being heteronormative and for the use of 'he' to refer to all Gethens (White, 1999, pp.45-50). While Le Guin was later to apologise for these short-comings (Le Guin, 1988), at the time of writing she was staunch in her defence of these choices and in the essay 'Is Gender Necessary?' (Le Guin, 1979, pp.161-170) she went as far as to write: "I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she". Not only does this statement show that Le Guin was, at that time, incapable of adapting language beyond the gender binary – a failure that is

*The Listening*, however, has benefited from the third and fourth wave feminist thought that has emerged since the publication of *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The novel has been written during a period where transgender issues are increasingly becoming of mainstream discourse (Penny, 2014), the importance of intersectional politics is entering popular consciousness to the point that it is discussed in fashion magazines (Elle, 2018) and critical theory has explored the ways in which society creates gender and the individual 'performs' it (Butler, 1990). This means that while both *The Listening* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* set out to write about a group of people who change gender,<sup>21</sup> *The Listening*'s underlying understanding of 'gender' allows its characters to be physiologically identical to its readers. Though the God Children have an idea of sex that is very similar to ours (Geen, 2018, pp.90 & 93), the Ffieth are born with no gender and only become male or female once they come of age (Ibid., pp.89 & 93). Those who menstruate, or rather those who *present* as menstruating (Ibid., p.140), are considered to be women and everyone else becomes a man (Ibid., p.93). Meanwhile, once women stop menstruating they become 'mutton' (Ibid.), though they retain female pronouns.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of 'eliminating' gender through biologically altering the body, *The Listening* investigates gender as a social and political idea that enters and shapes the body. For instance, those who are understood to be female are encouraged to put on fat (Ibid., pp.133 & 140), whereas those who are perceived as male develop strong musculature due to the types of work that Ffieth deem fit for men (Ibid., p.137). This does not mean that *The Listening* perceives the body to be inconsequential; it is instead preoccupied with the uncanny dialogue between social constructs and flesh. As such, the focus of the second half of the book is on the conflict between the undeniable physical reality of Asha, who has just started menstruating (Ibid., p.124); how the Ffieth interpret periods, i.e. as the defining characteristic of a woman (Ibid., p.93); and how Asha chooses to identify (Ibid., p.196). These forms of bio-power are pervasive and performed by both the empowered, the God Children (Ibid., pp.19, 24, 51 & 52), and disempowered, the Ffieth (Ibid., pp.44, 132 & 167-168).

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especially ironic given that she had no difficulty imagining alien societies, dragons and magic – but the unfortunate use of 'mangle' evokes ableist discourses to suggest that the gender binary embedded in English was natural, healthy and to be protected.

21 Both novels are also invested in exploring gender in relation to race and colonialism.

22 The ugly and derogatory connotations behind this term were chosen to emphasize that the novel is not an attempt to write a utopian vision of gender. It instead aims to throw a spotlight on the contingent nature of social constructs, though they may seem necessary and absolute from the inside, and to emphasise that most, if not all, discursive frames exhibit mistreatment of some individuals due to a dismissal of their lived experiences, value and narratives, in short, due to a refusal to empathise.

Yet the body is not only a site of oppression, it is also a source of resistance and pleasure. For Foucault: "Power, after investing itself in the body, finds itself exposed to a counterattack in that same body" (1975). This bodily resistance can take many forms, including literal violent uprising, such as in Fanon's 'collective catharsis' through which subjects rid themselves of Colonialism (Pallas, 2016); bodily modifications that reject the moulds impressed on the body by norms (Pitts, 1998); and *écriture féminine*, which calls on women to put their bodies back into writing in order to disrupt masculine discourses (Cixous et al, 1976).

In this way, while the bodies of *The Listening* are fallible, weak and vulnerable, they are also powerful. Though Asha's body is written on and shaped by its society, it also uses it to chase girls who dehumanise it (Geen, 2018, pp.91-92) and to reject gender norms by wearing male clothes (Ibid., p.206). Language may command the body, but the body always answers back.

Yet, as Chapter Two argued, language and story should not be understood as being in dichotomy with the body. In the words of the gender theorist Elizabeth Grosz:

Bodies are fictionalized, that is, positioned by various cultural narratives and discourses, which are themselves embodiments of culturally established canons, norms and representation forms, so that they can be seen as living narratives. (Grosz, 1994, p.118)

The most powerful forms of resistance in *The Listening* therefore take the form of language and stories acting upon the body as magic (Geen, 2018, p.234). This means that Mi'luvver's stories can heal (Ibid., pp.40-41) and Asha's stories stave off Death (Ibid., pp.151-153 & 105-107). Through the course of the novel, Asha learns how to resist by forgoing its muteness to state its own perspectives (Ibid., p.157), by rewriting the stories of its oppressors (Ibid., p.220) and by preventing textual interpretation of its body by those who dehumanise it (Ibid., pp.221-224). Such magic has limitations, however, Mi'luvver's stories can ameliorate symptoms but do not have the efficacy of the fey magic (Ibid., p.66) and Death will eat Asha eventually (Ibid., p.230). Materiality is malleable to language, but magic is an uncanny art, more often than not flesh will feign deafness to the person's heart-felt pleas.

*The Listening* makes Asha the victim of violent narratives, the perpetrator of them and a story-teller who uses them as an act of resistance, yet the book only closes once she is capable of both asserting her own narrative perspective and of listening to those of other people (Ibid., p.234). In other words, Asha's journey requires it to learn that narrative is more than a source of power but can act as a form of balance between differing perspectives as empathy; and it is this empathetic power of stories that the next chapter will precede to explore.

In this chapter I argued that words shape the body and touched on some of the ways in which they have been employed to do by medicine, magic and reading experiences. This dialogue goes both ways, however, the body also shapes language, whether through Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphors or as violent resistance against certain types of discourse. To this end I explored how *The Listening* represents these types of narrative and updates the structuralist magic of *A Wizard of Earthsea* to post-structuralist thought and the second-wave feminist philosophy of *The Left Hand of Darkness* to fourth-wave thinking.

In Chapter One I touched on how 'sympathy' was once thought to explain the workings of magic as a form of affinity over a distance. The ability of words to impact upon the body, as explored in this chapter, can be understood as enacting a similar form of sympathetic magic. The processes involved in embodied semantics, for instance, create an affinity between the bodily actions and reactions of characters and the physiology of the reader, despite the distances in space and time between the writer and reader. Of course, 'sympathy' is no longer associated with the occult, but in the next chapter I attempt to show that 'sympathetic magic' can still be seen at play in modern literary empathy through the resonance between the text and the reader.

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At their mother's funeral, Vernon stands on the opposite side of the grave to Eugene. Once again, she is barely able to recognise her brother. The years of suffering have left dark smudges under his eyes, but, still, there he stands, on his own two feet. Before the ceremony he announced that he intends to travel the world (Colby, 2003, p.147).

A foreign doctor Vernon consulted is to thank for the miraculous recovery (Villari, 1908, p.186), though she finds little gratitude within her breast. It wasn't long after Eugene had accepted the diagnosis of what the doctors are now calling 'auto-suggestion' that their mother fell ill. The son grew in strength as the mother weakened and Vernon and Kit moved their ministrations from one to the other. Now Eugene stands while their mother lies in the casket.

The words of the priest rattle over Vernon like the earth raining into the grave and she refuses to look at her brother as he holds out the chest with the soil. The grit is rough between her hands and she is glad when she can wipe them clean and rejoin Kit, though Eugene still weighs in the corner of her eyes. He has soaked up the very last of their



mother's love and then detached himself, like a sated tick. The drawstrings around her heart tighten.

Later, her purse is to shut against him just as surely when he marries and brings a sickly child into the world (Colby, 2003, p.149). As he commits his only child to the ground Eugene resolves never to forgive his sister. Too many cruel words have been exchanged and too few of love. The siblings have rung out of tune and there is no going back.

## Chapter Four

“Words, cross the borders of our bodies in two directions, outside in and inside out, and therefore the minimal requirement for a living language is two people.”

*Siri Hustvedt (2010, p.55)*

When the copy of *The Contemporary Review* arrives, Vernon and Kit press together over the pages until they find their names: ‘Vernon Lee and C. Anstruther-Thomson, authors of *Beauty and Ugliness*’ (1912). The achievement has been hard won; though Kit is usually of a strong disposition, the unfamiliar strains of the writing process have greatly weakened her. Yet there their names now sit, side by side. As the peal of bells comes through the window, their fingers mesh for a brief moment until Vernon remembers herself and pulls away.

The satisfaction of publication is similarly short-lived. The art critic Bernard Berenson, family friend and rival, who had previously snubbed Vernon as “somehow making you feel that she is intelligent” (Colby, 2003, p.160), clearly thought that the article was clever enough for him to accuse the two women of plagiarising his work. Worse still, the piece comes to the attention of Lipps who informs the women that it deals with an already established theory known as ‘aesthetic empathy’ and that their thinking on it is flawed. Kit's observations of her inner psychology cannot be counted as physical fact, Lipps argues, for “it is impossible to be aware of bodily sensations while absorbed in the joyful contemplation of a Doric column” (Ibid., p.166). To think of literal bodily mimicry taking place in aesthetic contemplation is misleading – true empathy is not a matter of physiological echoing but an inner, emotional and imaginative projection into the object.

The correspondence unleashes Vernon's doubts. After all these years of being unable to experience an aesthetic response akin to Kit's, she educates herself in the contemporary writings on aesthetic empathy and realigns her view with Lipps':

I now believe that the alleged 'mimicry' of a work of art's movement and lines and balance is a great deal more inner than we first imagined, being primarily inside our mind or imagination, and only secondarily in any part of us. (Ibid.)

That Kit should have experienced such bodily responses to art, Vernon decides, was merely the result of her being a sensitive 'motor type' (Burdett, 2011b, p.12).

Kit has no ground on which to make a rebuttal. Her contribution to the project took the form of her bodily observations but now it appears that these self-reports are not

enough to win over the academic community or even retain the faith of the woman who loves her. Because how can one use words to evoke understanding in the body of the listener when it is the listener's inability to experience the aesthetic responses of her own body that created the need? Faced with such an intractable problem, she would have to share the reality of her lived experience through examining the body as an object, but it is 1897, over a hundred years before the neuroscience of embodied semantics, and there is no way of doing so. Exhausted and weakened, Kit experiences a mental breakdown and the two women drift apart. When, in 1898, Kit finally breaks away Vernon has a sense of the inevitable.

The bells have fallen silent.

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## **A Shared Language**

Vernon and Kit may have rung out of tune, but their romance dramatises the sympathetic resonance that still rings true between empathy, the body and the novel. In the previous chapters, I presented the case for the novel as embodied and in this chapter I will proceed to argue that this physical reading experience can be thought of as a form of empathy.

The idea that the novel creates empathy is not new. Chapter One provided an overview of some of the key research on this idea, yet – as I mentioned in my summary – this thinking fails to give due attention to is the role of the body. However, as this thesis has argued that the novel can be seen as a bodily phenomenon, there are a number of parallels that can be drawn between the processes that Simulation Theories claim take place in real world empathy and reading. Firstly, the power of the novel to give rise to visceral reactions can be theorised as a form of emotional contagion, in which the emotions of characters trigger similar emotions in the reader. Secondly, some elements of the embodied semantics process that takes place in reading could be seen as a form of textual mirroring,<sup>23</sup> for reading about the actions of a character prompts the reader to mimic these within the action circuitry of their own brain. I therefore believe that the various forms of bodily mimicry that take place in reading are, themselves, a form of empathy – or, at least, one important part of empathetic connection with the characters -

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23 It could be argued that this is an overstatement, given that embodied semantics suggests that the body is involved in understanding all forms of action sentences, however, I believe such a criticism can be countered when coupled with Libby and Kaufman's research (2012).

and, as such, play a role in the ability of the novel to enhance the reader's empathetic abilities.

The idea that readers are intimately empathising with characters can be supported by the research of the psychologists Lisa Libby and Geoff Kaufman (2012), which suggests that effective reading experiences lead to a self merger between reader and character. According to their paper, most narrative forms invite the audience to 'perspective take' – a process in which an individual uses conceptual knowledge of their own self to reason how another person might be experiencing a situation, thus draws on and bolsters sense of self. However, novels appear to be special in that they provoke a different process that Libby and Kaufman call 'Experience Taking'. Experience Taking involves the reader assuming the identity of the character by simulating its thoughts, emotions, behaviour, goals and traits as if they were their own. Unfortunately, Libby and Kaufmann don't explore the embodied aspects of this process, however, when coupled with embodied semantics their research would seem to suggest that entering the mind of a character involves some form of simulating them within our own flesh.

## Complications

One potential problem with this line of argument is that if we accept Decety and Jackson's claim that empathy requires a strictly maintained awareness of self-other separation at all times *and* Libby and Kaufman's assertion that transportation into a story calls for an experiential merger between self and other then it would appear that narrative fails to qualify as empathy.<sup>24</sup> There is an echo of this in philosopher's Roland Barthes writing on the pleasure of the text, when he called the reader: "never anything but a 'living contradiction': a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall" (1973, p.21). As Barthes emphasised, however, this process involves a contradiction – selfhood remains consistent *and* falls. Empathy itself involves this paradox. For, if a person is to recognise another person as another self, it seems likely that there is a space where the other is being processed similarly to the self, yet a distinction between self and other must remain for the person empathising to understand that the experience is not their own. To understand Libby and Kaufmann's talk of a 'merger' as an absolute suppression of the ego is likely overstating the power of the process. Reading, in most cases, allows the reader to cross over into the character's emotions and situ without their sense of self being eradicated. Though reading Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955)

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24 Though, even if this is the case, reading may still increase the individual's ability to empathize once they have put down the book.

prompted me to merge with the sociopathic and murderous Tom Ripley to the extent that I carried an irrational sense of guilt for days after putting down the novel, I never lost track of my own selfhood. The guilt was, itself, a good example of the distinction since it was a response that would be foreign to Ripley.

I therefore propose that empathetic reading experiences require a balancing act that ask the reader to immerse herself in the characters without being dissolved in them to the point of personal distress.<sup>25</sup> This balance isn't successful in all acts of reading, however, as was particularly apparent when the novel was a new phenomenon. According to the literary critic Ian Watt, Greek tragedy and the other literary forms that preceded the novel:

[C]ontained many elements which limited the extent to which identification could take place...

The novel, on the other hand, was inherently devoid of the elements which restricted identification. (1957, pp.201-202)

The new forms of identification that were provided by reading Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748), which Ian Watt believed to be one of the first novels, were a taxing experience for many readers. The philosopher Denis Diderot found the book so draining that "when his friends saw him afterwards they wondered if he had been ill, and asked if he'd lost a friend, or a parent" (Watt, 1957, p.201). Meanwhile, the writer Aaron Hill wrote:

Now and then, I am Colbrand the Swiss; but as broad as I stride, in that Character, I can never escape Mrs Jewkes: who often keeps me awake in the Night. (Ibid.)

Another complication arises if we approach the matter from the perspective of The Phenomenological Proposal, which gives no credence to the kinds of Simulation Theory approaches to empathy that I suggest happen through reading.

The issue is somewhat confused by the fact that the main criticism that phenomenologists confront Simulation Theories and Theory Theories with is that these accounts are reliant on the 'mental supposition', which assumes that the minds of others are hidden away from us. Of course, a novel cannot present the reader with the real – corporeal – bodies of characters. So it could possibly be argued that the minds of characters really are hidden away from us in literary texts. This, however, assumes that there are literal living minds behind the words, which is misleading in the case of fictional works.

In light of the conclusions of the previous chapters on the embodied nature of reading experiences, I believe that it is more intuitive to understand the minds of characters as

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25 Personal distress refers to the process by which appreciation of another's distress is lost within the distress of one's own vicarious experience of their suffering.

being given directly to us through their textual bodies, just as the minds of real people are given to us through their physical bodies.

Furthermore, as phenomenologists, such as Zahavi, accede that more complex acts of empathy occasionally require cognitive processes – such as perspective-shifting, imaginative projection and inferential attribution (2008) – the simulative acts discussed in this chapter can still be understood as acts of empathy within a phenomenological account when the reader is endeavouring to understand mental states that go beyond basic behaviours and feelings.

## **Empathy as Bodily Narratives**

The embodied nature of reading is important not only for giving novels the power to provoke a bodily reaction in the audience but for its ability to offer the reader a deeper appreciation of the characters' lived experiences. To 'have' another body, whether in actuality or through fiction, is to also 'have' another world. This is especially important when the embodied situation of a character diverges from what is considered to be normal. In my first novel, *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (Geen, 2016), I wrote from many such perspectives in the chapters that were set in the embodiments of other species, including those of a spider, seal and polar bear. These were designed to explore the 'what-it-is-likeness' of different bodies and the affordances – the possibilities – available to them in relation to their environments.

To unpack what I mean by this, consider a mundane glass of water – as a human, the glass appears to you in a certain fashion, likely through sight. Unlike an elephant, you don't have specific olfactory organs attuned for smelling the water. Unlike a pit viper, you cannot sense its heat signature. As a human, however, you are capable of grasping and drinking the water. In Heideggerian terms, the glass is ready-to-hand (1927, p.103) – it is available to you as a tool through which you can achieve an aim. Now consider how different this story would be if you switched bodies to that of an orb weaving spider. As a spider, the world is colourless and blurry and, since the water and the glass are transparent, you might not even be aware of its presence until you touch it. Moreover, you have a radically different relationship with the glass – it can no longer be picked up since it is hundreds of times your size and so becomes uncanny and *unready-to-hand*.<sup>26</sup> Instead of existing as a tool, it becomes a part of your landscape and, if you wish, you can climb and jump in. Given the strength of surface tension in relation to your size, the water will appear as solid, but walking on it would be a risky move – if

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26 'Unready-to-hand' here refers to something that is obstructive, in its broken state, to the person's wishes.

you broke through you wouldn't be strong enough to resist the pull of surface tension. What is a glass of water to a human can, to a spider, be invisible death.

I use the example of different species because the impact of the body on lived experience is emphasised by the radical difference of such embodiments. Yet phenomenological experiences also differ between humans. Disability can be a particularly powerful source of disparity in lived experience; for instance, the philosopher Havi Carel talks about how "[t]he geography and spatial relations of someone in a wheelchair are entirely different from those of the able-bodied person" (2008, p.100). Differences aren't limited to non-normative bodies, however. In a more subtle fashion, embodied attributes such as height, flexibility, health, weight, gender and race have a profound impact on the lived experience of a person. As Merleau-Ponty asserted, a body is not merely an object that we have but is "a nexus of living meanings" (1945, p.27).

One consequence of this is that aiming to understand the perspective of another person and their world of living meanings, as happens in empathy, asks of us to understand something of their embodied position. Here, it is important to comprehend both the internal conditions of the other person's body, which give rise to states such as happiness or pain, and how the idiosyncrasies of their embodiment allow them to relate to their environment, as with the spider and glass of water. Similarly, when psychosomatically simulating a fictional character through the act of reading we come to bodily empathise with their emotions, corporeality and their broader embodied existential situation. As Bolen writes:

Literature is powerful because, more than any other type of discourse, it triggers the activation of unpredicted sensorimotor configurations and surprises the mind with its own imaginative and cognitive potentialities. (2012, p.17)

These bodies are not generalised; each narrative, implicitly or explicitly, addresses the "'kinds of bodies [made] possible within that narrative world,' and to 'how the body interacts with what is outside of it'" (Ibid., p.25). As Chapter Two explored, the body is our general medium for having a world and to have another imaginary world requires the suppression of the experiences of the immediate body that speak against it. The bodily suppression that takes place in reading is not a disembodied process but a way of providing a clean slate for the reader to imagine the specific corporeality of the character and the idiosyncratic ways in which it experiences its world. As the literary critic Ralf Hertel writes, reading is not so much an out-of-body experience as "an in-another body experience, for we perceive the portrayed world not only through the protagonists' eyes but through their ears, nose, tongue, and skin" (2012, p.194).

Just as in empathy with real people, a story invites the reader to understand the narrative framing of a character and to perceive how she positions herself within it through absorption in, what I believe can be authentically called, psychosomatic literary empathy.

## **Embodied Narratives as Empathy**

Story-telling is also an important route for 'climbing into another's skin' in non-literary empathy, since narrative allows for the presentation of the experiential body from a first-person perspective and automatically situates it within a meaningful milieu. This milieu is made up not just of a physical environment but a social one, coloured by the person's mood, desires and projects. For the philosopher Shaun Gallagher, it is:

Through such narratives [that] we gain interpretive insights into the actions of others. ... We start to see others engaged in their actions, not simply in terms of the immediate and concurrent context. (Zahavi, 2014, p.372)

Similarly, philosopher Peter Goldie's writes that: "it is necessary that I have a grasp of the narrative which I can imaginatively enact, with the other as narrator" (Ibid., p.195). In other words, to be successfully empathetic across diverse situations,<sup>27</sup> you have to understand the individual's narrative arc, projecting both forwards and back. To fully understand a present emotion requires knowing where it came from and how the person imagines it will reflect on their future. To give an example of what this means in practice, consider a case study given by the psychiatrist Jodi Halpern in which she works with 'Mr Smith', an executive and family patriarch who had suddenly become paralysed from the neck down. Seeing him in this way, Halpern experienced sincere sorrow and sympathy, but when she expressed this he reacted with anger. It was only when she imaginatively placed herself within the broader story of his life and saw "what it would be like to be a powerful older man, suddenly enfeebled, handled by one young doctor after the next" (2012, p.50) that she was able to fully understand his anger and work with him.

The ability of novels to improve empathy could therefore be theorised as being realised, in part, through the fact that fully developed empathy *itself* requires the ability to simulate another person's embodied self-narrative through a similar process to that which is undertaken in the psychosomatic reading experiences I have proposed.

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27 I should emphasize here that I believe that more basic forms of feeling or projecting into the position of the other still count as empathy. However, as the gap between the situation inhabited by the self and other grows, more complex and multidimensional processes for understanding the other are better suited to capture the spirit of their experience.



## Empathy in *The Listening*

The idea of characters being simulated within the embodied self of the reader is played with by *The Listening* on multiple occasions and first appears in the passage where Asha talks about the power of Mi'luvver's stories:

And, through such tellings, I could feel them [the characters] within me too. ... their wound became your wound and their tears, your tears. When Kelston lost his tail, I'd feel the burn of a limb that had never been mine. When the arrow struck deep into Harole's chest, the air would woof from me. (Geen, 2018, pp.32-33)

The characters of *The Listening* don't just observe this phenomenon but employ it. For if the audience of a story simulates characters in their own flesh then this provides a direct route for the story-teller to influence the bodies of their audience. In this way Asha 'transforms' a child into a 'toad' through the story that she tells about it (Ibid., pp.97-99).

However, given the role of written language and myth in empire creation (Said, 1993), *The Listening* had to show both the positive and negative sides of story-telling. The novel acknowledges that stories, and the ways in which they can dehumanise, can also be failures of empathy.

The psychosomatic power of the novel means that lack of empathy in narratives in *The Listening* takes the form of bodily violence, as is represented by the inciting incident in which a text is tattooed onto Asha's skin (Geen, 2018, pp.22-23). The broader religious stories of the imperial faith also inflict violence. Scheherazade, a name appropriated from the narrator of *One Thousand And One Nights*, has her tongue removed for the sake of giving a man a penis (Ibid., p.85-86) and Woeman's creation of the world is framed as a sin that arises from her acts of speech, related to the 'second pair of lips' between her legs (Ibid., p.27), thereby provoking people in the world of the novel to real acts of violence (Ibid., p.87). The stories of the subordinated Ffieth can be just as ugly and many of them display a casual and pervasive dismissal of post-menopausal women through metaphors such as: "the stairs were as worn and slippery as a mutton trying to keep claws into 'er 'ubber" (Ibid., p.130). Asha's mother inflicts violence on Asha by presuming to narrate its life (Ibid., pp.11, 42, 82 & 118) and Asha's stories aren't necessarily any better since the story it tells Toad is an act of literal dehumanization that leaves the child on all fours and croaking (Ibid., pp.97-99). Some stories might be better off left untold.

Yet not telling one's story is also harmful and Asha's growth through the novel requires the realisation that the bodily nature of stories makes them a superlative form of resistance. Though the Faith has appropriated Scheherazade, like a weed under

concrete, she reappears in a Ffieth story as an old post-menopausal woman staving off Death through her stories (Ibid., p.39). Meanwhile, the Fey resist being conquered by God's Children because they understand how language can be weaponised (Ibid., pp.117 & 189).

This kind of resistance can be understood as empathetic. If oppressive power produces fixed realities that dehumanise and render certain bodies as 'other' then narratives that assert these excluded realities create spaces for understanding and acknowledging the excluded lived experiences. Through narrative two people can travel into the perspective of the other to better understand them, without necessarily sharing their experiences. Self can temporarily become other without overseeing its own destruction. Asha's growth through the novel is related to its ability to engage in this type of empathy. This allows Asha to both listen to its mother's account of events and to tell its own story, thereby preventing its self from being overrun by the other (Ibid., p.234).

It is important to note here that attaining the ability to maturely empathise in this way isn't only the result of Asha's deepened wisdom but is also reliant on a shift in the power dynamic between it and its mother. As empathy is a balance between self and other it demands a level of equality between the two parties. If only one party engages in empathy then she runs the risk of her own needs and perspectives being drowned out. This is especially unfortunate since empirical research suggests that the powerful tend to be poor at perspective-taking and rely too heavily on their own vantage points (Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Kipnis, 1972). What Asha achieves through the novel, therefore, is not just the ability to emphasize but the recognition from its mother that allows for this exchange to take place.

This process is, of course, even more vital in the context of Asha's relationship with the Brothers, but to put an onus on Asha to empathize with such oppressors would be grossly inappropriate. Chapter One suggested that Butler's impassioned critique of empathy in the *Parable of the Sower* was the result of her conflating empathy with emotional contagion, but it is also undoubtedly related to the lack of empathy that western culture tends to afford black women like Butler. I therefore tried to ensure that *The Listening* wouldn't advocate empathy for oppressors, but I was equally keen not to theorise empathy as inherently problematic. Consequentially, the book understands the lack of empathy of the oppressor to be at fault and acknowledges that violent struggle, and even murder (Geen, 2018, p.229), is sometimes necessary to reassert the humanity of the oppressed and make empathetic dialogue possible. In this way – after many years

of struggle – the novel ends with Asha and its mother finally sitting down over a bowl of soup to, at last, share their stories.

In this chapter I have made the case for narrative as a source of psychosomatic empathy, both within real and fictional people. Novels can evoke similar patterns in the physiology and brain circuitry of the reader as those experienced by the character, were they a person in the real world. This psychosomatic body of the text allows the reader to vividly understand and feel the experiences of the character (1960, p.81) in a similar fashion to that called for by Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it”.

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The lovers have not been parted for long when Vernon panics and writes to Kit, begging her to return and continue their important work. Kit politely declines and continues to do so as the letters keep coming. She will retain a fondness for Vernon and the two remain friends for the rest of their lives, but their romance cannot be rekindled (Colby, 2003, p.170).

Over the years, many adoring young women will come to Vernon for inspiration, but none of these relationships will replace the love and dedication of the collaboration she had with Kit. No lover. No mother. No brother. Though always surrounded by friends, the sense of isolation that haunted Vernon as a child returns with a vengeance. "One of our worst sufferings is the sense of isolation," she writes: "of being left behind, like ship-wrecked people, by the great moving bulk of activity" (Colby, 2003, p.134).

These days Vernon draws her shawls tight as she walks the paths around her villa. Her mincing steps grow more painful with every year. Is it her, or does the world stiffen and shrink with her ageing joints? Has the sky's palette faded with her dimming eyes?

But, sometimes, she stands upon the veranda and remembers the sounds of the Florence wedding rising to meet her and Kit. In these moments a ringing will start at the tips of her fingers and spread its tender shiver across her skin until her old heart climbs into her throat to yearn into the blue distance.

The bells never answer.

## Chapter Five

“[W]riting, whatever its medium, is made of words, and words are bodily, made with the body and the breath, received by the body, felt with the body, and the rhythms of words are bodily rhythms.”

*Ursula Le Guin (2007)*

The previous chapters presented answers to two of my research questions by arguing that the novel is both embodied and empathetic. The remainder of this piece will address my last research question by considering the ways in which writers may wish to approach their work in light of the assertions of this thesis.

Before discussing matters of craft it is worth pausing to emphasise that writers can take satisfaction in the importance of fiction in encouraging empathy. Novels have the ability to establish a deeply meaningful and psychosomatic connection between their characters and readers, which can lead to changes in real-world beliefs and behaviours (Libby and Kaufman 2012). Yet we must be careful not to be overly quick in indulging in self-righteous congratulation.

It is encouraging to observe that programmes such as EmpathyLab's Empathy Day (2018a), which works with schools and libraries to bolster empathy in children through reading, are receiving increasing support, but the lack of critical reflection such movements give to the ethical complexities of their work is a cause for concern. Instead of opening a sustained and nuanced dialogue into the power of empathetic literature, the copy of the EmpathyLab website takes empathy to be an unconditional good and offers vague, unreferenced and weakly qualified accolades, such as:

98% of us can train our plastic brains to become more empathetic. We're excited by new neuroscience research showing that reading fiction is a powerful tool. (2018b)

While the programme has published an evaluation report (2016), the evidence provided appears to be based entirely on the estimates and observations of teachers. I say 'appears' because no information is given on the methodologies and statistical analysis employed. Meanwhile, though the initiative offers a guide of books specifically selected to "offer powerful insights into other people's feelings" (2018c), no explanation is given as to why these particular texts have been singled out. Nor is it acknowledged

that if some books are uniquely positioned to evoke empathy then this means that other books are less capable of doing so and may even limit empathy.

As Chapter One touched on, the ability of novels to evoke empathy cannot be taken as an axiomatic good. The power of the novel to awaken readers to the experiences of others means that it also carries the potential to dehumanise and oppress if this process is not afforded to all characters. This is especially problematic when the experiences of certain demographics are prioritised. The onus therefore falls upon writers, and the industries that publish and support them, to ensure that diverse demographics and bodies are represented as possible objects of empathy in their work.

I write this at a time when the industry and media are giving increasing attention to this responsibility, but the statistics still paint a dismal picture. While the diversity of characters is growing, the entrance of diverse authors into the market is much slower (Cooperative Children's Book Center School of Education, 2017). Of the thousands of authors published in the UK in 2016 fewer than one hundred came from BAME backgrounds (Ibid.).

The problem is more extensive than diversity quotas, however. In his 2018 address to the Bare Lit Festival, which works to boost BAME voices in the literary industry, the writer Nii Ayikwei Parkes argued that "cultural production in the West doesn't lack diversity by accident – it lacks it by design" (2018). This systemic racism affects everything from jacket design "because the industry has to pat itself on the back for every drop of diversity it allows in its ocean of white middle-upper class manly goodness" (Ibid.), to "editorial approaches that seek to distil and limit what Asian, woman, queer, black, and working class experiences are" (Ibid.), to shaping fiction with a "hypothetical white male public who might not understand it" (Ibid.) in mind, to the canons and academies that teach "us how to read literature" (Ibid.) and were "first peopled by upper and middle class white men who were the first patrons of writers who interested and entertained *them*"<sup>28</sup> (Ibid.). Parkes therefore compares the new diversity schemes being launched by publishers to "treating the symptoms, but ignoring the causes" (Ibid.).

For even when diverse authors and characters are allowed into the market, they are often only allowed to exist as the embodiment of otherness. One particularly troubling recent example was given by author Leonard Chang, whose editor who responded to his novel with the critique that: "The characters, especially the main character, just do not seem Asian enough. They act like everyone else" (Ahsan, 2017). Such thinking is

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<sup>28</sup> Italics in original.

pernicious because – as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes the case for in her TED talk 'The Danger of the Single Story' (2009) – when a particular demographic is shown “as only one thing, over and over again”, then “that is what they become”.

The ways in which a demographic is represented are just as important as their inclusion and this applies to those with social power as much as it does to minorities and the disenfranchised. In her timely *Electric Literature* think piece, the literary critic Erin Spampinato draws a link between the 'incel' movement<sup>29</sup> and the normalization and celebration of the anger of sexually frustrated white men in the literary canon:

[O]ur literary culture has long treated rage and aggression as if they are normal features of (white) male sexuality. ... The literature we choose to teach our children evidences how untroubled we are by this disturbing cliché that rage and a fascination with violation are characteristic features of (again, white) male sexuality. (2018)

This fascination with male frustration not only contributes to the construction of problematic masculinity but bolsters the patriarchy's prioritisation of the experiences of men over those of women. As Spampinato writes:

We regularly ask teenage girls to read books in which characters degrade women... [we] hardly ever expect young white men to read extensively in traditions where their identities aren't represented or are degraded. (Ibid.)

In the words of the writer Rebecca Solnit: “A book without women is often said to be about humanity but a book with women in the foreground is a woman's book.” (2015). These gender biases of the canon imply that women should apply themselves to empathising with men, in real life as well as in their reading choices, but that men need not be concerned with investing time in understanding the 'domestic' (Flood, 2015) and 'emotional' concerns of women. In other words, by affording less literary merit to the lived experiences of women, the canon makes the unspoken, yet powerful, statement that the internal lives of women are less legitimate and valuable. Yet literature needn't be this way; books can, conversely, be a way of challenging prejudice. As Solnit continues, and this thesis makes the case for, imagination should be "a great act of empathy that lifts you out of yourself, not locks you down into your gender" (Ibid.).

The problem at play here is likely embedded in the fact that, as Chapter Four touched on, those with power are less likely to step out of their own vantage points to engage in acts of empathy. Author Azar Nafisi explains in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* that books such as *Lolita* go "against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives" (2003, p.35) by demonstrating how characters like Humbert, who possess the quality of dictators, lack

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29 A collection of men brought together by misogynistic anger based on the sense of being alienated from women and opportunities to sexually interact with them.

the ability to perspective-take and understand others as independent people. This means that:

Lolita's image is forever associated in the minds of her readers with that of her jailer. ... she can only come to life through her prison bars. (Ibid. p.37)

However, stories are perfectly positioned to act as a solution this problem by expanding the reader's empathetic scope.<sup>30</sup> The psychologists Andreoni and Rao (2011) provide evidence to suggest that the act of giving the less powerful a voice via the simple act of communication or the imaginative act of putting oneself in another's shoes can be enough to cause more altruistic and less selfish behaviour. It is this kind of ability that Nafisi talks of when she praises the "magic of imagination" (2005) that novels can gift us.

However, as Nafisi's choice to write on *Lolita* shows, the novel can also humanise monstrous characters, which invites complex ethical questions about whether this is desirable. Such fictions demand sensitive and nuanced readings and emphasise that uncritically extolling the ability of the novel to provoke empathy is naively simplifying an irreducibly complex issue.

If writers and the trends of publishing adopt the vantage point of the powerful then hegemonies are only reinforced. As authors we must never forget our privileged ability to either promote altruism and empathy or entrench bigotry and prejudice, and this is a responsibility that begs constant care and questioning.

## Writing the Body

There are several ways in which writers might wish to employ the ideas I have explored. To begin, they may be encouraged to give thought to how the psychosomatic impact of their words can be used to intensify the somatic responses of readers. In the words of Vernon Lee: "we attribute movement to motionless lines and surfaces... For we are inside them" (1912, p.433). Descriptions that pay attention to the bodily consciousness of our characters through empathetic fallacy can add vitality and a sense of authenticity to a scene. Vernon Lee employs this technique in her own work regularly, such as in this line from the start of her short story *Amour Dure* (1890):

The white bullocks dragged my gig slowly winding along interminable valleys, crawling along interminable hill-sides, ... this town of Urbania, forgotten of mankind, towered and battlemented on the high Apennine ridge. (p.2)

No literal 'winding' or 'crawling' takes place in this scene and the town was not built of towers, instead these descriptors reflect the empathetic fallacy of how the

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30 Assuming, of course, that those with power can be persuaded to consume these stories.

character experiences the situation and implies an impeded and overpowered body, which helps develop the atmosphere of the ghost story that is about to take place.

Lee is far from the only writer to employ empathetic fallacy, however. Considering that it plays an important role in language,<sup>31</sup> the majority of authors use the technique in some form. To give another example, at the beginning of Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) there is the line: “[t]here stretched the endless linoleum corridor, heaving slightly up and down for miles” (p.2). Again, this corridor does not literally ‘stretch’ or ‘heave’, it is not ‘endless’, rather these word choices awaken these ideas in the reader as a way of reflecting the embodiment of the protagonist, who is disorientated and suffering from radiation poison.

The mirroring that takes place in empathetic fallacy can also be an impetus for the author to draw the reader's attention, lightly, to the bodily situation of their characters. For example, the writer may wish to, occasionally, describe the physiological components of the character's emotion instead of simply stating their feelings. To this end, at the beginning of *The Listening*, instead of writing that Asha was nervous and angry, I wrote: “I would seal my fists and crowd into Mother’s skirts” (Geen, 2018, p.8) and when the protagonist and its friend are sick with excitement and nerves, I write:

We burst into laughter. The force of it doubled us over, the waves thrusting through my diaphragm, into Dee's, then back until my stomach hurt. (Ibid., p.12)

Rendering emotion in this way gives the reader implicit information about the characters, and their situation, that goes beyond basic feelings. By not stating emotion, space is left for the reader to develop a deep understanding of the character’s mental state and personality, and this understanding may even extend beyond the character's own awareness of their emotions.

It is normally advised that writers should describe emotion in this way due to the idea that it is better to ‘show’ than ‘tell’ (Acherman and Puglisi, 2012, p.3). Given the findings of embodied semantics, the power of ‘showing’ such bodily states likely works by prompting the reader to subtly simulate the physiological reactions within their own body more powerfully than if she were simply told the emotion. As some studies into embodied semantics have suggested that original idioms tend to elicit greater responses from sensory-motor circuitry (Desai et al 2011), avoiding cliché when making reference to the bodily states of the character is likely to result in a richer imagining of the words.

It is important to note, however, that this is a technique that can be easily overused and is only one of many. The Booker winning author Margret Atwood will on the rare

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31 As Lakoff and Johnson's work evidences.



occasion write a line such as: “[t]his was such a low blow that it left Felix breathless” (2017, p.20), but she is in full command of whole arsenal of techniques for writing emotion that range from metaphor: “What to do with such a sorrow? It was like an enormous black cloud boiling up over the horizon” (Ibid., p.15). To describing a situation or scene that is likely to conjure up the desired emotion from the reader without any reference to how the character itself reacts: “[t]hey are like birdcages; but what is being caged in? Legs, the legs of ladies; legs penned in so they cannot get out” (1997, p.24). To simply stating emotion: “Jimmy had been full of himself back then, thinks Snowman with indulgence and a little envy” (2013, p.82). There is a sense of a body acted upon in each of these examples, but it is shown or hidden to a lesser or greater degree depending on what effect Atwood desires of the passage.

In many cases, not mentioning the body can be more accurate to lived experience. For, as I argued in Chapter Two, actions that feel integrated rely on the body, in Leder's terminology, dys-appearing. When running or cooking or swinging a sword, though the body is of fundamental importance, the individual is unlikely to be absorbed in the awareness of their hands wrapped around the hilt or the sensation of their thighs moving against one another, instead they will be thinking about the desires that drive these actions – they will focus on how swinging the sword will slay the enemy who killed their family or how they must outrun a slave catcher. So while making some careful references to the body may help intensify the affective and empathetic involvement of the reader, over-writing bodily descriptions can easily make the prose unrealistic, as well as sluggish. It helps here to focus on reflecting the Leib of the character – their embodiment as it is lived. For instance, in *The Flame Alphabet* actions are for the most part described without reference to the body – the character simply “drove away” (Marcus, 2013, p.8), or “went out” (Ibid., p.211), or “descended and climbed, then traversed along” (Ibid., p.269). It is only when the body asserts itself on the character's consciousness as Körper,<sup>32</sup> due to sickness or grief, that it impinges on the text: “I spoke to her through a stiff, heavy face that seemed fitted on my head solely to block me from speaking” (Ibid., p.98).

Writing from the perspective of Leib requires the author to pay attention not only to the internal state of the body and how the intentions of the character affect the experiential body but the complex gestalt of the possibilities and limitations impressed upon it by its physical and social environment. Having this kind of empathy for the embodied situatedness of characters impacts upon a text in ways that are both subtle and

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32 In which the character experiences his body in its being as an object, due to its resistance to his will.

complex. It can shape the reader's awareness to objects in ways that would be foreign, or negligible, in the reader's own body yet fundamentally shape the character's experience of their fictional reality.

For instance, in *The Listening* I tried to always reflect the embodied situation of Asha, in particular how its little fingers "parenthesise" (Geen, Ibid., p.45) its life. The impact of Asha's little fingers, in the context of a world that deems it inferior for possessing them, shapes my writing decisions that range from word choice to the macro-level of the plot. It is Asha's little fingers that give meaning to the otherwise bizarre phrase "blessed woolly zeros" (Ibid., p.46) as a descriptor for mittens. It these little fingers that have shaped the sadness, anger and defiance that define Asha's character (Ibid., p.11 & 44). It is these little fingers that determine how other characters respond to Asha, including the disappointment of its mother: "*Kisses for fingers and thumb to rise with the sun. One, two, three, four...* But not for the little fingers" (Ibid., p.44) and the lack of empathy of the Brothers (Ibid., pp.117 & 125). These little fingers play a role in almost every plot point, from the inciting incidence of the Brothers choosing Asha as the medium onto which to write their text,<sup>33</sup> to Asha's muteness,<sup>34</sup> to its decision to push back.

These subtle ways of reflecting the embodied situation of Asha become more extreme when violence and pain leads to a rupturing of its sense of its body. These incidences call upon the prose to splinter in order to authentically reflect Asha's broken phenomenal experiences. For instance, the pain and trauma following being tattooed by the Brothers prompted me to use shortened and jarred sentences: "Unbearable – being. Being the pain the tattoo made of me. So sip at sensations then back to nothingness" (Ibid., p.30).

Every writer has their own idiosyncratic tastes, styles and techniques and few, if any rules, can be successfully applied to every work. I therefore invite writers to take or dismiss the techniques suggested above as they see fit. Yet I hope that, at the very least, this thesis will remind the writer of the bodies of their readers and their responsibility to these strangers. Though we may write alone in our rooms, with only the glare of the computer screen for company, our words reach across space and time to readers and embrace them.

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33 The Brothers would certainly never tattoo a God Child child. It only their lack of empathy for Asha and its lack of value in their eyes, as a Ffieth, that allow them to use it in this way.

34 Asha's decision to stop speaking is the summation of many factors. However, its little fingers play a role in its attempt to both resist and withdraw through its muteness. This is related, in part, to the 'silencing' of its little fingers in the discourse of the God Children (Geen, 2018, p.47).

## Bodily Reading

Though I have aimed to keep my suggestions on craft as general as possible caution is still required when applying them. Given the radical otherness of readers, there is always an element of unpredictability to how a text will be received.

Reader-response theories (Tompkins, 1980) recognise the reader as an idiosyncratic and creative agent who interacts with a work to invest it with meaning. This active art of reading understands each individual reader as creating their own unique interpretative performance of a text. According to the literary scholar David Bleich (1981) a symbolisation and resymbolisation process brings the individual's own unique life experiences, emotions and needs into how she interacts with prose, meaning that an objective interpretation is never possible and that the true text exists inside the reader's mind.

If, as this thesis contests, the mind is embodied then this unique performance of the text exists in the reader's body as mind and is shaped by the reader's unique embodiment. Extensive research is required, but the role of physiological processes in the reader's experience of a novel may mean that the idiosyncrasies of a reader's physiology impact on their reading experiences. For instance, it is not inconceivable that a person who is inclined to hyperventilate may find certain texts more frightening than their peers or that a person who often experiences goosebumps<sup>35</sup> may be more readily moved by a narrative. Meanwhile, since embodied semantics suggests that the reader's somatosensory circuitry is recruited in their processing of a text, the ways in which the life experiences of the reader have primed their motor systems may affect how descriptions of action, and even other types of language, are simulated. A fit and experienced mountain reader is likely to experience Joe Simpson's account of his near fatal expedition up Siula Grande in *Touching the Void* (1988) markedly differently to a portly elderly gentleman who has never climbed anything higher than a stepladder.

The cultural positioning of a person's body will also shape their reading experiences. According to the pedagogical theorist Delane Bender-Slack, "the gender with which we identify is such a powerful organizing framework that it affects how we act, think, read, and respond to texts" (2010, p.18). The scholar of women's literature Holly Virginia Blackford has found that gender impacts on every aspect of girls' reading experiences from how they experienced the moral world of a text to how they process genre. For instance, the girls in her study "approach Gothic fiction with an aesthetic stance to

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<sup>35</sup> Research suggests that goosebumps may be related to peak moments of emotional arousal and the experience of being moved (Wassiliwizky, Jacobsen, Heinrich, Schneiderbauer and Menninghaus, 2017).

identify with an omniscient point of view on the story rather than with the female victim" (2004, p.64).

All this means that the writer cannot be overly prescriptive in aiming to shape the reading experiences of their work. Yet this is a cause for celebration, not frustration. The ambiguity inherent in how a reader receives a novel opens up exciting spaces that afford the work creativity possibilities beyond those that the author could dream of alone. Moreover, if a bi-active (Holland, 1995) reader-response model is adopted,<sup>36</sup> then a parallel can be drawn between reading and empathy. Just as empathy isn't the act of allowing the mental states of one party to subsume the other, a successful reading performance doesn't oversee the reader passively absorbing writerly intention but neither does it result in the meaning that the author attempted to invest in the text being completely ignored. Instead, a complex negotiation takes place between text and person that respects both the alterity of the reader and the novel. For the literary critic Wolfgang Iser this "dynamic process of recreation" (1972, p.279) offers the reader the ability to question their existing perspectives and formulate "alien" ones (1978, p.147). In other words, both empathy and reading are territories for a meeting between self and other that, far from ending in colonisation or destruction, allow for "a totality emerging from interacting textual perspectives... it enables us to formulate ourselves and thus discover an inner world of which we had hitherto not been conscious" (1978, p.58).

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In this critical piece, I have told the love story of Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson through their research on empathy. During their lifetime empathy referred to the ability to bodily 'project' into another's person's mental states and into a work of art. However, in the years since their deaths, both the bodily and aesthetic connotations of empathy have been largely forgotten. Though a renewed interest is being shown to the connection between the novel and empathy this research tends to ignore the role of the body, an oversight that this thesis has worked to address.

To that end I set out with the following research questions:

1. Can the novel be thought of as embodied?
2. If so, what is the role of embodiment in novelistic empathy?
3. Finally, how might a novelist apply these ideas to the practice of their craft?

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36 In which the literary work controls one part of the response and the reader controls another.

In Chapter One, I set out my definitions and provided a summary account of the history of empathy and research on the empathetic novel. In Chapter Two, I began to answer my first research question by arguing that the novel is not disembodied but only appears this way because the act of reading suppresses real-world sensations in order to allow the body to simulate imaginary ones. Chapter Three continued to answer my first research question by suggesting that reading experiences draw upon the reader's body, both through embodied semantics in the action circuitry of their brain and through their broader physiology. Chapter Three explored how this uncanny power of words over the body can be considered as psychosomatic and supported this claim with the work of Lakoff and Johnson and evidence from the neuroscience of embodied semantics. In Chapter Four, I presented an answer to my second research question by suggesting that the ability of the body to psychosomatically mirror textual bodies can be thought of as empathy between the reader and the characters. Finally, in Chapter Five, I gave some tentative answers to my third research question by examining a few of the ways in which the ideas explored by the previous chapters can be employed by writers in their craft, with an emphasis on reminding writers to write from the perspective of the body as it is lived.

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Given everything that has preceded this conclusion, the reader might be surprised to hear that, despite being a proponent of aesthetic empathy, Vernon Lee was unnerved by the empathetic quality of fiction. In contrast to the Victorian novel's traditional enthusiasm for the powers of the sympathetic imagination, Lee's works display a deeply troubled relationship with the idea empathy as a resonance between people, opposed to mirroring between a person and a piece of art, and often serve as warnings about the "cataclysmic consequences for subjectivity... when one person seeks to know another" (Fluhr, 2006, p.287).

Reading, in Lee's words, was an: "extraordinary phenomenon" (Lee, 1923, p.22) in which the reader is "invaded from within by the personality of another creature" (Ibid) and this notion of possessive invasion fits well with the name of her first short story collection – *Hauntings* (Lee, 1890). The collection features multiple protagonists who undergo erosions of the aesthetic and critical distance between themselves and their objects of study, thereby moving from observers to agents: "Am I turning novelist instead of historian?" one character wonders (Ibid., p.20). This empathetic closing of

gaps affords them the knowledge they desire but at a great price. In *Oke of Okehurst*, a painter is fascinated by his subject – a woman who considers herself to be reliving an affair with the ghost of her ancestor's lover with murderous consequences. In *A Wicked Voice*, a composer believes himself haunted by an infamous singer and from then on finds himself only able to compose music in the traditions of the ghost's era, despite his great dislike of the form. In *Amour Dure*, a historical scholar researches a sixteenth-century Duchess who used seduction to consolidate her political power and finds himself falling under her sway to the point that he endeavours to avenge her death even though he knows that he will pay with his own life. The message of *Hauntings*, as a body of work, is clear: empathetic identification comes at the ultimate price - the loss of the self.

This perspective appears to reflect Lee's personal take on relationships to others, which can appear almost bodily excruciating - "I *cannot* like, or love," she declared to her friend Irene Cooper-Willis, "at the expense of having my skin rubbed off" (1937, p.x). The literary critic Kirsty Martin (2013) sees this fear of the erosion of boundaries as an explanation for Lee's odd, and unconvincing, habit of attempting to turn books into objects or visual artefacts that would allow them to be understood similarly to her psychological aesthetics, in which the act of reading could be seen as projection opposed to being 'invaded from within'. For instance, in Lee's essay *Reading Books* she makes the assertion that: "once you know the spirit of a book, there is a process... of taking in its charm by merely turning over the pages, or even, as I say, in carrying it about" (1904, p.42-43), as if the material engagement and closeness is more important than engaging with the words.

Yet this stance seems to not fully satisfy Lee either, for her work also demonstrates deep concerns about the idea of empathy as solipsistic projection. In her novel *Louis Norbert* (1914) she explores the limits of understanding another person through the relationship of two characters, the Archæologist and Lady Venetia, whose epistolary relationship becomes unhinged from the facts to the point that it suggests that their care for each other may be nothing more than egotistical projection or transference. "After all, are not all the persons in whom we take the most vivid interest just, to that extent, creations of our own?", the Archæologist muses, "And what is loving people except making them up to please one's heart's desire?" (Ibid., p.102). This process is received as an oppressive one and when the Archæologist declares that Lady Venetia is a "poet and a novelist" (Ibid., p.151), she responds with horror that: "it is *you*, my poor young,

learned friend, who have been inventing, *inventing a me* utterly unlike the reality" (Ibid., p.169).

The costs of attempting empathetic connection are clear in Lee's writings, yet she also warns of the downfalls of not engaging in it. I omitted one story from my above discussion of *Hauntings* because it stands as anti-thesis to the other works in the collection. In *Dionea*, the narrator manages to maintain the 'objective' distance that the other protagonists of *Hauntings* fail to, yet this wilful resisting of empathetic engagement results in both in the failure of his research and his death when his sceptical insistence that a young woman is nothing more than a castaway results in his inability to understand her as a reincarnation of the goddess Venus.

Similarly, Lee's first novel *Miss Brown* (1884) appears to suggest that empathy is a fundamental facet of morality and being human, which Lee portrays, in Martin's words, as : "a vital response of the body to the life infused in the body of another" (2013, p.39). We can see this through the eponymous character of Miss Brown, who considers her will to be "the most precious part of her nature" (Ibid., p.140), even though the novel demonstrates that it is constantly undermined by her materiality, causing her to succumb to "nervous prostration" (Ibid., p.164) and memory lapses. Miss Brown's mechanistic view of the body prevents her from fully dwelling in it and, as a result, her feelings for others are presented as inhumanly cold and lacking in love. She "has no heart, but only 'a muscle for pumping blood to the extremities', as one of her professors calls it" (Ibid., p.39).

As this comparison of Lee works has shown, her stance on empathy is by no means clear and the extent to which she repeatedly returns to it throughout her life through her short stories, novels, essays and research suggests a deep-seated uneasiness. One is at risk of either losing the self, through invasion, or the other, through solipsist projection, if one does engage in empathy but, equally, one becomes inhuman and divorced from true understanding if one doesn't.

The overall picture can appear somewhat bleak, with little hope to a successful outcome when it comes to the matter of other people. Yet perhaps what Lee was ultimately reaching for was a balance between self and other where neither party subsumes the other as this thesis argues for in its definition of empathy. This approach to Lee's work can be seen in the interpretation of the literary critic Royal Gettmann, who thought that, "for Vernon Lee the crucial point [of empathy] is not projection... or feeling into... but a merging of the beholder and the object beheld. Empathy is neither

egotistical absorption and projection nor a passive, empty surrender: it is a collaboration” (Lee, 1968, p.xii). A collaboration like she held with Kit.

As an old woman Vernon remained sceptical about the literal role of the body in aesthetic empathy, yet thinking back to her work with Kit, she remarked wistfully that:

Future neurologists will very probably discover the portions of our brains and nervous systems, that is to say of our bodies, upon whose processes such “mental” phenomena are dependent.

(Burdett, 2011a, p.273)

Since the personal and academic is so deeply entangled in Vernon's and Kit's work, it's hard not to interpret this statement as Vernon yearning for her old lover and she would have doubtlessly been heartened to know that neuroscientists were to do just as she had speculated. Moreover, the research of embodied semantics provided evidence to suggest that motor, that is to say bodily-directed, areas of the brain are involved in the aesthetics of Vernon's own craft of writing in a fashion that is not so far from Vernon and Kit's original theory. Given Vernon's love of ghost stories, I like to imagine that her spirit, haunting the corridors of art galleries, would find solace in this thesis.

Gilt frames against vermilion wallpaper, sun muted curtains, stale air – there is the sense that if you picked the right door you could step from art gallery into another or even into another time. There two women stand, little fingers lightly brushing, as the minutes turn into hours, then years.

Darkness falls and leaves, falls once more. Still the lovers stand, watch and listen – breathing, at last, in tune.



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